POLITICO

Don’t intervene in Libya again

War hawks want to make you think it worked the first time. Don’t believe them.

Christopher Preble

March 16, 2016

As the Islamic State has captured more area in Libya in the past few months, the U.S. and European countries are worried that the militants will have yet another stronghold where they can plot attacks against Western interests. In response, President Barack Obama has authorized the military to bomb targets in the country. Some politicians are calling for even deeper U.S. involvement, including possibly ground troops.

The arguments for intervention in Libya sound eerily similar to those made just five years ago, before NATO undertook a bombing campaign that eventually killed former Libyan president Muammar Qaddafi, destabilized the country and created a power vacuum that ISIS has filled. Then, we heard of averting a humanitarian catastrophe and creating a democracy to defeat radicalism; now, we would settle for squashing ISIS. But the underlying belief that military force will produce stability and that the U.S. can reasonably predict the result of such a campaign remains the same.

As the U.S. considers whether to increase its military efforts, the advocates for intervention are attempting to rewrite the history of the first Libyan war to pave the way for more like it. But an honest accounting of the 2011 bombing campaign reveals it as yet another foolish adventure in the Middle East—and offers a lesson for why the U.S. shouldn’t intervene once again.

In March of 2011, the Obama Administration in concert with the U.N. Security Council set up a no-fly zone over Libya to protect peaceful, pro-western, pro-democracy Libyans who they felt were threatened under the reign of Qaddafi. Obama claimed the sole objective was a humanitarian one—to protect the people of Libya from their own government and to spread peace and democracy in a world that has never lived under democratic rule. The NATO bombing campaign continued throughout the summer and rebel forces captured and killed Qaddafi in October. On October 31, NATO ended its operations over Libya.

This humanitarian case for war convinced the world to drop bombs on Libya but the case was always filled with holes. Midway through the NATO campaign, the nonpartisan International Crisis Group (ICG) reported that the most dramatic story of anti-civilian violence was dubious, and the risk of exacerbating the humanitarian situation with NATO intervention was real. “[T]here are grounds for questioning the more sensational reports that the regime was using its

air force to slaughter demonstrators," ICG said, "let alone engaging in anything remotely warranting use of the term 'genocide.'"

As journalist Michael Hastings reported in 2011, "Over the course of seven months, America spent $1 billion on the war in Libya. As NATO flew more than 22,000 sorties, including hundreds of bombing runs and drone strikes, the goal of the war quickly morphed from a limited desire to protect civilians into a more sweeping and aggressive push for regime change."

More recently in 2013, a policy brief from Alan Kuperman at Harvard's prestigious Belfer Center found that the humanitarian case for intervention was significantly overstated in the run-up to war. The brief was tellingly entitled "Lessons from Libya: How Not to Intervene." Kuperman explained how NATO's initial humanitarian goals were replaced by regime change, which resulted in the spilling of *more* Libyan blood. "NATO's action magnified the conflict's duration about sixfold and its death toll at least sevenfold," Kuperman estimates, "while also exacerbating human rights abuses, humanitarian suffering, Islamic radicalism, and weapons proliferation in Libya and its neighbors." As others have argued, the dramatic stories of regime-sponsored genocide were mostly rebel propaganda designed to tug at Western heartstrings.

The result of the bombing campaign wasn't a democratic, stable Libya. Instead, an estimated 30,000 people died and many thousands were displaced. The country is now split between a group led by a former Qaddafi loyalist who controls territory in the east and a coalition of Islamist militias that control the capital, Tripoli, and much of the rest of the country. It is difficult to imagine how Libya could possibly be in worse shape today had NATO chosen bargaining over bombs to deal with Qaddafi—and he *did* try to bargain. Before its final fall, the beleaguered Qaddafi regime was willing and able to deal.

Leaders in the Pentagon recognized this when they allegedly opened back-channel negotiations in 2011, circumventing the State Department, with Qaddafi's son and heir apparent in an effort to deescalate the situation. Qaddafi then publicly offered negotiations and internationally-monitored elections in an effort to avoid further NATO intervention, an offer U.S. officials rejected. Though by no means a trustworthy or laudable actor, the old regime was at least more tangible than the shifting sands of rival governments that have struggled to maintain even basic administrative function since the dictator's death. Moreover, Qaddafi had previously cooperated with U.S. officials on counterterrorism and counterproliferation.

It is possible that a hypothetical Libya, one that hadn't undergone Western-imposed regime change, would be just as unstable as the real one is now. Such speculation may be comforting for the architects of the 2011 war, but it is hardly a compelling argument for further entanglement today. If Libya was doomed either way, it is difficult to see why U.S. intervention was either necessary or wise.

The Obama administration does not deserve the complete blame for ISIS's presence in Libya. But there were ample warnings in 2011 which the White Housecould have heeded—cautions that intervening could well lead to more misery, instability, and terrorism in Libya. One such admonition, from that ICG report, now looks particularly prophetic:

"If, in the event of such an escalation, the regime should soon suffer total military defeat, it would be reckless to ignore the possibility that the outcome may be not a transition to democracy but rather a potentially prolonged vacuum that could have grave political and security implications for Libya's neighbours as well as aggravate an already serious humanitarian crisis."

Exactly such a vacuum did arise thanks to American-led NATO intervention. ISIS is now trying to fill it, but that doesn't mean that they will, and it certainly won't be easy. They are merely one of many factions competing in a multisided civil war, and the others have proved their mettle on numerous occasions. They are unlikely to allow foreign interlopers to steal the country away from them.

Despite this clear record of failure, interventionists refuse to back down. The most recent example is the former director of Libya for the National Security Council, Ben Fishman, who claimed that "The Obama administration is not responsible for the rise of the Islamic State in Libya."

This assertion—and more broadly the pardoning of *anyone* who orchestrated the disastrous 2011 intervention—is a necessary step in the current push to re-enter the Libyan quagmire. If they admit that the 2011 campaign failed, it will be hard to garner support for more bombing. That is why the cheerleaders for yet another intervention are anxious to shift the blame for Libya's collapse elsewhere.

However, the outcome of the war has made a skeptic of U.S. intervention of one important actor: Barack Obama. In his recent interview with *The Atlantic*'s Jeffrey Goldberg, the president admitted that the intervention in Libya failed. "Libya proved to him," Goldberg writes, "that the Middle East was best avoided." The President reportedly told a former Senate colleague, "There is no way we should commit to governing the Middle East and North Africa…That would be a basic, fundamental mistake." But despite these reservations, the president has already expanded the bombing campaign in Libya.

The battle for the future of Libya should be decided by the people of Libya. U.S. involvement would be unlikely to tip the scales decisively in the favor of our preferred faction—presuming we could find one—and would undermine its authority if it prevailed. And we shouldn't be goaded into acting by our putative allies who have busily fueled the Libyan civil war, and others raging in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. U.S. officials should advise them to stay out, too. If they ignore that warning, and perpetuate the violence in Libya, they should understand that Americans won't save them from the aftermath.

Having apparently learned nothing from the missteps in Libya and the ongoing catastrophe of nation-building in Iraq, the bipartisan foreign policy establishment is ready for another round. Counterfactual excuses and historical revisionism should not persuade us to let them try. Americans should understand that we don't need to overthrow distant governments and roll the dice on what comes after in order to keep America safe. On the contrary, our track record over the last quarter century shows that such interventions often have the opposite effect.

Christopher Preble is vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute.