



Looking for Moderates in All the Wrong Places

Libya and the Failure to Learn From Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria

Trevor Thrall

January 22, 2016

Doubling down on the same strategy that failed so miserably in Syria, the Pentagon is assessing various armed factions in Libya an effort to find partners in the fight against ISIS. Given the recent history of U.S. intervention in the Middle East, it is hard to know what exactly the Obama administration is thinking.

They should know such proxy wars are a dead end. In fact, “an internal C.I.A. study,” the *New York Times* reported in October 2014, found that sending U.S. money and arms to local proxies in conflicts across the world, “rarely works.”

Whatever the administration is thinking, it is clear that they have failed to learn at least five important lessons from the experiences in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria.

The first lesson is that armed groups in the middle of a civil war make lousy allies. None of the groups in Libya cares about what the United States wants; each is preoccupied with its own search for power and influence. True, some groups may agree to take U.S. support, but history reveals that they will do so in order to further their own causes, not to further the U.S. cause. Though none of the Libyan groups in question loves ISIS today, patterns of allegiance can shift quickly. Even if the United States enjoyed a deep knowledge of the Libyan political situation on the ground – which it does not – the United States has little ability to influence the behavior of proxies over the long term.

Second, providing weapons and money to existing conflicts only makes them bigger and more violent. Moreover, there is no promise that American weapons will wind up being used by groups allied with the United States or for purposes aligned with U.S. goals. U.S. experience in this regard is especially poignant. American funding to fight the Russians in the 1980s helped the Taliban rise to power in Afghanistan. In Iraq, the Islamic State has captured thousands of U.S. Humvees, rifles, pistols, mortars, and other equipment originally given to the Iraqi army.

And in Libya, U.S. weapons, including as many as 15,000 shoulder-to-air missiles, already fuel the conflict. In 2011, the United States blessed the transfer of arms from the United Arab Emirates and Qatar to rebels to fight Gadhafi, only to learn that some of the weapons were going to Islamist extremists that are now fighting for control in post-Gadhafi Libya.

Third, taking sides in other people’s wars creates new enemies. By supporting “moderates” in Libya the U.S. will inevitably add to the list of people and groups who are violently unhappy

with the United States. By definition, since the U.S. will not support Islamist groups, its new enemies will be the most extreme groups and this, in turn, will increase the probability of future anti-American terrorism both in Libya and elsewhere.

Fourth, small conflicts have a way of turning into large conflicts. Once the United States engages in Libya, the president's political fate becomes intertwined with Libya's fate. At that point the president will face significant pressure to ensure victory even as setbacks or casualties mount. In Afghanistan and Iraq, presidents Bush and Obama both ordered massive military surges after failing to make progress in pacifying the chaos on the ground. In Syria the Obama administration followed the failed rebel training program by sending thousands more Special Forces troops. From there, the slope gets even more slippery. If ISIS scores a significant military victory against U.S. forces at this point, killing or wounding dozens of soldiers, it is difficult to see how the president could keep a lid on expanding U.S. intervention.

Finally, the United States has failed to learn that being a superpower does not imply the ability to remake the domestic politics of other nations. Despite almost fifteen years of military occupation, threats, bribes, economic development support, training and funding for military and police forces, the United States has made little headway in helping Afghanistan a stable nation or encouraging the Sunni and Shia in Iraq to get along within a system of shared governance. Instead, U.S. efforts have unleashed chaos and spawned the birth of ISIS.

The situation in Libya looks in many respects much like the one in Syria – a dizzying array of factions competing for influence in a society left angry and devastated by decades of oppression and conflict. And as with Syria, U.S. efforts to shape outcomes will be overwhelmed by the more powerful domestic political dynamics at work within Libya.

Trevor Thrall is a senior fellow for the Cato Institute's Defense and Foreign Policy Department.