Obama's Libya Debacle

How a Well-Meaning Intervention Ended in Failure

By Alan Kuperman, FOREIGN AFFAIRS, March/April, 2015

Protesters chant slogans during a rally against former militia fighters in Tripoli, November 2013. (Ahmed Jadallah / Courtesy Reuters)

On March 17, 2011, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1973, spearheaded by the administration of U.S. President Barack Obama, authorizing military intervention in Libya. The goal, Obama explained, was to save the lives of peaceful, pro-democracy protesters who found themselves the target of a crackdown by Libyan dictator Muammar al-Qaddafi. Not only did Qaddafi endanger the momentum of the nascent Arab Spring, which had recently swept away authoritarian regimes in Tunisia and Egypt, but he also was poised to commit a bloodbath in the Libyan city where the uprising had started, said the president. “We knew that if we waited one more day, Benghazi—a city nearly the size of Charlotte—could suffer a massacre that would have reverberated across the region and stained the conscience of the world,” Obama declared.

Two days after the UN authorization, the United States and other NATO countries established a no-fly zone throughout Libya and started bombing Qaddafi’s forces. Seven months later, in October 2011, after an extended military campaign with sustained Western support, rebel forces conquered the country and shot Qaddafi dead.

In the immediate wake of the military victory, U.S. officials were triumphant. Writing in these pages in 2012, Ivo Daalder, then the U.S. permanent representative to NATO, and James Stavridis, then supreme allied commander of Europe, declared, “NATO’s operation in Libya has rightly been hailed as a model intervention.” In the Rose Garden after Qaddafi’s death, Obama himself crowed, “Without putting a single U.S. service member on the ground, we achieved our objectives.” Indeed, the United States seemed to have scored a hat trick: nurturing the Arab Spring, averting a Rwanda-like genocide, and eliminating Libya as a potential source of terrorism.

That verdict, however, turns out to have been premature. In retrospect, Obama’s intervention in Libya was an abject failure, judged even by its own standards. Libya has not only failed to evolve into a democracy; it has devolved into a failed state. Violent deaths and other human rights abuses have increased severalfold. Rather than helping the United States combat terrorism, as Qaddafi did during his last decade in power, Libya now serves as a safe haven for militias affiliated with both al Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). The Libya intervention has harmed other U.S. interests as well: undermining nuclear nonproliferation, chilling Russian cooperation at the UN, and fueling Syria’s civil war.

Despite what defenders of the mission claim, there was a better policy available—not intervening at all, because peaceful Libyan civilians were not actually being targeted. Had the United States and its allies followed that course, they could have spared Libya from the resulting chaos and given it a chance of progress under Qaddafi’s chosen successor: his relatively liberal, Western-educated son Saif al-Islam. Instead, Libya today is riddled with vicious militias and anti-
American terrorists—and thus serves as a cautionary tale of how humanitarian intervention can backfire for both the intervener and those it is intended to help.

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A FAILED STATE

Optimism about Libya reached its apogee in July 2012, when democratic elections brought to power a moderate, secular coalition government—a stark change from Qaddafi’s four decades of dictatorship. But the country quickly slid downhill. Its first elected prime minister, Mustafa Abu Shagour, lasted less than one month in office. His quick ouster foreshadowed the trouble to come: as of this writing, Libya has had seven prime ministers in less than four years. Islamists came to dominate the first postwar parliament, the General National Congress. Meanwhile, the new government failed to disarm dozens of militias that had arisen during NATO’s seven-month intervention, especially Islamist ones, leading to deadly turf battles between rival tribes and commanders, which continue to this day. In October 2013, secessionists in eastern Libya, where most of the country’s oil is located, declared their own government. That same month, Ali Zeidan, then the country’s prime minister, was kidnapped and held hostage. In light of the growing Islamist influence within Libya’s government, in the spring of 2014, the United States postponed a plan to train an armed force of 6,000–8,000 Libyan troops.

By May 2014, Libya had come to the brink of a new civil war—between liberals and Islamists. That month, a renegade secular general named Khalifa Hifter seized control of the air force to attack Islamist militias in Benghazi, later expanding his targets to include the Islamist-dominated legislature in Tripoli. Elections last June did nothing to resolve the chaos. Most Libyans had already given up on democracy, as voter turnout dropped from 1.7 million in the previous poll to just 630,000. Secular parties declared victory and formed a new legislature, the House of Representatives, but the Islamists refused to accept that outcome. The result was two competing parliaments, each claiming to be the legitimate one.

In July, an Islamist militia from the city of Misurata responded to Hifter’s actions by attacking Tripoli, prompting Western embassies to evacuate. After a six-week battle, the Islamists captured the capital in August on behalf of the so-called Libya Dawn coalition, which, together with the defunct legislature, formed what they labeled a “national salvation government.” In October, the newly elected parliament, led by the secular Operation Dignity coalition, fled to the eastern city of Tobruk, where it established a competing interim government, which Libya’s Supreme Court later declared unconstitutional. Libya thus finds itself with two warring governments, each controlling only a fraction of the country’s territory and militias.

As bad as Libya’s human rights situation was under Qaddafi, it has gotten worse since NATO ousted him. Immediately after taking power, the rebels perpetrated scores of reprisal killings, in addition to torturing, beating, and arbitrarily detaining thousands of suspected Qaddafi supporters. The rebels also expelled 30,000 mostly black residents from the town of Tawergha and burned or looted their homes and shops, on the grounds that some of them supposedly had been mercenaries. Six months after the war, Human Rights Watch declared that the abuses “appear to be so widespread and systematic that they may amount to crimes against humanity.”
Such massive violations persist. In October 2013, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights reported that the “vast majority of the estimated 8,000 conflict-related detainees are also being held without due process.” More disturbing, Amnesty International issued a report last year that revealed their savage mistreatment: “Detainees were subjected to prolonged beatings with plastic tubes, sticks, metal bars or cables. In some cases, they were subjected to electric shocks, suspended in contorted positions for hours, kept continuously blindfolded and shackled with their hands tied behind their backs or deprived of food and water.” The report also noted some 93 attacks on Libyan journalists in just the first nine months of 2014, “including abductions, arbitrary arrests, assassinations, assassination attempts and assaults.” Ongoing attacks in western Libya, the report concluded, “amount to war crimes.” As a consequence of such pervasive violence, the UN estimates that roughly 400,000 Libyans have fled their homes, a quarter of whom have left the country altogether.

Libya’s quality of life has been sharply degraded by an economic free fall. That is mainly because the country’s production of oil, its lifeblood, remains severely depressed by the protracted conflict. Prior to the revolution, Libya produced 1.65 million barrels of oil a day, a figure that dropped to zero during NATO’s intervention. Although production temporarily recovered to 85 percent of its previous rate, ever since secessionists seized eastern oil ports in August 2013, output has averaged only 30 percent of the prewar level. Ongoing fighting has closed airports and seaports in Libya’s two biggest cities, Tripoli and Benghazi. In many cities, residents are subjected to massive power outages—up to 18 hours a day in Tripoli. The recent privation represents a stark descent for a country that the UN’s Human Development Index traditionally had ranked as having the highest standard of living in all of Africa.

THE HUMAN COST

Although the White House justified its mission in Libya on humanitarian grounds, the intervention in fact greatly magnified the death toll there. To begin with, Qaddafi’s crackdown turns out to have been much less lethal than media reports indicated at the time. In eastern Libya, where the uprising began as a mix of peaceful and violent protests, Human Rights Watch documented only 233 deaths in the first days of the fighting, not 10,000, as had been reported by the Saudi news channel Al Arabiya. In fact, as I documented in a 2013 International Security article, from mid-February 2011, when the rebellion started, to mid-March 2011, when NATO intervened, only about 1,000 Libyans died, including soldiers and rebels. Although an Al Jazeera article touted by Western media in early 2011 alleged that Qaddafi’s air force had strafed and bombed civilians in Benghazi and Tripoli, “the story was untrue,” revealed an exhaustive examination in the London Review of Books by Hugh Roberts of Tufts University. Indeed, striving to minimize civilian casualties, Qaddafi’s forces had refrained from indiscriminate violence.

The best statistical evidence of that comes from Misurata, Libya’s third-largest city, where the initial fighting raged most intensely. Human Rights Watch found that of the 949 people wounded there in the rebellion’s first seven weeks, only 30 (just over three percent) were women or children, which indicates that Qaddafi’s forces had narrowly targeted combatants, who were virtually all male. During that same period in Misurata, only 257 people were killed, a tiny fraction of the city’s 400,000 residents.
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The same pattern of restraint was evident in Tripoli, where the government used significant force for only two days prior to NATO’s intervention, to beat back violent protesters who were burning government buildings. Libyan doctors subsequently told a UN investigative commission that they observed more than 200 corpses in the city’s morgues on February 20–21 but that only two of them were female. These statistics refute the notion that Qaddafi’s forces fired indiscriminately at peaceful civilians.

Moreover, by the time NATO intervened, Libya’s violence was on the verge of ending. Qaddafi’s well-armed forces had routed the ragtag rebels, who were retreating home. By mid-March 2011, government forces were poised to recapture the last rebel stronghold of Benghazi, thereby ending the one-month conflict at a total cost of just over 1,000 lives. Just then, however, Libyan expatriates in Switzerland affiliated with the rebels issued warnings of an impending “bloodbath” in Benghazi, which Western media duly reported but which in retrospect appear to have been propaganda. In reality, on March 17, Qaddafi pledged to protect the civilians of Benghazi, as he had those of other recaptured cities, adding that his forces had “left the way open” for the rebels to retreat to Egypt. Simply put, the militants were about to lose the war, and so their overseas agents raised the specter of genocide to attract a NATO intervention—which worked like a charm. There is no evidence or reason to believe that Qaddafi had planned or intended to perpetrate a killing campaign.

Admittedly, the government did attempt to intimidate the rebels, promising to pursue them relentlessly. But Qaddafi never translated that rhetoric into targeting civilians. From March 5 to March 15, 2011, government forces recaptured all but one of the major rebel-held cities, and in none did they kill civilians in revenge, let alone commit a bloodbath. Indeed, as his forces approached Benghazi, Qaddafi issued public reassurances that they would harm neither civilians nor rebels who disarmed. On March 17, he directly addressed the rebels of Benghazi: “Throw away your weapons, exactly like your brothers in Ajdabiya and other places did. They laid down their arms and they are safe. We never pursued them at all.”

Two days later, however, the NATO air campaign halted Qaddafi’s offensive. As a result, Benghazi did not return to government control, the rebels did not flee, and the war did not end. Instead, the militants reversed their retreat and went back on the offensive. Eventually, on October 20, 2011, the rebels found Qaddafi, tortured him, and then summarily executed him. The regime’s last remnants fell three days later. All told, the intervention extended Libya’s civil war from less than six weeks to more than eight months.

Claims of the number killed during the war have varied wildly. At a closed-door conference in November 2011 organized by the Brookings Institution, one U.S. official characterized the final death toll as “around 8,000.” By contrast, the rebels’ health minister asserted in September 2011, before the war was even over, that 30,000 Libyans had already died. However, the postwar government’s Ministry of Martyrs and Missing Persons sharply reduced that figure to 4,700 civilians and rebels, plus an equal or lesser number of regime forces, and 2,100 people missing on both sides—for a high-end death estimate of 11,500.
Aggregate casualty statistics were not compiled during the subsequent two years of persistent low-level conflict, but reports did emerge of several significant skirmishes, such as a March 2012 fight between rival tribes in the southern city of Sabha that left 147 dead. In light of such figures, it is reasonable to estimate that the conflict killed at least 500 people a year in 2012 and 2013. Better data are available for the renewed civil war of 2014. The website Libya Body Count, which documents casualties daily, reports that the total number of Libyans killed last year was more than 2,750. Moreover, unlike Qaddafi’s forces in 2011, the militias fighting in Libya today do use force indiscriminately. In August 2014, for example, the Tripoli Medical Center reported that of the 100 killed in recent violence, 40 were women and at least nine were children. The following month, in a blatant war crime, militants fired a multiple-rocket launcher at a medical facility.

This grim math leads to a depressing but unavoidable conclusion. Before NATO’s intervention, Libya’s civil war was on the verge of ending, at the cost of barely 1,000 lives. Since then, however, Libya has suffered at least 10,000 additional deaths from conflict. In other words, NATO’s intervention appears to have increased the violent death toll more than tenfold.

TERRITORY FOR TERRORISTS

Another unintended consequence of the Libya intervention has been to amplify the threat of terrorism from the country. Although Qaddafi supported terrorism decades ago—as witnessed by his regime’s later paying reparations for the Lockerbie airplane bombing of 1988—the Libyan leader had evolved into a U.S. ally against global terrorism even before 9/11. He did so partly because he faced a domestic threat from al Qaeda–affiliated militants, the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group. Qaddafi’s external security chief, Moussa Koussa, met multiple times with senior CIA officials to provide intelligence about Libyan fighters in Afghanistan and about the Pakistani nuclear peddler A. Q. Khan. In 2009, General William Ward, who headed U.S. Africa Command, praised Libya as “a top partner in combating transnational terrorism.”

Since NATO’s intervention in 2011, however, Libya and its neighbor Mali have turned into terrorist havens. Radical Islamist groups, which Qaddafi had suppressed, emerged under NATO air cover as some of the most competent fighters of the rebellion. Supplied with weapons by sympathetic countries such as Qatar, the militias refused to disarm after Qaddafi fell. Their persistent threat was highlighted in September 2012 when jihadists, including from the group Ansar al-Sharia, attacked the U.S. diplomatic compound in Benghazi, killing Christopher Stevens, the U.S. ambassador to Libya, and three of his colleagues. Last year, the UN formally declared Ansar al-Sharia a terrorist organization because of its affiliation with al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.

Libya’s Islamist militants are now fighting for control of the entire country, and they are making headway. In April 2014, they captured a secret military base near Tripoli that, ironically, U.S. special operations forces had established in the summer of 2012 to train Libyan counterterrorist forces. Qatar and Sudan have flown weapons to the Islamists as recently as September 2014. In response, the more secular governments of the United Arab Emirates and Egypt launched air strikes against Islamist militants in Tripoli and Benghazi in August and October of last year. Libya’s jihadists now include more than just al Qaeda affiliates; as of January 2015, factions
aligned with ISIS, also known as the Islamic State, have perpetrated killings or kidnappings in all three of Libya’s traditional administrative zones.

NATO’s intervention also fostered Islamist terrorism elsewhere in the region. When Qaddafi fell, the ethnic Tuaregs of Mali within his security forces fled home with their weapons to launch their own rebellion. That uprising was quickly hijacked by local Islamist forces and al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, which declared an independent Islamic state in Mali’s northern half. By December 2012, this zone of Mali had become “the largest territory controlled by Islamic extremists in the world,” according to Senator Christopher Coons, chair of the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Africa. The danger was elaborated by The New York Times, which reported that “al Qaeda’s affiliate in North Africa is operating terrorist training camps in northern Mali and providing arms, explosives and financing to a militant Islamist organization in northern Nigeria.” But the spillover from Libya did not stop there, also spurring deadly ethnic conflict in Burkina Faso and the growth of radical Islam in Niger. To contain this threat, in early 2013, France was compelled to deploy thousands of troops to Mali, some of whom continue to fight jihadists in the country’s north.

The terrorism problem was exacerbated by the leakage of sensitive weapons from Qaddafi’s arsenal to radical Islamists across North Africa and the Middle East. Peter Bouckaert of Human Rights Watch estimates that ten times as many weapons went loose in Libya as in Somalia, Afghanistan, or Iraq. Perhaps the greatest concern is man-portable air defense systems, known as MANPADs, which in capable hands can be used to shoot down both civilian airliners and military aircraft. Up to 15,000 such missiles were unaccounted for as of February 2012, according to a U.S. State Department official cited in a Washington Post column; a $40 million buyback effort had secured only 5,000 of them. The column added that hundreds of these weapons were still on the loose, including in Niger, where some had been obtained by Boko Haram, the radical Islamist group across the border in northern Nigeria. Another few dozen have been found in Algeria and Egypt.

The missiles have even made their way through Egypt to the Gaza Strip. In October 2012, militants there fired one for the first time, just missing an Israeli army helicopter, and Israeli officials said that the weapons originated in Libya. More recently, in early 2014, Islamists in Egypt used another such missile to shoot down a military helicopter. Libyan MANPADs and sea mines have even surfaced in West African arms markets, where Somali buyers have snapped them up for Islamist rebels and pirates far away in northeastern Africa.

THE BROADER BACKLASH

The harm from the intervention in Libya extends well beyond the immediate neighborhood. For one thing, by helping overthrow Qaddafi, the United States undercut its own nuclear nonproliferation objectives. In 2003, Qaddafi had voluntarily halted his nuclear and chemical weapons programs and surrendered his arsenals to the United States. His reward, eight years later, was a U.S.-led regime change that culminated in his violent death. That experience has greatly complicated the task of persuading other states to halt or reverse their nuclear programs. Shortly after the air campaign began, North Korea released a statement from an unnamed Foreign Ministry official saying that “the Libyan crisis is teaching the international community a
grave lesson” and that North Korea would not fall for the same U.S. “tactic to disarm the country.” Iran’s supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, likewise noted that Qaddafi had “wrapped up all his nuclear facilities, packed them on a ship, and delivered them to the West.” Another well-connected Iranian, Abbas Abdi, observed: “When Qaddafi was faced with an uprising, all Western leaders dropped him like a brick. Judging from that, our leaders assess that compromise is not helpful.”

The intervention in Libya may also have fostered violence in Syria. In March 2011, Syria’s uprising was still largely nonviolent, and the Assad government’s response, although criminally disproportionate, was relatively circumscribed, claiming the lives of fewer than 100 Syrians per week. After NATO gave Libya’s rebels the upper hand, however, Syria’s revolutionaries turned to violence in the summer of 2011, perhaps expecting to attract a similar intervention. “It’s similar to Benghazi,” a Syrian rebel told The Washington Post at the time, adding, “We need a no-fly zone.” The result was a massive escalation of the Syrian conflict, leading to at least 1,500 deaths per week by early 2013, a 15-fold increase.

NATO’s mission in Libya also hindered peacemaking efforts in Syria by greatly antagonizing Russia. With Moscow’s acquiescence, the UN Security Council had approved the establishment of a no-fly zone in Libya and other measures to protect civilians. But NATO exceeded that mandate to pursue regime change. The coalition targeted Qaddafi’s forces for seven months—even as they retreated, posing no threat to civilians—and armed and trained rebels who rejected peace talks. As Russian President Vladimir Putin complained, NATO forces “frankly violated the UN Security Council resolution on Libya, when instead of imposing the so-called no-fly zone over it they started bombing it too.” His foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov, explained that as a result, in Syria, Russia “would never allow the Security Council to authorize anything similar to what happened in Libya.”

Early in the Arab Spring, proponents of intervening in Libya had claimed that this course would sustain the momentum of the relatively peaceful uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. In reality, NATO’s action not only failed to spread peaceful revolution but also encouraged the militarization of the uprising in Syria and impeded the prospect of UN intervention there. For Syria and its neighbors, the consequence has been the tragic exacerbation of three pathologies: humanitarian suffering, sectarianism, and radical Islam.

THE ROAD NOT TAKEN

Despite the massive turmoil caused by the intervention, some of its unrepentant supporters claim that the alternative—leaving Qaddafi in power—would have been even worse. But Qaddafi was not Libya’s future in any case. Sixty-nine years old and in ill health, he was laying the groundwork for a transition to his son Saif, who for many years had been preparing a reform agenda. “I will not accept any position unless there is a new constitution, new laws, and transparent elections,” Saif declared in 2010. “Everyone should have access to public office. We should not have a monopoly on power.” Saif also convinced his father that the regime should admit culpability for a notorious 1996 prison massacre and pay compensation to the families of hundreds of victims. In addition, in 2008, Saif published testimony from former prisoners
alleging torture by revolutionary committees—the regime’s zealous but unofficial watchdogs—whom he demanded be disarmed.

From 2009 to 2010, Saif persuaded his father to release nearly all of Libya’s political prisoners, creating a deradicalization program for Islamists that Western experts cited as a model. He also advocated abolishing Libya’s Information Ministry in favor of private media. He even flew in renowned American scholars—including Francis Fukuyama, Robert Putnam, and Cass Sunstein—to lecture on civil society and democracy. Perhaps the clearest indication of Saif’s reform credentials is that in 2011, the revolution’s top political leaders turned out to be officials whom he had brought into the government earlier. Mahmoud Jibril, prime minister of the rebels’ National Transitional Council during the war, had led Saif’s National Economic Development Board. Mustafa Abdel Jalil, chair of the National Transitional Council, was selected by Saif in 2007 to promote judicial reform as Libya’s justice minister, which he did until defecting to the rebels.

Of course, it is impossible to know if Saif would have proved willing or able to transform Libya. He faced opposition from entrenched interests, as even his father did when attempting reform. In 2010, conservatives temporarily closed the media outlets that Saif owned because one of his newspapers had published an op-ed critical of the government. By late 2010, however, the elder Qaddafi had sacked his more hard-line son Mutassim, a move that appeared to pave the way for Saif and his reformist agenda. Although Saif was not going to turn Libya into a Jeffersonian democracy overnight, he did appear intent on eliminating the most egregious inefficiencies and inequities of his father’s regime.

Even after the war began, respected observers voiced confidence in Saif. In a New York Times op-ed, Curt Weldon, a former ten-term Republican U.S. congressman from Pennsylvania, wrote that Saif “could play a constructive role as a member of the committee to devise a new government structure or Constitution.” Instead, NATO-supported militants captured and imprisoned Qaddafi’s son. In an October 2014 jailhouse interview with the journalist Franklin Lamb, Saif voiced his regrets: “We were in the process of making broad reforms, and my father gave me the responsibility to see them through. Unfortunately, the revolt happened, and both sides made mistakes that are now allowing extreme Islamist groups like Da’ish [ISIS] to pick up the pieces and turn Libya into an extreme fundamentalist entity.”

LEARNING FROM LIBYA

Obama also acknowledges regrets about Libya, but unfortunately, he has drawn the wrong lesson. “I think we underestimated . . . the need to come in full force,” the president told the New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman in August 2014. “If you’re gonna do this,” he elaborated, “there has to be a much more aggressive effort to rebuild societies.”

But that is exactly the wrong take-away. The error in Libya was not an inadequate post-intervention effort; it was the decision to intervene in the first place. In cases such as Libya, where a government is quashing a rebellion, military intervention is very likely to backfire by fostering violence, state failure, and terrorism. The prospect of intervention also creates perverse
incentives for militants to provoke government retaliation and then cry genocide to attract foreign assistance—the moral hazard of humanitarian intervention.

The real lesson of Libya is that when a state is narrowly targeting rebels, the international community needs to refrain from launching a military campaign on humanitarian grounds to help the militants. Western audiences should also beware cynical rebels who exaggerate not only the state’s violence but their own popular support, too. Even where a regime is highly flawed, as Qaddafi’s was, chances are that intervention will only fuel civil war—destabilizing the country, endangering civilians, and paving the way for extremists. The prudent path is to promote peaceful reform of the type that Qaddafi’s son Saif was pursuing.

Humanitarian intervention should be reserved for the rare instances in which civilians are being targeted and military action can do more good than harm, such as Rwanda in 1994, where I have estimated that a timely operation could have saved over 100,000 lives. Of course, great powers sometimes may want to use force abroad for other reasons—to fight terrorism, avert nuclear proliferation, or overthrow a noxious dictator. But they should not pretend the resulting war is humanitarian, or be surprised when it gets a lot of innocent civilians killed.