

# BACKGROUND

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## Intervention in Libya: Lessons in Leading

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### Abstract

*Four years after U.S. military intervention in Libya, the oil-rich country has disintegrated in a series of sub-state conflicts. The plundering of Muammar Qadhafi's vast stocks of arms, and their proliferation throughout northern Africa after his death, has destabilized the greater Sahel region. The Obama Administration's decision to "lead from behind" (read: not to lead) in Libya, and its failure to implement a strategy that accounted for what should follow in the days after "liberation," resulted in the worst of all outcomes: Libya as a haven for terrorists, U.S. influence diminished, and U.S. security interests placed at greater risk. The United States must finally learn the lesson that it must have a plan not only to win a war, but also to win the peace.*

### Weeds of the Arab Spring

The Arab Spring undoubtedly changed the political, economic, and security landscape in the Middle East and North Africa. More than four years after the self-immolation of Tunisian street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi and the catalytic explosion of the event on social media among Arab youth populations, authoritarian regimes quickly came under fire, with protests and rebellions erupting in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Bahrain, Syria, Jordan, and Morocco. While the leadership in Jordan and Morocco responded quickly to popular demands to reform the political systems and hold constitutional referenda, authoritarian regimes in Syria and Libya fared very differently. Syria remains mired in a brutal civil war and has become an Islamist terrorist paradise spanning the Syrian–Iraqi border. Oil-rich Libya has disintegrated in a series of sub-state conflicts.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/bg3008>

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### KEY POINTS

- Since the U.S. intervention in Libya in 2011, the oil-rich country has become not only a breeding ground for terrorism, but also the headquarters for a lethal proxy war in which Turkey, Qatar, and Sudan support Islamist-extremist factions.
- U.S. intervention consisted of a supporting role—"leading from behind"—while France and the U.K. led coalition airstrikes.
- The Administration argued that this role would prevent the U.S. from being dragged into yet another foreign morass while allowing other states to exercise leadership.
- But the President's decision not to lead in Libya, and the failure to implement a post-Qadhafi strategy, resulted in the worst of all outcomes: Libya as a haven for terrorists, U.S. influence diminished, and U.S. security interests placed at greater risk.
- The U.S. must finally learn that it needs a strategy not just to win wars, but also to win the peace.

The plundering of Muammar Qadhafi's vast stocks of arms, and their proliferation throughout northern Africa after his death, destabilized the greater Sahel region, including the Islamist and Tuareg insurgencies in Mali. Libya has become not only a breeding ground for terrorism, but also the regional cockpit for a lethal proxy war in which Turkey, Qatar, and Sudan support Islamist extremist factions, and Egypt and the United Arab Emirates support a "moderate" eastern alliance of a mix of political groups.<sup>1</sup> Surely, this is not what the Obama Administration had in mind when it undertook to remove Qadhafi from power with a now-infamous "lead from behind" style of intervention in Libya.<sup>2</sup>

### The "Liberation" of Libya

The Arab uprisings, beginning in late 2010 and spilling into 2011, presented serious challenges for the Obama Administration. While the "Arab Spring" was met with euphoric reactions in many Western capitals, including Washington, the conditions on the ground in many countries, particularly in Libya, did not favor the establishment of a stable democracy. In fact, it was highly questionable whether democracy could take root at all in a country ravaged for decades by a brutal dictator, and lacking any experience with democratic traditions or sustainable state institutions. As if to validate this concern, Qadhafi responded in true dictatorial fashion to the protests heating up in Libya—with brute force.

By late February 2011, members of the Qadhafi regime were renouncing the government and pressuring the United Nations to help depose Qadhafi. In response to this and growing reports of violence against civilians, the U.N. Security Council

passed Resolution 1970 (UNSCR 1970)<sup>3</sup> on February 26, condemning the Qadhafi regime's use of force against protestors, imposing an arms embargo, and restricting travel rights and freezing financial assets of designated government officials. By mid-March, fears of the regime's forces committing mass atrocities to suppress the rebel momentum was a turning point for the Obama Administration, although subsequent reporting from groups such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch indicated that the scale of violence on the ground was not as great as the scenario that the Administration used to build an intervention narrative.<sup>4</sup> On March 17, the U.N. Security Council passed UNSCR 1973,<sup>5</sup> which reaffirmed the concerns and provisions of UNSCR 1970, authorized U.N. member states to "take all necessary measures...to protect civilians and civilian populated areas under threat of attack" by the government, but forbade foreign occupation of Libya.

Operation Odyssey Dawn,<sup>6</sup> led by France and the United Kingdom and supported by the U.S., was launched to implement UNSCR 1973. Control of the operation was passed to NATO on March 31, 2011, which continued implementation under Operation Unified Protector.<sup>7</sup> Again, the U.S. was in support, providing command-and-control capabilities, intelligence, cruise missile strikes, and supplying various precision-guided munitions ("smart bombs" and cruise missiles) to the international force.

After several months, Libyan opposition groups, with assistance from the international community, were able to push back government forces and gain control of eastern Libya, including the city of Benghazi, and methodically expand their control westward to eventually take control of Tripoli. Fighting

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1. "Libya: The Next Failed State," *The Economist*, January 10, 2015, <http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21638122-another-font-global-mayhem-emerging-not-helped-regional-meddling-and-western> (accessed March 17, 2015).
  2. Aamer Madhani, "Obama Says Libya's Qaddafi Must Go," *National Journal*, March 3, 2011, <http://www.nationaljournal.com/obama-says-libya-s-qaddafi-must-go-20110303> (accessed March 17, 2015).
  3. United Nations Security Council, "Resolution 1970 (2011)," February 26, 2011, [http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/1970%282011%29](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/1970%282011%29) (accessed March 17, 2015).
  4. Alan Kuperman, "Lessons from Libya: How Not to Intervene," Harvard Kennedy School, Belfer Center *Policy Brief*, September 2013, [http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/publication/23387/lessons\\_from\\_libya.html](http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/publication/23387/lessons_from_libya.html) (accessed March 17, 2015).
  5. United Nations Security Council, "Resolution 1973 (2011)," March 17, 2011, [http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/1973%282011%29](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/1973%282011%29) (accessed March 17, 2015).
  6. Jim Garamone, "Coalition Launches 'Operation Odyssey Dawn,'" American Forces Press Service, March 19, 2011, <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=63225> (accessed March 17, 2015).
  7. North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "NATO and Libya: Operation Unified Protector, February–October 2011," March 27, 2012, <http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/71679.htm> (accessed March 17, 2015).

between Qadhafi loyalists and the forces of the self-appointed National Transitional Council (NTC) raged from February to mid-November 2011, with NTC forces having captured all major cities by late October. Qadhafi was killed on October 20. By mid-November, the governments of all major foreign states had formally recognized the NTC as the official government of Libya. Operation Unified Protector formally ended on October 31 after the NTC declared Libya liberated,<sup>8</sup> at which time multinational involvement effectively ceased, including any meaningful involvement by the United States.

What unfolded in Libya after its liberation was predicted by many, but the situation in the country and its geographic proximity to the region's other hotspots and the capitals of Europe should have been more cause for concern during the initial planning phases. One must look no further than former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates's brief breakdown of Libya's fragmented history prior to unification to understand what the country could devolve back into absent a significant unifying force, something the Obama Administration decided not to facilitate.<sup>9</sup>

### **Desired Outcomes Demand Committed Involvement**

During the initial crisis period, when the population rose up against the regime, the various factions involved were relatively unified and focused by the common objective of regime overthrow. Once Qadhafi was gone, however, the institutions necessary to govern a country and maintain security—from national defense to local law enforcement—also ceased to exist in any coordinated or unified sense. Militias and tribal groups once allied in their quest to defeat Qadhafi were now faced with a very different reality in Libya: competition for political dominance.

But as is the case with the majority of revolutions, power was set to pass on “to the best organized and most ruthless elements in the revolution.”<sup>10</sup> The new NTC, composed of a great many factions, became consumed with the immediate challenges of organizing a government that accounted for the diversity of interests and objectives. While the NTC focused on that task, the rest of the country descended into chaos, resulting in opportunistic exploitation by groups large and small in major cities and across the country, loss of control of borders (enabling the movement of groups from other countries into Libya), and loss of control of Qadhafi's old weapons stores, which were looted and the arms distributed among a multitude of militias. The arms were proliferated across the loosely controlled borders to places such as northern Mali, destabilizing the region further.

Throughout the intervention, the U.S. played a supporting role—“leading from behind”<sup>11</sup>—while France and the U.K. led coalition airstrikes and related activities. The Obama Administration argued that this supporting role would prevent the U.S. from being dragged into yet another foreign morass while creating opportunities for other states to exercise leadership in their own regions. Critics argued that this approach was one more step in the diminution of U.S. influence that would result in lessened ability to shape the affairs and conditions of countries, regions, and issues of importance to U.S. interests.<sup>12</sup> What is clear is that without a policy that accounted for the removal of the Qadhafi regime, the coalition that worked for Qadhafi's removal had no effective mechanism by which to implement a “comprehensive effort to build a workable governance or internal security apparatus.”<sup>13</sup>

By the time it became clear that the situation was spiraling into chaos, it was too late to do anything

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8. North Atlantic Treaty Organization, “NATO Secretary General Statement on End of Libya Mission,” October 28, 2011, [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/news\\_80052.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/news_80052.htm) (accessed March 17, 2015).
  9. Robert M. Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (New York: Knopf, 2014), p. 522.
  10. Niall Ferguson, “Americans and Revolutions,” *Newsweek*, February 27, 2011, <http://www.newsweek.com/niall-ferguson-americans-and-revolutions-68631> (accessed March 17, 2015).
  11. Ryan Lizza, “The Consequentialist: How the Arab Spring Remade Obama's Foreign Policy,” *The New Yorker*, May 2, 2011, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/05/02/the-consequentialist> (accessed March 17, 2015).
  12. Charles Krauthammer, “The Obama Doctrine: Leading from Behind,” *The Washington Post*, April 28, 2011, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-obama-doctrine-leading-from-behind/2011/04/28/AFBCy18E\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-obama-doctrine-leading-from-behind/2011/04/28/AFBCy18E_story.html) (accessed March 17, 2015).
  13. John Hudson, “It's Not Benghazi, It's Everything,” *Foreign Policy*, May 20, 2014, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/05/20/its-not-benghazi-its-everything/> (accessed March 17, 2015).

about it. Because the U.S. was not prepared to take effective action to stabilize Libya at the outset, the power vacuum created by Qadhafi's removal, the inherent dysfunction of the indigenous militia coalition, and the unwillingness of the multinational coalition to be more involved combined to favor the growth of Islamist extremists and the resulting regional instability. Programs to secure armories or to disarm militias were not taken seriously by the coalition partners, and it was not until 2013, nearly two years later, that the Obama Administration seriously considered supporting the professionalization of the security forces.

Given the lessons that should have been learned from the consequences of some of the early decisions in the Iraq war, such as disbanding local law enforcement and other stabilizing authorities in the wake of Saddam Hussein's removal, it is alarming that nearly the same mistakes were made in Libya. The failure of the Coalition, and of U.S. leadership in particular, to plan for potential post-Qadhafi developments and to take a more proactive role in shaping the outcome of events has resulted in Libya being well on its way to becoming a new Somalia.

### **Leading Means Leading**

For a U.S. Administration that has so often addressed the supposed failings of the Bush Administration in Iraq and Afghanistan, the decision to support the rebels in Libya in March 2011 without a clear strategy for engagement with Libya after Qadhafi seems naive, if not tragically irresponsible. There was no clearly defined endgame or articulation of what victory would look like once Qadhafi was deposed. Consequently, the Administration appears not to have had any plan for dealing with Libya's resulting condition. The events that have unfolded in Libya (including the death of four Americans, among them Ambassador Christopher Stevens in 2012) over the past four years highlight the dangers of not fully considering the consequences of a minimalist approach to something as significant as regime change. Putting aside the debate over whether it was appropriate for the U.S. to become involved in the multinational military intervention, once the Obama Administration chose to become involved, it also chose to allow others to determine outcomes.

Leading from behind ultimately led to fewer options and opportunities to correct course, because

the U.S. was not at the helm to steer the effort as the situation changed. Today, Libya is a boiling cauldron in which an array of interests are mixed to include the security of neighboring Europe and regional powers in the Middle East, the hyper-violent efforts of extremist groups such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State to extend and consolidate their rule, and the competing efforts of a vast array of militias, ranging from moderate to radical, to dominate the local political landscape, with many now serving as proxies for external interests.

The effect of instability rippling out from Libya has been chilling. The Tuareg-based insurgency in northern Mali was overtaken by an Islamist insurgency; the situation grew with such intensity and reach in 2013 that the French were compelled to intervene militarily. Vast numbers of weapons looted from Libya have proliferated across the region, some of which are believed to now be in northern Nigeria, Gaza, and in the Sinai Peninsula in Egypt—a deeply troubling development for regional and international security.

### **Lessons for Leadership**

Though the story of post-Qadhafi Libya is still unfolding in blood and mayhem, there are five key lessons that must be learned if policymakers and national leaders are to avoid yet another tragic repeat of missed opportunities and unnecessary loss:

- 1. Determine national interests at stake.** Determine what interests are at stake with the existing powers and actors in place, how important those interests are to the nation, and whether those interests are sufficiently in jeopardy to warrant not only the effort necessary to change conditions but to hazard unexpected outcomes.
- 2. Envision what follows.** Before deciding to change an existing order, decide what one would like to see in its place and determine whether the will, time, and resources exist to make that outcome happen. If one cannot envision and articulate what the day-after should look like, and has not determined to commit the resources necessary to see the effort through, it is generally unwise to trade the known for whatever fate might bring.

**3. Assess the risk to one's own interests if others are determining the outcome.** If deciding to cede leadership at the beginning to others, one cannot be surprised if they quit once their interests are satisfied, leaving one's own interests unmet or the general situation in disarray.

**4. Develop an appropriate strategy.** Starting a war is relatively easy. Winning one is never assured, but for the U.S., against most any country, it is much more likely than not. Winning the peace, however, takes skill, focus, statecraft, and a long-term commitment. Any U.S. strategy for intervention must always account not only for the actions necessary to defeat an opposing power militarily, but for establishing the basis for what is to follow, and for influencing and shaping the power structure meant to replace the one just removed. U.S. strategy should always include consideration of "what comes after."

**5. Accept the burden of leadership, an essential element for success.** Leading from behind, that is, depending on others to see to U.S. interests, is a prescription for leaving U.S. interests behind. Other powers will always place a higher priority on their own interests that will not necessarily align with those of the U.S. Leading from behind means that others will shape things along paths that serve their interests, which can include lack of any interest in remaining involved at all after the military objective has been accomplished. This is what happened in Libya with the consequence that when everyone else went home, the U.S. had no ability, no vantage point, by which to influence how conditions evolved post-Qadhafi. If the U.S. means to see an outcome acceptable to its interests, it must shoulder the burden of leading the effort, including the frustrating work of establishing a viable postwar order.

As amply illustrated in the multinational effort to support the liberation of Libya from the dictatorial rule of Muammar Qadhafi, breaking apart an existing order and then walking away assuming that the resulting shambles will somehow realign in a desirable outcome without further involvement was a recipe for disaster. U.S. policymakers should have foreseen that, in the chaotic aftermath of war,

creating a functional government would not be an easy task and would be all the more difficult in the absence of any third party able to act as a mediator among competing factions. Further, the U.S. should have expected that competition for power and influence in the new Libya might not resolve in favor of U.S. interests, thus highlighting the importance of remaining involved in the rebuilding of Libya's governing and security structures to shape their development along a preferred path. It is always in the United States' interest to ensure that its interests are not critically dependent on the efforts of others.

Having been the single most important enabler of the multinational effort to overthrow Qadhafi, by providing the means to wage war, the reputation of the U.S. was inextricably linked to the outcome in Libya. Further, America's security interests—both in the physical security of its friends and allies and the security of America itself and that of Americans abroad—were likewise tied to what would rise from the ashes. A stable Libya with a government that is friendly to the U.S. would preclude the rise of terrorist elements using the country as an operational sanctuary. But a Libya torn by war and mired in anarchy is everything the U.S. had "led from behind" to change. Worse still, a Libya riven by warring factions and lacking the involvement of any great power to help steer its path toward stability is the sort of sanctuary for terrorists that not even Qadhafi would have tolerated.

The Obama Administration's decision not to lead in Libya, and its failure to implement a strategy that accounted for what should follow in the days after "liberation," resulted in the worst of all outcomes: Libya as a haven for terrorists, U.S. influence diminished, and U.S. security interests placed at greater risk.

Final lesson: The United States must have a plan to win the peace—not just the war.

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