

An Examination of Decisions to Intervene in Libya and Syria

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PAUL STOKES, JUN 23 2012

Why did the International Community Decide to Intervene in Libya, yet not in Syria?

"The Middle East is a region where fools rush in, but wise men fear to tread."

– Leon Carl Brown

This essay will explain why two countries, Libya and Syria – and two leaders, Muammar al-Gaddafi and Bashar al-Assad – that have been very similar regarding divisiveness in their regional and international relations, have elicited two very different reactions from the international community over the past year. I will begin by comparing the international relations of the two states over the past few decades, in an attempt to both identify respective alliances each might have, and to highlight the equally deleterious effects that some policies have had in the region. I will then offer four reasons that intervention was deemed appropriate in Libya: a weak security apparatus, comparatively weak alliances, excitable and inconsistent foreign policies, and unique circumstances for intervention. This is in stark comparison to Syria's situation where intervention is still unforthcoming: a loyal security apparatus, very strong alliances with Russia and Iran, strategic importance in the peace-process with Israel, and their influence over Hezbollah. I will finally offer a complementary explanation that asserts that the recent popularity of Islamist political parties, emanating from democratic elections in Tunisia and Egypt, is being viewed cautiously by Israel, the region's superpower and beacon of democracy. A similar outcome in Syria could prove detrimental to their security. The question I will be attempting to answer is *why* for two countries so similar, one seems to have had the towel thrown in, and the other has been left to go a few more rounds.

On September 1, 1969, following a military coup, Muammar al-Gaddafi seized power in Libya. For the next 42 years he would be the *de facto* leader of the State until the UN-authorized intervention in 2011. Describing Gaddafi's time in power, Luis Martinez tells us that he:

"...very much wanted to achieve the role of a major international actor, but the inconsistencies in his foreign policies, his frequent antagonism toward neighbouring countries, his support for radical, fringe groups, and his inability to rally Arab or African support for his more extreme positions have consistently undercut his efforts at leadership beyond Libya's borders" (Martinez, 2011: 566-567).

The first thirty years of Gaddafi's rule were consistent with this analysis. The Libyan leader defined his foreign policy through "hostility towards the West and Israel, his promotion of Arab unity schemes, and the exertion of Libyan influence over its neighbours" (Martinez, 2011: 567). He was a supporter of terrorism and financed and armed groups as far and wide as the IRA in Northern Ireland (Davis, 1990: 10), and rebel factions throughout Africa – in Chad, Sudan, Tunisia and Mauritania (Martinez, 2011:567). In an effort to cement Libya's place at the top of Arab politics, Gaddafi took a hard line approach to the issue of Israel. Here, again, Gaddafi financed militants and aided the Palestinians via "funds, bases, and training" (Martinez, 2011: 567). Setting it apart from other Arab states, Libya opposed the Israeli-Palestinian Oslo Accords in 1993 (Martinez, 2011: 567). However, in the late 1990s, Gaddafi's stance softened. He eased relations with Israel and the Palestinian Authority, reduced tensions with the United States and began again to hold some sway in the international arena. Surprisingly, just days after the attacks on New

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York and Washington, D.C. in 2001, Gaddafi “declared that the United States had the right to take reprisals against terrorist attacks” (Martinez, 2011: 569) and on foot of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, Muhamad Chalgam (effectively, the Libyan foreign minister) “publicly announced that the Libyan government would disclose and end all of its unconventional weapons programs” (Martinez, 2011: 569). Such back-tracking in foreign policy came at the same time that Libyan intelligence agent Abdel Basset Ali al-Megrahi, the Lockerbie bomber, was handed over for trial. In 2009, he was released back to Libya as the British government acknowledged that their commercial interests via British Petroleum played a role in the decision to release Megrahi.[1] Since 1988, Gaddafi and Libya had been placed under constraints from United Nations and US sanctions. At the same time, the Soviet Union, Libya’s “wary patron and supplier of arms”, collapsed; this left Libya further isolated from the global community and “increased the danger to Libya of maintaining a radical foreign policy” (Martinez, 2011: 567). Libya’s relations with its Arab neighbours fractured at this point as the Arab League acted in indifference to the sanctions imposed again Libya by the international community. As a result, Arab nationalism in Libya dimmed somewhat. Gaddafi’s relationships with his neighbours has deteriorated in recent years, with some Arab States accusing him of pandering to the US with his decision to abandon Libya’s weapons programs (Martinez, 2011: 571). Just two years after the Libya-UK deal to release Megrahi, with Gaddafi seemingly neutered on the international stage he faced civil uprising from rebel forces domestically, Libya found itself the focus of a UN intervention. Unlike Rwanda and Srebrenica before it, Benghazi was spared much notoriety, as Gaddafi’s forces were stopped before their march on the rebel-held city. Since then, rebels have killed Gaddafi and Libya has been freed from his enigmatic 42-year reign.

Throughout Gaddafi’s time of rule in Libya, there was a parallel father-son leadership in Syria. Hafiz al-Assad reigned from 1970 until 2000, when Bashar as-Assad took over. Hafiz inherited a Syria grieving over the loss of territory in the Golan Heights to Israel and set about turning Syria “from a victim into an actor in regional politics” (Hinnebusch, 2011: 691). He made it his mission to reclaim those Golan Heights militarily. In the process, he made alliances with the Soviet Union (which would transcend communism) and Egypt (which would collapse following the 1973 failure to recapture the Golan Heights). Hafiz focused his efforts in the late 1970s on Lebanon; intervening there, he “used the civil war to insert Syria as Lebanon’s arbiter” (Hinnebusch, 2011: 692) and made up for losing Egypt as an ally. Hafiz realized that:

“...whoever controlled Lebanon was in a strong position to control the PLO; hence the Palestinian card: Syria’s bargaining leverage in the Arab-Israeli conflict would be greatly enhanced if it could veto any settlement of the Palestinian problem that left Syria out and overcome rejectionist Palestinian resistance to an acceptable settlement” (Hinnebusch, 2011: 692).

In 1979 yet another opportunity for alliance presented itself to Syria, when Iran revolted and transformed into a “fiercely anti-Zionist state” (Hinnebusch, 2011: 692). 1990-1991 saw Syria enter peace negotiations with Israel and attach itself to the Western-led coalition in the Gulf war. This resulted in “US and Israeli tolerance of Assad’s further military intervention in Lebanon to consolidate a Pax Syriana” (Hinnebusch, 2011: 693). Unlike Gaddafi’s wavering foreign policy, this ploy by Hafiz had set in motion a relationship that solidified Syrian security for years. Hafiz needed the US to “accept Syria as the key to peace and stability in the Middle East”, and the Gulf war was such an opportunity to “trade membership in the anti-Iraq US coalition...for US promises to broker an acceptable Arab-Israeli settlement after the war” (Hinnebusch, 2011: 694). Hafiz’s ability to create such an alliance while keeping relations with Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas is telling.

When Bashar al-Assad came to power in 2000 he inherited a regional power structure where Turkey and Israel were aligned. In order to counteract this, Bashar employed non-conventional defense strategies: “reliance on Hezbollah’s capacity to engage forces in asymmetric warfare and investment in missiles with chemical warheads in hardened sites that targeted Israel” (Hinnebusch, 2011: 695). Following the meeting of Bashar and US President Bill Clinton in 2000, peace talks between Syria and Israel broke down and Syria aligned itself fully with Iran. The foreign policy of Bashar al-Asad mirrors, once again, those of Muammar al-Gaddafi, by promoting terror. Following the breakdown of the peace-talks, Syria supported the Palestinian intifada and “allowed Hamas and Islamic Jihad to maintain offices in Syria, even though these groups were involved in suicide bombings in Israel”, and also Hezbollah’s operations in Lebanon, including massive assistance in the 2006 Hezbollah-Israel conflict (Hinnebusch, 2011: 695). US-Syrian relations diminished at this time with the rise of both Bashar and the neoconservatives in the US. The US saw Syria

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as a threat to the region, as Syria was aligning itself with Saddam Hussein's Iraq in early 2001. However, Bashar has outlasted both United States President George W. Bush and the 'neocons.' Another area of concern for the West was Syria's close ties with Hezbollah in Lebanon, where Syria has vital security interests, with "each supporting the other against common enemies" and where Hezbollah's "proven ability to confront Israel was a pivotal part of the Israeli-Syrian power balance" (Hinnebusch, 2011: 698). As relations between Syria and Turkey thawed and Syria made closer alliances with Iran, by 2009:

"...Syria had managed to position itself between two networks: on the one hand, it was still part of the Iran-led "resistance axis" and had developed diverse economic connections in Asia and renewed security and economic relations with Russia; on the other hand, it revived the option to lean toward a West-centric camp that included Saudi Arabia and the 'moderate' Arabs and was manifest in Turkish-sponsored peace talks with Israel; closer relations with Western Europe, symbolized by the detente with France; and a cautious improvement in relations with the United States under the new administration of Barack Obama" (Hinnebusch, 2011: 700).

2011-2012 has seen huge social uprising in Syria, however, against the Bashar al-Assad regime. The violence returned by Assad against his civilian opponents has been "if anything, even worse than Gaddafi's" (Evans, 2011: 41). Yet intervention has not been forthcoming, in contrast with Libya, where after 250 deaths and Gaddafi's vow to go "house-to house' ...the next day NATO began bombing" (O'Connell, 2011: 15).

Having seen the similarities in both the Libyan and Syrian regimes' abrasive foreign policies over the years, it begs the question why one state has been treated differently by the international community than the other. I argue that those very same foreign policies play a vital role in how the international community perceives the state of the nations. Firstly, while Gaddafi's main influence in supporting terror has been financial and vocal, his standing army and security apparatus were weak enough to allow the world to see a crumbling state when rebel forces began their uprising. Had a stronger security apparatus been in place, the perception of stability would have been enhanced. In Libya, "internal fracturing and conflict are partly attributable to the relationship between the regime and the army and security forces," specifically "within the army – a weak institution – and within the parliamentary and security organizations" (Dalacoura, 2012: 70). Secondly, as illustrated above, due to Gaddafi's tumultuous international relations, he garnered himself very few political allies. The stage was, therefore, set for the international community to oust Gaddafi fairly easily if the opportunity occurred. It is curious, however, that the international community distanced itself from Gaddafi at a time when he was in the twilight of his aggressor years, so to speak. I have, above, shown how his foreign policies towards his regional neighbours and the West became significantly more amicable in the 2000s:

"Not long ago, Libya's leader [Gaddafi] signed friendship treaties and trade deals with major Western leaders and was praised for his active cooperation with European partners in the fight against terrorism and illegal migration" (Colombo & Tocci, 2012: 78).

Why then the abandonment of their 'ally'? For the same historical reasons, the international community could not trust Gaddafi. His track record of whimsical and often contradictory foreign policies outlined above show that his support could not be counted on and, while playing nice with the West in more recent years, it would have been interesting to see what direction his foreign policies took towards his neighbours' in the midst of the Arab Spring had he not had his own domestic issues. This is especially interesting as his neighbours already chastised him for pandering to the United States in 2001. As such, the stage was irrevocably set for an international community disillusioned after four decades of dealing with an unpredictable, terrorism-promoting aggravator to remove him from power. Finally, the opportunity presented to the international community was unique: "The Libyan military had a very limited capability, the terrain was extremely favourable to an aerial campaign and the international community was united in its resolve" (Shanahan, 2012). This is in contrast with Syria where:

"The Syrian opposition controls no territory, can not confidently claim the support of a majority of the Syrian population, and until recently has refused to call for international intervention. Syria's terrain, alliances and location make for a radically different strategic environment than Libya's, and everyone recognizes that a No-Fly Zone in the Syrian case would immediately mean a larger-scale military intervention which nobody wants. The difficulties posed

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by Syria's bloodbath are real, then, and the policy choices excruciating" (Lynch, 2011).

In examining Syria, and the reasons for non-intervention thus far, I will frame my explanation around the same structure as that of Libya: perception emanating from security apparatus, alliances, and international relations. One of the most staggering differences between Libya and Syria is that because of Syria's hard line against Israel over the years and proud national identity, Bashar al-Assad has received mass popularity until late. What is more is that Assad's regime has been proven to adapt. Heydemann & Leenders describe Syria as a state of recombinant authoritarianism, in which the regime has the ability to "modify their practices as circumstances change, to accommodate seemingly contradictory policies, to balance competing demands, and sustain diverse ruling conditions" (Heydemann & Leenders, 2011: 4). While it would be foolish to suggest that Assad's legitimacy is not now being called into question, due to the strength and direction of Syria's foreign policy down the years the cracks may not have appeared as significant to the international community as they did in Libya:

"...the Syrian regime had a residue of popular legitimacy not enjoyed by fellow autocrats in the region, which derived from its foreign policy and, in particular, its 'resistance' to Israel and the West." (Colombo & Tocci, 2012: 77)

This, coupled with the assistance of Iranian security forces in quelling the protests, has proven to be a much more stable security apparatus than the one Gaddafi held.[2] Dalacoura writes that it is the continuing ties held between "the Alawite regime and the army and security forces in Syria – and the security forces' exercise of elaborate mechanisms of control over state institutions and society" that explain Assad's ability to hold on to power (Dalacoura, 2012: 70). Iran, however, is not the only strategic alliance held by Syria. Heydemann writes that "leading authoritarian states such as Russia and China...have far greater capacity to constrain and limit the effects of Western support for democracy" than before (Heydemann, 2012: 26). This is true, as it is these two states that are casting the veto on intervening in Syria. One shared reason is their intimate tie to the country, formed by Hafiz al-Assad and strengthened by Bashar. This level of global alliance is in contrast to anything Muammar al-Gaddafi could have imagined. Russia, in particular, cannot stand to lose Syria as an ally. Having already lost billions in arms deals, similar events in Libya would prove detrimental, alongside the fact that Syria offers the Russians their only naval base on the Mediterranean. An intervention in Syria would result in effective Russian expulsion from the region, a catastrophic blow to economy, security, politics and pride (Shanahan, 2011).

Syria's role in the Arab-Israeli peace-process is extremely important. This role is most certainly a factor in the international community's decision not to intervene militarily in Syria. The mutual necessity with the United States created by Syria has, so far, not buckled entirely. Syria has always seen the US as a "necessary broker that alone could bring Israel into a peace settlement," while Syria has placed itself in a position so that the US views an "Israeli-Syrian peace as pivotal to completing the 'circle of peace' around Israel and empowering moderate forces in the region" (Hinnebusch, 2011: 696). The sway held with Hezbollah in this regard, and Syria's ability to use them to extraordinary effect as agents in a proxy war against, Israel is also an issue. Dalacoura writes that an overthrow of the Assad regime would be hugely detrimental to both Hezbollah and Iran (Dalacoura, 2012: 76-77). All of these factors are a direct result of the steps taken in Syrian foreign policy since the beginning of the Hafiz al-Assad regime in the 1970s. They offer a stark contrast to Gaddafi's history of international relations.

In offering an alternative argument to the previous one, there are those who believe that the potential for Islamist parties to come to the fore in the aftermath of the Arab Spring is rising. It follows that this is why the West is perhaps easing away from military intervention in Syria until these countries see how Tunisia and Egypt begin to act in the region under new, potentially Islamist, rule (Springborg, 2012: 43). Heydemann & Leenders remark that, as such, Western support for political reform in the region "has been marked by timidity, a disinclination to alienate pro-Western regimes, and reluctance to tackle core issues concerning the distribution of political power" (Heydemann & Leenders, 2011: 2-3). Israel, for one, has been toiling with the various Assad regimes for decades. For Israel the enemy it knows is almost surely better than the enemy it does not, were a Salafist party to come to power in a new Syria. Both arguments are most likely true and complementary. While the regional and international relations of both Libya and Syria have played a leading role in the international community's decision to intervene in the former and wait-it-out in the latter, the influence from Israel and others regarding rising radical Islam in the region is undoubtedly a factor in the decision not to intervene in Syria.

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