

# The United States and Libya: Turbulent History and Uncertain Future

Written by Youssef M. Sawani

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

## The United States and Libya: Turbulent History and Uncertain Future

<https://www.e-ir.info/2014/12/27/the-united-states-and-libya-turbulent-history-and-uncertain-future/>

YOUSSEF M. SAWANI, DEC 27 2014

Relations between the United States (US) and Libya have remained turbulent ever since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. When Libya was awarded independence by the United Nations (UN) in 1951, the US had already developed a significant economic and military presence on its soil. This presence was deepened when oil was discovered in large commercial reserves in Libya in 1963. As a result, US oil companies gained great concessions, and a further enhanced US military presence was established.

While ties initially deepened and the Libyan government remained loyal to the US policy in the region, Libya's revolutionary coup in 1969 abolished the pro-US monarchy, leading to a restructuring of relations (Emeesh 2008, 380). Overcoming the uncertainties of regime change, US-Libyan relations continued to witness positive improvements in political and economic spheres. This was in despite of evidence that the coup leaders desired the end of the US military presence (Attir 2014, 163).

As a consequence of this desire, Libya's authoritarian ruler, Muammar Gaddafi, shifted policies, as he sought to undermine US interests. Aided by huge oil wealth, Gaddafi sponsored multiple terrorist groups from 1979, causing the U.S to retaliate by cutting diplomatic relations and impose sanctions for two decades. When the Gaddafi regime abandoned this policy in 2003, Libya embarked on domestic reform, restoring relations with the US. However, as popular protests swept the country in early 2011, the US ended its rapprochement with Gaddafi, assisting the rebels in the destruction of his regime (Zoubir, 46-84).

Since 2011, the situation in Libya has been that of a violent struggle. While this struggle is costing Libya more than it could have imagined, the US and its allies in contrast appear willing to witness the Libyan tragedy horribly unfold.

This article seeks to engage with the contemporary and historical dynamics that explain US policy towards Libya. The article springs from a hypothesis that the US military intervention in 2011 was based upon a pretext of invoking the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) principle without an accompanying clear-cut policy or plan for post-revolt Libya. The US intervention was a realist move that unleashed forces and dynamics that have resulted in an ongoing political and military struggle and the destabilization of the state. This struggle has so far cost Libya more than could be imagined, while the US and its allies appear content with observing a Libyan tragedy horribly unfold.

### **The 2011 Intervention in Libya: Cause and Effect**

Inspired by the wider Arab Spring protests of 2011, the Libyan people revolted against a dictatorial regime which reacted with violence and oppression. The US and its allies saw in the regime's reaction a danger that must be countered in order to protect civilians. Later that year, the US and its NATO allies intervened in Libya, annihilating Gaddafi's forces and toppling his regime. The US justified the intervention through the principle of 'Responsibility to Protect' (R2P). Trying to achieve two goals simultaneously, the US sought to remove Gaddafi, while appearing supportive of the Libyan people and their long yearning for democracy (Sawani).

# **The United States and Libya: Turbulent History and Uncertain Future**

Written by Youssef M. Sawani

The intervention was successful in militarizing an otherwise peaceful, popular uprising and toppling the Gaddafi regime. However, the hope for freedom and stability today are a mirage. Today, Libya descends into a civil war that not only threatens its social and national cohesion, but has equally alarming implications for regional security. What is striking however, is that the US has refrained from pro-active engagement in post-revolt Libya. It has resorted to 'leading from behind'.

The Western military intervention unleashed forces and dynamics that have directly contributed to the ongoing political and military destabilization of the state. This is taking place while nascent political and representative state institutions are still being formed. Meanwhile, an array of political, tribal, regional and ideological forces are doing all they can to gain the upper hand in a struggle in which the very idea of the revolt and the reasons behind its ignition are now secondary. Libya has become a failed state *par excellence*. The most alarming aspect of this case, however, is the reluctance of the US and other western states to pay appropriate attention to the ills that have beleaguered this country since the fall of the Gaddafi regime. Such neglect of the country further discredits the otherwise noble objectives that had justified the NATO military intervention.

The US and NATO's new disengagement is a testimony of how foreign intervention can undermine a truly genuine peoples' uprising. The western intervention was driven by the desire to remove Gaddafi without paying adequate attention to the prospect of arming Libya's tribes and radical Islamists, and how that would lead to an armed struggle. The US in particular adopted an approach of disengagement to post-Gaddafi Libya, despite its downward move towards greater civil war and gross human rights violations. The pursuit of this disengagement only enhances the feeling that the US' real concern was to remove the Gaddafi regime without caring for the fate of the Libyan people afterwards (Blanchard).

This also provokes the question of as to how the US would react if the situation in Libya further deteriorates. Libya appears essentially unimportant to the US, largely because Libya is a source of petroleum and natural gas to Europe rather than the United States. Such a policy approach can only be seen as reflecting calculated caution and a wariness or unwillingness to bear responsibility for the occurrences after the intervention.

## **The Strategic Importance of Libya**

In addition to its strategic location, Libya remains an important oil producer and exporter, providing 2% of world production and still retaining proven reserves of approximately 50 billion barrels. Other important aspects of Libya's oil include its lightness, lower cost of refining, proximity to Europe, and the apparent security of its petroleum distribution and transport systems. Libya also has a great potential for alternative sources of energy and could provide these sources of energy for Europe and the region. Besides its substantial proven oil reserves, Libya also has the potential for the discovery and exploitation of shale oil and gas, with its reserves ranking fifth in the world (EIA). Moreover, geothermal, solar, and wind sources of energy are also possible within its vast territory. This makes Libya strategically important in the global competition for energy resources. Europe's reliance on Libya's oil and gas is likely to increase given its geographical proximity and the apparent security of its petroleum distribution and transport systems. Furthermore, Libya's oil is known for its lightness and its lower cost of refining (Pack).

## **Oil and Gaddafi: The Politics of Contradiction**

Under the Gaddafi regime, Libya's oil industry was nationalised and production was cut in order to conserve its reserves. The huge financial fortune generated by oil exports financed Gaddafi's desires and designs, as he embarked on adventures that brought him into direct contact with the great powers of the world. Gaddafi particularly became involved in state-sponsored terrorism that brought Libya into a direct confrontation with the US and its interests. Gaddafi incited violence against the US as early as December 1979, when the US embassy in Tripoli was attacked and set on fire (Attir, 147-148).

The US reacted by unilaterally cutting diplomatic relations with Libya in 1981. The last two decades of the twentieth century saw the US impose severe economic sanctions on Libya; however these harsh measures only resulted in Gaddafi intensifying his anti-US actions. Gaddafi continued with targeting U.S interests and personnel; such as his

# The United States and Libya: Turbulent History and Uncertain Future

Written by Youssef M. Sawani

responsibility for deadly acts against US nationals at the La Belle discotheque in Berlin in 1986. Gaddafi became US public enemy number one and the target of US air raids on Tripoli during April 1986, signalling a new phase of direct animosity (Hurst).

Petrodollars pouring into Gaddafi's purse gave him the false perception that he was capable of acting as he wished with impunity. Therefore, Libya's foreign policy was persistently adventurous, as Gaddafi sponsored world terror groups to fulfill his self image and role as a world rebel. An increase in terrorist activities was evident throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Such escalation of Gaddafi's anti-US activities led the US to push for further international sanctions against his regime. Moreover, the US retaliated by bombarding Gaddafi's house in April 1986 and it was actively involved in attempting to destabilize his regime by aiding domestic opposition. These efforts were intensified after Gaddafi was accused in 1991 of a terrorist attack on an American civilian airliner over the town of Lockerbie (Tobey).

It appears that accusing Libya served many purposes, including isolating the Gaddafi regime and eventually removing him from power. It also appears that the Gaddafi regime had to accept responsibility for the actions of its two citizens implicated in the Lockerbie affair at the same time it was embarking on a political strategy to restructure its priorities in a changing global environment. Therefore, the Gaddafi regime abandoned its weapons of mass destruction (WMD) activities and in 2003 engaged in direct negotiations with the U.S and the UK (Tobey). Libya sought to liberate itself from the severe effects of international sanctions and their impact on the domestic environment. However, the US change of policy was not completely divorced from the re-evaluation of its own priorities as far as Libya was concerned. The Bush administration in 2001 decided that energy security dictated a reevaluation of its relationship with Libya. With backing from oil giants, the administration sought to lift sanctions so that US investments could recommence in Libya (Zoubir, 46-84).

Both sides, the US and Gaddafi, could claim great success for the new policy. Relations gradually moved from one success to another and the circle of common interests widened, particularly with regard to the war on terror, fighting Muslim extremism, and pursuing the global network of trafficking in nuclear materials. The gains that the US was able to realise from restoring relations with Gaddafi were considerable (Alterman, 2006). The US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice visited Tripoli and she was entertained by Gaddafi. The visit provided a diplomatic seal of approval, while issues of human rights and democracy were clearly pushed to the background or swept under the carpet.

## US Intervention in Libya: Neorealism

The Realist theory of international relations gives primacy to national interest. Given Libya's role in contributing to the strategic objectives of the USA's energy policy, the realist framework of analysis appears to fit the case. Realism helps us understand the reasons underlying US decisions since 2011 in Libya, explaining the shift from R2P to disengagement. President Obama's step was "largely on the advice of liberal interventionists like Ambassador Rice, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and NSC aides Samantha Power and Michael McFaul" (Walt).

The US was initially unable to react to the radical developments of the 2011 Arab Spring revolts. What was more problematic, however, was the lack of a coherent Obama Doctrine for the Middle East. Given the scale and magnitude of the 2011 protests in Libya, the US seized the moment and called for an international coalition to effectively force Gaddafi out. Such change of position generates several key questions: Why did this shift happen? How had Gaddafi become, in the words of Secretary Hillary Clinton, "*an evil and vile dictator*" (Parsons).

A debate took place throughout different levels of US policy community during the discussion on Libya in 2011. The debate was heated from the inception of the revolt and reflected the complexity in the formulation of US foreign policy (Hendrickson, 2013, 178-189). Many voices called for a non-interventionist approach because they claimed that Libya did not represent a core US interest (Vandewalle; Kinzer; Zenko). Obama's linking intervention to US national interests, human rights, and the responsibility to protect was seen as nonsense that could not change reality. 'Not only does Obama's decision to intervene militarily in Libya not serve any tangible American interests; it may directly serve the interests of the Islamist enemy.' (Ibrahim). Yet another view accused the President of reluctance and

# **The United States and Libya: Turbulent History and Uncertain Future**

Written by Youssef M. Sawani

hesitancy in response to a human tragedy in Libya with most of those who criticized Obama for choosing to “lead from behind” focusing on the negative strategic implications (Joyner).

## **Libya and the Obama Doctrine**

The developments that ensued revealed that the US decision had less to do with the principles of defending freedom and liberty, than with *realpolitik*. This approach was certainly in line with the Obama Doctrine, that sought to appear to comply with international law and in accordance with the expectations of the world community. Obama framed his actions and policy in Libya so as to not to go to a war unilaterally but rather in concert with the rest of the world. Such an approach was vital in the US effort to eradicate the public image of post-911 US unilateralism.

The US intervention in Libya also reflected the US strategic vision as described in a 2010 national security document that awarded a high degree of importance to the pursuit of interests through diplomacy, especially by working through international organisations and institutions. Such an approach was a cornerstone in restoring world confidence in the US; particularly in the Arab World (The Wall Street Journal). The US needed to appear respectful of international legal norms, so this approach towards Libya was vital for claiming it was undertaking a moral and legally legitimate duty. Moreover, the Libyan case helped consolidate the perception that the U.S was supportive of the Arab peoples’ 2011 uprisings. Because of this approach, the US image in Arab public opinion improved considerably during 2011 and 2012. For example, after 2011, Libyans were reported to have become appreciative of Americans to a degree that was higher than their views of Canadians (Fisher).

However, the resources and the strategic location of Libya, with its long Mediterranean coast and a vast terrain that extends well into the Sahara clearly influenced the US calculations. The US sought early to influence Gaddafi’s African policy and win him for its strategy in Africa. This was particularly the case with AFRICOM about which Gaddafi was more than reluctant. Gaddafi attempted to derail the AFRICOM project and its goals, considering it an imperialist attempt to control Africa’s resources (Al Wasat News). The US intervention in Libya, as executed, was a pragmatic and realist choice rather than various moral principles. US realist logic in the formulation of foreign policy was behind the assessments undertaken regarding Libya in 2011 (Kazianis). After the Russians, Chinese and Arabs gave the go-ahead for the intervention in Libya, the US could proceed with little or no political cost.

The US military was responsible for most of the military operations in Libya, revealing the US was the only ‘real’ actor in the intervention (Wilson). In another speech made in March 2011, Obama outlined the elements of the military campaign that his nation’s forces were waging in Libya. They included destroying Gaddafi’s military forces heading towards Benghazi, annihilating Libya’s military capabilities in cities and towns west of Benghazi like Ajdabbiya, destroying Libya’s air defenses, destroying all tanks and other military equipment, and cutting support and logistical supply lines. Despite the significant US role in military operations and these vast tactical and strategic objectives, Obama still insisted the US involvement was limited (BBC).

A cursory view of Hillary Clinton’s official diary of meetings and visits reveals that the United States was intent upon destroying the Gaddafi regime as early as 2011, when Libya Contact Group was set up (Parsons). A review of the chronology of the events reveals that the aim was less about protecting civilians than ending Gaddafi’s regime. Therefore, facts were fabricated, falsified, or manipulated so that military action to support humanitarian objectives could become morally defensible (Shondob, 2013).

A study published in a 2013 issue of Security International shed important light on this issue. The writer drew lessons from the western intervention in Libya and highlighted a number of facts that counter the narrative of the western intervention. The most striking fact of this report was that the NATO intervention had not actually sought the protection of civilians but the destruction of the Gaddafi regime, even at the cost of increasing damage to Libyan civilians themselves. NATO campaign in Libya had actually prolonged the war six times longer than it otherwise would have been without the military intervention. The number of casualties and deaths are thought to have increased at least seven fold (Kuperman).

## **The Prospects of a Failed State and Disintegration: Any New US Approach?**

# The United States and Libya: Turbulent History and Uncertain Future

Written by Youssef M. Sawani

The deepening crisis in Libya opens up a necessary discussion and poses legitimate questions regarding the intervention in Libya and its consequences. Has the intervention achieved its objectives beyond getting rid of Gaddafi and the destruction of the Libyan state apparatus? Has it paved any way for democracy in Libya when we see armed militias do all they can in order to block the democratic process?

It is immediately clear that Libyans' aspirations for a post-Gaddafi Libya have not been attained. Libya is swiftly moving into new phase of a more substantial civil war, which has wider regional repercussions.

*Rather than standing as a model for political transition, Libya has become a toxic mixture of inherited structural weaknesses, post-conflict challenges and the fallout of regime change, all made worse by a series of unwise political decisions. Stumbling through this new era, the country seems poised on the edge of lawlessness, violence, political atomization and even renewed authoritarianism.* (Gaub, 101)

Analysts at the time of intervention argued that the situation in Libya would, under the best of circumstances, be that of a weak, fragile, or failed state (Kaplan). This was also anticipated by Richard Hass, when he affirmed that getting rid of Gaddafi and those around him would unleash a series of events that would bring to the fore personalities and leaders of varied tribal, regional orientations and desires, and the potential for radical Islamists gaining the upper hand. In both cases Hass expected that Libya's new government would be unable to control large swaths of the territory, thus creating vacuums that would be seized by Al Qaeda, Islamic State or similar groups (Hass).

While there is an undeniable value in getting rid of Gaddafi, the negative consequences of the foreign intervention and the militarization of the uprising have not only spoiled a genuine peoples' revolt, but have made Libya, in the words of the French minister, a "viper's nest" for Islamist militants (Reuters). The country is in a civil war with two parliaments and two governments promising yet more divisions. Militias reject abandoning their weapons and thus denying the country the chance to build coherent institutions. Libya requires a strong national army and police but that will not be possible without dissolving militias. The US and its allies have not shown any desire or ability to change the situation (Katulis & Peter Juul). Western leaders have created a situation in Libya that is similar to Somalia, which is plagued by warring militias, warlords, and the frightening spread of arms (Michael).

The situation is that of a vicious circle: security rests upon dismantling militias who will not voluntarily forsake the advantages they have obtained or the gains they have accumulated. They will not lay down their arms unless they are certain that their rivals will not have the upper hand. Hence, any call to disarm will go unanswered. Armed militias are actually stockpiling weaponry with the direct help of regional state and non-state actors that will have far-reaching security implications: encouraging more armed groups, organized crime, and Al Qaeda and its affiliates (Security Council).

If any of these fundamental goals of US are to be attained, Libya must be properly placed within the parameters of the US strategy. There is an increasing need for a clear-cut policy that helps achieve these goals. Therefore, merely relying on and being content with rhetoric that claims to be spreading democracy and human rights while the country descends into further chaos is certainly a self-defeating prescription and Libya has proved it as such (Morrissey). The US and international cooperation in Libya on the whole has been more of a "let a thousand flowers bloom" approach than a well-coordinated effort with a clear strategy and division of labour" (Chivvis et al.).

The conclusion that may be drawn is that the R2P was employed to justify an intervention that has caused and led to a continuous civilian losses as a result of the armed struggle it ignited. The militia elements the intervention empowered with arms and power have but transformed Libya into a safe haven for Jihadists and terror groups. Despite any moral pretext, the military intervention has actually made the promise of a democratic and peaceful regime replacing a nasty dictatorship misleading to say the least.

## References

Abrams, Elliott , Micah Zinko, & Douglas Dillon, "US military intervention for Libya?" Council on Foreign Relations, 2011.

# **The United States and Libya: Turbulent History and Uncertain Future**

Written by Youssef M. Sawani

Al Wasat News, "Gaddafi receives the head of AFRICOM."

Alterman, Jon B., "Libya and the U.S.: The Unique Libyan Case", *Middle East Quarterly*, 2006 .

Attir, Mustafa Omar(2014).(Sira' al Khemahwa al Qaser: rouia naqdia lil mashrou al hadathi al libi( the Struggle Between the Tent and the Palace: A Critique of the Libyan Modernization Model), Al Maaref Forum, Beirut.

BBC News, "Libya: Obama says US intervention will be limited", 2011.

Blanchard. Christopher, 'Libya: Transition and U.S. Policy', Congressional Research Service, 2014.

Chivvis, Cristopher S., Keith Crane, Peter Mandaville, Jeffrey Martini, "Libya's Post-Qaddafi Transition The Nation-Building Challenge," RAND Corporation.

Emeesh, Ibrahim Fathi, (2008), al tarikh al siasi wa mustaqbal al mujtama al madani fi Libya, al jozou al awal ( the Political History and the Future of Civil Society in Libya), Berniq Publisher, Benghazi.

Fisher, Max, "Libyans Now Like America Slightly More Than Do Canadians," *TheAtlantic*, August 13, 2012.

Gaub, Florence, "A Libyan Recipe for Disaster", *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, 56:1.

Haass, Richard, "The US Should Keep Out of Libya," *The Wall Street Journal*.

Hendrickson, Ryan C., "Libya and American war powers: war making decisions in the United States", *Global Change, Peace & Security*, 2013, Vol. 25, No. 2

Hurst, David, "Colonel Muammar Gaddafi Obituary," *The Guardian*, 2011.

Raymond, "Ideals Trump Interests in Obama's Libya Policy," *Middle East Forum*, 2011.

Joyner, James, "Libya War: An Obama Doctrine?" *Atlantic Council*, 2011.

Kaplan, Robert, "Libya, Obama and the Triumph of Realism," *Financial Times*, 2011.

Katulis, Brian and Peter Juul, "The Real Scandal in Libya: A Security Vacuum and New Terrorist Threats," *Center for American Progress*, 2013.

Kazianis, Harry, "Intervention in Libya: Example of "R2P" or Classic Realism?," *E-International Relations*, 2011.

Kinzer, Stephen, 'Why the US must not intervene in Libya', *The Guardian*, 2011.

Kuperman, Alan, "Lessons from Libya: How Not to Intervene," *Belfer Center*, 2013.

Maggie Michael , "Libya's guns free-for-all fuels region' s turmoil," *Associated Press*, 2014.

Morrissey, Ed, "AP: Three Years After US-NATO Intervention, Libya Is a Failed State," *Hot Air*, 2014.

Obama, Barack, "Remarks by President Obama in Address to the United Nations General Assembly" *The White House*, 2013.

Obama, Barack, "President Obama's Speech on Libya," *The White House*, 2011.

Obama, Barack, Remarks by President Barak Obama on Libya on 03/19/2011.

# The United States and Libya: Turbulent History and Uncertain Future

Written by Youssef M. Sawani

Pack, Jason, 'Libya is too big to fail: international intervention is the right move and not just for humanitarian reasons', *Foreign Policy*, 2011.

Parsons, Renee, 'The Regime Changers: from Libya to Ukraine', Counterpunch, 2014.

Reuters, "France says Southern Libya now a 'viper's nest' for Islamist militants", Reuters, 2014.

Sawani, Youssef, "The February *intifada* in Libya: disposing of the regime and issues of state-building", in, Ricardo Rene Laremont (ed.) *Revolution, Revolt, and Reform in North Africa: the Arab Spring and Beyond* (London & New York: Routledge, 2014) pp. 76-80.

Security Council, "Report of UN Panel of Experts on Arms Spreading from Libya".

Shondob, Ali, (2013), *al Gaddafi Yatakalam (Gaddafi Speaks)*, Bisan Publishers, Beirut.

St John, Ronald Bruce, *Libya and the United States: Two Centuries of Strife*, (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University Press, 2002).

The Wall Street Journal, 'Arabs Love the Pax Americana: Fearing a U.S. retreat, the Saudis move into Bahrain', Tripoli Post, Issue Number 171

Tobey, William, "A message from Tripoli: How Libya gave up its WMD", *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 2014.

U.S. Department of Defense, "Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense".

Vandewalle, Dirk (ed), *Libya Since 1969: Qadhafi's Revolution Revisited*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

Walt, Stephen M. 'What intervention in Libya tells us about the neocon-liberal alliance', *Foreign Policy*, 2011.

U.S. Energy Information Administration, 'Technically Recoverable Shale Oil and Shale Gas Resources: An Assessment of 137 Shale Formations in 41 Countries Outside the United States,' 2013.

U.S. Energy Information Administration, "Libya: Overview," 2014.

Zoubir, Yahia H. , "Libya in US foreign policy: from rogue state to good fellow?", *Third World Quarterly*, 23:1.

---

## About the author:

**Youssef M. Sawani** is Professor of Politics and International Relations, University of Tripoli, Libya. His latest publications include: 'The February 17 Intifada in Libya: disposing of the regime and the issues of state-building', in, Ricardo Laremont (ed) *Revolution, Revolt and Reform in North Africa: The Arab Spring and Beyond*, Routledge, London and New York, 2013; "Dynamics of Continuity and Change" in, Jason Pack (ed.) *The 2011 Libyan Uprisings and the Struggle for the Post-Qadhafi Future*, London; Palgrave Macmillan, 2013; "Libyan constitutionality and sovereignty post-Qadhafi: the Islamist, regionalist, and Amazigh challenges", with Jason Pack, *The Journal of North African Studies*, Vol.18, Issue 4, 2013. You can follow him on Twitter at @youssefsawani.