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The Libyan Tragedy and Its Meaning

The Wages of Indecision

Eran Lerman



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The overthrow of Muammar Qadhafi's dictatorship in Libya was followed by the collapse of governance and the disintegration of the state; the eruption of brutal warfare along local, tribal and ideological lines; and the emergence and ultimate collapse of an Islamic State (IS) enclave in Sirte. Although events in Libya have been largely overshadowed by the much greater scope of slaughter and destruction in Syria, they are nevertheless of great strategic significance given their potential impact on the entire Mediterranean arena.

Libya's dismemberment into rival sub-states was accelerated and exacerbated by years of neglect that followed the UN-mandated intervention of 2011. The wages of indecision were high: thousands of lives were lost in warfare, and many more in lawless attempts to reach Italy in rickety boats. Those losses will remain high, despite the victory over IS, if Libya continues to be torn by internal conflict. That conflict is now centered around the GNA (Sarraj's internationally recognized Government of National Accord) vs. the LNA (General Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army).

There are also lessons to be learned from the ongoing Libyan tragedy. The excessive caution that marked the Obama administration's conduct in Libya after 2011 contributed to the decline into chaos and the rise of the IS presence. The carefully measured Western intervention (with special forces and air strikes offering support to local forces, mainly the Misratawi militia, who fought in Sirte) that came later – much later – proved a judicious investment. It might be too late for this insight to be applied in Syria, but it could be relevant for the next US administration when facing similar challenges elsewhere.

Israel too can learn lessons from the Libyan crisis. Even in conflicts where Israel does not have a direct stake, it cannot be entirely neutral. Israel's interests lie with the forces of stability. Haftar is not necessarily an admirable man, or Israel's friend. But Egypt's Sisi is a strategic partner, and Israel has reason to hope for the success of his policy in Libya. Equally significant is the Mediterranean dimension. It is urgent to build up structures of strategic consultation among the key players in the eastern Mediterranean. These include Italy, Greece, Cyprus, the Adriatic Coast nations, Egypt, and Israel (with Jordan), as well as Turkey (if Erdogan's policies change). Enhanced consultation reinforces the ability to stand against common enemies.

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INTRODUCTION

The sad story of the disintegration of Libya over the past five years has been overshadowed by the even more catastrophic dismemberment of the Syrian state. There, the dictatorship has been able to hold onto power in large parts of the country, causing a much larger-scale civil war and leading to immense bloodshed and massive dislocation.

For good reason, the events in Syria have captured the attention of the world, generating intense (but futile) diplomatic initiatives led by US Secretary of State John Kerry and, much more dramatically, an extensive (and effective) military intervention by the Russian Federation. The flow of Syrian refugees into Europe, and the moral lessons of the world's failure to prevent the horrors, have left a global imprint.

Events in Libya did not take place on quite the same scale. The initial stage was relatively swift and successful, albeit brutal. The dictator's army was weak and fickle, and he relied on foreign mercenaries. The West intervened in force against him and he was overthrown in August 2011, a mere six months after the initial protests. He was caught two months later and died an ugly death.

Thus, despite the fighting that erupted in Libya following the collapse of governance, the emergence of rival governments, and many acts of brutality, not much happened there that equals the degree of

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destruction in Syria – particularly the razing of Aleppo, once one of the great cities of the Levant. The number of lives lost in Syria is greater by an order of magnitude than those lost in Libya (though solace is not to be derived from deaths in the tens of thousands rather than the hundreds of thousands).

Still, Libya's tragedy has been quite dangerous in its own way. It has shattered an important and potentially prosperous land, turning it into a political and economic disaster area and a torn landscape of human suffering. It gave the Islamic State (IS) a hold (for a while) on a section of the Mediterranean littoral; and by making the shores of Libya an easy base for human traffickers, the prolonged crisis there has generated a significant refugee crisis of its own.

The potential for spillover and destabilization into southern Europe, specifically Italy, might become even more acute if the chaos in Libya continues to propel migrants towards Europe's southern shores. Thousands of Libyan refugees, and much greater numbers of Africans going through Libya, have been exploited by human traffickers or have died in attempts to reach Europe.

The other side of the coin is that Libya is relatively small, in terms of both the size of its armed forces and local militias and the size of its overall population (about one-fourth that of Syria). It may thus be more responsive to limited and judicious acts of intervention, and the Western powers have better prospects for effective action.

After years of neglect, some of them finally did engage in a limited way in the effort that led to the destruction of the remaining IS enclaves. This demonstrates, in effect, that once the Western powers shake off their confusion and naïveté over long-term goals, and set about acting in ways that could strengthen the militias of stability in the region and help them defeat their enemies, it should be possible to bring about an outcome less tragic and disruptive than in the Syrian case. Coordinated and effective shows of Western strength on Libya's shores, combined with close coordination with Egypt, the influence of which is the key to stabilization, will help to limit meddling by Russia and keep Iran at bay.

This study outlines possible medium-term outcomes of such actions against the background of the twists and turns of the bloody power struggle in Libya since 2011. It begins by offering a historical survey of the manner in which Libya, maintained by one man's repressive power through the mirage of the Jamahiriyyah, ultimately disintegrated.

The state of affairs in Libya during the dictator's regime was reminiscent of feudal conditions and was often based on primordial tribal loyalties. Militias with a local base were dominated by warlords, but were also occasionally colored by ideological affiliation. These militias became more significant than the armed forces of the Libyan "state."

Thus, it was the city of Misrata that provided the forces that destroyed the IS hold in Sirte on behalf of the GNA (the Government of National Accord). The GNA includes elements dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood under the banner of the "Libyan Dawn" forces, which can now claim credit for the successful battle against IS. Meanwhile, the LNA (Libyan National Army) – the essentially Cyrenaican forces led by General Khalifa Haftar – carried out what came to be known as "Operation Dignity" on behalf of the internationally recognized government in Tobruk. When the latter merged into the new GNA, Hifter struck out on his own, backed by Egypt.

With IS now out of the equation, the challenge for the West (and Russia, which now supports Hifter) is to forge a workable matrix that will allow both forces – the internationally recognized GNA, and the Egyptian-backed general and his LNA – to sustain their local gains, without escalating their quarrels and in a manner conducive to regional stability.

Events in Libya took on a very different trajectory than did those in its two immediate neighbors, Egypt and Tunisia, when their dictators were driven out of power. To understand why that is the case, it is necessary to proceed from the specifics of localities and tribes. One must map, however sketchily, the underlying social and political realities that characterized Qadhafi's Jamahiriyyah. Internal dynamics are, after all, central to this tragedy.

However, the local power struggle emerged in conjunction with the broader rivalry of ideological camps, and was exacerbated early on by the intrusion of regional politics. Amid the turmoil that swept across

the Arabic-speaking world, three categories of Islamist totalitarian forces struggled for dominance, and all three – IS, Iran, and the Muslim Brotherhood – meddled in Libya to varying degrees. (The Iranian regime had a relatively minor impact in the Libyan arena.) Seeking to counter Islamist advances in Libya and elsewhere was the camp that may be described as the forces of stability, led in this context by Egypt (using Hifter as a proxy).

Perhaps equally important was the Western intervention and its tragic lack of follow-up. Western powers got involved in order to overthrow Qadhafi, inspiring much activity, but their attention dissipated sharply after his death. That inattention left the Transitional National Council – at the West’s misguided request – to its own devices. The world stayed on the sidelines as Libya fell apart, only to be re-energized late in the day by the migration crisis and the need to destroy IS’s hold on the Mediterranean shore.

It is in this respect – belatedly recognizing the utility of carefully tailored acts of intervention – that the bitter lessons of recent experience can continue to be applied so as to alter the trajectory of the Libyan tragedy. An improved Libyan outcome would benefit regional and European stability as well as offer the prospect of better lives to those now caught in the conflict.

A clear-headed and unified strategy of judicious and well-informed intervention (i.e., carefully chosen and limited actions, driven by the sort of detailed intelligence that only national establishments can provide, as NATO has no mature capabilities of its own) is a better alternative than the neglect of 2012-14, the results of which were anything but benign. Nor can Libya any longer be “led from behind.” Now that the remnants of IS have been destroyed, a combination of US-led pressures and incentives should be brought to bear to produce a political balance or “matrix” that recognizes internal diversity and division. Taking a page from the present French strategy, the Western powers should take care, first and foremost, to safeguard the interests of the regional forces of stability that have the most at stake. Cairo’s concerns are real, and the support for Hifter represents Egypt’s need for a strong sentinel on her western border.

THE DEATH OF LIBYA: A SHORT SURVEY OF THE ROAD TO HELL

It came as no surprise when the wave of protests that came to be known (incongruously, in retrospect) as “the Arab Spring” spread to Libya in mid-February 2011. The country was sandwiched between two neighbors whose dictators had already been overthrown: first Ben Ali in Tunisia; then Mubarak in Egypt. Libya had been led for more than forty years (!) by Muammar Qadhafi, an erratic and self-obsessed potentate with dynastic designs and a long history of brutal repression.

Libyans courageously used the internet to launch a “Day of Anger” on February 17, 2011. Qadhafi’s regime reacted violently, using Libyan troops as well as loyal tribal militias and mercenaries, mainly from Chad and Niger, against the protestors.¹ As clashes rapidly spread, Qadhafi’s son Sayf al-Islam warned that the family would fight “until the last bullet.” The death toll, particularly in Benghazi, spiraled swiftly into the hundreds.²

By February 21, 2011, Benghazi had been overrun by protesters and Qadhafi’s Justice Minister Mustafa Abd al-Jalil had resigned (later to play a short-lived leadership role in the transition period). In Tripoli and nearby towns, regime loyalists struck back fiercely; the International Federation for Human Rights reported at least 640 killed in some ten days of clashes. The cities of Misrata and Zawiya fell to the rebels as fighting spread to Libyan oil terminals east of Tripoli.³

By the end of February 2011, the country was in the throes of a full-scale civil war. Libyan diplomats at the UN and the Arab League defected; Air Force pilots refused orders; Army units changed sides. Qadhafi still had formidable forces, however, with which to launch a massive counterattack.⁴

At this point, it was already clear that Libya’s crisis was not about to evolve along the trajectory of either Tunisia (from which the president had fled) or Egypt (where the army forced the president to step down, despite having been warned by the US about the consequences of the use of force). Moreover, the key aspects of Libya’s structural weakness, which would blight the country’s future in the coming years, were already coming into focus. Battle lines began to take shape according to local and tribal loyalties, which had been allowed to thrive under

Qadhafi's Jamahiriyyah – unlike political parties, membership in which had been punishable by death. Florence Gaub describes the “rotten substructure” of political life under the Jamahiriyyah, with its pseudo-democratic procedures for direct access to those in power via “people's committees” and local deliberative forums.⁵

The pattern of disintegration of the state began in its weak institutions. (This included the military, which Qadhafi kept away from its own weapons for fear of a coup, leading to its being derided as “the Libyan disarmed forces.”) This weakness reflected part of the broader pattern of state collapse that was about to engulf Syria, Yemen, and Iraq, and which, in other forms, had already befallen Lebanon (hijacked by a terror organization under foreign control) and the Palestinians (carved up into two rival entities).⁶

Yet despite their common characteristics – the “republics of fear,” to use Kanan Makiya's famous title about Saddam's Iraq, which fell apart when the fear dissipated – each of these countries had its own unique trajectory of disintegration. This was certainly the case in Libya, where an idiosyncratic form of government intersected with persistent regional and primordial identities. What hid this from view for a while was the vicious and comprehensive nature of Qadhafi's counterattack, which greatly intensified across the country in the first weeks of March 2011 and made the role of Western intervention decisive.

Again, militias and mercenaries fought alongside elements of the regular forces. By March 12, Misrata alone (which soon came under a brutal siege) was still under full rebel control, leading Sayf al-Islam to confidently predict that by March 16th, all fighting would be over in 48 hours.⁷ He was soon proven wrong. It was this bid to re-affirm power by conquest and slaughter, particularly the anticipated massive attack on Benghazi (which began on March 19),⁸ that triggered the unprecedented international reaction, specifically the UNSC Chapter 7 resolution of March 17 (UN Security Council Resolution 1973).

The UNSC resolution was underpinned by the premise that there was a single Libyan state, and a single Libyan people, that needed to be rescued from a bloody and imminent fate. UNSCR 1973 contained no reference to regional divisions. At this stage, the assumptions underlying NATO's

intervention reflected the absence of any thought about local dynamics. With the emergence of a rebel leadership (the National Transition Council, or NTC) under Chairman Mustafa Abd al-Jalil and Prime Minister Mahmoud Jibril, it seemed for a fleeting moment as if a new Libya would be born from the wreckage of the old.⁹

This is not what happened. NATO airstrikes turned the tide of battle and helped the rebels gain control of the oil terminals in Ra's Lanuf, Brega and Tobruk. Misrata was held despite fierce attacks and a “medieval” siege, which was broken on April 23. It was local militias and tribal elements that won the decisive battles (particularly the Misratawis, who have been a formidable strategic player ever since).¹⁰ The NTC was gaining international legitimacy, but had little or no practical control over these forces. This set the stage for the rapid disintegration that would follow Qadhafi's death and the NTC's rise to nominal power in Libya.

The civil war continued, with NATO bombings, as often happens when the theory of dominant air power is put to the test against a determined enemy, proving insufficient to dislodge the dictatorship altogether. Qadhafi's forces did lose some ground, but held much of Tripoli and other areas, particularly Sirte, where loyalist tribes such as the Ourfali and the Qadhadhfa were dominant.

The coalition (particularly the French) therefore turned to more divisive tactics. By late May 2011, battles were raging in the Nafusa Mountains south of Tripoli, largely populated by the Amazigh (Berber) minority.¹¹ That minority's militias gained strength as they sought to avenge years of brutal repression and suppression of their language and culture. French military assistance turned them into a significant player, shifting the balance of power and adding another factor to the disintegration of the Libyan “state” along local fault lines.

By June 2011 (after the failure of mediation efforts by President Zuma of South Africa), Qadhafi expressed a willingness to hold elections and to step down if defeated. It was too late, however, to avert military collapse in the face of joint efforts by the rebel forces and NATO.¹² In July, last-gasp counterattacks and attempts to sow divisions among the rebels (by turning the Islamist elements against the secular leadership) ultimately led to little.¹³

By mid-August, the fall of Gharyan and Zawiya to opposition forces advancing from the mountains signaled the tightening of the noose around Tripoli. Key regime figures defected or fled.¹⁴ On August 21, Tripoli fell to the rebels, whose rapid advance – backed by massive NATO air strikes – was named “Operation Bride of the Sea,” as the city is fondly named. Scattered acts of violent resistance by loyalists continued and Qadhafi himself eluded capture, but the outcome of the war was no longer in doubt.¹⁵

What was coming into question, however, well before the fall of Tripoli, was whether the new “government” was going to be able to govern. At the core was the familiar dilemma over the unification of all military forces. On August 10, 2011, NTC Chairman 'Abd al-Jalil “ordered” all fighters who had fought to bring down the Qadhafi regime to be incorporated individually into the new national liberation army.¹⁶ He might as well have been King Canute, ordering the sea.

The question of control over the armed forces – the “One Gun” ethos – has plagued many nations at the point of transition. Israelis with an interest in history will recall the drama over this question in 1948. But neither 'Abd al-Jalil nor Jibril was in a position comparable to that of David Ben Gurion. Nor were the various local, poorly trained, unruly “brigades” of Libya as docile as the IZL or the Palmach when it came to obeying orders to disband.

Nor was any enforcement mechanism in place. The Libyan Armed Forces, feeble to begin with (Gaub quotes assessments that put them, right from the beginning, at a quarter of their nominal strength) had been both decimated and discredited, unlike the armed forces of either Egypt or Tunisia. There was no core capacity with which to carry out the NTC's commendable, but ultimately futile, policy decisions.

Moreover, as Gaub points out, Libya presents an extreme case of the usual ills that attend all regime changes: disruptive discontinuity at the political level leads to the weakening, if not the disappearance altogether, of the institutions of government and social services. Libya in 2011 suffered some 30,000 dead, thousands missing, 50,000 wounded, and a GDP reduced by 60%, as well as the mounting cost of vengeful partisanship in the wake of a clear victory by one side.

That brutal, vindictive plague hastened the disintegration of the state as a whole. Qadhafi was brutally put to death after he was captured, two months after the fall of Tripoli, as he was attempting to escape Sirte after it was finally overrun. The manner of his execution does not bear description here (and gives an unpleasant twist to Secretary Hillary Clinton's joyous comment at the time, "We came, we saw, he died"). What matters is the imprint this vindictive act left on the political culture.¹⁷

The premonitions of those Libyans who feared a descent into chaos and interneceine warfare were fulfilled shortly thereafter. The first battles between the two most powerful local militias in the west, the Misratawis and the Zintanis, broke out by the end of October 2011; and Jibril was ousted as Prime Minister on October 31. The patterns of political weakness at the top, regional meddling at the mid-level, and local disintegration on the ground were evident within weeks.

By late November, militias were openly demanding a political role. The Zintanis decided to hold onto Qadhafi's son Sayf al-Islam, whom they had captured, as a wild card. Meanwhile, tribal elements and clans threatened to ignore the NTC government.¹⁸ Attempts to create an integrated military failed, and the ambitious commander of the new national army, General Khalifa Hiftar, was replaced in January 2012 by Colonel Yusuf al-Manqush. The latter's authority was rejected even in the east, but he showed no sign of will to impose a "one gun" policy.¹⁹

The fault lines continued to multiply. While the institutional structure of the new state was being put in place, little could be done to provide for the most basic functions, including a legal system. Rough "justice" was meted out by local forces, the Zintanis, who took control over Tripoli Airport. There, they caught, tortured and killed Omar Brebesh, the former Ambassador of Libya to France, in one prominent episode among many.²⁰

Among groups such as the Wurfali, who had long been Qadhafi loyalists, there was still tribal resistance to the new regime. Predictably, the Amazigh too, for their part, hoped to translate their military role in the push for Tripoli into local autonomy: political representation and the free use of their own language. When their hopes were dashed, they took to the streets in November 2011, and have continued to be a restive element since then: one more nail in the coffin of a unitary Libyan state.²¹ The

Amazigh, moreover, were not the only minority group with a local base to take up arms. In February and March 2012, heavy fighting erupted in the Fezzan, Libya's southern desert. The Thebbu ethnic group struggled with local neighbors and fought the authorities for control over smuggling routes, claiming hundreds of lives.²²

The old administrative units – Tripolitania in the west, Fezzan in the south, and Cyrenaica or “Barqa” in the east – were fast becoming separate political entities. The last was declared an autonomous region by a group of local politicians, backed by the tribes and militias in control of Benghazi. When 'Abd al-Jalil spoke of maintaining unity “by force” if necessary, more demonstrations ensued demanding a “federal” structure.²³ By mid-2012, the forces turning Libya into a failed state were much stronger than anything the NTC could field against them.

A NEW MAP EMERGES

In effect, the new Libya ceased to be a real state even before it was born. The damage done during Qadhafi's years was too deep, and the constructive forces too feeble, for the political transition to succeed. Some hope was offered by the relatively impressive results of the July 2012 elections. Out of the 80 seats allotted to parties, almost half (39) were won by the liberally oriented National Forces Alliance, led by former transitional Prime Minister Mahmoud Jibril. The Justice and Construction Party, on the other hand – like other similarly named parties in the region, a front for the Muslim Brotherhood – came in with only 17 seats, and at a time when the Brotherhood's parallel party in Egypt was sweeping both parliament and presidency.²⁴

The election could have been a solid foundation for good national governance, as many in Libya and the west fervently hoped at the time, had it not been for three basic flaws:

1. The constitutional structures against a strong party system, which left all other 120 seats (out of 200) in the hands of independent local actors, minimizing the impact of the liberals' parliamentary achievement
2. The inability of the newly elected national institutions to impose control over the various armed militias

3. The increasing preponderance among these militias of Islamist elements that were better led, better trained, and, as will be seen, often better supplied by external interests than their local rivals. These militias were thus better equipped for power.

The assassination of one of the leading symbols of the revolution, 'Abd al-Fattah Yunis, in July 2011 was one of the first indications that violent Islamist radicalism might emerge as another challenge to the new state. A year later, his suspected murderer was set free in an assault by Islamists on the jail in Benghazi in which he had been held. The jailbreak was followed by further terror attacks and assassinations in the city.²⁵ A new pattern of violence was beginning to take shape and with it a new political map on which elected national authorities (prime ministers came and went at an alarming rate) played less and less of a role.

In the east, control in Cyrenaica (Barqa) was contested by the national and local authorities. Social groups took to the streets and demanded an end to the militia rule of radical Islamists. These militiamen comprised the Ansar al-Shari'a group, which was involved in the murder of former army officers and, later, in the terror attack on the US consulate in Benghazi on the symbolic date of September 11, 2012.

That attack claimed the lives of four Americans – Ambassador Christopher Stevens, another diplomat, and two security guards – as well as three others. This event turned into a major political issue in the US, with Secretary of State Clinton facing difficult questions concerning her decision not to evacuate the consulate despite growing anti-American sentiment on the ground.

Ansar al-Shari'a later withdrew from Benghazi but held onto bases elsewhere in Cyrenaica (Derna and adjoining areas).²⁶ Assassinations by Islamist cells in Benghazi continued to claim the lives of prominent local figures. Meanwhile, as the government in Tripoli lost its grip, governing elements in Barqa were laying the foundation for an independent economic base, and by the end of 2013 were operating an oil exporting company of their own.²⁷ Amidst these tensions, with the population in Benghazi increasingly angry at the collapse of law and order, little was done (at first) to curb the rise of Islamist groups elsewhere in Cyrenaica- which became the entry point for the Islamic State's presence on Libyan soil.

In the west, the national government was increasingly powerless. In April 2013, the Foreign and Justice Ministries were besieged or stormed by armed men demanding jobs for the revolutionary fighters and a purge of all institutions from former regime officials.²⁸ As local militias battled one another, Prime Minister Ali Zaydan admitted his government was too weak to control vital facilities.

Meanwhile, the subversive influence of groups associated with the Muslim Brotherhood grew steadily. An ultimatum issued in June 2013 by interim Chief of Staff Col. Salem Qinaydi (who took over after Manqush resigned) presumed to give the militias until the end of the year to lay down their arms and join the military.²⁹ It had no effect. The most powerful element in Tripolitania, as mentioned, was (and still is) the Misrata-based militia, whose association with the Islamists gave the latter a powerful tool in the struggle for control in Tripoli. There was nothing the government could do to curb their power.

On August 13, 2013, Amazigh demonstrators forced their way into the parliament building, damaging it and demanding greater recognition. They later took hold of a gas terminal and disrupted supply to Italy.³⁰ Further south, the Fezzan had already become a no-man's-land. Government forces clashed regularly with the Thebbu, going back to a bloody round in June 2012, which proved that governance was fraying there as well.³¹

One important effect of the tribal quarrels was that Libya's borders with its African neighbors remained dangerously porous, with arms, goods and people flowing in both directions. This traffic exacerbated the problem of governance in the country as a whole (and in Mali) as well as the patterns of African migration through Libya to European shores, which played a major role in making the Libyan crisis an Italian (and international) concern.

By the spring of 2014, this fissiparous situation had led to the collapse of any semblance of legitimacy. Political assassinations continued apace. Cyrenaican forces held much of the country's energy export infrastructure, and the government was unable to prevent trade from those terminals. One incident, in which a North Korean tanker, the Morning Glory, slipped through a government naval blockade, led to an angry vote in

parliament to dismiss Prime Minister Zaydan, who fled the country. The tanker was later detained by US special forces and handed over to the Libyan authorities,³² though it was no longer clear at that point what ‘authorities’ really meant.

On April 8, 2014, the appointed Prime Minister, 'Abdallah al-Thinni, announced he was going to step down after what he described as a “traitorous” attack on him and his family.³³ Parliamentary authority split in two and the last vestiges of Libyan unity disintegrated.

An Islamist-dominated faction within the parliament (to be known later as the General National Congress, or GNC), led by Speaker Nuri al-Sahmayn, voted on May 4 for another new Prime Minister, businessman Ahmad Mi'tiq. On May 19, the faction asked the Misrata militia and other forces associated with the Muslim Brotherhood (collectively known first as “Libya Central Shield” and then as “Libyan Dawn”) to stand ready to fight against what they defined as rebel forces, mainly those of General Haftar in the East.³⁴

In response, however, 'Abdallah al-Thinni, still acting as Prime Minister ad interim, refused to recognize the new cabinet's authority. Within days, the Supreme Constitutional Court was presented with arguments to the effect that Mi'tiq's election had violated the provisional constitution.³⁵ This position was upheld by the court on June 9.³⁶

The legal ruling did not end the crisis. Instead, it consolidated Libya's rapid fracture into two (and soon more) domains controlled by competing governments at war with each other. All of this occurred alongside the myriad militias, gangs and warlords already holding effective power.

Al-Thinni and others who rejected Muslim Brotherhood rule now chose to strike out on their own in what came to be known as “Operation Dignity.” They organized “national” elections on June 25 – boycotted by the Muslim Brotherhood, and with only 630,000 votes cast (among 1.5 million eligible). Still, they used the vote to claim internationally recognized status for their “House of Representatives” (HoR) and their government.

What had made this possible was not so much the fine points of their legal case, but the gains of General Haftar. As forces in Tobruk (specifically at the air base) declared loyalty, Al-Thinni's cabinet fled Tripoli and re-

constituted itself in internal exile. Amid further signs of chaos, including the abduction of Arab diplomats and a wave of murders of Europeans and other foreigners (the Greek navy organized an evacuation from Tripoli on August 1), the HoR met in Tobruk on August 4. The country was now effectively divided.

LIBYA AS A BATTLEFIELD IN THE REGIONAL POWER GAME

It is at this point that the role played in the Libyan tragedy by the regional “game of camps” comes into sharper focus.³⁷ It had, in fact, been a major factor from the beginning of the uprising against Qadhafi, which drew both inspiration and support from neighboring states.

In March 2011, when the regime was still hoping to win backing from the new military leadership in Egypt, the rebels put their case before the Arab League. It was not difficult to find rival Arab potentates with scores to settle with the Libyan dictator. This was, after all, a man who had publicly insulted many of them and privately supported their internal enemies, and whose mercurial behavior and personal peculiarities (particularly regarding women) were a source of embarrassment. Qadhafi’s once brash enmity towards the West had dissipated after he was attacked by the Reagan administration and later accused of the Lockerbie bombing. Libya was an easy target, a useful venue in which to channel the murderous rages the so-called “Arab Spring” had unleashed.

Thus, the Arab League, along with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), took a position in early March 2011 supporting action to protect Libyan civilians, provided this was not read as an invitation to invade. A similar stance was taken by the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC).³⁸ In effect, the Arab League lent its support to UNSCR 1973, which authorized military intervention in Libya.

The US used this Arab position to overcome resistance at the Security Council and garner the necessary votes, against the views of some of the world's most powerful nations (10 ultimately supported the resolution, while Germany and the BRIC countries – Brazil, Russia, India, and China – abstained). The text acknowledged the Arab League's role as a regional organization under Chapter 8 of the UN Charter, and requested

its members to cooperate in the implementation of what soon turned from a no-fly zone to a full scale bombing campaign.³⁹

The Secretary General of the Arab League at the time, Amr Musa, showed signs of hesitation, and expressed concern about civilian casualties in allied airstrikes. By March 22, 2011, however – within days of the resolution – he closed ranks. In a meeting with UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, Musa committed the League to the implementation of UNSCR 1973 provided there would be no ground campaign.⁴⁰

On March 25, Qatari pilots flew their first sorties as part of the intervention, adding a symbolic Arab presence to NATO operations. Qatar continued to play a major role in financing and arming the rebels (including Islamist elements) and also convened an international contact group in April to monitor developments in Libya.⁴¹

Elsewhere in the region, Qatar was acting in close strategic cooperation with Erdogan's Turkey (a lesson Israel learned more than once during its rounds of fighting in Gaza). The complex trajectory of Turkey's role in the Libyan crisis illuminates the scope and nature of the AKP government's thoughts and ambitions in the broader regional context. Over time, it came to have a major – and far from benign – influence on Turkey's standing in Europe and on Erdogan's relations with several key players.

At a very early stage of the crisis, Erdogan took up a firm position, calling upon Qadhafi to step down and avoid massive bloodshed.⁴² He did, however, raise sharp doubts (at first) about the utility and purpose of a NATO intervention. Erdogan's mind was perhaps already turning towards the prospect of regional action, led by Turkey, designed to assist the Islamist elements (such as the Muslim Brotherhood) towards whom he felt a degree of ideological affinity.

Erdogan changed this position sharply and dramatically, however, after UNSCR 1973 was adopted. The alternative to NATO would likely have been a French or Anglo-French leadership role over which he would have had no control. The Alliance, of which Turkey is a prominent member, suddenly offered a more attractive option.

Erdogan harbored a hearty dislike of Sarkozy, and saw his Mediterranean initiative as an attempt to offer Turkey a second-best alternative to EU membership. He gave vent to his feelings about French policy during a strongly worded speech in Istanbul at the end of March. He accused the French of “only see[ing] oil, gold mines and underground treasure,” and demanded that Sarkozy put on “glasses of conscience from now on.”⁴³

Rather than stand by its unjustly maligned French ally, the Obama administration let the Turkish side have the upper hand. (Admiral James Stavridis, the SAC-Eur, was sent to Ankara to work out a solution.) After all, an ambiguous NATO responsibility for operations in Libya served the president's concept of “leading from behind” quite well.

This was much more than a tactical or personal issue. Despite the limited scope of Turkey's military contribution to NATO, the long-term impact of allowing Erdogan to play a military role in Libya was bound to influence the purpose and outcome of the intervention. Turkey's participation worked in the Muslim Brotherhood's favor, in Libya and elsewhere, as part of a broader pattern. Openly (in the case of Hamas) or covertly, through the work of the Turkish intelligence service (MIT), Erdogan and his government have lent support to Islamists across the region, including both political parties and more brutal organizations, such as Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria.

A physical hold on parts of Libya became essential as the country fell apart, as an almost endless supply of weapons (from depots to which the Libyan military itself had been denied access in Qadhafi's day) was now being smuggled out of Libya to feed the so-called “rat line” supplying the rebels in Syria.⁴⁴ Qatar played a similar role by forwarding money and supplies obtained during the dissolution of Libya to the Islamist rebels in the Sahel. This was to the dismay of the French, who found themselves drawn into battle with Salafi-jihadist elements in Mali and to the north who were drawing upon such Qatari largesse.

In July 2013, a new regional twist was added to an already convoluted power game. Egyptian attitudes towards the uprising in Libya had always been somewhat ambivalent. There was no love lost for Qadhafi, with whom Sadat had fought a brief war in the summer of 1977 (an

interesting prelude to his peace effort later the same year). Many exchanges over the years had deteriorated into name-calling acrimony. However, in the first year and a half after the outbreak of the so-called Arab Spring, the Egyptian military under Tantawi had no wish to add to the already chaotic situation in Libya by actively assisting the rebels. Its main concern was to stem the gushing flow of arms from Libya into Egypt's western provinces and beyond.

Several Qadhafi officials were handed over, including the 71-year-old former ambassador to Cairo (who resisted arrest and had to be handcuffed).⁴⁵ Other individuals were sheltered by a court ruling, including Qadhafi's cousin, Ahmad Qadhaf al-Dam (the name, quite appropriately, means “spiller of blood”), who acted as a confidant and go-between with Egypt.⁴⁶ Mursi's regime in Cairo had a clear interest in the rising influence of the Muslim Brotherhood in Tripoli politics, but given the attitude of the Egyptian army, could do little to assist it directly. Soon enough, as the tables turned, Egypt became the key sponsor of the anti-Brotherhood forces.

A massive “tamarrud” (insurrection) took place in Egypt on June 30, 2013. It was followed three days later by Mursi's overthrow, Sisi's consolidation of power, and a violent clash with the Muslim Brotherhood. The new regime in Cairo had reason to fear that Libyan territory, particularly the lawless enclaves in Cyrenaica held by Islamist elements, could be used to launch a Muslim Brotherhood counterattack. This was quickly translated into a new policy of intervention in the Libyan power struggle.

Thus, in February 2014, when General Haftar raised the banner of rebellion in Cyrenaica, it was widely seen as a sign of a new and assertive Egyptian intervention in Libyan affairs (despite Egyptian messages to Libyan Prime Minister Zaydan lamely denying any involvement).⁴⁷ There were enough reasons for the Egyptians to look for effective ways to influence the balance of power in Libya and contain the consequences of the continued deterioration. Weapons were still flowing across the wide open and long desert border, dominated by the Bani Walid tribes and others with a keen interest in the arms trade. Terror struck from time to time, including a bombing attack on the Egyptian Consulate in Benghazi (August 17, 2013) that wounded a security guard.⁴⁸ Many

more Egyptian lives were at stake; there were still some one million Egyptians making a living in Libya, despite the massive flight of foreign workers in 2011. Some were Copts, whose very presence, in a land otherwise almost totally Sunni Muslim, gave rise to attacks on Christians and their churches as well as dark suspicions and accusations of proselytizing – a capital offence under shariah law.

As Sisi took up the mantle of counter-terrorism in Egypt and beyond, he could no longer be a neutral observer of Libyan affairs. What this meant in practice was that by the fateful summer of 2014, two major regional powers were now involved in Libyan politics on opposite sides. Their own bitter rivalry exacerbated internal struggles and tore the country apart.

The enmity between Egypt and Turkey was becoming acute. Erdoğan openly viewed Sisi as the illegitimate leader of a coup that had overthrown a legally elected president. Meddling in Libya was a way of protecting the allies Turkey still had in the Arab world and North Africa. Thus, when the newly elected (and disputed) Libyan parliament decided to move away from the grip of Brotherhood elements and other Islamists in Tripoli and relocated to Tobruk, Erdoğan called this an “unacceptable” step. In response, the “legitimate,” parliament-backed Libyan government recalled the Libyan ambassador to Ankara to protest Turkey’s interference in Libyan affairs.⁴⁹

This was not just a matter of verbal sparring. In February 2015, al-Thinni (still the internationally recognized Prime Minister of Libya, albeit in internal exile) accused Turkey of sending weapons to the “Libya Dawn” (mainly Misratawi) forces in support of the rival Brotherhood-oriented government in Tripoli. Earlier, a Libyan activist in Benghazi claimed that Turkish agents were supporting an al-Qaeda affiliate in Cyrenaica, Ansar al-Shari’ah. These claims are less easy to verify but are in line with the practices of the Turkish Intelligence Service, MIT, elsewhere in the region. (In January 2015 Ansar al-Shari’ah confirmed the death of one of their commanders in a Turkish hospital, where he was being treated for wounds sustained in the battles for Benghazi).

Early in March 2015, the acting interior minister in Tobruk reported the detection and discovery of regular supply flights, executed by Turkey and Qatar and flown to an air base near Tripoli. As Jonathan Schanzer has shown, Turkish weapons caches destined for Islamist militias are

occasionally intercepted by Greek and Egyptian forces. These Turkish shipments breach the UN arms embargo on Libya and have been recorded since January 2013. There is thus good reason to see the Libyan internal conflict as a proxy war between Ankara (and Qatar) on one hand and Egypt (and the UAE) on the other, despite Turkish diplomatic protests against this “smear campaign.”⁵⁰

Egypt's proxy, meanwhile, did not remain idle. In months of heavy fighting, Haftar gradually destroyed much of the Islamist power base in the east. By mid-June 2014, he intensified his offensive in Benghazi. (Interestingly, this coincided with a US special forces raid that captured a leader of Ansar al-Sharia who had been involved in the murderous attack on the US consulate in September 2012.)⁵¹ Haftar was simultaneously cleaning up the areas closer to Egypt, destroying local Islamist terror bases, and offering the al-Thinni government a military capacity on which to rely while it was besieged in Tobruk.

Clearly, this could not have been achieved without external help. While direct Egyptian and UAE air operations were limited in number and scope, and were aimed at IS targets (as described below), channels of supply to Haftar's forces must have been open as the fighting intensified.

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE ISLAMIC STATE FACTOR

As pro-Egyptian forces, backed by the regional Camp of Stability, continued to fight Turkish-backed Muslim Brotherhood elements across several fronts in Libya, a third camp – Salafi-jihadi elements hostile towards both – took advantage of the situation to gain a significant foothold on Libyan shores. (The fourth regional camp, the Iranian regime and its adjuncts, tried to penetrate but largely failed. Libyan society is unfriendly towards the Shi'a and hostile to any attempt to convert Sunnis (*tasha'yyu'*), an activity Iran is suspected of promoting).⁵²

Salafi-jihadi groups, some loosely associated with al-Qaeda, were active in Libya even before Qadhafi fell. In 2014, the first attempts to build upon their presence and work towards a new model were made in Cyrenaica, specifically in Derna. The footholds were established under a model of the “tamkin” – a locality (*makan*, or place) under the effective rule of an Islamist armed group that can become a nucleus of governance within the Islamic State.

In April 2014, the Libyan “al-Bittar al-Libi Battalion,” consisting of 300 experienced fighters, returned from Raqqa to Libya. In June 2014, their group, now named the “Islamic Youth Shura Council,” declared its support for the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da’esh, by its Arab acronym at the time). In November they formally swore allegiance to the so-called Khalifa (Caliph), Ibrahim al-Samara’I, who had taken the name Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The group’s territory in Libya thus became a “province” of al-Baghdadi’s “Islamic State.”⁵³

Interestingly, the idea of Libyans running a Libyan IS province was met with resistance among some IS activists. IS is ideologically opposed to the creation of “national” units, and pressed for non-Libyan commanders to be sent in to replicate the model used in Iraq and Syria (where provinces consisted of militants who derived from multiple origins). IS sought areas of control in Cyrenaica, to be used to rendezvous Egyptian, Tunisian and African recruits as well as locals.

However, such strict ideological rules were relaxed because Libya came to be perceived as a land of opportunity for IS. Libya had the potential to be used as a territorial base from which IS could destabilize all of North Africa and potentially pose a direct threat to Europe. Brutal threats as well as ideological appeals won over significant parts of Ansar al-Sharia in Benghazi and elsewhere (including Tunisian and Moroccan elements). In Libya, IS developed into a relatively formidable force, with their numbers rising from about 1,000 in mid-2014 to some 5-6,000 (US estimates) or at least 2-3,000 (UN figures) by the end of 2015.⁵⁴

In June 2015, the original founders of IS in Libya faced a major setback: a local militia, with its own Islamist leanings, drove them out of Derna and broke their hold on other parts of Cyrenaica. Tribal motivations inspired the local militia to rise up against IS oppression (similarly to the Sahwa in western Iraq nine years earlier). IS’s response demonstrated an alarming ability to shift strategy and adapt.

They made use of the deeply ingrained frustration and anger among many in Sirte, where Qadhafi and his loyalists had taken their last stand in October 2011, who were suffering under a reign of arbitrary repression imposed by the Misratawi. IS swiftly turned this base of support in Sirte

into a new type of “province,” and was able to expand its territory with relative ease as the fighting between the “Dawn” and “Dignity” forces weakened the hold of both.

IS experienced little resistance along the Mediterranean coast on either side of Sirte. This success generated renewed energy for the idea of the “Caliphate,” with rumors developing of an impending shift to Libya at a time of growing pressure on IS’s territorial bases in Syria and Iraq. To a large extent, this new surge was based on the residual hostility of tribes such as the Qadhahfa, long loyal to the previous regime, and both the Misrata militia and Haftar.

As in other places, IS in Sirte made its presence known, marking out its territorial ambition via horrifying acts of brutality. Perhaps most notoriously, IS militants beheaded 21 Egyptian Copts (guilty of nothing but their faith) by the seaside in February 2015, and circulated a gruesome video of the atrocity for all to see.

Egypt reacted by launching an airstrike against IS targets.⁵⁵ As it turned out, this was a one-time response. The horrors in Sirte continued for a while, essentially unimpeded, with tribal attempts to challenge IS rule brutally put down. Meanwhile, albeit without the “tamkin” model, IS cells (largely based in former Ansar al-Shari’ah cadres) fought on in parts of Benghazi against Haftar’s NLA and the Tobruk government. They established a presence in the far west, on the desert borders with Tunisia and Algeria – a location that gave them the capacity to attempt cross-border terror attacks. By meddling in the local struggles of the tribes in the Fezzan, IS found ways to serve its interests and secure supply routes. IS leaders were evidently looking upon Libya as a major prospect for further conquest and for actions against the west.⁵⁶ Paradoxically, it was just this prospect that brought them down.

The threat posed by the rapid rise of IS in Libya managed to induce changes that the extensive bloodshed of 2014 did not bring about (despite 1,300 killed in Benghazi alone, much more than in 2011). The Misrata forces and the GNC finally turned their attention to the danger on their doorstep. Efforts at mediation aimed at unifying the two rival governments picked up momentum, after a year of futile meandering, and the international community awakened to the need to “do something.”

THE INTERNATIONAL ROLE REVISITED

The international role in Libya followed a pattern of intervention, withdrawal, neglect, and then a renewed realization that the Libyan factions cannot be left to their own devices. It is a story of careful short-term planning that failed to prevent a long-term disaster (as President Obama admitted in his conversations with Jeffrey Goldberg, “It didn’t work”). It also involved a deliberate American attempt, in Obama’s words, “to prevent the Europeans and the Arab states from holding our coats while we did all the fighting...It was part of the anti-free rider campaign.”

The original Western intervention, in 2011, was relatively well executed within the limits set for it. The parties acted with an explicit UN Security Council mandate, and European and Arab players were called upon to “carry their weight” in a military coalition. All of this proceeded as the president intended: “without putting boots on the ground and without a long-term military commitment in Libya.”

It still ended up, however, a “mess” (privately, Obama used more pungent language). The relatively successful initial operation, “Odyssey Dawn,” was followed by half-hearted actions, fatal indecision at crucial moments, and blindness to possible consequences. Qadhafi was removed from power, and the threat of massive slaughter in Benghazi and elsewhere was averted. But the notion of delegating long-term follow-up to other countries, such as France, Britain, perhaps Turkey, and the Arabs proved to be disastrously wrong-headed.

The idea tallied with the idea of “leading from behind” (which Obama himself never used and is said to have resented). According to Goldberg’s account, the Libyan tragedy played a major role in the president’s disillusionment about the “Arab Spring” and the realization that he may have been hasty in using such high language about the arc of history bending towards justice.⁵⁷

Militarily, the US was bound to lead and coordinate the military effort, not least because many of the intelligence and strike capabilities were only available to US forces. The relatively new regional command, AFRICOM, established a command center aboard the USS Mount Whitney. US naval and air commands assigned to NATO missions in

the Mediterranean and Africa – the Fifth Fleet and the 17th Air Force, respectively – were incorporated into the Joint Task Force Odyssey Dawn. Forces from France, Britain, Italy, and Canada were later joined by Denmark, Spain, Norway, Belgium and others, including the Qataris and the United Arab Emirates, all flying airstrike missions.

These countries were then joined by Jordan and Kuwait, which confined themselves to humanitarian and logistical support roles. With the coalition steadily building, reminiscent of 1990 at its best, the US administration – first Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and then the president himself – made it clear that it would seek to shed overall responsibility “within days” and hand it to NATO. But as described, controversy erupted within the Alliance. Germany resisted the operation altogether, and Turkey played a complex game with an anti-French twist.

The Germans pulled their naval assets out of the Mediterranean to avoid being drawn into an intervention they strongly objected to. They compensated for this, however, by increasing their NATO presence in Afghanistan to free up Alliance assets. By March 23, Turkey focused on a NATO role in Libya, if only to avoid the French taking a leading position. Both Turkish and Greek ships joined the military effort, and in terms of diplomacy as well as military coordination, this went well.

Gradually, the US military role shifted to support operations. On 15 June 2011, President Obama responded to Congressional claims that the operation had no legal sanction under the War Powers Resolution of 1975 by describing it in terms of “non-kinetic” support for NATO, suppression and destruction of Libyan air defenses, and unmanned strikes in the context of a parallel operation, “Unified Protector,” designed to impose the UN arms embargo.⁵⁸ It fell to the British and the French, who had fewer qualms about placing special forces teams on the ground, to work in closer coordination with the rebel forces (including the Amazigh in the summer of 2011) as they slowly closed the noose around Qadhafi’s neck.

The absence of “boots on the ground,” however – no matter how politically desirable, from both an American and an Arab point of view – came with an operational price that would soon come to have strategic implications. Even the morally passionate advocates of American intervention from

within the administration (Hillary Clinton, Susan Rice, Samantha Power) and outside it (such as Bernard Henri Levi in France, and Leon Wieseltier writing in white anger in the *New Republic*) felt obliged to stress that “nobody is suggesting that a single American soldier set foot on Libyan soil.” The assumption, as Wieseltier put it, was that “Obama will not be rushed. He is a man of the long game. But the Libyan struggle for freedom, and the mission of rescue, is a short game.”⁵⁹

Therein lies the painful contradiction that led to much of what was to come. “Rescue” might have been a “short game,” but the struggle to make Libya a place fit to live in (let alone “free” in any sense of the word) required not only a long-term commitment but an intimate knowledge of, and interaction with, the local culture (or, rather, cultures, which varied greatly from town to town and tribe to tribe). The lessons learned in this respect by US General David Petraeus in both Iraq and Afghanistan could not be applied in a NATO air campaign.

The innate American (and European) reluctance to challenge what Wieseltier scathingly called “assumptions about the assumptions” of the Arabs, presumably including their resistance to Western intervention in their domestic affairs, added a political barrier to the practical one. When, as Gaub reminds us, the NTC made the fatal mistake of refusing outside help, there were no capabilities on the ground, Libyan or otherwise, that could have secured a stable transition.⁶⁰

What followed was not surprising, given the intensity of Obama’s feelings about the outcome in Libya. That was a period of effective neglect. Clearly, the US administration expected the British and particularly the French to undertake the difficult, complex and unrewarding business of managing the transition. The Obama administration felt that France had been handed a fine moral result and a victory visit (attended by both Sarkozy and Cameron) in Tripoli. Unfortunately, European oversight was not acceptable to the NTC, which felt it could handle the transition itself. It was wrong, but the Europeans went ahead and turned their attention elsewhere.

Sarkozy lost his election to a much less adventurous figure, and the general mood of Britain was amply demonstrated in the parliamentary vote on Assad’s use of chemical weapons in Syria. While regional

players lined up their proxies, the strange tribal squabbles of Libya could have been taking place on another planet as far as most of Europe was concerned. The heroic figures among the rebels, originally lionized by the likes of Bernard Henri Levi, were now either marginalized or dead, and were hardly protagonists worthy of support in the first place. (Haftar in particular was looked upon quite warily by western players, who saw little to admire in his military talent or his Egyptian links and not much to support in terms of his political ambitions.)

Such attitudes became less tenable in 2015, however, and by 2016 the pendulum had swung in the opposite direction. Two intertwined factors forced Italy, then Europe, then the reluctant US administration to rethink their policies of neglect. The unending stream of refugees in rickety boats, many of them dying on their way to Italy, put growing pressure on the government in Rome to take preventive action. Some of these refugees were Libyans, but many others were Africans and migrants from even further afield who were using the chaos in Libya to embark on journeys organized by human traffickers (few of whom are ever interfered with by local law enforcement agencies, which have largely ceased to exist).

Thus, by February 2015, planners and politicians in Rome were looking into the option of military action, at least against the traffickers. Although Prime Minister Matteo Renzi took a clear stand against the sudden shift “from total indifference to hysteria,” Italy did lead the way, with strong British backing, in a series of European initiatives. In October 2015, “Operation Sophia” in the Mediterranean won the endorsement of the UN in Security Council Resolution 2240.⁶¹

Immigration came to be politically charged across Europe, and was one powerful reason to look again at Libya; but there were others. The fighting in the oil terminal areas was wreaking havoc on supplies to Europe (and on the Mediterranean environment). In December 2014, Italian firefighters were called in to control the fires raging in terminals fought over by the two rival governments.⁶² For European as well as Turkish businesses, the prospect of seeing their investments in Libya go to naught was one more reason to encourage the mediation efforts.

Most significantly, the rise of an IS “province” on Libyan shores meant that western powers could no longer ignore the worsening implications of the Libyan meltdown – not even the Obama administration, despite the president’s peroration on the subject (as quoted by Goldberg). With a war against IS being waged elsewhere, Libya could not be neglected again. It was no longer just the lives and livelihoods of Libyans at stake: in the regional struggle for power, the province had the potential to be a game changer. As it turned out, the tools of a counter-strategy were available, and policy decisions led to their use – although there is little record of any focused and systemic reconsideration of policy in either Washington or Europe.

With Rome setting the tone at times, due to Italy’s immediate needs, the western community of nations gradually came to craft a more effective strategy in Libya. The ardent rationalization of American abdication during 2012-14 by the president and his apologists was proved not to have been rooted in a sober assessment of all options. Rather, in Libya as elsewhere, it rested upon a risk-averse and artificial dichotomy between an all-out commitment (“another Iraq?”) and doing very little. A more pro-active policy could have been crafted – and, to a large extent, was crafted, in 2015-16 – bringing some pressure and limited military action to bear on the Libyan situation with rather significant results.

The critical object was to roll back and destroy, or at least bring to the verge of destruction, the IS “province” in Libya. It was necessary for both governments in Libya to turn away from fighting each other and dedicate major resources to overrunning IS territory around Sirte. Geography and military capacity dictated that the main thrust of this effort would fall to the “Libyan Dawn” Misratawi forces, whose bases were nearby, who had been in control of Sirte in the past, and who were best positioned to retake it.

As for Haftar’s LNA, it did play a role in mopping up IS cells in Cyrenaica and could bring air assets into action; but most significantly, it could indirectly contribute by reducing the level of hostilities with the Tripoli government, leaving it more space and resources to dedicate to the battle of Sirte.

Thus, as part of the anti-IS drive, it was also necessary to give additional political momentum to the international mediation efforts. In August 2014, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon appointed Bernardino Leon, a Spanish

diplomat who was serving at the time as the EU Special Representative for the Southern Mediterranean, as his Special Representative and Head of the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL).⁶³

His efforts did not immediately bear fruit, not least because the key stakeholders were not truly interested yet. In an email (leaked a year after it was sent) that Leon sent in late December 2014 to Abdallah al-Nahyan, Foreign Minister of the UAE (Egypt's ally in the proxy war), he showed himself to be very much on the side of the Tobruk government. Leon sought to reestablish it as Libya's ruling government and bring about the removal of the GNC ("the illegitimate government"). At the same time, he was acutely aware of the complexity of tribal relations and unable to get the Egyptians (and thus, Haftar) to sign on to his aggressive diplomatic strategy of creating a common ground between "Operation Dignity" and "Libyan Dawn."

As Leon was leaving his position to take up new duties as a diplomatic instructor in the Emirates in late 2015, the leak cast a retroactive shadow on his claims of impartiality in the conflict. However, it should come as no surprise that as a UN envoy, he was committed to the success of the "lawfully elected" HoR. In keeping with his promise to the Emiratis, he kept in close consultation with Mahmoud Jibril and other liberal voices. The Italians, too, became somewhat partisan: once friendly towards Ankara, they came to see Turkish meddling in Tripoli in an extremely negative light. However, Leon did explain to his friends that the key to change in Libya – moving towards reintegration and destroying the radicals – would have to run through coopting Misrata (which Leon described as "a business and trade-oriented city") and driving a deep wedge between it and the radical Islamists.

Unfortunately, given that neither the US nor Europe had real tools of influence on either side; that Egypt was still reluctant, at this stage, to engage; and that the quarrelsome atmosphere among Tobruk politicians (neither Leon nor the UAE had any personal sympathy for Prime Minister al-Thinni) made it difficult to implement any effective strategy, there was little Leon or the Italians could do to advance a direct Tobruk-Misrata deal. Leon thus saw no choice but to fall back on what he viewed as an inferior Plan B: talks between the political parties organized by the UN, on Moroccan soil and elsewhere.⁶⁴

Meanwhile, Leon was working on inducing the key western powers, including, by his own account, “US, UK, and France,” to cooperate with the UAE on what he called “Plan T (for Terrorism).” This was a kernel of what later became an effective, if not necessarily pre-planned or coherent, strategy by these key players (as well as Italy). It involved a commitment to several military operations, limited in nature but important in the local fight against IS, which would create some leverage towards the political outcome that Leon and others perceived as workable. It was much too late for the Copts in Sirte, and the many others who lost their lives over the years of neglect; but something was finally to be done.

The question western planners now had to face was how to prioritize their options: an all-out campaign in support of the HoR in Tobruk, and of Haftar's forces; or seeking first to achieve a real, or at least a nominal, reconciliation between the two governments.⁶⁵ (The first was not an appetizing choice: Haftar was suspected at the time of seeking, with Egypt's help, to overthrow both governments and assume a “Sisi-like” role in Libya.) What emerged, as had been the case so often before, was a poorly coordinated hybrid; but it at least worked better than had previous western policies.

For reasons having to do with their broader regional orientation, where they are far more firmly aligned with the “Camp of Stability” than with the Obama administration, the French brought in special forces and intelligence capabilities on behalf of Haftar's campaign in Benghazi.⁶⁶ This followed a pattern of special forces assistance (French, American and Algerian) established in 2014 in the ultimately successful hunt for Mukhtar Belmokhtar and other Islamist terrorists in the Fezzan.⁶⁷ Meanwhile, the Italians, British, and Americans provided around 6,000 troops with special forces in the lead, as well as other elements, including drones to be used against IS targets in effective support of the Misratawi's war effort.⁶⁸

At this point, the diplomacy Leon had outlined but did not bring to fruition became vital. For the western coalition to help “Libyan Dawn” forces crush IS, it was now absolutely necessary to legitimize them under the umbrella of a unity government. In 2015, far-reaching calls by informed but opinionated observers to abandon support for Tobruk in pursuit of national unity had not been heeded, and with good reason.⁶⁹ But by the end of the year, and with military support plans being implemented on

behalf of both sides, increasing pressure could be brought to bear. The quarrelsome parties thus came to terms and established the Government of National Accord (GNA).

Italy, for obvious reasons, took the lead. In December 2015, against the chaotic background of the leak of Leon's problematic email, Italian Prime Minister Renzi moved in to convene an international conference in Rome with US Secretary of State Kerry. Leon exposed his Emirati preferences, scandalized many on both sides, and added to internal fissures, both within the HoR in Tobruk and among the various elements of the GNC in Tripoli. Leaders on both sides were pressed to uphold the agreements already reached in talks in Tunis so as to prevent political collapse.⁷⁰

The difficulties persisted; but under the leadership of a new UN mediator, the German diplomat Martin Kobler – who refused to be pessimistic even when his efforts were on the verge of collapse – there was finally a breakthrough in the political process, with parallel efforts made to establish a military dialogue between Haftar and the Misratawis. On December 17, 2015, the long-awaited Libya Political Agreement (LPA) was signed in Skhirat, Morocco, largely based on Leon's concept of a new national authority taking over from both governments. This still required some diplomatic ambiguity: Kobler deftly skirted the difficult issue of ratification by the HoR, which was in doubt, by declaring that it had already taken place (in fact, the approval was in principle, not a formal ratification as required by the agreement).

Kobler also managed to avoid, at least for a while, the even more loaded and dangerous question of the line of command. Haftar was presumed to be removed as commander, and the LNA subjected to the authority of the new GNA Presidential Council. No party saw any benefit to belling the angry cat and telling him so, which would have led to a violent crisis and the collapse of the entire effort.⁷¹ The decisive stand taken by Egypt in support of Haftar's position left him in play as a power broker, but none of this stood in the way of the necessary act of reconciliation.

On March 30, 2016, the Presidency Council of the Government of National Accord, led by Fa'iz Sarraj, established itself in Tripoli as the internationally recognized government. Sarraj had been Leon's choice back in October 2015, a Tripoli politician from a noble family who had

worked in the Housing Ministry under Qadhafi but was not tainted by political support for the old regime.⁷² Key figures from both sides joined the new administration, and a significant portion of Libyan armed groups were supportive. This did not, however, bring Libya's agonies to an end. Much of the capital was still held by armed brigades who did not entirely see themselves as subordinate to the GNA.⁷³ Electricity outages caused by militia control of power stations and the collapse of the dinar undermined Sarraj's standing, and the crucial question of Haftar's status had yet to be resolved.⁷⁴

Still, the essential point of legitimizing a regime in Libya was so that it could send forces into battle against IS, with extensive international help. This took place, and the results were dramatic. By September 2016, the remnants of the IS “province” were reduced to three neighborhoods in Sirte.⁷⁵ The IS hold in the central Mediterranean, which had seemed so dangerous not long before, was destroyed relatively swiftly. On October 10, 2016, the Misratawi press office was claiming that “liberation is in sight.”⁷⁶ Mopping-up operations went on for two months, but by December 2016, the last IS fighters in Sirte laid down their arms.

This raises the question of “the Day After,” as the deep hostility between “Dignity” and “Dawn” has resurfaced. Much depends on how Haftar will be handled. His forces’ swift capture, in September 2016, of the “oil crescent” of ports and facilities (Ra’s Lanuf, Al-Sidra, Zuwaytania, and Brega) earned him a promotion to field marshal by the still-active government of Cyrenaica. (Haftar, 73, who commanded the Libyan contingent in the 1973 war with Israel, was one of very few generals in a land of colonels. Captured in Chad in 1987, he spent more than 20 years in exile, gaining American citizenship – and a death sentence from Qadhafi).⁷⁷ His forces’ success also ensured that any stable solution to Libya’s political and economic imbalances must take into account his needs, and those of his supporters in both Cyrenaica and Cairo.

This should not be beyond the ingenuity of Kobler and his western backers. Turkey, the GNC’s patron, may help: it now has other fish to fry in the complex regional game. True, to surrender to an act of “armored blackmail”

in the oil crescent by conceding Haftar's military position in the new state structure is morally questionable. But to allow Libya to slide back into civil war would be even less edifying. Moreover, western pressure is now needed to keep all involved focused on ensuring that the destruction of IS in Sirte is not followed by fresh outbreaks elsewhere in Libya, which might again pose a threat to local, regional and international security.

CONCLUSION: COMPLEX STORY; SIMPLE LESSONS

The twists and turns of history that led to Qadhafi's overthrow, Libya's descent into civil war, and the attempt to put the country back together again have been complex, occasionally contradictory, and difficult to understand even for those in the thick of things. It led the US and the west to an initial intervention, driven by "R2P" (responsibility to protect) sentiments, and to a hard-headed but poorly thought-out abdication. Since 2015, the west has embarked on a renewed intervention combined with a delicate diplomatic exercise in government-building. This study has been a necessarily oversimplified attempt to follow the contours of the story and point to some of its broader implications and lessons.

Those lessons are simpler than the story. For the Libyans themselves – to be precise, the sober voices on both sides of the Dignity/Dawn divide – an opportunity may now present itself to sustain a fragile but non-violent modus vivendi. This may seem unlikely, given the extent of bloodshed and bitterness; but with the memories of the descent into hell still vivid, and with financial reserves dangerously close to the point of economic disaster, there may be powerful incentives at work to curb a return to 2014 realities.

Lebanon, where passions ran even higher during the long civil war years, can provide an example of a country that came several times to the edge of the abyss, but made sure not to repeat its fatal mistakes of the 1970s. Even closer in place and time, Algeria is a case of a society determined not to succumb once again to the horrors that engulfed it in the 1990s. If powerful pressures and incentives continue to be provided by external stakeholders, pushing both sides to remain within the GNA template, it is not entirely naïve to hold out hope of relative stabilization (albeit in the context of a highly decentralized system that gives due recognition to

regional, ethnic [Amazigh] and tribal identities and interests). The need to fight Islamist radicals, belatedly recognized by both sides, should remain a unifying element for some time to come.

For the regional players – particularly Turkey and Egypt, whose fierce rivalry and ideological hostility turned the Libyan situation largely into a war by proxy – the lessons of the past year should tend towards a realization of the limits of their power and the costs of aggressiveness. Turkey paid a steep price, in terms of her standing in Europe, for its overt and extensive support of the GNC in Tripoli. Egypt may run into difficulties with its (already reluctant) friends in Washington and Europe if gives unrestrained backing to Haftar's bid for power. If there is a “pareto-optimal” point at which the interests of both parties would be served, Turkey's friends, including the Muslim Brotherhood, would have a share of power; but Egypt would have a strong anti-MB buffer in Cyrenaica, with Haftar's military position recognized as part of the GNA administration. It would be in the interest of both to find such a point, with the help of international players.

Among those players, one – Russia – has drawn a powerful lesson from the Libyan experience: it will never again allow the Security Council to mandate an intervention that would bring about the demise of a regime that has long been its friend. Russia's actions in Syria (and in New York, on the Syrian issue and on others) speak for themselves. Moreover, the anger over Secretary Clinton's conduct in Libya (and her callous reaction to Qadhafi's death) played a role in setting Putin's agenda in the US presidential election campaign of 2016.

As for the Europeans, the obvious lesson is that a fire cannot be left burning indefinitely under their feet in the Mediterranean – certainly not in the central Mediterranean, where the potential for disruptive impact on Italy and beyond cannot be ignored. For Rome, Paris and London (Brexit notwithstanding, Britain remains not only a key member of NATO but an important Mediterranean strategic player, with bases in Gibraltar and Cyprus), the period of benign neglect turned out to have been a tragic mistake. Renzi was right when he warned, early in 2015, against moving overnight from total indifference to interventionist hysteria. But once the full set of circumstances was taken into account, a limited and specific military intervention, combined with a more robust diplomatic effort (and

a division of labor, not necessarily planned but quite useful, between the French supporting the LNA and the British and others helping the Misrata militias) turned out to be a better option than doing nothing.

Much the same is true for the US, where the next administration, as it settles down to reassess Obama's foreign policy legacy, would do well to take a long, hard look at the overt and unstated assumption that drove policy in Libya since 2011. Such a review would need to question the wisdom of Obama's reluctance to act, much as he himself questioned (or jettisoned) the "Washington establishment's playbook" about the need for credibility and consistency in action.

At the end of the day, the west came back in 2016 to do things that could have been done well before, with much less loss of Libyan life. At the core of this insight is the old argument ignited against the background of Vietnam by Caspar Weinberger and followed up by his disciple, General Colin Powell, who had this to say at the early stages of the Bosnian crisis: "As soon as they tell me it's limited, it means they do not care whether you achieve a result or not. As soon as they tell me 'surgical', I head for the bunker."⁷⁸ Strong words: but surely the lesson by now is that the prejudice against limited but effective actions and interventions, combined with a sophisticated diplomatic effort, has swung way too far in the opposite direction since the days of Vietnam.

Problems with the potential to change regional balances of power, be they in Bosnia or Libya (let alone Syria), will not go away if left to rot. Throwing up your hands in disgust is not an option. Libyan behavior was bitterly disappointing to Obama in the immediate aftermath of Qadhafi's overthrow; but ultimately, it was the willingness to step in militarily and help in the fight against IS that enabled the western powers to bring about a modification (however fragile) of that behavior.

Israel wisely kept out of the Libyan storm. The crisis was only dimly understood, and there was little that could be done from an Israeli perspective to have any direct effect on the outcome. Still, four points may stand out as lessons for Israeli decision-makers:

1. Where local outcomes are important to Israel, such as on the Syrian side of the Golan border, the tools of intervention – military,

humanitarian and political – may prove indispensable, as was the case in the west in Libya. Turning our back on complex challenges will not make them simpler.

2. In terms of the broader picture, a regional balance affected by a coherent and robust American and western policy (which proved helpful in Libya at the end of the day) creates a safer and more predictable environment, not only for Israel but for other like-minded nations in the “Camp of Stability.” As Israel would be wise to discuss with the incoming American administration, it must be recognized that there are enemies out there who need to be fought.
3. Even in conflicts where Israel does not have a direct stake, it cannot be entirely neutral. Israel’s interests lie with the forces of stability. Haftar is not necessarily an admirable man, or our friend. But Sisi is a strategic partner, and we have reason to hope for the success of his policy in Libya.
4. Equally significant is the Mediterranean dimension. Specifically, the role of Italy and the intensity of its involvement make it more urgent to build up structures of strategic consultation among the key players in the eastern Mediterranean. These would include Italy, Greece, Cyprus, the Adriatic Coast nations, Egypt, and Israel (with Jordan), as well as Turkey if Erdogan’s policies change. Such consultation would advance common purpose and reinforce the need to stand against common enemies.

NOTES

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