

# **Paved with Good Intentions: How Washington Created the Libya Hell**

Ted Galen Carpenter

If there was ever a case demonstrating that good intentions in foreign policy are not enough, the 2011 US-led military intervention in Libya is that case. US policymakers sought to prevent a slaughter of innocents, overthrow the brutal dictator Muammar Gaddafi, and help install a new, democratic regime. Their prevailing assumption was that Libya would enjoy a much better future as a result of US and Western ministrations.

But policies must be judged by their consequences, not their intentions. The consequences in Libya have been nothing short of horrific. Instead of becoming a stable, democratic country, post-Gaddafi Libya has degenerated into an arena of violent anarchy among numerous rival militias, many of which are radical Islamist in their ideological orientation. Libya is now Somalia on the Mediterranean. Many thousands of innocents have died, including victims among the nearly 1 million desperate refugees that have attempted to cross the Mediterranean in small, leaky boats. By any reasonable measure, the US military crusade in Libya produced a calamity.

## **Libya's Inherent Fragility**

The Barack Obama administration's decision to intervene militarily in Libya was based implicitly on the doctrine of "responsibility to protect" (R2P)

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innocent civilians from war crimes.<sup>1</sup> That doctrine had been on the rise in liberal internationalist circles for nearly a quarter century. To such advocates as Samantha Power, the author of a seminal work on the Rwanda genocide and later a policy adviser in the Obama administration, Libya appeared to be an appropriate laboratory for applying the R2P doctrine. Libya's longtime dictator Muammar Gaddafi ruled with an iron fist, imprisoning or executing opponents with little semblance of due process or even basic mercy. As in other arenas where the United States has intervened militarily during the post-Cold War era, the growing desire on the part of humanitarian activists to protect innocents in Libya from nasty treatment dovetailed with the goal of helping supposedly democratic factions unseat an odious dictatorship. Both R2P and democracy promotion helped build the Western case against Gaddafi.

Despite his harsh, authoritarian rule, however, Gaddafi posed no credible security threat whatever to the United States. Indeed, Washington and its allies had scored a major diplomatic coup in December 2003 by inducing Gaddafi to relinquish his embryonic nuclear program in exchange for the removal of sanctions and Libya's readmission into Western diplomatic and economic circles.<sup>2</sup> But the nature of the Libyan strongman's rule did not change significantly, and deep domestic divisions continued to plague the country.<sup>3</sup>

As in the case of most "nations" that the outside imperial powers created in the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries throughout the Middle East and Africa, Libya was an extremely artificial entity. Italy cobbled Libya together as a colony from three regions of the decaying Ottoman Empire. Those regions had very little common history or culture, and when the victorious Allies stripped Rome of its colonial possessions in World War II, the United Nations preserved the defective handiwork. The principal centers of political and economic influence were Tripolitania in the west

1. For a skeptical assessment of the responsibility-to-protect rationale in international affairs, see Rajan Menon, *The Conceit of Humanitarian Intervention* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 6–10, 43–4, 83–4, 89–97.

2. "Bush, Blair: Libya to Dismantled WMD Program," *CNN.com*, 20 December 2003, [www.cnn.com/2003/WORLD/africa/12/19/bush.libya/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/2003/WORLD/africa/12/19/bush.libya/index.html).

3. See Alan J. Kuperman, "Lessons from Libya: How Not to Intervene," Policy Brief (Cambridge, MA: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, September 2013), [belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/publication/23387/lessons\\_from\\_libya.html](http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/publication/23387/lessons_from_libya.html).

and Cyrenaica in the east. The southern Fezzan region was more sparsely populated—largely by the Tuareg and Tebu tribes that sought to maintain an independent existence.<sup>4</sup>

As had been the case since the beginning of his rule in the late 1960s, Gaddafi's political power structure was centered in Tripolitania. He relied on support from the tribes in the western part of the country (especially in the area around Tripoli) to help keep him in power. Tribes in the Fezzan were far less favorably inclined, and tribes in Cyrenaica (especially near the city of Benghazi) were overwhelmingly hostile to Gaddafi. Indeed, rebellions in the east had broken out several times during his rule. Columbia University senior research scholar Rajan Menon notes that eastern Libya also “housed the political base of the Senussid monarchy that Gaddafi had overthrown in 1969 and of those elites who regarded the onetime colonel as a parvenu and usurper from society's lower ranks.”<sup>5</sup>

In late January and early February 2011, yet another eastern uprising began, with demonstrations in a number of towns and villages, focused mainly on the government's incompetent economic policies. The rebellion reached critical mass on 15 February, when Gaddafi's security forces fired on demonstrators in Benghazi. The insurgency spread rapidly after that incident, and on 27 February rebels formed the National Transitional Council as a competing government to Gaddafi's regime. Both domestic and international pressure mounted on the Obama administration to intervene.

### Washington's Path to War

US and other Western officials did not see the rebellion as just the latest manifestation of Libya's fractious tribal and regional politics. Instead, they reacted to the disorder as another theater in the Arab Spring's democratic uprisings that were beginning to sweep portions of the Middle East and North Africa. Senator John Kerry, chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, made that connection explicitly in mid-March. Describing the growing tur-

4. Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates was one of the few US officials to understand Libya's fragility and the problems that the regional and ethnic divisions posed. See Robert M. Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), 522–3.

5. Menon, 111.

moil in the Middle East as a “new Arab Awakening” and a “huge blow to extremism,” Kerry asserted that Washington’s reaction to developments in Libya would help determine “how Muslims around the world see us going forward, probably for decades to come.”<sup>6</sup>

And, in a process reminiscent of the prevailing assumptions before and during the Balkan conflicts and the Iraq war, official analyses and media accounts portrayed the struggle in Libya as a stark moral conflict. According to that narrative, on one side was a murderous dictator, and on the other were rebels seeking greater freedom for their country and protection for civilians from the dictator’s security forces. The assumption of well-meaning Westerners, based on little more than faith, was that a successor government would be much better than the current one.<sup>7</sup> Senator John McCain, ranking Republican on the Armed Services Committee, ridiculed arguments that the United States didn’t know enough about the rebels to arm them. After the North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s air strikes to support the insurgents began, McCain was utterly laudatory. During a visit to rebel-held territory in eastern Libya, he described the insurgents fighting Gaddafi’s troops as his “heroes.”<sup>8</sup>

As the congressional pressure on the Obama administration suggested, lobbyists for a humanitarian military intervention were in full offensive mode by early 2011. That drive was apparent in France, Britain, and other key European members of NATO as well as in the United States.<sup>9</sup> They accused the Gaddafi government of war crimes and even crimes against humanity, calling for a detailed UN probe into the allegations.<sup>10</sup> As time went on and

6. Gail Russell Chaddock, “Five Senators Push Obama to Do More in Libya,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 22 March 2011, [www.csmonitor.com/USA/Politics/2011/0322/Five-senators-push-Obama-to-do-more-in-Libya/Sen.-John-Kerry-D-of-Massachusetts](http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Politics/2011/0322/Five-senators-push-Obama-to-do-more-in-Libya/Sen.-John-Kerry-D-of-Massachusetts).

7. Daniel Larison, “Clinton’s Libyan War and the Delusions of Interventionists,” *American Conservative*, 29 February 2016, [www.theamericanconservative.com/larison/clintons-libyan-war-and-the-delusions-of-interventionists/](http://www.theamericanconservative.com/larison/clintons-libyan-war-and-the-delusions-of-interventionists/).

8. Associated Press, “John McCain Praises ‘Heroic’ Rebels on Visit to Libya,” *Guardian*, 22 April 2011, [www.theguardian.com/world/2011/apr/22/john-mccain-praises-libya-rebels](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/apr/22/john-mccain-praises-libya-rebels).

9. See, for example, “Responsibility to Protect: Calls for Intervention Intensify,” *NATO Watch*, 24 February 2011, [natowatch.org/node/472](http://natowatch.org/node/472); “Libya Revolt: Gaddafi in Crimes against Humanity Probe,” *BBC News*, 3 March 2011, [www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-12636798](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-12636798); Atika Shubert, “Gadhafi Faces Investigation for Crimes against Humanity,” *CNN.com*, 3 March 2011, [www.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/meast/03/03/libya.war.crimes/](http://www.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/meast/03/03/libya.war.crimes/).

10. That campaign accelerated once the NATO military intervention commenced. See Associated Press, “UN: Qaddafi Forces Committed War Crimes,” *CBS News*, 1 June 2011, [www.cbsnews.com/news/un-qaddafi-forces-committed-war-crimes](http://www.cbsnews.com/news/un-qaddafi-forces-committed-war-crimes).

the rebellion against his authority spread, Western activists insisted that Gaddafi's military offensive against Benghazi and its environs would culminate in a genocidal bloodbath. Dennis Ross, a senior Obama administration adviser, warned that one hundred thousand people would be killed in Benghazi if Gaddafi succeeded in conquering the city.<sup>11</sup> Such a monstrous toll would have been one-seventh of Benghazi's population, but Ross made that allegation without a shred of evidence. Ross was not alone in expressing such inflammatory speculation. Other administration officials shared his fears. In her memoirs, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated flatly, "We were looking at a humanitarian catastrophe, with untold thousands at risk of being killed."<sup>12</sup>

The rebels continuously hyped atrocity stories and provided a drumbeat of warnings that Gaddafi would conduct a mass slaughter if the United States and its allies did not intervene militarily. At one point, the insurgents falsely claimed that his forces had already killed thirty thousand civilians. That figure equaled the total that the Transitional National Council later conceded was the maximum number of all deaths, military as well as civilian, that occurred during the entire nine-month civil war that finally overthrew Gaddafi's regime. Yet, as Menon notes acidly, "Apparently no American official thought it worth asking how Gaddafi's small and lackluster army, fighting an armed rebellion on multiple, widely separated fronts, could have managed such a feat in only two weeks."<sup>13</sup> There was little or no pushback regarding other outlandish statements the rebel political leadership issued. On 10 March, a prominent opposition leader, Mustafa Abdul Jahlil, asserted that the regime would kill five hundred thousand people unless the UN or the Western powers promptly imposed a no-fly zone.<sup>14</sup> Western officials and media outlets typically accepted such comments and predictions at face value and regurgitated them to an ambivalent but generally credulous public.

Clinton was an especially crucial proponent within the Obama administra-

11. Ross Douthat, "100,000 Libyan Casualties?" *New York Times*, 24 March 2011, [douthat.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/03/24/100000-libyan-casualties/](http://douthat.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/03/24/100000-libyan-casualties/).

12. Hillary Rodham Clinton, *Hard Choices* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014), 370.

13. Menon, 112.

14. Chris McGreal, "Gaddafi's Army Will Kill Half a Million, Warn Libya Rebels," *Guardian*, 12 March 2011, [www.theguardian.com/world/2011/mar/12/gaddafi-army-kill-half-million](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/mar/12/gaddafi-army-kill-half-million).

tion of an armed intervention in Libya, ostensibly for humanitarian purposes, but more fundamentally to achieve regime change.<sup>15</sup> Clinton received strong support in her campaign for military intervention from both National Security Council staffer Samantha Power (a longtime advocate of the R2P doctrine) and the US ambassador to the United Nations, Susan Rice. At the crucial 17 March 2011 meeting of the National Security Council, however, intense divisions within the administration were evident. Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates succinctly identified the factions. Vice President Joe Biden, Admiral Michael Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Central Intelligence Agency Director John Brennan, and Gates himself were among the advisers opposed to US military action. “Clinton, Rice, Power and [Deputy National Security Adviser Ben] Rhodes argued that we had to get involved,” according to Gates, and although the president “said it was a close call,” he ultimately “came down on the side of intervention.”<sup>16</sup>

US leaders seemed inclined to repeat many of the same errors that George W. Bush’s administration had committed in Iraq. Once again, the United States was leading an effort to overthrow the longtime secular dictator of a very fragile, artificial country, based on little more than a hope that the aftermath would be more stable and democratic.

Former Cato Institute research fellow in defense and homeland security studies Benjamin H. Friedman summarized the prointervention case.

Secretary of State Clinton, along with President Obama, made three major arguments for supporting Libya’s rebels in 2011. One was that a rebel victory over the Gaddafi government would make Libya a liberal democracy. Another was that by supporting Libya’s rebellion, the United States and other outside powers would show willingness to stand up for other rebels and Arab Spring protests against Middle Eastern dictators. Convinced of US resolve, those dictators would give ground to the democratic move-

15. For discussions of Clinton’s central role, see Benjamin H. Friedman, “The Real Benghazi Scandal Everyone Is Missing,” *National Interest Online*, 28 October 2015, [nationalinterest.org/feature/the-real-benghazi-scandal-everyone-missing-14185](http://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-real-benghazi-scandal-everyone-missing-14185); Jo Becker and Scott Shane, “Hillary Clinton, ‘Smart Power,’ and a Dictator’s Fall,” *New York Times*, 29 February 2016, [www.nytimes.com/2016/02/28/us/politics/hillary-clinton-libya.html?ref=todayspaper&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/28/us/politics/hillary-clinton-libya.html?ref=todayspaper&_r=0).

16. Gates, 518. Gates also stated in his memoirs that Obama later told him the Libya intervention had been “a 51–49 call for him.” Gates, 519.

ments rather than crush them. The third argument was humanitarian: by aiding the rebels, we would protect civilians, especially in Benghazi.<sup>17</sup>

As with the Iraq war, and more recently in Syria, most policymakers seemed blissfully unconcerned about what might follow the ouster of the incumbent government. That pattern is extremely troubling. It is unprofessional, if not a case of outright malpractice, for US leaders to launch military missions with potentially far-reaching consequences without a sober assessment of, and a serious strategy for, the probable aftermath. Such flippancy would seem to be a violation of policymaking 101. Yet time and again Washington has embarked on humanitarian interventions or regime-change enterprises without such considerations. Libya would become a prime example.

For all the warnings about Gaddafi's actual or planned war crimes, the insurgents were committing plenty of their own offenses.<sup>18</sup> However, defenders of the US-led intervention, both at the time and in retrospect, habitually overlooked those numerous troubling episodes.<sup>19</sup> The rebels committing such atrocities were the same people that Obama administration officials believed would create a new, tolerant, and democratic Libya.

### Washington's Arrogance and Persistent Illusions

It quickly became apparent that the US-NATO operation in Libya was not a limited humanitarian intervention to protect vulnerable civilians. Instead, it was another regime-change war. When the insurgents were able to topple Gaddafi, aided by the influx of military hardware and, even more important, the US-led air and missile barrage against the Libyan government forces,

17. Friedman.

18. Amnesty International, *The Battle for Libya: Killings, Disappearances, and Torture* (London: Amnesty International, 2011), 70–8, 82–7, [www.amnesty.org/en/documents/MDE19/025/2011/en/](http://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/MDE19/025/2011/en/); David Smith, "Murder and Torture Carried Out by Both Sides of Uprising against Libya Regime," *Guardian*, 12 September 2011, [www.theguardian.com/world/2011/sep/12/murder-torture-both-sides-libyan-regime](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/sep/12/murder-torture-both-sides-libyan-regime); Seumas Milne, "If Libya War Was about Saving Lives, It Was a Catastrophic Failure," *Guardian*, 26 October 2011, [www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/oct/26/libya-war-saving-lives-catastrophic-failure](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/oct/26/libya-war-saving-lives-catastrophic-failure).

19. An example of the latter is Rand Corporation scholar Christopher S. Chivvis, *Toppling Qaddafi: Libya and the Limits of Liberal Intervention* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014). See especially page 175, where he accepts the inflated estimates of the civilian casualties that government forces allegedly inflicted without mentioning a word about rebel atrocities.

Obama administration officials believed that their policy had been vindicated. Even when rebel forces captured Gaddafi at the end of August and then tortured and executed him in an especially gruesome fashion, Clinton responded with the flippant observation: “We came, we saw, he died.”<sup>20</sup>

President Obama was less crude and insensitive, but he clearly shared his secretary of state’s assumption that the new Libya would be a decided improvement on Gaddafi’s rule. “Tripoli is slipping from the grasp of a tyrant,” the president stated in August. “The people of Libya are showing that the universal pursuit of dignity and freedom is far stronger than the iron fist of a dictator.”<sup>21</sup> Senators McCain and Lindsey Graham were equally gratified and optimistic. “The end of the Gadhafi regime is a victory for the Libyan people and the broader cause of freedom in the Middle East and throughout the world,” they concluded.<sup>22</sup> The two senators, along with colleagues Mark Kirk and Marco Rubio, proclaimed during a visit to “liberated” Tripoli that the rebels had “inspired the world.”<sup>23</sup>

In his remarks regarding Gaddafi’s death in October, Obama asserted that “the dark shadow of tyranny has been lifted” from Libya. He urged the citizens of that country to “build an inclusive and tolerant and democratic Libya that stands as the ultimate rebuke” to the former oppressor.<sup>24</sup> Ivo H. Daalder, the US ambassador to NATO, and Admiral James Stavridis, NATO supreme allied commander, Europe, were equally euphoric. Describing the intervention as “an extraordinary job, well done,” they called it “an historic victory for the people of Libya who, with NATO’s help, transformed their country from

20. “Clinton on Qaddafi: ‘We Came, We Saw, He Died,’” *CBS News*, 20 October 2011, [www.cbsnews.com/news/clinton-on-qaddafi-we-came-we-saw-he-died/](http://www.cbsnews.com/news/clinton-on-qaddafi-we-came-we-saw-he-died/). Her attitude was not unique. Political scientist Benjamin Barber noted that Qaddafi had refused to flee the country, stating that he would live or die in Libya. “The Libyan freedom fighters granted him his wish,” Barber stated. Benjamin Barber, “Libya’s Revolution Has Triumphed, but Will Democracy?” *Guardian*, 21 October 2011, [www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/oct/21/libya-revolution-democracy-muammar-gaddafi](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/oct/21/libya-revolution-democracy-muammar-gaddafi).

21. Don Lothlan, “Obama on Libya: Tripoli Is Slipping from the Grasp of a Tyrant,” *CNN.com*, 22 August 2011, [www.cnn.com/2011/POLITICS/08/22/obama.libya.statement/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/2011/POLITICS/08/22/obama.libya.statement/index.html).

22. Quoted in *ibid.*

23. Kareem Fahim and Rick Gladstone, “U.S. Senate Delegation Offers Praise and Caution to Libya’s New Leaders,” *New York Times*, 29 September 2011, [www.nytimes.com/2011/09/30/world/africa/senate-delegation-offers-praise-and-caution-to-libyas-new-leaders.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/30/world/africa/senate-delegation-offers-praise-and-caution-to-libyas-new-leaders.html).

24. Quoted in Andrew J. Bacevich, *America’s War for the Greater Middle East* (New York: Random House, 2016), 329.



an international pariah into a nation with the potential to become a productive partner with the West.”<sup>25</sup> Much of the US foreign policy community and news media chimed in about the glorious outcome of the US-NATO intervention. Princeton University professor Anne Marie Slaughter, an outspoken advocate of R2P in general and the Libya mission in particular, asserted that skeptics of that intervention were “proved badly wrong.”<sup>26</sup>

*New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof gushed about how the people he encountered in Libya loved America. “Americans are not often heroes in the Arab world, but as nonstop celebrations unfold here in the Libyan capital I keep running into ordinary people who learn where I’m from and then fervently repeat variants of the same phrase: ‘Thank you, America!’” Although unlike some supporters of the intervention, Kristof at least made the pro forma admission that things could still go wrong, he saw the Libya intervention as an attractive model for future missions. “To me, Libya is a reminder that sometimes it is possible to use military tools to advance humanitarian causes. This was an exceptional case where we had international and local backing.” The Libyans, Kristof contended, “overwhelmingly favored our multilateral military intervention.”<sup>27</sup>

There were only a few dissenting voices at the celebration. Journalist Glenn Greenwald expressed his astonishment and dismay at the lack of realism or even minimal skepticism on the part of policymakers. “I’m genuinely astounded at the pervasive willingness to view what has happened in Libya as some sort of grand triumph even though virtually none of the information needed to make that assessment is known yet, including: how many civilians have died, how much more bloodshed will there be, what will be needed to stabilize that country and, most of all, what type of regime will replace (Moammar) Gadhafi?”<sup>28</sup>

25. Ivo H. Daalder and James G. Stavridis, “NATO’s Success in Libya,” *New York Times*, 30 October 2011, [www.nytimes.com/2011/10/31/opinion/31iht-eddaalder31.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/31/opinion/31iht-eddaalder31.html).

26. Quoted in Conor Friedersdorf, “Did Libya Prove War Hawks Skeptics Right or Wrong?” *Atlantic*, 29 July 2014, [www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/07/did-the-war-in-libya-prove-the-interventionists-right-or-wrong/375211/](http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/07/did-the-war-in-libya-prove-the-interventionists-right-or-wrong/375211/).

27. Nicholas Kristof, “Thank You, America!” *New York Times*, 31 August 2011, [www.nytimes.com/2011/09/01/opinion/kristof-from-libyans-thank-you-america.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/01/opinion/kristof-from-libyans-thank-you-america.html?_r=0).

28. Quoted in “Was Libya a Victory for Obama, NATO?” *USA Today*, 25 August 2011, [usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/opinion/forum/story/2011-08-25/Was-Libya-a-victory-for-Obama-NATO/50137822/1](http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/opinion/forum/story/2011-08-25/Was-Libya-a-victory-for-Obama-NATO/50137822/1).

## The Horrid Aftermath of America's Libya Crusade

Washington's hopes for an orderly transition to democracy in Libya proved as illusory as they had been in Iraq. Just weeks after Gaddafi's fall, the insurgents began to fragment, largely along tribal and regional lines. The western tribes started to coalesce around a power center in Tripoli, whereas the eastern tribes generally supported a rival faction headquartered in Benghazi. More generalized disorder characterized the southern portion of Libya.

Instead of being allied with fledgling democrats in Libya, the United States now found itself in an increasingly uncomfortable association with tribal militias—many of which were decidedly Islamist. The perils of trying to cooperate with such factions became all too apparent on 11 September 2012, when an extremist militia attacked the US consulate in Benghazi, killing Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three other Americans.

The aftermath of the US-led intervention has been a mess. Libya has become the playground for rival militias and rival governments. Writing in 2012, shortly after the death of Ambassador Stevens and the other victims, Greenwald asked perceptively, "How much longer will it be before we hear that military intervention in Libya is (again) necessary, this time to control the anti-US extremists who are now armed and empowered by virtue of the first intervention? US military interventions are most adept at ensuring that future US military interventions will always be necessary."<sup>29</sup>

That prediction proved to be devastatingly accurate. A little more than three years after the Benghazi incident, the United States conducted a new round of air strikes to prevent the establishment of an Islamic State beachhead in Libya.

Despite the increasingly evident dismal results of the Western intervention, Clinton and her ideological allies continued to portray the mission as a success. During an October 2015 Democratic primary debate, Clinton insisted that the Libya intervention was "smart power at its best." She conceded that because "of the Arab Spring, because of a lot of other things, there was turmoil," but insisted that the long-term outlook remained encouraging.<sup>30</sup>

29. Glenn Greenwald, "State Department Attacks CNN for Doing Basic Journalism," *Guardian*, 24 September 2012, [www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/sep/24/cnn-journal-libya](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/sep/24/cnn-journal-libya).

30. Conor Friedersdorf, "Hillary Defends Her Failed War in Libya," *Atlantic*, 14 October 2015, [www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/10/hillary-clinton-debate-libya/410437/](http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/10/hillary-clinton-debate-libya/410437/).

In reality, the already bad situation grew steadily worse. The Human Rights Watch *World Report 2017* estimated that by the end of 2016 there were nearly four hundred thousand internally displaced Libyans.<sup>31</sup> That is in addition to the nearly 1 million refugees that had fled the country entirely—some four hundred thousand in 2016 alone. Moreover, the pace of that desperate migration to Europe had tripled since 2013.<sup>32</sup> In other words, the situation was deteriorating, not improving. The massive refugee flow into Europe also is causing serious societal tensions among some of Washington's most important strategic allies—yet another inadvertent consequence of the Libya intervention.

The Human Rights Watch report on the overall situation was uniformly depressing, and it underscored how the West's expectations about post-Gaddafi Libya have become a mockery. The UN-backed, internationally recognized Government of National Accord struggled in 2016 to assert itself in the capital Tripoli, as two authorities—one also based in Tripoli and another in eastern Libya, dominated by former Gaddafi general and Central Intelligence Agency asset Khalifa Haftar—continued to compete for legitimacy and control over resources and infrastructure.

Forces aligned with all governments and dozens of militias continued to clash, exacerbating a humanitarian crisis with close to half a million internally displaced people. The civilian population struggled to gain access to basic services such as healthcare, fuel, and electricity. Militias and armed forces affiliated with the two governments engaged in arbitrary detentions, torture, unlawful killings, indiscriminate attacks, abductions, and forcible disappearances. Criminal gangs and militias abducted politicians, journalists, and civilians—including children—for political and monetary gain.<sup>33</sup>

An October 2017 incident illustrates just how fractured post-Gaddafi Libya remains and how convoluted the political and military rivalries have become.<sup>34</sup> An airstrike killed at least fifteen civilians, including a dozen

31. Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2017: Events in Libya, 2016* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2017), 1, [www.hrw.org/world-report/2017/country-chapters/libya](http://www.hrw.org/world-report/2017/country-chapters/libya).

32. Esther Yu Hsi Lee, "Why So Many Refugees Are Fleeing to Europe from Libya," *ThinkProgress*, 2 June 2016, [thinkprogress.org/why-so-many-refugees-are-fleeing-to-europe-from-libya-f95d570f4d81/](http://thinkprogress.org/why-so-many-refugees-are-fleeing-to-europe-from-libya-f95d570f4d81/).

33. Human Rights Watch.

34. Aidan Lewis and Ulf Laessing, "UN Condemns Civilian Deaths from Air Attack in Eastern Libya," Reuters, 30 October 2017, [www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security/u-n-condemns-civilian-deaths-from-air-attack-in-east-libya-idUSKBNICZ2NM](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security/u-n-condemns-civilian-deaths-from-air-attack-in-east-libya-idUSKBNICZ2NM).

women and children, in the besieged city of Derna, located about 165 miles west of the Egyptian border. At the time of the attack, Derna was controlled by a coalition of Islamist militants and rebel veterans known as the Derna Mujahideen Shura Council (DMSC), one of the numerous political-religious factions in the country. The source of the air strike was unclear. The coastal city had long been under siege by the eastern-based Libyan National Army (LNA) (General Haftar's armed wing), which had previously conducted air strikes against it, as had Egypt, which backs the LNA.<sup>35</sup> However, both the LNA and the Egyptian government denied carrying out the most recent raid. Indeed, Egypt's foreign ministry issued a statement condemning the strikes, which it said had killed innocent civilians. One Egyptian TV station with close ties to the Cairo government insisted Libyan planes had conducted the attack. The LNA, however, denied that assertion and said there had been a "terrorist attack" in the area. The Tripoli-based, UN-backed government, which opposes the LNA and maintains very loose ties with the DMSC, denounced the air strikes and announced three days of mourning.

That was hardly the extent of the murky, complex, multisided struggle, however. The DSMC had controlled Derna only since 2015. It achieved that status by expelling the Islamic State, which had established a foothold there the previous year. In other words, one militant Islamic group drove out a rival militant Islamic group. Such is the nature of political and military affairs in post-Gaddafi Libya.

The one common feature of the various parliaments, cabinets, and militias that are competing for power in Libya is that virtually none of them exhibit much commitment to either secularism or democracy, much less to both values. Instead, there is a pronounced trend toward various types of authoritarianism, often with a distinct Islamist overlay. Clinton and her admirers may still describe the 2011 intervention as a victory, but that argument strains credulity well past the breaking point.

35. Egypt is merely one of several Middle East powers backing one faction or another in Libya. Others include Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Turkey. That geostrategic meddling by regional powers was already prominent in 2014. See Gilad Wenig and Andrew Engel, "Battlefield Libya," *National Interest*, 17 September 2014, [nationalinterest.org/feature/battlefield-libya-11291](http://nationalinterest.org/feature/battlefield-libya-11291). Also see Simon Henderson, "U.S. Allies Bombing Islamists: The UAE Airstrikes on Libya," (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 25 August 2014), [www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/u.s.-allies-bombing-islamists-the-uae-airstrikes-on-libya](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/u.s.-allies-bombing-islamists-the-uae-airstrikes-on-libya).

University of Texas scholar Alan Kuperman's early assessment has proven to be far more accurate than those of Clinton or other defenders of the Libya intervention. In a 2013 policy brief for Harvard's Belfer Center, Kuperman concluded, "NATO's action magnified the conflict's duration about sixfold and its death toll at least sevenfold, . . . while also exacerbating human rights abuses, humanitarian suffering, Islamic radicalism, and weapons proliferation in Libya and its neighbors."<sup>36</sup> *New York Times* reporter Mark Landler contends that Libya "has descended into a state of *Mad Max*-like anarchy." Post-Gaddafi Libya is now "a seedbed for militancy that has spread west and south across Africa." Beyond those problems, the country has "become the most important Islamic State stronghold outside of Syria and Iraq," and sends out "waves of desperate migrants across the Mediterranean, where they drown in capsized vessels."<sup>37</sup>

The Obama administration's regime-change venture in Libya was another in a growing list of tragic outcomes from that approach for both US foreign policy and the multitude of victims in the target countries. Andrew Bacevich, author of *America's War for the Greater Middle East*, argues that in Libya, unlike in Iraq, "the absence of US troops enabled Americans to avert their gaze from what intervention had wrought."<sup>38</sup> What it wrought was vastly different from the stable, harmonious, democratic polity that Washington professed to desire. Instead, Libya became another chaotic arena featuring bloody pitched battles among competing authoritarian factions.

Writer David Bromwich provides a succinct epitaph for Washington's humanitarian venture in Libya when he states that the US-NATO action to overthrow Gaddafi with the hope of a democratic replacement "has turned out to be a catastrophe with strong resemblance to Iraq—a catastrophe smaller in degree but hardly less consequential in its ramifications, from North Africa to the Middle East to southern Europe."<sup>39</sup>

36. Kuperman.

37. David Landler, *Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, and the Twilight Struggle over American Power* (New York: Random House, 2016), 187.

38. Bacevich, 330.

39. Quoted in Friedersdorf, "Hillary Defends Her Failed War."