Foundational Failings: A Case Study on US Intervention Overseas

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Abstract

This thesis will seek to demonstrate how the U.S.'s attempt to export democracy by leading the

NATO air campaign to overthrow Muamar el Gadafi in 2011 undermined U.S. foreign policy

goals producing regional instability and power vacuums. This work will attempt to summarize

the historical fragility of democracies, the cultural basis needed to establish a strong democratic

system, the tradition of autocratic government in the Middle East, and how all three of these

factors were largely ignored in overall U.S. planning and strategy in its intervention in the

Libyan Civil War. Finally, an alternative foreign policy criterion for assessing U.S. regional

objectives and strategy in the Middle East will be proposed that satisfies overall U.S. foreign

policy in promoting human rights and freedom while avoiding destabilizing actions and ensuring

U.S. geopolitical interests are secured.

Foundational Failings: A Case Study on US Intervention Overseas

The U.S. has often been referred to as the policeman of the world, and not without reason. At the end of the Second World War there was only one other global superpower than the U.S. and it was diametrically opposed to American values and ideals in every conceivable manner. The push to counter unchecked Soviet ambitions to establish a global Communist empire led the U.S. to interfere in numerous foreign wars to varying degrees in both categories of involvement and success. Throughout the Cold War era the U.S. had to approach its foreign policy pragmatically, often making the decision to support an authoritarian ruler to avoid the possibility of a Communist takeover. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, the U.S. has become far more indecisive and idealistic in its foreign policy, which has led to disastrous consequences for not only U.S. interests abroad, but for the people of the nations in which the U.S. has chosen to militarily intervene. The U.S.'s foreign policy objectives in Libya and the greater Middle East has been severely undermined by its preoccupation with the exportation of democracy.

Context of U.S. Interventionism

The practice of idealism-based interventionism was first introduced to American political thought with the foreign policy of President Woodrow Wilson and his efforts to secure the right to "self-determination of peoples" for many of the world's disenfranchised through the Treaty of Versailles and the creation of the League of Nations.[1] Democratic governance and eventually world governance was viewed as the objective as it was reasoned that if democracy were achieved on a broad scale by most of the world's nations, war would be much more easily

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[1] Steve Martinot, "The Cultural Roots of Interventionism in the U.S.," *Social Justice* 30, no. 1 (91) (2003): 116-117.

averted and diplomatic congeniality and peace would prevail.[2] Wilson's idealism, was not shared

by the Allies of the First World War or the American people voiced through Congress. Wilson's

dream of a democracy filled world was largely shelved until the administration of Franklin

Roosevelt. At the end of the Second World War, the Wilsonian vision was revived in the creation

of the United Nations declaring the Self-Determination of Peoples its founding dual value along

with the sovereignty of the nation-state.[3] However, the rivalry of the Soviet superpower forced

FDR and following administrations to be pragmatic in their strategic geopolitical foreign policy

decisions, allying with and supporting many leaders and regimes that did not share American

values and views on governance and rights. American foreign policy makers did so in view of

the long-term goal of preventing a complete Communist takeover, allowing for the possibility of

eventual democratic reform in otherwise autocratic allies in the future.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, the Clinton administration

reintroduced Wilsonian idealism, humanitarian-based interventionism, and democracy

exportation through military means if necessary.[4] In the succeeding administration of George W.

Bush, the overthrow Saddam's Baathist regime and replacement with an attempt at Iraqi

democracy follows along these same idealist lines of thought. A similar situation developed with

the U.S. invasion and following 20 year-long occupation in support of the establishment and

maintenance of Afghani democracy, which promptly fell apart upon the withdrawal of American

troops in August of 2021.

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[2] Håvard Hegre, "Democracy and Armed Conflict," *Journal of Peace Research* 51, no. 2 (2014): 159.

[3] Norman A. Graebner, and Edward M. Bennett, *The Versailles Treaty and its Legacy: The Failure of the Wilsonian Vision*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) 60-64.

[4] Nicolas Bouchet, *Democracy Promotion as US Foreign Policy: Bill Clinton and Democratic Enlargement*, 1st ed. (New York: Routledge, 2015), 38-39.

Despite the self-evident hazards, mixed returns, and immense burden of committing to fight two ongoing wars of insurgency the Obama administration led a NATO coalition air campaign in support of a popular Libyan uprising to overthrow their long-time dictator Muammar Gaddafi in 2011. The hope was that by enabling the rebels to enforce their demands the formation of a new, free, democratic nation, would be fostered without making the costly commitment of thousands of ground troops.[5] What resulted was absolute chaos: Gaddafi was brutally murdered, his forces crushed leaving a power vacuum with former Libyan government forces and rebel groups fracturing into various warring factions that have continued the conflict for the past decade.[6] This instability and turmoil turned Libya into a haven for terrorists such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS insurgents, and led to the assault on the U.S. embassy in Benghazi that saw ambassador Chris Stevens and three other American nationals murdered. Foreign involvement has only increased with various regional and global players intervening and supporting separate factions in the civil war.[7]

This interventionist idealistic impulse is not wholly attributable to Wilson's work and vision. Throughout the American history prior to the World Wars, U.S. leadership and in turn its populace have demonstrated an eagerness to go to war for what is viewed as a righteous cause or crusade.[8] This can be seen first in crafting of the Monroe Doctrine, one of the U.S.'s earliest and

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[5] Brett A. Larson, "The Conundrum between National and Ideational Interests in Foreign Policy Making: Bureaucratic Politics and Operational Code During the U.S. Participation in Operation Unified Protector." (PhD diss., University of Colorado, Denver, 2013), 51, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.

[6] Hamzeh Al-Shadeedi, et. al., *One Thousand and One Failings: Security Sector Stabilization and Development in Libya*, (Clingendael Institute, 2020), 18.

[7] Patrick Terry, "The Libya Intervention (2011): Neither Lawful, nor Successful," *The Comparative and International Law Journal of Southern Africa* 48, no. 2 (2015): 179.

[8] Martinot, "The Cultural Roots of Interventionism," 116-117.

boldest foreign policy decisions in the Republic's nascent years. Although there was an evident

pragmatism in implementing a policy that attempted to curb influence from the European Great

Powers in America's proverbial backyard, a principled almost paternalistic attitude of protecting

the little guy from the playground bully is unmistakable in its creation and execution.[9] This

ideological trend can be traced throughout most of the wars waged by the early Republic

continuing through the U.S. Civil War where both sides sought to justify their cause by declaring

they were championing the rights of the disabused and downtrodden (that of the States in the

case of the Confederacy and the enslaved in that of the Union).[10] The First World War merely

witnessed a weaponization of this liberator fervor on an unprecedented scale. When the

Armistice and Treaty of Versailles revealed itself for the sham and unequal peace that it was,

with U.S. interests primarily disregarded, the American public realized it had been used as a tool

for the advancement of their Allies' imperialist objectives and the backlash was swift and

decisive.[11]

The U.S. lapse into "isolationism" was temporary, however, and the Second World War

would see its return to the international stage in the place of foremost prominence. America's

new unique position as the world's leading superpower and de facto world policemen would only

enhance its liberator complex by bringing it into conflict with the spread of Communism in the

Korean War, Vietnam, and numerous proxy conflicts throughout the globe.[12] Throughout its

conflict history both prior and post-World War II, the U.S. was and is distinctly anti-

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[9] Alex Bryne, *The Monroe Doctrine and United States National Security in the Early Twentieth Century*, (Palgrace Macmillan, 2020), 5-6.

[10] Martinot, "The Cultural Roots of Interventionism," 128.

[11] Graebner, and Bennett. *The Versailles Treaty*, 60-64.

[12] Bryne, *The Monroe Doctrine*, 205.

imperialist.[13] The American public had no stomach for the empire building clearly demonstrated

in its first attempt to do so in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War with its management of

the massive Philippine archipelago, its first and only serious colonial possession, which it

promptly promised eventual independence seeking only naval basing rights in return.[14] This

distaste for colonialism and empire helped contribute to the impetus for U.S. championing of the

dissolution of its allies' empires in the aftermath of the Second World War in deference to a wide

variety of peoples and leaders with unknown agendas and priorities. In many cases newly formed

states and regimes proved themselves enemies and opponents to America and its interests, yet

the U.S. commitment to anti-imperial thought continued to prevail despite its self-sabotaging

nature.[15]

The Middle Eastern Context

By contrast, the nations the U.S. has attempted to export democracy to via military

intervention in the last few decades have little next to nothing in common with America's unique

situation. Iraq is a region that has served as the crossroads and intersection of empires for

thousands of years, dominated by its northern, eastern, or southern neighbors who command

strategic positions in the mountains of Anatolia, the Persian Plateau, or the buffer of Palestine

and the desert.[16] The modern nation is hopelessly divided along ethnic, religious, and other

sectarian lines that have a recent and ancient history of hatred and violence perpetuated upon one

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[13] Ian Tyrrell and Jay Sexton, *Empire's Twin: U.S. Anti-Imperialism from the Founding Era to the Age of Terrorism*. 1st ed. (Cornell University Press, 2015), 1-3.

[14] Ibid., 88-89.

[15] Ibid., 1-3

[16] Henry G. Blake, Hugh Kennedy, John E. Woods, Majid Khadduri, and Richard L. Chambers, "Iraq," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2022.

another.[17] Autocratic rule has been the norm for Iraq since the time of Sargon of Akkad, without an iron hand to enforce cooperation between all of its varied peoples and ideologies there is no other authority that unifies. The current democratic government established in the wake of Hussein's overthrow is plagued by corruption and has never truly attained national stability on its own much less national homogeneity or domestic tranquility.[18] Afghanistan's democratic experiment and ensuing dissolvement speaks for itself. Another crossroads of empires not only divided along ethnic, religious, and ideological lines but interminably interrupted by a massive maze of mountain ranges that inextricably link it to its domineering neighbors.[19] This disruptive geography has always lent itself towards disunity and decentralization which no empire of the ancient or recent past has ever fully overcome, Kabul either remaining a distant outpost or seat of a nation's empire.[20]

Libya, has a similar context to these fellow Middle Eastern regions. Another cross road of empires, the port cities of the Libyan coast have served as a critical way points for cross Mediterranean trade and later safe havens for pirates. Libya's extenuated coastline, vast open deserts, powerful neighbors and lack of a hard boundaries facilitated its domination by foreign influences throughout its history.[21] Empires ranging from the ancient Egyptians to the Ottomans having held sway over the region. Libya as a nation or even region would not be conceptualized

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[17] Johan Franzén, *Pride and Power: A Modern History of Iraq*, (London, England: C. Hurst and Company, 2021), 337.

[18] Ibid., 388-390.

[19] Thomas J. Barfield, *Afghanistan a Cultural and Political History*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 23-25.

[20] Ibid., 59.

[21] Dirk J. Vandewalle, *A History of Modern Libya*, Second edition. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 53-55.

as a unified whole until the Italian conquest of the Ottoman Tripolitania Vilayet taking the

traditional regional divisions of Tripoli, Cyrenaica, and Fezzan merging them under the title of

"Libya" a derivation of the word used by the ancient Greeks for the people of the region.[22] This

tripartite division had roots in the open geography of the region as the coastal cities of Cyrenaica,

in the east were usually dominated and influenced by whatever power held sway over Egypt, and

the cities of the West domineered by powers based in Tunisia or its immediate northern

neighbors of Italy and Greece.[23] The foremost sub-regional cities respectively were and are

Benghazi in the East and Tripoli in the West; during the truncated lifespan of the Kingdom of

Libya (1951-1969) both cities served as the nation's dual alternative capitals.[24] The Berber

peoples that inhabit the southerly deserts of Fezzan, have always remained semi-autonomous

from the coastal regions and whatever empire held sway at the time.[25]

In the aftermath of World War II, Libya was administrated jointly by France and Britain

until former Libyan resistance leader Emir Idris was granted the kingship of the newly formed

constitutional monarchy of the Kingdom of Libya in 1951.[26] Thus began Libya's first ever

experiment with a "democratic" form of government. The Kingdom's constitution crafted under

U.N. oversight included a number of protective mechanisms designed to protect the rights and

freedoms of all Libya's diverse citizenry and granting significant autonomy the state's provincial

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[22] Vandewalle, *A History of Modern Libya*, 62.

[23] Ibid., 54.

[24] Ibid., 85.

[25] D. D. Cordell, Nevill Barbour, Gary L. Fowler, Mukhtar Mustafa Buru, and Brown, L. Carl, "Libya," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2022.

[26] Cordell, et al., "Libya," 2022.

government; the end result was viewed quite favorably in the West.[27] However, significant

power was vested in the monarchy permitting it to interfere with legislative processes leading the

path open to autocratic rule. This development did not take long, by the end of the first elections

in 1952 all political parties and their formation was banned.[28] The main opposition party, which

had thoroughly lost in the general elections, was outlawed and its leader exiled. In response the

Libyan populace felt far more connected to their local provincial governments as they had more

of a say and there were incessant jurisdictional disputes between the King's central government

and the provinces.[29]

The discovery of rich oil reserves in Cyrenaica in 1959 signaled a massive increase in not

only wealth but Western interest and support for Libya's development; it would also add fuel to

the fire of the nascent kingdom's preexisting and volatile sectarian divisions.[30] With revenue

pouring into the state coffers from the exportation of oil Idris' government moved to centralize

authority further by abolishing its decentralized federal form of government and the historical

tripartite division along with it in 1963. In their stead a unitary monarchy with a central

government whose power was all but absolute was adopted and the country divided into ten new

districts overseen by a governor appointed by the king.[31] Growing dissatisfaction over the

centralization of wealth and power in the hands of the king and his inner circle, the rising

influence of Egyptian president Gamel Nasser and his Pan-Arab movement, combined with the

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[27] Vandewalle, *A History of Modern Libya*, 85-86.

[28] Ibid., 87.

[29] Ibid., 86.

[30] Ibid., 88.

[31] Ibid., 102.

unpopularity of the King's continued alliance with the West in spite of the events of the 1967 Six

Day War and Israeli-Palestinian conflict culminated in a bloodless coup d'état by a number of

military officers led by Muamar al-Gaddafi.[32]

Declaring the establishment of the Libyan Arab Republic Gaddafi promoted Pan-Arabism

and a form of "direct democracy," however Gaddafi and his pollical allies practically held all

power.[33] The ban on political parties was not repealed, trade unions, and political dissent was

additionally banned and little actually changed as far as how things were run. Gaddafi and his

supporters ensured the people were constantly surveilled through a system of "Revolutionary

Councils" established throughout the provinces.[34] In the same vein of many other popular anti-

imperial/Western uprisings the economy's major industries such as oil were nationalized, foreign

companies expelled, and British and U.S. forces forced to leave abandoning the substantial base

complexes they had built up over the decades.[35] Ethnic minorities that had succeeded in the

Libyan economy such as the Italian and Jewish communities that had formed much of the

nascent nation's middle class had their property expropriated and were forced to flee in a

national holiday Gaddafi titled "Vengeance Day."[36] Riding high on the influx of funds from a

general rise in oil prices during the 1970s Gaddafi's regime funded a myriad of internal social

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[32] Vandewalle, *A History of Modern Libya*, 106-109.

[33] Federal Research Division, *Libya: A Country Study*, 4th ed. Vol. 550-85; (Washington, D.C: The Division, 1989), 42-43.

[34] Ibid., 47-48.

[35] Ibid., 46.

[36] Jonathan Bearman, *Qadhafi's Libya*, (London: Zed Books, 1986), 72.

and development projects as well as a massive military spending and the funding of numerous

insurgent and terror groups abroad.[37]

It did not take long for Gaddafi to draw the increasing ire of the U.S. as his anti-

imperialist and pro-socialist rhetoric combined with his funding of terrorist operations during the

height of the Cold War in the 1980s earned him a series of airstrikes in Operation El Dorado

Canyon.[38] This combined with a general decrease in the price of oil globally led to the lessening

of Gaddafi's incendiary rhetoric and revolutionary support. In the aftermath of the Cold War

Libya found itself increasingly isolated on the world stage despite attempts by Gaddafi to

ingratiate himself with the African Union.[39] Libya remained under his domineering rule for over

forty years during which dissent, divisions, and any attempt at democratic reform outside central

approval was systematically quashed and repressed. Limited reforms were implemented, with

some privatization measures being adopted, political prisoners released, etc. in the 1990s, but

they failed to turn Libya's spiraling economic conditions and rampant corruption around.[40]

Despite Libya's near complete religious homogeneity with around 96% of the population

identifies as Sunni Muslim, the late 1990s and early 2000s witnessed an uptick in Islamist

activity as groups such as Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood and others gained in domestic

influence.[41] Throughout the duration of Gaddafi's rule, the same sectarian, ethnic, and

geographical divisions remained under the thin veneer of Libyan anti-imperialist "unity" and

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[37] Federal Research Division, *Libya*, 50-51.

[38] Ibid., 56-58.

[39] Vandewalle, *A History of Modern Libya*, 175-176.

[40] Ibid., 208-209.

[41] Ibid., 183.

once his downfall was assured the nation quickly splintered along its East – West and tripartite

bifurcations.[42]

R2P, Intervention, and Fallout

The social upheaval of the "Arab Spring" initiated first in Tunisia quickly spread to its

next-door neighbor and throughout the entire Middle East. Gaddafi's typical iron-fisted response

did not land well with an ideologically driven West. Seeking to capitalize on the region wide

revolutionary fervor, the U.S. and European nations supported the overthrow of many of the

Arab autocrats it found so distasteful to deal with despite the risks such actions posed to overall

regional stability.[43] This manifested in either direct subversion via aid and assistance to

opposition forces or nominal statements of support and condemnation of autocrats and their

respective regimes.[44] In face of such international and internal pressures lifelong presidents

began to resign, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak in Egypt to name the

most prominent. The result was a wave of political and security destabilization en masse

throughout the Levant and North Africa. Radical Islamist forces from ISIS to Iranian backed

Shiite militias grew and spread throughout the Middle East mixing with Western backed anti-

government forces. While these radical elements were not explicitly supported by the West, they

compromised any notion or hope that these popular revolutions would usher in an unprecedented

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[42] Vandewalle, *A History of Modern Libya*, 203-204.

[43] Larson, "The Conundrum between National and Ideational Interests," 51.

[44] Andrew Porter, "Arab Spring will add to extremism if we do not help, says David Cameron," *The Daily Telegraph*, May, 2011. https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/david-cameron/8539420/Arab-Spring-will-add-to-extremism-if-we-do-not-help-says-David-Cameron.html.

era of democratic Arab self-governance and pluralism.[45] Old sectarian divisions reemerged with a vengeance, and the case of Libya was no exception.

The impetus for U.S. and Western support for the Arab Spring and by extension its intervention in Libya was based on ideological and not strategic considerations such as maintaining a "balance of power." The U.S. and West deemed itself protector of the growth and spread of Arab "democracy" by countering those authoritarian rulers who were well equipped to crush such popular protests and insurgencies. "To brush aside America's responsibility as a leader and – more profoundly – our responsibilities to our fellow human beings under such circumstances would have been a betrayal of who we are…some nations may be able to turn a blind eye to atrocities in other countries. The United State of America is different."[46] Gaddafi, while not propagating atrocities was holding on to power successfully unlike his strongmen counterparts in neighboring Tunisia and Egypt who both resigned with minimal violence. Gaddafi's continued presence was viewed as a threat to the wider regional revolution. Speaking on the Libya intervention Senator John McCain declared, "this intervention was both right and necessary in light of the unprecedented democratic awakening now sweeping the broader Middle East."[47]

This sudden shift was a new development and reversal of recent U.S.-Libyan relations. Since the early 2000s Gaddafi had cooperated by partnering with the U.S. in nuclear non-proliferation and counterterrorism efforts. As late as 2010, General William Ward head of

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[45] Mahmoud Gebril, "Libya: Will Stability and Order Be Restored? Why Things Got out of Control." *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 9, no. 3 (2016): 347.

[46] Scott Wilson, "Obama: U.S. had Responsibility to Act in Libya," *Washington Post*. March 28, 2011. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/obama-us-had-responsibility-to-act-in-libya/2011/03/28/AF6fkFrB_story.html.

[47] Ibid.

AFRICOM, referred to Gaddafi's Libya as "a top partner in combatting transnational

terrorism."[48] Up until the revolutionary events of 2011, Gaddafi had been pursuing an amicable

relationship with the U.S. while softening repressive tendencies. His son and heir apparent Saif

Gaddafi, appeared to be a promising candidate for future gradual reform having declared in

2010, "I will not accept any position unless there is a new constitution, new laws, and transparent

election…everyone should have access to public office. We should not have a monopoly on

power."[49] The younger Gaddafi's words were not empty either as he had been the primary source

of recent reforms facilitating the release of nearly all political prisoners, privatization of state-run

media, and introducing deradicalization measures for Islamists.[50] Further, President Obama's

Secretary of Defense Robert Gates at the time referred to Libya as "not a vital interest,"[51] to U.S.

foreign policy. Despite these evident changes, Gaddafi had not reformed Libya fast enough for

the West; his presence and mere potential to resist overthrow with force was deemed

unacceptable as according to President Obama, failure to remove him would threaten "the

democratic impulses that are dawning across the region…as repressive leaders concluded that

violence is the best strategy to cling to power."[52] According to the words and actions of the

presidential administration and its key supporters leading up to and after the Libyan intervention,

U.S. involvement was based on ideological considerations rather than strategic security interests,

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[48] Alan J. Kuperman, "Obama's Libya Debacle: How a Well-Meaning Intervention Ended in Failure." *Foreign Affairs* 94, no. 2 (2015): 72.

[49] Ibid., 75.

[50] Ibid., 75-76.

[51] Paul Harris, "Barack Obama Defends US Military Intervention in Libya," *The Guardian*. March 28, 2011. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/mar/29/barack-obama-us-speech-libya.

[52] Wilson, "Obama: U.S. had Responsibility."

which would have sought to maintain a relatively stable Libyan regime at least nominally open

to gradual reform.

President Obama, Senator John McCain and many interventionists argued that, based on

Gaddafi's incendiary or "genocidal rhetoric," failure to intervene would have resulted in human

slaughter comparable to Rwanda in the 1990s:

> Gaddafi declared he would show "no mercy" to his own people. He compared them to
> rats, and threatened to go door to door to inflict punishment. In the past, we had seen him
> hang civilians in the streets, and kill over a thousand people in a single day. We knew if
> we waited one more day Benghazi…could suffer a massacre that would have
> reverberated across the region and stained the conscience of the world.[53]

This narrative of brutal repression by Gaddafi's regime did not match reality however. "Human

Rights Watch found that of the 949 people wounded there in the rebellion's first seven weeks,

only 30 (just over three percent) were women or children, which indicates that Qaddafi's forces

had narrowly targeted combatants, who were virtually all male."[54] A mere thousand rebel forces

were killed by the regime prior to NATO intervention. Despite grandiose threats and incendiary

rhetoric, in each city Gaddafi's forces retook all who surrendered were promised humane

treatment and for the most part received it.[55] Regime forces did not target civilians. By the time

NATO interfered the rebels were on the verge of defeat after a few weeks of fighting. There was

no shortage of misinformation by anti-regime and foreign influences alleging massacres had

taken place when none had occurred:

> From March 5 to March 15, 2011, government forces recaptured all but one of the major
> rebel-held cities, and in none did they kill civilians in revenge, let alone commit a
> bloodbath. Indeed, as his forces approached Benghazi, Qaddafi issued public

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[53] Harris, "Barack Obama Defends."

[54] Kuperman, "Obama's Libya Debacle," 70.

[55] Peter Beaumont, "Muammar Gaddafi Offers Rebels an Amnesty," *The Guardian*. 2 March 2, 2011.
https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/mar/02/muammar-gaddafi-offers-rebels-amnesty.

reassurances that they would harm neither civilians nor rebels who disarmed. On march 17, he directly addressed the rebels of Benghazi: "Throw away your weapons, exactly like your brothers in Ajdabiya and other places did. They laid down their arms and they are safe. We never pursued them at all."[56]

In contrast, once the U.S. and NATO started enforcing the UN sanctioned "no-fly zone," the fighting drew out for months and became increasingly brutal with rebel militias targeting Gaddafi supporters indiscriminately civilian and soldier alike, while torturing prisoners. As a result of foreign intervention, the death toll of the Libyan Civil War would jump astronomically to over 10,000.[57]

As the anti-government protests progressed into armed rebellion it became apparent that despite some initial gains by rebel groups their lack of organization and proper equipment would lead to their ultimate defeat at the hands of the far better trained pro-Gaddafi forces.[58] The U.N. Security Council in the absence of Russia and China declared a no-fly zone over Libyan airspace and a ban the deployment of foreign troops.[59] This measure was implemented and enforced primarily by the U.S., U.K., and France, but saw the participation of the NATO coalition as a whole. The official basis for such an intervention took form in the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine within international law. The essential premise of this principle is based on three assumptions or "pillars": each state is responsible to protect its people from genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes, and crimes against humanity; all states are obligated to assist one another in this responsibility to protect; any state that fails in its responsibility is liable to "collective

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[56] Kuperman, "Obama's Libya Debacle," 71.

[57] Ibid., 69.

[58] Karl P. Mueller et al., *Precision and Purpose: Airpower in the Libyan Civil War*, (RAND Corporation, 2015), 69.

[59] Paul Tang Abomo, *R2P and the US Intervention in Libya*, (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 173.

action" by the international community up to and including military invention in order to protect

its populace.[60] The U.N. Security Council was granted sole authority to invoke the doctrine. A

rather intrusive international norm, but one adopted unanimously by all members the U.N.

General Assembly in 2005.[61] It was developed in response to the international community's

general indolence towards atrocities committed in the 1990s during the Rwandan and Srebrenica

genocides.

Proponents of R2P are quick to point out the differences between it and general

ideologically based interventionism, emphasizing the inherent collective nature of the process

and that armed force is to be used as an absolute last resort after all other diplomatic and

economic measures have been exhausted. The whole objective is to "protect" a given nation's

populace, not to advocate for regime changes, occupy the territory, or take advantage of the

situation to advance one's national interests.[62] This was an extremely idealistic framework to

operate from that the ensuing conflict in Libya would repudiate as in practice every one of these

lofty objectives would be utterly ignored. The first abuse of the doctrine, would be its misuse to

ensure regime change.

Gaddafi's regime was diplomatically isolated, which was why it was condemned by the

international community for its "brutal actions" against protestors and "genocidal rhetoric."[63]

These combined with accounts of allegations of war crimes, but primarily the refusal by Gaddafi

to step down formed the basis for the U.N. Security Council's invocation of R2P. "This denial

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[60] Jennifer M. Welsh, "Norm Robustness and the Responsibility to Protect," *Journal of Global Security Studies* 4, no. 1 (2019): 56.

[61] Ibid., 53.

[62] Ibid., 56, 54.

[63] Abomo, *R2P*, 139.

and continued defiance led the international community to adopt tougher sanctions. As a step

forward, Australian Foreign Minister Kevin Rudd called for a no-fly zone over Libya…such an

action would clearly need international support and the means to enforce it."[64] The U.S. for its

part was already engaged in two wars of insurgency involving ground forces within the Middle

East and the administration was naturally cautious about being drawn into a third. The nature of

the Security Council's use of R2P however, specifically banned the involvement of foreign

ground forces and called for the implementation of a neutral no-fly zone in Libyan airspace. This

provided an opportunity for the U.S. under the Obama administration to flex its support for

human rights and "democracy" while maintaining minimal commitment of human capital.[65] The

ability to retreat behind the curtain of "collective action" and avoid bearing the brunt of any

potential fallout from the overall operation's failure to achieve its ends also provided a

convenient political escape. This half-hearted commitment is best summarized in the President's

own words: "The United States will not be able to dictate the pace and scope of this change.

Only the people of the region can do that. But we can make a difference. I believe that this

movement of change cannot be turned back, and that we must stand alongside those who believe

in the same core principles that have guided us through many storms."[66] Such a position, a denial

of responsibility, is untenable when one holds the power to determine the fate of a nation and its

leader and chooses to use it.

The ensuing devastation of the Libyan air force and air defense system proved critical in

weakening Gaddafi's forces. NATO and U.S. support did not cease at mere enforcement of the

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[64] Abomo, *R2P*, 154.

[65] Mueller et al., *Precision and Purpose*, 6.

[66] Harris, "Barack Obama Defends."

no-fly zone however, as they aggressively targeted Libyan regime forces as they retreated

threatening no one and in tandem with rebel assaults and maneuvers.[67] This instance of "mission

creep," which could be more aptly titled "mission leap," received broad international criticism as

the U.S. and NATO openly changed their tune and admitted they intended to use R2P to

facilitate regime change.[68] By October, the result was a victory for the rebel opposition groups

and the extrajudicial killing of Gaddafi along with members of his family in his hometown and

base of support in Sirte. Yet the U.N. - recognized opposition government in the form of the

Transitional National Council (TNC) and its immediate successor interim government in the

General National Congress (GNC) failed to command the respect of the innumerable militias

spread throughout the nation. Its directive to disarm and join the nascent nation's newly formed

armed forces were ignored.[69] This refusal was due to a general distrust of the newly formed

government's motives, ambitions, and former Gaddafi associates within said government. This

suspicion was combined with and compounded by a reluctance to lay down the arms that had so

recently won the rebel militiamen their "freedom." Libya's rebels soon fractured along

traditional regional, tribal, and ideological lines swiftly falling into fierce internal fighting and

civil war.

Islamist influence amongst many of these militias as elsewhere in the popular protests

and rebellions of the Arab Spring was prevalent.[70] It generally contended with a more

nationalistic and secularized militarism in the vein of Gaddafi's and other autocratic regimes as

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[67] Mueller et. al., *Precision and Purpose*, 44.

[68] Harris, "Barack Obama Defends."

[69] Al-Shadeedi, et. al., *One Thousand and One Failings*, 18.

[70] Gebril, "Libya: Will Stability and Order Be Restored," 347.

one of the determining ideologies in the fracturing of the Libyan opposition's forces and successor governments.[71] ISIS and Al-Qaeda linked associate groups were widespread in the immediate aftermath of the rebellion, one such group Ansar al-Sharia attacked the U.S. consulate in Benghazi killing four Americans including ambassador Christopher Stevens in 2012.[72] Events such as these, as well as disputes between factions and militias over the nation's oil resources, only served to further undermine what little legitimacy and authority the first interim governments did possess leading to the bifurcation of Libya that is seen today.

By 2014, two rival governments had formed, the House of Representatives based in the eastern city of Tobruk backed by general Khalifa Haftar and his Libyan National Army (LNA) and the GNC splintered into the Islamist dominated National Salvation Government (NSG), which for a time held the reins of power in Tripoli before being challenged by the former GNC's more moderate elements in the form of the Government of National Accord (GNA) and moving its base of operations to Misrata.[73] The eventual domination of and reincorporation of the Islamist NSG and its militias into the GNA, which currently receives official U.N. recognition as Libya's government may have simplified internal politics somewhat, but it has also deepened the divide between Tobruk and Tripoli.[74]

Accusations between the two sides and their myriad of militias have continued to fly holding that the other is illegitimate. General Hafter and Tobruk claiming the GNA has been

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[71] Al-Shadeedi, et. al., *One Thousand and One Failings*, 19.

[72] Anup Kaphle, "Timeline: How the Benghazi attacks played out," *The Washington Post*. June 17, 2014. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/timeline-how-the-benghazi-attack-played-out/2014/06/17/a5c34e90-f62c-11e3-a3a5-42be35962a52_story.html.

[73] Nienke van Heek, "Libya's Broken Revolution and the Western U-Turn," *Clingendael Spectator: Magazine Voor Internationale Betrekkingen*. June 23, 2020.

[74] Ibid.

thoroughly infiltrated by radical Islamists and the GNA dismissing Haftar as a Gaddafi wannabe

and Egyptian puppet.[75] A common dichotomy witnessed throughout the Middle East is being

replayed once again over the traditional East-West division of Libyan geography. The nation is

splintered between two ideological positions championing two different approaches to

government and hierarchy of values. Members of the House of Representatives in Tobruk

repeatedly emphasize the importance of bringing stability via the military's moderating

influence, expulsing foreign forces/influences, and maintaining the secular nature of state

governance. The GNA on the other hand emphasizes the importance of implementing the Sharia

in all areas of life and governance, while inviting sympathetic Islamist Turkish armed forces into

the country. While moderates may exist on both sides, and both claim to strive for democratic

governance the reality is that any form of "democracy" that will be fomented by either party is

unlikely to be one that fully satisfies or reflects the West's standards of pluralism, human rights,

equality, etc.[76] What the U.S. and West is faced with instead is the option of supporting another

militaristic nationalist government's take on democracy or that of a heavily Islamist influenced

and supported one.

Despite the expansive purview the R2P doctrine grants the powers taking "collective

action," U.S. involvement in ensuring Libya's populace was protected and the interim

government supported was minimal to non-existent.[77] Western political leaders used the initial

success of the air campaign to overthrow Gaddafi as a podium to preach from on the virtues of

democracy and how Libya was a "model intervention"[78] while the devastated state was engulfed

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[75] Heek, "Libya's Broken Revolution."

[76] Gebril, "Libya: Will Stability and Order Be Restored," 347.

[77] Abomo, *R2P*, 235-236.

[78] Kuperman, "Obama's Libya Debacle," 66.

in chaos. The nation descended in a death spiral of sectarian warfare, failed successor

governments, and transformation into a haven for terrorists.[79] As these events unfolded and the

development of a functional democracy remained ever elusive and Libya became a by-word, the

subject no one within the U.S. foreign policy community wanted to touch and as a result the fire

of war continued to rage unabated. President Obama defended U.S. reticence to follow up on the

obligations undertaken with R2P explaining, "we went down that road in Iraq…but regime

change there took eight years, thousands of American and Iraqi lives, and nearly a trillion

dollars. That is not something we can afford to repeat in Libya."[80] While ideological-based

interventionism is plagued with its own host of issues, failure to fulfill one's word and

proclaimed goals is far worse as it displays weakness in an international system dominated by

power politics and a severe lack of moral character.

The U.S.'s failure to lead decisively and follow through on its initial interventionist

actions to help Libya's nascent interim governments establish order, institutions, and legitimacy

produced a power vacuum that was soon filled by a multiplicity of foreign powers each pursuing

their own agenda.[81] President Obama would later declare that failure to adequately prepare for a

post Gaddafi Libya was his "worst mistake."[82] The U.N.'s ban on the presence of foreign forces

was ignored almost immediately, and was violated repeatedly in the ensuing chaos and fracturing

of Libya's rebel forces. From the beginning of the rebellion Qatar openly supported the anti-

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[79] Terry, "The Libya Intervention," 179.

[80] Harris, "Barack Obama Defends."

[81] Sarah Feuer, Yoel Guzansky, and Gallia Lindenstrauss, "Libya: A Violent Theater of Regional Rivals," (*Institute for National Security Studies*, 2019), https://www.inss.org.il/publication/libya-a-violent-theater-of-regional-rivals/.

[82] "President Obama: Libya aftermath 'worst mistake' of presidency," *BBC News*. April 11, 2016. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-36013703.

Gaddafi militias, sending aid, weapons, and military advisors for training purposes.[83] As the U.S.

backed away from involvement its NATO and other affiliated major allies in the French, Italians,

Turks, Egyptians, and Saudis all took separate sides in the ensuing civil war. Other major and

regional players include Russia, Syria, the UAE, and even Iran with each having found

themselves allied with and against traditional enemies and friends alike.[84]

A Realist Alternative

Such has been the case throughout the Modern Middle East's history for the last eighty

years. A mere handful of constitutional monarchies established by Western powers in its

decolonization efforts have survived out of the multitude originally founded and only then via

Western networks of extensive aid and military support. The U.S. and West's options for

partners within this context tend to be either regimes run by often secular minded political and

military elites on the one hand or populist leaders on the other, who seem to inevitably be of an

Islamist persuasion at best ambivalent towards the West and openly hostile at worst.[85] Rarely do

the populist movements that often accompany pushes for democratic reform and self-rule in the

Middle East share the values or favor the interests of the U.S. and its allies. These nations and

the region as a whole do not possess the West's unique history, ideology, and set of

circumstances that have facilitated the growth of its rich tradition of self-governance. It is

foolishness and diplomatic suicide to attempt to preach the virtues of a Western model of

government and value system to a culture and society that simply does not possess the same

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[83] Sam Dagher, Charles Levinson, and Margaret Coker, "Tiny Kingdom's Huge Role in Libya Draws Concern," *WSJ*, October 17, 2011. https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052970204002304576627000922764650.

[84] Feuer, Guzansky, and Lindenstrauss, "Libya: A Violent Theater of Regional Rivals."

[85] Gelvin, *The Modern Middle East*, 316.

norms but does have plenty of reasons to distrust powers that formerly dominated their lands so recently.[86] Such pontification merely comes off as a brazen attempt at imperialism, does little to persuade, and has the opposite desired effect serving instead to only further alienate our allies and enemies alike.

Ideological interventionism, specifically in the form of R2P is a dangerous and double-edged doctrine. If followed to its logical conclusion then the responsibility to protect should be invoked every time a nation abuses or oppresses any group within its population. Yet, if this were the case the U.S. and other interventionist minded powers would be at war with more than half the world including Russia and China. R2P and ideological interventionism as a whole fundamentally construe and conflict with the American government's true responsibilities abroad as laid out in the Constitution: to protect U.S. citizenry and its fundamental foreign interests of security. Despite its avowed stance that any state that "manifestly fails" in its protection responsibilities subjects itself to "collective action," R2P seems to be little more than a tool to be utilized by the strongest world powers granted dedicated seats on the U.N. Security Council to justify selective discipline of weaker nations.[87] There is no practical way it can be invoked against one of the Security Council members as they can simply veto it. Even if the hypocritical triggering mechanism of R2P did not exist and it could be invoked by any power there is nothing to stop China or Russia from invoking it against the U.S. for its say, failure to adequately protect minority populations.

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[86] Amy Chua, *World on Fire: How Exporting Free Market Democracy Breeds Ethnic Hatred and Global Instability*, (New York: Anchor Books, 2004), 259.

[87] Ibid.

When ideological interventionism is adopted and implemented based on unsubstantial evidence and then followed by failure to see it through, the U.S. and its foreign policy is turned into a joke. It displays duplicity first in that a nation the U.S. has partnered with one minute is freely abandoned and turned upon in the next; and secondly, that U.S. commitment to protecting a given people is only good so long as the conflict is brief and politically expedient. As mentioned previously, Gaddafi had a recent history of cooperation with the West handing over what advancements he had achieved in nuclear and chemical weapon development to the U.S. in 2003, and providing valuable assistance in counterterrorism efforts.[88] The rapidity of the U.S. and NATO to welcome an opportunity for his overthrow signaled to states such as Russia, North Korea, and Iran, that any attempt to compromise with the West was fraught with peril. "Well-connected Iranian, Abbas Abdi, observed: 'When Qaddafi was faced with an uprising, all Western leaders dropped him like a brick. Judging from that, our leaders assess that compromise is not helpful."[89] The message communicated is that the U.S. is not afraid to and actively negotiates in bad faith with its opponents.

In invoking the "responsibility to protect" the intervening powers were obligated to ensure the Libyan populace's protection. As far as can be accurately ascertained Gadafi and his supporters were not murdering innocents in their repressions of rebel forces. Whether this was evident to the Obama administration in the fog or war and propaganda is not clear, but according to the President's own words the intervention was a preventative in nature, "we knew if we waited one more day Benghazi…could suffer a massacre that would have reverberated across the

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[88] Kuperman, "Obama's Libya Debacle," 72.

[89] Ibid., 74.

region," based on rhetoric rather than demonstrative actions.[90] If the U.S. and NATO had

refrained from entering in immediately, delayed judgment, while monitoring Gaddafi's actions

closely, then intervention may very well have been avoided. While this may have counted as a

loss for "democracy" in the Middle East, what governing institutions Libya did possess would

have been preserved alongside its extensive security apparatus, while the gradual liberalization it

had been experiencing continued. In the worst-case scenario, where Gaddafi's forces enter

Benghazi and suddenly reverse their operating procedure they had held throughout their entire

campaign and suddenly begin purging civilians, U.S. and NATO air forces present in the area

could have been activated and annihilated whatever force the Gaddafi could muster with pinpoint

accuracy.[91] Such a policy was not pursued; while some attempts at negotiation by the U.N. were

made, U.S. and NATO leaders did not reason with Gaddafi, but simply delivered demands,

vilifying him from the start.[92] When the intervention began the civilian death toll began to

rapidly rise and a decade later continues to do so as peace is ever elusive. Rather than accept

responsibility for its actions and attempt to ameliorate the fallout of interference via deployment

of ground forces or other measures to stifle the ensuing chaos, the U.S. backed away from its

responsibility at the nearest opportunity.[93] This only served to further undermine U.S. security

interests, the second and third pillars of R2P, and America's overall credibility as an ally.

      If the U.S. is to have an effective policy that advances its interests and values abroad it

must start by recognizing that every society possesses its own hierarchy of values and interests it

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[90] Harris, "Barack Obama Defends."

[91] Mueller et al., *Precision and Purpose*, 51-52.

[92] Vandewalle, *A History of Modern Libya*, 205.

[93] Maximilian C. Forte, *Slouching Towards Sirte: NATO's War on Libya and Africa*, (Chicago: Baraka Books, 2013), 260.

emphasizes above others and that is not inherently a problem. Good governance, cannot be so narrowly defined to only include democracy: different peoples expect their respective governments to deliver on the priority they value the most otherwise they are viewed as illegitimate.[94] For much of the Middle East including Libya, this priority is collective security or stability above the rights and freedoms of individuals and groups within the nation, which is often best delivered by some form of autocracy.[95] Democratization efforts, however well intentioned, often open the door for majoritarian rule and domination at the expense and to the detriment of a given nation's minorities.[96]

In order to avoid such risks of miscalculation and malignment there needs to be a fundamental reorientation of the criteria used in the crafting of U.S. foreign policy alongside a shift away from a short-term mindset. Clear communication of practical goals is required; these goals must be based on the overarching criterion of stability.[97] The U.S. should prioritize the universally understood and appreciated criterion of stability to maintain the regional balance of power rather than attempting to enforce the adoption and synthesis of its value and governmental system by other nations, which has been a source of near constant confusion and strife.[98] This not only protects the security and general strategic interests of the U.S. and its allies in the Middle East but overall protects and preserves human life.[99] The instability caused by intervention in

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[94] Emily Estelle, *A Strategy for Success in Libya*, Report, American Enterprise Institute, (2017): 15.

[95] Gebril, "Libya: Will Stability and Order Be Restored," 347.

[96] Chua, *World on Fire*, 9-10.

[97] Gebril, "Libya: Will Stability and Order Be Restored," 347.

[98] Chua, *World on Fire*, 9-10.

[99] Estelle, *A Strategy for Success*, 15-16.

Libya has been the source of a massive refugee crisis, growth in regional terrorism, and significant disruption of Europe's energy sector where 70 percent of Libya's oil exports were directed before the war.[100] If stability is communicated as the matter of first importance other goals and interests will follow.

This is where a long-term mindset must be adopted for success to be achieved. Secondary interests, such as human rights are more likely to improve as a given nation's wealth and prosperity increases and its ruling class becomes more lenient.[101] Saudi Arabia for example, has made advances in the realm of women's rights and personal freedoms that while comparatively minor to that in the West, is a success and an incremental development worth recognition. This comes from one of the most fervent Islamist autocratic powers, but one that has seen consistent improvements in its standard of living and overall prosperity.[102] This approach may be far slower and less evident that the radical and rapid reforms brought on by violent revolution and overthrow of an oppressive dictator but they seem to be far more palatable to the people and in turn long lasting as they originate within their nation and are not imposed by a foreign power.[103]

Maintaining stability is far easier to communicate than the confused jumble of assumptions and ambitions within ideological interventionism and certainly more palatable to nations that do not share Western values. Since the end of the Cold War these smaller autocratic regional powers and states seem to be perpetually confused by the U.S. stance which fluctuates

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[100] Larson, "The Conundrum between National and Ideational Interests," 50.

[101] Sonja Grimm and Okka Lou Mathis, "Stability First, Development Second, Democracy Third: The European Union's Policy Towards the Post-Conflict Western Balkans, 1991-2010," *Europe-Asia Studies* 67, no. 6 (2015): 926-927.

[102] Philby J. Teitelbaum, Harry St. John Bridger and William L Ochsenwald, "Saudi Arabia," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2022. https://www.britannica.com/place/Saudi-Arabia.

[103] Estelle, *A Strategy for Success*, 15.

radically between nominal disproval to explicit armed aggression. While antagonistic powers at times, Gaddafi's Libya and Saddam's Iraq both understood what was expected and desired of them by the Cold War superpowers. Since the Cold War's conclusion both actors fell afoul of an ideologically interventionist minded West.[104] The U.S. cannot completely divorce its values and who it is as a nation from its foreign policy, however, it is capable of understanding outside perspectives and working towards limited strategic objectives by brokering compromises that sees its interests advanced without upsetting an entire region's society bringing untold amounts of chaos and destruction.

Conclusion

Ideological interventionism, democracy exportation, "Responsibility to Protect," – whatever its label, is a fundamentally flawed endeavor as it is plagued with tremendous risks, requires a high degree of time and capital investment for there to be a chance of success. The attitude that all nations should adopt the Western model of government is pure hubris at work: it leads to the adoption of foreign policy measures that are counterproductive to the U.S.'s national interests, and only succeeds in confusing friends and enemies alike further alienating ourselves. Permitting nations to pursue their own path, including value systems and forms of government and letting the resultant success and failure of states speak for themselves allows for human flourishing and avoidance of embitterment over what is viewed as "imperialist" undertakings. The case of U.S. and NATO's intervention in Libya was especially egregious. It forms the textbook example of how to undermine one's foreign policy interests. Outside of dogmatic considerations, the basis for humanitarian-based intervention is dubious at best. Libya erupting into a bifurcated regional proxy state may have been somewhat inevitable due to its history and

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[104] Gelvin, *The Modern Middle East*, 268-269.

geography, but the primary role the U.S. played leading to the nation's current state of affairs

was avoidable. The decision to then abandon the responsibility claimed by the U.S. that formed

the basis for intervention was a result of lack of forethought and planning, the effects of which is

still being felt to this day. Very few powers act like the U.S. does in this, and none do outside the

West: the Turks, the Russians, and the French, all know who holds their interests and are not

afraid to express explicit support wherever a given regime falls on the value and governmental

spectrum. If the U.S. is to be effective on the international stage, the Middle East, and Libya

specifically, it cannot commit to an eternal crusade for the expansion of the "free" world but

must set pragmatic limited objectives within the framework of preserving stability.

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