Dictators, Terrorists, and Politics: American Foreign Policy Toward Libya in the Obama and Trump Administrations

by

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CHAPTER 1 – Introduction

“Libya is being taken over by Islamic radicals—-with @BarackObama's open support.” --Donald Trump

The Three Facets of Libyan Intervention

"You're telling me that Benghazi could be overrun this week, but you're not giving me any options that stop it," said President Obama at a March 2011 meeting to discuss the potential for Libyan intervention. "I want real options." By this point Obama had been convinced that intervention was necessary to prevent Gaddafi’s forces from massacring Libyan civilians. There were voices against military intervention, however, and General Clark was among them. In a piece he penned for the Washington Post on March 11, 2011, he said, “In Libya, if the objective is humanitarian, then we would work with both sides and not get engaged in the matter of who wins. Just deliver relief supplies, treat the injured and let the Libyans settle it.” General Clark’s statement is a direct rebuttal to the Responsibility to Protect doctrine that was being put forward by some of President Obama’s most trusted advisors, including Hillary Clinton, Susan Rice, and Samantha Power.

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1 @realDonaldTrump. “Libya is being taken over by Islamic radicals—-with @BarackObama's open support.” Twitter, 31 Aug. 2011, 9:07 a.m.
Once President Obama had essentially dedicated himself to US involvement in Libya, he detailed the criteria upon which the intervention’s execution would be dependent. According to Obama administration insiders, these five guiding principles were: that an intervention must be effective, involve an international coalition, follow international law, commit no US ground forces, and pursue a clear, achievable goal. The open and seemingly endless nature of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were something that Obama was unwilling to engage the United States in more of. Though, General Clark warned that a half-measure military intervention in Libya was setting the US up for just that, calling it a, “slick way to slide down the slope to deeper intervention.”

General Clark’s predictions turned out prophetic, as American involvement in Libyan conflict extended beyond President Obama’s second term. Despite his intentions to ensure that the Libyan engagement had a logical closure point, the US had been committed to defending a nascent government from political rivals, international pressure, and global terrorism. In an interview with CNN, Samantha Power said that, “The aftermath has proven very challenging and ... one of the things we didn't anticipate was just how anti-foreigner a country that had just had an intervention occur carried out by foreigners -- how anti-foreigner that they would be.” In this hostile environment came the September 11, 2012 terrorist attacks on a United States embassy that resulted in the deaths of multiple Americans, including

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4 Hastings.
5 Clark.
a US ambassador. The audacity of this attack and the uncertainty that followed in the attack’s immediate aftermath within the US intelligence community prompted some very public political gaffes for Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and US Ambassador to the United Nations Susan Rice.

Donald Trump saw the interviews and early reports, which had attributed the Benghazi attacks to protests that had gotten out of hand, as well as the public reaction that came with the revelation that the initial narrative was incorrect, and knew he had an opportunity. Trump latched onto the Benghazi attacks as a rallying cry for his political base, many of whom saw the Libyan intervention as needless and the Benghazi attacks as an unpunished affront. Once Trump decided to pursue the presidency and knew that Clinton would be his post probable political opponent, Benghazi became a topic of utmost importance. He frequently released Tweets like, “Hillary Lies to Benghazi Families #CrookedHillary”. His domestic political focus on Libya and the Americans involved with it was intense, but did his actual policy in Libya hold such an impetus?

**Context Within the Existing Literature**

There is significant reporting and analysis in place regarding the United States’ role in the Arab Spring uprisings. Analysis about President Obama’s motivations for engaging the US in some of the protests, while choosing to neglect others is not in short supply. The same can be said for analysis about the efficacy of

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7 @realDonaldTrump. “Hillary Lies to Benghazi Families #CrookedHillary” Twitter, 23 Jun. 2016, 10:07 a.m.
American intervention on the region’s various democratization efforts. Where the research of this paper will focus is on combining literature from across three presidential terms for the purpose of understanding how and why American policy shifted over the years. It also bears consideration whether President Trump treating Libya in line with his typical foreign policy methodology, or if it is treated differently due to the amount of rhetoric he has chosen to use regarding Benghazi and Hillary Clinton. President Trump’s administration is also so young that compiling enough data to constitute a track record is only just becoming feasible. It is also frequently taken for granted that Trump and Obama have vastly different policy perspectives, so looking at a region like Libya and objectively questioning the extent to which their policies differ holds significant intellectual value.

**The Right Policy**

President Trump was extremely critical of President Obama’s decisions throughout the course of his presidency. In fact, President Trump has regularly invoked Obama’s presidency as a negative point of comparison well into his own term. Trump built a presidential campaign around a return to the ideals and practices of a bygone era—as he remembers it. President Trump has touted his intent to strengthen the military from its status during the Obama administration, with an emphasis on more selective engagements, more thorough commitment when engagement is deemed necessary, and better funding to ensure the missions is completed to a standard that he finds acceptable. Additionally, President Trump
has criticized the international order that President Obama saw as so important, saying, “The United Nations has such great potential but right now it is just a club for people to get together, talk and have a good time. So sad!” With Trump’s focus on distancing himself, as well as America, from Obama’s legacy, we are left to question whether he was successful or not.

President Obama faced a similar challenging when he came into office in the aftermath of President Bush’s two-term administration. Where Bush had a propensity to work with the United Nations for so long as they cooperated with his goals, but a willingness to take the United States out to work on its own when the UN would not do what he wanted, President Obama wanted to bolster the strength of the international order. Obama saw the UN—as well as NATO and others—as the path to global cooperation and security that was not so heavily reliant on United States’ intervention. Obama campaigned on a platform that sought to erase what he saw as the injustices of the Bush administration, such as closing the Guantanamo Bay detention camp and drawing down the Afghanistan and Iraq wars. Coming into office, Obama saw the most likely future point of concern for the United States as China and shifting the policy focus to China was often called the “pivot to the East.”

Of course, President Obama could not predict the impending so-called Arab Spring uprisings that would erupt throughout much of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) at the conclusion of 2010. This forced a reevaluation of US priorities and raised questions about whether involving the US in these demonstrations would

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8 @realDonaldTrump. “The United Nations has such great potential but right now it is just a club for people to get together, talk and have a good time. So sad!” Twitter, 26 Dec. 2016, 1:41 p.m.
successfully bring about democratic transitions, or if it would lead to failed states and dangerous power vacuums, as had already been the case in Iraq and Afghanistan. President Obama approached each of the states that had these large-scale public demonstrations with varying levels of American support, with Libyan rebels being one of the few groups to receive US logistical and air support. Once the regime change section of the Libyan revolution was over, it slipped into civil war and chaos. The instability of the failed state fostered an environment which was ideal for the development and sustainment of terrorist organizations. On September 11, 2012, a series of terrorist attacks on US assets in Benghazi, Libya resulted in a widespread domestic controversy in the United States that was frequently panned by Donald Trump. These terrorist attacks paved the way for a slow shift in President Obama’s policies in Libya, as well as for some of Trump’s more virulent attacks against then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who would be his political rival in the 2016 presidential election.

With just over a year into President Trump’s presidency, there is a small but valuable insight beginning to develop on his foreign policy methodology. Decisions on Libya have been trickling out of his administration as these 15 months have progressed. With this data, a variety of questions arise, such as: has Trump been following the foreign policy path he laid out during the election cycle, have his decisions been consistent with the criticisms he levelled against President Obama, and are his decisions being influenced by the bureaucratic systems in place in his administration?
Methodology

This thesis has been written based on information gathered from case studies, which I have collected from variety of sources. For issues of political theory, I have focused on peer reviewed sources which had been written by well-regarded scholars and published in reputable academic journals. Historical data comes from a range of sources, such as: academically oriented publications, news publications, and memoirs. The fourth chapter features public opinion polling data from Quinnipiac University, which is used as a rough gauge to contextualize the impact that the Benghazi scandal had on the general public. Finally, due to President Trump’s proclivity for sharing his opinions in an open source format, there are numerous quotes and references to his Twitter feed throughout this document as well. I have tried to draw together a breadth of sources and analyze them in a context that is appropriate to their individual academic merits. I chose to utilize this approach in order to have the most thorough and holistic understanding of these two presidents, their respective decision-making processes, and how they have evolved over the years of being involved in the Libyan conflict.

Road Map

This paper will address the aforementioned questions through a series of data chapters that split the timeline in three portions. The first data chapter will address the first portion of Barack Obama’s presidency. This first portion roughly
correlates with his first term, but for the purposes of this paper, it ends just prior to the September 11, 2012 terrorist attacks on in Benghazi, Libya. The first data chapter will cover the events of the Libyan Arab Spring uprisings, the removal of Colonel Gaddafi from power, and the role of Obama’s advisors in the decision-making process during that period. The second data chapter will detail the Benghazi terrorist attacks and the period of Obama’s presidency that followed them in order to discern the shift in policy changes that occurred as well as decode what motivated them. The final data chapter will begin with President Trump’s ascension to power—and how the election cycle was impacted by the Libyan conflict—as well as what is different between Trump’s policies to this point and Obama’s. Finally, the conclusion will draw together the ideas from the previous chapters and suggest this paper’s potential ramifications and opportunities for future research.
CHAPTER 2 – Obama During the Libyan Arab Spring

Introduction

The first of the three periods of comparison is the initial period of the Obama administration, when Muammar Gaddafi was still in control of Libya.

Though this period technically begins when President Obama assumed office on the 20th of January 2009, the renewed friction between Libya and the United States began in mid-February 2011. This is when the protests that had begun to erupt throughout the Middle East spread to Libya. The period in question will end with the deposition and execution of Colonel Gaddafi. The factors that shaped President Obama’s American policy towards Libya throughout this period will include: broad American foreign policy goals, security concerns, the role of advisors on presidential decision-making, and domestic political considerations. These factors will be used to account for the decisions that President Obama made during the Libyan uprising and why they are not entirely consistent with his later decisions, nor with those made by President Trump during the first year of his administration’s tenure.

American motivations in Libya are fraught with statements that are incongruous from individual to individual, and occasionally inconsistent from month to month from the same person. Among the potential reasons for involvement are American international security considerations, to President Obama’s stated policy goal of pivoting from a MENA-centric foreign policy towards Asia, to preventing a humanitarian crisis, to fostering a democratic transition in Libya. To understand why
the United States chose the methods of intervention that did, we will first look at the existing literature on President Obama’s broad strategic goals for the United States before the Libyan crisis forced him to realign his expectations. Next, the security implications of American intervention as compared to a position of non-intervention will be examined. Following that, the stated goals of President Obama’s various advisors and their capacity to shape his decision-making process will be examined through the lens of the bureaucratic process model. After that, the desire to remove Colonel Gaddafi from his position in the regime will be explained. Finally, the American value placed on enabling the democratization Libya will be assessed and compared to the statements made by policy-influencing individuals to see if it motivated the decision to intervene in Libya.

**The Libyan Context and Initial American Response**

Protesters scheduled the “Day of Rage” for February 17th, but tensions were exasperated on the 15th, when Fathi Terbil, a human rights lawyer and activist, was arrested by government officials. Protesters gathered at the site of his detention and demanded his release from custody, but the police were not willing to concede. Instead, the police fired on the crowd, and further inflamed the situation, ultimately bringing more protesters into the streets. Not to be outdone, Muammar Gaddafi’s forces escalated their response as well by bringing tanks and planes to disburse
crowds of protesters. The protesters shifted from peaceful demonstration to violent opposition, as they acquired military equipment from defecting military officers.9

These events inspired the United States to intervene on the behalf of the rebels, and the first of these interventions was economic. Initially, the US sought to grind Gaddafi’s reprisals to a halt by freezing thirty-two billion dollars’ worth of Libyan assets. This seizure was the largest economic sanctions ever imposed and represents “the largest blocking under any sanctions ever,” according to a US Treasury Department official.10 Approximately three months later, the US disbursed about $150 million of those frozen assets to rebel-held areas of Libya in the form of humanitarian aid. The next step that the United States took was signing on to the UN-imposed a travel ban and arms embargo in the form of Resolution 1970, adopted unanimously on February 26, 2011. This resolution was the first time that the US had referred a case to the International Court – including the 2005 vote on Darfur, from which the US abstained.11

At this point, the rebels gathered in Benghazi and organized the National Transitional Council, which was intended to be an interim government. Gaddafi responded by dispatching his regime’s special forces, who found little resistance from the rebels and turned back their advances in overwhelming fashion. After turning the tides in his favor, Colonel Gaddafi took the opportunity to advance his

11 Crook, 570.
troops on the rebel stronghold in Benghazi.\textsuperscript{12} Gaddafi coupled the advance on Benghazi with an address, in which he said that his army would, “march to purify Libya inch by inch, house by house, home by home, alley by alley, corner by corner, person by person to clean the dirt and impurities.”\textsuperscript{13} This intimidation rhetoric was successful in stoking fear. Unfortunately for Gaddafi, the fear in the international community was also stoked, which lead them to intervene in the Libyan Civil War due to concerns that Gaddafi’s military would massacre the civilians in Benghazi in retaliation for the uprising.\textsuperscript{14}

Once the Arab League expressed their desire to have international cooperation and assistance in a humanitarian intervention in Libya, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton began to press the issue before the United Nations. At this point, the UN Security Council’s decided to pass Resolution 1973 on March 17, 2011, which the United States supported. This resolution created a UN no-fly zone in partnership with NATO and allowed states to take “all necessary measures to protect civilians.”\textsuperscript{15} The measures that the United States, France, and Britain deemed as necessary for the protection of civilians were a seven-month air bombardment campaign against the Gaddafi regime. The US facet of the operation was dubbed “Odyssey Dawn.” Within two weeks, NATO took the onus of leadership, and the campaign was renamed to “Operation Unified Protector.” Throughout this campaign, the United States also provided the Libyan National Transitional Council

\textsuperscript{14} Brahimi.
\textsuperscript{15} Crook, 570-576.
with logistical support and “non-lethal” equipment, such as uniforms, body armor, optics, tents, and medical supplies. The multilateral air campaign involved the three initial western powers, more NATO states, as well as select members of the Arab League.\(^{16}\)

**American Policy Goals**

The first major policy goals for the Obama Administration upon assumption of command was what Christopher Layne calls “offshore balancing” in the Middle East. His assumed goal was to disengage the US from its military entanglements in Iraq and Afghanistan. To achieve this goal, allies would be given responsibility for the security of their respective regions, which would allow the United States to stop carrying the enormous financial and military burden of multiple unilateral direct engagements. Under this arrangement, the United States would provide logistical and intelligence support to allied countries that were operating in a manner that was consistent with US expectations, but any American direct military engagement would be minimal.\(^{17}\) Hallams and Shreer claim that the Libyan intervention “reflected America’s logic of a new transatlantic burden-sharing model in the light of a changed grand strategy”.\(^{18}\)

\(^{16}\) Weissman, 674, 682.
Prior to the outbreak of the protests in Libya, the United States had already adopted the Responsibility to Protect doctrine. The principle of Responsibility to Protect was developed around three primary pillars. The first of these pillars is that states have an obligation to protect their populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity. The second pillar is that capable states are obligated to help struggling states to meet their obligations to their people under the first pillar. The third pillar is that the international community is obligated to coordinate through the United Nations – ideally the UN Security Council – to intervene in a state that is either failing or unwilling to meet their obligations under the first pillar. This doctrine was developed and adopted to establish a framework which would allow for a consistent and moral response to situations that could result in the massive loss of innocent life. The acceptance of this framework was considered essential to the United States' moral standing in the world and was eventually used as the rationale for the humanitarian intervention in Libya.

Layne argues that President Obama’s instinctive desire in the MENA region was to disengage from American involvement in existing conflicts and wind down the overall US military posture in the Middle East in an effort to instigate a strategic pivot towards Asian political engagement. This shift in policy was intended to function as a means of balancing against the perceived rise of China. The idea that the United States is a great power on the decline, while China is ascending, was beginning to gain traction during the Obama administration. The administration was

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also concerned with preservation of a substantial naval presence in the South China Sea, which is a key route for international trade. A preemptive buildup of military capacities that are well-suited to countering likely Chinese advances was an important facet of the plan to maintain a global hegemonic advantage. The United States had already begun a program of strengthening ties with China’s neighbors. Unfortunately for President Obama’s intended strategic shift, prior and emerging political entanglements in the Middle East and North Africa would prove to be more urgent.20

Though the Obama administration repeatedly emphasized the position that the United States’ intervention in Libya was predicated on the Responsibility to Protect doctrine, and necessary for the prevention of a civilian massacre at the hands of the Gaddafi regime, there are issues that confound this claim. The administration’s official narrative is complicated by the fact that President Obama had authorized the CIA to distribute weapons and logistical support to anti-regime rebels in Libya before the United Nations approved the air strikes on Libya’s regime forces. This logistical support included some “lethal and intelligence assistance.”21 The emphasis on burden sharing and responsibility redistribution to NATO and UN partners is rendered insincere when factored against clandestine actions, which were ordered outside of the very structures that are supposed to be empowered.

21 Weissman, 681.
The Obama administration’s willingness to engage themselves in covert operations in Libya before the approval of the UN multilateral operation reframes the role of United States participation from that of a reluctant but obligated participant to a much more self-focused and eager position. Though humanitarian concerns were considered by the United States during the planning of the Libyan intervention, statements of administration officials seem to state that the US also sought the to overthrow the Gaddafi regime. Additionally, it casts doubts on the administration’s repeated claims that it was not in the United States’ best interests to pursue militaristic regime changes in the Middle East.

The desire to depose Colonel Gaddafi due to long-standing tensions between him and the United States was another background incentivizing factor for the Obama administration’s decision to intervene in Libya. The rhetoric during the lead-up to the United States’ decision to become involved militarily in Libya was focused on the need for a humanitarian intervention. It was presented to the American public as a repeat of the successful strategy that had been employed by the NATO in the Balkans to remove the Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic from Kosovo. Despite this presentation, administration officials have since reported that behind closed doors, the focus was on the removal of Colonel Gaddafi from power. Though humanitarian concerns were absolutely a factor in the decision to intervene, a primary goal for the United States in the conflict was to unseat Gaddafi. It was made clear, in fact, that to meet the United Nations’ goal of ensuring civilian safety on the long term, Gaddafi “had to go” and there was no implication among
administration insiders that the intervention was intended to create a negotiated peace.\textsuperscript{22}

Secretary Gates described the NATO air operations against Libya during his March 31 testimony before the US Congress. According to Secretary Gates, the operation consisted of three phases between April 11 and October 23. The strikes were predominantly centered in Tripoli, which was not where most the rebels were located. The NATO campaign targeted regime troops, supply lines, ammunition dumps, vehicles, and other various pieces of Libyan military operational supply. This targeting is indicative of an operation that is not just intended to stop an impending humanitarian crisis in Benghazi, but rather to affect the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi by degrading his logistical capacities to the point that he was no longer capable of maintaining command.\textsuperscript{23}

The United States had a troubled relationship with Gaddafi for decades before the US decided to intervene on the behalf of the rebels. It is worth noting that officials within the Obama administration saw Gaddafi as a villainous figure and believed that the opportunity to depose him was ideal due to the window presented by the revolution. During the 2012 presidential debates with Mitt Romney, President Obama said that Gaddafi had “more American blood on his hands than any individual other than Osama bin Laden,” and noted this as a justification for his removal, though, he euphemistically referred to it as “finish[ing] the job.” This statement is echoed in Secretary Clinton’s statements to CBS in 2015, wherein she

\textsuperscript{22} Weissman, 675.
\textsuperscript{23} Weissman, 680.
repeated the bloody hands metaphor. The United States’ resolve to affect retribution on Muammar Gaddafi carried through to their last direct action against him. After Colonel Gaddafi had been deposed and was fleeing in a convoy, a joint operation between the United States and France intercepted the vehicles with drone strikes and left him to be captured and executed by rebels.

The importance of democratization efforts has been a focal point for the United States throughout the 20th century. Despite the typical American bluster which emphasizes projecting the values and capabilities of democratization abroad, particularly in the Middle East, the United States failed to support the opportunities afforded by the Arab Spring uprisings. The protests in Egypt, Yemen, and Bahrain were threatening to the United States’ preferred regional order. Egypt had been a long-time ally and had proven to be particularly valuable as an ally in the post-9/11 War on Terror. Similarly, the uprisings in Yemen and Bahrain threatened the stability and legitimacy of Saudi Arabian monarchy. The Saudis were another key regional figure for the United States and had been a sympathetic partner in the continued efforts to suppress extremism in throughout the region. The overthrow of either regime afforded the potential for uncertainty and instability, which may well have fostered an expanded Middle Eastern power vacuum.

Conversely, revolutions in Libya and Syria presented promising prospects for American ambition in the region. Both Libya and Syria had developed a history of cooperation with Russia and China and were seen as a menace to the US hegemonic

24 Weissman, 671.
25 Weissman, 673.
order in the region. In Libya, the Obama administration’s stated foreign policy aspirations aligned with those of the revolutionaries fairly directly. As for Gaddafi’s iron grip on the Libyan rentier economy, President Obama’s Executive Order 13566 unilaterally froze financial assets for the Libyan government and its political elites to the tune of more than thirty-two billion dollars before redistributing one hundred and fifty million dollars of those same frozen assets to serve as humanitarian assistance in rebel-held areas. This financial obstructionism did serve to hinder Gaddafi’s ability to manipulate the repression effect in his favor by paying off and enhancing his security apparatus.

The United States’ policies towards Libya during the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings were of very limited benefit to the establishment of a lasting democratic order. The American involvement in NATO bombing and no-fly zone operations was sufficient- likely even necessary- to ensure the successful overthrow of the Gaddaфи regime. The operations also were likely to have provided a significant amount of immediate humanitarian relief. There has been very little effort made by the United States to foster a democratic transition, however, and the removal of the Gaddaфи regime seems to have been politically sufficient for the Obama administration.

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27 Crook, 569.
American Security Implications

A detailed step-by-step account of the United States’ escalating intervention in Libya is described by Crook in his examination of US foreign Policy and its relationship to international law. This timeline states that President Obama began intervention through economic means on February 25, just ten days after the protests – and violent regime response – began. This demonstrates that President Obama was willing to intervene in Libya well in advance of United Nations and NATO intervention efforts. This supports the possibility that the Obama administration was interested in limited Libyan intervention, despite the minimal first-order impact that the Libyan crisis had on American affairs.

Song argued that the Libyan situation did, in fact, pose a security threat to the United States. Her rationale is that the likely brutal regime response would cause an inevitable refugee crisis that would negatively impact American allies in Europe. The destabilizing effect of this refugee crisis would diminish the effectiveness of peacekeeping alliances, such as NATO, upon which the US relies for the maintenance of its own defensive security posture. It is unlikely that the bulk of Libyan refugees would have the means to flee all the way to the United States, so they would not be of immediate concern, but if long-term concerns are factored in, the refugee crisis could prove meaningful.

28 Crook, 568-578.
Though the removal of the crony capitalist system that had taken root in Libya would be beneficial to the advancement of democratization, it is not necessarily a shared interest between the United States government and the Libyan revolutionaries. Whereas it would be beneficial to the establishment and maintenance of a democratic system in Libya, it would empower the labor force to the point that oil prices would rise dramatically in European countries that are particularly reliant on Libyan oil, such as the UK and France. This would be harmful for the United States, ultimately, because the increased expense of oil on such key NATO partner states would diminish the defensive posture of the alliance as a whole.

**The Role of Advisors**

Layne emphasizes President Obama’s inability to resist the hawkish nature of the preexisting US foreign policy establishment and claims that it drove him to engaging the United States in conflicts that he did not desire.\(^{30}\) This follows the bureaucratic politics model of foreign policy and places the impetus of political outcomes at the feet of those that inhabited the positions around President Obama that were not filled by appointment. The individuals which remained following President Bush’s term had a measure of situational expertise within their respective organizations and were able to sell the necessity of continued American vigilance in the sphere of international policing via the US military.

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\(^{30}\) Layne, 12.
Layne’s belief that the president’s unilateral power was used by the remnants of the previous, and more warlike, administration in the foreign policy decision-making scheme are in opposition to Mikael Blomdahl, who wrote that President Obama was the “supreme player” in the United States’ response to the Libyan revolution. Blomdahl varies from Layne in that he believes President Obama was not pushed into a military intervention which he did not support. Instead, Blomdahl wrote that Obama fostered a bureaucratic staff that was predisposed towards the decisions he already supported. Blomdahl cites President Obama’s willingness to engage Libya via military intervention as the product of his desire to prevent a humanitarian crisis. His concerns on this front are reflected in the officials he chose for staff positions. Secretary Clinton, US Ambassador to the UN Susan Rice, and Special Assistant to the President Samantha Power all impressed upon him their belief that an escalation in Libya by Colonel Gaddafi might lead to a situation like that of the Rwandan genocide.

A common refrain in the literature is the idea that President Obama’s motivations in Libya were, “better understood as leading without wishing to be seen as taking the lead.” Hallams and Shreer are among a multitude of scholars that discussed President Obama’s grand strategy shift towards, “lead[ing] from behind.” Hallams and Shreer also stated their belief that the NATO airstrikes were

32 Blomdahl, 149.
34 Hallams & Shreer, 321.
of vital importance for safeguarding the civilian population from regime reprisals.

Their work in “Towards a ‘Post-American’ Alliance? NATO Burden-Sharing After Libya” concentrates on how much of the intervention was a multilateral effort that was driven by the United States, and if this burden-sharing agreement would become a norm for future engagements.

The Hallams and Shreer approach places the shift towards enhanced international burden-sharing at the forefront of American policy goals. In their assessment, the Libyan conflict was just the first opportunity that presented itself to the Obama administration, and enabled them to pursue the rebalance of the power-sharing burden between the US and Europe. In contrast, the Blomdahl piece places the impetus for American intervention in Libya at the feet of a morals-based ideational argument, wherein American cooperative intervention was the result of a call to humanitarian intervention.

Pacquin, Massie, and Beauregard write in support of Hallams in Shreer’s conclusion in “Obama’s Leadership Style: Enabling Transatlantic Allies in Libya and Mali” that the United States used the Libyan intervention to reposition itself geostrategically and push some of the burden onto partner states in NATO. Pacquin et al. claim that Obama’s leadership focused on concepts of “multilateralism and collective action,” and that this was pursued by allowing allies a greater capacity to set agendas and adopt individual positions that are not necessarily directly in line
with the United States.\textsuperscript{35} Their work even claims that President Obama did not pressure European partner states into military intervention in Libya – as was stated by Hallams and Shreer\textsuperscript{36} – but, rather, that it was following France’s lead most of the time.\textsuperscript{37} This contention that the US played a semi-passive supporting role would fit with the framework laid down by Hallams and Shreer, who believed that the Obama administration desired disengagement from the Middle East in favor of a pivot toward Asia.\textsuperscript{38}

The bureaucratic environment that President Obama surrounded himself with supported his intended Asian pivot. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton went before the United Nations Human Rights Council to apply pressure for them to remove Muammar Gaddafi. She emphasized the international community’s obligation to protect human rights, which she stated had been violated by Gaddafi’s repression in the face of popular protest. Her actions are indicative of the administration’s desire to instigate interventionist military action, but without having to shoulder the brunt of the action itself. Likewise, per his institutional role, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates said that Libyans can get military aid from another country and emphasized his desire to keep the US out of direct engagement by saying that there would be no boots on the ground so long as he were the Secretary of Defense.\textsuperscript{39}

\textsuperscript{36} Hallams & Shreer, 320.
\textsuperscript{37} Paquin, Jonathan, Massie, and Beauregard, 190.
\textsuperscript{38} Hallams & Shreer, 319.
\textsuperscript{39} Song, 85.
Domestic Political Concerns

Barack Obama’s 2008 successful presidential campaign was focused, among other topics, on changing the perceived status quo in the United States. Pew post-election polling revealed that nearly half of voters thought that Obama’s presidential rival, Senator John McCain, would continue the previous administration’s policies. Among people that believed that McCain’s potential presidency would be an extension of President Bush’s, 90% favored Obama’s “change we can believe in” rhetoric.40 One of the most significant talking points for Obama as a candidate centered around the enormously expensive—in lives, money, and international prestige—wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Even when these issues were not directly discussed by him, the implication of their impact weighed in on other talking points. Pew also cited the economic crisis as the biggest issue among voters, while the threat of terrorism was slipping as an issue among voters. This means that voters found the expense involved in maintaining a huge standing army and two foreign wars was becoming increasingly hard to justify, even for those that would be otherwise in support of the war efforts. The fervor of this push away from maintaining foreign wars net President Obama the Nobel Peace Prize in 2009. Specifically, the Norwegian Nobel Committee cited

Obama’s drive towards multilateral diplomacy, “with emphasis on the role that the United Nations and other international institutions can play.”

Conclusion

The foreign policy approach employed by the United States in Libya, in response to their 2011 Arab Spring uprising has drawn criticism from many. Domestically, intervention in Libya had very little support and the prevailing opinion was that American troops were already spread too thin between the Iraq and Afghanistan theaters. Societal war fatigue was at an all-time high after a decade of fighting, and the prospect of expanding to a third conflict in Libya – and potentially a fourth in Syria – was untenable for many. President Obama had been elected on a campaign platform that emphasized ending the wars and refocusing on the United States’ ailing economy. The Arab Spring was a surprise to the international community, and President Obama’s rhetoric emphasized disengaging from the region without the benefit of predicting the demands of the ever-changing political climate in the Middle East.

Despite his desire to disengage from the Middle East, the United States was forced to weigh the merits of Libyan intervention. President Obama had to determine whether he was interested in fostering democratization in Libya, or if the impetus was on deposing Colonel Gaddafi and leaving the Libyans to handle the rest with the support of the international community. He also had to calculate the

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potential cost in human lives – for both the Libyans and the Americans - and
determine the level at which he was willing to commit American troops to obtain
these goals. The long-term security implications of non-involvement, particularly in
the likely resulting immigration crisis in Europe needed to be considered. Finally,
the financial investment that would be necessary to succeed if he were to pursue
intervention had weighed against the long-term costs on non-commitment.

To evaluate the significance of these various factors, President Obama
looked to his advisors, who fell squarely into two opposing camps. The side in favor
of intervention was largely influenced by Samantha Power, a scholar that was deeply
interested in the Rwandan genocide and made it her focus to prevent another such
atrocity, if possible. In her role as the Special Assistant to President Obama, she
exercised her influence by pushing Obama to consider the possibility that Libya
could devolve into a situation that could bring another, similar tragedy. Power
leveraged her political alliance with Susan Rice, US Ambassador to the UN, and
Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to acquire a great deal of political capital.42

On the other end of the spectrum, however, stood Secretary of Defense
Robert Gates, National Security Advisor Thomas Donilon, and President Obama’s
chief counterterrorism advisor, John Brennan. These three took the realism-centric
approach typical to military advisors. In their estimation, Libya offered no first-order
military threat to the United States and, as such, was not worth the considerable
cost of a prolonged military intervention. For them Libya represented the dual

42 Song, 91.
threats of another quagmire – in the vein of Iraq or Afghanistan – as well as a
country ripe for extremism in the vacuum that might arise from the removal of the
Gaddafi regime.\textsuperscript{43} Due to these concerns, Gates, Donilon, and Brennan urged
President Obama away from any sort of intervention in Libya, particularly an
intervention that would put American “boots on the ground.”

While Blomdahl asserts that the outcome of the disagreement between the
humanitarian intervention viewpoint and the non-involvement viewpoint was a clear
victory for the interventionists, I am inclined to disagree. These competing camps
are likely to have driven President Obama towards the “lead from the rear”
approach that was ultimately adopted. By encouraging the international
community, particularly European states, to operate at the forefront of the
intervention, President Obama could appease Power, Rice, and Clinton by playing a
role in supporting the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) ideology abroad with the
“humanitarian intervention” prescribed by the Secretary Clinton camp, while still
minimizing the costs that would result from American leadership in this engagement
– as prescribed by the Secretary Gates camp. This compromise clearly influenced
President Obama’s decision, and helped to defray the cost of US commitment, while
its distillation from competing perspectives demonstrates the validity of applying the
bureaucratic process model to assess the motivations behind the Libyan
intervention.

\textsuperscript{43} Song, 91.
The underlying political motivations of the interventionist camp succeeded in propelling the United States into a Libyan intervention, while the non-interventionist camp directed President Obama’s focus towards handing over the onus of the responsibility to the international community, by choosing to play a supporting role, instead. The potential devastation that faced revolutionary protesters as the Gaddafi regime began their move on Benghazi to suppress the revolution was likely to cause a catastrophic loss of civilian lives and may well have turned the tide of the Arab Spring uprisings away from democratization by empowering a resurgence of authoritarian influence.
CHAPTER 3 – Obama After the Benghazi Terrorist Attacks

Introduction

For the United States military, supporting NATO remained the status quo until, on the 11th and 12th of September 2012, three attacks were carried out against United States’ facilities in Benghazi. According to the United States Senate Select Committee on Intelligence Review of the terrorist attacks on US facilities in Benghazi, the first of these three attacks was carried out at approximately 9:40 p.m. Benghazi time against the US Temporary Mission Facility. Immediately after the compound was compromised, a Department of State employee notified a nearby CIA compound, Libyan Forces, American forces in Tripoli, and the Diplomatic Security Command Center in Washington, DC. During this attack a minimum of sixty people scaled the facility’s fence, opened the gate from the inside, and went from building to building as they saw fit. Once inside the compound the intruders set fire to the Libyan 17th February Brigade militia’s barracks before moving to buildings which were occupied by US personnel. US Ambassador to Libya Christopher Stevens was on the US Temporary Mission Facility, along with five US Department of State employees and eleven Libyans police, military, and contractors. Within thirty minutes these numbers were bolstered by six CIA security personnel and an interpreter, who reinforced their numbers from the nearby CIA compound upon receiving the distress notification.
The attackers set fire to the main compound, which contained Ambassador Stevens, and he was separated from his State Department security element in the ensuing chaos. During this separation, Ambassador Stevens was received wounds that would ultimately prove fatal. The State Department agents on site connected with the CIA personnel that came to reinforce them and they began to search for Ambassador Stevens. They found the missing State Department Information Management Officer Sean Smith deceased but failed to locate Ambassador Stevens. This group exfiltrated to the CIA compound with Smith’s body.

The second wave of attacks began to strike the CIA building in the form of small arms fire and rocket-propelled grenades around midnight. This second attack lasted until 1 a.m. During this second attack there were no US casualties, but the attackers are believed to have taken casualties in the ensuing firefight. The third attack was also on the CIA annex, and took the form of eleven minutes of “particularly accurate” mortar fire which began at 5 a.m. This final attack took the lives of American security officers Tyrone Woods and Glen Doherty. The lethality of this final attack and how quickly the Libyans were able to direct accurate fires on the annex led the Chief of Base to initiate an evacuation. Libyan militia forces arrived within an hour of the call to evacuate and escorted the Americans to the Benghazi airport, where the body of Ambassador Stevens was also returned to them. There were four US casualties in all that evening.44

44 Senate Report No. 113-134. (2014)
Perhaps the most significant event of the post-Gaddafi era of Libyan politics for the Obama administration were these September 11th and 12th, 2012 attacks in Benghazi. Though these three attacks spanned fewer than eight hours, their impact resonated in domestic American politics beyond President Obama’s administration. This chapter will explore how the Obama Administration shifted its policy towards Libya in the post-Benghazi terrorist attacks era in three fairly subtle, but very important ways. First, the US’ financially targeted seizures of Libyan assets was expanded in scope. No longer were Gaddafi’s family and affiliates the primary focus, but now people resisting the UN-backed government, terrorist organizations, and others were included. The guidance was left open enough that the Secretaries of State and the Treasury became able to dictate who meets the disqualifying criteria going forward. Second, the handling of visas and travel to the United States for Libyans was modified in kind. Early guidance that targeted specific members of the Gaddafi regime was significantly expanded to include travel bans based on the discretion of the Secretaries of State and the Treasury. Finally, the role of the US military in Libya became more independent and more focused than it was in its early role in the Arab Spring uprisings. The Obama administration began with command over bombardment and aerial strikes of Libyan targets of military value. The US role was quickly handed over to NATO-led forces, wherein the US took a back seat during the early days of the Libyan conflict. By the end of President Obama’s term, the United States

States military was carrying out hundreds of air strikes on ISIS strongholds in concert with the Government of National Accord.

In order to address which policy changes occurred from the pre-Benghazi terrorist attacks period to second term of the Obama presidency, the specifics of the situation in Libya and the continued American response will be explored. The country had devolved into a failed state with warring factions vying for control and the President Obama had to discern which conflicts warranted intervention, and which were best left to the Libyans or international community. Next, we will take a look at American foreign policy goals and how they shifted from the beginnings of the Libyan conflict. From the outset Obama was looking to engage in a brief military support campaign in Libya before transitioning control back to the local population. By his second term Obama was forced to realign his expectations regarding brevity and who constituted the enemy forces. Following that, the importance of American security concerns following the Benghazi terrorist attacks will be examined. Next, the American political climate and its impact on the Obama administration’s freedom to maneuver politically will be inspected. Once scandal hit the Obama administration in the wake of the Benghazi attacks the administration had to project a more forceful policy regarding terrorist activity in Libya. Finally, the role of President Obama’s advisors and their impacted the administration’s handling of Libya in the post-Benghazi attack period will be examined. Hillary Clinton chose to disengage from the State Department and focus her political energies elsewhere, but the aftermath of the Benghazi scandal was persistent.
The Libyan Context and Continued American Response

Between the removal of Colonel Gaddafi on the 20th of October 2011 and the Benghazi terrorist attacks on the 11th and 12th of September 2012, Libya was in a state of upheaval and near-anarchy. Due to Libya’s historically weak government institutions, which were largely neglected under Muammar Gaddafi, the state did not have a stable foundation upon which to reestablish itself once the regime fell. The tribal composition of Libya, along with its geographic makeup—which split the country between its eastern and western halves—made the country difficult to unify. The regional rivalries had predated the revolution and fueled the ongoing national divide. Libya was beset with many distinct militias with various goals and ideologies.

Upon the collapse of the Colonel Gaddafi’s regime, the National Transition Council formed in August of 2011. The NTC was comprised of Sheiks representing various tribes, militia leaders, and political leaders. The NTC was the quickly recognized as the new government for Libya, receiving widespread international support from organizations like the UN, African Union, and Arab League. The NTC received military guidance from General Khalifa Haftar, who is a significant figure in the Libyan scene due in part to his historical involvement in the Gaddafi regime. He helped Gaddafi seize control of the country from the previous ruler of Libya, King Idris. General Haftar fell from Gaddafi’s favor in 1987 when a military operation in

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Chad was unsuccessful, causing Haftar and others to be captured and held as prisoners of war. During this time Haftar was recruited into a CIA-backed organization that intended to remove Gaddafi from power. After spending years organizing their effort in Chad the plan fell apart, leading Haftar and his compatriots to seek refuge in the United States where he continued to train for a potential Libyan coup. Once the Arab Spring came to fruition, this former CIA asset reemerged in Libya in 2014 and released a video declaring a coup on the grounds that the interim government was failing to properly handle the Islamist threat.47

Some of the other militias that came to power were interested in a progressive reformation in Libya, others were criminal enterprises that sought to take advantage of the turmoil, and still others were jihadi organizations. Huge numbers of untracked weapons—such as rocket-propelled grenades, missiles, and other military-grade equipment—proliferated throughout the country as the Libyan military’s reserves were looted. The local al Qaeda subset, known as al Qaeda in the Maghreb (AQIM), had much of this weaponry available to them at the time and was using it to further the region’s instability.48

Following the collapse of Colonel Qaddafi’s regime, many of the powerful figures that surrounded him went missing. With their absence, much of the vast quantities of wealth that the regime hoarded were missing and untraceable. This situation left billions of untracked dollars to permeate the local militias, and

48 Zoubir, Yahia H. “Qaddafi’s Spawn.” Foreign Affairs, 24 July 2012
potentially the local terror organizations. This money, coupled with the vast frozen assets seized by the United States, left the struggling upstart Libyan government with little fiscal flexibility. The Libyan government was fresh, largely-undefined, struggling for legitimacy, and spending nearly 10% more than its GDP to maintain itself. This entity could not hope to adequately contain the bevy of factions, tribes, militias, and terrorist organizations that found themselves flush with cash, weapons, and newly-experienced fighters. 49

The Obama administration continued to pursue a strategy that focused on capturing and interrogating high value targets in a series of raids carried out by US Special Operations Forces (SOF). On October 6, 2013, Nazih al-Ragye, more popularly known by the alias Abu Anas al-Liby, was captured in Tripoli when SOF surrounded his vehicle, dragged him from his vehicle, drugged him, and brought him aboard the USS San Antonio. Al-Ragye was wanted by the United States Department of Defense for his role in the 1998 bombings of US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania that caused the deaths of 224 civilians. 50 Another such operation was carried out on June 15, 2014 against Ahmed Abu Khattala by US SOF after nearly a year of preparation. In August of 2013 Khattala was charged with leading the September 11, 2012 Benghazi terrorist attacks. Khattala is an alleged “senior leader” of the terrorist group Ansar al-Sharia. 51

49 Zoubir.
Despite these US SOF raids, Libya was an enticing target for ISIS to expand into. The general lawlessness provided a ripe atmosphere for the development of a deeply entrenched terrorist network without significant government interference. Throughout 2014 ISIS sent various important members to Derna, Sirte, and Benghazi to establish a foothold. By February of 2015, Libya was home to the largest ISIS contingent outside of Syria and Iraq. In the summer of 2015, Sirte had become the Libyan ISIS stronghold, but local support for their extreme ideology wavered. Locals had been enticed by the promises of institutional structure and security that ISIS offered to them, which were fundamentally different from the failing institutions to which they had grown accustomed under Gaddafi. The reality of life under ISIS was less appealing, however, as the strict enforcement of their ideology instigated an uprising, which ISIS brutally suppressed.

President Obama acknowledged the negative potential of this situation and spent the year from August 2015 to 2016 having US SOF establish a series of small operational compounds throughout the region to establish relationships and perform reconnaissance. Some of these relationships have drawn criticism due to their potential to destabilize efforts at reconciling the Libyan government into a single entity. The United States then began Operation Odyssey Lightning to liberate Sirte from ISIS on August 1, 2016 with a series of air strikes. On December 6, 2016, Libyan forces declared Sirte had been freed from ISIS control. The final

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52 Bryan, 23-25.
53 “Freed Gaddafi Loyalists Found Dead in Libya's Tripoli.” Al Jazeera, Al Jazeera, 12 June 2016.
military action authorized by President Obama was carried on out January 18, 2017, wherein US forces performed a series of airstrikes on training camps in the vicinity of Sirte that resulted in more than 80 ISIS casualties. One of the casualties was Noureddine Chouchane, a high value target that had been implicated in attacks that killed 60 people in Tunisia.55

**American Policy Goals**

The United States’ foreign policy following the collapse of Colonel Gaddafi’s regime was a slight modification of the policies that were put into place during the Arab Spring uprisings, in general. The initial US financial policies towards Libya were the largest economic sanctions ever put in place. These sanctions seized approximately thirty-two billion dollars’ worth of holdings that Libya had stored in US financial institutions.56 The people affected by Executive Order 13566’s asset seizure were Muammar Gaddafi, specific members of Gaddafi’s immediate family, Libyan senior government officials, any person that participated in human rights abuses in Libya, anybody that is acting as a financial intermediary for a person that would be affected by this executive order, or any spouse or child of a person that would be affected by this executive order. The Secretary of the Treasury, then Timothy Geithner and the Secretary of State, then Hillary Clinton, were given the

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55 Bryan, 26.
56 Crook, 569.
ability to determine who met these criteria and, as a result, qualified for financial
asset seizure.57

Once President Obama expanded these sanctions with Executive Order
13726, the Secretary of the Treasury, then Jacob Lew, and Secretary of State, then
John Kerry, still had the power to determine which individuals fit the criteria for
asset seizure. This order was differentiated from the first, however, due to its
expanded scope. No longer dealing with people that were involved with the
corruption and human rights abuses of the Gaddafi regime, the new order addresses
people that threaten current and future Libyan peace, impede the development and
implementation of the Government of National Accord, misappropriate Libyan state
assets, coerce state financial institutions or the Libyan National Oil Company, or
people that have perpetrated specific acts of terrorism within the Libyan state. This
order expands the United States’ sanctions program in Libya from a moderately
narrowly-targeted program built around ousting the then-standing Gaddafi regime,
to a program that can be re-focused and re-adapted in perpetuity.58

The development of a UN-backed democratic government remained a
priority of the Obama administration throughout their time in dealing with the
Libyan conflict. This was not a purely altruistic goal, fueled by the desire for the
Libyan people to have greater access to democracy—but also by the desire to
remove a long-time geopolitical opponent from power. Towards the beginning of
US involvement in Libya, the White House generated a report to Congress on US

activities in Libya. That report stated that “Qadhafi has lost all legitimacy to rule and must step down.” \(^{59}\) Once that goal was achieved, the next step for Libya was to be placed in the hands of the Libyan opposition group, which was led by the Transitional National Council. \(^{60}\) By 2014, the United States voiced support for UN Security Council Resolution 2174, which expressed support for the Libyan House of Representatives and Constitutional Drafting Assembly. \(^{61}\) Then, in 2016, President Obama’s Executive Order 13726 expressed support for the UN-backed Libyan Government of National Accord, which is intended to be the “Unity Government” going forward. \(^{62}\)

**American Security Implications**

The United States military’s role in Libya began in 2011 as an effort to target the “front end of operations in Libya.” \(^{63}\) The goal was to destroy essential Libyan military targets, including air defense equipment, which would enable the establishment of a no-fly zone. US command of these direct engagement missions began in February and lasted until March 31, 2011, when the US military’s independent command in Libya shifted to the UN, before being integrated into NATO command on April 4, 2011. After that point, the US was to function in a “supporting role” in the Libyan conflict. The military mission in Libya was to ensure

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\(^{61}\) SC/11537 (2014)  
a cessation of attacks against civilians by the Gaddafi regime, force Gaddafi’s troops
to withdraw from major cities and restore public utilities, and to guarantee that
civilians would have access to foreign humanitarian assistance packages.64

After these attacks, the Obama administration was faced with an onslaught
of domestic political pressure which demanded a recalibration of their efforts in
Libya. As a result, 2013’s Executive Order 13726 steps away from the UN’s line on
previous measure, Resolution 1970, which was passed during the initial effort to
remove Colonel Gaddafi from power. This updated UN resolution called for a
ceasefire, due to the perception that violence was rising throughout Libya. It also
sought to put pressure on the Libyan House of Representatives and Constitutional
Drafting Assembly to “carry out their tasks in the spirit of inclusiveness.”65 This
resolution was supported by President Obama’s Executive Order 13726, by
supporting its renewed calls for the suppression of destabilizing forces, such as Al
Qaeda linked terrorist organizations, and the continuation of targeted sanctions.

The UN resolution was expanded in 2015 by UN Security Council Resolutions
2213 and 2214, though only 2213 was explicitly mentioned in President Obama’s
Executive Order 13726. These resolutions acknowledge the threat posed by the
Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant. Both resolutions came to the floor during the
same meeting, with 2213 recalling resolution 1970 from 2011, but affirming specific
statues from it, such as the travel ban and property transportation ban, before

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65 SC/11537 (2014)
calling for the UN to monitor human rights violations in Libya. After this resolution was put forward, Resolution 2214 was put forward, as the more militarily-focused of the two. It was to provide Libya with the necessary weapons to support their efforts in the struggle against terrorism. Representatives from the United States said at this UN meeting that “the two resolutions reinforced the Special Representative’s efforts towards forming a unity government.”66 Despite the United States’ support for the militarily-focused 2214 at the UN Security Council meeting, it is not mentioned in President Obama’s Executive Order 13726.67

The Role of Advisors

US Ambassador to the United Nations Susan Rice went on the CBS program *Face the Nation* on September 16th, four days after the attacks on Benghazi, and provided the administration’s official position on the attacks as they stood at that time. Rice claimed that the attacks in Benghazi were an escalation of spontaneous protests. These spontaneous protests were supposedly inspired by protests that were happening at the same time in front of the US embassy in Cairo. She continues by saying that the protests were motivated as a reaction to a hateful video. The video Rice refers to in this interview, but does not name, was called “Innocence of Muslims”, which was an anti-Islamic short video that was uploaded to YouTube in early September of 2012. The video was seen as denigrating the Prophet Muhammad and sparked a great deal of outcry across the Muslim world. Rice

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66 SC/11842 (2015)
continues by saying that the spontaneous protest was infiltrated by “extremist elements” that brought heavy weapons with them. She then says that they were either al Qaeda affiliates or Libyan-based extremists.68

The narrative of a spontaneous protest that escalated into a violent attack was immediately refuted by the American Republican party. The very same CBS Face the Nation segment featured an interview with Arizona Senator John McCain. In his interview, he presses the idea that the attacks were premeditated. He says that he does not believe a person attending a spontaneous protest would bring an RPG—rocket-propelled grenade—with them.69 The disunity of these messages set immediately to work on the American public. Questions of the validity of the administration’s narrative were raised and calls for an official investigation into the Obama’s subordinates came forward.

Secretary Clinton faced similar challenges to Susan Rice, in her support for the narrative that the Benghazi attacks were instigated by an inflammatory video. Clinton released a statement to MSNBC in which she said, "Some have sought to justify this vicious behavior as a response to inflammatory material posted on the Internet. The United States deplores any intentional effort to denigrate the religious beliefs of others, but let me be clear: There is never any justification for violent acts of this kind."70 As reports came to light that contradicted this initial narrative, which

was put forward by the Obama administration, some began to question Clinton’s trustworthiness.

A poll from Quinnipiac University in late 2012 showed a near-even split between respondents when asked whether they thought the administration deliberately mislead them or shared information as it became available, with 41% believing it was a conspiracy and 47% believing that the initial impression of the situation may have just been incorrect. This poll was repeated in 2013 and 2014, with each subsequent iteration being less favorable for the Obama administration and those officials involved in the narrative. In 2013, respondents 46% believed they were deliberately mislead, with 40% believing they got information as it was discovered. In 2014, 52% did not trust the initial narrative’s motives, and only 37% felt assured in the trustworthiness of the administration’s motivations.71

Clinton has been involved in 8 probes into the Benghazi attacks. She was never formally charged with any wrongdoing, despite many allegations. The attacks in Benghazi have served as a lightning rod for the Republican party, who have used it to decry the Obama administration, and Clinton in particular. The scandal caused by the perception of neglect in preparing Libyan targets in the event of an attack, in the timeliness and scale of support provided as the attacks were occurring, and the narrative given to the American public in the immediate aftermath of the attacks raised questions for many about Clinton’s fitness to be a presidential candidate in

the 2016 elections. This public unease and her political opponent Donald Trump’s willingness to exploit it will be discussed at greater length in the next chapter.

**Domestic Political Concerns**

The January 15, 2015 US Senate report on the Benghazi terrorist attacks says that in the months before the attacks were perpetrated, there were hundreds of reports that indicated the likelihood of an attack on US and “Western” targets. These reports went so far as to list the US mission compound, which was the eventual target of one of the attacks, as being at significant risk of being targeted. The US Intelligence Community warned that Libya was a “terrorist safe haven”. The lack of government legitimacy—especially as regards a monopoly over the use of force, the proliferation of advanced weaponry, and the vast quantity of untracked money—were all attractive lures for terrorist organizations such as al Qaeda to establish themselves and thrive.

In the months leading up to the Benghazi terrorist attacks, there were various smaller attacks on US facilities, including the ones that were the victims of the culminating attacks. IEDs were thrown over compound walls, US personnel were driven off of the road and attacked, convoys received small arms fire, etc. These events were acknowledged and reflected in the intelligence reports that were received by Washington and the US officials in Libya at the time. Though the climate was acknowledged to be deteriorating and the likelihood of more significant attacks

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72 Senate Report No. 113-134. 10. (2014)
were understood, the State Department did very little by way of necessary security improvements. Requests for bolstered security elements at US facilities were also disregarded. These perceived shortcomings by the State Department reflected poorly on then-Secretary Hillary Clinton by many. In the aftermath of the attacks and subsequent investigations and trials, her domestic political situation was tumultuous.

The domestic political upheaval that resulted from the Benghazi attacks made Libya a very unpopular topic for President Obama’s administration. As a result, policy towards Libya tended to be fairly untouched for the next three years, with the US maintaining the Arab Spring era executive orders, rather than stoking Republican political rhetoric with fresh Libyan talking points. This remained the status quo until, on April 19, 2016 President Obama signed Executive Order 13726, which restricted travel and the entry of goods from Libya. This executive order was specifically targeted at people that the Obama administration deemed to be impediments to the development of Libya and did not broadly apply to all Libyans. The affected people included people that the Secretary of the Treasury, in consultation with the Secretary of State, decided fit certain criteria, such as: people that threatened the security of the Libyan state, impeded the transition to the Government of National Accord, misappropriated Libyan assets, or coerced state financial institutions (including the Libyan National Oil Company). This targeted approach was intended to function as a support for the United Nations Security

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73 Senate Report No. 113-134. 13-16. (2014)
Council Resolutions 2174 and 2213, passed on August 27, 2014 and March 27, 2015, respectively, by expanding on the previous Executive Order 13566.74

The previous standard by which the Obama Administration had operated was Executive Order 13566, which was put in place on February 25, 2011. This initial executive order had a similar intention to the later 13726, but specifically targeted Gaddafì, his immediate family, and his regime. By 2016, Gaddafì was long-dead, and the guidance was modified to be more expansive and allow for the flexibility that would be required to keep pressure on the regime in the long term. Where the original Executive Order gave the Secretary of State and the Secretary of the Treasury the ability to prevent travel to the United States by individuals that could be linked to previous regime failings, the updated order was far wider-reaching. 13726 gave the secretaries the ability to revoke visas and bar entry to the United States based on current activities in Libya, independent of the deposition of Colonel Gaddafì at their own discretion. The shift from a retroactive policy to a proactive one provided the secretaries with significantly expanded discretionary powers over Libyan travel to the United States until some other guidance supersedes the order.

**Conclusion**

The Obama Administration’s hands-off period and eventual shift in policy towards Libya in the post-Benghazi attack period could demonstrate President Obama’s desire to anchor Libya, which he saw as crucial component in the stability

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of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), while minimizing the domestic perception that he is involving the US military in yet another protracted conflict. In the aftermath of the 2012 Benghazi attacks, public support for the Obama administration suffered outside of his Democratic according to some polls. A 2013 CNN poll showed 48% of independent voters as viewing the administration’s handling and reporting on the attacks as dishonest.\textsuperscript{75} A 2014 Rasmussen poll showed that 46% of respondents thought that the attacks would negatively impact Secretary Clinton in a potential presidential bid in 2016.\textsuperscript{76} Next chapter will address how this all factored into Hillary Clinton’s 2016 presidential bid and how the narrative that ultimately led to President Trump’s ascension to power was fueled in part by this lingering scandal. It will also look at if and how President Trump’s policy has been shaped by his desire to distance himself from the failings of the previous administration.

\textsuperscript{75} “May 30, 2013 - American Voters 4-1 Want Special Prosecutor For IRS, Quinnipiac University National Poll Finds; But Fixing Economy Is More Important, Voters Say 3-1.” Quinnipiac University, 30 May 2013. Web.

\textsuperscript{76} “46% Think Benghazi Will Hurt Hillary Clinton in 2016.” Rasmussen Reports, 20 Jan. 2014.
CHAPTER 4 – The Trump Administration

Introduction

An important factor in the run-up to the 2016 US presidential election between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton was stoking concerns over former Secretary of State Clinton’s involvement in, and subsequent handling of the Libyan crisis—the terrorist 2012 terrorist attacks in Benghazi in particular. President Trump began to post on his Twitter feed about Libya on August 23, 2011. The first few days of posts focused on his belief that the United States should be receiving payment from the Libyan rebels in the form of oil as compensation for their military support. He made predictions that whatever governance followed Gaddafi would be worse than leaving him in power would have been. Trump focused the blame of his opposition to the Libyan conflict on President Obama from 2011 until May 19, 2015—a month before he made his own candidacy for president public—when he switched to Hillary Clinton.

This pivot to Hillary Clinton was coupled with an attack on Jeb Bush, who he was to compete with in the Republican primaries. Trump tweeted, “Remember when Jeb gave Hillary a medal on the 1 year anniversary of Benghazi?!” before

77 @realDonaldTrump. “We spent over a billion on Libya and lead the way---why is Europe getting the oil?” Twitter, 23 Aug. 2011, 8:57 a.m.
78 @realDonaldTrump. “As bad as Gaddafi was---what comes next in Libya will be worse---just watch.” Twitter, 23 Aug. 2011, 12:24 p.m.
continuing, “Guess he would have invaded Libya too!” Trump’s move to put the Benghaz scandal at Hillary Clinton’s feet began as she was brought to testify regarding her involvement in the 2012 Benghaz terrorist attacks. From that point forward, Donald Trump went on to talk about Hillary Clinton’s involvement in Benghaz by calling her a “Crooked Hillary” and even quoting a tweet that called her “Killary” in order to emphasize the narrative that she was to blame for Ambassador Stevens’ murder.

For Donald Trump, the Benghaz attacks were important as a point of rhetoric and stirred up significant fervor among his supporters during the election cycle. Once his election bid was successful and he assumed control of the Oval Office, however, his practical focus on Libya was less emphatic. Periodic character attacks against Hillary Clinton and President Obama continued into President Trump’s term, especially regarding their decisions in the Middle East and North Africa. Trump’s militaristic threats moved from North Korea to ISIS to Bashar al-Assad in Syria to al Qaeda. Some of these threats yielded strikes, such as continued air strikes against ISIS and Syria in retaliation for chemical weapon usage. The focus on Libya was minimized once Trump assumed office. While giving his inaugural address, Trump devoted a significant portion to address the threat of

79 @realDonaldTrump. “Remember when Jeb gave Hillary a medal on the 1 year anniversary of Benghaz?! http://dailysignal.com/2015/02/19/conservative-group-brands-jeb-bush-unelectable-giving-medal-hillary-clinton/ ... Guess he would have invaded Libya too!” Twitter, 19 May 2015, 8:09 a.m.
80 @realDonaldTrump. ““@JacoH: @CNN @realDonaldTrump I can’t believe how low CNN can go. Obviously a bunch of Killary fans.” @CNN only says negative-bad reporters” Twitter, 28 Nov. 2015, 7:47 p.m.
global terrorism. Despite US involvement in Libya, and Libya’s battle against the spread of ISIS within its borders, Libya was never mentioned by name.82 President Trump did not mention Libya in his address to the UN General Assembly in September 2017, either, despite addressing many of the same issues of terrorism and national instability.83

Despite Trump’s insistence that President Obama’s policy was clearing the way for “Islamic Extremist control of Libya,” President Obama’s track record against known terrorists in the country is much more aggressive than President Trump’s has proven to be.84 In 2016 President Obama unleased almost 500 airstrikes on the ISIS stronghold in the coastal city of Sirte. President Trump, on the other hand, has authorized 8 airstrikes against Sirte since he has assumed office.85 This disparity exists despite Trump’s insistence that he would be much tougher on what he calls “radical Islamic terrorism” than President Obama and Hillary Clinton, who he claims, “unleashed ISIS” and “destabilized the Middle East.”86 Though President Trump seems to be using a much more limited number of air strikes against enemies in Libya, the placement of these fewer number of strikes seem to be indicative of an expanded scope for counterterrorist efforts in the Northern Africa region.

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84 @realDonaldTrump. “The US Air Force won the war in Libya to clear the way for Islamic Extremist control of Libya.” Twitter, 27 Oct. 2011.
The Trump administration has led some significant attacks against terrorist organizations in Libya, first by expanding airstrikes outside of the northern regions of Libya – where ISIS is most present – into the al Qaeda controlled southern regions. This region, called Ubari, is located in one of Libya’s various ungoverned regions. Its location makes it an ideal operational hub for terrorist networks that are interested in operating in Libya, Niger, Chad, and Algeria. The decision to strike in that region may mean an expanded interest in operations more broadly across North Africa. This possibility is borne out by recent American Special Forces raids in neighboring Nigeria.87

On October 30, 2017, President Trump also released a statement that says he authorized United States forces to capture Mustafa al-Imam, who has been accused of having a role in the 2012 Benghazi terrorist attacks.88 A US Navy SEAL team captured al-Imam in Misrata before bringing him aboard a Naval ship for transport to Washington, DC. Mustafa al-Imam will be tried on charges of killing or conspiring to kill someone during an attack on a federal facility, providing material support for terrorists, and using a firearm in connection with a violent crime.89 This statement also affirmed the United States commitment to the eradication of terrorism from Libya and encouraged Libyans to support the United Nations efforts to institute a

87 Walsh & Schmitt.
unified government in Libya, though there is no such pledge for American support for the UN venture.

This chapter will first address the Libyan context and the continued American response. General lawlessness permeates much of the country and neither of the major factions can spare the forces to police them. This has had significant ramifications on the stability of the country as a whole. President Trump has minimized American military engagement in Libya during his term to this point, which has left space for other foreign interests to develop relationships with the battling militias, which further destabilizes the country. Next, President Trump’s policy choices for the continuation handling of the Libyan state will be examined. For Trump Libyan policy is more indicative of his concerns about domestic appearances and political cache with his voting base than it is about an ongoing foreign military conflict in a failing state—Libya’s status appears to be incidental to him. After that the American security concern will be addressed, which in the policy of President Trump appears to be a matter of freezing money, keeping out immigants and refugees, and scaling back military involvement. Finally, for continuity, the role of President Trump’s advisors will be looked at. The Trump administration has had a particularly high turnover rate, but Rex Tillerson’s brief stint as the Secretary of State and his minimal interaction with Libya will be discussed, along with that of Secretary of Defense James Mattis, who has had a similarly limited open involvement with Libyan politics.
The Libyan Context and Continued American Response

The current instability in Libya has contributed to the perpetuation of zones that are essentially lawless, wherein Libya’s Government of National Accord does not have the capability to maintain a monopoly on violence. These areas have facilitated the flow of terrorists and other criminal elements between Libya, Niger, Chad, and Algeria.90 This concern is supported by the Pentagon’s top general for Africa, Thomas D. Waldhauser, who said, “The instability in Libya and North Africa may be the most significant near-term threat to US and allies’ interests on the continent.”91

The aftermath of the Arab Spring in Libya left the country in a state of near-anarchy. As time progressed, the country coalesced into three major factions within the Libyan Unity Government—as well as a number of smaller interests. These three major factions were brought together as the Unity Government as a result of the Libyan Political Agreement (LPA), which the UN brokered. The first Unity Government-internal faction is called the Presidential Council (PC) and is meant to preside over the Libya as the head of state. The PC is composed on nine members and is led by Prime Minister al-Sarraj. Abdessalam Kajan represents Muslim Brotherhood interests as a deputy in the PC. Though the United States openly supports the GNA, this connection to the Muslim Brotherhood is a potential point of friction with President Trump, who has spoken against the United States maintaining

90 Walsh & Schmitt.
a relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood dozens of times on his personal Twitter account. One of the two most significant militias is based in Misrata and supports the PC, which has given them a great deal of credibility. The base operations for the PC is in the western coastal city of Tripoli.

The second major faction is the State Council. The State Council pulls its members from the Government of National Salvation, who are rivals with the GNA. The LPA sought to incorporate the rival Government of National Salvation into the Unity Government by making them a Libyan consultative body who will assist the House of Representatives (HOR) in making some appointments and decisions. The Government of National Salvation derived its authority from the temporary parliament that had been put together in 2012, called the General National Congress (GNC). The migration of the majority of GNC members into the State Council left the Government of National Salvation without any significant holdings.

The third of the major factions is House of Representatives (HOR), led by General Khalifa Haftar. General Haftar has been very outspoken about his anti-Islamist position and enforces that viewpoint from a position of a sort of military dictator over the Tobruk and Bayda authorities. Haftar currently enjoys both Russian and Egyptian support, which falls well in line with both countries’ anti-Muslim Brotherhood rhetoric. The Libyan National Army (LNA) is also led by General Haftar and is a significant Libyan fighting force which has given the HOR the

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93 Becker & Schmitt.
ability to resist integration into the Unity Government. Per the UN’s Libyan Political agreement, the House of Representatives is to be the legislative body of the Government of National Accord.94 The division between these factions rather than their complete compliance with a process of transitioning into branches of the Unity Government has been the root of a lot of trouble for Libyan stability. The division has nurtured the expansion of terrorist networks—such as ISIS—due to the lawlessness that has arisen in areas that are contested by the rival governments or have been abandoned by them in order to consolidate manpower in locations that are more significant in their struggle against each other.95

General Haftar has been particularly active in the fight against ISIS, which has won him a great deal of favor with Russia. The Kremlin even welcomed him aboard their aircraft carrier in January of 2017 to celebrate his successes. During this visit the Kremlin penned a $2 billion arms agreement with General Haftar’s Libyan National Army, despite the standing UN sanctions.96 President Trump’s wavering policy, which vacillates between a desire to disengage from Libya entirely and a stated intent to defeat ISIS entirely, has created an opportunity for Russia to spread their influence in the absence of United States competition for foreign influence. The unwillingness to participate in deep engagements on the side of the GNA rather than the HOR could also reflect President Trump’s preference to be disengaged from interaction with the Muslim Brotherhood.

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94 Fitzgerald & Ugolini, 3.
95 Becker & Schmitt.
President Trump’s interest in working with Russia against ISIS has been clearly stated on many occasions. On November 11, 2017 President Trump and President Putin released a joint statement regarding their cooperative effort to defeat ISIS in Syria, where a civil war and areas of government vacuum allowed ISIS to develop, much like has happened in Libya.\(^9\) Since President Trump has shown a desire to work with Russia to eliminate ISIS, and Russia is openly supporting General Haftar, this raises a concern for the Government of National Accord and their United Nations patrons.

Egypt is also an outspoken benefactor for General Haftar. Egypt reportedly sees having the eastern portion of Libya in General Haftar’s hands as very beneficial to their own security. Cairo is believed to see Haftar’s sphere of control as a buffer against ISIS encroachment and is willing to support his efforts to consolidate control. The LNA has had their arms supply significantly bolstered by Egypt, and several of Tobruk government officials have traveled to Cairo on official business.\(^9\) The Egyptian willingness to provide military support to General Haftar puts the United States in a precarious position. Due to the fact that Egypt is the second largest recipient of foreign aid from the US, $1.3 billion of which is earmarked for “Peace and Security”, the level of resolve that the United States is showing in support of the GNA is questionable.\(^9\) The United States officially supports the GNA, but by partnering with Russia on other similar initiatives in other countries and leaving

\(^9\) Fitzgerald & Ugolini, 5.
\(^9\) Foreignassistance.gov
space for Russia to operate in Libya, President Trump is destabilizing efforts to reconcile the Libyan government into a cohesive entity.

American Policy Goals

One of the central pieces of President Trump’s campaign platform was a proposed ban on travel from countries that he felt carried a high risk of exporting terrorist activity to the United States. President Trump seems to see this as a counterbalancing procedure to move away from Obama-era policies that he did not agree with, such as nation-building and humanitarian intervention. A part of Trump’s proposed travel overhaul included "a new screening test for the threats we face today," which Trump followed with, "I call it extreme vetting ... extreme, extreme vetting." On January 27, 2017, President Trump issued executive order 13769, titled “Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States.” This executive order suspended travel to the United States from Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. Each country was categorized under the heading of an infraction that was supposed to have made them more likely to export terrorist elements to the United States. The broad travel ban under this order was to last for 90 days. Executive order 13769 was also to suspend the United States Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) for 120 days. Executive order 13769 was replaced with executive order 13780 on March 6, 2017 due to concerns raised by the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth

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100 Jackson.
Circuit. The revised order modified language that implied that non-Muslims would receive preferential treatment in the waiver process due to their status as “minority religions” in the included states. Executive order 13780 also removed Iraq from the list of countries covered by the travel ban. The 120-day USRAP ban was also modified in the updated order, allowing the Secretary of State and Secretary of Homeland Security to jointly issue wavers on a case-by-case basis when it was deemed to be within the scope of national interest to do so. Perhaps most significantly, the updated order includes specific language that protects many immigrants and refugees that are already in the United States with a general protection from deportation under the rules as they came into place.\(^{102}\) The most recent iteration of the Trump administration’s travel restrictions came in the form of Presidential Proclamation 9645. This newest revision removed Sudan from the list of banned countries and added North Korea, Chad, and Venezuela. This travel ban is hotly contested, with Hawaii and Washington State bringing lawsuits against Donald Trump in order to halt the restrictions. The legal battles are ongoing.

**American Security Implications**

President Trump has voiced a desire to disengage from foreign intervention in a broad sense, particularly in the Middle East. This has been mixed with saber rattling in favor of harsher repercussions for terrorists, particularly “radical Islamic

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terrorists.” 103 Though these positions would typically be seen as at odds with each other, they have been used interchangeably to criticize prior administrations, especially that of President Obama. How these foreign policy goals have come to materialize is in the form of offloading responsibilities to foreign entities. President Trump has publicly supported the United Nations on its efforts at nation building within Libya in a series of statements released after meeting with Libyan Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj. Trump administration officials have stepped in line to do the same.

The Trump administration has encouraged the UN to do as much as possible to quell terrorist activity in Libya’s lawless regions. The administration seems to have also hedged its bets by encouraging Russia in its own efforts to eliminate ISIS. The desire that many past administrations have shown to maintain political and military influence abroad does not appear to be as pressing a concern for the Trump administration, who have been allowing Russian expansion into Libya in exchange for a minimized role in the region’s conflicts. At President Trump’s speech to the United Nations General Assembly on September 19, 2017, he said, “The United States will forever be a great friend to the world, and especially to its allies. But we can no longer be taken advantage of, or enter into a one-sided deal where the United States gets nothing in return. As long as I hold this office, I will defend America's interests above all else.” 104 President Trump’s policy—or lack thereof—is indicative of a position that is willing to back both opposing viewpoints of the UN administration.

103 Jackson.
104 Trump, Donald. “READ: President Trump’s speech to the UN General Assembly.”
and Russia and hope that he will be seen as a stalwart ally by the victorious side in
the end.

On February 09, 2018, President Trump issued a continuance of the state of
national emergency in Libya that was instigated by President Obama’s executive
order 13566. This extension extended President Obama’s sanctions on Colonel
Gaddafi’s family members, known regime associates, and others—as seen fit by the
Secretary of Treasury and Secretary of State. Trump’s rationale was that former
members of Colonel Gaddafi’s regime are still playing a significant role in the
ongoing Libyan civil war, and that the preservation of the state of emergency will
allow the United States the freedom to operate as necessary to deny their advances.
His statement also says that maintenance of the state of emergency will allow the
United States to strengthen Libya’s move towards a reconciled government, which
he believes is necessary to defeat ISIS in the region.

The Role of Advisors

On December 1, 2017 Secretary of State Rex Tillerson met with the Libyan
Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj. The results of this meeting were passed through a
brief statement from Heather Nauert, a spokesperson for the State Department. At
this meeting Secretary Tillerson affirmed the United States support for the
Government of National Accord, which is the entity supported by the United
Nations. Nauert said, “Attempts to bypass the UN-facilitated political process or
impose a military solution to the conflict would only destabilize Libya and create
opportunities for ISIS and other terrorist groups to threaten the United States and our allies.”

This position allows the Trump administration the freedom to say that they are supportive of the rebuilding effort in Libya and of counterterrorism efforts in the country, without obligating themselves to provide significant support on either front.

Likewise, Secretary of Defense James Mattis met with the Prime Minister of Libya Fayez al-Sarraj at the Pentagon on November 30, 2017. The Defense Department press release for the event says that the meeting between Secretary Mattis and Prime Minister al-Sarraj focused on the United States continuing commitment to Libyan redevelopment as well as a mutual affirmation of the threat posed by ungoverned spaces within the Libyan state. Both men expressed concern about the capacity that these spaces offered terrorist networks such as ISIS and al Qaeda to operate. As a result, they pledged their mutual support for counterterrorism efforts in the region, but no specific goals, timeline, or military commitments were released to the public.106 (defense.gov).

**Domestic Political Concerns**

Libya has served the Trump administration as a focal point for developing favorable US public opinion rather than a country that needs American intervention. When President Trump has publicly spoken about Libya he has emphasized the

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minimal fiscal upside for the United States. In his inaugural address, President Trump said,

We will seek friendship and goodwill with the nations of the world -- but we do so with the understanding that it is the right of all nations to put their own interests first. We do not seek to impose our way of life on anyone, but rather to let it shine as an example for everyone to follow. We will reinforce old alliances and form new ones -- and unite the civilized world against radical Islamic terrorism, which we will eradicate completely from the face of the Earth.\footnote{Trump, Donald. “Inaugural Address: Trump’s Full Speech.”}

In these three consecutive sentences President Trump espoused ideas in support of nation-centric alliances of convenience, isolationism, and globalist militarism. Though these three ideas are fundamentally at odds with each other, they are presented in rapid succession in the hope that selective listeners will pick the broad statement that best suits their personal ideology and disregard the rest.

Before Trump began his presidential campaign in earnest his public discourse about Libya focused on the costs associated with the campaign, how long involvement in Libya could take, and what the political situation in Libya would look like after the removal of Colonel Gaddafi. His criticism was leveled squarely at President Obama, and frequently accused him of working to empower what Trump saw as “radical Islamists.” Once Trump was working on his election prospects and Hillary Clinton became a political threat his attention focused. Rather than Libya
being a broad topic about a years-long conflict, Trump focused in on the Benghazi terrorist attacks and used them as a political weapon. From that time forward, Benghazi was an implicit attack that Trump would use without having to directly reference it in order to discredit Hillary Clinton on various topics. He used Benghazi to assail her capability to handle stress, saying, “Hillary Clinton doesn't have the strength or stamina to be president.” He used Benghazi to attack the value she places on the lives of American personnel, saying, “she only gets #Americans killed #Benghazi.” The domestic political value of Libya and Benghazi have laid a foundation for President Trump to attack and discredit various political opponents and has given him a measure of credibility on topics of national security that he may not have if he were judged solely on the military actions he has taken while in office.

Conclusion

The Trump administration has demonstrated a desire to disengage from the region’s politics as much as possible. President Trump himself has condemned the Obama administration’s use of military intervention on humanitarian grounds and predicted that removing Colonel Gaddafi would lead to a direr situation for the people of Libya than faced while under Gaddafi’s control. Some of President Trump’s most frequently stated concerns regarding Libya are: which countries are getting Libyan oil now that the regime has been restructured, whether or not Libyan

108 @realDonaldTrump. “Hillary Clinton doesn't have the strength or stamina to be president. Jeb Bush is a low energy individual, but Hillary is not much better!” Twitter, 2 Jan. 2016, 12:00 p.m.
109 @realDonaldTrump. “@bcuzmdmomma: @FreeDavidKing No she only gets #Americans killed #Benghazi - we need @realDonaldTrump #MAGA” Twitter, 4 Oct. 2016, 6:35 p.m.
terrorists pose a threat to the United States, and that the United States should not have concerned itself in the business of Libyan government in the first place.

The application of American military force in Libya has been significantly reduced from previous years, leaving a power vacuum that Russia has been quite willing to fill. The area of operations that recent US airstrikes implies that the Trump administration may be taking an expanded regional focus in an effort to curb the efficiency of a broad range of terrorist networks in Northern Africa, rather than focusing stifling the expansion of ISIS in a single hot-bed city. The low volume of strikes brings the administration’s commitment to this expansive vision into question, however, and begs the question of whether this is a valued long-term strategy or a headline for American domestic consumption.

The most concrete policy decisions that the Trump administration has made to this point are the policies towards immigration and sanctions. President Trump made a lot of promises to his constituency about preventing immigration from countries that he believed were especially likely to export “Islamic terrorism” to the United States. Several iterations of his travel restrictions have been implemented and battled against by domestic opposition parties—the current executive order 13780 and its expansion under presidential proclamation 9645 restrict Libyan nationals with either business or tourist visas from entering the United States. President Trump has stayed in line with the Obama administration’s orders for economic sanctions on Libya, however. President Trump chose to extend the existing executive order rather than revising its scope.
CHAPTER 5 – Conclusion

Contextual Summary

Early Obama Policy

Prior to the September 11, 2012 Benghazi terrorist attacks President Obama’s administration engaged the Arab Spring uprisings in Libya as a humanitarian crisis in the context of a military intervention. The Obama administration worked to cast US efforts in such a light that they would be viewed as reluctant heroes, coming to aid revolutionary reformation. The administration made a clear effort to ensure that the public knew this US would not be taking control of the international effort in Libya or occupying Libya to develop a new regime. The Libyan intervention was an opportunity for President Obama to demonstrate his intention to shift US involvement in international conflict to a position of support in favor of a regional security format.

Three important policy factors came out of the early Obama administration’s handling of this situation. First, the most expansive economic sanctions ever instituted by the United States were carried out at the outset of the United States’ involvement in the Arab Spring uprisings. Though the amount of funds that the economic freeze effected was enormous, the number of individuals directly targeted was relatively small. Colonel Gaddafi’s immediate regime support and family members were the primary targets of these sanctions.
The second significant Libyan policy to come out of the early period of President Obama’s administration regards the immigration and travel of Libyans. Travel limitations were emplaced that targeted many of the same individuals that were impacted by the administration’s economic sanctions. The travel restrictions were narrow in scope but absolute in intensity, with explicitly listed individuals being disallowed from travel to—or take up residence in—the United States.

The third policy channel on which the Obama administration focused was, perhaps, the most visible—the methods, visibility, and leadership positioning of military intervention. The United States was involved in early intervention efforts on behalf of the Libyan protesters by way of intelligence, support, and airstrikes against Ghaddafi-loyal forces. As the international community developed their involvement in the intervention efforts, President Obama took the opportunity to step back American involvement in order to empower NATO first, and then the United Nations to have control over the situation. President Obama was reluctant to make the US military the centerpiece of yet another MENA conflict, especially given his election campaign’s focus on drawing down the Iraq and Afghanistan wars.

**Late Obama Policy**

Following the September 11, 2012 Benghazi terrorist attacks, President Obama’s policy methodology towards Libya shifted slightly. The “responsibility to protect” narrative became harder to justify in the face of American casualties, including the death of a diplomat. The information vacuum that immediately
followed led to incomplete information being spread through the media by key members of the Obama administration, such as Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. As she shared the narrative that the attacks were the result of an Islamophobic YouTube video that had sparked protests elsewhere in the Arab world and inflamed Libyans in Benghazi as well. Once this account was discredited, Clinton and Obama’s various political opponents seized the opportunity to cast the initial explanation as a bit of intentional disinformation. Much of the following American civil discourse regarding Libya following this event centered on Benghazi as an isolated circumstance, rather than a symptom of a nearly-collapsed state failing to maintain its monopoly on violence.

In the aftermath of these attacks President Obama’s policies became broader than they had previously been. The economic sanctions which had been previously implemented were narrow and exacting. As the Obama administration’s understanding of the continuing scope of Libyan intervention expanded, so did the capability to expand the scope of the sanctions as the developing situation dictated. The new sanctions package that the administration put forward allowed the Secretaries of State and Treasury to identify and target individuals that are negatively impacting a variety of essential institutions within the Libyan state. The new sanctions were intended to protect the fledgling democratic order and Libyan oil concerns. Anybody that could be reasonably be tied to terrorist activities in Libya was also subject exemption from US travel under the new rules.
The framework for in place immigration and visa acquisition was narrowed by allowing for case-by-case review and denial on an individual basis at the hands of the Secretaries of Treasury and State. This expansion followed suit with the actions taken for expanded economic sanctions and moved away from the expanded power came at a time when the former Ghaddafi regime was less important than the faction rivalries that were developing within the Libyan state. By broadening the power to reject individuals as they were deemed unfit for entry into the United States, rather than by a list of pre-determined individuals, President Obama was acknowledging the likelihood that the Libyan crisis was going to be a long-term issue, rather than a matter of regime change with a democratic hand off at the end.

Military intervention during President Obama’s second term was quite different from that of the Arab Spring era. During the Battle of Sirte in 2016 the United States engaged in Operation Odyssey Lightning. During this operation the United States carried out some 495 airstrikes against ISIS targets in the coastal Libyan city of Sirte. This was fundamentally different from the airstrikes that were carried out during the first portion of Obama’s presidency, because the United States did not seek to delegate management of the operation to an external regulatory body such as NATO or the UN. Instead, AFRICOM directed the activities from August 1, 2016 until the end of US involvement in the hostilities on December 20, 2016. This period of Obama’s presidency was also marked with US Special Operations Forces carrying out raids on various high value targets within Libya. These raids netted the capture of Abu Anas al-Liby—a notorious bomber—and
Ahmed Abu Khattala—the orchestrator of the September 11, 2012 Benghazi terrorist attacks. This methodology, using small scale unit raids to capture or kill high value targets, fall in line with the Obama administrations tactics elsewhere, such as the raid that killed Osama Bin Laden in Pakistan in 2011.

*Trump Policy*

Finally, in contrast with the two periods of President Obama’s control over US involvement in Libya, comes President Trump’s time at the helm. Domestic policy actions regarding Libya to this point in President Trump’s administration broadly follow suit with the trend that began under the second Obama administration. The actions taken by the military are significantly reduced, however. Domestic discourse surrounding the Libya have been a largely political device for President Trump, however, and his interaction with Libya could be justifiably understood as a domestic political talking point rather than a region of significant policy impetus. Much of the conversation that has occurred within the United States about Libya has been centered on the September 11, 2012 Benghazi terrorist attacks, and not the broader issues present in Libya that may have fomented the attacks in the first place.

One of the tangible policies President Trump has implemented towards Libya has in the form of economic sanctions. Despite President Trump’s rhetoric about President Obama’s supposed light-handed policies towards terrorists and Islamists, President Trump chose to extend Obama-era economic sanctions on Libya. Perhaps
he sees the same executive order as more effective in his hands because it will be his appointees making decisions about who to sanction, but the language and scope of the orders remain the same. In the executive order in which President Trump extended the existing Obama-era order, he argues that a continuation is necessary to counter, “Those who reject dialogue and obstruct or undermine Libya’s democratic transition.”  

Where the economic sanctions and immigration/travel guidance put out by the Obama administration moved in step with each other, President Trump stepped the scope of travel limitations beyond Obama-era guidance. Rhetoric about his intention to block refugees, immigration, and travel visas from a series of Muslim-majority countries began during the presidential campaign cycle and once he came into office one of his earliest actions was to implement the first draft of his travel ban. Due to court challenges and his desire to add and remove individual countries from the ban the travel ban has gone through three iterations. In its current form, travel from Iran, Libya, Somalia, Syria, Yemen, North Korea, Venezuela, and Chad has been prohibited without specific allowances on an individual basis for applicants. The breadth of this ban is still being battled in the US legal system, but in its current form it exceeds the Obama plan by a significant margin.  

Military intervention in Libya from the Trump administration has an amalgam of the approaches taken during President Obama’s term, but on a significantly smaller scale. As for oversight, President Trump and his advisors have paid lip

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service to the United Nation’s efforts to unite the disparate Libyan factions under the umbrella of the unity government, but his actions have been fairly hands-off as regards bolstering the Government of National Accord’s foothold against General Haftar and his Libyan National Army. The number of airstrikes that President Trump is known to have authorized against ISIS targets in Libya is 8—compared to nearly 500 from the year before, under President Obama. The same goes for strikes against individual high value targets, with only one known target being collected by US special operations forces. In fact, the space that President Trump has left in the Libyan sphere of influence has allowed Russia the freedom to maneuver and develop an alliance with General Haftar’s rival government. Egypt and the United Arab Emirates have also put their support behind Haftar and the LNA due to his hardline stance against Islamists.

The evolution of American policy towards Libya under Presidents Obama and Trump has become less interdependent on international cooperation and has developed increasingly broad policies for the identification and punishment of suspected enemies. Despite President Obama’s stated goals at the outset of his first term, his policies became less globally inclusive and, instead, focused on providing the US government with the freedom to act on upcoming threats within Libya as they presented themselves without the need for further significant policy guidance. President Trump’s stated goals have also shifted as they have been implemented. His rhetoric about the Obama administration’s perceived weakness and promises to increase the degree of American security through the eradication of “radical Islamic
terrorism” has borne out anemic results. President Trump has continued President Obama’s economic sanctions and severely cut back on the amount of military force being applied to known terrorist organizations within Libya. The only expanded measure that has been pursued by President Trump has been the travel and immigration measure, which has been met with resistance at every step, and still faces stout opposition in the courts as of the time of this paper’s production.

Implications

Limitations of Current Thesis

Any research that deals with current international conflicts will be limited by the availability of declassified information. It is not likely that a more precise record of the activities carried out by United States special operations forces will come to be publicly available until many years in the future, if at all. This means that any assumptions built upon the frequency, duration, or intensity of attacks against enemies, their supplies, or their places of operation are very likely to be incomplete. Whether or not this changes the validity of any such assumptions cannot be known until such a time as complete records come into the public discourse. It would be unlikely that a president would withhold all information regarding significant military actions, however, as military victories tend to make for positive trends in favorability polling among supporters. So, even if the details are withheld, it is likely that individual acts of military intervention in Libya would still make the domestic news
cycle, even if their details had to be scrubbed for the maintenance of operational
security going forward.

This paper also has to work with logical assumptions about what motivated a
particular actor at any given time when there is an absence of contemporary
reporting to fill in these gaps. Without the benefit of perfect knowledge, the best
that can be done is developing assumptions that are in pattern with a subject’s usual
behavior, if possible, or in line with typical human behavior. For example: the idea
that President Trump is intentionally playing the United Nations and Russia by
providing minimal assistance to the GNA or by allowing military aid to go to Egypt
when it explicitly supports General Haftar is an assumption. Though, it is possible
that President Trump truly supports the UN-backed Unity Government in Libya, and
he just is not willing to sacrifice Egyptian relations over a disagreement over their
never get too attached to one deal or one approach. For starters, I keep a lot of
balls in the air, because most deals fall out, no matter how promising they seem at
first.”\textsuperscript{111} Following his own stated method for handling negotiations, it would be
logical to conclude that he is playing both sides. This has been shown in practice as
well as in the statements in his book, as he has a history of trying using contradictory
statements and actions to convince all involved parties that he has their best
interests at heart, even when their interests might be diametrically opposed.

Future Research

The methodology used to discern between the actions taken by the Obama administration and the Trump administration could be used to dissect and understand the decision-making processes in other similar conflicts like, Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. By understanding the domestic pressures that helped to motivate presidential policy on decisions in Libya, a future researcher could place Libya in a global context to develop an understanding of why it has been treated so differently from other nations. Syria, for example, has been handled quite a bit differently than Libya, despite both being failed states in the midst of years-long civil wars, ruled—at least initially in the case of Libya—by ruthless dictators, and populated with vast terrorist networks (including some of the same terrorist networks). The bureaucratic model that is discussed in chapter 2 also demonstrates the ability for valued advisors to redirect the likely course of a person in power.

Another boon for future research could come lies in the possible release of currently classified documents. These unreleased documents have the potential to provide a more complete understanding of how hands-on each president was with decisions of military application during their White House tenure. Though, in the case of President Trump, revising this topic at the end of his presidency could also yield a bevy of new information, as he will have had more time to flesh out his policy. As it stands, this analysis has only been able to address 15 months of Trump’s experience in the White House and a vast back catalogue of communications and grievances with the general public. During his candidacy,
President Trump told his constituency that he would recruit the best people available for every job and then delegate the appropriate responsibilities to them. Perhaps, once his White House records are declassified and are eligible for a Freedom of Information request, researchers will be able to see if his delegation approach came to be tenable, or if he chose to be more directly accountable for military intervention once he found himself in office.

Findings

The variation between President Obama’s policy in Libya and President Trump’s policy in Libya have been significantly less dramatic than might have been expected based solely on their rhetoric regarding foreign policy. President Obama’s policy postured the United States in the role of a global support entity. President Trump has echoed this sentiment, to a degree, by saying that he wants to disengage the United States from deals that he sees as one-sided—and seldom in favor of the US. President Trump has placed himself a bit further from the altruistic support role than Obama, however, as he postulates the United States is due proper financial compensation for its support. Trump has said that he believes that United States should shine as an example for the world to see, both domestically—at his inauguration speech—and internationally—before the UN General Assembly. Where Obama ultimately sided with the Responsibility to Protect doctrine, Trump has made it clear that unless the United States receives direct compensation, he does not believe the US should be getting involved in foreign conflict.
When it comes policy that is specific to Libya, President Trump’s decisions have been following the same path that President Obama’s were on during their evolution. Obama’s economic policy towards Libya started with narrow sanctions that were tightly-focused but deeply impactful and resulted in the seizure of an enormous amount of Libyan capital. As this policy was revised by President Obama in the following years the scope of the policy expanded by becoming more adaptable to the changing face of conflict within Libya. No longer did his sanctions target a few specific individuals, but instead allowed for the addition of new targets as deemed appropriate by high-level appointees. Though he did not leave specific discretion to himself, Obama placed himself a single degree of separation away from freezing the assets of any Libyan based on criteria that would be internally justified. Upon assumption of power and the looming sunset of this executive order, President Trump opted to make no changes. The flexibility and availability of the order in its format was apparently sufficient for his needs. Despite saying that Obama’s policies were enabling Islamic radicals, Trump seems to agree with Obama’s methodology for crippling enemy Libyan financial systems.

Immigration, on the other hand, is the most significant point of departure for their respective foreign policies. While President Obama initially emplaced restrictions on travel for Gaddafi’s family and high-level regime, he chose to expand it in step with the economic sanctions. The updated Obama-era travel and immigration restrictions provided the White House with the ability to adapt its restricted list as the Secretaries of State and Treasury saw fit. This was a valuable
expansion for the Obama administration for the same reasons that they were valuable expansions on the economic sanctions front. They allowed for freedom to maneuver, politically. Both policies redefined the enemy in Libya from a finite list to a vague enemy called “terrorism.”

For President Trump, this was not a sufficient enough expansion of power. Trump did not just want the ability to pick and choose which individuals he could bar from entry to the United States, he wanted the ability to choose the countries these people came from in the first place. President Trump’s expansion on this bill has been polarizing, to say the least. Though the proposal of this plan bought Trump a lot of support from his voter base, it has also been a significant sticking point for many outside of his immediate political sphere. The countries included on his prohibited list have also been understandably upset about their prohibition from the United States. Interestingly, Trump’s travel ban has been lauded by jihadist groups, according to the Washington Post, who see the ban as evidence that the United States is at war with Islam as a whole and believe this ban will invigorate their recruiting efforts.112

Though President Trump’s intention on this has been more extreme than President Obama, the longevity of this ban is yet to be seen. Interference from the US judicial system have caused the revision of the order due to concerns that it unfairly targeted people based on their religion rather than the political stability of

the country from which they originate. The executive order is currently contested and if it is disallowed the most significant policy separation between Trump and Obama’s policies towards Libya will evaporate.

Militarily, Presidents Trump and Obama have approached Libya with a similar set of tactics. Targeted air strikes do the bulk of the support work for the GNA against terrorist elements. These strikes were supplemented by US Special Operations Forces raids under both administrations. These raids resulted in the detention of high value targets within Libya before they were extradited to the United States for trial and punishment. Where these two presidents vary in their commitment of military forces to Libya is the frequency of such activities. President Obama authorized thousands of airstrikes on Libya during his presidency, first to topple the Gaddafi regime, and then to neutralize terrorist elements within the state to ensure the establishment of a unified government. President Trump has authorized approximately eight strikes and has taken credit for a single notable HVT capture. It is a possibility that Trump may not have engaged in the Libyan conflict in the first place, but his repeated punitive bombings in Syria for the use of chemical weapons against civilian targets makes the case that he may also be willing to engage in military intervention for humanitarian purposes.
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