

# 1 Libya and the Light Footprint

On August 23, 2011, rebels armed with Kalashnikov assault rifles and backed by NATO warplanes overran Muammar al-Qaddafi's Tripoli compound, Bab al-Aziziya, ending the North African dictator's nearly forty-two-year reign. Within days, ordinary Libyans were visiting Bab al-Aziziya en masse, wide-eyed tourists in the seat of power of their own land. Signs reading "Down, Down U.S.A" and "We love our Leader Muammar Qaddafi forever" greeted them at the door – perhaps posted during the revolt, perhaps of older provenance. Inside the rubble-strewn compound, visitors found the iconic House of Resistance, which was bombed by the United States in 1986 in retaliation for Qaddafi's terrorism and then preserved in its ruined state by Libya's self-proclaimed "Brother-Leader" as a symbolic reminder of his country's oppression by the "great powers."<sup>1</sup>

Six months earlier, almost to the day, Qaddafi had stood there, in front of the very same House of Resistance, and delivered a bloodcurdling speech promising to crush a week-old revolt in Libya's second largest city and eastern hub, Benghazi. With rebel forces on the verge of victory, the end was now near. Qaddafi would flee to his hometown of Sirte, and the fighting against him would drag on through October, but for all intents

<sup>1</sup> Jon Lee Anderson, "King of Kings: The Last Days of Muammar Qaddafi" *New Yorker*, November 7, 2011, vol. 87, no. 35.



Figure 1.1 Rubble at Bab al Aziziya, Tripoli. Photo by author.

and purposes, with his compound now in rebel hands, his four decades of dictatorship were over.<sup>2</sup>

When the revolution had first erupted in February, on the heels of uprisings in neighboring Tunisia and Egypt, the United States and its allies had seemed unwilling to do much to stop Qaddafi from brutally repressing it. The financial and political toll of the previous decade's interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan was still high, and Europe was in the throes of a major economic crisis that threatened to upend its post-Cold War political and economic structures, buffet the world economy back into recession, and possibly cost President Obama a second term.

<sup>2</sup> Other books that discuss the war in detail include Ethan Chorin, *Exit the Colonel: The Hidden History of the Libyan Revolution*. New York: Public Affairs, 2012; Alison Pargeter, *Libya: The Rise and Fall of Qaddafi*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012; Jason Pack, ed., *The 2011 Libyan Uprisings and the Struggle for the Post-Qaddafi Future*. New York: Palgrave, 2013; Karl Mueller, ed., *Precision and Purpose: Airpower in the Libyan Civil War*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND, forthcoming.

## LIBYA'S RELEVANCE FOR THE FUTURE

3

Moreover, the crisis in Libya was only one of numerous issues dominating headlines from across the turbulent Arab world, and some of the rationales for military intervention in Libya might also have been applied to other states in the region and beyond.

But as the violence in Libya intensified in the weeks that followed, and Qaddafi's forces threatened to terrorize the civilian population further, the pressure to act mounted. In early March, Qaddafi recovered his footing, ordering his tanks to recapture Benghazi, and threatened to slaughter anyone who stood in his way. French and British leaders pushed the UN to endorse military action that would stop the regime forces from leveling the city. Unexpectedly, the Arab League voted in favor of a no-fly zone over Libya, and, within days, the Obama administration changed course from reticence about military action to a full-court press for a UN Security Council Resolution authorizing military action to protect Libyan civilians from the regime's attacks.

On March 17, that resolution, UN Security Council Resolution 1973, passed, authorizing "all necessary means" to this end. Two days later, cruise missile and bomber strikes from a U.S.-led coalition destroyed Qaddafi's air-defense systems, forced his armored columns to retreat, and established a no-fly zone over most of the country. An international contact group with a broad-based membership was created to manage the politics of the intervention, support the rebels (*thuwwar*), and pressure Qaddafi to step down. A seven-month, NATO-led military intervention that would end in Qaddafi's capture and death had begun.

### Libya's Relevance for the Future

This intervention was a high-tech, combined, joint mission operating from Europe, the United States, and elsewhere in the Middle East and North Africa. Military operations relied heavily on precision airpower, striking some 6,000 targets, mostly along Libya's Mediterranean coast. All told, the operation would draw on more than 8,000 personnel, 21 warships, and some 250 aircraft flying more than 26,000 sorties. Nineteen countries

contributed military forces, including four from the Middle East. By contrast with interventions in Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq, the Libya intervention started with a mandate from the United Nations for the use of force to protect civilians – although the interpretation of that mandate would become a central controversy of the war.

If military intervention in the broadest sense is defined as the use of force to affect the internal affairs of another country, Libya was the seventh significant U.S. military intervention since the end of the Cold War.<sup>3</sup> In the 1990s, the Clinton administration had intervened in Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Kosovo. The following decade, the George W. Bush administration intervened in Afghanistan and Iraq. The intervention in Libya was heavily influenced by the lessons of these earlier experiences, but it also departed from them in novel ways that will shape the American and allied approach both to NATO and to military intervention in the future.

To begin with, in Libya, the United States encouraged European allies, and France and Britain in particular, to take the lead and bear the heaviest burden they could. Prior to Libya it was widely assumed on both sides of the Atlantic that the United States would always take the lead in any significant allied military intervention. This, however, was often a cause of consternation among U.S. allies. They argued that America had a track record of refusing to agree to military operations unless it was fully in command, yet when given command it too often conducted operations in ways that accounted poorly for allied interests. In the early years of the Bosnia war, for example, the Clinton administration was uneasy about getting pulled back into military commitments in Europe just as the Cold War had ended, and resisted allied overtures for greater U.S. political and military support. At that time, many allies saw U.S. reluctance as problematic. A few years later, however, when

<sup>3</sup> If one accepts that the 1991 Gulf War was primarily international. Technically Panama was post-Cold War, but it was closer to the Cold War mode of U.S. unilateral intervention in Latin America.

## LIBYA'S RELEVANCE FOR THE FUTURE

5

NATO intervened in Kosovo, European allies sometimes complained that the United States was dictating strategic and operational choices without due consideration for European needs. Fairly or not, Europeans felt marginalized in important military decisions, where their interests were arguably more intensely in play than those of the United States. European concerns that the United States would not intervene unless it had a dominant role eventually became an impetus for the European Union's (EU) push to build a military capability independent of NATO.

In Libya, however, the U.S. offered broad support but adopted a limited military role and did not seek to dictate terms to the allies. Many analysts and politicians in the United States disapproved of this approach and criticized it roundly. In general, however, it worked. Why it worked, and whether it can be used again – or whether this was a unique case where the stars aligned in favour of a European lead – is one of the central issues of this book. The French surprised many by following up their action in Libya by spearheading an intervention against Al Qaeda linked rebels in northern Mali, thus suggesting the U.S. approach to Libya may be replicable. But before U.S. defense planners start to base their assumptions on the Libya model, they will also have to consider the difficulties European militaries faced in Libya, as well as nagging questions about Europe's broader financial and defense outlook.

Beyond the novel U.S. approach to NATO, the Libya intervention was also a test case for a less ambitious concept of operations, sometimes referred to as the "light footprint." Although it drew on an impressive array of advanced weaponry, the intensity of allied operations over Libya was low in comparison with previous post-Cold War U.S. interventions. The Libya intervention contrasted sharply both in size and scope of ambition not only from the two interventions of the George W. Bush administration, but also from those of the late Clinton era in the Balkans. In Libya, the initial objective was limited to stopping violence against innocent civilians. Although this objective would eventually entail others that were more ambitious than many critics would have liked, allied objectives in Libya were on an altogether different scale from Iraq and

Afghanistan. Likewise, operations in Libya were largely restricted to airpower, which itself was used in a very limited way in keeping with the UN Security Council Resolution and need to avoid civilian casualties.

How well this approach worked, how it might be improved in the future, and the overall implications for the future of military intervention are also central issues in this book. As the United States emerges from the wars of the post-9/11 decade deeply reticent about extended foreign military deployments and focused on fiscal and economic restoration, the possibility of a lower-cost approach to the challenge of state failure and other forms of violent international crisis is much needed. U.S. political leaders will surely be more reserved about interventions after Iraq and Afghanistan, but it would be naïve to think the United States could eschew interventions altogether; the moral, political, and national security costs of permitting the spread of chaos in today's highly integrated world are simply too high. A more cost-effective approach to meeting this challenge than the one currently in place is nevertheless sorely needed. Libya serves as a partial guide to how the circle can be squared.

### Controversies over Libya

In Washington, heated debates over intervention started as soon as the revolution broke out in February. Many esteemed observers argued sharply against taking any action to help Libya's suffering population. "We don't need Libya to offer us a refresher course in past mistakes," wrote General Wesley Clark, who commanded NATO's 1999 intervention in Kosovo.<sup>4</sup> U.S. interests in Libya were simply too weak to warrant another war, he argued. This was not Egypt, with its access to the Suez, much less Saudi Arabia, with a major share of the world's petroleum, or Iran, with its aspirations to nuclear weapons (which Qaddafi had renounced several years earlier). Opponents such as Clark argued that a military intervention would do more harm than good, since NATO

<sup>4</sup> Wesley K. Clark, "Gen. Wesley Clark Says Libya Doesn't Meet the Test for U.S. Military Action" *Washington Post*, March 11, 2011.

## CONTROVERSIES OVER LIBYA

7

would never commit the military might required to succeed; if it did, they argued, blowback from another U.S. invasion of a Muslim country would be worse than any possible gains from ousting Qaddafi (who everyone at least agreed was odious).<sup>5</sup>

But neoconservative hawks, progressive interventionists, and others contended the revolt in Libya gave the United States an opportunity to save lives, support democracy, and improve America's reputation in a region where it was exceptionally bad and had suffered greatly over the past decade. Former George W. Bush administration officials called for immediate U.S. military action, as did liberal European interventionists such as Paddy Ashdown, who had led international state-building efforts in Bosnia in the previous decade.<sup>6</sup> A leading progressive proponent of intervention, was Princeton University Professor Anne-Marie Slaughter, who had recently departed from a post as director of the Policy Planning Staff in the Obama State Department. Slaughter argued that doing nothing while Qaddafi killed innocent civilians would make U.S. rhetorical support for the uprisings elsewhere in the Arab world look like so much worthless posturing, and potentially undermine pro-democracy movements in neighboring Tunisia and Egypt. She also claimed Qaddafi was not as tough as he looked and predicted that if he were confronted with a UN Security Council Resolution he would quickly cave and seek a negotiated settlement, thereby limiting the need for an extended military action in the first place.<sup>7</sup>

The debate would evolve as the war did. A few weeks into it, former U.S. secretaries of state Jim Baker and Henry Kissinger penned a joint article arguing that although the United States should normally only use

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., Richard Haas, "The U.S. Should Keep Out of Libya" *The Wall Street Journal*, March 8, 2011; Leslie H. Gelb, "Don't Use U.S. Force in Libya" *Daily Beast*, March 8, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Jim Lobe, "US Neo-Cons Urge Libya Intervention" *Al Jazeera*, February 27, 2011; Paddy Ashdown, "It Is Time for Europe to Back a No-Fly Zone in Libya" *Financial Times*, March 13, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Anne-Marie Slaughter, "Fiddling While Libya Burns" *The New York Times*, March 13, 2011.

military force when a national interest is at stake, Libya was an exception to the rule, a case where “a limited military intervention solely on humanitarian grounds could be justified” by the fact that Qaddafi’s forces had already done so much harm, were about to do much more, and the regime was so weak. The Carter administration’s national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski voiced support, albeit tepid, on MSNBC, saying that the intervention “really isn’t war,” but rather “something between war and military intervention.” He ultimately backed the decision to go to war.<sup>8</sup>

Once underway, there was no shortage of skepticism about the chances the intervention would work. Observers such as Princeton Professor Gary Bass and *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat warned that the United States would never commit the resources needed to win. Relying on rebel forces on the ground was a risky strategy, these critics argued, not only because the rebels might lose, but also because they would likely have very different objectives from the United States and be much less sensitive to western concerns about human rights and the rules of war.<sup>9</sup>

Other critics charged that the administration was confused about its objectives and needed to prosecute the war much more aggressively. Initial support for the intervention notwithstanding, Kissinger soon censured the White House for an alleged lack of clear objectives on *Fox News*. The *Washington Post* charged the administration of being “confused in Libya” and pushed for more aggressive action.<sup>10</sup> Archconservative John Bolton fumed that the “Nobel Peace Prize-winning president has gotten things badly wrong by demanding Muammar Gadhafi’s ouster while restricting U.S. military force to the more limited objective of protecting civilians.” He predicted the intervention would be a “massive strategic

<sup>8</sup> Hiram Reisner, “Brzezinski: Libya Action Isn’t War, But Necessary Intervention” *Newsmax*, March 24, 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Gary J. Bass, “How Doing the Right Thing Can Go So Wrong” *Washington Post*, April 10, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> “Confused in Libya” *Washington Post*, March 23, 2011. See also, “Mr. Obama Speaks on Libya” *Washington Post*, March 29, 2011; “Saving Lives in Libya” *Washington Post*, April 28, 2011.

## CONTROVERSIES OVER LIBYA

9

failure.”<sup>11</sup> For the GOP presidential candidate Mitt Romney, Bolton had it right: the United States was in “mission muddle in Libya.”<sup>12</sup>

More partisan political attacks on the U.S. strategy mounted in May, as initial military success gave way to stalemate and an unnamed administration official dubbed the White House strategy “leading from behind” in an interview in the *New Yorker*. Although the article in which the phrase appeared, written by Ryan Lizza and titled “The Consequentialist,” was very positive overall about the Obama administration’s first three years in office, the phrase “leading from behind” opened the floodgates of reproach for many on the right.<sup>13</sup> “Leading from behind is not leading. It is abdicating. It is also an oxymoron,” wrote Charles Krauthammer in the *Post*.<sup>14</sup> For Jim Dubik, a retired U.S. Army three-star general, leadership was “not exercised from the rear by those who seek to risk as little as possible.” Like it or not, Dubik prognosticated, “America’s leadership has been crucial to most of NATO’s successes. The same will be true in Libya. . . . Airpower alone does not produce victory.”<sup>15</sup> Administration officials would rue the day the Lizza article appeared, as their efforts to get the genie back in the bottle by disowning the comment only seemed to make matters worse.

Yet just as the neocons and others pushed for more aggressive action in the face of difficulty, other analysts complained about alleged hypocrisy and called for NATO to pull out. Richard Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations, argued in testimony to the U.S. Senate that the administration had greatly exaggerated the potential scale of the humanitarian crisis that was brewing, and overstated the significance of

<sup>11</sup> John Bolton, “Obama Wobbly on Libya” *BostonHerald.com*, April 21, 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Mitt Romney, “Mission Muddle in Libya” *National Review Online*, April 21, 2011.

<sup>13</sup> Ryan Lizza, “The Consequentialist: How the Arab Spring Remade Obama’s Foreign Policy” *The New Yorker*, May 2, 2011.

<sup>14</sup> Charles Krauthammer, “The Obama Doctrine: Leading from Behind” *Washington Post*, April 28, 2011.

<sup>15</sup> James M. Dubik, “Finish the Job” *New York Times*, April 26, 2011.

Qaddafi's repression for the rest of the region. He urged a cease-fire that allowed Qaddafi to remain in office.<sup>16</sup> In an anonymous article in *Slate* titled "A Solution from Hell" – in reference to White House National Security Staff Senior Director Samantha Power's Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *A Problem from Hell* – a group that went by the pseudonym "n+1" pronounced that "wars waged by the U.S. are inevitably imperialist" while simultaneously charging the United States with hypocrisy for acting in Libya but not Syria, Bahrain, or elsewhere.<sup>17</sup> In a similar vein, Steven Erlanger of the *New York Times* lamented the doctrine of the "responsibility to protect" which he thought dubious given its uneven application around the world.<sup>18</sup> Still other critics foresaw a repeat of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars,<sup>19</sup> while, Leslie Gelb, former president of the Council on Foreign Relations, lectured the administration for allegedly weakening NATO,<sup>20</sup> and several observers attacked the White House for allegedly conducting an "illegal war."<sup>21</sup>

When Tripoli fell to the rebel forces in August, some of these critics changed their tune, but many did not.<sup>22</sup> "But oh what a war!" wrote Erlanger with apparent sarcasm. "More than six budget-busting months against one of the weakest militaries in the world, with shortages of planes, weapons and ammunition."<sup>23</sup> Neo-isolationists and libertarians insisted that the political and economic costs of intervention were too

<sup>16</sup> "Prepared statement by Richard N. Haass" *United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations*, First Session, 112th Congress, April 6, 2011.

<sup>17</sup> n+1, "A Solution From Hell" *Slate Magazine*, August 17, 2011.

<sup>18</sup> Steven Erlanger, "Libya's Dark Lesson for NATO" *New York Times*, September 4, 2011.

<sup>19</sup> Rajan Menon, "Breaking the State" *The National Interest*, (May-June 2011).

<sup>20</sup> Leslie Gelb, "How Libya Saps America's Power" *Daily Beast*, April 17, 2011.

<sup>21</sup> George F. Will, "Obama's illegal war" *Washington Post*, May 29, 2011; Bruce Ackerman, "Obama's Unconstitutional War" *ForeignPolicy.com*, March 24, 2011; Eric A. Posner, "Outside the Law" *ForeignPolicy.com*, October 25, 2011.

<sup>22</sup> For example, Richard Haass, "But Plan to Put Boots on the Ground" *Financial Times*, August 23, 2011; Ross Douthat, "Libya: The End and the Beginning" *New York Times Blogs*, August 24, 2011.

<sup>23</sup> Steven Erlanger, "Libya's Dark Lesson for NATO" *New York Times*, September 4, 2011.