

United States: A Chance for Improvement?

Authors: Karim Mezran and Alissa Pavia



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by Karim Mezran and Alissa Pavia

Libyan-American relations have always been contentious. After a period of good relations following American support for Libyan independence in 1951 and the short monarchical period, since the 1970s, belligerent confrontations and periods of strong tension have characterized this relationship with the regime of Gaddafi. In 1986, the U.S. President Ronald Reagan ordered a series of airstrikes on Tripoli and Benghazi that led to more than 40 casualties. The strikes were in retaliation to a bombing that occurred at a West Berlin discotheque, a frequently attended nightclub by U.S. soldiers, which the U.S. accused Libya of orchestrating. The situation further deteriorated during the later part of the 1980s, when Pan Am Flight 103, a transatlantic flight from London to New York, was bombed mid-air. Relations grew more strained as, what is known as the Lockerbie bombing, which left 270 dead, became the subject of an international investigation led by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). Subsequently, after the FBI found Libya to be the main culprit behind the Pan Am Flight attack, the U.S. placed Libya under heavy sanctions through the United Nations Security Council, a move which set the two countries at even greater odds. These violent outbursts laid the foundation for fraught relations between the two countries for the following ten years at least.

The relationship between the two countries took a turn for the better in the late 90s when Gaddafi began to cooperate with the U.S. and the international community by surrendering two suspects of the Lockerbie bombing following a warrant issued by the FBI. This rapprochement was further strengthened by Gaddafi's strong public condemnation of Al-Qaeda's attacks against the U.S. and by his public call to donate blood for the victims.¹ Additionally, Gaddafi also stated that the U.S. and Libya had a common interest to fight Islamic extremism.² In essence, the resolution of the Lockerbie bombing and Gaddafi's public willingness to cooperate on all matters

¹ Ken Silverstein, 'How Kadafi Went From Foe to Ally' 4 September 2005, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2005-sep-04-fg-uslibya4-story.html>

² Ibid.

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concerning the 'global war on terror' saw the de facto alignment around common interests and therefore a rapprochement between the two countries, so much so that in 2011, on the eve of the Libyan revolts, the U.S. State Department welcomed Khamis Gaddafi, the youngest of the Colonel's sons, for an official visit of the United States.³

Once the Libyan revolts commenced in 2011, the U.S. was reluctant to get involved. However, President Sarkozy of France, who took the lead for the anti-Gaddafi front, was conscious of the need for U.S.-led military involvement and thus exerted strong pressure on its American allies to do so. France was not the only country that sought a U.S. military presence in Libya; many Arab countries, including the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar and the United Kingdom (UK) also supported France's political gambit of seeking a U.S.-led intervention. These countries advocated for an intervention based on the United Nation's 'Responsibility to Protect' principle, according to which the international community must protect any population from the threat of genocide and other war crimes.⁴ They were fearful Gaddafi might turn against his own population. As a result, the pressure to intervene, coupled with the fear that Gaddafi may commence a genocide, finally convinced the U.S. to intervene directly and triggered the U.S. to approve a NATO-led intervention in Libya.

After the victory of the anti-Gaddafi rebels, the U.S. initially adopted a policy aimed at backing a peaceful and democratic transition from the Gaddafi regime by becoming actively involved in Libya's politics. The U.S. primarily focused on advancing security sector reforms through demobilization and reintegration (DDR) initiatives, through which they planned to train and provide guidance to ministries and other national institutions that had collapsed following the end of the Gaddafi regime.

The U.S.' stance changed following the fateful attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi on the 11th of September 2012 by Salafi Jihadists, resulting in the death of the U.S. ambassador Christopher Stevens and three other American nationals.⁵ U.S. diplomacy towards Libya was radically reshaped as a result. With the U.S. bunkered up in its embassy in Tripoli and reduction of its diplomatic personnel to a bare minimum, U.S. diplomatic presence and power significantly diminished as a result.

The situation further deteriorated in May 2014 when Khalifa Haftar, prior to Libya's second democratic elections launched Operation Dignity, sparking Libya's bitter civil war that would later see the country divided by rival administrations and parallel institutions. Already in a state of emergency and practically locked down in its compound since the consular attack in 2012, the American authorities decided to

3 Joby Warrick, 'U.S. officials assisted visit by Gaddafi son' 25 March 2011, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/us-officials-assisted-visit-by-gaddafi-son/2011/03/25/AFT017YB_story.html

4 Article 139, Responsibility to Protect, available at: <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/about-responsibility-to-protect.shtml>

5 'US confirms its Libya ambassador killed in Benghazi' 12 September 2012, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-19570254>

withdraw completely from the country and thus evacuated their embassy.⁶

Following its departure, the U.S. limited its involvement in Libya to a strategy of containing terrorism in the region, as well as towards an effort to maintain international norms and unity despite rogue attempts to divide the country, a policy which was made evident by operation Morning Glory of the U.S. Navy SEALs. In March of 2014 the U.S. Navy's special forces seized a tanker flying the flag of North Korea, the Morning Glory, which had illicitly obtained oil from the eastern fields and escaped Libyan authorities.⁷ Through this operation, the U.S. demonstrated its readiness to contain a potential fragmentation in the region ensuing from the Libyan conflict, and to ensure no illegitimate force would take over the country.

The U.S.' strategy of containment was further evidenced by a number of events that took place starting from 2014. First and foremost, the U.S. backed the actions of the United Nations Support Mission to Libya (UNSMIL), whose mandate is to support the peaceful transition of power and the establishment of a democratic 'post-conflict' political framework.⁸ Secondly, in 2015 the U.S. promptly supported the Libyan Political Agreement (LPA) signed in the Moroccan city of Skhirat, as well as those institutions that the agreement established, the Presidential Council (PC) and the Government of National Accord (GNA) led Fayez Serraj.⁹ These U.S.-led actions, coupled with the fact that the U.S. was still operating on all matters pertaining to Libya from its Embassy in Tunisia, are a testament that the U.S. was willing to remain engaged in Libya in an effort to contain a spillover effect of the instability in neighboring countries, even if from afar.

The priority of fighting terrorism and containing its spread within Libya was the trigger for the massive counter-terrorism operations, which ultimately defeated the Islamic State in Libya. In 2016, the U.S. military launched over 500 airstrikes¹⁰ against Islamic State strongholds in the city of Sirte through Operation Odyssey Lightning. This US-led operation supported the GNA's armed groups mostly from the city of Misrata, which drove the Islamic State out of Sirte, thus enabling the GNA to take over the city along with its key entry points to important oil and gas terminals.

⁶ Barbara Starr, Joe Sterling and Azadeh Ansari, 'U.S. Embassy in Libya evacuates personnel' 27 July 2014, <https://edition.cnn.com/2014/07/26/world/africa/libya-us-embassy-evacuation/index.html>

⁷ Christian Caryl, 'SEALed and Delivered in Libya' 18 March 2014, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/03/18/sealed-and-delivered-in-libya/>

⁸ UNSMIL Mandate, <https://unsmil.unmissions.org/mandate>

⁹ '7598TH Meeting' 23 December 2015, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc12185.doc.htm>

¹⁰ Eric Schmitt, 'U.S. Military Again Strikes ISIS in Southern Libya' 27 September 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/27/world/africa/strikes-isis-libya.html>

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Former U.S. President Donald Trump

U.S. interest was also expressed through its support of the National Oil Company in Tripoli, which it viewed as the only legal collector of oil sales revenues, along with the Central Bank of Libya in Tripoli.

Libya's Second Civil War

Comparatively to these U.S. actions in Libya, the Trump administration implemented more ambivalent ones. While immediately after Haftar's attack on Tripoli the State Department officially backed the GNA and demanded Haftar's withdrawal from the Western part of the country,¹¹ Trump parted with this stance when, in April 2019, he made a sympathetic phone call to Haftar to praise his counter terrorism efforts and to thank him for ensuring the security of Libyan oil fields.¹² Trump's ambivalence also emerged because of his personal preferences for the Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, and the UAE's de facto ruler Crown Prince Mohamed Bin Zayed (MbZ) who strongly recommended the U.S. support Haftar's efforts to control Libya. However, when Turkey militarily intervened in Libya to aid the GNA in January of 2020,¹³ Trump dropped his ambivalence and allowed U.S. institutions to operate in support of UNSMIL. During the last quarter of his presidency, the Trump administration looked favorably at the ongoing Libyan peace talks, although without a deep commitment and involvement in them.

Currently, the U.S. officially backs the GNA because it is the legitimate actor recognized by the UN, and because it was formed under the auspice of the internationally endorsed Libyan Political Agreement. With the exception of the period of

¹¹ Ashish Kumar Sen, 'Trump wades into Libyan crisis, and why that's not good news' 22 April 2019, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/trump-libya-haftar/>

¹² Steve Holland, 'White House says Trump spoke to Libyan commander Haftar on Monday' 19 April 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security-trump/white-house-says-trump-spoke-to-libyan-commander-haftar-on-monday-idUSKCN1RV0WW>

¹³ Patrick Wintour, 'Turkish troops deploy to Libya to prop up embattled government', 5 January 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/05/turkish-troops-deploy-to-libya-to-prop-up-embattled-government>

ambivalence that marked the Trump administration, the U.S. has maintained a solid foreign policy strategy in Libya, one that has not been influenced by foreign actors. Egypt and the UAE have tried in different instances to sway the U.S.' political agenda in favor of Khalifa Haftar. While these attempts were unsuccessful, they nevertheless obtained some complacency from the then National Security Advisor Bolton by taking advantage of President Trump's lack of interest in the region to continue their support for Haftar's conquest of the West.

The incoming Biden administration will likely adopt a more coherent approach than that of Trump in supporting the newly established Government of National Unity (GNU). However, most observers consider it doubtful that Biden will reveal any grand strategies that will bring about real change in the region. He will focus his foreign policy on safeguarding human rights and ensuring that the GNA implement transparent decision-making processes for the country. Biden will also most likely support the upcoming presidential elections in Libya scheduled for December 24, 2021.

A key challenge for the Biden administration will be Russia's military presence in central Libya. The Kremlin has taken advantage of America's withdrawal from the region, and intervened to fill the gap and establish a presence that could threaten the Southern flank of NATO, that threatens more than Libya. The U.S. and its NATO allies will need to adopt a more coherent and decisive foreign policy strategy in Libya in order to pave the way for the formation of a unified government capable of continuing the transition to a stable democratic Libya. To do so, it must avoid at all costs that new actors become entrenched in the country.

In conclusion, the U.S. will have to do its utmost to prevent a Russian entrenchment in the conflict, and can do so by aligning the interests of all foreign or external actors involved, including France, Turkey, the UAE and Egypt around supporting the UN-led mediation that aims to obtain a government of national unity that, thanks to its consensus, can require the departure of all foreign forces. This would render any foreign presence in Libya illegal, and thus would allow the expulsion of all foreign troops and mercenaries. This strategy should also be coupled with one that seeks to build on a pro-American sentiment that is ever present in the country. In fact, a poll released in 2012 showed that Libyans are more pro-American than Canadians are. The U.S. has always failed to build on this consensus. It has allowed for the excessive personalisation of its Libya policy centered upon each U.S. president's animosity for the Libyan leader rather than look at it through the lens of a more objective national security and global, geopolitical analysis. It is time that it realizes the importance of Libya for its global strategic plan, and that it intervenes with more determination in helping the Libyan political class to resolve the current crisis and propel the country and its people into a brighter future.



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info@sadeqinstitute.org

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