

The Forgotten Libyan Lessons and the Syrian War

Exclusive: Western leaders are plotting to bomb another Mideast nation, this time Syria, citing “humanitarianism.” But similar claims in Iraq and Libya were deceptive and ended up killing far more people than were “saved,” says Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Most intelligent Americans – Republicans as well as Democrats – now accept that they were duped into the Iraq War with disastrous consequences, but there is more uncertainty about the war on Libya in 2011 as well as the ongoing proxy war on Syria and the New Cold War showdown with Russia over Ukraine.

Today, many Democrats don’t want to admit that they have been manipulated into supporting new imperial adventures against Libya, Syria, Ukraine and Russia by the Obama administration as it pulls some of the same propaganda strings that George W. Bush’s administration did in 2002-2003.

Yet, as happened with Saddam Hussein in Iraq, we have seen a similar hysteria about the evil doings of the newly demonized foreign leaders with the predictable Hitler allusions and vague explanations about how some terrible misdeeds halfway around the world threaten U.S. interests.

Though people mostly remember the false WMD claims about Iraq, much of the case for the invasion was based on protecting “human rights,” spreading “democracy,” and eliminating a supporter of Palestinians who were violently resisting Israeli rule.

The justification for aggression against Iraq was not only to save Americans from the supposed risk of Iraq somehow unleashing poison gas on U.S. cities but to free the Iraqis from a brutal dictator, the argument which explained why Bush’s neocon advisers predicted that Iraqis would shower American troops with rose petals and candies.

Those same “humanitarian” arguments were out in force to justify the U.S.-European “regime change” in Libya eight years later. As former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton asserted – even this year – Muammar Gaddafi was a “genocidal” dictator bent on slaughtering the people of eastern Libya (though Gaddafi insisted that he was only interested in killing the “terrorists”).

After a frenzied media reaction to Gaddafi’s supposedly genocidal plans, Western nations argued that the world had a “responsibility to protect” Libyan

civilians, a concept known as “R2P.” In haste, the United Nations Security Council approved a resolution to protect civilians by imposing a “no-fly zone” over eastern Libya.

But the subsequent invasion involved U.S.-coordinated air strikes on Gaddafi’s forces and European Special Forces on the ground working with anti-Gaddafi rebels. Before long, the “no-fly zone” had expanded into a full-scale “regime change” operation, ending in the slaughter of many young Libyan soldiers and the sodomy-with-a-knife-then-murder of Gaddafi.

As Western leaders celebrated – Secretary Clinton exulted “We came, we saw, he died” – Libyans began the hard work of trying to restructure their political system amid roaming bands of heavily armed jihadist rebels. Soon, it became clear that restoring order would not be easy and that Gaddafi was right about the presence of terrorists in Benghazi (when some overran the U.S. consulate killing U.S. Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three other Americans.)

Libya, which once had an enviable standard of living based on its oil riches, slid into the status of failed state, now with three governments competing for control and with jihadist militias, including some associated with the Islamic State and Al Qaeda, disrupting the nation. The result has been a far worse humanitarian crisis than existed before the West invaded.

Lessons from Libya

So, there should be lessons learned from Libya, just as there should have been lessons learned from Iraq. But the U.S. political/media establishment has refused to perform a serious autopsy of these monumental failures (U.S. inquiries only looked narrowly at the WMD falsehoods about Iraq and the attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi for Libya). So, it has fallen to the British to take a broader view.

The British inquiries have had their own limitations, but the Chilcot report on Iraq catalogued many of the flawed decisions that led Prime Minister Tony Blair to sign up for President George W. Bush’s “coalition of the willing” – and a recent parliamentary report revealed how Prime Minister David Cameron fell into a similar pattern regarding Libya and President Obama.

Of course, it’s always easier to detect the manipulations and deceptions in hindsight. In real time, the career pressures on politicians, bureaucrats and journalists can overwhelm any normal sense of skepticism. As the propaganda and disinformation swirl around them, all the “smart” people agree that “something must be done” and that usually means bombing someone.

We are seeing the same pattern play out today with the “group think” in support

of a major U.S. military intervention in Syria (supposedly to impose the sweet-sounding goal of a “no-fly zone,” the same rhetorical gateway used to start the “regime change” wars in Iraq and Libya).

We are experiencing the same demonization of Syria’s Bashar al-Assad and Russia’s Vladimir Putin that we witnessed before those other two wars on Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gaddafi. Every possible allegation is made against them, often based on dubious and deceitful “evidence,” but it goes unchallenged because to question the propaganda opens a person to charges of being an “apologist” or a “stooge.”

Past Is Prologue

But looking back on how the disasters in Iraq and Libya unfolded is not just about the past; it’s about the present and future.

In that sense, the findings by the U.K. parliament’s foreign affairs committee regarding Libya deserved more attention than they received because they demonstrated that the Iraq case was not a one-off anomaly but rather part of a new way to rationalize imperial wars.

And the findings showed that these tactics are bipartisan, used by all four major parties in the U.S. and U.K.: Bush was a Republican; Blair was Labour; Obama a Democrat; and Cameron a Conservative. Though the nuances may differ slightly, the outcomes have been the same.

The U.K. report also stripped away many of the humanitarian arguments used to sell the Libyan war and revealed the crass self-interest beneath. For instance, the French, who helped spearhead the Libyan conflict, publicly lamented the suffering of civilians but privately were eager to grab a bigger oil stake in Libya and to block Gaddafi’s plans to supplant the French currency in ex-French colonies of Africa.

The report cited an April 2, 2011 email to Secretary of State Clinton from her unofficial adviser Sidney Blumenthal explaining what French intelligence officers were saying privately about French President Nicolas Sarkozy’s real motives for pushing for the military intervention in Libya:

“a. A desire to gain a greater share of Libya oil production, b. Increase French influence in North Africa, c. Improve his internal political situation in France, d. Provide the French military with an opportunity to reassert its position in the world, e. Address the concern of his advisors over Qaddafi’s long term plans to supplant France as the dominant power in Francophone Africa.”

Regarding France’s “humanitarian” public rationale, the U.K. report quoted then-

French Foreign Minister Alain Juppé as warning the U.N. about the imminence of Gaddafi engaging in a mass slaughter of civilians: “We have very little time left – perhaps only a matter of hours.”

But the report added, “Subsequent analysis suggested that the immediate threat to civilians was being publicly overstated and that [Gaddafi’s] reconquest of cities had not resulted in mass civilian casualties.”

The report also found that “Intelligence on the extent to which extremist militant Islamist elements were involved in the anti-Gaddafi rebellion was inadequate,” including the participation of Abdelhakim Belhadj and other members of Al Qaeda’s affiliate, Libyan Islamic Fighting Group. A senior defense official said the jihadist danger was played down during the conflict but “with the benefit of hindsight, that was wishful thinking at best.”

The report stated: “The possibility that militant extremist groups would attempt to benefit from the rebellion should not have been the preserve of hindsight. Libyan connections with transnational militant extremist groups were known before 2011, because many Libyans had participated in the Iraq insurgency and in Afghanistan with al-Qaeda.”

(This year, Belhadj and his jihadist militia were enlisted by U.S. officials to protect the U.S.-U.N.-backed “Government of National Accord,” which has failed to win over the support of rival factions, in part, because more secular Libyan leaders distrust Belhadj and resent outsiders deciding who should run Libya.)

Hyperbolic Claims

The U.K. committee criticized the West’s hyperbolic claims about Gaddafi’s intent to slaughter civilians in eastern Libya when his actions were making clear that wasn’t happening.

The report said: “Muammar Gaddafi’s actions in February and March 2011 demonstrated an appreciation of the delicate tribal and regional nature of Libya that was absent in UK policymaking. In particular, his forces did not take violent retribution against civilians in towns and cities on the road to Benghazi. [North Africa analyst] Alison Pargeter told us that any such reprisals would have ‘alienated a lot of the tribes in the east of Libya’ on which the Gaddafi regime relied. ...

“Despite his rhetoric, the proposition that Muammar Gaddafi would have ordered the massacre of civilians in Benghazi was not supported by the available evidence. The Gaddafi regime had retaken towns from the rebels without attacking civilians in early February 2011. ...

“During fighting in Misrata, the hospital recorded 257 people killed and 949 people wounded in February and March 2011. Those casualties included 22 women and eight children. Libyan doctors told United Nations investigators that Tripoli’s morgues contained more than 200 corpses following fighting in late February 2011, of whom two were female. The disparity between male and female casualties suggested that Gaddafi regime forces targeted male combatants in a civil war and did not indiscriminately attack civilians.”

The report added: “On 17 March 2011, Muammar Gaddafi announced to the rebels in Benghazi, ‘Throw away your weapons, exactly like your brothers in Ajdabiya and other places did. They laid down their arms and they are safe. We never pursued them at all.’ Subsequent investigation revealed that when Gaddafi regime forces retook Ajdabiya in February 2011, they did not attack civilians. Muammar Gaddafi also attempted to appease protesters in Benghazi with an offer of development aid before finally deploying troops.”

In another reprise from the Iraq War run-up, the U.K. inquiry determined that Libyan exiles played key roles in exaggerating the dangers from Gaddafi, much like the Iraqi National Congress did in fabricating supposed “evidence” of Saddam Hussein’s WMD. The report said:

“We were told that émigrés opposed to Muammar Gaddafi exploited unrest in Libya by overstating the threat to civilians and encouraging Western powers to intervene. In the course of his 40-year dictatorship Muammar Gaddafi had acquired many enemies in the Middle East and North Africa, who were similarly prepared to exaggerate the threat to civilians.”

Qatar’s Al-Jazeera satellite channel, which currently is hyping horror stories in Syria, was doing the same in Libya, the U.K. committee learned.

“Alison Pargeter told us that the issue of mercenaries was amplified [with her saying]: ‘I also think the Arab media played a very important role here. Al-Jazeera in particular, but also al-Arabiya, were reporting that Gaddafi was using air strikes against people in Benghazi and, I think, were really hamming everything up, and it turned out not to be true.’”

Allegations Debunked

The report continued: “An Amnesty International investigation in June 2011 could not corroborate allegations of mass human rights violations by Gaddafi regime troops. However, it uncovered evidence that rebels in Benghazi made false claims and manufactured evidence.

“The investigation concluded that much Western media coverage has from the outset presented a very one-sided view of the logic of events, portraying the

protest movement as entirely peaceful and repeatedly suggesting that the regime's security forces were unaccountably massacring unarmed demonstrators who presented no security challenge. ...

"In short, the scale of the threat to civilians was presented with unjustified certainty. US intelligence officials reportedly described the intervention as 'an intelligence-light decision'. We have seen no evidence that the UK Government carried out a proper analysis of the nature of the rebellion in Libya. ...

"It could not verify the actual threat to civilians posed by the Gaddafi regime; it selectively took elements of Muammar Gaddafi's rhetoric at face value; and it failed to identify the militant Islamist extremist element in the rebellion. UK strategy was founded on erroneous assumptions and an incomplete understanding of the evidence."

If any of this sounds familiar – echoing the pre-coup reporting from Ukraine in 2013-2014 or the current coverage in Syria – it should. In all those cases, Western diplomats and journalists put white hats on one side and black hats on the other, presenting a simplistic, imbalanced account of the complicated religious, ethnic and political aspects of these crises.

The U.K. report also exposed how the original goal of protecting civilians merged seamlessly into a "regime change" war. The report said:

"The combination of coalition airpower with the supply of arms, intelligence and personnel to the rebels guaranteed the military defeat of the Gaddafi regime. On 20 March 2011, for example, Muammar Gaddafi's forces retreated some 40 miles from Benghazi following attacks by French aircraft. If the primary object of the coalition intervention was the urgent need to protect civilians in Benghazi, then this objective was achieved in less than 24 hours.

"The basis for intervention: did it change? We questioned why NATO conducted air operations across Libya between April and October 2011 when it had secured the protection of civilians in Benghazi in March 2011. ... We asked [former chief of defense staff] Lord Richards whether the object of British policy in Libya was civilian protection or regime change. He told us that 'one thing morphed almost ineluctably into the other' as the campaign developed its own momentum. ... The UK's intervention in Libya was reactive and did not comprise action in pursuit of a strategic objective. This meant that a limited intervention to protect civilians drifted into a policy of regime change by military means."

Less destructive options were also ignored, the report found: "Saif Gaddafi is the second son of Muammar Gaddafi. He was a member of his father's inner circle

and exercised influence in Libya. ... Former Prime Minister Tony Blair, who knew the Gaddafi regime better than most Western politicians, confirmed that Saif Gaddafi was 'the best, if not the only prospect' of effecting political change in Libya." But that opportunity was rebuffed as was the possibility of arranging Gaddafi's surrender of power and exile, the report said, adding:

"It was therefore important to keep the lines of communication open. However, we saw no evidence that the then Prime Minister David Cameron attempted to exploit Mr Blair's contacts. Mr Blair explained that both Mr Cameron and former United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton were aware that he was communicating with Muammar Gaddafi. We asked Mr Blair to describe Mr Cameron's reaction to his conversations with Muammar Gaddafi. He told us that Mr Cameron 'was merely listening'.

"Political options were available if the UK Government had adhered to the spirit of [U.N.] Resolution 1973, implemented its original campaign plan [to protect civilians] and influenced its coalition allies to pause military action when Benghazi was secured in March 2011. Political engagement might have delivered civilian protection, regime change and reform at lesser cost to the UK and to Libya."

Spreading Disorder

There was also the consequence of the Libyan conflict, spreading disorder around the region because Libyan military stockpiles were plundered. The report said: "Libya purchased some £30 billion [or about \$38 billion] of weapons and ammunition between 1969 and 2010. Many of those munitions were not issued to the Libyan Army and were instead stored in warehouses. After the collapse of the Gaddafi regime, some weapons and ammunition remained in Libya, where they fell into the hands of the militias. Other Libyan weapons and ammunition were trafficked across North and West Africa and the Middle East.

"The United Nations Panel of Experts appointed to examine the impact of Resolution 1973 identified the presence of ex-Libyan weapons in Algeria, Chad, Egypt, Gaza, Mali, Niger, Tunisia and Syria. The panel concluded that 'arms originating from Libya have significantly reinforced the military capacity of terrorist groups operating in Algeria, Egypt, Mali and Tunisia.' ...

"The international community's inability to secure weapons abandoned by the Gaddafi regime fuelled instability in Libya and enabled and increased terrorism across North and West Africa and the Middle East. The UK Government correctly identified the need to secure weapons immediately after the 2011 Libyan civil war, but it and its international partners took insufficient action to achieve that objective. However, it is probable that none of the states that intervened

in Libya would have been prepared to commit the necessary military and political resources to secure stocks of weapons and ammunition. That consideration should have informed their calculation to intervene.”

Despite these findings, the Obama administration and its allies are considering an escalation of their military intervention in Syria, which already has involved arming and training jihadists who include Al Qaeda militants as well as supposedly “moderate” fighters, who have aligned themselves with Al Qaeda and handed over sophisticated American weaponry.

The U.S. military has spearheaded a bombing campaign against Al Qaeda’s spinoff, the Islamic State, inside Syria. But the Obama administration sometimes has put its desire to oust Assad ahead of its supposed priority of fighting the Islamic State, such as when U.S. air power pulled back from bombing Islamic State militants in 2015 as they were overrunning Syrian army positions at the historic city of Palmyra.

Now, with Syria and its Russian ally resorting to intense bombing to root Al Qaeda and its allies, including some of those U.S.-armed “moderates,” from their strongholds in eastern Aleppo, there is a full-throated demand from the West, including virtually all major media outlets, to impose a “no-fly zone,” like the one that preceded the “regime change” in Libya.

While such interventions may “feel good” – and perhaps there’s a hunger to see Assad murdered like Gaddafi – there is little or no careful analysis about what is likely to follow.

The most likely outcome from a Syrian “regime change” is a victory by Al Qaeda and/or its erstwhile friends in the Islamic State. How that would make the lives of Syrians better is hard to fathom. More likely, the victorious jihadists would inflict a mass bloodletting on Christians, Alawites, Shiites, secular Sunnis and other “heretics,” with millions more fleeing as refugees.

Among the Western elites – in politics and media – no lessons apparently have been learned from the disaster in Iraq, nor from the new British report on the Libyan fiasco.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America’s Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)).
