

The US Hand in the Libyan/Syrian Tragedies

Exclusive: The Obama administration's "regime change" debacles in Libya and Syria are spreading terrorist violence into Europe, but they have inflicted vastly more bloodshed in those two tragic nations, writes Jonathan Marshall.

By Jonathan Marshall

Police investigations and media reports have confirmed that two of the bloodiest terrorist attacks in Western Europe – the coordinated bombings and shootings in Paris in November 2015, which killed 130 people, and the May 2017 bombing of the arena in Manchester, England, which killed 23 – trace back to an Islamic State unit based in Libya known as Katibat al-Battar.

Since those attacks, a number of analysts, myself included, have characterized them as a form of "blowback" from NATO's disastrous campaign to depose Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi in 2011. By turning Libya into an anarchic staging ground for radical Islamist militants, that intervention set in motion the deadly export of terror back into Western Europe.

But such a Eurocentric critique of NATO's intervention misses the far greater damage it wreaked on Syria, where nearly half a million people have died and at least 5 million refugees have had to flee their country since 2011. U.S., British, and French leaders helped trigger one of the world's great modern catastrophes through their act of hubris.

A decade ago, Libya was a leading foe of radical jihadis, not a sanctuary for their international operations. A 2008 State Department memo noted that "Libya has been a strong partner in the war against terrorism." It gave the Gaddafi regime credit for "aggressively pursuing operations to disrupt foreign fighter flows," particularly by veterans of jihadist wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

All that came to an end in 2011, when armed rebels, including disciplined members of al-Qaeda and Islamic State, enlisted NATO's help to topple Gaddafi's regime. Western leaders ignored the prescient warnings of Gaddafi's son Seif that "Libya may become the Somalia of North Africa, of the Mediterranean. . . . You will see millions of illegal immigrants. The terror will be next door." Gaddafi himself similarly predicted that once the jihadis "control the Mediterranean . . . then they will attack Europe."

Subsequent terrorist attacks in Europe certainly vindicated those warnings, while discrediting the so-called humanitarian case for waging an illegal war in Libya. But the predicted jihadi efforts to "control the Mediterranean" have had

far graver repercussions, at least in the case of Syria.

A recent story in the *New York Times* on the genesis of recent terror attacks on France and Britain noted in passing that the Islamic State in Libya, composed of “seasoned veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan,” was “among the first foreign jihadist contingent to arrive in Syria in 2012, as the country’s popular revolt was sliding into a broader civil war and Islamist insurgency.”

A former British counter-terrorism analyst told the newspaper, “some of the baddest dudes in Al Qaeda were Libyan. When I looked at the Islamic State, the same thing was happening. They were the most hard-core, the most violent – the ones always willing to go to extremes when others were not. The Libyans represented the elite troops, and clearly ISIS capitalized on this.”

Extremist Violence in Syria

These Libyan jihadists leveraged their numbers, resources, and fanaticism to help escalate Syria’s conflict into the tragedy we know today. The mass murder we now take for granted was not inevitable.

Although Syria’s anti-government protests in the spring of 2011 turned violent almost from the start, many reformers and government officials strove to prevent an all-out civil war. In August 2011, leaders of Syria’s opposition wisely declared that calls to arms were “unacceptable politically, nationally, and ethically. Militarizing the revolution would . . . undermine the gravity of the humanitarian catastrophe involved in a confrontation with the regime. Militarization would put the revolution in an arena where the regime has a distinct advantage and would erode the moral superiority that has characterized the revolution since its beginning.”

Largely forgotten today, the Assad regime also took serious steps to deescalate the violence, including lifting the country’s state of emergency, disbanding the unpopular National Security Court, appointing a new government, and hosting a national dialogue with protest leaders.

But on August 18, 2011, the same Western leaders who were bombing Gaddafi announced to the world that “the time has come for President Assad to step aside.” Further energizing Syrian militants, Libyan rebels were just then in the midst of conquering Tripoli with NATO’s help.

“That is an ominous sign for Syria’s President Bashar al-Assad,” reported the *Wall Street Journal*. “Already there are signs Libya is giving inspiration to the rebels trying to oust Mr. Assad. . . . Syrian protesters took to the streets chanting ‘Gadhafi tonight, Bashar tomorrow.’ . . . The Libyan episode may serve simply to sharpen the conflict in Syria: both spurring on the dissidents and

strengthening Mr. Assad's resolve to hold on."

Stoking war in Syria was not an unintended consequence of the Libyan campaign, but a conscious part of the longstanding neoconservative ambition to "remake the map of the Middle East" by toppling radical and anti-American regimes. The same *Journal* article described the grandiose aims of some Washington interventionists:

"Beyond Syria, a new dose of energy provided by Libya's uprising could ripple out to other nations in the region. In particular, U.S. officials hope it will reinvigorate a protest movement that arose inside Iran in 2009 to challenge President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's re-election. . . Syria has served for 30 years as Iran's closest strategic ally in the region. U.S. officials believe the growing challenge to Mr. Assad's regime could motivate Iran's democratic forces."

Instead of motivating Iran's democrats, of course, the Syrian conflict motivated Iran's hardliners to send Revolutionary Guard units and Hezbollah proxy forces into the country, further destabilizing the region.

Following the gruesome murder of Gaddafi in the fall of 2011, Libyan zealots quickly began fueling other terrorist conflicts, ranging from Mali to the Middle East, with arms looted from Gaddafi's vast stocks.

"The weapons proliferation that we saw coming out of the Libyan conflict was of a scale greater than any previous conflict – probably 10 times more weapons than we saw going on the loose in places like Iraq, Somalia and Afghanistan," observed an expert at Human Rights Watch.

A United Nations investigation determined that "Transfers of arms and ammunition from Libya were among the first batches of weapons and ammunition to reach the Syrian opposition." It also stressed that Libyan weapons were arming primarily "extremist elements," allowing them to gain territory and influence at the expense of more moderate rebel groups.

Spreading the War

As early as November 2011, Islamist warlords in Libya began offering "money and weapons to the growing insurgency against Bashar al-Assad," according to the *Daily Telegraph*. Abdulhakim Belhadj, commander of the Tripoli Military Council and the former leader of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, an al-Qaeda affiliate, met secretly with Syrian rebel leaders in Turkey to discuss training their troops. (In 2004, he had been the victim of a CIA kidnap plot and rendition from Malaysia to Libya.)

The commander of one armed Libyan gang told the newspaper, "Everyone wants to go (to Syria). We have liberated our country, now we should help others. . . This is Arab unity."

In April 2012, Lebanese authorities confiscated a ship carrying more than 150 tons of arms and ammunition originating in Misrata, Libya. A U.N.-authorized panel inspected the weapons and reported finding SA-24 and SA-7 surface-to-air missiles, anti-tank guided missiles, and a variety of other light and heavy weapons.

By that August, according to Time magazine, "hundreds of Libyans" had flocked to Syria to "export their revolution," bringing with them weapons, expertise in making bombs, and experience in battlefield tactics.

"Within weeks of the successful conclusion of their revolution, Libyan fighters began trickling into Syria," the magazine noted. "But in recent months, that trickle has allegedly become a torrent, as many more have traveled to the mountains straddling Syria and Turkey, where the rebels have established their bases."

A Syrian rebel told the newsweekly, "They have heavier weapons than we do," including surface-to-air missiles. "They brought these weapons to Syria, and they are being used on the front lines."

A month later, the London *Times* reported that a Libyan ship carrying more than 400 tons of weapons bound for Syria, including SAM-7 anti-aircraft missiles and rocket-propelled grenades, had docked in Turkey. Such weapons particularly compounded the suffering of civilians caught up in the war.

As France's foreign minister told reporters that October, rebel-held anti-aircraft missiles were "forcing (Syrian government) planes to fly extremely high, and so the strikes are less accurate."

According to later reporting by journalist Seymour Hersh, most such Libyan weapons made their way to Syria via covert routes supervised by the CIA, under a program authorized by the Obama administration in early 2012. Funding and logistics support came from Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar. The CIA supposedly avoided disclosing the program to Congress by classifying it as a liaison operation with a foreign intelligence partner, Britain's MI6.

Word of the operation began leaking to the London media by December 2012. The CIA was said to be sending in more advisers to help ensure that the Libyan weapons did not reach radical Islamist forces.

Of course, their efforts came too late; U.S. intelligence officials knew by that

time that “the Salafist(s), the Muslim Brotherhood, and (al-Qaeda)” were “the major forces driving the insurgency.” The influx of new arms simply compounded Syria’s suffering and raised its profile as a dangerous arena of international power competition.

Libya’s arms and fighters helped transform the Syrian conflict from a nasty struggle into a bloodbath. As Middle East scholar Omar Dahi noted, “the year 2012 was decisive in creating the present catastrophe. There were foreign elements embroiled in Syria before that date . . . but until early 2012 the dynamics of the Syrian conflict were largely internal. . . . Partly in . . . appropriation of weapons pumped in from the outside and partly in anticipation of still greater military assistance, namely from the West, the opposition decided to take up arms.

“The decision—militarization—had three main effects. First, it dramatically increased the rate of death and destruction throughout the country. . . . By mid-2012, the monthly casualties were almost in excess of the total in the entire first year of the uprising. Militarization gave the Syrian regime a free hand to unleash its full arsenal of indiscriminate weaponry. . . . Perhaps most fatefully, the advent of armed rebellion placed much of the opposition’s chances in the hands of those who would fund and arm the fighters. . . . It was then that the jihadi groups were unleashed.”

The collateral victims of NATO’s intervention in Libya now include 6 million Libyans attempting to survive in a failed state, millions of people across North Africa afflicted by Islamist terrorism, 20 million Syrians yearning for an end to war, and millions of innocent Europeans who wonder when they might become targets of suicidal terrorists. There is nothing “humanitarian” about wars that unleash such killing and chaos, with no end in sight.

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