

From Front to Back:

Changes in American Policy on Striking Libya between Reagan and Obama

By Julian Newton Weiss

“Haram ‘alaykum, haram ‘alaykum,” Muammar Qaddafi pleaded for his life to the opposition forces who had captured him in Misrata. The town of Misrata is 130 miles east along the Libyan coast from Tripoli, Qaddafi’s capital during his forty two year reign which had fallen to the opposition in September. He died hours later on the way to a hospital from bullet wounds to the head and chest. It was October 20, 2011.¹ This was the symbolic end of the eight month Libyan Civil War. President Barack Obama’s administration helped lead the international community to ensure the opposition’s success with support from the air and in the conference rooms of the United Nations.

President Obama refused to act without the support of the UN and regional leaders such as the Arab League. American attacks in conjunction with nine other nations from Canada to the United Arab Emirates on Libya were tactically effective, harkening back to President Reagan’s strikes on Libyan terrorist facilities under Qaddafi’s regime in 1986. Except in Reagan’s case, American strikes had been unilateral and abhorred by much of the foreign community. Twenty five years separates the two strikes. In that time, changed conditions in US foreign policy, the role of the United Nations, and wide contextual differences allowed for the evolution of strikes in Libya from Reagan’s leading from the front to Obama’s leading from behind. Both Presidents failed differently in utilizing the UN. Obama overstepped the UN mandate in the eyes of the foreign community and ruined the consensus which allowed for multilateral action in Libya,

while Reagan did not recognize the importance of international cooperation until his presidency was over.

Qaddafi had been an enemy of the United States since their relationship with Israel led to hostilities ending with the withdrawal of the American ambassador in 1973. In 1974, the dictator overcame ideological differences with the USSR. By doing so he could arm himself with Soviet tanks and jets, while insulting and threatening the US. During the signing of the Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty in 1979, Qaddafi argued that he chose to ally with the Soviets because “America is involved in a conspiracy [against the Arab world], primarily because of its policy toward Israel... The enemy of your enemy is your friend.”² Qaddafi funded insurrection campaigns in Chad and Tunisia to extend his sphere of control. With the same goal in mind he aggressively pushed for Syria and Egypt to join in the Federal Arab Republic in 1971. Sadat disagreed with his rapid pace and the plan broke down. When in 1973 Syria and Egypt began the October War against Israel, Qaddafi was irate that he was not involved in operational planning. By 1979, Qaddafi gave up on conventional means of increasing his power and denounced international norms by installing a puppet government in Chad to support his occupation of the mineral-rich Aouzou region near Libya’s southern border.³

Achieving success by unconventional means in Chad, Qaddafi increased his funding of terrorism and insurrection abroad against opponents whom he could not match conventionally including the United States and Israel. Qaddafi helped support Black September, the Irish Republican Army, and other terrorist organizations from South America to the Philippines. He was funneling hundreds of millions of dollars of oil money from Western countries into terrorist

groups who would attack in large part those Western countries. Forty percent of terrorist attacks involved Americans. He additionally seized the Gulf of Sidra which laid in international waters in 1973 and claimed the airspace above it as Libyan. In 1979 Qaddafi's anti-American propaganda enflamed protestors in Tripoli to sack the U.S. embassy. In 1980 the US cut all diplomatic ties with Libya. Two times in one week, Libyan aircraft allegedly fired on unarmed American reconnaissance planes in the Gulf of Sidra. Carter found no way to rebuke against Libya's aggression besides threats and stern dialogue. He could not justify the use of aggression so soon after Vietnam, and the Iranian hostage crisis paralyzed his use of the military in the Middle East. After three small scale naval exercises in the Gulf of Sidra, Carter refused to conduct a larger mission to restore international law in the Gulf, thus recognizing de facto Qaddafi's illegal claim. This in no small part helped Reagan get elected in 1980 on promises of increased defense spending, getting tough on the U.S.S.R., and focusing on counterterrorism.⁴

Reagan began immediately to counter Qaddafi's aggression upon taking office. In his inauguration speech he stated that "when action is required to preserve our national security, we will act" and then directed that statement at state supported terrorism, "let that be understood by those who practice terrorism and prey upon their neighbors."⁵ He employed a coercive strategy beginning in 1981 with the primary goals of isolating Qaddafi from the international community and weakening his ability to support terrorists. He employed economic and diplomatic sanctions with little to no success or international support. Reagan also directed subversive covert operations with Sudan against Qaddafi which failed in 1984 and assisted France in defending Chad from Libyan aggression which finally succeeded in 1987. In 1981 an assertion of naval power in the Gulf of Sidra defended American rights at sea. In 1986, responding to terrorist

attacks which Reagan believed were connected to Libya, Reagan ordered a much larger scale naval exercise in the Gulf of Sidra and Qaddafi responded much more aggressively. After Qaddafi had been militarily defeated in Chad and the Gulf, he responded by calling for more terrorist attacks in revenge.⁶

On April 5, 1986, terrorists bombed a bar regularly frequented by American GIs in West Berlin called *La Belle Discotheque*. Fifty American military personnel were injured and one was killed. American intelligence caught discussions between Tripoli and their East Berlin Bureau which discussed planning for an attack weeks ahead of time, then the day beforehand, then reported on the success of the attack afterward.⁷ A message from a Libyan Bureau in East Berlin to Tripoli hours after the attack read, "At 1:30 in the morning one of the acts was carried out with success, without leaving a trace behind."⁸ With concrete evidence of a Libyan connection to the *La Belle Discotheque* attack, reports of new attacks being planning, failure in diplomatic and economic methods for five years, and a supportive public, Reagan decided it was time to strike.

With no support on sanctions, Reagan knew that there would be no positive response from Europe if he tried to form a coalition of allies, petition the United Nations, or attack with NATO. As early as April 7th, plans were underway for a unilateral strike. The United States needed British bases to launch a sufficiently large air attack to accomplish its objectives. That flight was made longer after both Spain and France rejected the use of their airspace for an attack, so the bombers had to fly through the Strait of Gibraltar. British support from Margaret Thatcher was allowed only when Reagan could prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that the attack was in self-

defense to prevent terrorist attacks like the one in West Berlin. The strike was as unilateral as possible.⁹

During the night of April 13th, the American strike force took off in secret from several British bases. The primary targets were the barracks at Bab al-Aziziya, Tripoli Airfield, Benina Airfield, the Jamahiriya Barracks in Benghazi, a terrorist training facility in Murat Sidi Bilal, and anti-air defenses to facilitate the bombing.¹⁰ On the morning on April 14th, the targets were decimated by a combined force of forty-five aircraft. The operations went reasonably well despite the loss of one F-111F, the death of two pilots, and a handful of bombs which missed their targets and may have killed or injured a few dozen civilians.¹¹ The attack on Bab al-Aziziya caught Qaddafi and his family in the compound. Qaddafi alleged that the bombing killed his ten month old adopted daughter, but this claim has been disputed since the raid on the compound in the 2011 revolution revealed new information on the topic.¹² The bombing did however certainly injure his two sons and give Qaddafi a newfound sense of fear. Although the plan was not to assassinate the dictator, the fact that he was in the compound at the time was a bonus for Reagan. After the bombing, Qaddafi fled to the desert for months, likely in part to hide from more possible attacks.¹³

The results of the strike were mixed in the short term but more positive in the long run. On April 21st, diplomatic sanctions from many European countries took effect in order to prevent further American action. In May, the G7 made restrictions on economic ties with terrorist sponsoring nations. These gains were offset by several terror attacks in the years after the strike which claimed their motive as revenge for the bombings. Importantly, Qaddafi did not publicly call for

reprisals, but instead only asserted his right of self-defense. In September he claimed that he had “never condoned terrorist operations.”¹⁴ It is arguable that the strikes had a pacifying role on the dictator’s use of terrorism in the long run.

But Qaddafi did not entirely quit terrorism for some years. Perhaps the most conflicting result of the bombings is that Libyans were involved in the 1988 terrorist attacks on Pan Am Flight 103 in Lockerbie, then UTA Flight 772 in Niger. These attacks killed hundreds of people including hundreds of Americans. Despite Reagan’s proving that the United States could defend itself unilaterally, the United Nations stepped in to condemn the acts of terrorism and demanded criminal compliance from Libya which it eventually received. After Reagan left office, Qaddafi was never found to have planned an attack on the scale of the Lockerbie incident or the La Bella Discotheque bombings.¹⁵ In that sense, Reagan was successful.

Reagan should have capitalized on international support in the United Nations in order to give America another instrument of power to respond to acts of terrorism. Throughout Reagan’s presidency, he was highly critical of the UN. It was only after the UN’s response to the Lockerbie incident that Reagan changed his mind and praised the organization in a speech in September 1988.¹⁶ The UN could have taken some weight off of American intervention if it was given strong support. However, Reagan’s change of mind was insignificant at the end of his second term. For the next two decades, America would continue to intervene unilaterally in Iraq, Kosovo, Panama, Afghanistan, and Sudan at an immense cost to the Treasury and the international community’s understanding of American interests. UN-led interventions could not

only share the costs of war but also take legitimacy away from claims that America has imperialist goals around the world.

President Obama was in a similar situation to Reagan in that he came to power after a long draining conflict in which the military was disenfranchised and that prevailing American interests and values called for a response in Libya. The circumstances surrounding his use of force beyond that could not be more dissimilar. The Obama administration had no life-or-death objectives in Libya in 2009 when he was elected. Relations between the United States and Libya did not normalize in 2006. In the five years that Qaddafi maintained diplomatic relations with the United States, he did little but embarrass himself on the world stage.¹⁷ Obama had laid out a Middle East strategy committed to democracy, human rights and counterterrorism. When America would inevitably use force in the Middle East, Obama wanted to “do so in partnership with Muslim communities which are also threatened.”¹⁸ These values did not align in Libya until February 17, 2011. Two days before that, Qaddafi imprisoned a human rights lawyer with wide respect in Libya.¹⁹ On what became the Day of Rage, Qaddafi ordered his police to shoot into crowds and murdered fifty protestors.²⁰

After Qaddafi’s shootings, the protests began to turn violent. The opposition forces which assembled rapidly made quick gains around Benghazi. On March 9th, after weeks of fighting, Qaddafi had won the upper hand. In the next week he pressed on towards Benghazi, the home of the uprising. In a statement given on February 22nd, Qaddafi elaborated on his murderous plan, “We will march... to purify Libya inch by inch, house by house, home by home, street by street, person by person, until the country is clean of the dirt and impurities.”²¹

The United Nations acted with unprecedented haste. On the 22nd of February, the first UNSC meeting was held to discuss the Libyan situation. On the 25th of February, 50 member states requested a special human rights council session to investigate crimes against humanity in Libya. The UNSC passed resolution 1970 on February 26th which referred the Libyan situation to the International Criminal Court. Resolution 1970 also imposed an arms embargo, travel ban, and billions of dollars in asset freezes. On the first of March, Libya was suspended from the Human Rights Council. Qaddafi pressed on despite the economic and diplomatic sanctions. The opposition started losing ground on March 9th, and on March 12th the Arab League requested UN approval of a no fly zone. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton worked overtime to ensure the passage of Resolution 1973 on March 17th which imposed the no-fly zone and authorized member nations to use “all necessary measures” short of occupation to save Libyan civilians’ lives.²²

With days left before Qaddafi would reach Benghazi, the no fly zone was established. France began the air strikes of Operation Odyssey Dawn and soon all capable NATO nations were participating in strikes on anti-aircraft facilities and Libyan military targets. They stopped Qaddafi’s advance on Benghazi. By March 31st Operation Odyssey Dawn had completed its objectives of protecting Libyan citizens in Benghazi and establishing a no-fly zone.²³ America continued striking Qaddafi’s military assets under Operation Unified Protector run by NATO.²⁴

The opposition slowly became a professional fighting force and gained ground on Qaddafi. With air support the opposition could consolidate their gains and advance, and by June Qaddafi’s

forces were showing signs of collapse. In August the war was effectively over and Tripoli was soon captured. Qaddafi himself was captured and murdered in October. The National Transitional Council had been fully recognized by the United States in May when they were invited to open an office in Washington, DC.²⁵

President Obama declared all American objectives completed in his speech discussing the events on March 28th. He argued that American values compelled action in the region despite there not being any immediate reward in security or resources. By supporting Libyan democracy, Hillary Clinton argued that the Administration “would increase U.S. standing in the Arab world, and it would send an important signal for the Arab Spring movement.”²⁶ As a simple matter of cost-benefit, the entire American role in the conflict cost a total of around one billion dollars, or about a week in Afghanistan or Iraq.²⁷ For that cost, Americans overthrew a dictator who had a long history of supporting terrorism and damaging American interests in the Middle East, supported a new democracy, and protected the lives of tens or hundreds of thousands of people. Unspoken is the hope that a democratic Libya will be a permanent ally of the nations who helped them in their struggle for independence. Furthermore, America needed to support the United Nations and NATO in order to diminish its costly role as the global police force. The United Nations, by undermining a sovereign state, hugely expanded its power in 2011 and showed that it is capable of doing just as much as any of the P5 if it is given the means of doing so.

The larger cost of the intervention may be that many member states no longer trust the United Nations with intervention in humanitarian conflicts. The UN did not intervene in Syria despite similar conditions and a much more oppressive and violent dictator. Russia and China now

block most action in the UN against the Assad regime. Many nations argued that member states went beyond the UNSC mandate by assisting in Qaddafi's ouster after the initial humanitarian intervention.²⁸ It is the first time in history that a government was deemed to have lost its sovereignty due to a failure in its responsibilities to its citizens.

President Obama should have respected the UNSC mandate with as limited a scope as possible to give little reason to Russia and China to stop accepting humanitarian intervention as an international norm in the future. Both states abstained in order to allow the resolution to pass due to sweeping international and regional support.²⁹ That consensus support was lost due to the broad interpretation of Resolution 1973 which facilitated overthrowing Qaddafi in order "to find a solution to the crisis which responds to the legitimate demands of the Libyan people."³⁰ NATO should have sought clarification and permission to go further to assist the revolutionaries against Qaddafi when the initial operation was complete.³¹

When a similar humanitarian crisis became preventable in Syria that fall, Russia could veto time and time again without repercussion because of division of opinion on humanitarian intervention in the international community. President Obama's primary interest in intervening was to create a situation whereby America did not have to act unilaterally to support its interests or values. He mistakenly believed that he could replace American capacity with international intervention capacity without treading lightly.

The American situation in Libya has been difficult since the revolution, but it will take time to see if the cost-benefit analysis of American action was correct. Liberals won the first Libyan

election in June with the Muslim Brotherhood second, but that may have led to the bombing of the American Embassy in Benghazi by dozens of members of *Ansar al-Sharia*, a radical Islamic militia which assisted in the overthrow of Qaddafi. More significant than that is the setback in international trust of the UN handling humanitarian intervention. America will have to continue acting unilaterally to promote its values and interests.

Reagan had led from the front, and Obama had led from behind. Both were tactically successful, but Reagan had to go it alone and Obama had almost universal international support. The situations were significantly different. Reagan was dealing with a violent Qaddafi who was active in attacking America and its allies over a period of several years. Obama saw Qaddafi as a peripheral problem and only decided to strike when an opportunity made the cost of action less than the cost of inaction. Both Presidents saw meagre successes in the short term and significant setbacks. Reagan accomplished his long term goals of weakening Qaddafi and getting international aid in counterterrorism.

Reagan and Obama's strikes on Libya have changed the international community's norms in dealing with crises. What may have been more important for Reagan than preventing terrorism was proving to the world that if the United States is threatened it will act unilaterally if it has to, thus unwittingly giving incentive for most nations to increase the power and legitimacy of international organizations. Reagan may have had an unknowing hand in giving the United Nations the legitimacy to intervene in Libya in 2011. We cannot know yet the full effects of Obama's assistance of Libyan intervention. More important than the effects on the American relationship with Libya may be its changing role in the international community. Obama

established a doctrine whereby if the international community agrees to intervene in an area with regional support, America will use its military, economic and diplomatic means to carry out the will of the international community. Unfortunately, his eager willingness to do so in Libya has hurt the UN's power to act decisively in humanitarian crises. Reagan's leading from the front allowed for some of the conditions which twenty five years later allowed Obama to lead from behind. Reagan should have had the foresight to see that international organizations could be extremely useful in promoting American values and defending American interests. Obama should have been more careful in using the UN mandate in order to preserve that organization's ability to give such mandates.

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¹ *Haram 'alaykum* means literally "sin upon you all." ABC claimed that this was a phrase used to indicate vulnerability. This video is extremely graphic. "Moamar Qadhafi Dead Video: Last Moments Alive Caught on Tape in Sirte: WARNING GRAPHIC VIDEO," October 21, 2011, *ABC News*, Youtube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sGm492qVEzA>.

² Muammar Qaddafi, "An Interview With Gaddafi," *Time Magazine*, 9 April 1979, Academic Search Premier database.

³ Joseph T. Stanik, *El Dorado Canyon: Reagan's Undeclared War with Qaddafi*, (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2003), p. 11-21.

⁴ Stanik, *El Dorado Canyon*, p. 24-27, 30-32.

⁵ Ronald Reagan, "Inaugural Address," *Ronald Reagan Presidential Library*, 20 January 1981, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1981/12081a.htm>.

⁶ Stanik, *El Dorado Canyon*, p. 33, 38-40, 43-44, 48-50, 81.

⁷ Ronald Reagan, "Address to the Nation on the United States Airstrike against Libya," 14 April 1986, *Ronald Reagan Presidential Library*, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1986/41486g.htm>.

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- ⁸ “Trial Begins In The 1986 Bombing Of Berlin Disco -- Explosion, Which Killed 2 GIs, Prompted U.S. Raids On Libya,” *Seattle Times*, 18 November 1997, <http://community.seattletimes.nwsourc.com/archive/?date=19971118&slug=2573097>.
- ⁹ Stanik, *El Dorado Canyon*, p. 144-147, 172-173, 178.
- ¹⁰ Stanik, *El Dorado Canyon*, p. 150-151, 176, 179-181, 202-204.
- ¹¹ Bernard Weinraub, “U.S. Jets Hit ‘Terrorist Centers’ in Libya; Reagan Warns of New Attacks if Needed,” *The New York Times*, 15 April 1986, <http://www.nytimes.com/1986/04/15/politics/15REAG.html>.
- ¹² There is debate about the true meanings of the newly found records. Some have argued that Qaddafi may have adopted another girl and named her after Hana. Ruth Sherlock, “First Footage of Hana Gaddafi Found,” *The Telegraph*, 22 September 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/libya/8782044/First-footage-of-Hana-Gaddafi-found.html>.
- ¹³ Stanik, *El Dorado Canyon*, p. 199-200, 209, 219.
- ¹⁴ Stanik, *El Dorado Canyon*, p. 221.
- ¹⁵ Stanik, *El Dorado Canyon*, p. 217-239.
- ¹⁶ Julie Johnson, “Speech by Reagan to U.N. Today Seen as Sign of Change in Attitude,” *The New York Times*, 26 September 1988, <http://www.nytimes.com/1988/09/26/world/speech-by-reagan-to-un-today-seen-as-sign-of-change-in-attitude.html>.
- ¹⁷ David Rohe, *Beyond War*, p. 121-126.
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- ¹⁹ Carrie Booth Walling, *All Necessary Measures: The United Nations and Humanitarian Intervention*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), p. 217.
- ²⁰ Ronald Bruce St. John, *Libya: From Colony to Revolution*, (Oneworld Publications, 2011), p. 283.
- ²¹ Muammar Qaddafi, “Muammar Gaddafi speech TRANSLATED (2011 Feb 22),” *Youtube*, 22 February 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=69wBG6ULNzQ>.
- ²² Walling, *All Necessary Measures*, p. 214, 218-220, 223.
- ²³ Jeremiah Gertler, “Operation Odyssey Dawn (Libya): Background and Issues for Congress,” *Congressional Research Service*, 28 March 2011, p. 7-11, 17, <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/159790.pdf>.
- ²⁴ Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on Libya,” *The White House*, 28 March 2011, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/03/28/remarks-president-address-nation-libya>.
- ²⁵ Walling, *All Necessary Measures*, p. 229.

²⁶ Hillary Clinton in Jody Warrick, “Clinton Credited with Key Role in Success of NATO Airstrikes, Libyan Rebels,” *The Washington Post*, 30 October 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/hillarys-war-how-conviction-replaced-skepticism-in-libya-intervention/2011/10/28/gIQAhGS7WM_story.html.

²⁷ Micah Zenko, “What Does Libya Cost the United States?” *Council on Foreign Relations*, 11 August 2011, <http://blogs.cfr.org/zenko/2011/08/11/what-does-libya-cost-the-united-states/>.

²⁸ Walling, *All Necessary Measures*, p. 220, 229, 237-239.

²⁹ Walling, *All Necessary Measures*, p. 224.

³⁰ “Security Council Approves ‘All Necessary Measures’ to Protect Civilians, by Vote of 10 in Favor with 5 Abstentions,” *Department of Public Information, Security Council*, <https://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2011/sc10200.doc.htm#Resolution>.

³¹ “NATO Attacks in Libya: Key Targets, Day by Day,” *The Guardian Data Blog*, 19 September 2011, <http://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/interactive/2011/may/23/libya-nato-bombing-no-fly-zone>.