

Why Was Muammar Qadhafi Really Removed?

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In the wake of the “Arab Spring” revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt in late 2010 and early 2011, the conventional narrative, at least in the Western media, soon became one of an unstoppable tidal wave of emancipation. This was expected to leave no stone unturned, at least in the decaying Arab republics, which many academics continued to argue were structurally weaker than the region’s monarchies.¹

In this context, the Benghazi uprising in eastern Libya in February 2011 was widely portrayed as the start of yet another revolution — both nationwide and organic — that would soon see Muammar Qadhafi’s regime swept from power by an overwhelming majority of the population. As the weeks dragged on, however, with Qadhafi still effectively in power and the bulk of the Libyan armed forces apparently remaining loyal, this narrative had to be abandoned and replaced by a new one depicting a desperate regime clinging to power by wielding extreme violence against its people and deploying vicious foreign mercenaries. Certainly, by March 2011 it was generally assumed that Qadhafi’s fighters, whoever they were, would massacre thousands of civilians if they managed to re-enter Benghazi, and if the Western powers and their regional allies did not step up to the plate with some sort of humanitarian intervention on behalf of the “Libyan revolution.”

Although at the time several analysts did try to question the details underpinning these two interlinked narratives,² it took more than five years before any real willingness emerged in Western government circles to investigate more thoroughly the events of 2011. Published in September 2016, for example, a British parliamentary report recognized that the eventual NATO-led intervention (Operation Unified Protector) had gone badly wrong and conceded

that the intelligence it was based on was not necessarily credible in the first place. Entitled “Libya: Examination of Intervention and Collapse and the UK’s Future Policy Options,” it drew the conclusion that former British Prime Minister David Cameron was primarily to blame for the ensuing chaos in the wake of Qadhafi’s removal, due to “his decision-making in the [UK] National Security Council” and his “failure to develop a coherent Libya strategy.”³ But beyond this superficial and heavily politicized reading of the Libya conflict, which offered little insight into its root causes or the real objectives of Britain and the other intervening external powers, a substantial body of evidence has now emerged that allows for a much deeper understanding of the Libyan uprising and the NATO intervention. In particular, the contents of hundreds of recently declassified files, court-subpoenaed materials and leaked official correspondence strongly suggest that the two mainstream narratives of 2011, and even the British parliament’s belated findings, have largely obscured the real reasons behind Qadhafi’s removal and the methods used to make it happen.

After necessarily situating the Libyan conflict in its proper historical context and then identifying the patterns behind the numerous earlier attempts to remove Qadhafi from power, this article will draw heavily on this extensive and now accessible new evidence to demonstrate how the 2011 Arab Spring phenomenon was soon manipulated by external actors to provide diplomatic cover for the calculated dismantling of a Libyan regime that had remained largely resistant to the opening up of its economy to Western investment and, inconveniently, was still able to count on a significant domestic support base. Furthermore, it will be shown that, by this stage, the Libyan regime had not only failed to establish itself as a reliable partner in the long-running U.S. “War on Terror,” but had actually emerged as one of the strongest voices opposing the expansion of NATO and U.S. military power onto the African continent.

Within this more nuanced framework, the article will also reveal how the Western powers' regime-change agenda in Libya in 2011 was to a great extent shielded from public scrutiny, with some of the most significant and visible roles being assigned to key regional Arab allies. In this sense, mindful of the ongoing domestic backlash to the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and wary of further international criticism of their Middle East policies, the Western powers this time made sure to orchestrate better a web of compliant Arab proxies that could effectively provide most of the financing and on-the-ground logistical and intelligence support for those Libyans who were willing to oppose the regime, even if they were in a minority and even if their Arab Spring or "pro-democracy" credentials were impossible to verify or completely non-existent.

OIL WAR AND COLD WAR

Soon advancing into the void left by the retreating British Empire, and quickly overcoming their initial fence-sitting on Gamal Abdel Nasser's new nationalist administration in Egypt, by the mid-1950s U.S. planners acknowledged that securing the Middle East was going to be vital for the future prosperity and stability of the Western states and for holding the Soviet Union in check. As it was in the rest of the world, the extraction of natural resources was an obvious priority, so all indigenous attempts to nationalize economic assets — regardless of any progressive, liberal or even democratic agendas — needed to be intimidated or destroyed by the United States. In 1955, according to secret correspondence between British officials, President Dwight Eisenhower had even called for a "high-class Machiavellian plan to achieve a situation in the Middle East favorable to our interests which could split the Arabs and defeat the aims of our enemies."⁴

Just two years later, the region got its own Eisenhower Doctrine: an evolution of the earlier Truman and Monroe doctrines that had sought to secure U.S. interests against international communism and foreign encroachment in the Americas.⁵ Stating that “the U.S. regards as vital to the national interest and world peace the preservation of the independence and integrity of the nations of the Middle East,” Eisenhower effectively made the Middle East a special zone of U.S. control. Moreover, as with Truman’s more global declaration, Eisenhower sought to tie the Cold War to all threats to the Middle Eastern status quo by claiming he was “prepared to use armed forces to assist [any Middle Eastern country] requesting assistance against armed aggression from any country controlled by international communism.”⁶ He also proclaimed that “the existing vacuum in the Middle East must be filled by the United States before it is filled by Russia.”⁷

This sudden special treatment of the Middle East was, for the most part, due to the simultaneous deepening of U.S. dependency on crude-oil imports. Although still a net exporter at the end of World War II, by 1950 the United States was importing a million barrels per day, and by the 1960s more than a third of U.S. energy demands were being met by such imports, mostly from the shah’s Iran and the Gulf monarchies, but also from the Kingdom of Libya, which had become the region’s third-biggest oil producer.⁸ With Britain’s oil needs also growing, its interests and relations in the region fell increasingly in the U.S. shadow, with Whitehall planners admitting that Middle Eastern oil was “a vital prize for any power interested in world influence or domination.”⁹

In this context, with the United States and Britain having repeatedly sought to undermine or overthrow several Arab and other Middle Eastern governments in the 1950s and the 1960s that threatened to nationalize industries or chart new foreign policies,¹⁰ the revolutionary Libyan Arab Republic that formed in 1969 soon emerged as yet another threat to the interests of the Western powers and their corporations. Typified by Muammar Qadhafi, who had

joined the Libyan military in the early 1960s with the express purpose of launching a coup d'état against the Western-backed and increasingly unpopular King Idris al-Senussi, on September 1, 1969, the republican forces seized their chance while Idris was outside the country receiving medical attention. Having quickly arrested Idris's heir apparent,¹¹ the 27-year-old Qadhafi then broadcast the "communiqué number one" that confirmed the birth of the new state.¹²

The revolution immediately cost Britain an estimated £100 million in lost oil-infrastructure investments and access to military bases, and frustrated British officials privately acknowledged that it was popular and that Qadhafi was a charismatic leader.¹³ The United States had been less badly damaged by Qadhafi, despite the rhetoric of President Richard Nixon's administration; staff at its Wheelus Air Base in Libya had already been preparing for a full withdrawal following an earlier agreement signed under Idris.¹⁴

Nonetheless, with the loss of lucrative Libyan oil concessions for Western companies and with Qadhafi soon accused of funding countless governments and movements around the world deemed antagonistic to Western interests, both Britain and the United States quickly began to formulate scenarios to bring Qadhafi's apparently anti-imperialist regime to an end.¹⁵ Searching for a *casus belli*, in 1981 Washington announced that a Libyan hit team had been intercepted while trying to assassinate President Ronald Reagan, who stated to the media, "We have the evidence, and [Qadhafi] knows it." Problematically, however, officials involved in the task force to investigate the plot set up by Deputy Secretary of State William Clark admitted afterwards that "we came out with this big terrorist threat to the U.S. government. The whole thing was a complete fabrication."¹⁶ In fact, as later reported in the British press, the "hit team" turned out to be made up of Lebanese citizens who had been in the United States to assist with negotiations to release U.S. hostages in Beirut. They were understood to have had no connection whatsoever to Qadhafi.¹⁷

Brushing this fiasco aside, five years later, Reagan's administration was nonetheless ready to try again, especially after Libya was condemned for firing missiles at U.S. aircraft and its intelligence services were publicly blamed for the bombing of a West Berlin discotheque frequented by U.S. military personnel. Both charges seemed to stick, and within 10 days of the Berlin tragedy the United States began to launch retaliatory strikes on both Tripoli and Benghazi.¹⁸ It soon transpired, however, that Operation El Dorado Canyon was far more than just an effort to punish Qadhafi and, as is now becoming clearer, also had nothing to do with either the missile attacks or the disco bombing. As a former U.S. pilot and squadron leader who served in the operation has described, El Dorado Canyon had been in the planning stage "for about four months from the beginning of 1986." He understood it to have primarily been an assassination attempt on Qadhafi using the pretext of broader air strikes.¹⁹ Certainly Qadhafi's personal compound at Bab al-Aziz in Tripoli was directly and heavily targeted, with nine of the 45 aircraft involved in the operation having been assigned to it.²⁰ Four bombs were dropped on the building thought to be Qadhafi's house within the compound, but due to warnings from either a Maltese or Italian politician, Qadhafi had managed to escape beforehand.²¹

Although a later U.S. trial took the view that the Berlin bombing had been "planned by the Libyan secret service and the Libyan Embassy," a trial held in Germany after its reunification concluded that, while "Libya [bore] at the very least a considerable part of the responsibility for the attack," there was nonetheless no proof that Qadhafi was personally responsible.²² As for the missile attacks, the original account seems equally spurious; a group of British electronic engineers based in Libya at the time later described how they had watched on their radar as U.S. aircraft flew deep into Libyan territory. As one of the men stated, "I don't think the Libyans had any choice but to hit back. In my opinion they were reluctant to do so."²³ Meanwhile, in other reports, anonymous British officials have been quoted as saying that

during this period, U.S. intelligence on Libya was “wildly inaccurate” and had been passed on to Britain in an effort to “deliberately deceive.”²⁴

BRINGING IN AL-QAEDA

Although the Cold War may have been coming to an end, the safeguarding of access to Middle Eastern oil naturally remained a top priority. With viable alternative energies a distant speck on the horizon, in 1990 the journal *Science* concluded that nearly half of total U.S. oil needs were still being met by foreign imports.²⁵ In many ways, speaking for the entire U.S. governmental and military-industrial complex, Norman Schwarzkopf, commander-in-chief of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), put it best: “Middle Eastern oil is the West’s lifeblood. It fuels us today and ... is going to fuel us when the rest of the world has run dry. It is estimated that within 20-40 years the U.S. will have virtually depleted its economically available oil reserves, while the [Middle East] will still have at least a 100 years of proven oil reserves.”²⁶

Still surviving, by the mid-1990s, Qadhafi’s regime was proving particularly problematic. Not only were Libya’s vast oil reserves still largely off limits to Western companies;²⁷ it had convinced itself that the Western powers’ key Arab ally, Saudi Arabia, was in fact at the root of the dramatic resurgence in Sunni Islamic extremism across the region. Awkwardly for the U.S. and British administrations — both heavily implicated in the Saudi-CIA-funded jihad in Afghanistan in the 1980s that had aimed to deal a body blow to the intervening Soviet Union²⁸ — the Libyan government became the first in the world to collect evidence on Osama bin Laden’s activities and even supply it to Interpol.²⁹ In early 1998, some five months before al-Qaeda’s bombing of U.S. embassies in Africa, Qadhafi had formally requested an Interpol arrest warrant for bin Laden.³⁰ According to a former adviser to French

President Jacques Chirac and a French investigative journalist, both the CIA and MI6 had then actively tried to stop the Interpol warrant from being issued and had sought to “downplay the threat” posed by bin Laden.³¹

From Tripoli’s perspective, not only was the Arab world under threat from the scourge of religious radicalization, so too was its own domestic survival: a large number of the “Arab Afghans” earlier recruited by bin Laden and his associates were Libyan citizens. Established in the dying days of the Afghan jihad, the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) was the most prominent cadre of radicals, but there were others, too, including a number of smaller Libyan units that “mostly consisted of a leader and a handful of followers.”³² Those who had not moved on from Afghanistan to other campaigns, such as the fight against Serbian forces in Bosnia and Kosovo, had returned to North Africa, bringing with them both military experience and strong convictions about the secular nature of Qadhafi’s republic. According to one former Libyan jihadist, the reason they had gone to Afghanistan in the first place was that “a lot of young [Libyans] felt desperate because the regime made it very hard for people of Islamic persuasion to express their opinion.”³³

Disturbingly, however, a number of key LIFG members had also moved to Britain, most living in London and Manchester. They appear to have been offered sanctuary and soon began to make repeated public calls for the overthrow of the Qadhafi regime.³⁴ Britain had not designated the LIFG a terrorist organization, despite its obvious connections to al-Qaeda and other extremist groups in Central Asia; it was clearly a potential, if volatile, ally against Tripoli. Among its members was Nazih al-Ruqail, also known as Abu Anas al-Libi, who had moved to London in 1995 and been granted political asylum. He was known to have participated in an earlier failed al-Qaeda plot to assassinate Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and was later implicated in the U.S. embassy bombings in Africa, after having flown to Nairobi to train al-Qaeda members in surveillance techniques.³⁵ Described by a

former jihadist as having been a key player in al-Qaeda in Afghanistan since the early days, al-Libi eventually fled Britain in 2000. A subsequent raid on his Manchester apartment led to the discovery of a 180-page “terrorist training manual.”³⁶ Meanwhile, other key LIFG members had been living freely in Ireland, one remaining in Dublin until 2004, when he left to join the growing Islamist insurgency in Iraq against the Baghdad government and U.S. coalition forces.³⁷

Going a long way towards explaining their tolerated presence in Britain, there is evidence that in 1995-96, al-Libi and his LIFG associates were working closely with British intelligence. Having correctly identified Qadhafi’s vulnerability to jihadist organizations, MI6 developed a plan that would involve Libya-based LIFG veterans leading an assassination attempt and “producing unrest” across the country, while a simultaneous coup led by army officers would take control of the capital.³⁸ Although six innocent bystanders were killed, the LIFG attack failed and the regime remained in place. With fingers soon pointing at Britain, Foreign Secretary Malcolm Rifkind unequivocally denied any British involvement in the plot.³⁹ Unfortunately for Rifkind, however, two years later former MI5 officer David Shayler came forward and gave an interview to the BBC in which he claimed MI6 had indeed reached out to the LIFG, paying it £100,000 and providing it with 250 weapons to carry out the assassination of Qadhafi.⁴⁰ Shayler’s allegations were substantially reinforced in 2000, when a leaked MI6 document corroborating most of these details appeared on a U.S.-based server. Marked “UK Alpha Eyes” and reported by the BBC, the document’s authenticity was confirmed to the British press by Whitehall sources, while the secretary of Britain’s “D Notice” censorship committee requested that the document’s contents not be published.⁴¹

Rather belatedly, in February 2004, former CIA director George Tenet told the U.S. Senate’s Select Committee on Intelligence that “one of the most immediate threats [to U.S. national security] is from smaller Sunni extremist groups that have benefited from Al-Qaeda links.

They include ... the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group.” Tenet repeated his assessment to the 9/11 Commission the following month, with the United States finally designating the LIFG a terrorist organization shortly after and issuing a \$5 million bounty for the capture of al-Libi.⁴² After another year Britain finally followed suit when the Home Office Special Immigration Appeals Commission stated that the LIFG’s primary aim had been to “overthrow the Qadhafi regime and replace it with an Islamic state.”⁴³ Only in 2007 was it officially considered by Western intelligence agencies to be a part of al-Qaeda.⁴⁴

QADHAFI'S LAST CHANCE?

Despite the failed plots to remove him and the apparent self-sufficiency afforded by Tripoli's oil wealth, by the early 2000s Muammar Qadhafi had tried to improve his relations with the Western powers and their constituent corporations by offering to open up key parts of the Libyan economy to foreign investment. Having witnessed the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and later publicly warning at an Arab League summit in Syria that “America hanged Saddam and we might be next,”⁴⁵ Qadhafi apparently realized he had little choice but to “switch sides,” or at least be seen trying to do so. Others have pointed out that his increasingly grasping sons and inner-circle members were pressuring him to take advantage of the lifting of the sanctions imposed by the United Nations on Libya in the early 1990s for suspected terror links.⁴⁶ Their aim was to facilitate foreign direct investment and the denationalization of state assets — much as Hosni Mubarak had been doing in Egypt — so that the assets Qadhafi himself had once nationalized could now be bought up by his cronies. Trying to spin this as an extension of the “popular control” called for in his *Green Book* manifesto, Qadhafi’s own relatives were angling for their share of Libya’s global value.⁴⁷

Problematically, on top of Qadhafi's earlier intransigent stances on al-Qaeda, Saudi Arabia, and other Western allies and assets, there was a multitude of additional obstacles still preventing rapprochement between the West and Libya, even if strictly for business. Qadhafi's intelligence services had executed numerous dissidents in Western Europe and were understood to have been particularly active in London, where the Libyan embassy supposedly had a long list of targets it was working through.⁴⁸ Moreover, the Qadhafi regime continued to be blamed for a 1984 gun attack on demonstrators outside its London embassy that had led to the death of British policewoman Yvonne Fletcher, and of course for the downing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, in 1988. With that plane now known to have been carrying at least four U.S. officials and their bodyguards, including the CIA's Beirut station chief and a Defense Intelligence Agency officer on secondment to the CIA, the mid-air explosion was likely seen by the U.S. government as a direct attack on its secret Middle East operations.⁴⁹

With money on the table, however, all soon seemed to be forgiven; Qadhafi himself even began to make qualified apologies. In 2003, his government formally accepted responsibility for Lockerbie, even though no direct role was admitted, and most fingers had by then already begun to point elsewhere.⁵⁰ Trying to boost the Qadhafi regime's repentance further, reports also began to circulate that Libya had hired the U.S.-based Monitor Group to undertake a public-relations "cleansing campaign." One of the group's letters sent to a senior Libyan official promised, "We will create a network map to identify significant figures engaged or interested in Libya today. We will identify and encourage journalists, academics and contemporary thinkers who will have an interest in publishing papers and articles on Libya."⁵¹

From about this time, Libya had also begun to cooperate heavily with Western intelligence agencies, including the CIA and MI6. According to the Jamestown Foundation, Qadhafi's

intelligence chief, Moussa Koussa, had begun handing over names of Libyan Islamic Fighting Group members living in exile. Although hailed as a “major intelligence windfall” by the United States, they were the same characters MI6 had been working with during the 1990s. Nonetheless, according to documents later discovered in the former office of Koussa, who had defected to Britain almost immediately after the 2011 uprising and was then safely rehabilitated in Qatar, the Western powers had been deporting such dissidents back to Libya, where Western intelligence officers would then attend interrogation sessions. Bizarrely, the same captured documents detailed how British officials were even helping to draft Qadhafi’s speeches, and how MI6 had sought to arrange a public-relations stunt for Qadhafi and Tony Blair in 2004. This now infamous “meeting in the desert” was to take place in a Bedouin tent: “The English are fascinated by tents. The plain fact is that the journalists would love it.”⁵²

On top of processing renditions, Qadhafi also appeared willing to alleviate the North African refugee crisis in the Mediterranean. He offered to forcibly prevent African migrants from leaving Libyan shores in exchange for \$5 billion of Italian investments into Libya and six Italian-manufactured naval patrol boats.⁵³ It was clearly an act of extortion, with one of Qadhafi’s sons warning a Western official that without his father in power, Europe would face “unprecedented illegal immigration from Africa” and Qadhafi later telephoning Blair to warn of a jihadist invasion of Europe. Nonetheless, the Western intelligence agencies sought to portray the regime’s cooperation as further evidence of Libya’s coming in from the cold.⁵⁴ As a useful proxy, the U.S. and British ally Qatar also had a role to play in smoothing Libyan-European relations. In 2007, it had helped facilitate the extradition of a number of Bulgarian nurses imprisoned in Libya for allegedly infecting children with HIV, and two years later facilitated the release of convicted Lockerbie bomber Abdelbaset al-Megrahi from British custody.⁵⁵

With relations improving, at least on paper, the *Financial Times* reported that Western businessmen quickly found “rich and willing clients” among Libya’s new generation of business elites.⁵⁶ Rising to the fore was Saif al-Islam Qadhafi, the dictator’s second-eldest son and a postgraduate at the London School of Economics, identified in leaked U.S. diplomatic cables as the point man for Libya’s pending “political and economic reforms.”⁵⁷ As the Libyan equivalent of Mubarak’s business-friendly son Gamal, he had become a frequent visitor to Western capitals as part of his self-proclaimed *infitah*, or “opening,” strategy, and was regarded as “ultra-cool, charming, a modernizer.” Understood to have assumed control over the Libyan Investment Authority — the country’s major sovereign-wealth fund — he had paid Goldman Sachs \$1.3 billion to manage its future investments in currencies and stocks.⁵⁸

Among the first big movers was Royal Dutch Shell, which began to go forward quickly from an initial 2004 agreement with Qadhafi. It subsequently held 26 meetings over the next few years with British government officials hoping to facilitate the deal. British Petroleum joined in, too, winning a Libyan concession in 2007 worth \$15 billion. By the end of the decade, hundreds more British companies were operating in Libya in what had become an annual bilateral trade worth \$1.5 billion.⁵⁹ From the U.S. side, the optimism was no less palpable; Senator John McCain toured Libya in 2009, noting the “hydrocarbon producing potential” and the “high expectations of international oil companies.”⁶⁰

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, with Qadhafi pictured shaking the hands of world leaders and finally beginning to receive some good press in Western media, Libya was also ripe for arms deals. Ahead of the competition were the British companies, which sold large quantities of advanced military equipment to Libya from 2007, including the usual panoply of crowd-control hardware: armored personnel carriers, sniper rifles, smoke canisters, stun grenades and water cannons. A sophisticated communications system for Libyan tanks was also sold

after being approved for export by the British government, which had already designated Libya a “priority market” worthy of “high-level political interventions.”⁶¹ In 2009 alone, approximately \$500 million worth of British, French, German and Italian arms were believed to have shipped, and as late as November 2010, just weeks before the Arab Spring began, more than 50 British companies attended a Libyan arms fair at an airport in Tripoli. Later interviewed by the *Daily Telegraph*, the spokesman for one of the companies explained that “it [was] not embarrassing for us. The Libyans were a favored regime with our government. Tony Blair was out there and they had become a country we could trade with. Our politicians were more than happy to allow us to export out there.”⁶² Indeed, when Libyan regime offices were raided in 2011, a letter was found from Blair addressed to Qadhafi. Dated 2007, it thanked Qadhafi for his “excellent cooperation” after beginning with “Dear Muammar” and ending with “Best wishes yours ever, Tony.”⁶³

THE DEAL GOES SOUR

In parallel to the euphoria surrounding Libya’s apparent reintegration into Western markets, there were several early warnings that the regime was unlikely ever to be as compliant as expected. According to leaked U.S. diplomatic cables from 2007, Washington was already becoming frustrated with the speed of Qadhafi’s liberalization, complaining of his merely “lukewarm embrace of U.S. corporate interests.”⁶⁴ The cables also indicated that U.S. officials were wary of lingering “Libyan resource nationalism” and had tried to demonstrate the “downsides” of this approach to the Libyan government.⁶⁵

In many ways, the U.S. Department of State was right to be suspicious, even if some U.S. politicians were not; there were soon ample indications that Qadhafi was not such a

supplicant after all. As soon as they had signed concessions with Libya, both ExxonMobil and Total had been strong-armed into a new oil-sharing agreement that gave them much less favorable terms and called for \$5 billion in upfront payments to the Libyan government. A 2008 U.S. cable warned that a U.S. consortium including ConocoPhillips would be “next on the block,” despite its having already paid out substantial sums to Tripoli. By 2009, things seemed to be getting even worse: halfway through a video conference with Georgetown University students, Qadhafi abruptly threatened to renationalize Libyan oil.⁶⁶

Behind the scenes, this sort of rhetoric was already translating into action. Libyan ministers had begun to force U.S. oil companies to contribute to a new “claims compensation agreement,” that was supposed to support the victims of U.S. and Libyan bombings in both countries. Balking at such moves, the U.S. ambassador described them as “red lines,” although the Department of State was a bit more realistic, suggesting that “smaller operators and services might relent and pay,” and *The New York Times* noted that several did just that. European companies seemed to be faring no better, with Italy’s hopes of winning development contracts seeming to hang on its government’s paying \$200 million a year for 25 years as “compensation for colonial injustices.” Meanwhile, multinational corporations ranging from Caterpillar to Coca-Cola reported similar problems, including requirements that they had to enter into joint ventures with state companies that were, in effect, owned by Qadhafi family members.⁶⁷

Equally alarming for the Western governments was Qadhafi’s apparent free-for-all approach to Libya’s investment opportunities, with Tripoli increasingly beginning to grant oil concessions to Chinese, Indian, Japanese and Russian companies. China was also winning multibillion-dollar contracts in construction and infrastructure projects, including a \$2.6 billion railway contract that could just as easily have been awarded to a Western company. Meanwhile, in 2008, Russia agreed to forgive \$4.5 billion of Soviet-era debt in exchange for

the first pick of various new Libyan development contracts.⁶⁸ Ruffling U.S. feathers even more, Qadhafi seemed to have begun supporting the Kremlin's views on NATO expansionism in Georgia and Ukraine and, along with Nigeria, had publicly voiced his opposition to the expansion of Stuttgart-based U.S. AFRICOM onto the African continent.⁶⁹

Likely the final blows, the resistance to such cooperation with the U.S. military was doubtlessly exacerbated by the Libyan National Oil Company's announcement in early February 2011 that it would be granting no new oil concessions, and by the Libyan Investment Authority's decision a few weeks later to begin divesting its U.S. and British assets on the grounds that it was too exposed to Western economies.⁷⁰ Moreover, as the Hillary Clinton emails released by a special congressional inquiry have revealed, at about this time French intelligence had become aware of Qadhafi's plans to establish a new pan-African currency, based on the Libyan golden dinar, to serve as an alternative to dollars and euros. It was estimated that the Libyan central bank had amassed 143 tons of gold and a similar quantity of silver to back it up.⁷¹

From Uprising to Insurgency

Less than a week after Hosni Mubarak's ouster, Muammar Qadhafi's vulnerabilities also seemed exposed after a supposedly Cairo-like "day of rage" began in Benghazi on February 17, 2011. The protest started ostensibly as a response to the arrest two days earlier of a well-known human-rights lawyer, Fethi Tarbel, who had begun to represent the families of victims of prison massacres. Judges, lawyers and students assembled outside a police station and demanded his release. As eyewitnesses later described, Tarbel's arrest at this time was "the regime's big mistake."⁷²

With protests soon spreading across the historically restive city, Qadhafi's old policy of "keeping the East poor as a means by which to limit the potential political threat" — as described in a leaked U.S. diplomatic cable from 2008 — seemed to be proving a severe miscalculation. As U.S. officials had predicted, a poor Benghazi meant there would be "many young eastern Libyan men ... [with] nothing to lose by participating in extremist violence at home."⁷³ Peaceful at first, the demonstrators carried images of Omar al-Mukhtar, the martyred symbol of Libyan resistance to Italian occupation, and declared themselves "the grandsons of Omar."⁷⁴ The Benghazi movement quickly appeared to grow into a much bigger insurgency, with mass labor strikes and a number of prominent tribal leaders announcing their support.⁷⁵ Making matters worse for Tripoli and giving the uprising a harder edge, reports began to circulate of army and airforce defections in Benghazi and Tobruk (also in the east); two pilots had even flown their planes to Malta.⁷⁶

Still in command of the oil-producing regions, Qadhafi quickly promised a massive \$24 billion housing and development fund, most of which was to be spent on regenerating the now-rebellious eastern provinces. Fatefully, however, his firebrand personality seemed to be leading him into the same sort of trap as his counterparts in Tunisia and Egypt, especially after he took to the airwaves on February 20 to deliver an "unrepentant speech" that threatened bloody retribution against the dissenters.⁷⁷ Making matters worse, only a day later the once pro-reform Saif al-Islam appeared on television to deliver a disjointed, rambling and threatening speech in defense of his father's regime. Blaming the Benghazi emergency on drunken or drugged Islamists along with "coffee-drinking Arabs," he tried to whitewash the deaths of any protesters, attributing them to "planning errors," while at the same time promising "rivers of blood" for those who continued to resist. Ominously, he concluded that the government would "fight to the last minute and to the last bullet."⁷⁸

With the uprising soon reaching Tripoli and state television headquarters being stormed, the collapse of the regime seemed imminent, at least according to the international media. As the days went by, however, the capital appeared to remain quite firmly in Qadhafi's hands, with the much-anticipated nationwide revolution simply failing to materialize. Explained away with stories of pro-government thugs being unleashed in residential areas to keep people off the streets, along with busloads of paid Qadhafi supporters arriving in public squares and — according to the Qatar-owned Al-Jazeera — aircraft and helicopter gunships mowing protesters down, the true extent of regime violence during this crucial period has nonetheless been repeatedly called into question. Notwithstanding the Qadhafi family's incendiary speeches, *The New York Times* hinted nearly a month later that the regime's initial response may not have been as repressive as many had made out. Describing how “the rebels feel no loyalty to the truth in shaping their propaganda,” its correspondents believed the rebels were “claiming non-existent battlefield victories, asserting they were still fighting in a key city days after it fell to Qadhafi's forces, and making vastly inflated claims of his barbaric behavior.”⁷⁹ Even U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, by then in his final months in office, along with the department's Admiral Michael Mullen, stated in a press conference that they had read the media reports but agreed there was “no confirmation whatsoever” that the Qadhafi regime had been using airpower to attack civilians.⁸⁰ After a lengthy investigation, the director of the International Crisis Group's North Africa project concluded that Al-Jazeera's stories of the strafing of protestors were indeed untrue.⁸¹

Apart from some accounts of Serbian guns being used by regime forces, there was little mention in the media of the weapons its thugs were supposed to be using, and certainly no references to the millions of dollars' worth of British and other European arms and crowd-control equipment that had been sold to Libya up until a few months earlier.⁸² There were, however, myriad reports being filed that claimed the regime was clinging to power because it

was deploying thousands of dark-skinned mercenaries from Mali, Niger and Chad. Rebel eyewitnesses, for example, described to Reuters in detail how French-speaking West Africans had attacked the protesters, while Libya's permanent representative to the United Nations — who had almost instantly defected in February — soon told the world, “We are expecting a real genocide in Tripoli. The airplanes are still bringing mercenaries to the airports.”⁸³ The head of the working group on mercenaries for the UN high commissioner for human rights was only slightly more cautious, stating that the evidence of mercenaries being used was “not 100 percent but it does seem likely,” and it was reported that “he was aware of accounts describing Eastern European as well as African mercenaries in Libya.”⁸⁴

Others have been much more circumspect, with Cambridge University's George Joffe suggesting the dark-skinned fighters may have been part of Qadhafi's Deterrent Battalion, a foreign legion set up nearly 20 years earlier to counter tribal mutinies.⁸⁵ Some have been even more critical of the mainstream narrative, contending that the “real genocides” of the Libyan uprising were, in fact, the bloody and largely ignored reprisals and revenge attacks perpetrated by rebels against populations of black Libyans and African expatriates accused of fighting for the regime. As Concordia University's Maximilian Forte argues, this was a side to the conflict that the “white, Western world, and those who dominate the conversation about Libya, have missed ... and not by accident.”⁸⁶ On February 26, for example, an apparently impartial Turkish construction worker told the BBC, “We had 70 to 80 people from Chad working for our company. They were massacred with pruning shears and axes, accused by the attackers of being Qadhafi's troops.” He also stated, “The Sudanese people were massacred. We saw it for ourselves.”⁸⁷

Just two days after this, only 11 days after the uprising began, it was reported that “dozens of workers from sub-Saharan Africa, it is feared, have been killed and hundreds are hiding because angry opponents of the government are hunting down black African mercenaries,

witnesses reported.” Reuters, too, claimed that “hundreds of black immigrants from the poorest African countries, who work mainly as low-wage day laborers in Libya, have been wounded by the rebels. From fear of being killed, some of them have refrained from going to a doctor.” The victims also told Reuters that the rebels were using the pretext of revolution to “accuse [black Africans] of being murderous mercenaries. But in reality they simply refuse to tolerate us. Our camp was burnt down. Our company and our embassy helped us get to the airport.”⁸⁸ In March 2011, the *Los Angeles Times* published an equally disturbing account of how dozens of the rebels' prisoners, mostly black Africans, were being paraded in front of journalists in a clear breach of the Geneva Conventions. Although its correspondents were prevented from speaking to the prisoners, they still recalled seeing “one young man from Ghana bolting from the prisoners' queue.” As they described, he shouted in English at them, “I'm not a soldier! I work for a construction company in Benghazi! They took me from my house.” A guard had then reportedly shouted, “He lies ... He's a mercenary.”⁸⁹

A few months later, with a bitter civil war raging, Human Rights Watch observed that “dark-skinned Libyans and sub-Saharan Africans face particular risks because rebel forces and other armed groups have often considered them pro-Qadhafi mercenaries from other African countries.” Its report noted that “we've seen violent attacks and killings of these people in areas where the [rebels] took control.” Amnesty International gave much the same warning, noting there was a “disproportionate detention of black Africans in rebel-controlled Al-Zawiya, as well as the targeting of unarmed, migrant farm workers.”⁹⁰ In August 2011, even the African Union warned that “[rebels] seem to confuse black people with mercenaries” and that this meant for “one-third of the population of Libya, which is black, [they are] mercenaries.” Its chairperson further reported that “[the rebels] are killing people, normal workers, mistreating them,” and, making a broader point, complained that “the [rebels'] attitude has been negative all along. I went to Benghazi. We have treated them equally.”⁹¹

While some dismissed the African Union's conclusions on the basis that Qadhafi had long been one of its most vociferous supporters, it was harder to ignore an investigative report that appeared a few weeks later in the *Daily Telegraph*. Describing the "ethnic cleansing" of the predominantly black and slave-descended inhabitants of the Libyan town of Tawergha, it detailed how its population of about 10,000 had been collectively accused of remaining loyal to Qadhafi. The reprisal also led to a "large number of houses, and virtually every shop, being systematically vandalized, looted or set on fire" and with "even the local hospital vandalized. The beds were dragged out of the wards and ripped." One nearby rebel unit was even described as having painted a slogan on the road leading into Tawergha declaring they were "the brigade for purging slaves [and] black skin."⁹²

As the war dragged on, it was also clear that the majority of the regime's armed forces seemed to have remained loyal. As Kings College London's Robert Springborg argues, in part this may have been due to the prominent role of the *kataib*, or "special battalions," that either answered directly to Qadhafi or were commanded by one of his sons.⁹³ Although some Libyan scholars have argued that by 2011 tribalism was only superficial,⁹⁴ the loyalty of tribes also seemed to matter. The Zintan, for example, had clearly embraced the rebel movement and had pushed their elders to end relations with Qadhafi, but many others such as the powerful Warfalla had clearly continued to endorse the regime, even if they experienced some high-profile defections and had previously mutinied against Qadhafi.⁹⁵ In this sense, the mainstream explanations put forward by Al-Jazeera and other outlets for the revolution's marked lack of progress, namely that Libya simply had a better-armed and -financed military than had been expected, were largely bogus.⁹⁶ The inconvenient reality that few seemed willing to discuss at the time was that the Qadhafi regime was still regarded by many Libyans as the least worst alternative when faced with the prospect of a rebel-led government.

SUBVERTING THE NTC

Even if it had no truly nationwide revolution behind it, and various rebel groups did appear to be committing atrocities, the quickly formed Benghazi-based National Transitional Council (NTC) still seemed to embody most of the values and ambitions of the Arab Spring movements elsewhere in the region. A progressive and wholly indigenous organization, it claimed in its first communiqué to represent the city councils of all liberated cities and to represent no foreign interests.⁹⁷ Staffed by a mix of Benghazi activists, tribal leaders, defecting army commanders, lawyers and judges, it duly began to set up a parallel government complete with its own newspaper and television station. With almost Soviet-like organization, workers' committees were established to manage various parts of the economy and infrastructure. As journalist Simon Assaf describes, "Many observers, including Western journalists, noted the efficiency and energy of the councils and the relaxed air of freedom in the city." Moreover, he noted that "in Benghazi, despite food shortages, the poorest citizens told of how they are eating better now than before the revolution."⁹⁸

The NTC also seems to have withstood an early counterrevolutionary attempt when Qadhafi's ostensibly defecting former justice minister, Mustafa Abdel-Jalil, declared himself leader of the "provisional government" before trying to cut a deal between the old regime and the Western powers.⁹⁹ Since then, more has come to light about the nature of the deal, with the Hillary Clinton emails having revealed that French intelligence had already begun to "cultivate ... particular clients amongst the rebels," and had held secret meetings with Abdel-Jalil. In return for "weapons and guidance," along with promises of official French recognition for his government after Qadhafi was defeated, Abdel-Jalil was to ensure the "favoring of French firms and national interests, particularly regarding the oil industry." Worryingly, at the time this relationship was secretly being built, the French government's official position was that it "did not know who to support in Libya."¹⁰⁰

Likely aware of Abdel-Jalil's intentions, the core of the NTC declared on February 28, 2011, that it wished for no foreign intervention in Libya and expressed its fears that the West would use elements of the old regime to circumvent the real revolution.¹⁰¹ Indeed, in a U.S. Department of Defense press conference the next day, the secretary of defense bluntly confirmed that the "rebel leaders" had made no request for a NATO intervention.¹⁰² Less than a week later, however, in what the British media termed an "embarrassing episode," six SAS soldiers and two MI6 officers were detained by the NTC after having been dropped by helicopters onto farmland on a mission to establish contact with "anti-regime forces." Despite having bags containing "weapons, reconnaissance equipment, and multiple passports," Britain's foreign secretary referred to them as a "small British diplomatic team" that had had to leave Libya after "experiencing difficulties." The NTC again chose to make its position clear, with its spokesperson criticizing Britain's clandestine intrusion and claiming that the incident had "fueled doubts about [British] intentions."¹⁰³ Interestingly, the NTC also claimed that the Western powers were doing nothing to block incoming Qadhafi supply flights, were refusing to unfreeze Libyan assets abroad and release the funds to the NTC, and were not allowing the NTC to import weapons — on the grounds that they could fall into the hands of terrorists when delivered to Libya.¹⁰⁴

But with the uprising increasingly under pressure as government forces quickly began to regroup and focus their attention on rebel-held cities, it seemed Washington, London and Paris had already reached a decision to intervene on their own terms. The opportunity to help remove the problematic Qadhafi leadership under the banner of the Arab Spring was too good to miss, even at the risk of alienating the actual protesters who had first risen up against Qadhafi and whose leaders, it seemed, were increasingly distrustful of the West. In contrast to his relative radio silence on the beleaguered but pro-Western presidents of Tunisia and Egypt at the beginning of the year, on March 3, 2011, Barack Obama had already begun to

call for Qadhafi to go, and just six days later both he and David Cameron were stating that they were preparing for military action.¹⁰⁵ In this sense, the prospect of forcibly installing a new and more supplicant post-Qadhafi administration had become a much more attractive proposition to the Western powers than any attempted rescue of their erratic trade partner of the past eight years. Indeed, as the British media reported, Cameron had little interest in a last-minute intervention by Tony Blair, who had reportedly been contacted by a Qadhafi aide seeking a “deal with the British.”¹⁰⁶

Getting around the NTC and its publicly stated position against intervention required a multipronged strategy. The most obvious need was to frame the impending Western-sponsored military action as primarily driven by humanitarian concerns. As Qadhafi’s forces began to inch closer to Benghazi by the middle of March, they were already being described as on a “murderous rampage” with the regime having promised “no mercy.”¹⁰⁷ Meanwhile a sensational *casus belli*-style story was published by Al-Jazeera claiming that the Libyan army was on a “Viagra-fueled raping spree” across the country. Picked up and republished by almost every Western outlet, and even referred to by the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, the U.S. ambassador to Libya then repeated the claim to the UN Security Council.¹⁰⁸

As Alan Kuperman of the University of Texas and others noted, however, those towns being recaptured by the regime were not actually being subjected to massacres.¹⁰⁹ Moreover, as *The New York Times* made clear, Qadhafi’s infamous “no mercy” warning had, in fact, been directed specifically at the rebel combatants; the government had promised an amnesty for “those who throw their weapons away.”¹¹⁰ As for the Viagra mass-rape story, U.S. intelligence officials did not quite seem to share the U.S. ambassador’s position. One had admitted to NBC News that “there is no evidence that Libyan military forces are being given Viagra and engaging in systematic rape against women in rebel areas.” Leading a UN human-

rights inquiry into the situation, Cherif Bassiouni was even more circumspect and claimed that the Viagra story was the product of mass hysteria. Going even further, Amnesty International's spokesperson explained that Amnesty had "not found cases of rape. Not only have we not met any victims, but we have not even met any persons who have met victims. As for the boxes of Viagra that Qadhafi was supposed to have had distributed, they were later found intact near tanks that were completely burnt out."¹¹¹

The strategy's second need was for the NTC itself to be co-opted and stripped of its genuinely revolutionary sentiments so that any post-intervention government would be suitably pro-Western and ready to get back to business. In some ways, the problem took care of itself as Qadhafi's forces appeared to be advancing on Benghazi faster than many had expected. Reaffirming the strictly humanitarian U.S. motives, Clinton warned that "Qadhafi would do terrible things. It's just in his nature; there are some creatures that are like that," while *The New York Times* reported that the NTC had little option but to "mortgage the revolution" in return for formally requesting Western intervention so as to prevent a massacre.¹¹² As Assaf put it, "The revolution was forced into an unnecessary compromise with imperialism, and it had been panicked into its call for Western military intervention." Naturally, such intervention came at a significant price, with Abdel-Jalil emerging as the U.S. choice to take over the NTC's chairmanship.¹¹³

Home of the forward headquarters of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) and a British Royal Air Force station,¹¹⁴ Qatar became the first Arab state to recognize the new Abdel-Jalil-led and pro-Western incarnation of the NTC as Libya's official government. Described as "instrumental" in engineering the old regime's suspension from the Arab League, Qatar also began to campaign publicly and heavily for NATO strikes and an enforced no-fly zone over Libya.¹¹⁵ In parallel, a new Qatar-based "Libya TV" was also set up. Supposedly funded by unnamed "Libyan expatriate businessmen," it broadcast almost unrelenting criticism of the

Qadhafi regime while at the same time throwing its full support behind the NATO-friendly NTC.¹¹⁶ With Qatar in its corner and rejecting various peace initiatives, including one by the African Union, the new NTC soon made it quite clear that any premature end to the fighting would be unacceptable — a view quickly backed up by both the British foreign secretary and the NATO secretary general, who had argued that any ceasefire agreement with Qadhafi would be meaningless and that it would be impossible to put monitors on the ground to implement and enforce it.¹¹⁷ Unsurprisingly given its future *raison d'être*, the NTC promised that it would abide by all international contracts that had earlier been signed by the Libyan government, with one of its spokesmen later confirming that all pre-existing “contracts in the oil fields are absolutely sacrosanct. There’s no question of revoking any contract.”¹¹⁸

NATO TAKES ACTION

Proposed by Britain, France and temporary member Lebanon, but with far from unanimous support, UN Security Council Resolution 1973 on March 17, 2011, paved the way for the first NATO air strikes on Libya just 48 hours later.¹¹⁹ Premised on an earlier 2009 resolution on the “responsibility to protect” (R2P) that had led to no interventions in far bloodier conflicts elsewhere in Africa, Resolution 1973 called for a no-fly zone to be enforced over Libya and authorized “all necessary means” to protect its civilian population, although without permitting any foreign occupation.¹²⁰ As Columbia University’s Hamid Dabashi recalls, this was interpreted by most observers at the time as allowing everything “short of putting troops on the ground.”¹²¹

With the bulk of NATO’s Operation Unified Protector air power being delivered by Britain and France, and with the United States famously choosing to “lead from behind” after “purchasing the involvement” of these allies in return for their receiving public credit, it

seemed Muammar Qadhafi's long-held fears of Western plots to unseat him were being realized. As recently as 2009, a U.S. diplomatic cable had recorded his personally expressed suspicions that the real goal behind Western economic re-engagement with Libya was still to engineer a regime change.¹²² Indeed, U.S. "Operation Odyssey Dawn" — the name for its contributing mission as part of Unified Protector — was being managed exclusively by AFRICOM, the same U.S. military institution that Libya had earlier tried to block from entering the African continent.¹²³ Reaching the soundest conclusion, historian Matteo Capasso and anthropologist Igor Cherstich have since contended that the 2011 uprising was seen as a crucial tipping point for a state on the cusp of entering into a civil war, and one which was exploited by the West and its allies in an effort to "impose their ideological vision for Libya, which would be easier to pursue if Qadhafi were toppled."¹²⁴

With a deal in place with the United States and Britain to deflect criticism from its own parallel intervention in Bahrain, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in return not only pushed for the Arab League's backing of Unified Protector but also soon began to join the NATO powers in policing Libya's skies.¹²⁵ With Qatar providing six fighter jets and two strategic support aircraft, while the United Arab Emirates provided 12 fighter jets, the combined GCC contingent was almost as big as that of France.¹²⁶ Helpfully for the first few waves of NATO strikes, the Qatar-based Libya TV provided a thorough whitewashing of the campaign and then even began to broadcast purportedly intercepted telephone calls between Qadhafi-regime officials that indicated they were deliberately moving the dead bodies of rebels to the sites of strategic NATO strikes so as to claim there were heavy civilian casualties. By then understood to be "largely based in Doha [Qatar]," Mustafa Abdel-Jalil was given the sole platform on Libya TV to call for national unity and for the regime's remaining military units in Tripoli to stand down.¹²⁷

With the compelling humanitarian and R2P narratives in place and, as Maximilian Forte describes, a “powerful circle of acclamation” surrounding the intervention, few Western opinion makers beyond the strongest anti-imperialists were really able to put forward any meaningful condemnation of the NATO-GCC campaign.¹²⁸ Influential critics such as the University of Michigan’s Juan Cole argued that Unified Protector was quite safe on the basis that it did not involve boots on the ground and that this meant it was not comparable to the 2003 invasion of Iraq. He also claimed the intervention was being done in a “legal way” because the UN resolution was something of a “gold standard,” arguing that “if we just don’t care if the people of Benghazi are subjected to murder and repression on a vast scale, we aren’t people of the Left.”¹²⁹ Meanwhile, although Dabashi recognized the intervention as an “initially counterrevolutionary development” and understood it was using the pretense of humanitarianism, he saw some positives, as NATO’s air strikes would “challenge the very logic of military intervention in a democratic uprising” on the basis that they would end up destroying the same military equipment that the NATO powers had earlier sold to Qadhafi. Others, it seemed, were simply tricked by the messages of qualified support for NATO from some of the most unusual quarters, with Hezbollah’s Hassan Nasrallah himself having declared that “what is taking place in Libya is war imposed by the regime on a people that was peacefully demanding change. The revolutionary people of Libya should be helped so as to persevere.”¹³⁰ Too few had paused to consider that Hezbollah and other such “Axis of Resistance” powers were as anti-Qadhafi as they were anti-Western.

With the strikes rolling on and the Libyan regime steadily eroding, it was perhaps *The New Yorker* that got it most wrong. In a lengthy and widely read essay that struck an overly optimistic tone, it disingenuously claimed that the new Libya’s “emergent institutions were [being] developed above all by Libyans, not by Ahmed Chalabi [a reference to the Iraqi politician involved in the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003] or the CIA. They are indigenous;

they have legitimacy.” Going further, *The New Yorker* also attempted to identify a silver lining to the lengthy and bloody civil war, arguing that “an unintended consequence of the prolonged conflict was that the ragtag Libyan fighters improved their skills on the battlefield and enabled civil institutions to arise from the rubble of a reign of terror.”¹³¹

MANIPULATING THE UN

Almost as soon as the dust had settled after the first NATO strikes, evidence began to mount indicating that the participating air forces had little intention of sticking to their UN mandate of enforcing a no-fly zone and protecting civilians. In particular, a video emerged of the aftermath of the inaugural French interdiction on March 19, 2011. Although the target was officially supposed to have been a substantial armored column advancing on Benghazi, the video instead depicted only a handful of military vehicles on an open highway, clearly heading away from the city. Nevertheless, the Reuters report that began to circulate — apparently based on a mixture of official NATO press releases and NTC statements — described “about 14 tanks, 20 armored personnel carriers, two trucks with multiple rocket launchers and dozens of pick-ups destroyed in the strike.”¹³²

Reporting on subsequent strikes followed much the same format, with many seeming to have nothing to do with protecting civilians, and some having actually led to the deaths of civilians. Certainly, there were strikes on key air-defense and communications systems, but as *The New York Times* reported, there were also strikes on Libya’s state television headquarters, and, as CNN claimed, Apache helicopter gunships ended up killing civilians in a public square.¹³³ Matteo Capasso notes that NATO’s understanding of the need to protect civilians did not seem to extend to Qadhafi loyalists. Most notably, as he points out, when rebel forces began to enter the city of Sirte — Qadhafi’s home town and one of the regime’s

last remaining strongholds — the extent of the atrocities committed against its civilian population would likely have been described as “genocidal” by Western media if the circumstances had been different.¹³⁴ Sharing much the same view, Princeton University professor emeritus Richard Falk observed that the “NATO forces were obviously far less committed to their supposed protective role than to ensuring that the balance of forces within Libya would be tipped in the direction of the insurrectionary challenge.”¹³⁵ Indeed, NATO went far beyond protecting civilian populations, especially after May 2011, when it effectively “provided air support for the destruction of the Qadhafi state.”¹³⁶

Unsurprisingly, therefore, even after Qadhafi’s units made their last stand in Sirte, their scattered retreat on the afternoon of October 20 was heavily bombed, with U.S. Predator drones and French jet fighters knocking out the last few fleeing vehicles.¹³⁷ Apparently pulled out of a big pipe after stumbling from his car and very much alive, Qadhafi’s capture was videotaped and broadcast around the world, despite the obvious barbarity of the crowd and the brutality of the scene. Very soon afterward, however, he was described as having died, but with no further information being given. According to Human Rights Watch, he had been stabbed in the anus with a bayonet, causing catastrophic blood loss, but the doctor who performed the post-mortem had been threatened with death in order to keep his findings confidential.¹³⁸

But if crimes were being committed from the air, they were almost certainly being committed on the ground, too, despite the UN restriction on the use of troops. Although *The New York Times* later claimed that the CIA only ever had a handful of operatives in Libya at this time, its own correspondents had reported in March 2011 that CIA operatives had been working in Libya “for several weeks” as part of a “shadow force of Westerners . . . which can help bleed Qadhafi’s military.” This of course implied that they had arrived at some point in early or mid-February, long before the UN resolution and possibly even before the first days of the

Benghazi uprising. Again without stipulating a date, but stating that it happened “several weeks ago,” *The New York Times* also quoted U.S. officials as confirming that “President Obama signed a secret finding authorizing the CIA to provide arms and other support to Libyan rebels.”¹³⁹ This was despite earlier U.S. government statements that had claimed it was ready to honor the UN mandate confirming there would be “no boots on the ground,” and explaining the “Libyan uprising would evolve organically.”¹⁴⁰

Quickly recovering from the embarrassment of having its agents captured by the first version of the NTC, Britain seemed equally willing to contravene the UN resolution, with Reuters reporting that SAS units had been deployed to help with target acquisition and had infiltrated Tripoli on behalf of the rebels to plant radio equipment.¹⁴¹ Although barely mentioned on its own television channels or website, Al-Jazeera footage that clearly showed several armed “Westerners” on rebel front lines was reported on by other media outlets, including *The Guardian*.¹⁴² As Clinton’s emails have since revealed, in March 2011, both British and French special forces were training Libyan rebels in western Egypt and were present “to a limited degree in the western suburbs of Benghazi.”¹⁴³

Importantly, the illegally deployed Western forces in Libya soon seemed to be joined on the ground by those of their principal regional allies. Most obviously Qatar, which had earlier insisted it was only providing air support, later admitted in October 2011 that it had been sending hundreds of its special forces to every region of Libya. An NTC spokesman even revealed that the Qataris had planned most of the battles that eventually paved the way to victory. One extensive report described how Qatar had been providing training for rebel fighters in both eastern Libya and the western Nafusa mountains, while some had been brought to Qatar for their instruction. It also claimed that Qatari soldiers were spotted in Tripoli at the same time Qadhafi’s Bab al-Aziziya compound was finally overrun.¹⁴⁴

Certainly, images of a big Qatari flag flying from the top of its buildings began to circulate

widely, either raised by Qatari special forces or by rebels equipped by Qatar. Seemingly forgetting the terms of the UN resolution, British newspapers freely identified the role that “British-trained Qatari special forces had played,” with some even claiming that Qatari forces were pivotal in winning the final battles in Tripoli.¹⁴⁵

More mindful of the legal complications such admissions could lead to, the U.S. and British governments were a little more wary; Barack Obama guardedly stated that the United States needed “more transparency about what Qatar was doing in Libya.”¹⁴⁶ A number of commentators, meanwhile, seemed willing to buy into this idea that Qatar was somehow a free agent, with arguments being made that Qatar had chosen to “make a stand over Libya,” that its successes marked “a high-water mark of Qatari influence,” and that the campaign allowed Qatar to “demonstrate an alignment of values with the international community.”¹⁴⁷

More likely, of course, was that the home of CENTCOM and other important Western military assets was simply the proxy of choice to deploy Arab soldiers who would ensure rebel units capitalized quickly on the results of NATO air strikes. Indeed, at one point the Qatari armed forces’ chief of staff openly stated that his troops were the “link” between NATO and the rebels.¹⁴⁸

A SCRAMBLE FOR ASSETS?

Long before the battle for Sirte, the revamped National Transitional Council under Mustafa Abdel-Jalil had already set about denationalizing state assets that fell under rebel control and had begun to promise lucrative contracts and concessions to the NATO powers and their proxies. Having transferred \$400 million to the NTC to help with the war effort, Qatar was especially well placed, with its National Bank Group soon able to take a 49 percent stake in Libya’s Bank of Commerce and Development.¹⁴⁹ Seemingly also underpinning the deal was

an agreement, made only a day before Qatar recognized the NTC as Libya's official government, in which Qatar was granted exclusive access to rebel-held oil and was allowed to market and sell it on behalf of the new Libya. As Manouchehr Takin from the Center for Global Energy Studies pointed out, this was a "landmine, legally speaking." He also posed the question: "Is this [NTC] representing the Libyan people? Only two countries have accepted that."¹⁵⁰

There is evidence that, as early as April 2011, French businesses were also trying to move in. According to Hillary Clinton's emails, supposed French humanitarian flights into Libya were actually carrying "executives from the French company Total, the large construction firm Vinci and the European Aeronautic Defence and Space Company." Subsequent flights allegedly carried representatives "from the conglomerate Thales and other large French firms, all with close ties to [then-President Nicolas Sarkozy]." The understanding of the U.S. Department of State was that the French businessmen were holding meetings with the NTC before leaving discreetly in convoys "organized and protected by paramilitary officers" to head across the border into Egypt. As a close adviser to Clinton put it in an email, French intelligence agents were describing Sarkozy's interests in Libya as being founded on "a desire to gain a greater share of oil production, increase French influence in Africa, improve his internal political situation in France, [and] provide the French military with an opportunity to reassert its position."¹⁵¹

With similar ambitions, the British government has since admitted that, in May 2011, a secret "Libyan oil cell" had begun to meet. This comprised Foreign Office officials along with Britain's international development minister, and *The Guardian* made the allegation that the cell sought to control the post-regime Libyan oil market in conjunction with a company that had previously been investigated for supplying oil secretly to the Serbian regime in the 1990s and had been fined after pleading guilty to providing kickbacks to the Saddam Hussein

regime during the sanctions era. As the Libyan conflict dragged on, the secret cell and its commercial partner were understood to be “helping to enforce the sanctions regime to prevent Muammar Qadhafi importing and exporting oil while allowing oil to reach the rebels in the East.”¹⁵²

Italian energy giant Eni was also unwilling to wait for Qadhafi’s ouster; its executives arrived in Tripoli almost immediately after it fell under rebel control. Reportedly there to discuss the resumption of Libyan gas exports, they were barely hours ahead of visits from Cameron and Sarkozy, who jointly told the Libyan people that this was “your revolution, not our revolution.”¹⁵³ By the time the air strikes came to an end, Western officials had become even more blunt, as the sense of competition among the NATO partners for the spoils of war undoubtedly intensified. The U.S. ambassador to Libya stated that the war-torn country had a need for U.S. companies “on a big scale,” while Britain’s defense minister said that businessmen should start to “pack their suitcases” for Libya to secure reconstruction contracts. This was interpreted by the British media as “the starting pistol for British firms to pursue contracts in Libya,” as it also was for the leading mercenary network, which posted a message confirming there “will be an uptick of activity as companies scramble to get back to Libya. Follow the money, and find your next job.”¹⁵⁴ The chair of Britain’s cross-party parliamentary group on Libya even said that “Britain should come first when it comes to awarding contracts, which would also pay back some of the £300 million [we] spent on military action.”¹⁵⁵ Indeed, both the British and French governments had come up with exact price tags for their interventions, believed to be \$425 million in Britain's case and \$1 million a day for France.¹⁵⁶

France's foreign minister then claimed it was only “fair and logical” that French companies should benefit from the war.¹⁵⁷ According to France’s *Liberation* newspaper, this assumption was likely based on a letter the NTC had sent to the French government in April 2011

offering France “control over 35 percent of Libya’s oil and gas in exchange for French support for the insurgency.”¹⁵⁸ Casting more light on this apparent oil-for-strikes deal, Clinton’s emails have since revealed that, on a follow-up trip to Libya in September 2011, Sarkozy had urged the NTC to honor the promised “reservation” of part of its oil and gas industry for French firms.¹⁵⁹

By this stage, France and the rest of Europe were also likely viewing such unprecedented access to Libyan hydrocarbons as a good way of reducing their reliance on Russian gas. In this context, Libya could “release Western Europe from the stranglehold of high-pricing Russia producers who currently dominate their gas supply.”¹⁶⁰ Either way, the NTC seemed to be fully on board. Although it had at one point claimed to the media that NATO’s intervention was on a “purely humanitarian basis,” it nonetheless seemed fully aware of its obligations by the end of the campaign, having stated that it intended to reward those who showed support and “with Britain and France likely to lead the way.” Moreover, it also made clear that “our hero revolutionaries wouldn’t have made these achievements without the support of the allies, chiefly France and the United Kingdom.”¹⁶¹

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