

The West's Unwanted War in Libya

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A Western airstrike targeting forces loyal to Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi on a road between Benghazi and Ajdabiyah on March 20. Only French President Nicolas Sarkozy saw Libya's popular revolt as an **Goran Tomasevic**

PARIS — It is a war that Barack Obama didn't want, David Cameron didn't need, Angela Merkel couldn't cope with, and Silvio Berlusconi dreaded.

Only Nicolas Sarkozy saw the popular revolt that began in Libya on Feb. 15 as an opportunity for political and diplomatic redemption. Whether the French president's energetic leadership of an international coalition to protect the Libyan people from Moammar Gadhafi will be enough to revive his sagging domestic fortunes in next year's election is highly uncertain. But by pushing for military strikes that he hopes might repair France's reputation in the Arab world, Sarkozy helped shape what type of war it would be. The road to Western military intervention was paved with mutual suspicion, fears of another quagmire in a Muslim country and doubts about the largely unknown ragtag Libyan opposition with which the West has thrown in its lot.

That will make it harder to hold together an uneasy coalition of Americans, Europeans and Arabs, the longer Gadhafi holds out. Two weeks into the air campaign, Western policymakers fret about the risk of a stray bomb hitting a hospital or an orphanage, or of the conflict sliding into a prolonged stalemate.

There is no doubt the outcome in Tripoli will have a bearing on the fate of the popular movement for change across the Arab world. But because this war was born in Paris it will also have consequences for Europe.

"It's high time that Europeans stopped exporting their own responsibilities to Washington," said Nick Witney, a senior policy fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations. "If the West fails in Libya, it will be primarily a European failure."

A French Fiasco

When the first Arab pro-democracy uprisings shook the thrones of aging autocrats in Tunisia and Egypt in January, France had got itself on the wrong side of history.

Foreign Minister Michele Alliot-Marie had enjoyed a winter vacation in Tunisia, a former French colony, oblivious to the rising revolt. She and her family had taken free flights on the private jet of a businessman close to President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, and then publicly offered the government French assistance with riot control just a few days before Ben Ali was ousted by popular protests.

Worse was to come. It turned out that French Prime Minister Francois Fillon had spent his Christmas vacation up the Nile as the guest of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, the next autocrat in the Arab democracy movement's firing line, while Sarkozy and his wife, Carla, had soaked up the winter sunshine in Morocco, another former French territory ruled by a barely more liberal divine-right monarch.

Television stations were rerunning embarrassing footage of the president giving Gadhafi a red-carpet welcome in Paris in 2007, when Libya's "brother leader" planted his tent in the grounds of the Hotel de Marigny state guest house across the road from the Elysee presidential palace.

On Feb. 27, a few days after Libyan rebels hoisted the pre-Gadhafi tricolor flag defiantly in Benghazi, Sarkozy fired his foreign minister. In a speech announcing the appointment of Alain Juppe as her successor, Sarkozy cited the need to adapt France's foreign and security policy to the new situation created by the Arab uprisings. "This is a historic change," he said. "We must not be afraid of it. We must have one sole aim: to accompany, support and help the people who have chosen freedom."

Man in the White Shirt

Yet the international air campaign against Gadhafi's forces might never have happened without the self-appointed activism of French public intellectual Bernard-Henri Levy, a left-leaning philosopher and talk-show groupie, who lobbied Sarkozy to take up the cause of Libya's pro-democracy rebels.

Libya was the latest of a string of international causes that the libertarian icon with his unbuttoned white designer shirts and flowing mane of graying hair has championed over the last two decades after Bosnian Muslims, Algerian secularists, Afghan rebels and Georgia's side in the conflict with Russia. Levy went to meet the Libyan rebels and telephoned Sarkozy from Benghazi in early March.

"I'd like to bring you the Libyan Massouds," Levy said he told the president, comparing the anti-Gadhafi opposition with former Afghan warlord Ahmad Shah Massoud, who fought against the Islamist Taliban before being assassinated. "As Gadhafi only clings on through violence, I think he'll collapse," the philosopher said in an interview.

On March 10, Levy accompanied two envoys of the Libyan Transitional Council to Sarkozy's office. To their surprise and to the consternation of France's allies, the president recognized the council as the "legitimate representative of the Libyan people" and told them he favored not only establishing a no-fly zone to protect them but also carrying out "limited targeted strikes" against Gadhafi's forces. In doing so without consultation on the eve of a European Union summit called to discuss Libya, Sarkozy upstaged Washington, which was still debating what to do, embarrassed London, which wanted broad support for a no-fly zone, and infuriated Berlin, France's closest European partner. He also stunned his own foreign minister, who learned about the decision to recognize the opposition from a news agency dispatch, aides said, while in Brussels trying to coax the EU into backing a no-fly zone.

"Quite a lot of members of the European Council were irritated to discover that France had recognized the Libyan opposition council and the Elysee was talking of targeted strikes," a senior European diplomat said.

Across the Channel, British Prime Minister David Cameron, aware of the deep unpopularity of the Iraq war, had turned his back on Tony Blair's doctrine of liberal interventionism when he took office in 2010. But after facing criticism over the slow evacuation of British nationals from Libya and a trade-promotion trip to the Gulf in the midst of the Arab uprisings, he overruled cabinet skeptics, military doubters and critics among his own Conservative lawmakers to join Sarkozy in campaigning for military action. However, Cameron sought to reassure parliament that he was not entering an Iraq-style open-ended military commitment.

"This is different to Iraq. This is not going into a country, knocking over its government and then owning and being responsible for everything that happens subsequently," he said.

In Britain, as in France, the government won bipartisan support for intervention.

Germany Missing in Action

In Germany, on the other hand, the Libyan uprising was an unwelcome distraction from domestic politics. It played directly into the campaign for regional elections in Baden-Wuerttemberg, a southwestern state that Chancellor Angela Merkel's Christian Democrats had governed since 1953.

Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle, leader of the Free Democrats, the liberal junior partners in Merkel's coalition, tried to surf on pacifist public opinion by opposing military action. Polls

showed two-thirds of voters opposed German involvement in Libya, a country where Nazi Germany's Afrika Korps had suffered desert defeats in World War II. Present-day Germany's armed forces were already overstretched in Afghanistan, where some 5,000 soldiers are engaged in an unpopular long-term mission. Westerwelle made it impossible for Merkel to support a no-fly zone, even without participating. He publicly criticized the Franco-British proposal for a UN Security Council resolution authorizing the use of force to prevent Gadhafi using his air force against Libyan civilians. Merkel said she was skeptical. The Germans prevented a March 11 EU summit from making any call for a no-fly zone, much to the frustration of the French and British.

Relations between France's Juppe and Westerwelle deteriorated further the following week when Germany prevented foreign ministers from the Group of Eight industrialized powers from calling for a no-fly zone in Libya. Westerwelle told reporters: "Military intervention is not the solution. From our point of view, it is very difficult and dangerous. We do not want to get sucked into a war in North Africa. We would not like to step on a slippery slope where we all are at the end in a war."

That argument angered allies. As the meeting broke up, a senior European diplomat said, Juppe turned to Westerwelle and said: "Now that you have achieved everything you wanted, Gadhafi can go ahead and massacre his people."

When the issue came to the UN Security Council on March 17, 10 days before the Baden-Wuerttemberg election, Germany abstained, along with Russia, China, India and Brazil, and said it would take no part in military operations.

Ironically, that stance seems to have been politically counterproductive. The center-right coalition lost the regional election anyway, and both leaders were severely criticized by German media for having isolated Germany from its Western partners, including the United States. The main political beneficiaries were the ecologist Greens, seen as both anti-nuclear and anti-war.

U.S. Takes Its Time

In Washington, meanwhile, President Barack Obama was, as usual, taking his time to make up his mind. Military action in Libya was the last thing the U.S. president needed, just when he was trying to extricate American troops from two unpopular wars in Muslim countries initiated by his predecessor, George W. Bush.

Obama had sought to rebuild damaged relations with the Muslim world, seen as a key driver of radicalization and terrorism against the United States. The president trod a fine line in embracing pro-democracy and reform movements in the Arab world and Iran while trying to avoid undermining vital U.S. interests in the absolute monarchies of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and other Gulf states. Compared with those challenges, Libya was a sideshow.

The United States had no big economic or political interests in the North African oil and gas producing state and instinctively saw it as part of Europe's backyard. Obama had also sought to encourage allies, notably in Europe, to take more responsibility for their own security issues. Spelling out the administration's deep reluctance to get dragged into another potential Arab quagmire, Defense Secretary Robert Gates said in a farewell speech to officer cadets

at the West Point military academy on March 4: "In my opinion, any future defense secretary who advises the president to again send a big American land army into Asia or into the Middle East or Africa should 'have his head examined,' as General [Douglas] MacArthur so delicately put it."

Prominent U.S. foreign policy lawmakers, including Democratic Senator John Kerry and Republican Senator John McCain pressed the Obama administration in early March to impose a no-fly zone over Libya and explore other military options, such as bombing runways. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said after talks with Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in Geneva on Feb. 28 that a no-fly zone was "an option which we are actively considering."

But the White House pushed back against pressure from lawmakers. "It would be premature to send a bunch of weapons to a post office box in eastern Libya," White House spokesman Jay Carney said on March 7. "We need to not get ahead of ourselves in terms of the options we're pursuing."

While Carney said a no-fly zone was a serious option, other U.S. civilian and military officials cautioned that it would be difficult to enforce.

On March 10, U.S. National Intelligence Director James Clapper forecast in Congress that Gadhafi's better-equipped forces would prevail in the long term, saying Gadhafi appeared to be "hunkering down for the duration." If there was to be intervention, it had become clear, it would have to come quickly.

Arab Spine

U.S. officials say the key event that helped Clinton and the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, Susan Rice, persuade Obama of the need for intervention was a March 12 decision by the Arab League to ask the UN Security Council to declare a no-fly zone to protect the Libyan population. The Arab League's unprecedented resolve — the organization has long been plagued by chronic divisions and a lack of spine — reflected the degree to which Gadhafi had alienated his peers, especially Saudi Arabia. When the quixotic colonel bothered to attend Arab summits, it was usually to insult the Saudi king and other veteran rulers.

The Arab League decision gave a regional seal of approval that Western nations regarded as vital for military action.

Moreover, two Arab states — Qatar and the United Arab Emirates — soon said they would participate in enforcing a no-fly zone, and a third, Lebanon, co-sponsored a United Nations resolution to authorize the use of force. Arab diplomats said Arab League Secretary-General Amr Moussa, a former Egyptian foreign minister with presidential ambitions, played the key role in squeezing an agreement out of the closed-door meeting.

Syria, Sudan, Algeria and Yemen were all against any move to invite foreign intervention in an Arab state. But diplomats said that by couching the resolution as an appeal to the UN Security Council, Moussa maneuvered his way around Article VI of the Arab League's statutes requiring that such decisions be taken unanimously. It was he who announced the outcome, saying Gadhafi's government had lost legitimacy because of its "crimes against the Libyan people."

The African Union, in which Gadhafi played an active but idiosyncratic role, condemned the Libyan leader's crackdown but rejected foreign military intervention and created a panel of leaders to try to resolve the conflict through dialogue.

However, all three African states on the Security Council — South Africa, Nigeria and Gabon — voted for the resolution. France acted as if it had African Union support anyway. Sarkozy invited the organization's secretary-general, Jean Ping, to the Elysee Palace for a showcase summit of coalition countries on the day military action began, and he attended, providing African political cover for the operation.

Obama Decides

Having failed to win either EU or G8 backing for a no-fly zone, and with the United States internally divided and holding back, France and Britain were in trouble in their quest for a UN resolution despite the Arab League support. Gadhafi's forces had regrouped and recaptured a swathe of the western and central coastal plain, including some key oil terminals, and were advancing fast on Benghazi, a city of 700,000 and the rebels' stronghold. If international intervention did not come within days, it would be too late. Gadhafi's troops would be in the population centers, making surgical airstrikes impossible without inflicting civilian casualties.

In the nick of time, Obama came off the fence on March 15 at a two-part meeting of his National Security Council. Hillary Clinton participated by telephone from Paris, Susan Rice by secure video link from New York. Both were deeply aware of the events of the 1990s, when Bill Clinton's administration, in which Rice was an adviser on Africa, had failed to prevent genocide in Rwanda, and only intervened in Bosnia after the worst massacre in Europe since World War II.

They reviewed what was at stake now. There were credible reports that Gadhafi forces were preparing to massacre the rebels. What signal would it send to Arab democrats if the West let him get away with that, and if Mubarak and Ben Ali, whose armies refused to turn their guns on the people, were overthrown while Gadhafi, who had used his air force, tanks and artillery against civilian protesters, survived in office?

The president overruled doubters among his military and national security advisers and decided the United States would support an ambitious UN resolution going beyond just a no-fly zone, on the strict condition that Washington would quickly hand over leadership of the military action to its allies. "Within days, not weeks," one participant quoted him as saying.

A senior administration official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the key concern was to avoid any impression that the United States was once again unilaterally bombing an Arab country. Asked what had swung Washington toward agreeing to join military action in Libya, he said: "It's more that events were evolving and so positions had to address the change of events.

"The key elements were the Arab League statement, the Lebanese support, co-sponsorship of the actual resolution as the Arab representative on the Security Council, a series of conversations with Arab leaders over the course of that week, leading up to the resolution.

All of that convinced us that the Arab countries were fully supportive of the broad resolution that would provide the authorization necessary to protect civilians and to provide humanitarian relief, and then the [March 19] gathering in Paris, confirmed that there was support for the means necessary to carry out the resolution, namely the use of military force," the official said.

When Rice told her French and British counterparts at the United Nations that Washington now favored a far more aggressive Security Council resolution, including air and sea strikes, they first feared a trap. Was Obama deliberately trying to provoke a Russian veto, a French official mused privately.

"I had a phone call from Susan Rice, Tuesday 8 p.m., and a phone call from Susan Rice at 11 p.m., and everything had changed in three hours," a senior Western envoy said. "On Wednesday morning, at the [Security] Council, in a sort of totally awed silence, Susan Rice said: 'We want to be allowed to strike Libyan forces on the ground.' There was a sort of a bit surprised silence."

The Vote

Right up to the day of the vote, when Juppe took a plane to New York to swing vital votes behind the resolution, Moscow's attitude was uncertain. So too were the three African votes. British and French diplomats tried desperately to contact the Nigerian, South African and Gabonese ambassadors but kept being told they were in a meeting.

"There was drama right up to the last minute," another UN diplomat said. That day, March 17, Clinton had just come out of a television studio in Tunis, epicenter of the first Arab democratic revolution, when she spoke to Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on a secure cellphone. Lavrov, who had strongly opposed a no-fly zone when they met in Geneva on Feb. 28 and remained skeptical when they talked again in Paris on March 14, told her that Moscow would not block the resolution. The senior U.S. official denied that Washington had offered Russia trade and diplomatic benefits in return for acquiescence, as suggested by a senior non-American diplomat. However, Obama telephoned President Dmitry Medvedev the following week and reaffirmed his support for Russia's bid to join the World Trade Organization, which U.S. ally Georgia is blocking.

China too abstained, allowing the resolution to pass with 10 votes in favor, five abstentions and none against. It authorized the use of "all necessary measures" — code for military action — to protect the civilian population but expressly ruled out a foreign occupation force in any part of Libya. The United States construes it to allow arms sales to the rebels. Most others do not.

Clinton said no decision had been made on whether to arm the rebels, although sources told Reuters that Obama has signed a secret order authorizing covert U.S. government support for rebel forces.

Arab Jitters

No sooner had the first cruise missiles been fired than the Arab League's Moussa complained that the Western powers had gone beyond the UN resolution and caused civilian casualties.

His outburst appeared mainly aimed at assuaging Arab public opinion, particularly in Egypt, and he muted his criticism after telephone calls from Paris, London and Washington.

Turkey, the leading Muslim power in NATO with big economic interests in Libya, bitterly criticized the military action in an Islamic country. The Turks were exasperated to see France, the most vociferous adversary of its EU membership bid, leading the coalition. Sarkozy, who alternated on a brief maiden visit to Ankara on Feb. 25 between trying to sell Turkish leaders French nuclear power plants and telling them bluntly to drop their EU ambitions, further angered Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan by failing to invite Turkey to the Paris conference on Libya.

Italy, the former colonial power which had Europe's biggest trade and investment ties with Libya, had publicly opposed military action until the last minute, but opened its air bases to coalition forces as soon as the UN resolution passed. However, Rome quickly demanded that NATO, in which it had a seat at the decision-making table, should take over command of the whole operation. Foreign Minister Franco Frattini threatened to take back control of the vital Italian bases unless the mission was placed under NATO.

But Turkey and France were fighting diplomatic dogfights at NATO headquarters. Ankara wanted to use its NATO veto put the handcuffs on the coalition to stop offensive operations. France wanted to keep political leadership away from the U.S.-led military alliance to avoid a hostile reaction in the Arab world.

The United States signaled its determination to hand over operational command within days, not weeks, as Obama had promised, and wanted tried-and-trusted NATO at the wheel.

It took a week of wrangling before agreement was reached for NATO to take charge of the entire military campaign. In return, France won agreement to create a "contact group" including Arab and African partners, to coordinate political efforts on Libya's future. Turkey was assuaged by being invited to a London international conference that initiated that process.

That enabled the United States to lower its profile and Obama to declare that Washington would not act alone as the world's policeman "wherever repression occurs." While the president promised to scale back U.S. involvement to a "supporting role," the military statistics tell a different tale. As of March 29, the United States had fired all but seven of the 214 cruise missiles used in the conflict and flown 1,103 sorties compared with 669 for all other allies combined. It also dropped 455 of the first 600 bombs, according to the Pentagon.

For all the showcasing of Arab involvement, only six military aircraft from Qatar had arrived in theater by March 30. They joined French air patrols but did not fly combat missions, a military source said. Sarkozy announced that the United Arab Emirates would send 12 F16 fighters, but NATO and UAE officials refused to say when they would arrive. Britain's Cameron spoke of unspecified logistical contributions from Kuwait and Jordan. The main Arab contribution is clearly political cover rather than military assets.

Casualty List

While the duration and the outcome of the war remain uncertain, some political casualties are

already visible.

Unless the conflict ends in disaster, Germany and its chancellor and foreign minister — particularly the foreign minister — are set to emerge as losers. "I can tell you there are people in London and Paris who are asking themselves whether this Germany is the kind of country we would like to have as a permanent member of the UN Security Council. That's a legitimate question which wasn't posed before," a senior European diplomat said.

German officials brush aside such talk, saying Berlin would have the backing of its Western partners and needs support from developing and emerging countries more in tune with its abstention on the Libya resolution.

Merkel has moved quickly to try to limit the damage. She attended the Paris conference and went along with an EU summit statement on March 25 welcoming the UN resolution on which her own government had abstained a week earlier. She also offered NATO extra help in aerial surveillance in Afghanistan to free up Western resources for the Libya campaign.

A second conspicuous casualty has been the European Union's attempt to build a common foreign, security and defense policy, and the official meant to personify that ambition, High Representative Catherine Ashton. Many in Paris, London, Brussels and Washington have drawn the conclusion that European defense is an illusion, given Germany's visceral reticence about military action. Future serious operations are more likely to be left to NATO, or to coalitions of the willing around Britain and France. By general agreement, Ashton has so far had a bad war. Despite having been among the first European officials to embrace the Arab uprisings and urge the EU to engage with democracy movements in North Africa, she angered both the British and French by airing her doubts about a no-fly zone and the Germans by subsequently welcoming the UN resolution. Unable to please everyone, she managed to please no one.

As for Sarkozy, whether he emerges as a hero or a reckless adventurer may depend on events beyond his control in the sands of Libya. Justin Vaisse, a Frenchman who heads the Center for the Study of the United States and Europe at the Brookings Institution think tank in Washington, detected an undertone of "Francophobia and Sarkophobia" among U.S. policy elites as the war began. "Either the war will go well, and he will look like a far-sighted, decisive leader, or it will go badly and reinforce the image of a showboating cowboy driving the world into war," Vaisse said. The jury is still out.

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