

After Gaddafi

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The end of Muammar Gaddafi's authoritarian regime in Libya is something that should be celebrated. Gaddafi was an often brutal leader whose involvement in terrorist activities earned him enmity from many. The habits of years of largely unchallenged rule contributed to Gaddafi becoming increasingly strange during the later years of his leadership. This became most evident during his last months in office, particularly in the weeks leading up to the NATO intervention in his country, when Gaddafi's threats and rantings were both frightening and bizarre.

Gaddafi was not easily deposed. Months of fighting between rebels and forces loyal to Gaddafi and a five month NATO air campaign were needed to bring Gaddafi's reign to an end. The air campaign which marked a significant level of western, including American, involvement was precipitated not simply by a desire to rid the Libyan people of their erratic and violent dictator, but by a belief that Gaddafi was pre-genocidal and if left on his own would begin killing massive numbers of Libyan people.

It is not possible to know the extent to which that was actually the case, but should it should nonetheless be obvious that if preventing widespread killings by Gaddafi was important, preventing similar violence remains important now. This is only one of the reasons why the western involvement in Libya will not easily end now that the rebels have won, and should have been an important consideration when the decision to begin the intervention was made.

Defining and assessing the mission in Libya has never been easy because the underlying notion that the role of NATO was to prevent a genocide from occurring cannot easily be determined to have been successful or not. Although genocide has not happened in Libya, there is no way of knowing with any certainty whether one would have happened had there not been an intervention. It is the military equivalent of proving a negative.

Moreover, anybody who thought that the intervention was going to be brief and aimed solely at limiting Gaddafi's ability to harm the people of Libya was willfully ignoring a great deal of recent history. Events in Afghanistan and Iraq, while very different cases, are difficult to miss examples of just how difficult it is to have a limited intervention aimed at deposing a brutal regime.

These are real challenges which must continue to inform our policy in Libya, and should have been part of the decision calculus before the intervention. Given the Obama administration's tendency to err on the side of deliberation considering of all possibilities where the previous U.S. administration tended to err on the side of arrogance and impulse, it is more likely than in the past that at least some of these issues were considered earlier this year when the intervention was launched.

During the early days of the Libya intervention it was frequently said that the west did not know a lot about the anti-Gaddafi opposition in Libya. If that is still the case, we had better start learning now as we plan the next iteration of western involvement in Libya. Western leaders, not least President Obama, have already begun to discuss the need to help Libya develop into a democracy, but this entails a high level of political commitment and implicitly assumes that this is what the forces who defeated Gaddafi, and the people of Libya more generally want. While it is true that these people probably want freedom and democracy as abstract ideas, the extent to which they want to work towards this under western tutelage, and the extent to which this is achievable in the short term in Libya, is far less apparent.

Nonetheless, the U.S. and NATO commitment to Libya has most likely just begun. Achieving success will be difficult, but this was the risk that was knowingly taken at the time of the intervention. One of the impacts of the intervention is that now the future of Libya is not exclusively, as President Obama said, [“in the hands of its people.”](#) It is now in our hands too. This means, among other things, that while the U.S. cannot guarantee success, if Libya descends into violence, instability or civil war, many will hold the U.S., and its allies, responsible. This was also a foreseeable consequence of the intervention.