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## The Big Lie About the Libyan War

**The Obama administration said it was just trying to protect civilians. Its actions reveal it was looking for regime change.**

By Micah Zenko

March 22, 2016



In this fifth anniversary week of the U.S.-led Libya intervention, it's instructive to revisit Hillary Clinton's curiously abridged description of that war in her 2014 memoir, *Hard Choices*. Clinton takes the reader from the crackdown, by Muammar al-Qaddafi's regime, of a nascent uprising in Benghazi and Misrata; to her meeting — accompanied by the pop-intellectual Bernard-Henri Lévy — with Mahmoud Jibril, the exiled leader of the opposition National Transitional Council; to her marshaling of an international military response. In late March 2011, Clinton quotes herself telling NATO members, "It's crucial we're all on the same page on NATO's responsibility to enforce the no-fly zone and protect civilians in Libya."

Just two paragraphs later — now 15 pages into her memoir's Libya section — Clinton writes: "[By] late summer 2011, the rebels had pushed back the regime's forces. They captured Tripoli toward the end of August, and Qaddafi and his family fled into the desert." There is an abrupt and unexplained seven-month gap, during which the military mission has inexplicably, and massively, expanded beyond protecting civilians to regime change — seemingly by happenstance. The only opposition combatants even referred to are simply labeled "the rebels," and the entire role of the NATO coalition and its attendant responsibility in assisting their advance has been completely scrubbed from the narrative.

In contemporary political debates, the Libya intervention tends to be remembered as an intra-administration soap opera, focused on the role Clinton — or Susan Rice or Samantha Power — played in advising Obama to go through with it. Or it's addressed offhandedly in reference to the 2012 terrorist attacks on the U.S. special mission and CIA annex in Benghazi. But it would be far more pertinent to treat Libya as a case study for the ways that supposedly limited interventions tend to mushroom into campaigns for regime change. Five years on, it's still not a matter of public record when exactly Western powers decided to topple Qaddafi.

To more fully comprehend what actually happened in Libya five years ago, let's briefly review what the Obama administration proclaimed and compare that with what actually happened.

On March 28, 2011, U.S. President Barack Obama addressed the nation: "The task that I assigned our forces [is] to protect the Libyan people from immediate danger and to establish a no-fly zone.... Broadening our military mission to include regime change would be a mistake." Two days later, Assistant Secretary of State Philip Gordon declared, "The military mission of the United States is designed to implement the Security Council resolution, no more and no less.... I mean protecting civilians against attacks from Qaddafi's forces and delivering humanitarian aid." The following day, Clinton's deputy, James Steinberg, said during a Senate hearing, "President Obama has been equally firm that our military operation has a narrowly defined mission that does not include regime change."

From the Defense Department, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Adm. Michael Mullen informed David Gregory of *Meet the Press*, "The goals of this campaign right now again are limited, and it isn't about seeing him go." Meanwhile, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates echoed the administration line: "Regime change is a very complicated business. It sometimes takes a long time. Sometimes it can happen very fast, but *it was never part of the military mission.*" (Emphasis added.)

Now, contrast Gates's assertion in 2011 with what he told the *New York Times* last month:

"I can't recall any specific decision that said, 'Well, let's just take him out,'" Mr. Gates said. Publicly, he said, "the fiction was maintained" that the goal was limited to disabling Colonel Qaddafi's command and control. In fact, the former defense secretary said, "I don't think there was a day that passed that people didn't hope he would be in one of those command and control centers."

This is scarcely believable. Given that decapitation strikes against Qaddafi were employed early and often, there almost certainly was a decision by the civilian heads of government of the NATO coalition to "take him out" from the very beginning of the intervention. On March 20, 2011, just hours into the intervention, Tomahawk cruise missiles launched from a British submarine stationed in the Mediterranean Sea struck an administrative building in Qaddafi's Bab al-Azizia compound, less than 50 yards away from the dictator's residence. (This attack occurred just 100 yards from the building that Ronald Reagan authorized to be bombed by F-111s a quarter-century earlier in retaliation for a Berlin discothèque bombing ordered by the Libyan leader.) Just as the dictator somehow survived the attack on his personal residence in 1986, he also did in 2011.

Later that day, Vice Adm. William Gortney, director of the Joint Staff, was asked by the press, "Can you guarantee that coalition forces are not going to target Qaddafi?" Gortney replied, "At this particular point, I can guarantee that he's not on a targeting list." When it was then pointed out that it was Qaddafi's personal residence that had been attacked, Gortney added, "Yeah. But, no, we're not targeting his residence. We're there to set the conditions and enforce the United Nations Security Council resolution. That's what we're doing right now and limiting it to that."

In fact, not only was the Western coalition *not* limiting its missions to the remit of the U.N. Security Council resolutions, but it also actively chose not to enforce them. Resolution 1970 was supposed to prohibit arms transfers to either side of the war in Libya, and NATO officials claimed repeatedly that this was not occurring. On April 19, 2011, a brigadier general stated, "No violation of the arms embargo has been reported." Three weeks later, on May 13, a wing commander admitted, "I have no information about arms being moved across any of the borders around Libya." In fact, Egypt and Qatar were shipping advanced weapons to rebel groups the whole time, with the blessing of the Obama administration, while Western intelligence and military forces provided battlefield intelligence, logistics, and training support.

Yet, the most damning piece of evidence comes from a public relations video that NATO itself released on May 24, 2011. In the short video, a Canadian frigate — the HMCS *Charlottetown* — allegedly enforcing the arms embargo, boards a rebel tugboat and finds small arms, 105mm howitzer rounds, and "lots of explosives," all of which are banned under Section 9 of Resolution 1970. The narrator states, "It turns out the tugboat is being used by Libyan rebels to transport arms from Benghazi to Misrata." The *Charlottetown* captain radios NATO headquarters for further guidance. As the narrator concludes, "NATO decides not to impede the rebels and to let the tugboat proceed." In other words, a NATO surface vessel stationed in the Mediterranean to enforce an arms embargo did exactly the opposite, and NATO was comfortable posting a video demonstrating its hypocrisy.

In truth, the Libyan intervention was about regime change from the very start. The threat posed by the Libyan regime's military and paramilitary forces to civilian-populated areas was diminished by NATO airstrikes and rebel ground movements within the first 10 days. Afterward, NATO began providing direct close-air support for advancing rebel forces by attacking government troops that were actually in retreat and had abandoned their vehicles. Fittingly, on Oct. 20, 2011, it was a U.S. Predator drone and French fighter aircraft that attacked a convoy of regime loyalists trying to flee Qaddafi's hometown of Sirte. The dictator was injured in the attack, captured alive, and then extrajudicially murdered by rebel forces.

The intervention in Libya shows that the slippery slope of allegedly limited interventions is most steep when there's a significant gap between what policymakers say their objectives are and the orders they issue for the battlefield. Unfortunately, duplicity of this sort is a common practice in the U.S. military. Civilian and military officials are often instructed to use specific talking points to suggest the scope of particular operations is minimal relative to large-scale ground wars or that there is no war going on at all. Note that it took 14 months before the Pentagon even admitted, "Of course it's combat," for U.S. soldiers involved in the ongoing mission against the Islamic State in Iraq. Meanwhile, the public learned just this week — only because Staff Sgt. Louis F. Cardin was killed on Saturday — that there is a previously unannounced detachment of Marines in northern Iraq providing "force protection" for the Iraqi military and U.S. advisors. The gradual accretion of troops, capabilities, arms transfers, and expanded military missions seemingly just "happens," because officials frame each policy step as normal and necessary. The reality is that, collectively, they represent a fundamentally larger and different intervention.

During the theatrical and exhaustive Benghazi hearing in October 2015, Rep. Peter Roskam (R-Ill.) asked Clinton about a video clip that read, "'We came, we saw, he died [meaning Qaddafi].' Is that the Clinton doctrine?" Clinton replied, "No, that was an expression of relief that the military mission undertaken by NATO and our other partners had achieved its end." Yet, this was never the military mission that the Obama administration repeatedly told the world it had set out to achieve. It misled the American public, because while presidents attempt to frame their wars as narrow, limited, and essential, admitting to the honest objective in Libya — regime change — would have brought about more scrutiny and diminished public support. The conclusion is clear: While we should listen to what U.S. and Western officials claim are their military objectives, all that matters is what they authorize their militaries to actually do.