

Why the United States hasn't intervened in Syria

By Steven Heydemann, Smith College

On March 17, Syria's uprising will enter its sixth bloodstained year. The country that existed before the uprising is gone. Its people have been ravaged and dispossessed. Its economy destroyed. Its terrain laid waste by its own leaders and their international patrons.

Syria today has become a case study in the globalization of violence, subject to the predations of a multinational stew of mercenaries, warlords, bandits and thugs. Its sovereignty has been fatally compromised, bartered away by a regime whose survival has always been its sole *raison d'être*. The armed opposition fights on, still fragmented, still poorly served by its political leaders, still outgunned and more desperate than at any time in the past five years. As this grim anniversary approaches, Russia and Iran have assured the regime's survival — at least for now — even as the devastation they have wreaked bleeds into the Levant and across the Aegean into Europe.

There is no shortage of causes for Syria's erasure as a state. The brutality with which the Assad regime has pursued its own survival looms largest but it by no means stands alone. The Islamic State, aided and abetted by the Assad regime, has absorbed large pieces of Syrian territory into its so-called Caliphate. Syria's fractious opposition, dependent on its regional patrons and captive to the personal ambitions of its leaders, is certainly complicit in the destruction of its homeland. So too are the neglect and incoherence of the "Friends of Syria" group established in 2011 to coordinate international support to the opposition under the leadership of the U.S. and its Western allies. Despite President Obama's declaration in August 2011 that it was time for Assad to step aside, the administration's calculus of interests, constraints and costs quickly led it to view Syria and Syrians as expendable.

Was Syria's collapse inevitable once the Assad regime moved to crush a national protest movement, setting in motion a downward spiral of escalating violence? Was

there anything the United States, in particular, could have done to mitigate the conflict, shift the trajectory of the uprising and help bring about a meaningful political transition along the lines set out in the Geneva Communiqué of June 2012? If such options were available, as former senior figures in the Obama administration have acknowledged publicly after leaving office, why did the United States not pursue them?

What has been most evident in the administration's approach to Syria is a deep cognitive bias against risk. For the president and his advisers, the possibility that U.S. actions might have negative consequences has consistently loomed larger than the actual and visibly negative effects of inaction. Even as Syria's conflict escalated and the costs of inaction have mounted, the administration's risk calculus has remained static. White House staff have consistently viewed the payoffs from action as uncertain, the potential benefits as low and the likely costs as unacceptably high. Senior officials, including Obama, regularly justify their approach on the grounds that engagement would inevitably lead to mission creep, drawing the United States into an Afghan-style quagmire — a view reinforced by administration concerns about the difficulty of controlling the cascade effects that often follow what begin as limited interventions.

Given its intense risk aversion, the administration has pursued a minimalist approach in dealing with the Syrian conflict. Apart from its air campaign against the Islamic State, it has directed most of its efforts and a majority of its resources to mitigating the war's humanitarian effects. It has done far less to address its principle cause — the behavior of the Assad regime. Instead, its aim has been to contain the Syrian conflict and keep violence within Syria's borders.

The conflict, however, has not cooperated. Violence has metastasized, spilling millions of desperate refugees

outward. Regional actors and radicalized fighters have flowed inward, transforming a local insurgency into a “mini world war.”

In rejecting engagement, the legacies of failed interventions weigh heavily on the Obama administration. Iraq and Afghanistan, but also the experience of Libya, where the removal of Moammar Gaddafi and the subsequent collapse of the Libyan state happened under Obama’s watch, stand as object lessons for the administration in the limits of military power and the disastrous consequences that U.S. interventions can unleash.

The administration’s reliance on “lessons learned” from past interventions, moreover, is not simply an ad hoc justification for avoiding engagement in Syria’s messy conflict. Historical analogies have played a major role in defining the principles that guide his approach to Syria. As expressed in his final State of the Union address, these include setting a high bar for determining when U.S. interests are at stake, restraint in the use of military force, burden sharing, the need for local actors to lead in solving local problems and skepticism about the capacity of the U.S. to build nations.

An intellectually honest critique of Obama’s Syria policy has to acknowledge the legitimacy of his skepticism and the validity of the lessons he has drawn from the experiences of Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya. Too often, U.S. interventions have not been effective. In many cases they have done more harm than good. The United States does regime change badly. Why should Syria be different?

Certainly, Syria bears some resemblance to Iraq and Afghanistan, but the differences are significant, as well. Unlike Syria, neither Iraq nor Afghanistan experienced a national uprising that sought a peaceful process of political transition. In Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States achieved regime change through direct military interventions. In Syria, “boots on the ground” in the sense of a large-scale U.S. military presence has never been a serious option. American intervention has never been sought by the Syrian opposition or recommended

by credible voices in the United States. Syrian opposition activists have requested U.S. support, not participation in combat operations.

Advocates of a more assertive U.S. policy in Syria have sought to empower local moderates, shift the military balance of power on the ground and facilitate a negotiated political transition that would preserve state institutions, leave in place elements of the Assad regime that did not have blood on their hands, and guarantee the security of minorities, including the Alawi community.

Did such moderates exist? Did the United States know enough about them to justify providing support? Would U.S. support for the armed opposition have made a difference? On these critical issues administration claims have been stunningly inconsistent and — as former U.S. ambassador to Syria Robert Ford acknowledged after resigning his post — at odds with the empirical evidence.

At different times, the White House has claimed to know too little about the opposition and too much. It has characterized opposition fighters as untrained do-gooders and ruthless fanatics. Yet for at least the first phase of the uprising, as the White House was well aware, a majority of the armed opposition consisted of a highly dispersed and decentralized network of local civil defense “battalions” that operated alongside of and at times in coordination with larger, more mobile franchise battalions made up largely of defectors from the Syrian army. Foreign fighters were barely present. Extremist ideologies were held by a small minority of opposition fighters — at most.

While the opposition’s lack of coherence has made it harder to deal with, the fighters succeeded in pushing the combined might of the Assad regime to the point of regime collapse, not once but three times: in mid-2012, again in mid-2013 and in the summer of 2015. Each time, external intervention from the regime’s backers, unmatched by comparable support to the opposition, tipped the military balance back in the regime’s favor, forestalling conditions that might have forced the regime into negotiations.

Even after large-scale Iranian intervention in 2013 to prevent the regime's fall, the armed opposition continued to gain ground. By mid-2015, opposition gains had pushed the Assad regime into such a precarious position that Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered his military to intervene. It was only well into the uprising, and in response to the failure of the United States and its allies to respond to appeals for assistance, that the armed opposition underwent a process of radicalization. Even then, as late as January 2014, moderate battalions affiliated with the Free Syrian Army defeated and pushed the Islamic State units out of positions they had seized across opposition-held areas of northern and eastern Syria, contradicting narratives about the unchecked extremism of the opposition.

Because it misread processes of radicalization, the White House missed low-risk opportunities to check the growth of extremist groups like Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State. It viewed rising extremism as revealing something essential and intrinsic about opposition fighters, seeing their affiliation with extremist groups as an expression of the fighters' ideological commitment to jihadist worldviews. Instead, as numerous interviews with fighters make clear, radicalization was instrumental rather than ideological. The absence of support from the West created incentives for Syrian fighters to auction their support to the most extreme bidders, regardless of their worldviews.

Syrian fighters followed resources, not beliefs. Affiliation did not always signal loyalty. Compliance did not always imply commitment. In such cases, more robust U.S. support for moderate armed groups might well have stemmed processes of radicalization that were principally instrumental and not ideological. Even now this option, which has never been seriously tested by the administration — its "train and equip" program was a Rube Goldberg contraption designed to fail — could make a difference in shoring up the moderate opposition.

What about sectarianism? Did Syria's sectarian make-up doom it to follow Iraq down the path of sectarian polarization, extremism and territorial fragmentation?

Did demographics and history determine Syria's fate? Only if we accept that these conditions are the causes of violence — a product of the "ancient hatreds" and not its effects. In the Syrian case, however, the evidence points in the opposite direction: polarization, extremism and fragmentation are the effects of escalating violence, not its causes. Participants in the uprising, as well as forthcoming research by Princeton political scientist Kevin Mazur, highlight the regime's instrumental use of violence to exacerbate sectarian tensions. Recent survey data reflect the impact of sectarian polarization in Syria after years of conflict, but also the extent to which Syrians continue to express tolerance and a desire for cross-sectarian compromises in the name of peace.

Despite deep flaws in the assumptions underlying the administration's policy, advocates of engagement inevitably run up against the ultimate defense of inaction: Syria just isn't worth it. Supporters of the administration's approach regularly fall back on the claim that the Syrian conflict is simply not central to U.S. strategic interests. Politically, they note, Syria has always been an adversary to the United States. Economically, its ties to the United States are trivial. However wrenching the conflict might be, the United States has little at stake in its outcome.

The only basis on which such a claim can stand, however, is to adopt an anachronistic, rigid conception of state interest — a conception the administration knows is inadequate in an era of hyper-globalization and increasingly porous state borders. Does the United States have an interest in preventing atrocities and supporting international mechanisms, such as Responsibility to Protect? Is it a matter of interest to the United States whether Iran consolidates its position as regional hegemon in the Arab east? Should the stability of Syria's neighbors matter to the United States? Is the stability of the European Union in America's interest? Does the United States have an interest in preserving a liberal international order that constrains authoritarian regimes such as Russia and Iran, including by raising the costs of aggression, whether in Syria or the Ukraine? As freedom of movement within the E.U. erodes, a global network of authoritarian regimes

emerges to weaken liberal norms and institutions globally, and while the Arab state order unravels, it is increasingly clear that what is at stake for the United States in Syria was never simply about U.S.-Syrian relations. It is sadly ironic that the president's commitment to inaction has undermined his vision of an international system in which military restraint and a smaller U.S. footprint would produce a more stable and peaceful international order.

What, then, are some of the preliminary lessons learned from the Syrian conflict? In the short term it is not too late for the incoming president to engage the United States more assertively in efforts to move the Syrian conflict toward a negotiated transition, on terms that increase the likelihood of a durable settlement that will not force Syrians to return to the brutal dictatorship of the Assad regime, or expose them to the equally brutal predations of the Islamic State.

What this will require is not direct military intervention but a willingness to apply American resources more forcefully toward a diplomatic outcome that meets the minimum requirements of all relevant actors — including security for all civilians regardless of sect. Without a willingness on the part of the United States to match Russian resolve and support the demands of the Higher Negotiations

Committee, this round of the Geneva talks is unlikely to fare better than the last, missing what may be one of the final chances to preserve Syria as an integral state.

In the long term, the futility of containment and costs of inaction certainly rank high among the lessons learned from the administration's failure in Syria. Effective strategy requires flexibility and a willingness to adapt as conditions change. Getting historical analogies right and not over-learning the lessons of the past are important. So too is the imperative of taking on board and weighing appropriately the potential "multiplier effects" of regional conflicts on the stability of the international system. It is imperative to establish criteria to determine when U.S. interests are sufficiently at stake to justify the use of force, either direct or indirect. Strengthening the institutions and mechanisms that expand the range of tools, both diplomatic and military, that are available to the United States to forestall humanitarian catastrophes like Syria and prevent governments from engaging in slow-motion genocide should be a paramount priority for the next U.S. president.

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The surprising ways fear has shaped Syria's war

By Wendy Pearlman, Northwestern University

As negotiations continue in Geneva, international observers and analysts struggle to comprehend the violence of the Syrian conflict. But how do Syrians themselves make sense of the horrors that have befallen their country? Since 2012, I have carried out open-ended interviews with more than 250 Syrians in Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates. The people I meet vary by age, class and region, but the large majority oppose the regime of President Bashar al-Assad.

Despite their differences, I find that their individual stories coalesce into a clear collective narrative. This narrative highlights many themes, from hope to resilience to crushing disappointment with a world that has abandoned them. One of the most central themes, I argue in a new article for *Perspectives on Politics*, is the overwhelming role of fear in shaping the lived experience of politics. I identify four different types of fear, each of which has different sources and functions.

Syrians' stories about life before 2011 call attention to a silencing fear that served as a pillar of the authoritarian regimes of Hafez al-Assad and then Bashar al-Assad. People consistently describe a political system in which those who had authority could abuse it limitlessly and those without power found no law to protect them. As one man explained: "We don't have a government. We have a mafia. And if you speak out against this, it's off with you to bayt khaltu — 'your aunt's house.' That's an expression that means to take someone to prison. It means, forget about this person. He'll be tortured, disappeared. You'll never hear from him again."

In this pre-revolutionary Syria, an omnipresent security apparatus brought threat of punishment to the street level. A lawyer described a world in which "a single security officer could control an area of 20,000 people holding only a notebook, because if he records your name in it, it's all over for you." Undercover spies and pervasive surveillance led parents to warn children not to speak because "the walls have ears."

"Nobody trusted anyone else," a rural dentist noted. "If anyone said anything out of the ordinary, others would suspect he was an informant trying to test people's reactions." A drama student joked, "My father and brothers and sisters and I might be sitting and talking . . . And then each of us would glance at the other, [as if to think] 'Don't turn out to be from the security forces!'"

Some people so internalized intimidation that they carried this propensity for self-censorship and silence beyond the homeland. A Syrian in exile since childhood noted: "When you meet somebody coming out of Syria for the first time, you start to hear the same sentences. That Syria is a great country, the economy is doing great. . . . It'll take him like six months, up to a year, to become a normal human being. To say what he thinks, what he feels. . . . Then they might start whispering. They won't speak loudly. That is too scary. After all that time, even outside Syria, you feel that someone is recording."

The spread of peaceful protests across the Arab world in 2011 helped launch a dramatically distinct experience of fear as a personal barrier to be surmounted. Syrians who participated in demonstrations explained that, aware of state violence, they never ceased to be afraid. However, they mobilized a new capacity to act through or despite fear. A mother told me that "no amount of courage allows you to just stand there and watch someone who has a gun and is about to kill you. But still, this incredible oppression made us go out . . . When you chant, everything you imagined just comes out. Tears come down. Tears of joy, because I broke the barrier. I am not afraid; I am a free being."

It is easy for rationalist-minded political scientists to underestimate the importance of this emancipatory, emotional moment. When I asked Syrians about their first demonstration, many insisted that the exhilaration of coming together with others to demand change was simply "incredible." A writer recounted her entry into protest as the transformative discovery of a sense of self

that had been subjugated: “I felt the barrier of fear inside. The first time I broke through it, I was in a demonstration. Others were shouting and I joined them. I started to whisper, *freedom*. And after that I started to hear myself repeating, *freedom, freedom, freedom*. And then I started shouting *freedom!* My voice mingled with other voices. I thought: this is the first time I have ever heard my own voice ... I wanted to feel this freedom forever. And I told myself that I would never let anyone steal my voice again.”

The Assad regime responded to peaceful protests with severe repression. As the opposition took up arms, the regime escalated to artillery, airpower and chemical weapons. United Nations investigators judged Assad’s assaults to constitute crimes against humanity. For civilians enduring war, inescapable violence ushered in a new experience of fear as a semi-normalized way of life. On the one hand, physical danger generated profound and visceral terror. On the other, danger was so relentless that it became the backdrop of the day-to-day. As one man shrugged, “We are all *mashrua’ shaheed*, martyrs-in-the-making.”

Syrians told me about children who distinguish between missiles by their different explosions, militants who need the sounds of bullets to sleep at night and doctors who planned their schedules around spikes in casualties anticipated for certain days of the week. An activist commented that people either accept the potential of dying at anytime or flee the country, provided that they have the means to escape.

Finally, the protraction of violence has produced yet another kind of fear: the nebulous trepidation of an uncertain future. This fear and uncertainty has proven decisive across many of the Arab transitions. Syrians I meet follow each new crisis, from the Assad regime’s use of newly horrific weapons to the rise of the Islamic State, and lament the fate of a revolution that now fights tyranny on multiple fronts. Nearly all expressed despair with the foreign agendas distorting what began as a popular groundswell for dignity. “Many countries have interests in Syria and they are all woven together like threads in a carpet,” a Free Syrian Army commander shook his head. “We don’t know where this is leading. All we know is that we’re everyone else’s battlefield.” The 20-somethings who

led demonstrations count lost comrades with a pain tinged with depression, even guilt. “I belong to the revolution generation, and I’m proud of that,” one young woman explained. “We tried our best to build something. We faced a lot, and we faced it alone. But we lost control. We don’t know what is useful anymore.”

Others identify a fear of losing themselves as individuals as they become extensions of a conflict with no end in sight. “Myself, as a person, I forget her features,” one woman explained. “We’re tired and can’t bear any more blood. We’re afraid. We’re afraid for Syria.” Many people’s most urgent fear is for their loved ones: children who have lost years of schooling, family scattered among Syria and several other countries, and relatives who have been arrested and never heard from again. A Syrian colleague articulated this fear in reaction to the January 2014 revelation of photographs evidencing systematic torture in regime prisons. “The most difficult part of the torture pictures,” he told me, “is not the decomposed flesh, the starved bodies ... or even the knowledge that the torture is both widespread and systematic. These things have always been elements of our Syrian reality. What is so difficult that I do not think we have the strength to overcome is the fear that some of these pictures may show us the body of someone we know and we hope is still alive.”

Syrians’ testimonials of fear provide a humanistic lens on what revolution and war mean to many who have lived it and been transformed by it. Apart from offering insight into rebellion, these voices also offer a chance to bear witness to rebellion in action. In describing how they have experienced the Assad regime before and since 2011, citizens are transforming its power from something too menacing to be named into something whose naming renders it contestable. When a state uses fear to silence subjects, their talking about that fear — articulating its existence, identifying its sources, describing its workings — is itself a form of defiance and an assertion of the will to be free.

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Yemen, five years gone

By Stacey Philbrick Yadav, Hobart and William Smith Colleges

The past five years in Yemen offer a bleak opportunity to reckon with failure. When protests began in January 2011, many Yemenis dared to hope for meaningful political change. Today, after the collapse of a poorly designed political transition and a year of ferocious war, the country's urban areas have been rendered unlivable, 21.2 million people are in need of immediate humanitarian aid, residents of Yemen's largest city live under siege conditions, and a civilian population with close to 2.5 million internally displaced persons is effectively trapped as the result of a naval and air blockade.

Yemen's horrific conditions today directly follow from the systematic conceptual and political failures of those who designed and administered the plan for a managed transition from the regime of former president Ali Abdullah Saleh. This Gulf Cooperation Council plan directly contradicted the primary goals of the 2011 uprising. After sustaining an 11-month uprising against prodigious odds, Yemenis found themselves shackled to a transitional agreement designed by a coterie of monarchs to protect the vested interests of a plutocratic elite.

It is safe to say that five years on, the GCC transition plan has fully failed – for many of the reasons about which Yemeni activists warned from the outset.

A central organizing slogan of the 2011 popular uprising in Yemen was “No tribes, no parties — our revolution is a youth revolution.” Although it was catchier in Arabic, it is easy enough to see that the popular protesters rejected the partisan landscape, including the formal opposition, as a whole. Those protesters were not a marginal or elite phenomenon. They included hundreds of thousands of diverse Yemenis, not only in the capital, Sanaa, but also in rural areas who flocked to local “change squares” across the country.

Yemen has the youngest population in a very young

region. It's clear why Yemenis might take issue with an ossified political class that had delivered little in the face of two decades of encroaching authoritarianism dressed in parliamentary clothes. Indeed, from the vantage of 2016, the whole of the 2000s reads as a record of the regime's gradually tightening grasp over the only node of opposition it could effectively manage and suppress and its failure to deal with the escalating crises of insurgency (in the north), secession (in the south) and episodic acts of extremist violence.

Yet the transitional agreement invested in precisely that partisan political class, crafting a transitional government composed of members of the former ruling party and a handful of allied opposition parties known as the Joint Meeting Parties. This left the bulk of the population unrepresented, with “outreach” efforts mandated by the transitional framework only partially and imperfectly undertaken. The parties, for their part, created more distance between themselves and their members by suspending internal democratic practices when their constituents wanted more accountability. Major insurgent and secessionist groups were left out of the new governing coalition, and the security-sector reforms necessary to successfully combat violent challenges to the transition were late arriving and similarly incomplete.

The National Dialogue Conference played a pivotal role, both signaling Yemen's political unraveling and contributing to it. Marred by obstructionism, it unfolded in a climate of increasing everyday violence. While the NDC was far more inclusive than other institutional components of the transitional framework, that inclusivity only cast into bolder relief how few voices were included in the substantive processes of transitional governance. In effect, the NDC provided groups with a voice but no real role in decision-making. When the NDC proved unwieldy, President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi simply worked around it with more manageable — but still less representative and wholly unaccountable — working groups.

After the NDC's conclusion, participating Yemenis were sent back to their corners in order to await the real work of governing, much of it done by presidential appointees and, in some cases, ad hoc committees. The release of a plan for federal districting by one such committee is often cited as the proximate cause of the war, as the draft was categorically rejected by the Houthis and their armed takeover of Sanaa soon followed. But it also speaks to fundamental tensions produced by a transitional framework that sought to contain "spoilers," without mechanisms to ensure accountability to large sections of the population.

The current war's consequences will be far-reaching in ways that require Yemeni and international actors alike to rethink some of their assumptions about who and what matters in Yemen and why.

The organized political parties — already substantially challenged during the uprising and transition— are now arguably irrelevant. The goal of "restoring the Hadi government," as such, has increasingly given way to other imperatives for all concerned. Going into this war — the first five months of which, the head of the Red Cross concluded, caused as much destruction as three years of war in Syria — Yemeni lives and livelihoods were already precarious, as the country ranked last or at the bottom of the region in a whole host of human development indicators, and it was already struggling with the effects of pervasive insecurity during the transitional period.

That said, the scale of destruction of infrastructure, housing and resources produced by 11 months of open war means that an already impoverished population will struggle to account for an internal displacement crisis and to secure the most basic of needs in at least 10 governorates that are experiencing a Phase 4 food emergency and are on the edge of famine. None of the current factions in Yemen's internationalized civil war show the willingness to prioritize these first-order civilian needs. Instead, there is evidence that both the Saudi-led coalition backing President Hadi and the Houthi-Saleh alliance control access to resources and the movement

of goods and people. Most damning is that fact that the region with the least violence and greatest food security is Hadramawt, under the local control of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) since April 2015. All parties, from the members of the Saudi-led coalition and its U.S. and British allies to the Houthis themselves, should be able to coalesce around the rejection of this condition. Instead, internally displaced Yemeni people are finding shelter in Mukallah under AQAP governance.

It is hard to envision an end to this war that either side — assuming there are only two, which is true only at the very broadest level — would consider a victory in military terms. The window for victory for the Saudi-led coalition has already passed. Ground forces aligned with the Houthis and Saleh loyalists — mainly irregular forces, albeit with some heavy weapons — have held a coalition with clear air and naval superiority at bay for nearly a year. Yet even in the unlikely case that either of these two groups managed to secure a military victory, there is little reason to believe that the Yemen they would inherit would be one that they could govern in any real sense. At the same time, many Yemenis will be loathe to turn to international actors to resolve this crisis, given the role of the United Nations and the GCC in laying the foundations for the conflict to begin with.

In light of serious allegations that coalition forces have been deliberately targeting Yemeni civilians and have used prohibited cluster munitions, several countries are now publicly questioning arms sales to Saudi Arabia and considering ways to promote greater accountability through the United Nations. British members of Parliament have called from the floor of the House of Commons for a halt to weapons sales, Germany has backed out of a weapons deal and Canadian support for existing deals is wavering. Recently, Sen. Chris Murphy (D-Conn.), who serves on the Foreign Relations Committee, called on his colleagues to consider the same.

While such moves might help to bring about more serious negotiations to end the war, any internationally brokered post-conflict reconciliation and reconstruction process

will have to contend with the same issues of inclusivity and accountability that were neglected in the 2011 transitional agreement. This time, however, the stakes will be higher, as planners will have to face the dual challenge of demobilizing militias and serving a polarized and devastated society. Until that time, the war goes on.

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Why Libya’s transition to democracy failed

By Frederic Wehrey, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

To visit Benghazi these days is to enter a stricken city, a city at war with itself. The site of the first protests in 2011, the courthouse and nearby buildings, are a no-go zone, a shambles of twisted iron and spilled concrete pocked by heavy caliber rounds. Those who gathered there in the heady days of the revolution are now on opposite sides of a conflict that has torn apart families, killed or wounded thousands, and displaced many more. All the while, the Islamic State moved in. Its black banners now flutter from ruined rooftops; its fighters hurl taunts in Tunisian-accented Arabic and blare recorded sermons across the front lines.

How did this happen?

The ultimate blame must lay with Muammar Gaddafi himself, who bequeathed Libyans a country without a state. Leaders of the new Libya found it hard to break free from the pull of an exploitative, hyper-personalized reign that pitted communities against one another and atrophied institutions, the sinews of governance. Of course Libyan actors carry responsibility; incompetence, petty vendettas, and an unabashed lust for power all played a role. So too did ambivalence and meddling by outside powers. A confluence of fateful missteps during and after the revolution set the country on downward spiral that will probably take years to reverse.

The revolutionaries were divided among themselves from the start. It was always a highly localized insurrection; neighborhoods and towns rose up bereft of unifying leadership or a shared vision. The fault lines were many: between communities enriched by Gaddafi’s rule and those marginalized by it; between Libyans who returned after decades abroad and those who stayed; between technocrats who had accommodated the regime and worked to reform it, and Islamists who languished in its prisons; between defected army generals and younger civilian fighters; between women who challenged the old patriarchy and conservatives who sought to enforce it.

Outside military support sharpened the fissures: Factional militias jostled for weapons shipments and training from competing patrons. The revolution’s fragile governing coalition, the National Transitional Council, proved powerless to bridge these divides and at any rate was overtaken by local forces and events on the ground. Whatever plans it had developed for the post-Gaddafi period, with outside help, dissolved on first contact. The fall of the capital proceeded pell-mell. Advancing militias seized airports, ports, armories and ministries as spoils to be converted into political power later on. Still, in those first several months after liberation, it was possible to be guardedly optimistic.

The United States returned to Libya, but with a narrow mandate and an overly optimistic assessment of the country's transition needs. "There was this sense that Libya had a lot going for it, that given its oil wealth and small population, this would not be a strictly bottom-up affair," one former White House official told me. Haunted by Iraq and Afghanistan, the Obama administration was desperate to avoid a nation-building imbroglio and a militarization of America's presence in Tripoli. The Libyans themselves feared a creeping occupation and were highly divided about how much Western assistance they wanted. Even the nominal troops at the American Embassy for security required calming assurances to Libyan leaders.

Much of the U.S. effort was focused on bolstering civil society, education and a free media, what one diplomat termed "nation-building by proxy." No doubt it was inspiring to watch the blossoming of voluntary associations, clubs, charities, and media outlets, unfettered by government control. And the United States and others did their best to nourish these groups. Yet the impact of aid was destined to be limited, given the absence for so long of meaningful people-to-people contacts between the United States and Libya under Gaddafi. Moreover, many of the Libyan civil societies, whose dual-citizen leaders gathered in marble hotel foyers eager for outside support, rarely penetrated beyond Tripoli or Benghazi. But perhaps most damningly, the absence of early Western assistance on the security front left the activists vulnerable to violence by militias and extremists.

Using elections as a marker of success

The United States ceded much responsibility to the Europeans and United Nations. But without a stabilization force, the United Nations mission was, by its own admission, ill equipped to handle the challenges of rebuilding the hollowed-out security sector and especially dismantling the well-armed militias. It focused instead on the preparing the country to vote for a national legislative assembly. For the country's transitional leadership and for the United States, so much was tied to those elections; too much, in retrospect. "We got distracted by the elections as

a success marker," an American development worker at the time told me. "Rushing the elections was a grave mistake," admitted one former senior UN official in Libya.

And rushed they were. The transitional leadership decreed that elections would take place 240 days after liberation — for a country that had not held national voting in more than half a century that is light speed. Some veteran scholars of democratic transitions warned at the time, almost prophetically, that holding elections in Libya so soon after conflict would lead to a relapse of civil war. When elections did happen, on July 7, 2012, they took place amid acts of armed coercion by federalists, tribal fighting in towns in the west and south and rising extremist violence in the east.

Still, turnout was relatively high and Western observers deemed the voting fair and transparent. Few within the NTC or in the West were naive enough to think that elections would themselves resolve the country's yawning divides. But the great hope was that the country's elected government would have stronger legitimacy to tackle growing lawlessness and insecurity. In fact, the new legislature, the General National Congress, entrenched and solidified factionalism.

Growing militia power

The contest for security institutions — for the monopoly of control on force — proved Libya's undoing. The NTC had at various times tried to dissolve the militias. At the same time, bereft of the ability to project its authority it began subsidizing militias, placing them on the nominal control of the ministries of interior and defense. But these ministries were themselves captured by competing political factions. The result was a swelling of militias — beyond the number that had fought in the revolution — and the formation of a localized, highly divided and hybrid-security sector that existed in parallel to the decrepit army and police.

The new elected government were unable to resolve the most pressing question of whether to preserve and reform the remnants of the old military or undertake a wholesale

remaking of the security structure that privileged younger revolutionaries. Even worse, figures within the GNC developed a symbiotic relationship with outside militias, who began threatening elected authorities over passage of a lustration law, kidnapped the prime minister, and seized oil facilities. Mindful that government could not even protect its own buildings or personnel, the United States, Britain, Turkey and Italy planned for the overseas training of a purportedly neutral army, the so-called general purpose force. But it was too little too late. Those trainees that returned found there was no military structure to join; they were put on indefinite leave or melted back into the militias.

Egypt's shadow over Libya

Another major shock to Libya occurred at the regional level. The rise of now President Abdel Fattah al-Sissi in neighboring Egypt and the subsequent crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood cast a long shadow over Libya. It sharpened a conspiratorial paranoia that had taken root in Libyan politics. This polarization was already well underway, fueled in part by the spread of highly partisan media funded by influential Libyans abroad. But after the crackdown in Cairo one started hearing the term "deep state" muttered fearfully and with greater frequency within Libya's Islamist and revolutionary circles. For their part, the ex-technocrats and officers, eastern tribes, federalists and some liberals started looking approvingly at Sissi as an exemplar for restoring order and, less nobly, excluding their opponents from power.

Nowhere was the "Sissi effect" felt more acutely than in Benghazi. Here, a wave of assassinations against military officers, police, judges and activiststerrorized the populace. Buoyed by this groundswell, Gen. Khalifa Hifter, a former Gaddafi-era military officer, launched Operation Dignity in May 2014, with the stated goal of evicting Islamist militias from Benghazi and restoring security. Less obvious was Hifter's desire to restore the primacy of the old officer corps within the security sector over the younger revolutionaries and Islamists. He forged alliances with a wide array of groups, included western Zintani militias with whom he had clashed in late 2011. Many of them

eyed him warily but saw a utility in joining his campaign to undermine their local rivals.

Hifter and his allies made a number of threats against the GNC and vowed to bring their military forces to Tripoli. These threats, along with losses in elections for the follow-on legislature to the GNC, spurred a counter-movement to Dignity, the so-called Dawn movement, which began with a military attack by Misratan, Islamist and western militias on Tripoli's airport to evict the Hifter-allied Zintanis.

Dueling factions backed by regional powers

What followed was the effective division of the country into two rival governments: one in the east, based in Tobruk and Bayda and allied with Hifter, and one in Tripoli, backed by a constellation of Misratan, Islamist and western militias. Regional military intervention sharpened the conflict. The UAE and Egypt backed General Hifter forces with airstrikes, weapons and special operations; Qatar, Turkey and Sudan backed elements of the Dawn coalition.

Enter the Islamic State

The ensuing war has brought Libya untold humanitarian and financial ruin, spreading to the central oil fields and the southern periphery. In Benghazi, the struggle created new space for extremists by making allies of disparate Islamist militias whom Hifter had lumped together. Worse, the fighting has taken on a vicious, communal quality between families and neighborhoods. Forced displacement, torture and summary executions are widespread on both sides.

Amid personal and tribal divisions, the Dignity campaign has stalled. For their part, power brokers in Misrata and Tripoli continued to play a dangerous game of shipping weapons to Benghazi's battle lines, where the distinctions between their favored militias and more radical groups like Ansar al-Sharia and, increasingly, the Islamic State, has blurred.

The Islamic State has seized on the vacuum to implant itself in Sirte, in surrounding towns in the so-called oil crescent, some neighborhoods in Benghazi, the environs of Derna, and Sabratha and Tripoli in the west. Fortified by an influx of foreign fighters and defectors from Ansar al-Sharia, it seems determined to disrupt the formation of the new government by cutting off oil revenue and attacking its fledgling security forces. The Dignity and Dawn fighting has enabled its spread; each side seems more focused on the other, and each has cynically accused the other of collusion with the Islamic State.

A unity government under stress

Under great pressure from the West and their respective regional backers, representatives from the two sides recently signed a U.N.-brokered agreement to form a unity government. But the new government faces enormous political and security challenges in taking office in Tripoli and exerting its authority. A key stumbling block

remains control over Libya’s military and specifically the continued role of Hifter as commander-in-chief of the Libyan National Army, which Dawn factions fiercely oppose. Another is the fragmentation and devolution of power within the Dawn and Dignity camps, so much so that they exist in name only. This not only opens door for spoilers and rejectionists, it complicates U.S. and other Western efforts to channel military aid in the fight against the Islamic State through a cohesive chain of command. It simply does not exist.

But perhaps most troubling has been the spread of a profound disenchantment with the revolution’s early promise, a despair that extends not just to democracy, but to politics itself. Along with the country’s ruptured social fabric, it is an affliction that will be difficult to remedy.

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Looking beyond the state
