

The Libyan Revelation: Why Recent Events in Libya Should Revolutionize  
America's Approach to the Muslim World

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**Abstract:** On September 11, 2012, Libyan militants attacked their country's US consulate and killed the American ambassador. Notwithstanding some alarmist reactions in the American media, the attack was not representative of post-revolution Libya, which is overwhelmingly democratic and pro-American. American support for the rebels has turned out to be one of the country's great foreign policy success stories. This success is partly attributable to the minimalistic nature of American involvement, which empowered Libyans to forge their own political destinies while avoiding the appearance of ulterior motives. Without an "occupation" to rally against, militant fundamentalists have alienated the Libyan population.

**Keywords:** Libya, Benghazi, Islam, Arab Spring, foreign policy

### I. The Destruction of an American Consulate and the Fog of Political War

On September 11, 2012, some fifty masked and heavily armed Islamists attacked an American diplomatic compound in Benghazi, Libya. The compound's staff was evacuated to another facility, but that facility came under mortar fire as well. By the end of the night, Ambassador Christopher Stevens, diplomat Sean Smith, two Navy Seals, and several Libyan security guards were among the dead.<sup>1</sup> Who exactly orchestrated the attack remains unclear, but participants were affiliated with a hodgepodge of militia and jihadist groups. A leading role may have been played by Ansar al-Sharia, an Islamist militia that participated in Libya's NATO-

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<sup>1</sup> Associated Press, "Attack on US Consulate in Libya Used Military Tactics but Level of Planning Remains Unclear," *The Washington Post*, September 21, 2012, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/attack-on-us-consulate-in-libya-used-military-tactics-but-level-of-planning-remains-unclear/2012/09/21/38035acc-0429-11e2-9132-f2750cd65f97\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/attack-on-us-consulate-in-libya-used-military-tactics-but-level-of-planning-remains-unclear/2012/09/21/38035acc-0429-11e2-9132-f2750cd65f97_story.html).

backed revolution in 2011 and has subsequently served as the security provider for Benghazi's main hospital.<sup>2</sup>

Coming as it did during a presidential election season, the attack was politicized almost the moment the first diplomat's blood hit the ground. During the next two months, a flood of hysterical media coverage sought to determine what had gone wrong, who was to blame, and how this could happen to a great power like the United States. Unfortunately, much of this coverage more closely resembled political propaganda than serious journalism.<sup>3</sup> The aftermath of an attack like the one in Benghazi is always chaotic and confusing, as journalists and intelligence agencies struggle to penetrate the "fog of war," but this one was doubly so because it was also shrouded by the fog of political war.<sup>4</sup> The unprecedented amount of media attention focused on this event should have served as a fog light or a foghorn; instead it was a fog machine.

The present paper focuses on one particular line of political fault-finding that portrayed the Benghazi attack as the result of American support for the Arab Spring and for the 2011 Libyan revolution.<sup>5</sup> One of the most ardent proponents of this line

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<sup>2</sup> Eli Lake, "Ansar al-Sharia's Role in Benghazi Attacks Still a Mystery," *Daily Beast*, November 5, 2012, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/11/05/ansar-al-sharia-s-role-in-benghazi-attacks-still-a-mystery.html>; Suzanne Kelly, Pam Benson, and Elise Labott, "US Intel Believes Some Benghazi Attackers Tied to al Qaeda in Iraq," CNN Security Clearance (blog), October 24, 2012, <http://security.blogs.cnn.com/2012/10/24/us-intel-believes-some-benghazi-attackers-tied-to-al-qaeda-in-iraq/>.

<sup>3</sup> David D. Kirkpatrick, "Election-Year Stakes Overshadow Nuances of Libya Investigation," *New York Times*, October 15, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/16/world/africa/election-year-stakes-overshadow-nuances-of-benghazi-investigation.html?pagewanted=all>.

<sup>4</sup> Aki Peritz, "How Critics of Obama's Libya Response Profoundly Misunderstand Intelligence," *The Atlantic*, October 2, 2012, <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2012/10/how-critics-of-obamas-libya-response-profoundly-misunderstand-intelligence/263139/>.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Pete Kasperowicz, "Rep. Gohmert Says Obama Helping to Build Second Ottoman Empire," *The Hill's* Floor Action Blog, September 21, 2012, <http://thehill.com/blogs/floor-action/house/251045-rep-gohmert-says-obama-helping-to-build-second-ottoman-empire>.

of reasoning was conservative commentator Ben Stein, who complained that Libya's former dictator Colonel Muammar Gaddafi was "our friend," and US President Barack Obama had "stabbed him in the back" by supporting the rebels. In so doing, Obama had "worked to create an 'Arab Spring' that has given us a fantastically more anti-American, anti-Israel, pro-al Qaeda Middle East."<sup>6</sup> Fellow conservative Dinesh D'Souza went so far as to claim that Obama's support for the Libyan rebels was motivated by jihadist sympathies and a desire to destroy America from within.<sup>7</sup> In a startling contradiction of George W. Bush's democratization policy in Iraq, Obama's critics now seemed to suggest that democracy only enables the violence and fanaticism of the Muslim masses—that violence and anti-Americanism are such essential features of Muslim identity that only coercive dictators can keep them in check.<sup>8</sup>

These sorts of claims were greatly facilitated by sensationalized media coverage of the Benghazi attack. As Republican candidate Paul Ryan said in a televised debate with Democratic Vice President Joe Biden, "what we are watching on our TV screens is the unraveling of the Obama foreign policy, which is making the [world] more chaotic [and] us less safe."<sup>9</sup> Indeed news coverage of Libya in the months following the attack tended to represent Libyans as violent and anti-

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<sup>6</sup> Ben Stein, "End Times," *American Spectator*, September 14, 2012,

<http://m.spectator.org/169477/show/5ac5659b4bad54584d1e6d32fbc87df0/>.

<sup>7</sup> *2016: Obama's America*, directed by Dinesh D'Souza and John Sullivan (Obama's America Foundation, 2012), DVD. This is the second highest-grossing documentary of all time. Scott Paulson, "'2016: Obama's America' Movie Grosses \$26 Million to Date," September 9, 2012, Examiner.com, <http://www.examiner.com/article/2016-obama-s-america-movie-grosses-26-million-to-date>.

<sup>8</sup> Meredith Blake, "Jon Stewart Slams Conservative Reaction to Middle East Unrest," *Los Angeles Times*, September 18, 2012, <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/tv/showtracker/la-et-st-jon-stewart-slams-conservative-reaction-to-middle-east-unrest-20120918,0,7530281.story>.

<sup>9</sup> "Transcript of Vice-Presidential Debate," FoxNews.com, October 11, 2012, <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2012/10/11/transcript-vice-presidential-debate/>.

American, while ignoring or minimizing evidence to the contrary. Television viewers were bombarded with footage of Ambassador Stevens's body, the diplomatic compound's burned-out ruins, and the violent behavior of the Libyan attackers. As if this bias toward violent images weren't enough, news agencies also eagerly supplied dark and misleading interpretations of those images. Fox News's Sean Hannity played a video clip of concerned Libyans checking Ambassador Stevens's pulse, but interpreted this as an act of abuse by "looters" who found the ambassador's body and "dragged [it] through the streets of Benghazi."<sup>10</sup> Contrary to Hannity's account, another video shows that the Libyans didn't know who the ambassador was, but rejoiced to find him still alive when they pulled him from the building, and subsequently carried him to a local hospital where an attempt was made to revive him.<sup>11</sup> Even more inflammatory than coverage on Fox was a report in the conservative *Washington Times* claiming Stevens was "sodomized" before being "murdered" by his attackers. This claim turned out to be an unfounded Internet rumor, which the *Times* hadn't bothered to source-check and later reluctantly withdrew.<sup>12</sup> Even when not reporting outright falsehoods, many news agencies interpreted the attack as a manifestation of "Muslim Rage," a phrase that

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<sup>10</sup> "Hannity: Chris Stevens's Body Dragged through the Streets," YouTube, uploaded September 21, 2012, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=Z2Tzn5Vh4Ow](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=Z2Tzn5Vh4Ow).

<sup>11</sup> Arwa Damon, "Video Purportedly Shows Libyans Rushing to Aid U.S. Ambassador," CNN, September 18, 2012, <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/09/17/world/africa/libya-benghazi-video/index.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Kerry Picket, "UPDATE – AFP Not behind Report of Purported Rape of Murdered U.S. Ambassador to Libya," *Washington Times*, September 13, 2012, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/blog/watercooler/2012/sep/13/picket-report-murdered-us-ambassador-libya-reporte/>.

essentialized Muslims and obscured legitimate grievances.<sup>13</sup> To put it bluntly, some media outlets allowed racist assumptions about Muslims to distort their narratives of events.

Lost in these bleak portrayals of Libyan violence was a more positive story of progressive political change. As argued in the next section of this paper, if the events surrounding the Benghazi attack were a commentary on American support for the Libyan revolution, they were a surprisingly positive one. Attacks on diplomatic targets in the Middle East are a regular occurrence under democracies and dictators alike, including under Colonel Gaddafi.<sup>14</sup> It's problematic, then, to blame the attack on Libya's revolution, except insofar as heavy weaponry is still freely available and the new government is still finding its feet. The people and government of the new Libya, in fact, made it eminently clear in the aftermath of the attack that they neither support nor tolerate such deeds. If anything, Libya is emerging as a strikingly progressive country and a paragon of what the Arab Spring could be.

What appears to account for the success of the Libyan experiment, as the last two sections of this paper argue, is a combination of the country's unique geography

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<sup>13</sup> Haroon Moghul, "Are Muslims Nuts?," *Religion Dispatches*, September 19, 2012, [http://www.religiondispatches.org/archive/atheologies/6401/are\\_muslims\\_nuts\\_/](http://www.religiondispatches.org/archive/atheologies/6401/are_muslims_nuts_/); Nael M. Shama, "Shallow Analysis Hides Real Reasons for Anti-US Rage," *Global Times*, September 26, 2012, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/NEWS/tabid/99/ID/735403/Shallow-analysis-hides-real-reasons-for-anti-US-rage.aspx>; Lawrence Pintak, "Framing the Other: Worldview, Rhetoric, and Media Dissonance since 9/11," in *Muslims and the News Media*, edited by Elizabeth Poole and John E. Richardson (New York: I.B. Taurus, 2006), 188-98.

<sup>14</sup> The eight years of the George W. Bush administration saw some sixty-four attacks on American diplomatic targets, including several that resulted in fatalities. This number was low compared to the senior President Bush, who saw more diplomatic attacks in four years than his son in eight. Democratic presidents have fared about the same. Adam Serwer, "The Truth about Attacks on Our Diplomats," *Mother Jones*, October 3, 2012, <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2012/10/libya-consulate-embassy-attacks-obama-romney>. For probable Gaddafi sponsorship of a 1979 embassy attack, see Yaroslav Trofimov, *The Siege of Mecca: The Forgotten Uprising in Islam's Holiest Shrine and the Birth of Al Qaeda* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 202-206.

and history with just the right kind and amount of Western involvement. The Libyan case suggests that the best results will be obtained when Middle Eastern democratic transitions are nurtured by Western powers rather than forced. The Libyan case also reveals that Islamic revolution needn't always be illiberal revolution. With time, patience, and circumspection, American support for Islamic democracies in the Middle East could produce gratifyingly progressive results.

## **II. One of the Great American Foreign Policy Successes**

Contrary to media portrayals of post-revolutionary Libya as an anti-American terrorist state, the new Libya has turned out to be surprisingly friendly to America and grateful for its support. According to Gallup, approval of the leadership of the United States jumped from thirty percent in pre-revolution Libya to fifty-four percent in March–April 2012, “among the highest approval Gallup has ever recorded in the Middle East and North Africa region, outside of Israel.”<sup>15</sup> Another post-revolution poll showed the United States with a ninety-percent approval rating in Eastern Libya, compared to just twenty-eight percent for the Salafists and thirty-one for the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>16</sup>

The scenario of a Libya ruled by Islamist radicals has also failed to materialize, as Libyans at the polls have preferred nationalists and liberals. A prime

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<sup>15</sup> Jay Loschy, “Opinion Briefing: Libyans Eye New Relations with the West,” Gallup World, August 13, 2012, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/156539/Opinion-Briefing-Libyans-Eye-New-Relations-West.aspx>; “Global Views of U.S. Leadership,” Gallup, 2012, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/142631/Worldwide-Leadership-Approval.aspx>.

<sup>16</sup> These are the proportions of respondents who had at least a “somewhat” favorable opinion of each group. France and NATO earned even higher approval ratings than the United States. Shabakat Corporation, *Survey of Public Opinion in Eastern Libya: October 12–25, 2011* (n.p.: The International Republican Institute, 2011), 18, 27, <http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2011%20December%2019%20Survey%20of%20Eastern%20Libya%20Public%20Opinion.%20October%2012-25.%202011.pdf>.

example is the President of Libya's General National Congress, Mohammed Magarief: a liberal academic who spent the last few decades coordinating the Libyan opposition from European exile. According to Al Jazeera, Magarief's party promotes "democratic government with constitutional guarantees, free and fair elections, free press, separation of powers, non-discriminatory rule of law, gender equality, multi-partyism, sustainable development, and a realistic democratic road-map that benefits from ... Nelson Mandela's democratisation experience."<sup>17</sup> Similarly, the candidates who faced off in Libya's largely overlooked runoff election for prime minister the day after the Benghazi attack were both American-educated technocrats. The Muslim Brotherhood's candidate didn't even qualify for the runoff, having placed a distant third in the general election.<sup>18</sup> Although the Brotherhood cast the deciding vote to pick the runoff's winner and was rewarded with a disproportionate number of cabinet seats by the Prime Minister-elect, this unrepresentative cabinet and the candidate who appointed it were immediately rejected by Libya's General National Congress, which then selected as Prime

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<sup>17</sup> Umar Khan, "Mohammed Magarief: From Libya's Most Hunted Man to National Congress Speaker," *Libya Herald*, August 11, 2012, <http://www.libyaherald.com/?p=12608>; Larbi Sadiki, "Libya's Postponed Democracy," *Al Jazeera*, April 19, 2011, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2011/04/2011415163618467700.html>.

<sup>18</sup> "Meet Mahmoud Jibril: The Man Who May Be Libya's First Elected Leader," *Time*, July 11, 2012, <http://world.time.com/2012/07/11/meet-mahmoud-jibril-the-man-who-may-be-libyas-first-elected-leader/>; Ashraf Abdul Wahab and Michel Cousins, "Abushagur Elected as Prime Minister," *Libya Herald*, September 12, 2012, <http://www.libyaherald.com/?p=14214>; "Mustafa AG Abushagur," *Academia.edu*, 2009, <http://rit.academia.edu/MustafaAGAbushagur>; Mustafa A.G. Abushagur, "Don't Give Up on Libya," *The Cap Times*, September 23, 2012, [http://host.madison.com/news/opinion/column/mustafa-a-g-abushagur-don-t-give-up-on-libya/article\\_e706a784-0430-11e2-a554-001a4bcf887a.html](http://host.madison.com/news/opinion/column/mustafa-a-g-abushagur-don-t-give-up-on-libya/article_e706a784-0430-11e2-a554-001a4bcf887a.html).

Minister a more congenial liberal: former Geneva-based human rights lawyer Ali Zidan.<sup>19</sup>

The real Libya was revealed not in the Benghazi attack itself, but in the country's response to it. Admittedly, local militias responsible for providing security in Benghazi apparently refused to come to the diplomatic compound's aid when called upon, though some volunteered to help on an individual basis.<sup>20</sup> This, however, was likely a manifestation of the delicacy of post-revolutionary politics rather than sympathy for Ansar al-Sharia. The Islamist group had been causing trouble in the area for several months, but the Libyan government had refused to authorize other militias to move against it, lest instability and violence ensue.<sup>21</sup> Despite the reticence of local militias, the embattled Americans eventually received help from Libyan military intelligence forces, which arrived late to the scene but escorted the survivors to the airport.<sup>22</sup> Whatever their failures during the attack itself, Libyans were extremely supportive of the United States after the attack was over. In the days following, the attack was roundly condemned by both the Libyan government and the country's top cleric, who issued a fatwa damning the culprits to

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<sup>19</sup> Associated Press, "Libya's National Congress Elects Ali Zidan as Interim Prime Minister," *Guardian*, October 14, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/oct/14/libya-interim-prime-minister-ali-zidan>.

<sup>20</sup> David Ignatius, "CIA's Benghazi Timeline Reveals Errors, but No Conspiracy," *Daily Star*, November 5, 2012, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Opinion/Columnist/2012/Nov-05/193732-cias-benghazi-timeline-reveals-errors-but-no-conspiracy.ashx#axzz2BQbfF3de>.

<sup>21</sup> "I Saw Islamists Attack the US Consulate in Benghazi," *France24: The Observers*, September 12, 2012, <http://observers.france24.com/content/20120912-exclusive-testimony-islamists-attack-us-consulate-benghazi-ambassador-libya-ansar-al-sharia-film-muslims>.

<sup>22</sup> David Ignatius, "CIA's Benghazi Timeline Reveals Errors, but No Conspiracy," *Daily Star*, November 5, 2012, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Opinion/Columnist/2012/Nov-05/193732-cias-benghazi-timeline-reveals-errors-but-no-conspiracy.ashx#axzz2BQbfF3de>.



hell.<sup>23</sup> At a more popular level, demonstrations in support of America were held throughout the country, and “sorry” became a trending topic among Libyans on Twitter.<sup>24</sup> As of September 28, Muslims from 110 countries—including many from Libya—had sent 7,000 condolence letters to the slain ambassador’s family.<sup>25</sup>

Even more stunning were the events of September 22. In a pre-planned protest, the citizens of Benghazi marched 30,000 strong, calling for rogue militias to be disbanded and incorporated into the national army. Some of the protesters carried banners memorializing Ambassador Stevens and chanted pro-American slogans. At the end of their march, the protesters ransacked the headquarters of Ansar al-Sharia, demanded its disbandment, and drove it out of town.<sup>26</sup> In a parallel action, the Libyan government continued a drive to clear militias from Tripoli.<sup>27</sup> The *Libya Herald* attributed these actions in part to the death of Ambassador Stevens, who was beloved by Libyans and has become something of a martyr for law and

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<sup>23</sup> Michel Cousins, “Libya Denounces Ambassador’s Killing,” *Libya Herald*, September 12, 2012, <http://www.libyaherald.com/?p=14174>; “Mufti Condemns Ambassador’s Killer, Blames Government for Not Standing Up to Extremists,” *Libya Herald*, September 15, 2012, <http://www.libyaherald.com/?p=14471>.

<sup>24</sup> Jessica Testa, “15 Photos of Libyans Apologizing to Americans,” BuzzFeed, September 12, 2012, <http://www.buzzfeed.com/jtes/12-photos-of-benghazi-citizens-apologizing-to-amer>; Donna Leinwand Leger, “Libyans Express Sorrow over Killing of Americans,” *USA Today*, September 15, 2012, <http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/story/2012/09/15/libyans-express-sorrow-over-killing-of-americans/57785218/1>.

<sup>25</sup> “‘Celebrate Mercy’: After Libya Attack, Muslim Condolence-Letter Campaign for Slain Ambassador’s Family Goes Viral (VIDEO),” *HuffPost Religion*, September 28, 2012, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/09/28/celebrate-mercy-libya-campaign-viral-muslim-group-condolence-ambassador-chris-stevens\\_n\\_1921221.html?ir=Religion&ncid=edlinkusaolp00000008](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/09/28/celebrate-mercy-libya-campaign-viral-muslim-group-condolence-ambassador-chris-stevens_n_1921221.html?ir=Religion&ncid=edlinkusaolp00000008).

<sup>26</sup> Richard Spencer, “Libya: Benghazi Crowds Drive Out Islamist Militias Blamed for Killing US Ambassador,” *The Telegraph*, September 22, 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/libya/9559743/Libya-Benghazi-crowds-drive-out-Islamist-militants-blamed-for-killing-US-ambassador.html>.

<sup>27</sup> Sami Zaptia, “Libyan Authorities Make Efforts to Rein-In Unlawful Militias,” *Libya Herald*, September 22, 2012, <http://www.libyaherald.com/?p=14918>.

order.<sup>28</sup> Clearly Stevens did not die in vain. His sacrifice may have accomplished more for the future of Libya than all our drones and bombs.

By all these measures and more, right-wing critics of American support for the Arab Spring are way out in left field. Support for the Libyan revolution has been not a failure, but one of the great American foreign policy successes. In a startling contrast to every other recent American military venture in the Middle East, the United States has succeeded in winning Libyans' hearts and minds, while Islamic fundamentalists have failed. If what worked in Libya can be identified and replicated, it could revolutionize America's approach to the Muslim world.

### **III. What Made Libya Different**

The Libyan revolution came at the end of a long decade of failed American efforts to democratize the Middle East, and comparison with those earlier failures is instructive. According to Lawrence Pintak, there was widespread sympathy for the United States among Muslims immediately after 9/11, with only a small minority saying the terrorist attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Center were justified. Yet within just a few years, America's approval rating in the Muslim world "was effectively zero." Polling data suggest that this astonishing reversal resulted not from oversensitive "Muslim rage," but from resentment of the terrible human toll exacted by America's post-9/11 foreign policy.<sup>29</sup> In 2001 the US led a NATO invasion of Afghanistan, where tens of thousands of civilians have been killed and three

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid. Michael Pearson, "Slain Ambassador Died 'Trying to Help Build a Better Libya,'" CNN, September 12, 2012, <http://www.cnn.com/2012/09/12/world/africa/libya-us-ambassador-killed-profile/index.html>.

<sup>29</sup> Lawrence Pintak, "Framing the Other: Worldview, Rhetoric, and Media Dissonance since 9/11," in *Muslims and the News Media*, edited by Elizabeth Poole and John E. Richardson, (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 190-91.

million more displaced, often directly by American forces.<sup>30</sup> In 2003 the US invaded Iraq, where more than a hundred thousand civilians have been killed and more than four million displaced.<sup>31</sup> While American news presented a largely bloodless view of these events, Arab news painted a graphic portrait of massive human suffering.<sup>32</sup> Further resentment was created by American support for Israeli violence in the West Bank and Gaza, including a 2002 incursion that killed or wounded some 2,000 Palestinians and destroyed eleven schools and thousands of homes.<sup>33</sup> By the time the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse scandal broke in 2004, it looked to Muslims like just another example of America's relentless crusade of misdirected vengeance. In Iraq and Afghanistan, in short, the United States spent its sympathy and squandered its support.

Some of the things that made the American intervention in Libya different from Iraq and Afghanistan were factors beyond American control, having to do with Libya's internal politics and geography. For example, since Gaddafi kept his military relatively weak to avoid a military coup, the rebels were able to win their fight with

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<sup>30</sup> For estimates of civilian casualties, see "Afghanistan Mid-Year Report 2012: Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict" (Kabul: UNAMA/OCHCR, July 2012), 1-7, <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/AF/UNAMAMidYearReport2012.pdf>; Mark W. Herold, "A Day-to-Day Chronicle of Afghanistan's Guerilla and Civil War, June 2003 – Present," 2004, <http://pubpages.unh.edu/~mwhherold/DaybyDayChronicle.pdf>. For estimates of refugee displacement, see Ami Sedghi and Simon Rogers, "UNHCR 2011 Refugee Statistics: Full Data," *The Guardian*, June 20, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/2011/jun/20/refugee-statistics-unhcr-data>.

<sup>31</sup> "Iraqi Deaths from Violence 2003-2011," Iraq Body Count, January 2, 2012, <http://www.iraqbodycount.org/analysis/numbers/2011/>; Associated Press, "U.N.: More Than 4 Million Iraqis Displaced," MSNBC, June 5, 2007 [http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/19055852/ns/world\\_news-mideast\\_n\\_africa/t/un-more-million-iraqis-displaced/#.UGj5603R6yY](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/19055852/ns/world_news-mideast_n_africa/t/un-more-million-iraqis-displaced/#.UGj5603R6yY).

<sup>32</sup> Pintak, "Framing the Other," 192-94

<sup>33</sup> "Report of the Secretary-General prepared pursuant to General Assembly resolution ES-10/10," United Nations, May 7, 2002, <http://www.un.org/peace/jenin/index.html>.

fairly little outside help.<sup>34</sup> Gaddafi also suppressed radical Islamists much more effectively than other dictators in the region, preventing them from doing the humanitarian work that made them so popular in Egypt. This meant that politically, after the revolution, the Muslim Brotherhood in Libya was “starting at square one—just like everybody else.”<sup>35</sup> Libya has also enjoyed relative stability since the ouster of the old regime, in contrast to Afghanistan’s Taliban insurgency and Iraq’s sectarian civil war. This is partly because Libya is a ninety-seven percent Sunni state with few sectarian tensions,<sup>36</sup> and partly because of its comfortable distance from meddlesome regional powers such as Pakistan and Iran.<sup>37</sup>

Still, these factors merely set the conditions for America’s successful involvement in Libya; the use made of them was equally decisive. The most striking difference from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, in fact, may be that the United States waited for such an opportunity at all. Those wars were unilaterally initiated by the United States, which imposed unwanted, unasked-for costs on the populations of the liberated countries. As a result, Americans bore the blame for the ensuing civil wars. In Libya, the US supported an indigenous revolution in progress; the rebels shouldered responsibility for the human toll. In addition to avoiding

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<sup>34</sup> Associated Press, “Qaddafi Survival Means Weak Army, Co-Opted Tribes,” CBS8, February 23, 2011, <http://www.cbs8.com/story/14084125/clampdown-in-libyan-capital-as-protests-close-in>.

<sup>35</sup> Abigail Hauslohner, “Why the Islamists Are Not Winning in Libya,” *Time*, July 10, 2012, <http://world.time.com/2012/07/10/why-the-islamists-are-not-winning-in-libya/?iid=gs-main-lede>.

<sup>36</sup> “The World Factbook : Africa : Libya,” The Central Intelligence Agency, September 24, 2012, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ly.html>.

<sup>37</sup> Ian Black, “Libyan Rebels Win International Recognition as Country’s Leaders,” *The Guardian*, July 15, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/jul/15/libyan-rebels-international-recognition-leaders>. However, cf. Steven Sotloff, “Why the Libyans Have Fallen Out of Love with Qatar,” *Time*, January 2, 2012, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2103409,00.html>; Christopher Rhoads and Drew Hinshaw, “U.S. Ties Libya Attack to ‘Powder Keg’ in Mali,” *The Wall Street Journal*, September 26, 2012, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10000872396390443507204578020672751302456.html>.

culpability, American leaders, before committing forces, were also able to see that the Libyan population was committed and the war was winnable.

A related difference between Iraq and Libya is that the United States acted in Iraq with minimal international support, while in Libya the US waited for NATO and the Arab League to lead the way.<sup>38</sup> Some Americans were disappointed with their country's lack of leadership, but from a public relations standpoint this was wise. An action led by an international body like NATO has more credibility than one led by the United States, because it is less likely to be motivated or co-opted by the interests of a single nation. Even more important was the support (if occasionally tepid) of the Arab League, which all but guaranteed a more favorable framing in the Arab media than in the US's previous wars.

An especially critical aspect of the Libyan conflict was the absence of Western forces on the ground. NATO's role in Libya was almost entirely restricted to material and aerial support. In a region still smarting from the legacy of imperialism, this was a prudent strategic decision. In Iraq and Afghanistan, the presence of American boots on the ground raised the specter of colonial occupation. And if Iraqis believed the US came as a colonial power, this can be seen as a logical conclusion given the history of the country. In fact, many Americans believed the same, pointing to the George W. Bush administration's history of concern that world production of crude oil might soon peak and decline, leading to an intense competition for control of

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<sup>38</sup> Ethan Bronner and David E. Sanger, "Arab League Endorses No-Flight Zone over Libya," *The New York Times*, March 12, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/13/world/middleeast/13libya.html?pagewanted=all&r=1&>.

remaining reserves.<sup>39</sup> In this context, many thought the Iraq invasion looked like strategic jockeying for access to Middle Eastern oil.

The US fueled this “occupation” narrative by leaving substantial stabilization forces in Iraq and Afghanistan after its objectives were achieved.<sup>40</sup> In both countries, the US became mired in civil wars that caused massive collateral damage and gave fundamentalist militants a way to portray themselves as the people’s champions, fighting to expel the “crusaders.” In Libya, by contrast, NATO gave the rebels enough air support to earn their gratitude, but deprived the Islamists of their favorite bogeyman by leaving no stabilization force on the ground. With no occupiers to rally against, the militants had no excuse; Libyans saw their trouble-making for what it really was. In an April 2012 Gallup survey, sixty-two percent of Libyans said Islamic militants posed a “major threat” to the country’s future, while only seventeen percent said they posed “no threat” at all.<sup>41</sup> The importance of NATO’s decision to stay out of Libya’s ground war was a principle that US Ambassador Christopher Stevens understood well, according to a colleague posthumously summarizing the slain ambassador’s views. Stevens, in his colleague’s paraphrase, believed Libya had “received the right measure of international help—enough to win their friendship, but not so much as to deny them ownership of their revolution.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> John Bellamy Foster, “Peak Oil and Energy Imperialism,” *Monthly Review* 60, no. 3 (July-August 2008), <http://monthlyreview.org/2008/07/01/peak-oil-and-energy-imperialism>.

<sup>40</sup> For perspective, it may be useful to imagine how the Patriot militias would have reacted if French assistance during the American Revolution— in reality almost exclusively naval—had involved large commitments of ground forces. Mistrust and terrorism would surely have ensued, especially if French “stabilization” forces had remained and French companies been awarded lucrative resource contracts after the British surrender.

<sup>41</sup> Loschy, “Libyans Eye New Relations with the West.”

<sup>42</sup> It’s a shame that in the artificial controversies about Stevens’s death, his own vision for Libya has almost never been referenced. Stevens’s murder does not mean his dream has failed. To the contrary,

This hints at another problem with the US's stabilization strategy in Iraq and Afghanistan, which is that it is not sustainable for indigenous leaders after the American departure. Particularly in Afghanistan, NATO tried to militarily impose a unified, centralized state on a region with little indigenous infrastructure and few effective institutions. However, as American forces withdraw, Afghan forces are left with no helicopters to supply their remote bases, no contractors to repair their equipment, and no leaders who can be trusted to assert order.<sup>43</sup> By contrast, Libyan leaders have developed their own stabilization strategies, which rely heavily on the development of indigenous networks, alliances, infrastructure, and security forces. These strategies are not always pretty, but they are sustainable and possess popular legitimacy. Further, because the apparatus of stability is hard-earned, Libyans have taken ownership of it. This, perhaps, is the most important point of all. Commitment to consensual, cooperative problem-solving strategies is something people develop through hard experience, not something that can be imposed through military force. This is not to say that Western powers must observe a policy of total non-involvement in Libya's stabilization process. Libyans are highly open to Western political, economic, and technical assistance, so long as it in no way compromises their sovereignty. While nearly forty-eight percent of Libyans still regard Western military forces as a "major threat" to the country's future, large majorities nevertheless favor the presence of Western governance experts and military

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Libyans' reactions to the tragedy of his death were a vindication of that dream. See Tom Malinowski, "The Libya Surprise," *Foreign Policy*, October 2, 2012, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/10/02/benghazi\\_libya\\_obama\\_stevens](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/10/02/benghazi_libya_obama_stevens).

<sup>43</sup> Kevin Sieff, "Months after Americans Leave, an Afghan Base in Disrepair," *The Washington Post*, August 2, 2012, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/months-after-americans-leave-an-afghan-base-in-disrepair/2012/08/02/gIQApMfzSX\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/months-after-americans-leave-an-afghan-base-in-disrepair/2012/08/02/gIQApMfzSX_story.html).

trainers.<sup>44</sup> This suggests that while stabilization works best when it occurs indigenously, Western powers can still play an important role as facilitators and advisors.

#### **IV. Going Forward: Religion, Risk, and Reward**

America's successful involvement in Libya suggests that the quest to promote democracy in the Middle East is not a hopeless one. It points the way, however, toward a subtler, lower-impact strategy for achieving that objective. The United States needs to play the long game: fostering indigenous democratic movements, harboring and educating political exiles, and limiting military involvement mainly to supply and support. It also needs to cultivate credibility by cooperating with international treaty organizations and holding itself accountable to international law. To be sure, America should not support just any revolution. In 1978 we supported the Iranian Revolution, only to have it hijacked by a theocratic oligarchy. In the 1980s we supported Afghanistan's Mujahedeen against the Soviet Union, leading to the ascendancy of the Taliban. Little good can come of supporting revolutionaries with illiberal aspirations or too little social capital to realize their goals.

What the Libyan case illustrates, however, is that "illiberal" is not the same as "Islamic." For all their hostility to fundamentalism, Libyans support Islamic governance by a wide margin.<sup>45</sup> This seeming disparity is possible because "sharia law" and political Islam come in many different forms. As Ed Husain reports, one fourteenth-century Muslim theologian understood sharia law as "the maintenance

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<sup>44</sup> Loschy, "Libyans Eye New Relations with the West."

<sup>45</sup> Shabakat Corporation, Survey of Public Opinion in Eastern Libya, 14-15.



of religious freedom, life, offspring, reason, and property. Any mode of government that provided for these five principles was Islamic government.” Husain rightly argues that the most effective antidote to hard-line Islamism is probably not secularism, but a more sober form of political Islam.<sup>46</sup>

Americans who fear an “Islamist Spring” should not forget the Christian roots of their own Revolution, which drank deeply from a Protestant well.<sup>47</sup> Several of America’s earliest political parties, such as Pennsylvania’s Quaker and Presbyterian Parties, were organized around Protestant denominations. Similarly, much of the recruiting for the American Revolution was done by radical Patriot clergy—known to Loyalists as the “black regiment”—who preached that resistance to evil rulers was a glorious Christian duty. Most early Americans also understood the principles of republicanism in decidedly Christian terms.<sup>48</sup> It may be naive, in fact, to expect anything else. In developing countries, religious groups are among the few types of organizations with the networks and popular commitment—the social capital—necessary for effective political mobilization.

This doesn’t mean, however, that these societies are eternally doomed to fundamentalist tyranny. For all the American Revolution’s lofty principles, early America was in some ways a profoundly illiberal place, rife with intolerance,

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<sup>46</sup> Ed Husain, “Radical Departure,” *New Statesman* 139, no. 4988 (February 15, 2010): 29-30.

<sup>47</sup> Heather Maher, “Muslim Protests: Has Obama Helped Bring On an Anti-U.S. ‘Islamist Spring’?,” *The Atlantic*, September 23, 2012, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/09/muslim-protests-has-obama-helped-bring-on-an-anti-us-islamist-spring/262731/>.

<sup>48</sup> R. Laurence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 67-89; Patricia U. Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven: Religion, Society, and Politics in Colonial America*, updated ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 162-216; Jeffrey H. Morrison, “John Witherspoon’s Revolutionary Religion,” in *The Founders on God and Government*, eds. Daniel L. Dreisbach, Mark D. Hall, and Jeffrey H. Morrison (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004), 117-46.

inequality, and violence.<sup>49</sup> Americans haven't transcended these things completely, but in the last few centuries have come a long way. In the Muslim world, as in early America, the drawback of democracy will be the risk of mobocracy. This risk, however, will be offset by the long-term effects of democratic structures of accountability, consensus, and development that will point these societies in more liberal directions.<sup>50</sup>

Already the post-Arab Spring Middle East may be experiencing the first stirrings of progressive political trends. In addition to the Libyan case already discussed, consider conservative Egypt, where liberal parties have now formed a united front and are actively agitating for a secular constitution.<sup>51</sup> Or consider Tunisia, where a new anti-Islamist political party has a growing base of around twenty to twenty-five percent of the country's support.<sup>52</sup> Even countries not directly affected by the Arab Spring may be progressively influenced by it. Saudi Arabia's monarchy survived the revolutionary swell partly by being responsive to calls for reform, including recently curtailing the powers of its religious police.<sup>53</sup> And

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<sup>49</sup> See, for instance, Richard Maxwell Brown, "Historical Patterns of Violence in America," in *The History of Violence in America: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*, eds. Hugh Davis Graham and Ted Robert Gurr (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1969), 45-89.

<sup>50</sup> Rami G. Kouri, "New Arab Realities," *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, September 23, 2012, <http://www.aucegypt.edu/gapp/cairoreview/Pages/articleDetails.aspx?aid=237>.

<sup>51</sup> Mohamed Abou al-Aynaynn, "Massive New Coalition Unites to Rival Political Islam in Egypt," *Al-Monitor*, October 11, 2012, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2012/10/egypt-civil-democratic-movement-forms-to-unite-liberal-groups-against-religious-forces.html>; Ahmad Mustafa, "Demonstrations Planned against Draft Egyptian Constitution," *Al-Monitor*, October 11, 2012, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2012/10/egypt-constitution-protests.html>.

<sup>52</sup> Nizar Bahloul, "Tunisia Party Fights Islamization, Raises Ire of Ruling Ennahada," *Al-Monitor*, October 6, 2012, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2012/10/nidaa-tunis-the-current-governments-nightmare.html>.

<sup>53</sup> Ahmad Dahman, "Saudi Youth Push Back Online against Saudi 'Virtue' Police," *Al-Monitor*, October 13, 2012, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/culture/2012/10/saudi-religious-police.html>; The Associated Press, "Saudi Religious Police Losing Some Powers," Yahoo! News, October 3, 2012, [http://news.yahoo.com/saudi-religious-police-losing-powers-132952802.html?utm\\_source=twitterfeed&utm\\_medium=twitter](http://news.yahoo.com/saudi-religious-police-losing-powers-132952802.html?utm_source=twitterfeed&utm_medium=twitter).

in Pakistan, thousands recently took to the streets to protest a Taliban assassination attempt against a fourteen-year old activist for female education.<sup>54</sup>

All of this suggests that the West should look upon support for Arab revolutions as investments: with short-term risk comes the potential for long-term reward. Like all investments, these will need to be made carefully and guarded closely. But if the lessons learned from Libya can be successfully implemented in other cases, the potential rewards are enormous. Taking the time to learn those lessons may prove to be the most rewarding investment of all.

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<sup>54</sup> Adil Jawad and Sebastian Abbot (Associated Press), "Thousands Rally for Pakistani Girl Shot by Taliban," Yahoo! News, October 14, 2012, <http://news.yahoo.com/thousands-rally-pakistani-girl-shot-taliban-131837818.html>.

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