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How the West wrecked Libya

Far from being a model for future interventions, Libya shows that meddling strangles the democratic impulse.

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‘People in Libya today have an even greater chance after this news of building themselves a strong and democratic future. I am proud of the role that Britain has played in helping them to bring that about.’

So **declared** UK prime minister David Cameron last year following the announcement that former tyrant Muammar Gaddafi had met his end at the hands of Libyan rebels just outside Gaddafi’s hometown of Sirte. Cameron’s response typified the self-congratulatory backslapping of Western leaders. Western intervention, in their eyes, had saved the Libyan people in their hour of need and dislodged the great ogre Gaddafi and his rotten regime. Now the Libyan people could begin to build a ‘strong, democratic future’.

Blinkered by a Manichean mindset, which characterised their kneejerk meddling in Libya’s affairs from the start, Western politicians and their media cheerleaders genuinely seemed to believe that saving Libya would be that simple. To help the liberated Libyans on their way, the ‘international community’ **thoughtfully cherry-picked** a National Transitional Council (NTC) -

headed by former Gaddafi cronies and an eclectic mix of other individuals - who spent much of their time during the rebellion last year reassuring the West that they would be suitable caretakers of a post-Gaddafi Libya. Many then flew into Libya to take the reins once Gaddafi fled Tripoli. What could go wrong?

It can surely bring no pleasure to anyone, except perhaps to the ghost of 'Mad Dog' Gaddafi, to report that post-Gaddafi Libya is currently a fragmented mess. And the outlook is bleak. One of the principal reasons for this – as reflected by ongoing protests in the country – is the impotence of the NTC, which has failed to gain the mandate of the Libyan people. Indeed, this unelected body often seems more concerned with the upcoming showtrial of Gaddafi's son Saif, being conducted in Libya under the strict guidance of the International Criminal Court (ICC), rather than with bringing about democracy in Libya.

Over the past couple of months, there have been ongoing protests in Benghazi, the second largest city in Libya, which indicate there is little public satisfaction with the transitional government. Protesters are complaining about issues ranging from a lack of transparency regarding who is on the Council and its operations, to support for the thousands of rebels who participated in the uprising. After over a month of nightly protests, in January several thousand protesters [stormed a government building](#) where the NTC was meeting, some throwing grenades and Molotov cocktails. This led to the resignation of the NTC's deputy head, Abdel Hafiz Ghoga, who - according to the BBC - was [singled out by protesters](#) as being 'an opportunist, who switched allegiances from the regime of Colonel Gaddafi as the uprising gained strength'.

Criticising the protesters' actions, NTC chairman Mustafa Abdel Jalil [claimed](#), 'there is something behind these protests that is not for the good of the country'. The main argument he could come up with to try to placate protesters, however, was that if they didn't support the NTC, they might 'take the country to a bottomless pit'.

With no centralised army backing the NTC, much of the military power lies instead in disparate groups of militias – formed during the struggle to oust Gaddafi - which have become laws unto themselves. As Tessa Mayes [reported](#) on *spiked plus* last month: 'Following the overthrow of Gaddafi, everyone seems to have guns. Even the Libyans who told me they never expected to use a gun now have one. You can hear celebratory gunfire in Tripoli most afternoons. And how and why did they get the guns? One man told me, "boats full of guns arrived last year and we took them to our neighbourhoods to protect ourselves".'

Protests have been taking place in Tripoli to restrict the carrying of firearms by militias, but these rebels without a cause have so far been unwilling to hand over their weapons, demanding that first they are properly rewarded by the interim government for their service in the uprising. Abdul Naker, commander of one of the largest militias in Tripoli with 20,000 men, [told Reuters](#) that the rebels would not 'join the government initiative until they clearly know what are the benefits they will receive... The people need higher salaries, economic stability, medical insurance, houses and cars, young single men want to get married. We want Islamic, interest-free loans so that we can live in prosperity. Why doesn't the government give us loans of 100,000 Libyan dinars (\$60,000) to realise our dreams?'

Militia from Libya's third-largest city Misrata currently control Sirte, Gaddafi's hometown, in a way that some describe as being like an occupation. Much of the city – once one of the most developed in the whole region – has been reduced to rubble and there seems little desire to invest in rebuilding it. Even the rebuilding of Libya's oil-extraction infrastructure, crucial for the regeneration of the country's economy, is proving to be a slow process, with analysts [estimating](#) that a return to the pre-conflict level of 1.6million barrels extracted per day is unlikely to happen for a few years.

On top of this, tens of thousands of people with connections to the former Gaddafi regime are incarcerated and reports abound about prisoners sporadically suffering brutal treatment. There are also reports of forced displacement. For example, Tawergha, a town close to Misrata, has become a 'ghost town', with an estimated 30,000 residents being forced to leave their homes, 'in what looked like an act of revenge and collective punishment carried out by anti-Gaddafi fighters'.

Amid the chaos, however, the people of Libya have far from given up. For example, frustrated with the NTC's hesitancy to call elections, the citizens of Misrata have taken it upon themselves to hold independent elections for the city council, ousting the self-appointed councillors that came to power during the uprisings last year. This election, [according to Associated Press](#), was 'the first experiment in real democracy anywhere in Libya' since Gaddafi came into power. While this is undoubtedly a positive step, it may also represent an increasing dissolution of Libya into disparate city states that have nothing to unify them.

No-one is more culpable in this state of affairs than the Western powers who – without any coherent strategy - decided to interfere in the affairs of this sovereign country. In doing so, they ripped the democratic initiative out of the hands of the rebelling Libyan people themselves – thus bringing an abrupt halt to the struggle for leadership, the battle of ideas, the necessary resolution

of internal conflicts and differences that could have led to the Libyan people attaining a more unified vision of what a post-Gaddafi Libya could look like. Having been handed ‘liberation’ from the old regime by well-meaning Westerners, this necessary – albeit difficult - struggle to develop a collective sense of purpose failed to take place. The upshot is that Libya is run by an unelected clique with seemingly scant legitimacy in the eyes of the people; all the NTC has to offer as a rallying call is ‘support us or a bottomless pit awaits’.

Despite all this, some are still heralding the West’s intervention in Libya as a success – and considering it as a potential model for use in Syria. A Syrian National Council (SNC) has been formed, headed by an ex-patriot Syrian working as a sociology professor at the Sorbonne, Paris. An increasing number of countries and international bodies – including the EU – have now [recognised the SNC](#) as the ‘official opposition’ to Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad. And, despite Russia and China’s veto of a UN Security Council motion condemning Assad, intervention has already begun in the form of crippling sanctions – with no-fly zones, secure training areas and the supply of weapons to the Free Syrian Army being mooted by many countries. Further intervention seems to be imminent. As French president Nicolas Sarkozy [declared last week](#), following the deaths of a French photographer and a British journalist in the besieged Syrian city of Homs: ‘That’s enough now, the regime must go.’

The question of whether the Libyan ‘model’ for intervention is one that could be repeated in Syria, or if another option is preferable, is currently being hotly debated by Western elites. Instead they should take a cold, hard look at the vacuum created in post-Gaddafi Libya and realise the best option is to let the Syrian people determine their own futures.