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Libya two years on: the American perspective

Professor Scott Lucas

Last September, Libya re-emerged in headlines in the US with protests and violence at the US Consulate in Benghazi, culminating in the death of the American Ambassador, Chris Stevens, and three other US personnel.

However, the ensuing discussion was not as much a reflection on Libya after the fall of the Qaddafi regime in 2011. Instead, amid the campaign for November's Presidential election, it was a political fight within Washington. The Obama Administration was pilloried over intelligence failure and supposed appeasement of "terrorists", with little reference to the complexities of the political, economic, and social situation from Tripoli to Misurata to Benghazi.

The episode illustrated that, far from being an integral part of the Libyan scene - and beyond that, the "Arab Spring" - the US Government had found itself searching for a role, if indeed it wanted one.

It is usually forgotten that the US was reticent in the first wave of the Libyan Revolution, from the initial protests in Benghazi to the call for mass demonstrations on 17 February 2011. For several years, there had been a move by the US and European partners towards reconciliation with Muammar Qaddafi, and it was unclear how the protests would affect the evolving political and economic ties. Qaddafi's attempt to crush the uprising in Benghazi, with the prospect of thousands of deaths, altered that situation: the Obama Administration - albeit in the guise of "leading from behind" - pursued what it would call a "humanitarian intervention" with NATO.

That intervention did not necessarily envisage the fall of Qaddafi, at least as quickly as it occurred in October 2011, nor did it envisage what would occur with the "new Libya". Instead, American attention appeared to fall back, in light with the broader theme of US foreign policy, on the template of guarding against "extremism". While the US offered support for some post-Qaddafi development projects - Stevens was reportedly in Benghazi on 11 September 2012 to discuss initiatives - its emphasis was on the monitoring of militias and other groups seen as hostile to "America". According to some reports, the majority of personnel in the US Consulate in Benghazi were CIA personnel.

The re-branded American War on Terror - a mandate to strike the "associates of the associates of Al Qa'eda", in the latest approach of the Obama Administration - is likely to continue this selective framing. Recent events in Mali and Algeria have furthered Washington's presentation of North Africa as a theatre for military and covert counter-terrorist operations, including drone strikes, as local developments are viewed through the prism of "anti-US extremism".

In part, however, the American approach may be one by default. Despite the perpetual rhetoric of American primacy, the US cannot be assumed to be at the centre of developments, even if it desired that place.

None of this is to minimise the challenges that Libya faces. As I write, the General National Congress has suspended its activities after debates were interrupted by armed protesters. However, the country cannot be placed in the easy, post-Cold War categories of "democratic success" or "failed State". Those are artificial terms which will do little to illuminate how challenges are faced in a country, diverse in its geographic, religious, and ethnic make-up, trying to negotiate political and economic challenges after more than 40 years of authoritarian rule.

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