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Libya and U.S. Long-Term Engagement

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Libyan popular and political support for engaging the international community offers the United States and Western partners an opportunity to help stabilize a North African energy producer and encourage orderly political change. Conversely, a failure to act could have costly, long-term regional and international security consequences. Domestic political limitations to direct U.S. government engagement, along with other issues that compete for attention and resources, are constraints on a more active policy. Moreover, Libyans themselves would not tolerate a dominating U.S. role. There is room, however, for the United States to expand a modest official presence and nurture extensive private sector assistance to Libya. Visa issuance, trade promotion, educational exchange, and cautious use of military training and equipment are promising tools. Politically, U.S. officials can best promote U.S. interests and build Libya's capacity for stable self-rule by working behind the scenes and with the United Nations, NATO, the EU, and the Friends of Libya.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Avoid a high profile for U.S. official presence in Libya. When possible, operate behind the scenes and in the company of others.
- Support the United Nations as the lead international actor on Libya's constitutional and political evolution.
- Continue current levels of U.S. political and security involvement but be wary of hard to sustain long-term commitments.
- Use leverage of the U.S. private sector. Helping the Libyan government to build infrastructure and deliver services and jobs to the Libyan people is best done by private firms. This is beginning to happen, as the government recognizes that it must do more than come to power constitutionally and reestablish security if it hopes to gain a public perception of legitimacy. There would be limited support in Congress and among the American public for official U.S. government assistance in these areas, but an Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC) agreement should be put in place, as well as an active Foreign Commercial Service.
- Resume full consular services for U.S. citizens in Libya and for Libyans seeking visas to the United States.
- Renew a focus on developing links to U.S. universities. Many Libyans have positive memories of U.S. higher education and want to send their sons and daughters for similar experiences. Efforts by the Libyan Embassy in Washington to foster these links would be welcome.
- Offer training and equipment to the Libyan armed forces as they gain some traction. U.S. defense companies are prepared to supply such resources.
- Support the Libyan police on a contractual basis. Highly qualified U.S. firms are prepared to offer this aid.

Libya's post-Qaddafi fate is existential for Libyans and extremely important for its African and European neighbors. It also impacts key interests of the United States, especially in the realm of regional security and counterterrorism. Potentially, Libya's political evolution can either validate or call into question the support of the United States for democratic transitions in the Arab world.

Domestic issues dominate the thinking of most Americans and their elected leaders, while the 2014 foreign policy agenda of the U.S. government is very full. President Obama and Secretary Kerry have made it clear that global trade and climate change are top priorities. Challenges from North Korea to Crimea demand that the United States play urgent leadership roles. Even when Washington policy makers narrow their focus to the Middle East and North Africa, several issues are likely to loom larger than Libya, such as an Israeli-Palestinian settlement, relations with Iran, and the future of Egypt, Iraq, and Syria. It would be tempting but probably too easy to write off greater U.S. engagement in Libya in view of that country's knotty internal problems and competing U.S. priorities, as well as the greater relative interests that NATO and the E.U. have in Libya.

But there are good arguments for the United States to give more attention to Libya than it currently does.



David Mack

Since 2003, Ambassador David Mack has advised U.S. firms on doing business in Libya. He previously served as acting president and vice president of The

Middle East Institute, where he remains as an adjunct scholar. Mack served for over 30 years in the U.S. Foreign Service. His assignments included deputy assistant secretary of state for Near East affairs (1990-93), ambassador to the United Arab Emirates (1986-89), and second secretary in Libya (1969-1972). Mack arrived in Libya six weeks before the September 1969 revolution to serve as political officer and interpreter for the U.S. ambassador. During three years in Tripoli and Benghazi, he attended meetings with Muammar al-Qaddafi and other Libyan leaders. Since leaving the State Department in 1995, he has met frequently with Libyan personalities in both the United States and in Libya. Ambassador Mack writes articles and delivers lectures on U.S.-Libyan relations.

- The Libyan struggle for democratic change is broadly popular. Libyans own their uprising against the Muammar al-Qaddafi regime and their resistance to extremist factions trying to exploit the resulting turmoil. Starting in 2011, Libyan leaders outlined a road map for

constitutional development and have tried to adhere to its broad goals. They have placed the process of change above individual ambitions to grasp and hold power.

- Libya has the potential for a prosperous economy that could be a force for greater stability and development in the Mediterranean, Arab, and African regions.

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- Conversely, if Libya spirals into the category of a failed state with vast ungoverned spaces, it will become an even more negative strategic reality in these regions. Terrorism, weapons proliferation, criminality, and unrestrained migration are clear threats. Libya’s location on a long Mediterranean coastline with a southern border open to the African continent would become a liability rather than an asset. A version of Somalia on the Mediterranean would force Western intervention on terms worse than the present ones.
- Libyans welcome active engagement by the United Nations, NATO and European Union governments, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and

other institutions prepared to help Libya stand on its feet. While Qaddafi viewed the United Nations and the World Trade Organization with hostility, Libyans are now eager to be full members of the global community.

- Libyan oil and gas are not large parts of the global energy pool, but they are important in the Mediterranean energy market. European desire to reduce reliance on Russian gas increases this importance.

- A limited number of U.S. firms have business interests in Libya despite political constraints, and the commercial potential is much greater.

- The Libyan government has been open to U.S. and other Western civil society institutions in the areas of education, democracy, and human rights. After some initial delay, it has resumed commercial ties with capable international firms to build infrastructure, deliver services, and create jobs. Such activities can multiply the effects of official engagement by the United States and its Western allies.

Washington has resisted a major temptation in dealing with change in Libya. It has minimized unilateral measures or operations with only a few partners, even though that might have enabled quicker decisions. When others have been prepared to step up to a problem involving Libya, the United States has supported international efforts

and Libyan sovereignty in a manner acceptable to congressional and public opinion. Yet when the United States has needed to act unilaterally or in discreet partnership with the Libyan government it has done so. Examples are the arrest and removal for trial of a suspected al-Qa‘ida associate and the seizure of an oil tanker operating in violation of Libyan sovereignty. The United States must be ready to conduct operations of similar limited scope when the circumstances strongly support such actions. It would be preferable, however, to develop greater Libyan capacity and willingness to take on such necessary measures.

Some critics of the Obama administration have argued that the United States should exercise more assertive leadership and show less restraint in the use of military force. Others have warned that an American public weary of foreign adventurism, particularly of a military nature, would not sustain more vigorous U.S. engagement.

There are other legitimate grounds for caution. After a bitter colonial legacy and a historic memory of being a battleground for external powers, Libyans could exhibit a negative backlash. Whatever Libyans tell us today, they have a history of suspicious resentment of outside intervention. Although Libya lacks the deep ethnic and sectarian fault lines found elsewhere in the

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region, a productive balance between powerful local identities and an effective central government has yet to emerge. Indeed, few countries have weaker central government institutions. Finally, Libya could become another morass for U.S. military forces.

Thus, while there are solid arguments for more U.S. involvement in Libya, there are also many reasons to proceed with caution. Essentially, Libya matters, but what should the United States do about it? A number of options are available.

Diverse Strategies for Engagement

Option One – Expansion of U.S. Government Support for Private Sector Assistance to Libyan Institution Building

- Avoid a high profile for U.S. official presence in Libya. When possible, operate behind the scenes and in the company of others.

- Support the United Nations as the lead international actor on Libya's constitutional and political evolution.
- Continue current levels of U.S. political and security involvement but be wary of hard to sustain long-term commitments.
- Use leverage of the U.S. private sector. Helping the Libyan government to build infra-structure and deliver services and jobs to the Libyan people is best done by private firms. This is beginning to happen, as the government recognizes that it must do more than come to power constitutionally and reestablish security if it hopes to gain a public perception of legitimacy. There would be limited support in Congress and among the American public for official U.S. government assistance in these areas, but an Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC) agreement should be put in place, as well as an active Foreign Commercial Service.
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Option Two – Full Engagement

- Expand programs to build Libyan military capacity with other NATO partners.
- Bolster Libyan capacity with an in-country presence of a modest number of U.S. military trainers and advisors.
- As Libyan military capacity develops, AFRICOM should engage in joint exercises with Libyan units.
- Consider direct U.S. government support for Libyan police and border security forces. Encourage NATO allies to do the same.
- Build on Libyan eagerness for U.S. higher education through a major program of educational exchange, including Fulbright professors in Libyan universities and rapidly expanding opportunities for Libyan students in U.S. universities.
- Commit to long-term direct government support of Libya's democratic political institutions and use U.S. influence to make the process successful.
- Recognize Libyan diversity by engaging with regional political actors as well as the central government. Although it may be impractical to reopen a U.S. dip-

lomatic office in Benghazi in the near term, frequent official visits to Benghazi, Misurata, Sabha, and other regional centers is desirable.

- Institutionalize the current Friends of Libya group, recognizing that stabilizing Libya is a long-term responsibility and that the U.N. role is limited by the veto power of permanent members of the Security Council.

Option Three – Limited Engagement to Combat Terrorism

- Continue to build Libyan military capacity with other NATO partners.
- Be prepared to bolster Libyan capacity with an in-country presence of U.S. military trainers and advisors.
- Consider direct U.S. government support for Libyan police and border security forces and insist that NATO countries do the same.
- Make it clear to the Libyan government that the United States expects cooperation against terrorist groups and reserves the right to use its own measures if cooperation falls short.
- Offer U.S. expertise and, as necessary, direct involvement.
- Avoid commitments in the areas of political and economic development. Over time, Libyans will quickly come to resent outsiders who exert influence in these areas.

Option Four – Defer to European Partners

- Continue to help organize international support for Libyan sovereignty and stabilization, but do not expand U.S. government engagement much beyond what it is already doing.
- Urge the E.U. and individual governments to play a more active role in Libyan security while limiting U.S. exposure to cooperation with NATO programs and low-key military liaisons.
- Gradually phase out direct U.S. government support for the Libyan armed forces while encouraging qualified U.S. firms to seek contracts in this area.

Recommendation

Some version of Option One best accords with the long-term interests and sustainable capacity of the United States. It is the best match to U.S. interests, U.S. unique capabilities, constraints on U.S. resources, respect for Libyan sovereignty and national pride, and the desirability of acting within a coalition that enjoys international legitimacy.

Explanation and Guide to Decision Making in Libya

The worst thing would be for the United States to promise more than it can deliver over the period of at least five years that

would be necessary for more direct nation building.

Better a large coalition than engagement that looks like the United States is trying to play not merely a leading but the dominant role. The United Nations, NATO, and other parts of the international system are desirable instruments for burden sharing. In particular, the U.N. enjoys a strong reputation in Libya due in part to its role in Libyan independence and its early efforts at constitutional governance. In some key respects, the E.U. is a more natural economic and political partner for Libya than the United States, which should give Western Europeans no excuse to avoid major commitments. Aside from commercial promotion, U.S. interests regarding Libya are not competitive with those of Western Europe. As an ad hoc group, the Friends of Libya has been a useful way to mobilize international support from individual governments and from more permanent institutions. It has the added virtue of a place at the table for Arab governments friendly to the United States that may have particular assets that supplement American ones.

Individual Libyans may seek greater direct U.S. government involvement in Libyan politics and constitutional development. Most Libyans, however, would resent this, and the resentment would increase as years pass. Libyan politics are a potential swamp into which the United States government would be wading at its peril.

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In the commercial area, the United States should insist on an even playing field rather than demanding special advantages for American firms. If Libya improves its procedures for doing business in a transparent way according to international norms, the most qualified international partners are likely to benefit. If the U.S. government engages in a modest level of trade promotion, U.S. companies will be among the winners in the Libyan marketplace.

The United States has the tools to take direct military action in the rare situations in which it would fit its national interest. Finding the right target to bomb in Libya is harder than delivering the pay load. ■

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