David Cameron, Libya and Disaster

The Findings of the UK Foreign Affairs Select Committee

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The UK Foreign Affairs Committee was a long time coming with this judgment, but when it came, it provided a firm reminder about how far the 2011 intervention against the Gaddafi regime was not merely flawed but calamitous in its consequences. There had been no coherent strategy on the part of the Cameron government; the campaign had not been "informed by accurate intelligence."

For members of the committee, it was clear that the then UK prime minister, David Cameron, had to carry a rather large can on the issue. "Through his decision-making in the National Security Council, former prime minister David Cameron was ultimately responsible for the failure to develop a coherent Libya strategy."

The consequential nature of this bloody and ultimately catastrophic blunder of international relations triggered continental instability, with a foul global aftertaste. The collapse of Libya into territories battled over with sectarian fury and the death of Muammar Gaddafi unsettled the ground in Mali. It also propelled violence through North African and the Middle East.

It is hard to rank the levels of severity in what went wrong in the aftermath of the Libyan collapse. Could a finger be pointed at the militia hothouse that was created within the state? (Tripoli alone currently hosts somewhere up to 150.) What of the external outrage stemming from it?

Near the top must be the conflict in northern Mali, precipitated by members of the Tuareg ethnic group who had long supplied Gaddafi with soldiers. Armed to the teeth, the MNLA, with the assistance of such Islamist groups as Ansar Dine, commenced a separatist action that in turn encouraged interventions by al-Qaeda sponsored Islamist groups.

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb eventually became one of the big and most menacing players, busying itself with operations beyond Mali, including Algeria, Niger, Mauritania, Tunisia and Morocco.

Meshed between these skirmishing groups were a French-led intervention in 2013 that petered out, followed by a continuing peace keeping operation which has long since ditched the word "peace" in its equation.

Not even the presence of 12,000 UN soldiers under the mission known as MINUSMA has done much to prevent the fraying of that land, despite the June 2015 peace deal. Since 2013, the mission has taken over a hundred casualties, a deal of it occasioned by the ubiquitous landmine and roadside bomb.

While Mali burned with fury, other African states felt the aftershocks, notably through a huge, easily accessible arms market that was not brought under control after Gaddafi's fall. Marty Reardon, Senior Vice President of The Soufran Group, a US-based security consultancy, surprised no one in telling *The Independent* that Libya's implosion led to the arming of "well-armed and militant groups" in Tunisia, Algeria, Niger, Chad, Sudan and Egypt.[1]

In this belligerent free for all, jihadi groups jostle and scratch for gains, creating a further pool of radicalised fighters who will, in time, find nowhere else to go. The Libyan collapse, in other words, has created a certain type of roving tourist jihadi, notching up points with each campaign.

Crispin Blunt, who chaired the committee, scoldingly suggested that the 2011 intervention was based on "erroneous assumptions and an incomplete understanding of the country." This kindergarten world view did not stop there.

Having made a right royal mess, it was incumbent on France and the UK to right the ship, with a "responsibility to support Libyan economic and political reconstruction." This responsibility was also a muddled one, with British and French institution builders profoundly ignorant about local matters. Having pushed Humpty Dumpty over, they showed scant knowledge on how to put him back together.

The sense of culpability for Cameron is further compounded by the nonsense the intervention made of such international humanitarian doctrines as the responsibility to protect. There was always a sense that the French-UK led mission was struggling for a plausible alibi, but recourse to the nonsensical notion of civilian protection reared its head.

That door was opened by the hoovering effect of UN Security Council Resolution 1973, which authorised "all necessary means" to protect that most wonderful contrivance, irrespective of what those in the host state thought.[2] Find the civilians and save the day.

While it remains the most insidious of contrivances at international law, that responsibility to protect could be said to have been discharged rapidly – after the initial round of strikes. In the words of the MPs, "If the primary object of the coalition intervention was the urgent need to protect civilians in Benghazi, then this objective was achieved in March 2011 in less than 24 hours."

This was not to be. Instead, the intervention ballooned into a monstrous matter of regime change, with no attempt made to "pause military action" when Benghazi was being secured. "This meant that a limited intervention to protect civilians drifted into an opportunist policy of regime change by military means." Docks in international criminal courts should be warmed by such adventurous men.

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Notes

 [1] http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/libya-report-britain-uk-gaddafi-civil-war-david-cameron-responsible-terrorism-isis-al-qaeda-mali-a7309821.html

[2] http://www.elac.ox.ac.uk/downloads/Welsh%20Civilian%20Protection%20in%20Libya.pdf

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