



ISSUE BRIEF

Beyond the War: The History of French-Libyan Relations

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On February 23, 2011, French President Nicolas Sarkozy declared to the world his revulsion at the brutalities taking place in Libya: “The international community cannot remain a spectator to all the massive violations of human rights,” he said.¹ Much had changed in the relationship between Sarkozy and Colonel Muammar al-Qaddafi since the latter’s visit to France in 2007. Much has also changed in Libya and the rest of the world since these declarations were uttered and the ensuing intervention by NATO began. Yet France’s role in the Libyan conflict remains pivotal. To understand French interests and interventions in modern day Libya, it is imperative to understand the two countries’ combined history beyond the fall of Qaddafi and the current civil war. The history of the French-Libyan relationship is dynamic and multifaceted: Its roots date back to French colonialism, it became complex during the Sarkozy-Qaddafi era, and it culminates today with President Emmanuel Macron’s involvement in the contemporary Libyan conflict. This piece aims to give an overview of the diverse circumstances that led to France’s contemporary role in Libya in order to explain the seemingly drastically different stances that French leaders have taken in the conflict.

HISTORY

Libya’s territory is divided into three main historical regions: Tripolitania in the northwest, Cyrenaica in the east, and the Fezzan in the southwest. Under Ottoman rule, the regions were recognized as separate provinces and were ruled accordingly. To strengthen local tribes and establish tribe-state relationships, “Ottoman rulers

1 Nicholas Watt and Patrick Wintour, “Libya No-Fly Zone Call by France Fails to Get David Cameron’s Backing,” *The Guardian*, February 23, 2011.

depended on influential tribal leaders, particularly in peripheral and rural areas such as the Fezzan, in order to collect taxes, enlist troops, and maintain trade routes.”² In doing so, they established the foundation for the norms of future tribe-state relations. This system lasted until the Ottomans tried to modernize in the second half of the nineteenth century. Governance was from then on centralized within the northern part of the state, thus weakening and creating rifts between tribal leaders and initiating a long tradition of neglect in the Fezzan region.

As the Ottoman Empire weakened, it lost what came to be known as “Libya” to Italy in 1911. Italian colonialism was extremely ruthless toward the Libyan tribes, who fought relentlessly but eventually lost to Benito Mussolini’s army in the 1920s. Seen as “one of the most successful counterinsurgencies in Western history,” the so-called pacification of Libya, which began in 1922, entailed the death and encampment of thousands of Libyans in concentration camps.³ It was followed by a systemic process of colonialism, which created the “Quarta Sponda” and resulted in the emigration of thousands of poor Italian workers to the new territory.⁴ This period saw further centralization within the north and neglect of the peripheral regions.

The French Empire had been expanding through the better part of northern and western Africa since the early eighteenth century. Local tribes eventually fell completely under French rule in the second half of the nineteenth and the start of the twentieth centuries. French rule in this region depended on a “divide and conquer” strategy that pitted local tribes and ethnic groups against each other and changed the social structures and dynamics of the intra-tribal relations, creating conflicts that have persisted in many cases to the present day.⁵ Despite consistent rebellion against French rule, the territories remained under French control well into the twentieth century due to the heavily weakened tribal leadership.

However, the neglect of the Fezzan region allowed for Tuareg tribal leaders to establish their own autonomy and strengthen their military anti-colonial efforts. Seeing as Tuareg tribes extended beyond the official Libyan borders, they were able



Libya’s President Colonel Muammar al-Qaddafi welcomes French President Nicolas Sarkozy at the Bab Azizia Palace in Tripoli on July 25, 2007. Source: Guibbaud Christophe/ABACA via Reuters.

to attack both French and Italian powers.⁶ While they were eventually overpowered, the Fezzan region remained of interest to the French as tribal relations in the Fezzan affected much of their territory and presented a palpable threat to their rule.

In 1943, during World War II, Italy lost Libya to France and the United Kingdom, with the former occupying the Fezzan and the latter occupying the Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. In 1951, Libya was granted its independence and, through British pressure, King Idris al-Senussi assumed rule over the Kingdom of Libya. The Senussi leadership was known for its pro-Western and anti-Arab nationalism, which put both Tripolitania and the Fezzan at a disadvantage and fostered further discontent in the country.⁷

In 1969, a coup d’état by a young Muammar al-Qaddafi overthrew the monarchy and established a thoroughly anti-Western, anti-imperialist leadership that endured until 2011.

2 Fransje Molenaar, Jonathan Tossell, Anna Schmauder, Rahmane Idrissa, and Rida Lyammouri, *The Status Quo Defied: The Legitimacy of Traditional Authorities in Areas of Limited Statehood in Mali, Niger and Libya*, Clingendael Institute, CRU Report No. 37, 2019.

3 Federica Saini Fasanotti, “Libyans Haven’t Forgotten History,” Brookings, January 18, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2017/01/18/libyans-havent-forgotten-history/>.

4 George Joffe, “La Libye et L’Europe,” *CERI Sciences Po*, 2002, 3. Unless otherwise stated, all translations into English in this paper are the author’s.

5 Molenaar et al., “The Status Quo Defied,” 34.

6 Ibid., 37.

7 Ibid., 47.

QADDAFI

Muammar al-Qaddafi, who grew up under colonial rule, was known for his intellectual curiosity from a very young age. By the time he reached his mid-twenties he had studied works by the likes of Maximilien Robespierre, Napoleon Bonaparte, Karl Marx, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and Mao Tse-Tung.⁸ Above all, he was uniquely inspired by Egypt's Gamal Abd El Nasser and his revolutionary pan-Arab ideologies⁹ and anti-colonial efforts—Qaddafi expressed his own anti-imperialist sentiments to all who would listen. In 1963, he joined the military academy “not to become a professional soldier, but to infiltrate the institution from the inside and prepare for the revolution.”¹⁰ On the night of August 31, 1969, Qaddafi and his men launched a coup d'état that overthrew King Idris I and put Qaddafi in power.

Within a few years, Qaddafi had shut down foreign military bases, nationalized petroleum assets, and expelled foreign nationals (primarily Italians). He also established his own strict Islamic laws, outlawing alcohol consumption and gambling, among other things. In 1973, he began to establish his own version of socialist leadership, creating the “Libyan Jamahiriya” and introducing his *Green Book*, reminiscent of Mao's *Little Red Book*.¹¹ His philosophy heavily influenced his ventures beyond Libya.

In alignment with his national revolutionary ideology, the rich dictator began financing and supporting various forms of revolutionary and insurgent movements abroad. His government was implicated in many violent incidents that comprised high-profile assassinations and extremist attacks, as well as the bombings of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, in 1988 and UTA Flight 772 over Niger in 1989.¹² In 1976, Qaddafi's military also intervened in the Chadian civil war, funding and aiding insurgents in their fight against the French-supported government.¹³ The annexation of the Aouzou Strip, over which Libya laid claim based on old colonial discord, was a red line for the French authorities, who then intervened in support of N'Djamena.

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In 1986, in response to many of these incidents and particularly the targeted attacks against US military officers around the world, the United States bombed several sites in Libya, including Qaddafi's home, which resulted in the death of his infant daughter but failed to overthrow the dictator.¹⁴ President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing of France also attempted many indirect attacks that aimed to destabilize and overthrow Qaddafi in response to his intervention in the Chadian war by using neighboring forces from Egypt, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia.¹⁵ However, none of these attempts was successful, and in 1981 President François Mitterrand dismissed his predecessor's approach and opted for pursuing harsh economic sanctions instead.

At home, Qaddafi ruled his country with an iron fist, and maintained expansionist ambitions throughout his reign. He had hoped to establish an Arab Federation with him at its helm, which proved futile as Arab nations veered in various political directions and many were implicated in their own conflicts.¹⁶ His ambitions consequently turned southward as he proclaimed himself the “King of Kings” in Africa and attempted to unite the African nations.¹⁷ Both attempts succeeded only in further entrenching the international perception of him as an unruly and possibly unstable leader whose power needed to be curtailed.

8 Europe 1, “Au Cœur de l'histoire: L'énigme Kadhafi (Franck Ferrand),” video via YouTube, 6:29, July 19, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ckRRMPXtjdl>.

9 Europe 1, “Au Cœur de l'histoire,” 4:57.

10 Vincent Hugeux, “Il était une fois sa révolution,” *Kadhafi* (Paris: Éditions Perrin, 2017).

11 Ibid., “Le Livre vert à livre ouvert.”

12 Andrew Wedgwood and A. Walter Dorn, “NATO's Libya Campaign 2011: Just or Unjust to What Degree?” *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 26, no. 2 (April 3, 2015): 344.

13 Jalel Harchaoui, “La politique libyenne de la France et ses antécédents historiques,” *Revue Internationale et Stratégique* 116, no. 4 (December 17, 2019): 38.

14 Wedgwood and Dorn, “NATO's Libya Campaign 2011,” 348.

15 Harchaoui, “La politique libyenne de la France,” 38.

16 David Hirst, “Gaddafi's Brotherly Censure - Archive, 17 April 1973,” *The Guardian*, April 17, 2020, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/17/gaddafis-brotherly-censure-archive-1973>.

17 “Gaddafi: Africa's 'King of Kings,’” BBC News, August 29, 2008, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/7588033.stm>.

In the late 1990s, Libya began a process of reestablishing its image in the West, a move prompted by years of strict sanctions that had been imposed by Western nations. The process of cleansing its reputation entailed handing over citizens who were implicated in the Pan Am flight bombing to be tried in the Hague, denouncing terrorism, and turning over or destroying weapons of mass destruction that were believed to have been used in various attacks, namely in the Chadian war years before.¹⁸ In doing so, Libya was finally removed from the United States's list of state sponsors of terrorism and formally began its rehabilitation process on a larger scale.¹⁹ However, Qaddafi's Jamahiriya remained a dictatorship, and knowledge of his ruthlessness against dissidents and his own people was pervasive. His oppressive reign endured, as it was not until 2005 that Qaddafi met the man who, many years later, would call for his demise.

QADDAFI AND SARKOZY

In 2005, Qaddafi's son Saif al-Islam Qaddafi put his father in contact with young and ambitious French Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy.²⁰ Sarkozy's first visit to Tripoli on October 6, 2005, was highly publicized due to discussions concerning future French-Libyan relations. Officially a visit to discuss illegal migration and counterterrorism efforts, it veered mostly toward a discussion about possible future cooperation. Yet a private conversation between the interior minister and Qaddafi also took place that day, and by the end of it its participants expressed hopes of finally ending French-Libyan discord.²¹

Sarkozy, who ran his presidential campaign on promises of fighting for human rights and making no compromises with corrupt dictators, announced to his voters at his inauguration that his goal was to create a "Mediterranean Union" that would link Europe and Africa. To achieve this goal, he needed a strong North African ally to rally neighboring countries. After receiving one of his first congratulatory calls from Qaddafi, it seemed that this ally might be Libya.

Incongruously, Sarkozy's first great success as the new French president was negotiating the release of five Bulgarian nurses who had been unjustly held and tortured in Libyan prisons for years. Although negotiations were already underway with European Union representatives, it was claimed that it was Sarkozy who guaranteed their release.²² In exchange, Sarkozy made many promises, one of which was to extend an invitation to the Libyan leader to visit France, a request Qaddafi had specifically made during the negotiations.²³ Qaddafi received "all he had asked for," with the exception of one clause requesting that France come to the defence of Libya if it were ever attacked by another country.²⁴ Despite this one point of contention, the Libyan authorities finally relented and released the nurses. It was a French government airplane that brought them home, escorted by the first lady of France.²⁵

Portrayed as a testament to the changes taking place in Libya, the release of the nurses demonstrated a show of strength for French foreign affairs under the new president. The next day, Sarkozy was on his second official flight to Tripoli with an extremely lucrative arms deal on the agenda. For Libya, this trip was imperative, as the leader's African ambitions could easily be impeded by French influence in the region. However, Sarkozy's amicable behavior and the signing of over a dozen deals, which included arms sales along with an elaborate internet surveillance system, were thought to be more than sufficient to stabilize the relationship between the two countries.²⁶

Nonetheless, during a later discussion, Sarkozy attempted to broach the topic of his Mediterranean Union dreams with Qaddafi. The Libyan leader was less than responsive as he insisted on changing the subject and asked what else France could sell to Libya.²⁷ It became clear that the interests of the two leaders were starting to diverge. While the French president had a dream of being the leader who accomplished the historical feat of uniting the Mediterranean, his Libyan counterpart still had his eyes set on being the King of Kings in Africa.

18 Eben Kaplan, "How Libya Got off the List," Council on Foreign Relations, last updated October 16, 2007, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/how-libya-got-list>.

19 Ibid.

20 Investigations et Enquêtes, *Sarkozy-Kadhafi: Soupçons de financement libyen - Le documentaire choc*, video via YouTube, 4:44, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eAXq_ZDxq1E.

21 Fabrice Arfi and Karl Laske, *Avec les compliments du guide: Sarkozy-Kadhafi, l'histoire secrète* (Paris: Fayard, 2020), chap. 1.

22 Ibid., chap. 16.

23 Investigations et Enquêtes, *Sarkozy-Kadhafi*, 20:30.

24 Ibid., 22:03.

25 Arfi and Laske, *Avec les compliments du guide*, chap. 16.

26 Ibid., chap. 12.

27 Investigations et Enquêtes, *Sarkozy-Kadhafi*, 31:30.

A few months later, on the International Day of Human Rights, red carpets were rolled out for Muammar al-Qaddafi's promised first official visit to a Western country. The contentious trip was to mark the peculiarity of the leaders' relationship, ending their "honeymoon phase" and paving the way for their future fraught association. The day before Qaddafi's arrival, a statement of the French government's secretary of state for human rights appeared in the newspaper *Le Parisien*, which echoed many people's aversions: "Colonel Qaddafi must understand that our country is not a doormat on which a leader, terrorist or not, can come to wipe the blood of his crimes off his feet," she said.²⁸ With his tent set up outside the Elysée Palace, at Hôtel de Marigny, the Libyan's trip seemed ill-fated before it even started.

Business deals with the Libyan Jamahiriya were no small feat, and international diplomacy and financial gain were the main impetuses for the trip. The two governments signed many lucrative deals throughout the trip, including "contracts for Airbus planes, nuclear power and other deals which Paris said totaled more than 10 billion euros" along with "a memorandum of cooperation, with Libya committing itself to enter exclusive negotiations with France to acquire equipment in the framework of state-to-state contract."²⁹ These deals amounted to billions of euros and countless jobs for France.

Initially set to last three days as per French diplomatic customs, the trip was extended to a week.³⁰ Qaddafi was excited to see the many French sights he had read about in his youth, and the French government obliged by providing security detail and organizing many trips around the capital that were met with furious protests, notably by the families of the victims of the UTA flight that had been bombed years earlier. Sarkozy insisted that, while diplomatic dealings and bringing lucrative contracts for France were quite indispensable, human rights were still very much on the agenda, and he expressed as much to his Libyan counterpart.

With that reminder, the "honeymoon phase" met its end, and was finally extinguished when, without telling the French authorities, Qaddafi held a meeting at the United Nations



President Sarkozy shakes hands with President al-Qaddafi before their meeting at the Elysee Palace in Paris on December 10, 2007. Source: Abd Rabbo-Mousse/ABACA via Reuters.

Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in Paris and accused Europeans of mistreating African immigrants. His speech, a response to countless critiques and accusations concerning his human rights record, attacked European nations for their hypocrisy, as he announced to African immigrants: "Either you live respected here in Europe and enjoy the same rights and duties as Europeans or you return to Africa."³¹ Qaddafi's words angered his French hosts, pushing even the Minister of Foreign Affairs Bernard Kouchner to speak against the visit and the situation, which he deemed "pitiful."³²

In response to the outrage he received from his people, President Sarkozy insisted that he had spoken firmly to the Libyan leader on the subject of human rights. However, assuming that the French president had betrayed him, Qaddafi

28 Christophe Schipoliansky, "Tents, Trumpets and Tantrums: Gaddafi's Visit to Paris," ABC News, December 12, 2007, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/story?id=3984020&page=1>.

29 Francois Murphy and Kerstin Gehmlich, "Sarkozy Cuts Deals with Gaddafi," Reuters, December 10, 2007, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-libya-idUSL1068990320071210>.

30 Investigations et Enquêtes, *Sarkozy-Kadhafi*, 42:19.

31 Francois Murphy, "Gaddafi Accuses Europeans of Abusing Immigrants," Reuters, December 11, 2007, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-libya-idUSL1153657420071211>.

32 Arfi and Laske, *Avec les compliments du guide*, chap. 18.



People wave Libyan flags during celebrations commemorating the tenth anniversary of the 2011 revolution in Tripoli on February 17, 2021. Source: Reuters/Hazem Ahmed.

did not corroborate Sarkozy's words, going so far as to deny that any such conversation even took place.³³ The leaders were seen standing side-by-side "without even a glance at each other," as their once promising relationship lay ruined.³⁴

THE REVOLUTION

On February 15, 2011, following the popular uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia, the Libyan people of Benghazi took to the streets to protest the arrest of the human rights lawyer Fethi Tarbel. The unpopularity of Muammar al-Qaddafi's long reign, which had been simmering for half a century, erupted into a full-blown rebellion within days. Protesting his long and oppressive rule, "local revolts had snowballed into a revolution and become militarized" rapidly, as protesters increased their resistance despite government forces moving in against them.³⁵ The protests then took a bloody turn for the worse as fire was

exchanged between rebels and pro-Qaddafi forces. On February 22, Qaddafi took to the podium to deliver an angry speech in which he called for an end to the uprising. The speech became infamous for its aggressive wording, furious threats, and call for the deaths of the "drugged protesters."³⁶

Two days later, his French counterpart also took to the podium and became the first European leader to call for the fall of Qaddafi. On a trip to Turkey, Nicolas Sarkozy delivered a speech standing next to the Turkish leader in which he proclaimed that "Mr. Qaddafi must leave."³⁷ On February 27, in an address to his people, he stated that "in the face of what is happening in Libya, the French have a duty to react."³⁸ While Western countries considered ways to intervene, the French intellectual Bernard-Henri Lévy was in Benghazi, meeting with the representatives of the rebel group, the heads of the

33 Murphy, "Gaddafi Accuses Europeans of Abusing Immigrants."

34 Investigations et Enquêtes, *Sarkozy-Kadhafi*, 54:16.

35 Wolfram Lacher, *Libya's Fragmentation: Structure and Process in Violent Conflict* (I.B. Tauris, 2020), 19.

36 SLOBoe, "Muammar Gaddafi Speech TRANSLATED," video via YouTube, February 20, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=69wBG6ULNzQ>.

37 "Sarkozy juge que 'Kadhafi doit partir,'" *Le Point*, February 25, 2011, https://www.lepoint.fr/monde/sarkozy- juge-que-kadhafi-doit-partir-25-02-2011-1299638_24.php.

38 Investigations et Enquêtes, *Sarkozy-Kadhafi*, 1:00:49.

National Transitional Council (NTC) of Libya.³⁹ He soon put the French president in contact with the heads of the NTC, who agreed to meet with them immediately. They flew to Paris and met Sarkozy, who, after listening to them, publicly declared that they were now the official representatives of the Libyan cause and the Libyan people.⁴⁰

Soon after, betrayed by Sarkozy and in a rage, Qaddafi ordered the deployment of the military to the rebel enclaves, an act that triggered decisive Western intervention. Sarkozy and United Kingdom (UK) Prime Minister David Cameron, working with American Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, finally united their nations, and along with them the international community. United Nations Resolution 1973 was adopted on March 11, 2011, supported by the Arab League and neighboring states, “authorizing ‘all necessary measures’ short of foreign occupation to protect civilians.”⁴¹ On March 19, the so-called Coalition of the Willing, spearheaded by France, the UK, and the United States, began its airstrikes.⁴² The operation taken up by NATO soon after became the first official “Responsibility to Protect” action.⁴³ Operation Unified Protector lasted about eight months and succeeded in toppling Qaddafi, leaving the country in the hands of its people.

The French role in the intervention was pivotal and, following the brutal and bloody end of Qaddafi and his government, Sarkozy went on his third trip to Tripoli. In the capital, he announced the success of the revolution and the intervention. He congratulated the Libyan people, and told the world that in the twenty-first century “there will not be one place for [dictators] where they can remain certain of their impunity.”⁴⁴ This was not, however, the end of the conflict. The Libyan revolution did not lead to a happy ending for the nation, but was instead the start of a conflict that has continued to the present day.

THE CIVIL WAR

The NTC did not prove successful in its rule, and Islamist political groups and militias, along with tribal groups, soon took over the country. Violence in “both Tripoli and Benghazi amplified the rancor many Libyans felt for Islamist and revolutionary elites,” increasing fears that the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood would face a similar end as that of its counterpart in Egypt in 2013.⁴⁵ The revolutionary elites thus set up new laws that would prevent officials from the Qaddafi era from joining the government in any capacity for a number of years and fostered further fragmentation in the Libyan territory.⁴⁶ The Egyptian precedent nonetheless gave hope to General Khalifa Haftar, a retired army general from the Qaddafi era who was now exiled in the United States for his activities in the Chadian war, of emulating the neighboring example in his own country.

Since May 2014, Haftar, with the support of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), France, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, has launched a series of attacks under the name of the Libyan National Army (LNA), leading to a takeover of the eastern parts of Libya.⁴⁷ His presence has polarized Libya and turned the previously fragmented region into a largely east-versus-west contest, with the southern region aligned with either side depending on the tribes. Haftar’s campaign has thus far relied on a stance of anti-political Islam that leaves very little room for nuances and opposing ideologies. Since 2014, his army and support base have expanded with the help of outside actors. His advances in Cyrenaica have also secured him oil terminals and a headquarters and parliament in Benghazi.⁴⁸

In 2016, the United Nations instated an internationally recognized government under the name of the Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli. After coming to power, the

39 Joshua Keating, “Libyan Intervention: Brought to You by Bernard-Henri Levy?” *Foreign Policy* (blog), March 28, 2011, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/03/28/libyan-intervention-brought-to-you-by-bernard-henri-levy/>.

40 Ibid.

41 Kjell Engelbrekt, Marcus Mohlin, and Charlotte Wagnsson, eds., *The NATO Intervention in Libya: Lessons Learned from the Campaign* (London: Routledge, 2015), xvi.

42 Ibid., 22.

43 Ibid., 6.

44 Investigations et Enquêtes, *Sarkozy-Kadhafi*, 1:12:52.

45 Jalel Harchaoui and Mohamed-Essaïd Lazib, “Proxy War Dynamics in Libya” (Blacksburg, VA: Virginia Tech Publishing, July 23, 2019), 5.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid., 4.

48 Lacher, *Libya’s Fragmentation*, 37.

GNA had a number of militias to contend with. It was only with the help of militias native to Tripoli that they were able to secure their presence and push “out of the capital armed groups from other cities and armed groups associated with Political Islam.”⁴⁹ The officials of the GNA have so far been working under the auspices of the surrounding militias with very little political influence in the region.

The division in the country, the fragmented militias, and the clashes between the LNA and the GNA have instigated many conflicts over the years—in addition to causing the forced displacement of people, the deaths of thousands, and the establishment of criminal rings of various kinds. The country has also become a fertile ground for proxy wars in which the proxies themselves are unreliable and often change camps unexpectedly.⁵⁰ Several countries now have a stake in the ongoing civil war, with different states supporting opposing sides and militias.

The UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, France, Turkey, Qatar, Russia, Italy, and the United States are all involved in one way or another, supporting and jeopardizing different camps and in many ways extending the conflict.⁵¹ Despite the embargo by the United Nations, arms continue to circulate throughout the country. Furthermore, following Haftar’s unsuccessful and miscalculated attack on Tripoli in 2019, he suffered a number of losses in what was until then a relatively successful move to the West. His attack also exacerbated the situation as the Islamist militias that had been drawn out of Tripoli gained footing and Turkey officially joined the conflict.⁵²

The conflict is ongoing, with the French government that initiated the NATO intervention now supporting the Haftar camp and the LNA. President Emmanuel Macron has hosted both Fayez Sarraj of the GNA and General Haftar in Paris, further legitimizing the latter in an international context.⁵³ Macron’s support for Haftar has generated countless questions. Yet France continues to work diplomatically by providing advice and “training” to the



French President Emmanuel Macron shakes hands with Libyan Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj at a press conference after the international conference on Libya at the Elysee Palace in Paris on May 29, 2018. Source: Reuters

LNA camp, and has an active role in prolonging the conflict and working to instate Haftar as head of state.⁵⁴

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

Some see the international intervention in Libya as a “just war”—that is to say a war in which the responsibility to protect was imperative. It has been continuously hailed as NATO’s most successful intervention, and remains an example of successful international military cooperation. Many have wondered why France took such a leading role from the start, and why it continues to take part in the conflict. It has been called everything from “Sarkozy’s war” to a moral obligation, an economic venture, and an effort to curb cross-border crime and terrorism.⁵⁵

Shortly before his bloody death, Qaddafi gave an interview in which, in his usual mannerisms, he expressed his bewilderment

49 Harchaoui and Lazib, “Proxy War Dynamics in Libya,” 4.

50 Ibid., 13.

51 For detailed information on the parties involved in the conflict, the author highly recommends reading “Proxy War Dynamics in Libya” by Jalel Harchaoui and Mohamed-Essaid Lazib.

52 Sputnik France, “Guerre en Libye: ‘La France est clairement pro-Haftar, il n’y a pas de double jeu,’” video via YouTube, 13:41, June 17, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eVgne9Wr74w>; “Libya Conflict: Turkey Sends Troops to Shore up UN-Backed Government,” BBC News, January 6, 2020, sec. Africa. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-51003034>.

53 Jihâd Gillon, “France-Libya: Marshal Haftar, the Controversial Friend of the Élysée,” *The Africa Report*, March 20, 2020, <https://www.theafricareport.com/24823/france-libya-marshal-haftar-the-controversial-friend-of-the-elysee/>.

54 Nathalie Guibert, “La guerre secrète de la France en Libye,” *Le Monde*, February 24, 2016, https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2016/02/24/la-guerre-secrete-de-la-france-en-libye_4870603_3210.html.

55 Madelene Lindström and Kristina Zetterlund, *Setting the Stage for the Military Intervention in Libya: Decisions Made and Their Implications for the EU and NATO* (Stockholm: Department of Defence Analysis, Swedish Defence Research Agency [FOI], 2012), 20-24.

at the French president's stance, particularly since "it was me who got him to power."⁵⁶ This interview served as a catalyst for a prolonged investigation in which the former French president was accused of corruption and implicated in a case before French courts.⁵⁷ It also fed accusations that the French intervention in Libya and the peculiarly fervent interest in the region were fuelled by a personal vendetta.

Put differently, France has abandoned the idea of applying liberal democracy in Libya and has opted for supporting an autocracy or even a dictatorship if it could stabilize the region.

While these accusations may be well founded, especially since a number of investigations have testified to the likelihood that corrupt Libyan funds were influential for Sarkozy, they endorse a perspective that oversimplifies a complex situation. Sarkozy was going into an election year with dwindling popularity and he had come under fire when his minister of foreign affairs, Michele Alliot-Marie, offered to give the Tunisian president help in suppressing the protests.⁵⁸ His reaction to both the Tunisian and Egyptian situations was controversial, and Libya may have offered a chance at redemption. Reacting to the Libyan protests so ardently, especially in light of his former friendship with the colonel, was a chance to redeem France and his government, and establish him as the human rights president once and for all.

That said, France has always had a vested interest in the southern regions of Libya, as what occurs in the Fezzan,

particularly along the borders of neighboring Niger and Chad, affects France's counterterrorism efforts in those regions. France has a long-vested interest in its former colonies and continues to be an active presence within them, with boots on the ground in ongoing attempts to combat Islamist terrorism in western Africa.⁵⁹ The situation in Libya, the illicit trade routes for arms and human trafficking, the tribal conflicts such as the 2014 Ubari war, and the 2019 flooding in Ghat have all had ripple effects on the conflict in Niger, and by extension in Mali and the neighboring states.⁶⁰ As such, French interest in political affairs in the north is understandable, as the instability in the north certainly fuels that in the south.

Moreover, France has faced numerous Islamist terrorist attacks, notably in 2015 when the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) was at the height of its power. It also happened to be the time during which it had considerable influence and territories in Libya.⁶¹ Haftar, his army, the tribal leader, and the militias who support him had a considerable role in pushing ISIS out of Cyrenaica and taking over its strongholds.⁶² Haftar's anti-political Islam stance has thus found a considerable echo in many other countries including France, where the fight against political Islam and extremism is ongoing.

France has also had a history of using neighboring countries or other Arab states in its involvement in Libya. Much like d'Estaing in the previous century, Hollande and Macron have taken advantage of the experiences and stances of Arab states in determining their own views. Strong ties with Egypt and the UAE, a nation with an adamant and powerful stance against political Islam, have greatly influenced the French position in the conflict. Put differently, France has abandoned the idea of applying liberal democracy in Libya and has opted for supporting an autocracy or even a dictatorship if it could stabilize the region.⁶³

56 Arfi and Laske, *Avec les compliments du guide*, chap. 25.

57 Investigative journalists from Médiapart launched a long investigation with the book *Avec les compliments du guide* by Fabrice Arfi and Karl Laske as the end product of their research. The investigation by the team at Médiapart instigated a prolonged government investigation over these allegations. "Nicolas Sarkozy à nouveau entendu dans l'enquête sur le financement libyen de sa campagne de 2007," *Le Monde*, October 6, 2020, https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2020/10/06/soupcons-de-financement-libyen-sarkozy-a-nouveau-entendu-par-la-justice_6054980_3224.html.

58 Samuel Laurent, "Voyage en Tunisie: La défense de Michèle Alliot-Marie s'effondre," *Le Monde*, February 16, 2011, https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2011/02/16/voyage-en-tunisie-la-defense-de-michele-alliot-marie-s-effondre_1480787_823448.html.

59 Cyril Bensimon, "Au Sahel, deux guerres qui n'en font qu'une," *Le Monde*, June 13, 2020, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2020/06/13/au-sahel-deux-guerres-qui-n-en-font-qu-une_6042729_3212.html.

60 Molenaar et al., "The Status Quo Defied," 119, 135.

61 Farouk Chothia, "Islamic State Gains Libya Foothold," BBC News, February 24, 2015, sec. Africa, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-31518698>.

62 Jalel Harchaoui, "La Libye depuis 2015: Entre morcellement et interférences," *Politique étrangère* Hiver, no. 4 (December 4, 2018): 140.

63 Jalel Harchaoui, "AJ Balkans: The Situation in Libya and the Role Played by Arab and EU States," video via YouTube, February 22, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x3Pglm1t00s>.

Both the UAE and Egypt have a vested interest in ending the Libyan conflict and the Egyptian example serves as a prototype for what may yet take place in Libya. French support for these two nations that have been fighting their own wars against terrorism thus helps in advancing its own efforts in western Africa, as well as in securing its own Mediterranean border. While Haftar himself is a questionable ally, one with his own agenda and a thirst for power, he appears the best option for the countries implicated in the conflict.

For France, security, diplomacy, and subjective, personal relations have all played roles in the conflict. Sarkozy remains under scrutiny and before the courts thanks to Qaddafi's parting words. Emmanuel Macron has taken a clear stance on his foreign policy intentions, specifically with regard to Islamist threats and extremism within France and beyond.⁶⁴ In Libya, the civil war continues, with many militias getting comfortable in the country's continuous state of anarchy and destruction, and the proxy wars remain as questionable as ever. The only losing party remains the citizens who had a dream of creating a better future for themselves.

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64 Alexandre Lemarié and Olivier Faye, "Emmanuel Macron présente son plan contre 'le séparatisme islamiste,'" *Le Monde*, October 2, 2020, https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2020/10/02/emmanuel-macron-presente-son-plan-contre-le-separatisme-islamiste_6054517_823448.html.

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