US Policy towards Libya and Syria

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Libyan Mummer Qaddafi has been ousted from power and Libya is on course towards successful transition since 2011. Ouster of strongman of Libya wasn’t possible if NATO forces had not helped fighting rebels with their diplomatic, military and technical support. At the same time when Libya presented a success story of NATO intervention, massive killings in the Syrian conflict, human cost, refugee crisis and uncertainty about the length of Syrian war has led policy makers to think the cautious approach of United States in Syria. Libya intervention was driven under humanitarianism whereas Syrian conflict presents a bigger humanitarian crisis as compare to Libya. This study is being presented under the light of above mentioned lines that deals with the questions as what was United States underlying foreign policy during President Obama’s administration. Secondly a comparative study of Libyan and Syrian case is explored under the assumption that although a successful intervention took place in Libya but why same policy was not followed in Syria which represents a bigger tragedy.

This paper is based on a comparison of US policy against Libya and Syria but there are certain limitations that are being defined before the issues are discussed. First of all period under consideration is Arab Spring that was on its peak in 2010-2011. Syrian and Libyan regimes are also discussed in the same period. As fundamental question is changes in US policy of intervention but only President Barack Obama’s administration is being discussed here so as to present a comprehensive conclusion.

It is argued in this paper that overall US policy presented a shift away from active intervention by sending troops on ground towards a policy called smart intervention that relied on allies support and management (Gelb, 2012). Secondly Obama administration was more concerned with Chinese rise in the world than problem in Middle East so it reflected it their policy of “picot towards Asia (Haass, 2013). Thirdly, economic stabilization was the main focus
and any misadventure of war in foreign land was to be avoided (ARQUILLA, 2013). Syrian and Libyan situation made it more complex due to their sectarian divide, allies and effects of any kind of intervention on their regional neighbors.

US administration’s foreign policy doctrine is important to understand its role in Arab Spring generally and in Libya and Syria particularly. On one hand this administration represents a Democratic President as President Barack Obama and his personal vision regarding foreign intervention and on the other hand, contextual environment in US politics provides the ground for this policy to work. It is to be kept in mind while discussing US role in 2011-12 that US government was coming out of financial crisis that has rocked its economy in 2007-08. Economic meltdown had affected many lives and economic stabilization was taken as first priority for the administration and its critics alike (ARQUILLA, 2013). Economic crisis in West and United States was coupled with an emerging China which was more eager to bolster its economic and political role in the world and particularly in East Asia. It was a challenge for US to deal with the growing influence of China in the region that was considered as the fast growing region of the world (Haass, 2013). Another factor that influenced US policy at that time was US role in Middle East in the past decade and two wars that it was fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq. There was an uncertainty regarding President Obama’s promise to pull out of Iraq until 2012 because Iraqi military wasn’t quipped well enough to deal with insurgent challenge that was threatening its sovereignty (Ben-Meir, 2012). This situation made it difficult for US government to engage US troops in Libya and Syria as it would have invited public distaste and Republican criticism for sending its people to fights someone’s else war. In the wake of these circumstances, US administration developed its foreign policy on the lines of US smart intervention, meaning giving technical support to the rebels in the civil war, sharing intelligence with them but not
committing its own troops on ground. Secondly, during this time US policy experienced a pivot towards Asia that took it away from Middle East and its problems. This pivot towards Asia was to counter Chinese influence in the region so it came at a cost of its disengagements in Arab World. Thirdly US was not ready to start another war in the region and challenge its improving economy economics stabilization was the mantra that echoed in the corridors of White House at that time. (Haass, 2013)

US model of smart intervention was based around the concept of integrating allies in operations, getting support of regional allies, an effective mechanism to mobilize local militias to carry out fighting (Stavridis, 2012). One of most important factor that Obama administration had to forgo was ambitious plans of political restructuring and building of a political system that could replace old one. Lessons were learned from Iraq case and a more indirect approach was adopted that focused on economic and diplomatic pressures to force regimes to abide by US interests (Libby, 2011). This type of intervention was influenced under the motives to achieve as less as possible American Casualties on ground. American casualties meant direct pressure from American public who dubbed US involvement as unnecessary and excessive (Stavridis, 2012). Secondly this policy was influenced from the idea to share the burden for both logistics and responsibilities. In case of both Syria and Libya this policy had its impacts as US led a coalition of NATO countries to oust Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi. In Syrian case it applied more diplomatic pressures when President Obama announced his infamous “Red Line” but as a result of it world community was able to force Bashar Assad to surrender his chemical weapons when he used them against civilians in 2013 (JERUSALEM, 2017). Although Syrian case presents a more reluctant approach but all kinds of interventions are meant to weaken the enemy to succeed and removing chemical weapons by Russian support did give a shock to Syrian President.
“Pivot to Asia” presents another policy shift that was driven under President Barack Obama’s administration. This policy shift was driven in part by China’s growing political and economic influence in the region. China has disputes with its neighboring countries on small islands near Japan and in South China Sea (Glaser, 2008). China is not ready to let go of its claim on these islands and it has demonstrated its military strength in recent years which has irked Japan and South Korea who are main strategic US allies in the region. Second factor for US shift towards Asia comes on demand from its allies as its credibility is on stake if it is unable to protect interest of its allies in the region (Glaser, 2008). Thirdly it represents a US policy that represents same features as was containment of USSR during cold war because growing economy of China is ready to extend its reach in West as well. “Pivot” towards Asia ultimately forced US away from Middle East because it no longer concerned its national and economic interests and forced it to withdraw its role in Middle East. (Haass, 2013)

Economic interest of US in the world also played an important role to adopt a cautionary approach vis. a vis. Middle East was concerned. American Public already believed that America was excessively involved in world politics then it should have been (ARQUILLA, 2013). For example when US President Barack Obama decided to send ammunition and weapons to Syrian rebels on June 13, American public sent a very strong message against this step. According to Gallup poll 54 percent of respondents opposed the president's arms initiative, while 37 percent approved (Merry, 2013). A Pew Research Center poll released at about the same time showed that fully 70 percent of respondents opposed the idea of the United States and its allies sending arms to Syrian rebels. The Pew survey also indicated that large majorities of Americans believe the U.S. military is stretched too thin and doubt that Syria's rebel groups would govern any better than the Assad regime (Merry, 2013). A paper published by JOHN ARQUILLA in Foreign
Policy where 70 top US military thinkers were asked question about biggest threat for US. On scale of 1 to 8, 1 being the highest, economic threat was granted 2.8 in that research (ARQUILLA, 2013). This was the level of uncertainty that revolved around US economy and definitely it had occupied minds of American Public and American think thanks.

American Foreign policy did put some constraints for its government as per interventionist agenda was concerned and this has been discussed in above paragraphs. On the other hand, internal politics is not the only dimension that explains America’s policy towards Libya and Syria and but there are many external factors that played an important role in bringing out differences in both cases of Libya and Syria. All these factors are concerned with internal dimension of Libyan and Syrian politics and their relations with their allies. First factor is the homogeneity vs. heterogeneity as per sectarian divide is concerned that shaped America’s response accordingly (Totten, 2013). Secondly difference in allies considering both regional and internal that both these nations had led to the outcome of US policy towards them. Regional consequences of an action in Libya and Syria also played an important role in the wake of Arab Spring because it was all uncertainty as the future of these states was confusing after the overthrow of dictators and behaviors of future setup of resulting governments with their neighbors was not known. (Leslie H. Gelb, 2012)

Libyan society is more homogenous as compared to Syrian public as per sectarian lines are concerned. More than 95% of Libyan people are from Sunni sect of Islam (How Syria and Libya compare, 2011). Despite a clear divide between elites and the common man, there was no way that Libyan conflict could have been labeled a Sectarian one. It was always a struggle for civil rights and characterized as a Civil War. Based on this distinction, a massive massacre was predicted as it happens in civil wars and a humanitarian intervention was considered need of the
hour. On the other hand, Syrian society is heterogeneously divided on sectarian and religious lines. First of all there are two religions that are represented in Syria, Islam and Christianity (How Syria and Libya compare, 2011). Secondly, Muslims are also divided under majority Sunni public and minority Alawite Shiite authority (Totten, 2013). Syrian struggle, in the start was to overthrow the dictator Bashar Al-Assad and was following aspirations of Arab Spring but over a period of time this struggle morphed into a sectarian conflict or so it was presented by Alawite government. Attacks near Hazrat Zainab shrine on 31st Jan, 2016 were met with hue and cry all over the Shiite community (Bomb attacks near Hazrat Zainab's shrine in Syria kill 50, wound 110, 2016). There are credible evidence for involvement of Shiite and Sunni population fighting on opposite sides that have been sent from Afghanistan and Iran (Kermalli, 2017). There was also a concern for Christian population in Syria because it was feared that extremist groups in the society might attack Christian communities to counter any foreign invasion. It presented clear limitations for American government as per Libya was concerned but they were not ready to plunge into a sectarian mess in Syria. This factor of societal organization didn’t only affects directly both these Arab states but there was an indirect impact as well because it got involved many regional rivals into a proxy war in Syria but same didn’t happen in case of Libya.

Allies have played an important role as per comparison of Muammar Qaddafi and Bashar Al-Assad is concerned. In his last years, Mummer Qaddafi was left with no ally in the region or internationally (How Syria and Libya compare, 2011). It is apparent from United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973 that was passed in 2011 to take appropriate measures to ensure “Civilian protection” that no international power stood behind Libya (Stavridis, 2012). Only country that spoke in favor of Libyan president was Venezuela whereas Zimbabwe offered refuge to Qaddafi if he had stepped down from government (How Syria and Libya compare,
2011). Based around UNSCR and no support from allies, NATO was able to act freely in Libya and get its result within a short period of two weeks. On the other hand, Syria presents a totally different case to US foreign policymakers. Due to sectarian dimension of its conflict, it has Iran and Hezbollah jumped into fight with government forces against rebels. Secondly, Russia and China have also backed Bashar government against rebels. Russian has even sent its Naval ships into the Mediterranean to counter any possible attack from Western forces (Haass, 2013). This dimension of the conflicts forces US policymakers to demonstrate constraint as per Syrian massacre is concerned although it has crossed 300,000 deaths since 2011 and whole region has been gripped around problem of dealing with its refugee crisis. (Totten, 2013)

Regional politics and effects of a possible Syrian backlash have also played an important role in the civil war as compared to Libyan case. Libya is sandwiched between Tunisia and Egypt and around 2011 both these countries had already experienced democratization where they had deposed their long-standing dictators. Based on this argument, they didn’t share any sympathies with another dictator in the region rather it was in their benefit that whole region goes through reforms of democracy (How Syria and Libya compare, 2011). Syria unlike Libya presents a very complex case. It has two dimensions. First dimension concerns Israel because Syria has an accord with Israel on Golan Heights that was signed by Hafiz al Assad and taken forward by his son-Bashar al-Assad. Contrary to status quo on Golan heights, an uncertainty surrounds as per future of governments is concerned after Bashar is removed (Ryan, 2012). Experience for US shows that democratic process has always disliked US policies in the Middle East as per people and their choice is concerned. For Example in Egypt, they elected a Islamist government that didn’t shared US interests in the region. This direct problem from Israel and US leads to second issue of rise of extremism in Syria (Leslie H. Gelb, 2012). Today rebels are
fighting in unity against Syrian army and overall a more moderate and secular outlook of the rebels is being presented but who knows after Assad, extremist elements overpower other groups and US definitely do not want to repeat another Iraq again. Thirdly, Syrian conflict has given rise to a new Arab Cold War in the region between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Syria represents last ally of Iran in the Arab World and Saudi Arab wants to seize this opportunity (Totten, 2013). On the other hand, Iran is putting all kinds of efforts to protect its all in the region. This produces a Dilemma for Western Governments as whether they want to plunge themselves into a regional proxy war or they want to avoid it. Definitely they are ensuring a restraint in this regards that explains an intervention-smart intervention in Libya but a more conscious approach as per Syria is concerned. (Gelb, 2012)

Summing up these arguments, this paper highlights this conclusion that although there has been not much difference in US foreign policy of intervention as per Libya and Syria are concerned but some external factors have led them to follow as per their new policy in Libya under President Barack Obama but same policy has not been materialized in case of Syria. US has devised a policy of smart intervention involving less troops on ground, pivoting away from Middle east and towards Asia because Chinese Rise concerns them the most. Thirdly they have focused more on their economic stability rather than engaging in another war in the middle east because lessons have been learnt from Iraq Invasion. Second section has highlighted that constraint that Syria presents to the US policy makers. Syrian conflict has developed into a sectarian conflict that involves many stakeholders in the region but Libya had no allies. Syria has great division as per religious factions are concerned that doesn’t lead towards a consensus among its public whereas Libya was clear majority Sunni population that stood against their dictator. Syrian conflict has been further complicated because Israel, Russia, China, Iran and
Saudi Arabia has interests in its success or failure so it has been unable to rally world community behind any single goal. Based on these findings it can be said that Syrian conflict would lead to further polarization in the region whereas although Libya has been successful to implement its democratic institutions but a challenge lies ahead as per growing influence of Al-Qaeda is concerned.
Bibliography


