

“Necessary, Legal, and Right? The UK and the Intervention in Libya in 2011”

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This paper examines the United Kingdom’s role in the Libya intervention of 2011. Mass protests against Muammar Gaddafi erupted on 15 February. Gaddafi’s brutal threats and repression, some of it provoked by violent extremists among the protestors, led to international calls for his resignation and increasingly coercive action to push him from power. Along with France’s President Nicholas Sarkozy, Prime Minister David Cameron’s government was the driving force behind the intervention launched on 19 March. Most scholars and commentators believe that it was a successful humanitarian and military action, while sceptics at least accept that the interveners tried to do the right thing about a humanitarian emergency.¹ The research question asked here is, why did the government of Prime Minister David Cameron decide to intervene in Libya? Combining historical narrative technique and international relations theory, the paper argues that the Cameron government considered the completion of the completion of a political transition in Libya to be in his government’s interest and the national interest, and that this calculation was behind driving Britain’s leading role.

The paper first presents a revisionist historical narrative. The narrative structures the crisis, not around humanitarian and human rights concerns, but the debate that took place between Cameron and Gaddafi over the future government of Libya. The debate escalated several times to intervention, and more destructive power during the intervention, because Gaddafi refused to resign and allow the transition to be completed.

According to this narrative, Gaddafi was mischaracterized as an isolated madman out for blood, and the intervention framed as a humanitarian action. The article then shows that the Cameron government acted primarily for its political self-interest and the British interest, including standing and recognition as a great power.

The debate between Gaddafi and Cameron

The intervention was next to last in a series of escalations (the last was an increase in military destructive power during the intervention itself) to get Gaddafi to make way for the political transition begun by the protesters / rebels. It is commonly argued that the intervention exceeded its mandate in United Nations Security Council resolution 1973 (17 March) and pursued regime change, but this is a mistake. British did not intervene with a secret policy aim of regime change; rather, regime change was an open policy that began much earlier, almost from the day the crisis broke, and intervention was as noted only the part of a series of escalations to achieve it.

The Cameron government made sharp diplomatic interventions to convince Gaddafi to make way for the transition. There were four overlapping rounds of escalating diplomatic / economic pressure, before the looming defeat of the revolutionaries compelled Britain to resort to armed force. On 28 February, after most British nationals (mainly workers in the oil industry) had been evacuated from Libya, Cameron denounced Gaddafi's "murderous regime" (i.e. criminal), declaring that its "current leaders" should "face the justice they deserve."² To weaken Gaddafi, Britain helped draft the broad restrictions on arms, finances, trade, and travel in United Nations Security Council Resolution 1970 (26 February), and the even tougher European Union sanctions package that came into full effect – in record-time – on 7 March.³ The resolution, legally binding

under Chapter VII (enforcement provisions) of the United Nations Charter, included the first-ever referral of a crisis situation to the International Criminal Court.

That was part of the first round of pressure. In the next round, British escalated the pressure. To remove a psychological pillar he may have been resting on, the Cameron government informed Gaddafi that hanging on to power would not help him to escape accountability for repressing the protesters and revolutionary fighters, for “international justice has a long reach and a long memory.”⁴ He made Britain’s aim crystal clear, that it wanted Gaddafi and his government removed almost immediately, and for the first time he said he was considering the use of armed force to achieve this. Cameron endorsed calls from France for a no-fly zone, which would constitute the “occupation” of Libya’s sovereign airspace.⁵ Cameron told House of Commons on 28 February that the Ministry of Defence and Chief of the Defence Staff had been asked to “work with our allies on plans for a military no-fly zone.” Britain must “cut off oxygen from the regime.” Gaddafi must “go now.”⁶ British leaders made no secret of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s (NATO) contingency plans on Libya, a no-fly zone among them. Cameron and U.S. President Barak Obama told Gaddafi to step down on 8 March, and Cameron touted the 27-state European Union’s call on the 10th. Hague called for a new government to take power in Tripoli on 7 and 16 March.⁷

The second round showed no immediate effects, so the Cameron government struggled to escalate a third time, to armed force. However, President Barack Obama, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates were for some time sceptical of the wisdom of a no-fly zone because it could not prevent a massacre.⁸ They questioned the usefulness of a no-fly zone, because the violence was mostly

ground-based, and, given tensions with Iran, they did not want another war in a Muslim country. Britain's Chief of the Defence Staff, General Sir David Richards, was also sceptical. He believed that Britain must expand the nature of its military involvement to be decisive – “clout, not dribble” – but had a “hell of a job” convincing Cameron.⁹ In fact, Richards never convinced him. Richards got his message through by contacting his U.S. counterpart, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Michael Mullen. Once the Arab League called on the United Nations to impose a no-fly zone (on 12 March), and Gaddafi's victory was imminent, the Obama administration took control of the West's crisis response. With Resolution 1973 (17 March), the U.S. got approval for an aerial intervention that went beyond the maintenance of a no-fly zone to protect civilians and civilian “populated areas.” The latter permitted airstrikes on all Gaddafi attacks and units, for any attack would inevitably put civilians at risk, and any unit could be reasonably expected to support such an attack. This provision eliminated the need for a nexus between airstrikes and the no-fly zone, and permitted a degree of force that far exceeded all previous no-fly zones – including northern Iraq, Bosnia, and Kosovo – to date.¹⁰

Britain's conception of the no-fly zone was calibrated as a measure of extra help to balance the conflict in Libya, so that the Libyan revolutionaries could advance the political transition themselves. The U.S. initiative was more intense than what the British intended. Though the intent, to remove Gaddafi, was held in common, the British government wanted this done more quickly, and believed it could be achieved more efficiently with less force. A measure of the carefully calibrated and restrained Cameron government policy is that it hoped to stop the air strikes soon after starting them, to see if Gaddafi now would listen to reason and resign. The British campaign plan called for an

operation pause after the first round of air strikes in order to negotiate with Gaddafi again about his attitude regarding resignation. This would have been the fourth escalation, but according to Richards, this proposal was not accepted by Britain's allies.¹¹

The Cameron government believed that the transition in Libya could be facilitated more efficiently if they levelled the playing field in Libya with a limited intervention, rather than deploy overwhelming asymmetrical force as only the U.S. could do. Hague made the British conception clear on 20 March, when he said the intervention imposed a "balance of arms" with political implications: to ensure that Libyans could determine their own future without being massacred. Attacks on the revolutionary movement had to stop, and the extent to which Gaddafi's attacks continued would determine the military response of the intervention.¹² However, the revolutionaries were not able to defeat Gaddafi's forces. A stalemate took hold on the main front along the coastal road from Benghazi to Tripoli. The interveners had to take a more direct role in campaign, advising and sustaining the revolutionary fighters, dictating battle strategy, and deploying more destructive weapons to turn the tide against Gaddafi.

The Obama administration wanted to deploy sufficient force to prevent a massacre, and avoid getting entangled in another war. Obama had rhetorically committed to removing Gaddafi, but this was his political position, not his administration's military objective. From around the time the intervention began, Obama started to omit from statements his earlier calls for Gaddafi to resign. "We are not going to use force to go beyond a well-defined goal, specifically the protection of civilians in Libya," he said on 18 March.¹³ Admiral Mullen noted in multiple television appearances that military stalemate and Gaddafi ultimately remaining in power were possibilities: "The goals are

limited. It's not about seeing him go. It's about supporting the United Nations resolution which talked about eliminating his ability to kill his own people.” He added, “certainly potentially one outcome” was that the mission could succeed while leaving Gaddafi in power.¹⁴ U.S. officials nevertheless had a “really hard time” persuading Cameron to end the mission. Cameron was the most reluctant allied leader to stop once the immediate goal as the U.S. saw it— protecting civilians from massacre – had been achieved. For Cameron, the mission would not be over until the transition was complete.¹⁵ The last escalation took place during the intervention, when the interveners decided to intensify their war effort to break the stalemate. This phase is discussed below.

Britain and the decision to intervene

Cameron had been named prime minister in May 2010 after forming a coalition with the minority Liberal Democrats. This ended thirteen years of Labour Party government and was Britain’s first coalition ministry in sixty-five years. The Cameron government had an ambitious ‘Big Society’ policy and tough austerity program. Avoidance of overseas adventures was expected to be the order of the day, as the new government sought to shore-up the national consensus behind its priorities and public confidence its leadership. Mass protests and violence erupted in Libya on 15 February 2011, and civil war soon after. The Cameron government stumbled badly during the next two weeks of this, its first foreign policy crisis and elective war. The mistakes threatened to discredit Cameron’s leadership and policies. Governments in this sort of politically toxic situation are desperate to regain control.

Even before the Libya crisis, there was angst and debate around Whitehall about how to strengthen operations before the government fell into avoidable traps and public

relations disasters.¹⁶ The Cameron government's worst fears were realized once the crisis broke. The first mistake stemmed from a trip to the Middle East in mid- to late-February. Cameron was the first head-of-state since the 'Arab Spring' to visit Egypt. He gave a pro-democracy speech and walked through Cairo's symbolic Tahrir Square. But newspaper headlines spoke of hypocrisy, not freedom, when it was revealed Cameron had been accompanied by British defence corporation executives and that arms sales were behind the trip to the region.¹⁷ The combination of arms and democracy, and timing, with the Libya crisis exploding, struck discordant political notes. More questions arose when it was learned that Liberal Democrat Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg was also absent from London. Clegg, on a ski holiday with his family at Davos, the exclusive Swiss resort, had to rush back to London.¹⁸ The Cameron government looked disorganized and out of its depth, as though it forgot to leave someone in charge.

The second mistake concerned the Cameron government's evacuation of British civilians from Libya.¹⁹ The Royal Navy frigate HMS Cumberland had been directed to Libya, but could not dock at first because of safety concerns. Technical faults delayed a government-chartered plane at London's Gatwick Airport. The break-downs made Cameron furious, provoking a rare loss of temper.²⁰ France, Italy, Turkey, and Russia, and major corporations, such as British Petroleum, were moving forward with evacuations of their people. By 25 February, 3, 500 Britons were gone but 220 remained in Tripoli and remote oil-producing areas.²¹ One British oil worker said, "We are living every day in fear of our lives... We are desperate for the British government to come and get us." Foreign Secretary William Hague promised an investigation. Cameron also apologized. "What I would say to those people is that I am extremely sorry," he told Sky

News TV from Oman. “It is a very difficult picture in Libya. This is not an easy situation.”²²

The third mistake was derided by critics as “James Bond diplomacy.”²³ A decision had been taken to combine in one action routine information-gathering and covert contact with the rebels. On 4 March, British Army Special Air Service commandos, diplomats, and Secret Intelligence Service officers were helicopter-dropped near Benghazi at night, with the rebels not informed in advance. The team was detained by suspicious farmhands, and to make matters worse, Libyan state television broadcast a telephone call from British Ambassador to Libya Richard Northern seeking the team’s release and apologizing for the “misunderstanding.”²⁴ It was not clear why covert moves were necessary, when reporters were moving about Libya and contact could be made from frigates in the vicinity, such as HMS Westminster and Cumberland.

British national interests and standing

National interests

The Cameron government believed Britain had an interest in the political transition begun by the rebels on 15 February running its course. Cameron’s instincts and sympathies were with the beleaguered citizen rebels, and Britain so far had been slow in showing concern and engagement with the ‘Arab Spring’ that was shaking-up the North Africa / Middle East region. The rebellion was an opportunity for Britain to encourage the more democratic change it wanted for the region and thought the region’s peoples wanted.²⁵ Intervention would allow Britain to guide the transition toward its preferences while managing risks, and deepen the impression of Britain as a great power capable of shaping international events. The transition running its course meant the termination of

Muammar Gaddafi's government. It did not have to mean complete regime change (removal of Gaddafi both from power and from Libya), or complete Gaddafi change (Gaddafi resignation and sons banned from succession).

Rebel controlled areas by 24 February included Benghazi and Misrata, Libya's second and third-largest cities. On the 28th, Cameron said Britain's "message to Colonel Gaddafi is simple: go now."²⁶ Gaddafi's forces launched a vigorous counter-attack against the rebels in early March that was highly successful. Foreign Secretary William Hague suggested on the 8th that intervention would be imperative from Britain's perspective if the tide of battle turned against the rebels. "But, of course, if that scenario changes, if it goes in other directions," meaning towards a Gaddafi victory, "then we have to look at other options as well."²⁷ As scholar Richard Falk has observed, "the intervention was called upon to overcome the apparent growing likelihood that Qaddafi would re-establish order in his favour."²⁸ Gaddafi's troops reached the gates of Benghazi and central Misrata by 18 March, and the next day the coalition intervened.

The government framed Britain's involvement in humanitarian and human rights terms – otherwise the intervention could not be legitimate. National interests no longer provide authoritative language internationally for the use of force across borders.²⁹ In the 20th and 21st centuries, war initiation, except United Nations-authorized intervention in the name of international values, has reduced states' external standing.³⁰ British and French diplomats imposed their "own evidence and frames even in the face of contrary reports from other members' embassies in Tripoli." The framing power of the media was used to construct the intervention as a 'responsibility to protect civilians' action.³¹ At the Security Council, opposition to the British and French became impossible, even if the

stated purpose was to avoid radicalizing Gaddafi or to gain time for negotiations. With British diplomats in the lead, dissent was skillfully represented as unwillingness to defend civilian lives, and delegitimized.³² Security Council Resolution 1970 (26 February) authorized a financial asset freeze, arms embargo, and sanctions against the Gaddafi government under Chapter VII (the enforcement provisions) of the United Nations Charter. The resolution referred the situation in Libya to the International Criminal Court. Resolution 1973 (17 March) built on the earlier resolution, and authorized under Chapter VII an intervention to protect civilians and civilian populated areas throughout Libya.³³

Gaddafi's troops proved to be unexpectedly resilient and loyal in the face of British / French / American and NATO airpower. The BBC reported on 20 June that the "conflict has gone on for much longer than many people imagined it would." *The Washington Post* noted a week later that Gaddafi's "resilience has startled the leaders who committed to the operation."³⁴ Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne said in March that Britain's involvement would cost taxpayers "tens of millions, not hundreds of millions" of pounds; in fact, the final bill was £212 million (£145 million operating costs, £67 million to replace spent munitions).³⁵ Britain decided to compromise on whether Gaddafi could remain in Libya after the war. The position to this point, shared by the interveners and rebels, had been clear and firm: Gaddafi had to leave Libya after resigning. In mid-June, for example, Gaddafi's son Saif Al-Islam pledged democratic reforms and internationally supervised elections if NATO stopped the bombing, with Gaddafi resigning within three months if defeated, and Russian diplomats floated Gaddafi

resigning but remaining in Libya as a “private citizen.” The rebels felt free to denounce both peace proposals, calling the latter “ludicrous” and repeating that he must go.³⁶

Yet breaking-down Gaddafi’s forces was taking too long. To break the stalemate, the interveners deployed more powerful weapons, allowed the equipping and resupply of the rebels, and intensified NATO’s bombing effort. The rebels lacked the military cohesion and popular support to advance far beyond Benghazi. Even after Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, with British help, created an operational theatre-level headquarters and inserted special operators to establish a more effective proxy land force, the rebels could not advance east-to-west on Tripoli in a time-frame acceptable to the interveners.³⁷ In May, Britain introduced the enhanced Paveway III ‘bunkerbuster’ 2,000 lbs heavy bombs, largest in the Royal Air Force arsenal. With NATO approval and support, and despite the arms embargo under Resolution 1973, a seafit of small rebel boats smuggled medicine, fuel, baby formula, ammunition, weapons, etc. to pivotal battles, such as Misrata. In June, Britain and France deployed attack helicopters (Britain the Apache equipped with Hellfire long-range missiles), and France air-dropped arms and ammunition to rebels in the west, violating Resolution 1973.³⁸

Changes were made to NATO’s targeting and the axis of advance. In April, the first month of NATO’s air campaign, 4,398 sorties were launched, 1,821 of them strike sorties. At end July, the cumulative totals were 17,203 and 6,493. Monthly figures stayed constant, with small decreases in June and July. The intensification was not in terms of more strikes, but where blows fell.³⁹ According to General Sir David Richards, Britain’s Chief of the Defence Staff, it was his call to make the key decision to refocus NATO’s effort on the west, supporting better fighters in Misrata and the Nafusa Mountains and

targeting Tripoli much more heavily. Key British ministers, Defence Secretary Liam Fox among them, saw that stalemate would be unavoidable otherwise.⁴⁰ Gaddafi's forces would collapse under this burden in mid-August.

Until then, pressure increased on the interveners to deliver a cease-fire and power transition agreement. May-July was a tough time for them because the cohesion of Gaddafi's forces was uncertain. "What was very, very hard to read," Energy Secretary Chris Huhne said, "and we did not even know during the summer intensification, [was] what ultimately the morale of the Gaddafi forces were."⁴¹ Britain and NATO were throwing everything they could at Gaddafi, and he was hanging on. What if a stalemate took hold? As noted, the position was Gaddafi must 'go' before there could be a cease-fire. The sweetener now offered Gaddafi was he could remain in Libya upon giving up power and all involvement in politics.⁴² In July, Foreign Secretary Hague said what happens to Gaddafi is "ultimately a question for the Libyans."⁴³ There was a risk the Gaddafi family, if allowed to remain, would regain influence later. From the British perspective, stalemate was even more undesirable.

Endgames other than complete regime change and complete Gaddafi change were seriously considered, if not preferred. Gaddafi had made similar overtures about remaining in Libya, with the proviso that his son Saif Al-Islam succeed him. He may have been worried about the indictment and arrest warrant issued by the International Criminal Court on 27 June. Gaddafi's proposal would have ended the war; whether it would have serviced Britain's interest in the transition running its course is less clear. Certainly, for the Cameron government, Gaddafi alive and his son in power in post-war Libya would not have been a satisfying outcome psychologically.⁴⁴ The interveners and

rebels had rejected this proposal each time. As the war continued through July, however, more pressure was put on the interveners to find a negotiated peace.⁴⁵ The commander of NATO's operation, Canadian Lieutenant General J. J. C. (Charlie) Bouchard, said that Saif Al-Islam's taking power and making peace would have been "most difficult and complex ending." Although civilians would have been protected, "in the long run," he told the Atlantic Council think-tank in 2012, "this would have been a difficult event to manage."⁴⁶

National standing and honour

The Cameron government believed Britain also had an interest in nourishing the national spirit. According to Richard Ned Lebow, the spirit is an innate human drive, (self-)esteem its goal, and honour and standing the means by which it is achieved.⁴⁷ States do not feel, but people do who identify with them. Those in leadership roles experience and perform emotional schema for their state.⁴⁸ Libya was an opportunity to display British influence on external events, at a time when government austerity policies were seeing capabilities diminish. The intervention put Britain's greatness on display in three senses; namely, its independence from the United States, British values also being international values, and it being validated not constrained by international law. Revenge, unjust in the Augustinian understanding of just war, is a distinct type of war for national spirit. Although not a legitimate motive in contemporary international politics, and therefore not openly admitted, Britain sought revenge on Gaddafi, particularly for the Lockerbie incident (1988) that had not been forgotten.

The national spirit related to several key psychological and emotional needs of the British government and public. Standing, which is place in an honour hierarchy achieved

when we excel in activities valued by our society, has been the principal motive for war since the dawn of the modern state system.⁴⁹ For the Cameron government, the honour hierarchy was the circle of great powers, and approbation was sought from international society. To state leaders like Prime Minister Cameron, standing matters because they identify with their state, and must cater to segments of their publics that regard standing as a sign of respect and dignity.⁵⁰ Standing is important to leaders not only because of what they get, but also because of the psychological satisfaction it provides, because we enjoy the process of beating people, and gaining or confirming positions of superiority. Greater standing can have instrumental value too, for it can increase the state's soft power, and therefore domestic and international legitimacy.⁵¹

The Libya crisis was ideally suited to a sizable power like Britain taking a lead role. The United States, for instance, was willing to let the Europeans lead. Gaddafi was isolated and friendless on the United Nations Security Council, his military weak. Libya was close enough to Britain, very close to NATO's bases in southern Italy, and its large cities were concentrated along the coast and surrounded by vast desert. Still, Cameron did not know, when calling for intervention at end February, that it could be orchestrated internationally. He had to struggle against pessimism in his country about Britain's status as a great power. The tenor of debate was "dispiriting," Cameron recalled in a 2011 speech. "It was that too many thought Britain actually couldn't do something like that any more ... That our best days are behind us. That we're on a path of certain decline. Well I'm here to tell you that it isn't true."⁵² On 19 March, Conservative MP James Arbuthnot praised his "breathhtaking degree of courage and leadership," and not all plaudits came from the government party.⁵³ The intervention "represent[ed] a welcome, if

brief, upward blip in an otherwise gloomy strategic picture” and “showed to the world a determined and competent side of British military policy.” The initiative remains (for Britain) a bright spot on what in most respects is a discouraging picture of a fading great power.⁵⁴

The Cameron government believed one of the ways Britain could earn recognition as a great power was through will and capacity to lead independent of the United States. Decision-makers were of the view that Britain could guide the political transition in Libya without the United States, and were driven by the national spirit to demonstrate this in a manner that international society would deem honourable. Ministers and advisors argued that the United States’ support did not have to entail it assuming full responsibility for military action. The ‘Atlantic Alliance’ involved shared burdens. The United States was slow to embrace a no-fly zone, and so the government considered mounting one without them. This was, advisors said, “not desirable, but possible.”⁵⁵ Setting aside what the intervention would reveal about weapon shortages and heavy dependence for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance on NATO allies (especially the United States),⁵⁶ the key is that political elites believed Britain was strong enough, great enough to use force in Libya without the United States’ active support.

Cameron worked on the no-fly zone to protect Libyan civilians, and did not back down in the face of initial United States disapproval. So important was independent action to perceptions inside and outside of the country’s great power standing, that Britain (with France) forced the diplomatic pace even though the United States remained unconvinced of the need for intervention. Cameron pressed forward, despite an unusual communications break with United States President Barack Obama. He did not speak to

Obama from 7 to 15 March, when the draft of what would become Resolution 1973 was tabled before the United Nations Security Council. The leaders did not speak until after the intervention was authorized. Secretary of Defence Robert Gates criticized Cameron's call for a no-fly zone at the beginning of March; but on the 19th, the chief spokesman of the National Security Council offered unsolicited thanks, saying the United States was "incredibly grateful" for Britain's leadership.⁵⁷

The humanitarian and human rights assertions Britain made for the intervention furthered its standing and honour claim. The Cameron government considered these values to be 'British' as well as international, and to be tools in the promotion of state interests.⁵⁸ On the one hand, this emphasized the 'greatness' of British culture, institutions, and ideals. Greatness did not have to mean economic and military might alone. A benchmark government policy document, the National Security Strategy (2010), reflected this view of great powerhood: Britain is "a country whose political, economic, and cultural authority far exceeds its size."⁵⁹ Asserting 'British' values this way was to claim status as a great power of an untraditional sort, one in which soft and hard power assets were mixed.⁶⁰ On the other hand, the linkage of British and international values assisted the government's justification of force. International legitimacy was increased because Britain could claim to be acting in the name of core community values. Domestic legitimacy increased because of that perception, and the implication through the linking of British and international values that using force was in the national interest.

International law, in the skilled hands of Britain's lawyers and diplomats, conferred authority and freedom to act on the Libya crisis. The standout feature of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973 (17 March) was the authorization of force to

protect civilians and civilian populated areas from attack and threat of attack. It allowed defence of all rebel-held territory, since any Gaddafi assault put civilians at risk. The resolution allowed for highly potent enforcement, under the laws of war.⁶¹ Yet what is legal is not necessarily the same as what is right. It is possible to do what is legal and be morally wrong, and act outside the law and be just. Britain justified its authority to act, i.e. its power, through humanitarianism, human rights, and international law (Resolution 1973 the key instrument). The government's claims were furthered by the erosion of the Cold War legal system of deterrence and 'prohibition' of force. The system has given way to 'protection' of liberal values. International law served Britain as a legitimizing gateway, with force premised on distinction from illegality and immorality.⁶²

Cameron did not believe a great power like Britain should be constrained by international law from doing what it thought was right. Cameron and his ministers argued that Britain and allies could implement the no-fly zone without a new resolution beyond 1970.⁶³ NATO intervened in Kosovo in 1999 without specific authorization, an action an international commission found "illegal but legitimate."⁶⁴ But it triggered a debate that reverberates still about the fundamental principles – sovereignty, law, and human rights – of the international state system. That ministers assumed Britain could carry this risk for the state system is telling of their pride in Britain's power and prerogatives. The prime minister also published legal advice that Resolution 1973 did not preclude direct targeting of Gaddafi. He took public a debate with Chief of the Defence Staff General Sir David Richards, whose position was Gaddafi could not be targeted unless he was in a military complex or another setting directing the war.⁶⁵

British decision-makers did not consciously frame the intervention as an act of revenge – like standing, an expression of the spirit – but it was a powerful secondary motive. Revenge lost its principal stimulus when wars of territorial conquest became delegitimized, Lebow argues, but wars of standing and revenge can still reinforce each other, as in the United States intervention in Afghanistan (2001) and the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq (2003).⁶⁶ It is possible to enjoy partial revenge and appear just, like Israel did in southern Lebanon (2006), if restraint is exercised regarding casualties and damage and there is no explicit declaration of revenge.⁶⁷ Britain's Libya intervention was no different. Standing and revenge were connected because Britain had been humiliated by Libya in past decades. Adding shame was the 'deal with the devil' made less than a decade before, in which Britain embraced Gaddafi to enhance trade and security.⁶⁸ Cameron government leaders may have felt 'Aristotelian anger' toward Gaddafi. Lebow argues that Aristotelian anger is narrower than the western definition, and can be described as a sharp response to a slight or lessening. It is felt even more intensely when the wronger is of inferior status, and still provokes what may qualify as a war of revenge.⁶⁹

This is evident in Britain's desire for revenge on Gaddafi. His government was blamed for violence in and on Britain, notably support of the Irish Republican Army, the shooting from Libya's Embassy in London of Police Constable Yvonne Fletcher, and the notorious Lockerbie disaster. Cameron developed a strong, visceral, personal dislike of Gaddafi because of these incidents. So strong was the animosity, Britain avoided official peace negotiations even during the height of the stalemate in July, because Cameron was revolted by the prospect of talks with Gaddafi.⁷⁰ The Lockerbie incident contributed the

most to Britain's desire for revenge. It was Britain's worst air disaster and worst terrorist attack, and is commonly linked to Gaddafi. When making the deal with Gaddafi in 2003-04, Prime Minister Tony Blair said that it "doesn't mean forgetting the pain of the past, but it does mean recognizing that it is time to move on."⁷¹

However, Britain could not move on. Lockerbie was high on the agenda when diplomatic relations with Libya were restored back in 1999, but there was scant cooperation. The truth may never be known, said Oliver Miles, a former British ambassador to Libya, but "if there was a Libyan mastermind, it was Gaddafi."⁷² This appears to be the basis on which Britain proceeded against the Gaddafi government in 2011. "And don't let anyone say this wasn't in our national interest," Cameron stressed. "He's the man who gave Semtex to the IRA, who was behind the shooting of a police officer in a London square, who was responsible for the bombing of a plane in the skies over Lockerbie."⁷³ After the intervention, the government not only did not move on, it tried to move forward on Lockerbie. British police travelling to Libya to continue investigations into the air disaster was an issue from the day Gaddafi was overthrown, but the new Libyan authorities did not give approval until January 2013.⁷⁴

Conclusion

This article questions whether the Libya crisis and intervention of 2011 merit the label 'humanitarian.' The Cameron government had been embarrassed by its performance in the first two weeks of the civil war. In addition to a political interest in decisive action to get back in control, the Cameron government believed it would be in Britain's interests to see the Libya transition run its course. An active role guiding the transition would deepen impressions of Britain as a great power. Authority for the use of force was

claimed through humanitarian justification capped by legal authorization (Resolution 1973). Human rights and humanitarian abuses were exaggerated and the crisis oversimplified to demonize Gaddafi and fit Libya's civil war into a civilian protection frame. The misleading Libya narrative is analogous to the inaccurate weapons of mass destruction framing used to justify the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

To these points must be added thoughts about the intervention's troubling aftermath. There are two areas to emphasize: nuclear disarmament and weapons of mass destruction, and the Libya post-conflict situation. In 2003, Gaddafi agreed to destroy Libya's weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear weapons, under international verification. He kept a small 'hedge' chemical weapons stockpile.⁷⁵ Gaddafi might have survived if he retained Libya's nuclear weapons. "Imagine the possible nightmare if we had failed to remove the Libyan nuclear weapons program and their longer-range missile force," said Robert Joseph, who helped organize the effort under the United States George W. Bush administration.⁷⁶ Lord Owen said that states would have acted differently in 2011 – no intervention – had Gaddafi still possessed nuclear weapons.⁷⁷

The decision to de-nuclearize also had serious ramifications for international peace and security. They concern how states possessing or seeking weapons of mass destruction respond in light of Libya. Former Prime Minister Tony Blair said there is evidence that the President of Syria, Bashar al-Assad, has learned lessons from seeing Gaddafi give up his weapons of mass destruction and then be deposed by the West.⁷⁸ North Korea interpreted the Libya case as proof that military strength, in particular nuclear weapons, is the best guarantee of sovereignty and protection against foreign

interference. In January 2016, North Korea described its first successful hydrogen bomb test as an “act of self-defence” against the United States’ “stance of aggression.”⁷⁹

Also disturbing is Libya’s post-conflict situation. Libya has become a failed state. Advanced surface-to-air missiles and other weapons looted from unguarded warehouses have surfaced in arms markets open to terrorists and criminals, and in other conflicts, such as Syria’s, Mali’s, and Israel/Palestine’s.⁸⁰ There were reports of ethnic cleansing, torture, and other human rights abuses by the victorious rebels. Libya’s new government was too weak to maintain order, protect human security, or restrain competing militias. In 2014, a second civil war broke-out with rival governments in Tripoli and Tobruk; the former includes Islamists and has not been recognized internationally. The United Nations has said it will build peace around a third government. In the chaos, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria seized land, and African and Syrian refugees used Libya as a route to Europe. Britain and the other interveners helped set the stage for the renewed conflict not just by stepping back from the difficult work of peacebuilding, but also by shifting the axis of advance from the formal opposition at Benghazi to the rebel groups in the Nafusa Mountains and Misrata. The strategy led directly to Gaddafi’s defeat. At the same time, it did nothing to enhance the Transitional National Council’s authority and credibility in Libya. The crucible of war can forge national cohesion, but the Council did not suffer or endure that ordeal by itself, and the consequences for Libya have been severe.

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