

# Leading from Behind Still Isn't a Good Idea

by [Michael Singh \(/experts/michael-singh\)](/experts/michael-singh)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Singh \(/experts/michael-singh\)](/experts/michael-singh)

Michael Singh is the Lane-Swig Senior Fellow and managing director at The Washington Institute.



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## Despite Qadhafi's fall, the Obama administration's initial reluctance to become involved in Libya sends a negative signal to Iran and others regarding Washington's stomach for confrontation.

In the wake of Tripoli's fall, the White House has been quick to characterize the U.S. participation in NATO's Libya intervention as a success, and perhaps even a template for future military interventions. Never mind that the administration is engaging in a bit of revisionist history (far from rallying a U.N. Security Council resolution authorizing the intervention, the U.S., for a time, was among those blocking a resolution, according to British and French diplomats). Never mind that however full-throatedly the White House touts Libya as a model intervention, it is unlikely to apply that model anywhere else, including Syria.

These things aside, it is hardly surprising that the White House should tout Libya as a success. This is a political season, and a fractious one at that. Foreign policy successes come few and far between for any president, and White House communications teams are invariably quick to declare victory with a conspicuous lack of subtlety. Indeed, tactically speaking, the international intervention was a success: Tripoli has fallen, and while Qadhafi remains elusive, his regime has crumbled. While significant questions remain about the next phase of Libya's revolution, and while there is much to criticize regarding the timing and execution of American and NATO operations, the decision to intervene has been vindicated.

Nevertheless, the way in which the Obama administration handled the Libya conflict is no model; it had positive and negative aspects, the full ramifications of which will not be clear for some time. With the bulk of NATO's involvement likely concluded, it behooves U.S. policymakers to engage in a clear-eyed stock-taking of the Libya intervention to determine what to do, and what not to do, in future crises.

The advantages of the Obama administration's approach to the Libya intervention seem clear. Not a single American life was lost, as far as we know. In addition, the operation enjoyed broad international buy-in, which brings with it multiple benefits: the costs and responsibilities of the fighting were shared among coalition partners (though far

from equally so); it had credibility globally, regionally, and in Libya itself insofar as NATO was perceived as supporting an indigenous uprising; the Libyan opposition is not strongly associated with any single international power, but has broad-based support (diplomatically, though notably not financially); and the burden of post-conflict reconstruction assistance does not fall on American shoulders alone. Finally, the intervention gave tangible if belated expression to President Obama's avowed support for the Arab Spring.

The disadvantages, however, are equally stark. Foremost among these was the "leading from behind" mentality which has seemed to guide the Obama administration not only throughout the Libya conflict but also the Arab Spring broadly. The administration has portrayed this approach as patiently assembling a coalition and allowing local partners such as the Libyan opposition to take the lead. In the Middle East, however, the U.S. approach is viewed less charitably -- Washington is perceived as hanging back until an outcome seems clear or a decision is forced by events. It was not necessary that the United States lead the charge against Qadhafi -- that was appropriately the role of the Libyan opposition. But Washington did not even lead the international coalition to support the opposition; instead, we seemed a reluctant partner.

From the U.S. reluctance to engage fully in the intervention flowed a number of problems which will have lingering effects. First, the administration failed to make a coherent or compelling case to the American people and U.S. troops for the Libya intervention. U.S. officials made clear that they wanted to see Qadhafi and his regime toppled and behind the scenes were likely keen to demonstrate support for the Arab Spring and firmness in the face of possible advances in the region by Iran and extremists. However, they made no effort to secure a mandate or conduct military operations toward that end. Instead, international intervention was rhetorically justified on humanitarian grounds, which was hard to square with U.S. and international inaction elsewhere around the globe. As with Iraq, Afghanistan, and other conflicts past and future, the president owes Americans a clear and coherent explanation as to why and toward what objectives American soldiers are being put in harm's way and American resources expended.

The American ambivalence toward the Libya intervention has also had reverberations overseas. First and foremost, the lack of clear leadership in the coalition-building process led not only to a fractured alliance -- Germany and Turkey, for example, initially exempted themselves -- but also to ongoing poor coordination between the Libyan opposition and NATO, which was also hamstrung by its incongruous mandate. For many months, NATO's activities appeared designed to enforce a stalemate, preventing regime forces from advancing but doing little to assist opposition forces in doing so. In addition, Washington's reluctance to become involved in Libya -- despite the strength of international support, the weakness of Qadhafi's forces, and the compelling justification provided by his regime's activities -- sends a negative signal to the Iranian regime and others regarding Washington's stomach for confrontation. It conveys instead the impression of an America that is increasingly unwilling or unable to exercise influence in the Middle East, a development with deeply troubling implications.

*Michael Singh is managing director of The Washington Institute and a former senior director for Middle East affairs at the National Security Council. ❖*

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