

Obama's Leading from behind Approach in MENA and Political Stability in Libya

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Abstract

The main concern of the paper is to explore how Obama's leading approach from behind or low engagement approach in MENA has contributed to the instability and crippling of the political transition in Libya. The paper employs the descriptive method to pursue and analyze the implications of Obama's leading-from-behind approach to political stability and transition in Libya. The paper uses the defensive realism theory in an attempt to explain Obama's leading-from-behind approach in MENA. The paper found that Obama's leading from-behind approach had three direct implications on the instability and crippling of the political transition in Libya: first, military intervention to topple Ghaddafi Regime without a plan for political transition, which was required in a very complex case like the Libyan case. Second, the absence of the U S's active role and leaving Libya with very weak and divided European leadership. Third- U.S.'s inaction to prevent the regional powers from spoiling UNSMIL's efforts. Accordingly, the Obama administration bears the largest share of the instability and crippling of the political transition in Libya.

Keywords: Libya; U.S; leading from behind; engagement; ISIS; NATO; transition.

نهج القيادة من الخلف للرئيس أوباما في الشرق الأوسط والاستقرار السياسي في ليبيا

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ملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة على نحو أساسي باستعراض كيف أن نهج القيادة من الخلف أو الانخراط المنخفض في الشرق الأوسط ساهم في عدم الاستقرار وعرقلة التحول السياسي في ليبيا، توظف الدراسة المنهج الوصفي لبحث وتحليل تداعيات نهج القيادة من الخلف لأوباما على الاستقرار والتحول السياسي في ليبيا، تستخدم هذه الدراسة النظرية الواقعية الدفاعية في محاولة لتفسير نهج القيادة من الخلف للرئيس أوباما في الشرق الأوسط، وتوصلت الدراسة إلى أن نهج القيادة من الخلف للرئيس أوباما كان له ثلاثة تداعيات مباشرة على عدم الاستقرار وتعثر الانتقال السياسي في ليبيا: أولاً: تدخل عسكري لإسقاط نظام القذافي دون خطة للانتقال السياسي، وهو الأمر الذي كان ضرورياً مع حالة معقدة للغاية كالحالة الليبية. ثانياً: غياب دور فعال للولايات المتحدة في ليبيا وترك ليبيا لقيادة أوروبية ضعيفة جداً ومنقسمة. ثالثاً: تقاعس الولايات المتحدة عن منع القوى الإقليمية من إفساد جهود بعثة الأمم المتحدة للدعم في ليبيا. وعليه، تتحمل إدارة أوباما النصيب الأكبر من عدم الاستقرار وتعثر الانتقال السياسي في ليبيا، أيضاً، يمكننا القول بأن المشاركة الخارجية البناءة في بلدان التحول السياسي، خاصة تلك التي تتمتع بهيكل اجتماعي معقد للغاية، ضرورة للغاية لقيادة وتسريع عملية الانتقال السياسي..

الكلمات الدالة: ليبيا، الولايات المتحدة، القيادة من الخلف، الانخراط، داعش، الناتو، التحول.

1. Introduction:

The precedents of political transition in the countries after a civil war or after removing an authoritarian regime, whether by an internal revolution or external military intervention pointed out that the external high engagement approach in those countries, which can be called 'the positive role of the external engagement, has been a crucial role in accelerating the political transition and supporting the stability. Such a positive engagement is featuring in taking the initiative through a specific and comprehensive plan to accelerate the process of political transformation and support stability, building security institutions, putting pressure on the rival political factions, providing humanitarian aid, and eliminating warlords. In short, overcoming all obstacles that could hinder the political transition (O'Brien and Gowan, 2012, pp.8-9)

If we consider the Libyan case, we find that it has realistically embodied the negative role of the external factor, as Libya has turned into a quasi-failed state since the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime in 2011 (Shapiro, 2014, p. 28).

2. Research Problem

The United States overthrew the Gaddafi regime without putting a specific plan for the political transition process in the post-Gaddafi stage. Obama adopted the approach of leading from behind or limited involvement in Libya, which led to a state of instability and faltered political transition in Libya. Accordingly, the study problem can be formulated in the following main question: **How did Obama's leading from behind approach or low involvement in the Middle East contributed to the instability and crippling of the political transition process in Libya?**

3. Hypothesis of the Study

The main hypothesis of this study is that Obama's leading from behind approach in the Middle East and North Africa region and the claims of this approach has been the main cause of instability and crippling the political transition process in Libya since 2011.

4. Objectives of the Study

The study aims to shed light on the new role of the United States of America, and the repercussions of this role on North Africa and Libya, and to clarify the reasons for US President Obama to adopt leading from behind approach, and then to reach some recommendations that may contribute to supporting stability in Libya.

5. Significance of the Study

This study sheds light on the causes of instability and the faltering of the political transition process in Libya according to leading from behind approach in the Middle East and North Africa, as previous literature did not adequately address this topic. Also, the importance of the study stems from the fact that this topic is one of the vital and sensitive issues that affect the future of North Africa in general and Libya in particular.

6. Methodology of the Study

The study adopts the descriptive method to pursue and analyze the implications of Obama's leading from behind approach on the political stability and transition in Libya.

7. Review of Related Literature

Despite the scarcity of previous studies that dealt directly or indirectly with the subject of the study, leadership from behind approach of President Obama in the Middle East and North Africa and political stability in Libya, there are a number of studies that tried to approach the content and objectives of the study. These studies will be addressed in the following section:

7.1 Shaves, C. Martini, J. (2014), "Libya after Gaddafi: Through and Implications for the Future".

This study assessed the political scene in Libya. The researchers demonstrated insecurity and the spread of armed

violence were the most important causes of instability and undermining all efforts of political transitions, including reconciliation and building and stabilizing Libyan state institutions since 2011. The reasons for this violence were attributed by researchers to two main factors: The first is what the study called leaving Libya to decide its own destiny. Researchers believe that the weakness of the external factor was the cause of instability and weakness of the Libyan state institutions, due to the absence of a plan or a decisive political and security role for external forces, and the ability of the rebels and the various armed factions to impose their control over large parts of Libya, allowing the emergence of ISIS. The second is the tribal and political loyalties and self-interests of each political or security faction. This was demonstrated through boycotts and defections from the Transitional National Council, the Constitution Drafting Committee, the National Reconciliation Dialogues, and the General National Congress. The study recommends activating and accelerating the efforts of the political transition.

7.2 Watanabe, L. (2016), "Libya in the Eye of the Storm".

This study focused on the political division and conflict of interests in Libya, in addition to the divisions within the Libyan institutions themselves, especially the military institution established by the National Transitional Council in 2012. This reflects the conflict of interests and tribal loyalties, and illustrates the seriousness of the political division in Libya, specifically between Tripoli and Tobruk, as each party resorted to an alliance with multiple militias fighting against each other to implement its own agenda in Libya. This, in turn, contributed to fueling armed violence and the emergence of ISIS in Libya. The study concluded that the biggest dilemma for achieving stability and political transition in Libya lies in security control, integrating militias into the security services, and agreeing on a national vision to get Libya out of its stumble.

7.3 Holm, J.(2017). "External Actors' Influences on Other States' Internal Political Processes".

This study proved that the positive or negative role played by external powers had the greatest impact on the course of political transformations after the Cold War, and of course on the countries of Eastern Europe. The positive impact, according to the experience of the United States and Europe, had multiple forms, such as programs to promote democracy, provide foreign aid, and rapid intervention to defuse political or security crises because of its positive, rapid and significant impact on the political transition and stability, such as what happened in Eastern European countries in the aftermath of the Cold War. The negative impact was embodied in Russia's experience through the support of internal parties and factions.

7.4 Suria, Z (2016). "The Libyan Crisis and International Forces: Differing Views and Competing Interests".

It discussed divergent viewpoints and competing interests, and proved that the faltering political transition and instability in Libya is due to the existence of a conflict in the security, political and economic interests of the external parties that were involved in the Libyan crisis, as well as internal divisions and militia violence, and the emergence of ISIS later. Each party supported a certain internal faction with which it politically agrees or guarantees its interests in Libya; Egypt for example supported Haftar's forces because of its fears of the spread of ISIS elements on its western borders.

7.5 Ilardo, M. (2018), "The Competition between France and Italy over Libya, and its Repercussions on Southwestern Libya"

This study confirmed that the absence of any plans by the Western powers for post- Gaddafi political transition has contributed to the chaos and civil war and the division of the country into two main powers, west and east. Each force worked according to a different strategic vision based on reliance on different allies. While Italy supported the Tripoli government, France switched to supporting Haftar's forces since 2015. Both countries also put forward initiatives for a solution that reflect their interests and security vision. The two countries are racing to obtain the largest amount of oil concessions.

7.6 Pedde, N. (2017), "The Libyan Conflict and its Controversial roots: the Causes and Sources of the Conflict in Libya'.

This study touched on the role of external forces, as one of the main factors in the complexity of the Libyan crisis, and the main driver in the Libyan scene so far, as Libya has become an arena for regional and international competition and proxy wars to serve complex economic and geopolitical interests. Some countries had a role in the Libyan landscape, such as France, Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, Qatar, Egypt and Turkey. France focused on its economic and oil interests and undermined the Islamic Jihad and supported the alliance with Haftar, while Qatar, Turkey and Iran supported the

Brotherhood factions and militias that are fighting Haftar in Libya in the framework of supporting the Brotherhood project in the region. Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the UAE sought to ally with Haftar to strike the Brotherhood's project, and this in turn led to the complexity of the political solution and Libya's delinquency in chaos, the collapse of central institutions in Libya and the establishment of dozens of local militias.

7.7 Van de Voort, S. (2017), "Understanding Barack Obama's Middle East Legacy: Leadership from Behind and Obama's Strategic Vision".

This study confirmed that President Obama adopted a new strategy in the Middle East, which is called "The Leading From Behind". This strategy is based on the limited military participation of the United States in the crises of the Middle East. This approach appeared clearly after the end of the NATO mission in Libya. One of the results of the study was that Obama's strategy in the region is closer to being a defensive realism, as the United States did not withdraw militarily from the region, but rather opted for limited diplomatic participation, and military intervention in a narrower scope, such as fighting ISIS.

7.8 David, U. (2016), "Obama's foreign policy legacy".

This study proved that the reason for the Obama administration's hesitation is due to the lack of importance of Libya and the Middle East in general to the United States, that the intense European pressures on Obama pushed him to intervene in Libya, and that the American intervention in Libya aimed at a quick, low-cost military victory, and it did not have any plan for a political solution After Gaddafi.

7.9 Chindoga, M. (2016), Examining the Causes of Instability in Post-Qaddafi Libya, Mali and Nigeria: a comparative theoretical approach.

Chindoga argues that the United States not only destroyed the Libyan military apparatus, but also provided the rebels with weapons, which led to strengthening their positions in Libya at the expense of government institutions. The United States did not have a strategy for Libya despite its direct responsibility for instability in Libya, and almost completely abandoned its role after the killing of the American ambassador in Benghazi in 2012.

7.10 Ducleon, E.G.(2017), How did Obama's Foreign Policy Encourage the Rise of ISIS?

Ducleon believes that President Obama has ended the Carter doctrine in the region. This doctrine is based on the readiness of the United States of America to intervene militarily to deter any party trying to harm its interests and presence in the region. This explains why Obama ignored the region and its points of tension, especially the Syrian crisis. Remarkably; the Obama administration intervened militarily in the region to confront ISIS only.

7.11 Al-Sawani, Y.M.(2015), "The United States and Libya: Contradictions of Intervention and the Future of the Libyan Entity".

This study finds that President Obama's reluctance to intervene in Libya confirmed that Libya was not a priority for his administration. This was an indication of the reduction of American interest and involvement in the Middle East region. Nevertheless, Obama exploited the Libyan crisis opportunistically to improve the image of the United States in the Middle East after the legacy of the unilateral hegemony that his predecessors pursued in the region, and also to prevent the competitors of the United States, especially China, from accessing Libyan oil and gas.

The researcher benefited from previous studies in building the theoretical framework of the study, as they helped him in defining the study's problem and determining its objectives and questions. The previous studies dealt with the issues of the causes of instability in Libya in general, and the Libyan conflict after Gaddafi in particular. Perhaps what distinguishes this study is that it studies two variables that have not been addressed in the Libyan case, which is the approach of leadership from behind of President Obama in the Middle East and North Africa and its reflection on political stability in Libya, in addition to employing the theory of defensive realism to provide a reliable and objective treatment regarding the circumstances of the American role during the Obama administration. The leadership from behind approach of Obama needs to be rooted theoretically in order to know the real dimensions and objectives of this approach.

8. Theoretical Framework

The study seeks in this regard to test Obama's approach according to the vision of defensive realism theory. The study also attempts to examine all the dimensions and repercussions of the absence of the American role in Libya on instability.

8.1 Defensive Realism

Defensive Realism was founded by Kenneth Waltz. Defensive realism takes a different logic than classical realism in interpreting state behavior in the international system. It argues that the international system's structure, not the human desire to dominate others is the main influence on the behaviour of states (Douglas, 2012, p.18).

Unlike classical realism also, it has its own perspective on the conflict in the international system. It contends that the conflict is inevitable thanks to the anarchic structure of the international system. However, this conflict is not a permanent state, as states mainly seek to acquire the largest amount of power, not hegemony, to ensure its security in order to survive. In this vein, defensive realism argues that security is abundant. Thus, conflicts are rare cases in the international system. Specifically, states resort to military conflicts when their survival or vital interests are exposed to serious threats. Also, in rare cases, states may engage in conflicts because of leaders' misconceptions (Pashakhanl, 2018, pp. 31-32). Accordingly, defensive realism holds an optimistic view of the international system. Besides the abundance of security, the anarchic structure in itself motivates states to seek moderate policies, including cooperation as they the best way to eliminate the concerns of security and survival (Lobell, 2019).

According to Waltz, in an anarchic system, where states operate freely and focus on their own interests only, moreover, states do not trust the intentions of others. Power alone becomes the governing framework for achieving the interests of states. Thus, the principle of self-help becomes an inevitable principle. However, this is not to say that, self-help policies only aim at maximizing power or preparing for wars, but most likely aim at avoiding conflicts as much as possible via cooperation and alliances as the main goal of states is security, not hegemony or occupation (Waltz, 1979, pp. 111-112).

The concept of the security dilemma is one of the most important core concepts of the logic of defensive realism. Despite the optimistic view of defensive realism. Nevertheless, it acknowledges that cooperation and alliances among states do not preclude the deep conflict of interests among states, which inevitably leads to the emergence of a security dilemma. Conflict of interest is a very complex process that is permeated with many considerations, including the misconceptions of state leaders about other countries and the identity component. Hence, the conflict of interests between countries must be managed from the standpoint of the security dilemma, as a clash or conflict despite the existence of cooperation is very likely, and whenever there is a deep conflict of interests among countries, the more security dilemmas between them intensify, which translate into an arms race between them. However, this is not to say that, the security dilemma always leads to wars or conflicts, because states resort to maximizing their power in light of the intensification of the conflict of interests as an act of precautionary against the misbehavior of the adversely states. States in the anarchic system will remain rational actors avoiding the conflict as much as possible (Tang, 2009, pp. 598-603).

In the context of anarchy and security dilemma, defensive realism has made great attention to the issue of the balance of power. The balance of power for defensive realism is 'an iron law', the balance is a permanent state in the international system. According to Waltz, even when states seeking security, the anarchic system and conflict of interests force countries seeking to security to be in a permanent status of balance against the other countries. Also, the anarchic system that renders their survival at stake, force them to ensure that their power's foes do not rise in a dramatic way (Waltz, 1979, p. 117).

Balance in accordance with defensive realism is achieved through two mechanisms: the internal balance is almost a permanent state for states, through the state's strengthening of its economic capabilities in order to strengthen its military strength, and then ultimately developing smart strategies. And external balance that resorted when states feel that their security is seriously threatened by another country. The external balance has two types: the first is the balance policy through the movement of states to establish a counter alliance or expand an existing alliance to resist the threatening powers. The second is Bandwagon, which is the alliance of the state with the threatening forces themselves, to avoid threatening its security and ensure its survival; however, this alliance comes at the expense of its independence, so states always prefer a policy of balance (Waltz, 1979, p. 118; Douglas, 2012, p.19).

Accordingly, the study is divided into three sections: The first, low US involvement in the Middle East and North Africa, the second, the implications of Obama's low involvement in Libya on political transition and stability, the third, an overview of the political transition process since 2011. These three sections will be dealt with in detail as follows:

9. Low US Engagement in the Middle East and North Africa

A fundamental change was made in US foreign policy under President Obama by adopting what is called low engagement thanks to three main variables: the Iraq war, the rise of China, and the global financial crisis. The Obama administration has concluded that the United States of America no longer needs the priority of the project, especially excessive military supremacy in the international system. The new approach focused on the document issued by the US Department of Defense in 2012 called "US Continuing Global Command: The Priorities of U.S. Department of Defense for the twenty-first century". This document emphasized that the United States was prepared to conduct limited military operations if necessary in the aftermath of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Priority was given to other matters and non-military means in order to reduce US military commitments regarding stability operations (Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense, U.S. Department of Defense, January 2012).

The U.S military force as the key core of the new approach has to be empowered only when the U.S interests are exposed to a very serious threat. This is not mean the withdrawal of U.S forces around the world to home, but adopting instead an offshore military balancing strategy, i.e., remaining of these forces, in particular, the maritime forces at the periphery and summoning them when necessary. Additionally, the offshore balancing has to be largely concentrated in Asia to contain China's rise, not in Europe and Mena. Accordingly, the new approach of Obama in the international system, including offshore balance, is extensively consistent with the logic of defensive realism. This is also evidenced by the rest of the approach principles such as adopting burden sharing, which is based on the sharing of the U.N and U.S allies the financial and military burdens of solving the international crises. Furthermore, the priority of diplomacy in solving these crises should be given, and the dependency on the U.S protection of its allies should be reduced (Mcgrath and Evans, 2013; Krieg, 2016, p. 98).

Traditionally, MENA was considered the most important strategic area for U.S interests and global hegemony, especially to ensure the flow of Oil and fight terrorism. That's why the U.S was eager to follow a high approach of engagement centered on maintaining a strong military and diplomatic presence to impose its will in all region's affairs and crises and to vehemently and immediately deter any attempts aiming at destabilizing the region. U.S frequent military intervention in the region since the Second Gulf War until the occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq after the September events has shown the strategic significance of the region for the U.S global hegemony. The entire U.S strategy in MENA before 2009 can also be classified as an offensive realist strategy. In addition to Obama's low engagement approach in foreign policy, the Obama administration has concluded that the region is no longer as important as it was in the past to maintain the U.S high military and diplomatic engagement approach. Given that the diminishing of the U. S's oil dependence, the lack of a real threat to U.S interests and security, including Iran's nuclear threat, as Iran proved that it is unable to own transatlantic offensive. In reality, The United States' dependence on other countries' oil has begun to decline, and the real threat to the interests and security of the United States has decreased, including the Iranian nuclear threat, which was unable to own transatlantic offensive capabilities. In addition, the US strategy focused on Asia, which was called "Pivot to Asia", instead of the Middle East and North Africa region to contain the rise of China and maintain its global hegemony (Juneau, 2020, P.387; Yom, 2020, PP.75-76).

In the course of his election campaign, it turns out that Obama is going to adopt a low engagement strategy in the region. He spoke repeatedly of the need to free ourselves of foreign oil. Also, he indicated a need to more focus on Asia instead of MENA, as well as he promised to withdraw the U.S forces from Iraq and Afghanistan. Shortly after taking office, Obama detailed his approach to MENA in a speech at Cairo University. It noted that, in his speech, Obama did not emphasize the vital interests and priorities that have defined US policy in the region for decades such as regional security and stability. Furthermore, he expressed his willingness to move forward with Iran without preconditions, refusing also to depict Iran as a sponsor of terrorism (Wechsler, 2019, p.27).

Obama executed his low engagement strategy in the region; this is in terms of the withdrawal of U.S forces from Iraq

and Afghanistan, successfully reached a controversial agreement with Iran, giving up Mubarak regime, the closest ally to the U.S, in exchange for support of the Muslim Brotherhood to rule Egypt. Also, his military intervention in Libya in 2011 was very limited. Obama was dependent only on Drones to fight terrorism in Afghanistan. In Syria, Obama was reluctant to any U.S military intervention, which paved the way for Russian and Iranian expansion in Syria. Lastly, Obama hesitated a lot in eliminating the ISIS threat in the region (Wechsler, 2019, pp. 28-29; Krieg, 2016, 99-100).

By adopting the low engagement approach or the leading from behind strategy, Obama has shifted the traditional U.S offensive realist strategy in the region to a purely defensive one. Obama administration did not give up the region but defined the U.S interests in the region in a very narrow scope that does not require a high engagement, in particular on the military level. In this vein, Obama maintained a strong military presence in the Gulf, but the role of U.S forces has become only limited to the intervention when U.S interests are exposed to a serious threat (Varga, 2016, pp.4-5).

For instance, despite the decline of US demand for Gulf oil; however, it remains a security interest in maintaining fair oil prices for US partners. Hence, oil security can only be ensured by offshore deterrence maritime balance or by direct military intervention in extreme necessity when the oil security is exposed to a serious threat. This is evidenced by the U.S late military intervention in Iraq when fighting ISIS, which seized Oil facilities in the north of Iraq. Similarly, the Obama administration did not view the terrorist groups in the region as a serious threat to the U.S. Moreover, it concluded that the reduction of military presence in MENA can reduce the rampancy of Islamic fundamentalism in the region. That's why the U.S limited intervention to fight ISIS in the region came when ISIS's threat has reached the level of severity to the regional security and U.S allies. By analogy, the rest of U.S interactions in the region have been purely defensive realist (Ashford, 2018, pp. 132-133; Mcgrath and Evans, 2013).

10. The Implications of Obama's Low Engagement in Libya on Political Transition and Stability

Libya represented the first arena to test Obama's low engagement strategy, not only in the Middle East but also in general. In particular, the offshore military strategy, as Obama insisted on the participation of the military power of U.S allies to topple the Gaddafi regime. The U.S following interaction in Libya in post-Gaddafi phase has been completely 'leading from behind', as the Obama administration left the leadership in Libya to Europeans (Moyar, 2016, p.1). Libya has not been a priority to the U.S in the region. Accordingly, the U.S very low engagement in Libya, including the short periods of military and diplomatic involvement has been for other strategic interests and considerations related to the region and not for Libya itself, such as the great threat of ISIS on the region's stability (Fishman, 2017, p.91).

The logical question might be why the U.S, in particular, bears the largest share of crippling the political transition and instability in Libya since 2011, despite it adopted a low engagement policy towards Libya. In fact, the U.S. did not have any ambitions in Libya that requires adopting a high engagement policy dominated by hegemony, intervention and arrogance. Indeed, the reluctance of states to intervene in other states affairs considers a good thing. However, the answer to this question stems first from the U.S military intervention to topple the Gaddafi regime without a plan for a political transition in a country characterized by huge complications that make the political transition process extremely difficult. The second matter is the negative implications of the American absence from the Libyan landscape after 2011, which in return has weakened the efforts of others to achieve the political transition and also allowed the interventions of many external powers in the Libyan scene, which complicated the hopes of serious political stability in Libya.

10.1 U.S. Military Intervention in Libya 2011 and the Privacy of the Libyan Case

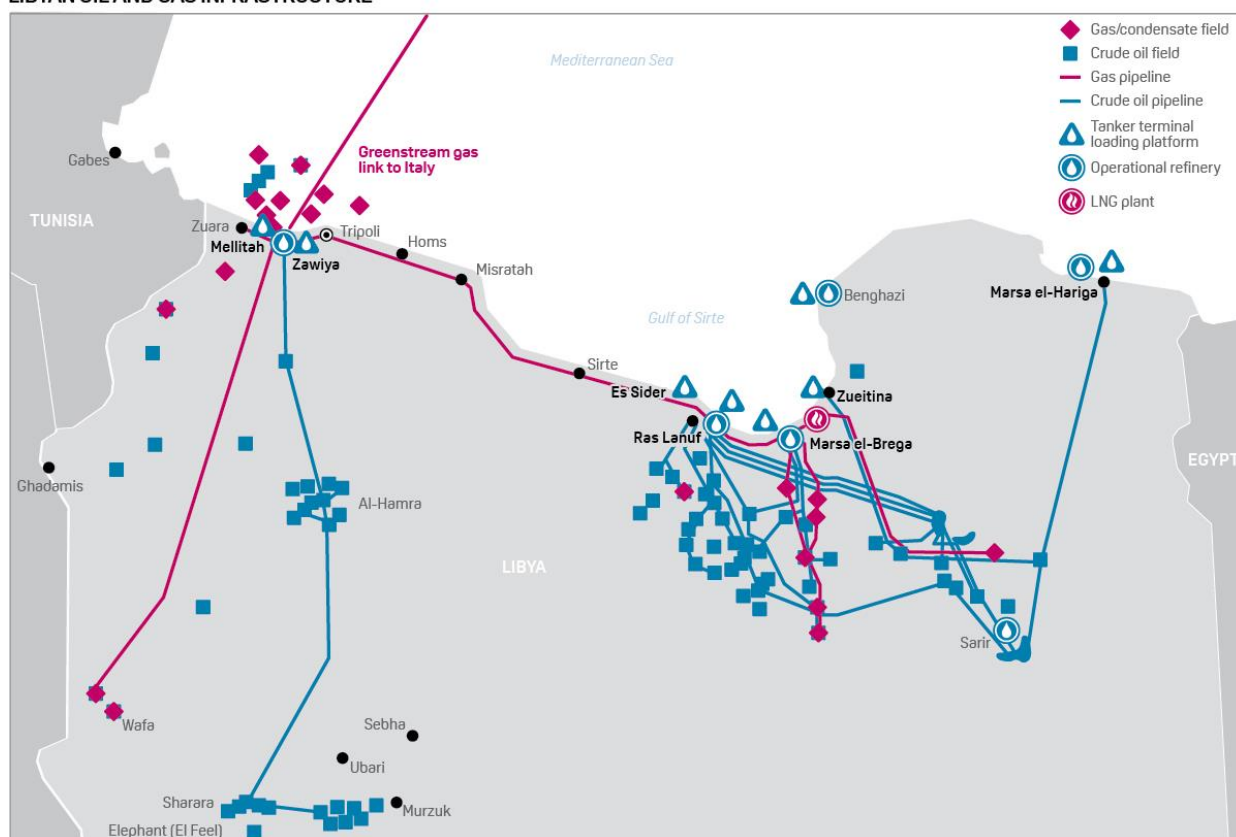
The Obama administration hesitated a lot in the decision to intervene militarily in Libya. At the beginning of the Libya crisis, Obama reiterated his low military engagement doctrine, which includes the necessity to limit the U.S military overseas involvement in the international conflicts, and focusing instead on nation-building. The strong opposition of any military action in Libya to stop the humanitarian catastrophe was expressed in the most three prominent opponents of the military intervention in Libya in the Obama administration. According to the statements of the US Secretary of Defense "Robert Gates", National Security Adviser "Thomas E. Donilon" and the head of the Anti-Terrorism Department "John O. Brennan" "there are no vital strategic interests of the United States in Libya"(Gosa, 2013, p. 47).

The Obama administration's final decision to militarily intervene in Libya after a long-hesitation can be considered the first and most important feature of the U.S. leading from behind in Libya and MENA in general. It also clearly reflects at the same time the defensive realism of the U.S. in MENA. Obama claimed that the main motive for intervention is to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe or massacre, as the United States does not have any direct national interest in intervening. However, the intervention targeted other strategic interests that are mostly related to Europe's interests and security. In his testimony before the US Congress, "Robert Gates" stated: "Washington's allies, especially Britain and France, have helped the United States in Afghanistan, so the United States should have helped its allies in Libya (Boke, 2016, p.63).

Indeed, the European pressures on the Obama administration have been one of the main causes of the U.S.'s intervention. Libya is very vital to Europe for two main reasons, Oil contracts and security concerns, especially the issue of terrorism and illegal immigration. Thus, the dangerous development of the situation in Libya, which threatened to plunge the country into chaos, forced the Obama administration to intervene to save its allies. The intervention aimed at protecting the oil contracts of the EU's allies, and to prevent a refugee crisis on the shores of Europe. In this vein, Oil prices skyrocketed due to Gaddafi's action to terminate the EU's Oil companies' contracts in Libya (Song, 2016, p.86). The following is a map showing the Libyan infrastructure for oil and gas fields:

Map of Libyan oil and gas infrastructure

LIBYAN OIL AND GAS INFRASTRUCTURE



Source: SGP Global Platts

Source: <https://www.spglobal.com/platts/en/market-insights/latest-news/oil/081221-opec-sees-significant-2021-oil-supplydemand-deficit-amid-us-pressure-on-prices>

The Libyan revolution had an impact on the emigration of large numbers of migrants, workers and Libyan citizens to Europe, as 422,000 Libyans left Libya in 2011 to neighboring countries, and with the increase in violence in 2014, there

were about 140 thousand refugees and migrants displaced to Europe via Libya and the Mediterranean sea. Consequently, migration has become a political and security challenge for Europe and threatened the political stability of the European Union, which led to the emergence of ISIS, which claimed responsibility for many terrorist operations, especially in Italy, France and Germany. This was the reason for President Obama's intervention in Libya (Mohammed Bani Salameh, 2019, pp. 243-254).

Successive American administrations have shown a willingness to sacrifice democracy and human rights if they collide with American interests, whether in the short or long term (Muhammad Turki, Islam Sami, 2020, pp. 74-90). Obama intervened in Libya to protect the interests of the United States' European allies represented in maintaining the oil contracts. Hence, it is clear that the American position, in fact, according to the perspective of the defensive incident, is more closely linked to oil and gas and American interests than to concern for values, human rights and democracy, but it is not directly related to the American interest. Rather, it is in the interests of his allies (Al-Sawani, 2015).

Besides, the long hesitation of the intervention reflected the truth of the U.S's leading from behind strategy in the MENA. The U.S. has insisted on the participation of its European and Gulf allies in the financial and military burden of intervention, and a resolution from the UN authorizing this intervention. Most importantly, U.S participation has limited to quick airstrikes against Qaddafi's forces (David, 2015, p.28).

Obama considered that the U.S mission in Libya was completed with the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime, which also for the U.S a quick victory without a high cost. Indeed, the Obama administration intervened in Libya to topple Qaddafi without a plan for reconstruction and political transition after 2011. Put differently, it avoided assuming any role in Libya in the post-Gaddafi stage, while countries that witness transitional periods require that the external powers play a greater role for stability and preparing the environment for rapid and smooth political reconciliation and transition. In particular, the Libyan case, which eliminated the by In addition, NATO intervention militarily in Libya destroyed what remained of Gaddafi regime's military capabilities. On the other hand, Libya represents a unique and very complex structure by which easy political stability and transition in Libya are far-fetched (Unger, 2016).

In this course, Wehrey (2016) diagnosed the very complicated case of Libya in four causes: First, Qaddafi's regime that inherited the Libyans a state without real institutions capable of managing a political transition in the country. Second, the leaders of political transition struggled with each other for power and wealth. Third, the militias' struggle ruled almost all the events in Libya after 2011. Finally, the social roots and legacies in Libya have rallied around tribal loyalties in the absence of weak state institutions (Wehrey, 2016).

For these reasons, it was required from the NATO-Led U.S to put a long-run plan of political transition from the first day in a post-Qaddafi phase. This military intervention in itself highly contributed to the consecration of the state of chaos in Libya. The U.S had not any plan for political transition or even a will or interest to do that, despite it is only the party that can do that.

10.2 The Absence of U.S Role and the Divergence and Weakness of the EU's Leadership

From the first day of the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime, the United States sought to rely on other parties, particularly the European Union and the United Nations, to take over the task of political stability and reconstruction in Libya. The leadership of the European Union and the United Nations of the process of political stability and rebuilding the state in Libya after the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime failed miserably owing to the absence of American leadership for this matter. In late 2013, the European Union or NATO was satisfied with sending a limited training mission to rebuild the Libyan army and pressure the Libyan factions to accelerate the end of the political process. As for the United Nations mission, it had a fragile role in the political transition process. The United States merely provided poor diplomatic support for both, which severely weakened their missions. In addition, the United States did not take any action to curb the excessive interference of external powers, especially its Gulf allies, which spoiled the political transition process (Hamid, 2016).

Since the ousting of Qaddafi, The U.S's role in Libya was absent. Its role has limited to very fragile diplomatic support to the United Nations. Obama's low engagement approach in MENA not only limits the U.S military intervention in the region's crises but also limits any powerful or prolonged U.S' diplomatic or financial engagement. Moreover, after the

assassination of the American ambassador in 2012, U.S. closed its embassy in Libya. In fact, the absence of the American role was not surprising, as this period did not pose a serious threat to its vital interests or the interests of its allies. However, when the threat of ISIS increased in late 2014, the United States intervened militarily in Libya (Estelle, 2017, p.2).

10.3 ISIS and U.S Military Intervention in Libya

In the context of the U.S's low engagement strategy in MENA, U.S's relative involvement, in particular, militarily has become limited to undermine the rise of challenges that constitute a very serious threat to the limited interests of the U.S or its allies in MENA, or the stability in the region at whole. The strong rise of ISIS since 2011, posed a serious threat to the stability in MENA. On the other hand, ISIS represented a direct and serious threat to the U.S and its European and Arab allies. ISIS threatened the oil flows that very crucial to the international economy. Additionally, ISIS's capture of large areas in Syria has created an unprecedented refugee crisis in Europe. Also, the chaos caused by ISIS provided an opportunity for competing power like Iran to expand its influence and threaten the Gulf regimes. Finally, the strong rise of ISIS has increased the global radicalization inspired by ISIS's ideology, which became a serious threat to the U.S. homeland and its EU allies. For these reasons, and also after reluctance, the U.S. was forced to lead the international coalition to counter ISIS's threat in Syria, Iraq, and Libya (Mueller et al, 2017, p.2).

U.S military option to counter ISIS was corresponding to defensive realism. The latter acknowledges that states are resorting to the military option in rare cases when they face a serious threat. Therefore, despite Obama's low engagement in the region; however, he decided to intervene militarily in Syria, Iraq, and Libya when the strength of ISIS escalated and became a real threat to stability in the entire region. As for Libya, in particular, the rise of ISIS in Libya, which mainly emanated from widespread instability and the collapse of state institutions, posed a major threat to the interests of the U.S's European allies, especially the outbreak of a refugee crisis on European shores. The U.S. also feared that Libya would become a base for the export of ISIS ideology to the neighboring African countries that are allies of the U.S. Accordingly, the US military intervened in Libya, with a weak diplomatic intervention, to support the political transition efforts in Libya. However, this intervention gradually decreased after the elimination of the ISIS threat. This reflects that Libya was not important to the United States from the perspective of defensive realism. (Boke, 2016, pp. 65-67; Chindoga, 2016, pp. 106-107).

Also, from the perspective of defensive realism, Obama had confirmed that ISIS poses a limited threat. That is why Obama's leadership of the international coalition was akin to leading from behind. This is in terms of building a broad coalition authorized by a UN decision, limiting the U.S military participation to airstrikes by drones, and bearing the coalition partners and local partners a great portion of fighting (Juneau, 2020, p.389).

11. Overview of the political transition process since 2011

11.1 National Transitional Council NTC

The NATO-backed NTC was recognized internationally as an interim government for Libya after the fall of the Gaddafi regime. It was entrusted with the task of organizing the political roadmap during the transitional period until the first parliamentary elections in July 2012. On August 3, 2011, NTC issued an Interim Constitutional Declaration defining a road map for the stage of political transition, which will end according to the declaration in May 2013 (Ichwanda and Satria, 2018, p.43). The way the council was established and the background of its members highlighted the initial signs of the difficulty of transformation during the transitional phase. The council was self-formed by the group of opposition factions in eastern Libya. That is why since its inception, it has reflected a relative power for the east. Moreover, the council faced two main difficulties until it completed its tasks: The first, the rebellion of tribes and regions that were marginalized; the second, the threats of the armed groups that demanded various financial and political privileges. Therefore, the council attempted to address these difficulties through negotiation and submission to the demands of the tribes and armed groups. For instance, the council expanded the seats of representatives of these tribes to 81 members by 2012 (Salem and Kadlec, 2012, pp.4-5). This proves that in the event of revolutions or coups, this can lead to an increase in conflicts between all factions, tribes and different forces, and lead to the ineffectiveness of civil institutions and give advantages to the powerful factions (Mohammed Salameh and Emad Shdouh, 2020, pp. 17-29).

11.2 General National Congress GNC elections

GNC's elections were held in July 2012, resulted in the winning of National Forces Alliance NFA the majority of seats. Nevertheless, the Justice and Reconstruction Party, linked to the Muslim Brotherhood, through its alliance with Independents and Salafists, managed to capture the majority and then almost completely dominate the conference. The post-election phase revealed the depth of social and elitist divisions in Libya; in particular, the struggle between secular and Islamic projects, as well as a struggle between old elites and new ones. The latter considers itself the representative of the revolution and wants to completely cut off the link with the past by cleansing the country of all that was related to the Gaddafi regime. While the first, in which many of its leaders participated in the rule of the Gaddafi regime, is more receptive to the political continuity between Gaddafi's Libya and post-Gaddafi Libya. GNC, dominated by Islamists, sought early to resolve this conflict when it approved the Political Isolation Law in May 2013, which was designed to exclude any former official in the Gaddafi regime from practicing political work, but in its essence, it specifically targets secular and liberal parties such as the National Action Party. This in return exacerbated the state of distrust and rivalry between the conference and the rest of the other political factions. One of its dangerous consequences was that each faction adopted its own armed militia to protect its political and economic gains (Decina *et al.*, 2018, p.7; Janssen and Abdo, 2015, p.2).

Revolutions erupt as a result of the weakness of civil institutions and the absence of political channels regulating the conflict between the parties with different interests, which led to the superiority of the national elites over the army because they possessed the means of power that enabled them to impose their control (Salameh and Shdouh, 2020, pp. 17-29). This applies to the Libyan case, where there is a conflict between the old and new elites, and both of them used armed militias to protect their political and economic interests, which led to instability and the failure of the formation of the military institution.

GNC agreed to hold elections for the Libyan House of Representatives on June 25, 2014, to replace the conference, at a time when the country is witnessing a political crisis and a sharp division between the political factions due to several matters, the most important of which is the controversial isolation law. Libya's slide into a civil war has resulted in severe negative consequences that continue until now. Ahead of the elections, Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar launched a military campaign in May 2014 called 'Operation Dignity', against the hegemony of Islamists in GNC. Haftar's forces were able to extend their control over the capital, and disrupt the work of the GNC by force, in addition to inflicting a major defeat on the Salafi jihadist militia in Benghazi. Amid the great victories achieved by Operation Dignity, The House of Representatives elections were held with very low popular support. This led to the Islamists being defeated very easily in return for a crushing victory for the secular factions allied with Haftar (Decina *et al.*, 2018, p.7). Due to the violent events that impeded the conduct of the voting process in many parts of the country, the GNC refused to submit its resignation to the House of Representatives, and its supporters and allies from Islam, launched the so-called Operation (Dawn of Libya) to defend the outgoing GNC and topple the dignity camp. The Islamists feared losing their gains and great influence in Libya that they had achieved since 2011, as well as legislative setbacks that would include them with harsh penalties under the name of fighting terrorism. The dawn of Libya managed to cause widespread security chaos in Tripoli and control of strategic sites in the capital, which led to the obstruction of the House of Representatives from carrying out its work and forcing it to move its headquarters to Tobruk in eastern Libya, which has become the capital of the political division in Libya (Badi *et al.*, 2019).

The previous overview has shown that the political division in Libya has been evident from the first day of the post-Gaddafi period that not only led to the crippling of the political transition process but also finally plunged Libya into a civil war and a sharp division in the country between the east and west. U.S not only intervened in Libya without a plan for the transitional period, but also left Libya to a very weak EU leadership, that lacked the will and ability to put pressure on the Libyan rival factions, and to undermine the power of armed militias, as well as to build the sufficient trust for relieving the tribal loyalties. In short, the EU without a U.S's powerful political and military support cannot assume leadership effectively (Fishman, 2017, p.91).

Also, one can safely say that the EU's position in Libya after 2011 has proven the fragility of the EU's role beyond its borders without the U.S leadership. Indeed, Europe since the end of the Second World War can be described as a free-rider,

which with its desire leaves the initiative and leadership of the international crisis to the U.S. In the early months in the aftermath of Gaddafi, it seemed the unwillingness of the EU to bear a large burden, materially or militarily in the process of nation-building. The absence of U.S leadership in Libya also revealed the fragility of the EU's solidarity and the sharp contrasts among the EU's countries regarding their interests and security visions in Libya. That, in return, triggered questions about the future of the common European solidarity, especially the common Security and defense arrangements (Litsas, 2020, p. 135).

The EU's fragile efforts in Libya proved the inability of a certain European power to support or pressure for a unified approach. This also might be because of the unwillingness of this power. However, all in all, the European powers have been a part of the destabilization instead of the solution. Talking about such European powers means specifically France and Italy that had the biggest role in Libya after 2011 to guarantee their many interests. However, the two powers engaged in a sharp rivalry in Libya due to the disagreement over economic and security priorities. Also, both powers selfishly contested over Oil privileges; each power defined its vision for the solution in Libya from the perspective of its concerns and political priority. While France sought a broad role as an extension of its African role and has placed the fight against terrorism as a priority, Italy in return has placed the issue of illegal immigration as a security priority. Therefore, the two countries contributed the largest share to perpetuating instability in Libya, especially the consolidation of the power of rival militias and political factions, as each force worked according to a different strategic vision that was based on relying on different allies. While Italy supported the Tripoli government, France turned to support Haftar's forces since 2015. Also, both proposed initiatives political stability that reflects their interests and their security vision of the conflict as well (Durrett *et al*, 2019, p.11; Ilardo, 2018).

12. Regional Powers Interventions and Failure of UNSMIL's Efforts

Obama's low engagement in the region has created a strategic vacuum filled by Russia and China. On the other hand, such a vacuum has stimulated regional powers like Iran to expand their influence and agenda in the region. Libya and Syria constituted the most visible reflective mirror of the consequences of such a strategic vacuum. Since 2011, Libya has become an arena for regional competition to serve complex economic and geopolitical interests. Specifically, Libya was a competition area between two camps: the moderate camp led by Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Emirates, and the Islamic camp led by Iran, Turkey, and Qatar. The first camp supported Haftar to block the Islamic project and for other considerations. For instance, Egypt had concerns about the rampancy of terrorism on its western borders. Needless to say, that such competition has been one of the main reasons in sliding Libya into a civil war, as each camp has given the confidence to the faction loyal to him in Libya that got him to impose his power and will on the ground, especially in light of an absence role of the U.S and a weakness leadership from EU. However, the most important, the regional powers, in particular, the moderate camp-U.S. ally have been the main reason to spoil UNSMIL's diplomatic efforts for political stability and transition by imposing their vision for the political solution in Libya, which included proposing private initiatives work against UNSMIL's diplomatic efforts (Pedde, 2017).

12.1 UNSMIL and Skhirat Agreement

The United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) began its work after the Libyan revolution, according to UNSC No. (2009) September 2011, to assume the tasks of assisting Libya during the transitional period, which included establishing a permanent government, and reconstruction, security and humanitarian tasks. During the period of Tariq Mitri assuming his position as the Special Representative of the Secretary-General of the United Nations in Libya, the mission faced great difficulties in carrying out its tasks and finding a solution to the Libyan crisis, until its work stopped completely in June 2014 due to Tripoli – Tobruk split. In September 2014, Bernardino Lyon succeeded Mitri. Lyon focused his efforts on drafting a political agreement to create a new transitional government to replace the rivals Tripoli and Tobruk that fueled the civil war. Lyon's efforts culminated in the creation of what became known as the "Skhirat Agreement" in December 2015 (Winer, 2019, pp.14-15).

The agreement established a presidential council was tasked with forming a government of national unity and also

forming the Supreme Council of the State, which consists of former members of the GNC. The agreement stipulated that the House of Representatives would continue as the sole parliament and would ratify the national unity government. It can be said that the Skhirat was born dead, it had already established a national consensus government, but it was too weak to act as a polarizing element for the rival factions (Asseburg et al., 2018, pp.17-18). Also, Skhirat was unable to unify the two main rival factions in Libya, as GNC refused to dissolve the conference and its militias continued to fight. In contrast, Haftar's forces and his allies, who rejected the agreement, continued their military operations to extend their influence by imposing a *fait accompli* aimed at improving their negotiating positions. Thus, the institutional structure was not completed, which led to a distorted result, at a time when supporters and opponents of the agreement insist on technical and legal considerations to support their positions (International Crises Group, 2016).

The Skhirat Agreement proved that it is almost impossible to reach any consensus that would satisfy all parties. The agreement has contributed, contrary to what it was intended, to exacerbate the crisis rather than calm it down. However, we cannot deny the role of regional power in spoiling the UNSMIL-led political process. For instance, Cairo and Abu Dhabi have provided rhetorical support for UNSMIL while simultaneously hosting separate negotiation tracks that clash with UNSMIL's efforts. Egypt sought to negotiate an arrangement in which its Libyan clients would play leadership roles, and the Islamists had to be excluded. At the same time, Egypt resisted Algerian and Tunisian attempts to build a joint initiative, which would have required a more balanced approach. That has encouraged Haftar and his ambitions rather than appeasing him. Indeed, If Egypt and the UAE were able to obstruct UNSMIL's efforts, this was mainly because U.S was unwilling to prevent them from doing so (Asseburg et al., 2018, p.20-21; Miller and Mezran; 2018).

In essence, The study deliberately covered Obama's era to prove that, the state of political chaos and the great stumbling of the political transition in Libya that continues until now, its main reference is Obama's leading from behind approach. In this vein, we should indicate that the Trump administration's strategy in general, and particularly in MENA, has proven that the low engagement approach has become a constant trend in American foreign policy. That's why Trump also neglected Libya. In fact, this also applies to Biden's administration. The latter's low engagement approach in the region has been very clear and quick. Biden has clearly identified that his priority is Asia. In this context, he announced the reduction of the U.S military forces in the Gulf, as well as the full and unconditioned withdrawal from Afghanistan. Furthermore, Biden's persistence in reviving the nuclear agreement with Iran is a strong indication of his low engagement in the region. Therefore, Biden's neglect of Libya is almost certain. Biden's administration stressed the diplomacy and the role of the U.N and the U.S's partners for stability and political transition in Libya. In other words, the U.S will again leave the leadership to the U.N and the Europeans in Libya in the line with low diplomatic support to the U.N and the efforts of the Europeans in Libya.

13. Conclusion

The main concern of the paper was highlighting the relation between Obama's leading from behind approach in MENA and the instability and crippling the political transition in Libya. The study concluded the following findings:

Firstly, Obama's leading from behind approach had three direct implications on the instability and crippling the political transition in Libya: 1) Military intervention to topple Ghaddafi Regime without a plan for political transition, which was required in a very complex case like the Libyan case; 2) the absence of the U. S's active role and leaving Libya to a very weak and divided European leadership; 3) U.S's inaction to prevent the regional powers from spoiling UNSMIL's efforts.

Secondly, crippling political transition and instability in Libya can be attributed to conflicting interests of the external parties involved in the Libyan crisis; each party sought to impose its agenda for a political solution and the support for a particular faction that guarantees their interests.

Thirdly, The process of stability and political transformation in a complex situation such as Libya needs a strong and effective role or positive involvement of the United States of America, which is able to put pressure on the internal parties in order to achieve reconciliation, enable the United Nations to perform its tasks, and also prevent the spoiling role of external actors.

Fourthly, Libya is not a priority of the US administration, and the importance of Libya is linked to the interests of US

allies, fighting terrorism, and preventing illegal immigration.

Fifthly, the failure of the United Nations and the European Union to lead the process of political transition in Libya is due to the absence of American leadership.

Sixthly, Countries with a complex structure that are undergoing transitional periods need from external powers a highly engaging approach and a plan to complete the process of transition and political stability.

Accordingly, The Obama administration bears the largest share of the instability and crippling the process of the political transition in Libya, as U.S – led NATO intervention is blamed for chaos in Libya through destroying the military foundations and supporting the opposition with weapons. However, the study also blames the U.S for giving up its constructive role that must have done in the political transition countries, particularly Libya. That can be called constructive or positive external engagement. Under its influence at the regional and international levels, the U.S was able to provide further support to European leadership in Libya, which includes unifying the Europeans to accelerate the political transition. On the other hand, it was also able to thwart the regional intervention in Libya. Unfortunately, the U.S was unwilling to do that.

14. Recommendations

The study recommends the following:

Firstly, the United States and countries supporting stability in Libya should strive to bring about reconciliation between the conflicting parties.

Secondly, working to spread the national spirit at the expense of ethnic and tribal tendencies and reject fanaticism.

Thirdly, providing assistance from the international community to secure the Libyan borders, and expand security cooperation with regional neighbors in accordance with a security plan to eliminate terrorist elements.

Fourthly, The United States of America and European countries should help Libya build military institutions and security services and eliminate armed brigades and militias that work to obstruct the building of the army and police and disrupt the process of stability and political transition.

Future literature

The researcher suggests conducting future studies on:

- 1) The differences and similarities in the leadership from behind approach of President Obama in the two Syrian and Libyan cases: a comparative study.
- 2) Factors for the failure of political stability in Libya and Afghanistan: A comparative study after the US administration's decision to withdraw forces from Afghanistan during the era of President Biden.

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