



Libya 1986-2011: A Testing Ground for the Evolution of US Foreign Policy?

Mattia Toaldo*

More than ten years after 9/11 and in the aftermath of the release of the new US Defence Strategic Guidance, it is worthwhile to look at the origins and the evolution of the US fight against terrorism. 2011 was the year of the international intervention in Libya and from Libya in 1986 many of the concepts and the ideas of the post-9/11 US War on Terror were developed. The conceptual framework which had been developed then has been rejected by the Obama administration – something evident also from its official documents – although the concrete policy on terrorism of the current presidency has many elements of continuity with the past.

The Reagan administration, under many aspects, was the intellectual breeding ground of some of the main concepts of the war on terror, as it has been codified in the Bush doctrine and in the 2002 National Security Strategy. As a matter of fact, Reagan was the first president to approve a military strike against a country deemed to be supporter of terrorists. The US bombing of Libya in 1986 was the result of a long discussion within the White House on the best way to fight terrorism originating from the Middle East and North Africa.

These ideas can be grouped in five concepts which, however, were only tested during the Reagan years and never became an official, comprehensive policy: the idea of pre-emptive strikes; the focus on state-sponsorship of terrorism rather than on non-state actors and the idea that these sponsor-states were all part of a worldwide network; the attempts to carry out regime change in these countries; the need to extend executive powers and to enact a special legislation in order to fight more effectively against terrorists and their sponsors; the right to act unilaterally to protect US national security. Reagan's confrontation with Libya and the Qadhafi regime was the main experiment for these ideas during the 1980s. These concepts, in different ways, became in turn some of the cornerstones of the Bush doctrine against terrorism.

THE REAGAN ADMINISTRATION AS A SOURCE OF INSPIRATION

Terrorism was one of the big issues faced by the Reagan administration, although it was not as important as negotiations with the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, the worse terrorist attacks suffered by the US before 9/11 took place during Reagan's first term: on 23 October 1983, 241 US soldiers were killed by a truck-bomb in Beirut. The attack was claimed by the "Islamic Jihad", one of the names used by what later would be identified as Hezbollah, the Lebanese "Party of God" which incidentally is still mentioned as one of the worse terrorist organizations in the recently published 2012 Defence Strategic Guidance.

One of the architects of Bush's War on Terror, then Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld, was appointed Presidential Envoy to the Middle East shortly after the Beirut bombing. In his



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memoirs, he described those days as the “beginning of the modern war waged by Islamist radicals against the United States of America”.

Nonetheless, Libya and not Lebanon had been spotted earlier on in the Reagan administration for its support for terrorism and subversion worldwide. In the fall of 1981, the president himself had been under personal threat by alleged Libyan “hit squads” at work in the US. Economic sanctions against the Northern African country were introduced in 1982 along with support for the anti-Qadhafi National Front for the Salvation of Libya. Qadhafi’s support for terrorism worldwide came along with US efforts to overthrow his regime during the Reagan years. The first one, a secret operation named “Flower”, was elaborated in the summer of 1985 and was aborted because of lack of cooperation from the Egyptian president Mubarak and because of the leaks in the US press. On 5 April 1986 a bomb blew up in the La Belle discotheque in West Berlin killing one American soldier and a Turkish woman. The Reagan administration, which saw clear Libyan fingerprints on the the attack, decided to strike against Libya on the night between 14 and 15 April 1986.

The strike had not been approved by any international organization and it was conducted almost unilaterally: Great Britain granted the use of the bases on its soil while France denied over-flight rights. Robert Gates, then Deputy Director of the CIA and later Secretary of Defence both under Bush and Obama, wrote in his memoirs that the material damage inflicted by the strike was not as much as intended by the planners at the Pentagon. The strike, however, was considered by the Reagan administration as a success in deterring Libyan-sponsored terrorism, at least until the bombing of the Pan Am flight over the Scottish town of Lockerbie during Christmas vacation in 1988.

Throughout the confrontation between the Reagan administration and the regime of Mu’ammār Qadhafi in Libya all of the five main concepts of Reagan’s war on terror were used. In his post-strike address to the nation, Reagan defined the mission both as “fully consistent” with Article 51 of the UN charter on self-defence and as a “pre-emptive action against terrorist installations”. This combination between self-defence and pre-emptive strikes would come up again in one of the most famous lines of the 2002 National Security Strategy: “we will not hesitate to act alone, if necessary, to exercise our right of self-defence by acting pre-emptively against such terrorists”.

In 1984 George Shultz, serving as Secretary of State under Reagan, talked of a “League of Terror” made up of Libya, Syria, Iran, North Korea and the PLO. Recently declassified records and Robert Gates’ memoirs, show that Libya was chosen because it was militarily the easiest target and it could be hit without provoking a Soviet reaction. The first four countries of Shultz’s “League” appeared in the “axis of evil” as stated by president Bush in his State of the Union speech in 2002.

Libya in the Reagan years was also the first in the list of countries where regime change attempts were conducted: not just the “Flower” operation in the summer of 1985 but also another plan after the 1986 strike. Both attempts failed and in none of them the goal was to “spread democracy” as in Bush’s Freedom Agenda. Reagan’s aim was more practical: to eliminate a regime which sponsored terrorism.

This is not the only difference between the Reagan and the Bush administration. The most important has to do with the historical context: Ronald Reagan saw the fight against the Soviet Union as the first priority of his policy and terrorism as part of this struggle while 9/11 put this issue at the top of the agenda of the Bush administration.

Also, Reagan lived in a bipolar world, while Bush’s War on Terror was shaped by the “unipolar moment”. The Reagan administration, in fact, theorized the possibility of conducting unilateral operations to fight terrorism. Incidentally, this was one of the conclusion of a Task Force on Combating Terrorism chaired by then Vice-president George H. W. Bush. Nevertheless, in the midst of the Cold War a one night-long strike on Libya was about as



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unilateral as the United States could afford to be and fences with Western Europeans were soon mended: the EEC approved diplomatic sanctions against Libya and the subsequent G-7 summit released a joint declaration against terrorism. A higher degree of unilateralism was possible for US policy-makers after 9/11 not only thanks to the structure of the post-Cold War international system but also because the attacks from Osama Bin Laden had posed what was perceived as an existential threat to the American way of life.

The fight against terrorism after 9/11 was perceived as a climatic struggle in which the “Commander in Chief”, namely the President, had to dispose of all means necessary to fight against “evil-doers”. This allowed for an increase in executive powers that, under Reagan, could only be theorized. The Reagan presidency came after a decade in which Congress had tried to rebalance in its favour decision-making on foreign policy. The withdrawal from Lebanon after the bombings in 1983 was also blamed by many members of the administration on pressure coming from Congress. Again, Libya proved to be the testing ground of new approaches. A few days after the 1986 strike, the Senate Majority leader and then Republican presidential candidate Bob Dole introduced a bill called “anti-terrorism act” which proposed the extension of presidential powers to face terrorist threats. Its language was strikingly similar to the Joint Resolution approved by Congress only three days after the attacks against the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon in 2001. The Joint Resolution authorized the president “to use all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations or persons” that had perpetrated the attacks and also called upon him “to prevent any future acts of international terrorism against the United States” leaving to the president to decide who and what was a threat to the US and how to respond.

The “Bush doctrine”, enshrined in the 2002 National Security Strategy, allowed for unilateral pre-emptive strikes against states deemed to be supporters of terrorism. Not by chance, after a speech he delivered before the Woodrow Wilson International Center at Princeton in 2006, George Shultz would be defined on the “Hoover Digest” as “the father of the Bush doctrine” who had introduced for the first time in 1984 the concept of “pre-emptive strikes”. Shultz had served under Reagan, whose foreign policy had been re-evaluated (and somewhat re-interpreted) by nationalist conservatives and neoconservatives who joined forces in the Project for a New American Century in the 1990s and would later serve in the Bush administration.

OBAMA’S TURNING POINT

Having placed the War on Terror under Bush in an historical context, it is therefore possible to discuss whether the fight against terrorism under President Obama is a turning point with the paradigm elaborated during the Reagan administration. Again, Libya is a good testing ground.

In one of the frequent ironies and paradoxes of history, the president that almost banned the use of the expression “War on Terror” was actually the one who achieved regime change in Libya in 2011. This was the only war, so far, to start and finish under his presidency. The intervention against Qadhafi in 2011, though, was under many aspects radically different not just from Reagan’s in 1986 but also from the two wars waged by President Bush in Afghanistan and Iraq in the name of the fight against terrorism. In 2011, the focus was no more on terrorism, rather on the “Responsibility to Protect” Libyan civilians. This was another difference: the use of force was legitimized not by the need to protect American lives as under Reagan and Bush but in the name of Libyan civilians who might have been slaughtered had Qadhafi’s loyalists recaptured Benghazi after it fell under the control of the rebels.

Moreover, the 2011 intervention was legitimized by UNSC resolution 1973 which passed thanks to the support of many Western European countries (first of all, the United Kingdom and France) and the abstention of Germany, Russia, China and emerging powers such as Brazil and South



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Africa. Quite a different picture from the unilateralism of Reagan's 1986 strike and of Bush's war on Iraq albeit it could be argued that the mandate of UNSC resolution 1973, which many among those who abstained read as confined to implementing a no-fly zone over Libya, was stretched to include regime change and intervention in the civil war.

Also, at the time of the intervention in 2011 the Obama administration had a clear, and internationally recognized, local ally in Libya: the National Transitional Council based in Benghazi and quickly recognized by many European countries as the legitimate representative of Libya, a government-in-waiting. Something which the Reagan administration in 1986 (and one could argue the same for the Bush administration in Iraq) lacked: the National Salvation Front for Libya did not have the same domestic and international legitimacy as the NTC.

Finally, the intervention in Libya under Obama must be placed in the wider context of three important documents issued in the past two years: the 2010 National Security Strategy, the 2011 National Strategy for Counterterrorism and the Defence Strategic Guidance issued on 5 January 2012. Moreover, the concrete policies against terrorism implemented during this administration have to be taken into account. This analysis shows some crucial conceptual differences with the War on Terror as conceived under the Reagan administration along with some practical, concrete continuities with the last stages of the Bush administration.

First of all, there is a geographic shift of strategic attention from the Greater Middle East towards Asia and the Pacific. The fight against terrorism under Reagan was also the result of a strategic shift: from Europe towards the Persian Gulf, a process which led to the creation of the Central Command which oversaw military operations in the Middle East. Three out of the four military operations conducted by US troops in the Reagan years were located in this part of the world. A similar point could be made about the Bush administration which waged war both in Iraq and Afghanistan and emphasized the geopolitical relevance of reshaping the Middle East.

The Defence Strategic Guidance released by the Obama administration in January 2012, on the contrary, emphasizes a "rebalance" of US attention towards the "Asia-Pacific region" while also stating that the intervention in Libya has demonstrated that "burden-sharing" (a long-time US goal in their relationship with the Western Europeans) is feasible and effective. Whether this signals a growing US military disengagement from the region and an increased reliance on European and local allies is too early to say.

Secondly, the Obama administration stresses the fight against terrorists rather than the one against terrorism: in other words, the enemies with their organizations rather than the tactic and the technique of warfare. The War on Terror is therefore re-branded, in the 2010 National Security Strategy, as the conflict with "Al-Qa'ida and its violent extremist affiliates". There is no mention of sponsor states and of the axis of evil. Moreover, the emphasis is on "non-state threats worldwide", namely organizations like Al-Qa'ida that have a transnational, often decentralized structure that relies on global communication and financial networks.

Thirdly, pre-emptive strikes seem to be outside of the conceptual framework of the Obama administration which uses prevention, both at home and abroad, only to stress the need to share intelligence, gather data, cooperate on law-enforcement and provide homeland security. Moreover, the National Strategy for Counterterrorism emphasizes the need to adapt tools to different situations and contexts while calling repeatedly for multilateral cooperation.

These all seem crucial conceptual differences with the fight against terrorism as it had been first elaborated during the Reagan years and then implemented by the Bush presidency. In the practical realm, however, under the Obama administration has continued the "war" that had been declared under Reagan and fought mainly under Bush, albeit under a different form: the widespread use of unmanned aerial vehicles, commonly known as drones, has changed the way war is fought. Also the use of this kind of technology has tipped the balance of powers in favour of the executive branch: since 2004, the US has carried out over 300 drone strikes in



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Pakistan. No debate on this operations ever occurred in Congress, no vote took place in seven years. Under the Obama administration, the program of “target assassinations” of terrorist leaders through unmanned drones has been dramatically stepped up: 7,000 missions in 2011 compared to only 50 a decade ago. In the first year of the Obama presidency more drone missions had been carried out than in the whole Bush presidency. Drones have been used in several countries: in Pakistan, Somalia, Yemen and, incidentally, in Libya. Starting on 23 April 2011 and for the following six months, 146 drone strikes have been conducted in the Northern African country. These unmanned operations did not require authorization from Congress under the War Powers Resolution and they were part of the airstrike that hit Colonel Qaddafi’s convoy on 20 October and eventually led to his death.

Finally, recent events in Libya confirm one of the main issues in the fight against terrorism with which the Obama administration has been grappling since its early days: what to do with prisoners considered to be threats to national security. The Libyan government is under scrutiny by the human rights organizations because of the unlawful and inhumane detention of 7,000 political prisoners accused of being part of Qadhafi’s regime. The new provisional government sees them as a potential threat to national security and stability. For a similar reason, after initially deciding to close down completely Guantanamo, the Obama administration had to slow down the process: some detainees could not be tried in a civil court for lack of hard evidence although they were considered by the US government to be too dangerous to be freed outright.

CONCLUSIONS

Some of the main concepts of the American fight against terrorism were conceived during the Reagan presidency and then implemented by the Bush administration: pre-emptive strikes, networks of sponsor-states, regime change, unilateralism, extension of executive powers. Libya in 1986 was a test for all of these ideas and one would have expected that Qadhafi’s regime would fall because of its support of terrorism. Ironically, he was overthrown by an administration that has repudiated the conceptual framework elaborated in the Reagan years and that in 2011 has conducted a new intervention in Libya, on a different basis and with a different coalition from that of 1986. The Obama administration had to adapt US foreign policy not only to the lessons learned during Bush’s War on Terror but also to the constraints of a burgeoning federal deficit. Libya was presented as an example of a war where burden-sharing with other countries, among them Western European countries, would be more relevant.

Nevertheless, the Reagan paradigm for the War on Terror had been put aside already in the last stages of the Bush presidency. The stalemate in Afghanistan and Iraq had put on hold further planning for pre-emptive strikes and regime change against states which sponsor terrorism. Especially after the report of the experts of the Iraq Study Group and as a consequence of the Democratic victory in congressional elections in 2006, president Bush had to change some of its policies and reduce the most expensive programs. By the time Obama entered office, waterboarding had not been practiced for years, Bush had ordered that the secret C.I.A. black site prisons be emptied, and the warrantless surveillance program and the military commission system had been restructured and approved by Congress. Once in office, Obama did not change the surveillance program, supported the Patriot Act, retained the authority to use renditions and embraced some of Bush’s claims to state secrets.

His policy so far has been one of conceptual rejection of the old paradigm of the War on Terror and practical continuity with some of the policies of the Bush administration, in its adjusted version. The 2011 National Strategy for Counterterrorism, issued after the capture of Osama Bin Laden, confirms that the US is “at war” with terrorists, although it also emphasizes that the “Counterterrorist campaign” does seek to “dominate American lives”. And this is



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probably one of the most important achievements of this presidency: de-emphasizing the fight against terrorism took away from terrorists the power to shape the agenda and hierarchy of priorities of American foreign policy. Nonetheless, one could argue, this has allowed for the expansion of an “unmanned” war of drones conducted silently and without public political discussion.

Further readings:

- 1) Lawrence Freedman, *A Choice of Enemies: America Confronts the Middle East* (New York: Public Affairs Books, 2008)
- 2) Timothy Naftali, *Blind Spot: The Secret History of American Counterterrorism* (New York: Basic Books, 2005);
- 3) Barry Buzan, ‘Will the Global War on Terrorism Be the New Cold War?’, *International Affairs*, 82:6 (November 2006)
- 4) US Strategic Defence Guidance, Sustaining US Global Leadership. Priorities for 21st Century Defense, 5 January 2012. Downloaded from http://www.defense.gov/news/Defense_Strategic_Guidance.pdf

*[Mattia Toaldo, mattiatoaldo@gmail.com]

Bio: Mattia Toaldo earned his Ph. D. in political sciences at Roma Tre University. He is currently a post-doctoral fellow at the British School of Rome and at the Society for Libyan Studies. His current research project focuses on relations between Italy and Qadhafi. His forthcoming book, due to be published by Routledge in September, is “The Origins of the US War on Terror”.