

DRONES, DENIABILITY, AND DISINFORMATION: WARFARE IN LIBYA AND THE NEW INTERNATIONAL DISORDER

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COMMENTARY

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Western governments have watched the battle over Libya's capital, Tripoli, with disinterest, even as it has drawn in a growing number of foreign powers. But this conflict has more to teach us about the future world order, or disorder, than many observers appreciate. The patterns of warfare in Libya today not only reflect the erosion of the U.S.-led international order, but they directly contribute to its demise. Three aspects in particular highlight the new international disorder.

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Armed drones embody a trend toward military action that minimizes the risks and costs to the intervening powers, thereby encouraging them to meddle in conflicts where no vital interests are at stake. With arms-length instruments such as drones and mercenaries, intervening states also seek to maintain a degree of deniability. The main reason why for the rise of deniability, however, is that the great powers are increasingly tolerant of even dubious denials of an increasing range of foreign meddlers. The authoritarian states intervening in Libya also lead disinformation campaigns whose scope illustrates dramatically altered international power relations. Warfare in Libya reveals seismic shifts in international order that have invited cavalier meddling by distant powers big and small, amid international indifference.

Drones

When a bomb falls from Libya's skies, the guessing game of who dropped it begins. Any of at least five foreign states might be responsible, in addition to two rival Libyan air forces that are associated with two competing governments and militia coalitions. Often, one of Libya's rival air forces will claim to have carried out the strike when, in reality, a foreign state did. But many strikes go unclaimed. When a particularly deadly bombing triggers an outcry, the culprits can go to great lengths to blame it on their enemy. The United States is the only foreign state that openly admits to airstrikes in Libya conducted by its military, but these are rare. Even rarer are strikes by the CIA, which does not admit responsibility.

Those with a vital or professional interest in identifying the perpetrators have grown used to asking the questions that allow them to narrow down the possibilities. What does the intended target say about the likely culprit? What does the strike's precision and the damage it did tell us about the type of aircraft? If the bomb misses its target, it may have been one of the two Libyan air forces' aging MiGs, Sukhois, or Mirages. A smaller, guided missile that hit its target precisely would point to a drone. That means it could have been one of the United Arab Emirates' Chinese-made Wing Loongs or the Turkish-operated Bayraktars, made

by the eponymous family-owned company whose chief technical officer, Selçuk Bayraktar, is Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's son-in-law. Or does the combination of devastating power and high precision suggest a state-of-the-art fighter jet, in which case it is most likely an Emirati Mirage 2000, or potentially an Egyptian Rafale, or one of either states' F-16s? If witnesses heard the screeching noise of a fighter jet or the distant humming of a drone, this can give additional certainty, though sometimes jets and drones will be in the sky simultaneously. Debris of the projectile provides the smoking gun, if you can make sure it is from the site you're interested in.

Asking those questions has become routine because nobody will publicly identify the perpetrators — not the U.N. Support Mission in Libya, not the United States, and not any other Western state. It is as though the struggle for Libya is a little war among friends, and outing the contestants would be impolite. This is certainly true for the roles of the United Arab Emirates and Egypt in Libya. Turkey's recent decision to intervene openly in Libya to support the Tripoli government has provoked criticism in the West, as has its clandestine deployment of Syrian Turkmen fighters — but not the drone strikes Turkey has carried out since May 2019, long before it made its intervention official. The United States has openly blamed Russia for covertly sending mercenaries to fight for Khalifa Haftar's militia alliance — unsurprisingly so, as Western states regularly admonish Russia for actions in other conflict theaters. (Russia has not carried out airstrikes in Libya.)

Since Haftar launched his offensive to capture Tripoli, in April 2019, drones have carried out the bulk of airstrikes in the ensuing war. By the end of the year, there had been well over 1,000 drone strikes, making Libya “probably the biggest drone war theater in the world,” according to U.N. Special Representative Ghassan Salamé. (Since mid-January 2020, the deployment of foreign-supplied air defense systems by both sides has largely grounded the drones, though this hiatus is likely to be temporary.)

Drones are cheap, and like the deployment of mercenaries, they are a hallmark of foreign military intervention in the Libyan war. They also reflect a broader trend toward “surrogate warfare.” With minimal investment and little or no official footprint, foreign powers have reduced risks to their regular forces and avoided blame for their actions — while exerting major influence in the battlefield. Above all, the states meddling in Libya have sought to maintain deniability.

Deniability

Deniability has become a central aspect of warfare not only in Libya, but also in other conflicts from Ukraine to the Persian Gulf. This is due less to states’ getting better at disguising their actions than to the reluctance of the United States and other Western states to confront rising powers over their military adventures. The relative decline of Western influence now allows regional powers to get away with behavior that the great powers would have prevented only a decade ago. In many cases, maintaining deniability is not so much an attempt to hide interventions as an effort to spare the West the embarrassment of having to attribute responsibility and blame. Implausible deniability is a trademark of contemporary wars because the great powers content themselves with others’ denials.

Among the most striking illustrations of shifting power relations in the Middle East and North Africa is the newly expansionist role of the United Arab Emirates. In 2014, the Emirates stunned the Obama administration when, without prior notice, its fighter jets struck the Libya Dawn militia coalition in Tripoli — a previous iteration of the forces that are now fighting against Haftar. A super-rich nation of around 1 million citizens, the Emirates had no tangible interest in Libya, some 4,000 kilometers (2,500 miles) away. The Emirates never admitted to the strikes, and neither the United States nor other states ever openly accused the Emiratis. U.S. diplomacy at least momentarily dissuaded the Emirates from continuing its fighter jet sorties. But the United States did not prevent the Emirates

from covertly establishing a military base in eastern Libya to support Haftar's campaign in Benghazi with so-called air tractors — U.S.-made agricultural planes reconfigured for warfare and flown by mercenaries.

Since April 2019, the Emiratis have been the leading driver behind Libya's new civil war, deploying drones and fighter jets and supplying sophisticated weapons such as Russian-made air defense batteries in support of Haftar's Tripoli offensive. But the Emirates has never admitted to any presence in Libya. And while Western states have criticized Russian and Turkish meddling in Libya, they have shied away from mentioning the Emirates. Even after an airstrike killed 53 migrants in Tripoli in July 2019, a U.N. investigation concluded that a Mirage 2000-9 had dropped the bomb but stopped short of naming the Emirates despite incontrovertible evidence.

Though no more than a federation of city-states, the Emirates has enjoyed complete impunity for destructive military campaigns not only in Libya, but also in Yemen. Underlying that impunity is the Emiratis' spectacular success in turning their financial might and status as a leading importer of arms from the United States and Europe into political influence in Western capitals. And yet, Emirati regional expansionism is rooted in opposition to Western policies: It was prompted by Western support to fledgling attempts in North Africa to overcome decades of dictatorship after 2011, and by the nuclear deal with Iran. Since the advent of the Trump administration, U.S. and Emirati policies have aligned more easily, and shrewd Emirati lobbying with Trump's inner circle has further bolstered Emirati influence.

For states intervening in faraway war zones, deniability not only aims at facilitating impunity at the international level. It is also a way of avoiding domestic scrutiny of overseas military adventures. This appeals not only to democracies like the United States or France. Even in authoritarian systems, sending soldiers to die abroad can be politically problematic unless it is accompanied by a vigorous

propaganda effort that stokes fear of external threats and shores up a regime's nationalist credentials. States need to cross a threshold to engage in overt warfare: Vital national interests have to be plausibly at stake.

Low-profile, lean interventions using mercenaries and drones require no such justification. States do not need to cross a threshold beyond which action becomes imperative. That they act regardless reflects changes in the international system: They intervene because they can. The great powers do not stop them. Deniability, and the acceptance of denial, has significantly lowered the entry costs to war.

Disinformation

Just as the United States and Europe retreat in the face of growing interventionism by regional states, power relations in the global media undergo dramatic changes that wreak unprecedented upheaval in the information economy of crisis states like Libya. Armies of bots and trolls fielded by Gulf states, Egypt, and Russia flood social media with propaganda, amplifying the views of venal "influencers" in Western and Middle Eastern capitals, and pushing conspiracy theories peddled by satellite channels such as Russia Today or Al-Arabiya.

Authoritarian states now direct such disinformation campaigns at multiple countries at the same time. They are making inroads into the public spheres of advanced democracies and developing countries. But settings like Libya offer a particularly fertile environment for their operations: countries without a history of independent, professional journalism but instead a legacy of mass indoctrination by regimes that tried to shield society from global information flows. Add to those conditions the effects of successive civil wars in which rival factions have long spread hatred for their political adversaries, and gained ample experience in manufacturing fake news.

Even before the entry of foreign bot farms onto the scene with the beginning of Haftar's Tripoli offensive, Libya's weaponized media made it impossible for anyone to get to the bottom of events without access to firsthand information. The

country's leading TV channels and news websites often hide their ownership and sources of funding, but most broadcast from Middle Eastern capitals, have foreign sponsors, and are directly linked to key players in the conflict. Propagandists on social media and television promote hate speech and lies in ways that offer their political sponsors deniability. Photos and videos taken from other countries or past events are a staple of Libyan fake news. Another is fabricated articles purporting to be from major Western newspapers, exploiting the limited language skills of most Libyans, a legacy of Moammar Gadhafi's decades-long ban on foreign language teaching.

When the current war erupted in April 2019, foreign information warriors considerably boosted the torrent of propaganda. Within hours of Haftar's announcement that the offensive had begun, Saudi, Emirati, and Egyptian influencers began posting and tweeting in support of the operation, supported by legions of automated accounts. Clearly, the social media campaign had been coordinated with advance knowledge of Haftar's offensive. Haftar had met Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman only a week before he launched the operation, giving rise to speculation that the unprecedented intervention of Saudi-sponsored bots and trolls was among the outcomes of that meeting.

Since then, propaganda specialists from other countries have entered the battle for the minds of Libyans, and for narratives of the war in the global media. A few days after the beginning of Haftar's offensive, Qatari and Turkish accounts began to shoot back. Pro-Haftar bots soon started adopting British and French personas, with dozens of accounts tweeting identical messages about Haftar doing "the Lord's work in Libya," and proving that "one man can be enough to change history." Several months before the war erupted, accounts linked to Russian oligarch Yevgeny Prigozhin began an influence operation in support of Haftar and Gadhafi's son Saif al-Islam, which continued as Prigozhin started deploying mercenaries to fight with Haftar's forces in Tripoli in September 2019.

The activity of foreign bot armies is yet another illustration of the shifting global balance of power. Under public pressure, Facebook has taken down hundreds of pages from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates due to “coordinated inauthentic behavior” directed at Libya, among other countries. Twitter has done the same for thousands of accounts from Saudi Arabia. But many similar networks continue operating with impunity, provoking accusations that Twitter has a “blind spot” when it comes to manipulation by powerful Middle Eastern states such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Together, Libyan and foreign agents of disinformation have turned Libya’s public sphere into a toxic mix of fake news and hate speech where nothing is immune to manipulation, and no amount of evidence is sufficient to prove something as true. Haftar’s powerful propaganda machine has many believe — or at least consider it possible — that the rockets Haftar’s forces regularly fire at Tripoli’s airport actually originate from Haftar’s enemies. When imagery of a downed drone appears, both sides will claim it is their enemy’s aircraft. Videos of airstrikes that killed dozens of civilians are turned into proof that artillery fire was responsible. When a video surfaced in which Syrian mercenaries bragged about their battlefield victories in Tripoli, the same video reappeared only hours later with a different soundtrack, suggesting it was taken in Syria. It remains unclear which of the two soundtracks is authentic, and attempts to geolocate the scenery in such videos have given rise to only more controversy.

Such information warfare strengthens the deniability of foreign intervention, particularly in the eyes of the Libyan public. No number of articles in *The New York Times* can convince true believers that Russians are fighting for Haftar, or Syrians for his opponents. But for those who have not entered the echo chambers of one particular faction, the flood of fake news from countless sources spreads confusion, and sows doubts even in indisputable facts.

What’s New?

Deniability and disinformation are as old as war itself, and combat drones first entered the world's war zones two decades ago. What is different about today's warfare in Libya is that a much greater range of actors is now wielding such instruments in a single conflict at the same time.

During the Cold War, "plausible deniability" was the hallmark of U.S. covert action. In fact, U.S. and Soviet support for mercenaries, insurgents, and militias was widely known, but simply not officially acknowledged. Deniability allowed both sides to avoid a direct confrontation that risked triggering nuclear war. This logic is now making a comeback amid intensifying great-power competition. But in Libya, not only the great powers take advantage of the fiction of deniability. In Libya, as in Syria, multiple middle powers intervene in a distant war zone using mercenaries from at least four countries.

The United States pioneered the use of drone strikes as a way of eschewing accountability for targeted killings. For years, the United States rarely acknowledged its responsibility for the strikes, though as the only power possessing combat drones, denials would have been implausible. The United Arab Emirates and Turkey merely imitate the longstanding U.S. practice of bombing people anonymously and out of the blue. Now, the United States has an incentive to claim the strikes it carries out in Libya, to dispel doubts that it could be responsible for strikes perpetrated by the other two states operating drones there. (France, which has recently acquired combat drones that are based in neighboring Niger, could soon emerge as a fourth drone power in Libya.)

Flooding social media with disinformation, conspiracy theories, and hate speech is a strategy first developed in Russia. But that approach has rapidly spread across the globe. The Gulf states are clearly among the leading investors in armies of bots and trolls. In Western and Middle Eastern capitals, countless influencers associated in one way or another with the states meddling in Libya have joined the battle over the narratives defining the country's war. The information war is not one of pitched battles, but of chaotic melees.

Drones, deniability, and disinformation in Libya are not mere symptoms of global disorder, but also its agents. Nostalgists of the so-called rules-based international order undoubtedly understate the injustice of those rules, and the role of political expedience in deciding whether they were applied or ignored. It is fitting that one decisive step towards the demise of the liberal world order was the 2011 intervention in Libya, which ushered in a decade of paralysis in the U.N. Security Council. Today, that body no longer cares whether its sanctions and resolutions on Libya are implemented — and several Western council members share that disinterest with Russia. The annual reports documenting weapons shipments and foreign intervention in violation of the arms embargo are of purely academic interest. Deniable meddling in Libya is now wrecking the vestiges of the rules-based international order, one drone strike at a time.

BECOME A MEMBER

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