According to the strategy of decapitation, the best way to defeat a nation is by attacking its civilian and/or military leadership. Without it, the enemy can no longer fight effectively due to lack of direction and strategymaking capacity. Hence, the leadership is akin to the brain of the body in this view: without it, the rest of the organs can no longer function at the strategic level. Specifically, the objective of decapitation is to kill, overthrow or isolate the enemy regime by striking a small number of crucial leadership targets.¹ The end goal is to win wars rapidly with minimal commitment of resources and risk of life, low collateral damage and minimal or no friendly casualties.²

Colonel John Warden, one of the chief architects of the Desert Storm military strategy, is the most prominent advocate of decapitation and considers the leadership to be the enemy’s main center of gravity.³ As Warden puts it, “wars through history have been fought to change (or change the mind of) the command structure—to overthrow the prince literally or figuratively or to induce the command structure to make concessions. Capturing or killing the state leaders has frequently been decisive.”⁴ However, international security scholar Robert Pape challenges this assertion. He argues that it is difficult to locate and neutralize leaders, and that their death, overthrow or isolation typically leads to less policy change than expected.⁵

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The Washington Quarterly • 40:4 pp. 135–149
https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2017.1406712
Stephen Hosmer, an international security scholar who has studied the effects of decapitation empirically, essentially confirms Pape’s views. Hosmer finds that “direct attacks on leaders rarely produce wanted policy changes, often fail to deter unwanted enemy behavior, sometimes produce harmful unintended consequences, [and] frequently fail to kill the leader.” The majority of the decapitation literature has also fundamentally reaffirmed Pape’s and Hosmer’s sentiments: this strategy is ineffective at best and counterproductive at worst.

The present investigation contributes to this body of work by extending the decapitation debate that has revolved around its wartime effectiveness to its consequences on peace as well. This is an important addition for, as Warden notes, “the purpose of war ought to be to win the peace that follows and all planning and operations should be directly connected with the final objective.”

Besides this analytical contribution, this article also provides novel empirical insights. It is the first inquiry to focus on the recent and vital case of leadership decapitation in Libya in light of NATO’s Operation Unified Protector in 2011 and its aftermath. This investigation has only been made possible by new evidence presented in the September 2016 UK House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee report, which was not available when earlier publications on Libya emerged.

As should be apparent, the main research question that this study seeks to address is how did leadership decapitation affect the ability to win the conflict (i.e. accomplish its stated military objectives during the operation) and the peace (i.e. create a secure and stable political, economic, legal and social order within the country after the operation) in Libya? The results indicate that this strategy enabled NATO to win the conflict, but also led to losing the peace in Libya. In the conflict phase, Warden’s analysis of decapitation’s usefulness is more likely to be true.

The failure to win the peace in Libya is attributed to NATO’s and outside powers’ lack of interest in pursuing costly, lengthy and demanding post-conflict nation building as well as the host nation’s reluctance to accept such extensive foreign involvement post-conflict. In addition, the Libyan case demonstrates that security must first be established and a strong unified domestic opposition with a positive agenda must be in place that has the will and capacity to implement its policies to win peace.

These arguments are advanced in the remainder of this article. The first section outlines NATO’s commitment to decapitation in Libya. The second provides an account of the role of NATO’s decapitation of the Libyan leadership in winning
the conflict. The third section demonstrates that this strategy resulted in the loss of peace in Libya. The lessons that can be learned from the Libyan case of decapitation are considered in the final section of this investigation, briefly examining the potential efficacy of decapitation strategy against Syria, North Korea and terrorist organizations today.

The Strategy of Decapitation in Libya

As early as 1983, President Ronald Reagan attempted a surgical aerial attack on Libyan President Muamar Qaddafi. In fact, the United States tried to kill Qaddafi several times over the years, but failed every time. In the run-up to the 2011 Libyan war, some older Western officials advocated a more peaceful solution and wanted to strike a deal with Qaddafi instead. For instance, former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who had contact with the Qaddafi regime, attempted to convince Qaddafi to stop the violence and step aside. Yet the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom at the time, David Cameron, did not show any interest in pursuing this diplomatic channel. Instead, he focused exclusively on military intervention and managed to secure parliamentary approval for his policy.

On March 17, 2011, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) passed Resolution 1973 and authorized nations to “take all necessary measures, short of foreign occupation, to protect civilians and civilian populated areas under threat of attack” in Libya. Two days later, an international coalition led by France, the United Kingdom and the United States launched an air-centric military intervention in Libya, which fell under formal NATO command shortly thereafter, known as Operation Unified Protector. During its campaign, NATO consistently denied targeting Qaddafi. The available evidence, however, suggests otherwise.

Liam Fox, the British Defence Secretary who was responsible for targeting during Operation Unified Protector, claimed that the UN resolution did not allow them to target specific individuals. Yet, he insisted that command-and-control centers such as Qaddafi’s residence in Tripoli were legitimate targets. If the Libyan leadership happened to be in these command-and-control centers at the time of bombing, it was their misfortune, according to Fox. Moreover, General David Richards, the British Chief of the Defence Staff, claims that influential people maintained that getting rid of Qaddafi was essential to protect
civilians in Libya. Furthermore, the main architects of Operation Unified Protector—Cameron, President Barack Obama and French President Nicolas Sarkozy—signed a joint letter for “a future without Qaddafi.”

Additionally, NATO and its allies rejected the cease-fire offers of the Libyan government since Qaddafi refused to abdicate. Finally, had the only goal of the intervention in Libya been the urgent protection of civilians in Benghazi, the operation could have ended in less than a day. Yet, NATO continued its war in Libya for seven months and only withdrew after Qaddafi had been killed and replaced by the National Transitional Council (NTC). As the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee’s report on Libya clearly establishes: “a limited intervention to protect civilians drifted into a policy of regime change by military means.” It is thus evident that decapitation of the Libyan leadership was one of NATO’s objectives during Operation Unified Protector.

Winning the Conflict

At the beginning of the campaign, the coalition launched cruise missiles and bomber strikes to neutralize the air force and air-defense systems of the Libyan regime. As a result, Qaddafi’s armored columns were forced to retreat and a no-fly zone was established over most of Libya. Eventually, NATO also managed to cut off Qaddafi’s connection to the outside world and denied him the capacity to re-equip and pay his military. By March 2011, NATO’s air strikes were already taking their toll on the Libyan leadership. According to some estimations, loyal forces to Qaddafi numbered merely 8,000 men, including several thousand mercenaries equipped with hundreds of armed vehicles in total. To make things worse, one of Qaddafi’s closest allies and the acting Foreign Minister of Libya, Moussa Koussa, resigned and fled to the United Kingdom on March 30, 2011.

The defection within the Libyan leadership is hardly surprising considering NATO’s attacks on government facilities including the office building of Qaddafi. In fact, on April 23, 2011, NATO jets launched two guided bombs into the Bab al-Aziziya complex, which contained one of Qaddafi’s residences, government offices and a military headquarters. These strikes occurred shortly after U.S. senator Lindsey Graham (R-SC), a member of the armed services committee, called NATO to “cut the head of the snake off” and said that Qaddafi “needs to wake up every day wondering, ‘will this be my last?’” Perhaps this thought did occupy Qaddafi’s mind, as this was the second air strike in three days to hit sites in or near the compound from where he was believed to direct military strategy.
In the meantime, NATO’s attack against Libyan leadership continued. In the week that followed, the sixth son of the Libyan ruler, Saif al-Arab Qaddafi, was hosting a gathering of family and friends with his parents present. During this event, three missiles struck his house, causing explosions that could be felt more than two miles away. Saif al-Arab and other members of the Qaddafi family were killed in this airstrike, but the Libyan leader himself escaped unharmed.

Jalal el Gallal, a rebel spokesperson in Benghazi, reacted to these events: “It’s a shame they didn’t get [Muammar Qaddafi]. . . . We need this to be over and done with and, frankly speaking, this is the easiest way.” The U.S. Senator Joseph Lieberman (D-CT) essentially echoed these sentiments: “I can’t think of anything that would protect the civilian population of Libya more than the removal of [Muammar Qaddafi].”

Even though NATO’s air strikes did not manage to get rid of Qaddafi just then, the damage to his leadership became even more apparent. By the end of May, more than eight generals and an entire brigade had either left the country or joined the opposition in the fight against the Libyan leader. At the same time, defected generals reported that Qaddafi’s army only operated at 20 percent of its capacity.

The situation would get even worse for the Libyan leader as three more generals and numerous officers defected between June and August. In this period, ambassadors and the Libyan embassy in Ethiopia and Japan defected as well. So did the Labor Minister Al-Amin Manfur, Interior Minister Nasser al-Mabroud Abdullah, Oil Minister Omran Abukraa and Prime Minister Baghdadi Mahmudi. NATO’s decapitation of the Libyan leadership was thus working with great efficiency. And it was about to get even better.

In August, anti-Qaddafi forces began an advance toward Sirte, one of the last strongholds of the Libyan leader. This advance lasted for several weeks until the Battle of Sirte commenced on September 15, 2011. Even then, progress was slow. This is because the pro-Qaddafi forces showed surprising tenacity and NATO cut down on its airstrikes in favor of intelligence collection.

There was, after all, little NATO could do to hasten the fall of Qaddafi without risking significant civilian casualties.

On October 20, 2011, a major breakthrough did nonetheless occur. A NATO aircraft spotted a convoy of 75 cars attempting to flee Sirte. NATO launched airstrikes against the vehicles and managed to destroy a dozen of them. Qaddafi’s car, however, stayed intact, and the Libyan leader escaped on foot with a group of guards to avoid further attacks. At this point, the NTC fighters found a trail of blood that they followed. This led them to Qaddafi’s hideout location where they captured and beat him. Shortly thereafter, they killed Qaddafi by shooting him several times.

In the words of then-U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton: “we came, we saw, he died.” Immediately after Qaddafi’s death, NATO Secretary-General Anders
Fogh Rasmussen announced that NATO would terminate its mission in Libya. Qaddafi’s assassination meant that the strategic implementation of decapitation in Libya had succeeded. This objective was accomplished with low civilian casualties, and the Human Rights Council Commission described NATO’s air campaign in Libya as highly precise.

As security scholar Christopher Chivvis put it: “NATO successfully achieved all its stated military objectives. It maintained an arms embargo, facilitated humanitarian relief, created and sustained a no-fly zone, and helped protect Libya’s civilian population from depredation at the hands of [Qaddafi’s] forces. NATO also accomplished these objectives without significant losses, without inflicting harm on Libya’s civilian population, and without destroying its civilian infrastructure, a feat that would facilitate postwar reconstruction.”

The successful decapitation of the leadership would, however, prove disastrous in winning the peace in Libya.

Losing the Peace

With the fall of Qaddafi came the collapse of security, basic governmental services and the rule of law upon which he had built his authoritarian regime. As North Africa expert Alison Pargeter remarked, “when you took Qaddafi away, you took everything away.” Libya fell victim to fragmentation, lawlessness and violence in the vacuum that emerged after Qaddafi. For instance, Islamist militants famously attacked the U.S. diplomatic compound in Benghazi in September 2012 and killed U.S. Ambassador Chris Stevens. The RAND Corporation estimated that such incidents might have been avoided and sufficient security provided to rebuild Libya in late 2011, if a stabilization force of approximately 13,000 troops had been allocated to the country. This was, however, not something that the international community was willing to commit to Libya.

At the same time, the NTC firmly rejected any foreign military personnel on the ground, including UN observers. This was problematic as Libya’s own armed forces and police had withered away with the fall of Qaddafi’s government. The post-Qaddafi regime was therefore forced to assemble new security forces. This process was made more difficult because the coalition that had fought against Qaddafi could not agree on much except for their disdain for the Libyan dictator. Furthermore, the new security forces in Libya largely consisted of civilians with very limited, if any, military experience and could not provide sufficient civilian security.

To make matters worse, violent Islamists had reportedly infiltrated the newly established security forces. Some of the security forces thus posed security threats in themselves. In fact, militias operating on their own orders were behind the kidnapping of the former Libyan Prime Minister Ali Zeidan.
possession of arms and ammunition that previously belonged to the Qaddafi regime made them a potent threat. They spread the Libyan insecurity to other countries across Africa and the Middle East as well. Libyan arms and ammunitions were trafficked and even reportedly fell into the hands of Boko Haram.\textsuperscript{54} The vacuum also opened up space for Salafi jihadists and Daesh to gain influence in Libya.\textsuperscript{55}

Legally, there was no constitution in place or agreed-upon rules for a post-Qaddafi order. It took four months to form the first government after Qaddafi and one year, instead of the planned 30 days, to lay the groundwork for the Constitutional Commission, a 60-member body established to draft the constitution. In practice, militias and ordinary citizens in Libya typically mete out justice today. The few court trials that take place are heavily politicized and there is no transitional judicial strategy in place.\textsuperscript{56}

Politically, very few citizens had any exposure to the democratic process. In fact, a national survey in Libya demonstrated that one-third of citizens have doubts about the value of democracy.\textsuperscript{57} Furthermore, their loyalty often lies with their local or tribal area, as the nation of Libya is in many ways an artificial construct. This makes it even more difficult to create a stable post-Qaddafi Libya that operates on the basis of national interests.\textsuperscript{58}

The conflict also negatively affected Libya’s economy, further impinging on the country’s recovery. Oil output dropped by 70 percent after the decapitation of the Libyan leadership, which accounted in turn for more than 70 percent of Libya’s gross domestic product (GDP).\textsuperscript{59} According to the International Monetary Fund, the war in Libya decreased its 2011 GDP by 60 percent.\textsuperscript{60}

Libya lost expertise, knowledge, infrastructure and resources because of the war and regime change. To make things worse, a 10-year ban was imposed on those who were associated with the Qaddafi regime or were against the February 17 revolution. This decision forced members of the government to step down and prohibited officers that had commanded a unit in Qaddafi’s army to serve. As a result, the Libyan brain drain escalated and the national reconciliation process was hindered.\textsuperscript{61} As a study conducted by a UN official revealed, Libya had all the possible obstacles to development: “geographic, economic, political, sociological, technological … If Libya can be brought to a state of sustained growth, there is hope for every country in the world.”\textsuperscript{62}

The evidence presented here clearly suggests that this statement became even more true with the decapitation of Qaddafi’s regime. As North Africa specialist Florence Gaub pointed out in 2014, “Libya’s downward slide effectively began...”
on the day that Jalil announced its liberation. Virtually every area of society shows signs of severe mismanagement and progressive deterioration, including security, justice and the economy. Libya’s prospects are therefore rather bleak: its current course threatens to create an uncontrolled, unaccountable security sector; a justice system based on vengeance rather than the rule of law; and a rentier economy that attempts to buy peace. In this scenario, Libya will not be an entirely failed state but rather one that is run by warlords and serves as a haven for criminal and terrorist networks.”

Altogether, this evaluation illustrates that the decapitation campaign that won the conflict lost the peace. The removal of leadership in Libya meant that NATO could secure its military objectives during the operation, but eventually descended the country into chaos and disorder. The structures of governance that decapitation destroyed were necessary to reestablish security and order after the operation.

Lessons to Be Learned

As the examination of the Libyan case demonstrates, the decapitation of Qaddafi’s regime proved decisive and enabled NATO to win the conflict. The Libyan leadership was the main center of gravity and the rest of the system collapsed with Qaddafi’s death, as Warden’s thesis suggests. Indeed, decapitation helped to achieve all the military objectives of the campaign and did so by minimizing the collateral damage at a low cost for the interveners. The Libyan case thus demonstrates that decapitation can be a relatively rapid and cheap strategy in winning the conflict.

In stark contrast, the experiences from Libya illustrate the shortcomings of decapitation as a means of winning the peace. Without its leadership, Libya has been beset by anarchy and chaos in the aftermath of Operation Unified Protector. Indeed, the removal of the Qaddafi regime created a political vacuum that has only heightened the insecurity of the country and its surrounding region and created a less stable political, economic, legal and social order in Libya.

With that said, there are four major lessons to be learned from the mistakes in Libya that could help to win the peace after the conflict has been won in decapitation. First, security must be established before other institutions can begin to function. In the midst of insecurity, internal
fighting in Libya had a spillover effect and came to undermine the nation’s political, economic and legal system as well. It is therefore imperative to ensure that there is security on the ground to allow the rest of the society to rebuild.

Second, the interveners and the host country must be willing to work together to rebuild the country. Although the United Kingdom pushed hard for the war in Libya, it showed little interest in post-conflict nation building. According to estimates, it has spent less than half on post-conflict reconstruction than it did on the war itself. At the same time, the Libyans refused foreign involvement on numerous occasions, as we have seen. This is unfortunate as it is essential to provide and accept outside help when the leadership of the country has fallen. Otherwise, the result will likely be chaos and disorder as in Libya.

Third, there must be a united opposition to the existing regime with deep knowledge of the country that can carve a path forward following decapitation of the leadership. Qaddafi built modern Libya around himself and repressed any opposition with impunity. The Libyan opposition was therefore very weak and fragmented. The domestic coalition that fought against him during Operation Unified Protector was an alliance of strange bedfellows who shared a single common objective: to remove Qaddafi from power. When this goal was achieved, they subsequently started to fight one another instead. Neither the United States nor the European Union admittedly had much knowledge about the domestic anti-Qaddafi coalition they supported. To win peace, it is therefore vital to have substantial knowledge of the domestic coalition one supports and to ensure that they form a united front with a positive agenda beyond decapitating the existing regime.

Fourth and relatedly, it is not only essential to have a positive agenda but the means of implementing that agenda. There was no shortage of plans for post-Qaddafi Libya. The problem was the lack of stable institutions and capacities capable of translating these ideas into policy. This is problematic as even good plans are useless without successful implementation.

These four issues must be taken into consideration and adequately addressed, if peace is to be won after leadership decapitation. Accomplishing this goal will, however, not be easy. Successful post-conflict nation building is typically an expensive, complex and demanding task that generally takes years to accomplish. For instance, the U.S. bill for Afghanistan and Iraq has totaled between $4-6 trillion. Despite this huge financial budget and over a decade’s commitment, peace has not been won in either of these countries.

The prospects of succeeding in this endeavor in the midst of the Libyan “shit show,” as Obama called it, is bleak as well. In fact, decapitation is likely to
fare even worse if pursued to confront some of the most pressing security challenges of the day, whether it is North Korea, Syria or terrorist organizations such as Daesh, Al-Qaeda and Boko Haram. They will be dealt with in turn below.

Beyond Libya

Decapitation is a far too costly and risky a strategy against a nuclear-armed North Korea. Winning the conflict is an extremely dangerous enterprise under these conditions. Winning the peace would be particularly difficult since North Korea has been ruled with an iron fist by the Kim family for seven decades and prohibits any organized political opposition, independent media, free trade unions, or independent civil society organization. To replace the Kim dynasty with a new leadership in a country that possesses nuclear weapons, is one of the most isolated nations in the world, lacks the necessary institutions to ensure a smooth transition, and is plagued by rampant poverty is thus not a viable option and presents a far greater challenge than Libya. Add to this the Sino-North Korean Mutual Aid and Cooperation Friendship Treaty, in which China pledged to immediately render military and non-military assistance to its ally in case of an outside attack, and decapitation appears all the more implausible.

The prospect of decapitation succeeding against Syria is extremely bleak as well, albeit to a lesser extent than it would be in North Korea. The Assad family, ruling the country since 1971, does not hold the nation under as tight of a grip as their North Korean counterparts, nor do they have nuclear weapons. There is also a more pronounced opposition group in Syria that might facilitate decapitation. Yet, like in North Korea, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad enjoys the support of important allies such as Russia and Iran. In contrast, Qaddafi was diplomatically isolated at the time of Operation Unified Protector. This would make it far more difficult to win the conflict and peace through decapitation in Syria than it was in Libya. The costs and dangers of such an operation would also be accentuated as a result.

Finally, decapitation would be ineffective against terrorist organizations that have adopted a decentralized structure in the aftermath of 9/11 as well. By decentralizing their operational capacity, actors such as Daesh, Al-Qaeda and Boko Haram do not need to plan and direct attacks from a centrally located command-and-control post. The decentralized, flexible, adaptive networks of these terrorist organizations make them far less vulnerable to decapitation campaigns. Their whole organization would not fall down, even if their leadership is knocked out. As such, the premise on which the decapitation strategy relies no longer applies. It is therefore not surprising that the majority of the literature suggests that decapitation is ineffective against terrorist organizations. The findings of this inquiry bolster these conclusions by highlighting the limitations of
decapitation more broadly in tackling some of the major contemporary security challenges of the West.

**Endnotes:**

15. “Tony Blair and Gaddafi Call, 1535-1600” (Foreign Affairs Committee, February 25, 2011), 1535–1600.
26. Antony Best et al., International History of the Twentieth Century and Beyond (London: Routledge, 2015), 616.


52. Fishman, 203.


55. Fishman, 199.

56. Gaub, 102, 114.


63. Gaub, 115.


