The New York Times | https://nyti.ms/21rtwB3

BY THE TIME Mahmoud Jibril cleared customs at Le Bourget airport and sped into Paris, the American secretary of state had been waiting for hours. But this was not a meeting Hillary Clinton could cancel. Their encounter could decide whether America was again going to war.

In the throes of the Arab Spring, Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi was facing a furious revolt by Libyans determined to end his quixotic 42-year rule. The dictator’s forces were approaching Benghazi, the crucible of the rebellion, and threatening a blood bath. France and Britain were urging the United States to join them in a military campaign to halt Colonel Qaddafi’s troops, and now the Arab League, too, was calling for action.

President Obama was deeply wary of another military venture in a Muslim country. Most of his senior advisers were telling him to stay out. Still, he dispatched Mrs. Clinton to sound out Mr. Jibril, a leader of the Libyan opposition. Their late-night meeting on March 14, 2011, would be the first chance for a top American official to get a sense of whom, exactly, the United States was being asked to support.

In her suite at the Westin, she and Mr. Jibril, a political scientist with a doctorate from the University of Pittsburgh, spoke at length about the fast-moving military situation in Libya. But Mrs. Clinton was clearly also thinking about Iraq, and its hard lessons for American intervention.

Did the opposition’s Transitional National Council really represent the whole of a deeply divided country, or just one region? What if Colonel Qaddafi quit, fled or was killed — did they have a plan for what came next?

“She was asking every question you could imagine,” Mr. Jibril recalled.

Mrs. Clinton was won over. Opposition leaders "said all the right things about supporting democracy and inclusivity and building Libyan institutions, providing some hope that we might be able to pull this off," said Philip H. Gordon, one of her assistant secretaries. "They gave us what we wanted to hear. And you do want to believe."

Her conviction would be critical in persuading Mr. Obama to join allies in bombing Colonel Qaddafi's forces. In fact, Mr. Obama's defense secretary, Robert M. Gates, would later say that in a "51-49" decision, it was Mrs. Clinton's support that put the ambivalent president over the line.

The consequences would be more far-reaching than anyone imagined, leaving Libya a failed state and a terrorist haven, a place where the direst answers to Mrs. Clinton's questions have come to pass.

This is the story of how a woman whose Senate vote for the Iraq war may have doomed her first presidential campaign nonetheless doubled down and pushed for military action in another Muslim country. As she once again seeks the White House, campaigning in part on her experience as the nation's chief diplomat, an examination of the intervention she championed shows her at what was arguably her moment of greatest influence as secretary of state. It is a working portrait rich with evidence of what kind of president she might be, and especially of her expansive approach to the signal foreign-policy conundrum of today: whether, when and how the United States should wield its military power in Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East.

From the earliest days of the Libya debate, Mrs. Clinton was a diligent student and unrelenting inquisitor, absorbing fat briefing books, inviting dissenting views from subordinates, studying foreign counterparts to learn how to win them over. She was a pragmatist, willing to improvise — to try the bank-shot solution. But above all, in the view of many who have watched her up close, her record on Libya illustrates how, facing a national-security or foreign-policy quandary, she was inclined to act — in marked contrast to Mr. Obama's more reticent approach.

Anne-Marie Slaughter, her director of policy planning at the State Department, notes that in conversation and in her memoir, Mrs. Clinton repeatedly speaks of wanting to be "caught trying." In other words, she would rather be criticized for what she has done than for having done nothing at all.

"She's very careful and reflective," Ms. Slaughter said. "But when the choice is between action and inaction, and you've got risks in either direction, which you often do, she'd rather be caught trying."

The New York Times's examination of the intervention offers a detailed accounting of how Mrs. Clinton's deep belief in America's power to do good in the world ran aground in a tribal country with no functioning government, rival factions and a staggering quantity of arms. The Times interviewed more than 50 American, Libyan and European officials, including many of the principal actors. Virtually all agreed to comment on the record. They expressed regret, frustration and in some cases bewilderment about what went wrong and what might have been done differently.

Was the mistake the decision to intervene in the first place, or the mission creep from protecting civilians to ousting a dictator, or the failure to send a peacekeeping force in the aftermath?

Mrs. Clinton declined to be interviewed. But in public, she has said it is "too soon to tell" how things will turn out in Libya and has called for a more interventionist approach in Syria.

Libya's descent into chaos began with a rushed decision to go to war, made in what one top official called a "shadow of uncertainty" as to Colonel Qaddafi's intentions. The mission inexorably evolved even as Mrs. Clinton foresaw some of the hazards of toppling another Middle Eastern strongman. She pressed for a secret American program that supplied arms to rebel militias, an effort never before confirmed.

Only after Colonel Qaddafi fell and what one American diplomat called "the endorphins of revolution" faded did it become clear that Libya's new leaders were

unequal to the task of unifying the country, and that the elections Mrs. Clinton and President Obama pointed to as proof of success only deepened Libya's divisions.

Now Libya, with a population smaller than that of Tennessee, poses an outsize security threat to the region and beyond, calling into question whether the intervention prevented a humanitarian catastrophe or merely helped create one of a different kind.

The looting of Colonel Qaddafi's vast weapons arsenals during the intervention has fed the Syrian civil war, empowered terrorist and criminal groups from Nigeria to Sinai, and destabilized Mali, where Islamist militants stormed a Radisson hotel in November and killed 20 people.

A growing trade in humans has sent a quarter-million refugees north across the Mediterranean, with hundreds drowning en route. A civil war in Libya has left the country with two rival governments, cities in ruins and more than 4,000 dead.

Amid that fighting, the Islamic State has built its most important outpost on the Libyan shore, a redoubt to fall back upon as it is bombed in Syria and Iraq. With the Pentagon saying the Islamic State's fast-growing force now numbers between 5,000 and 6,500 fighters, some of Mr. Obama's top national security aides are pressing for a second American military intervention in Libya. On Feb. 19, American warplanes hunting a Tunisian militant bombed an Islamic State training camp in western Libya, killing at least 41 people.

"We had a dream," said Mr. Jibril, who served as Libya's first interim prime minister. "And to be honest with you, we had a golden opportunity to bring this country back to life. Unfortunately, that dream was shattered."

On the campaign trail and in relentless congressional investigations, Republican critics have used a singular tragedy, the Sept. 11, 2012, terrorist attack on the American diplomatic complex in Benghazi, which killed Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens and three other Americans, as a hammer against the former secretary of state. And while attempts to pin blame on Mrs. Clinton have largely been frustrated, her rival for the Democratic presidential nomination, Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont, has seized on her role in the larger narrative of the Libyan intervention;

during a recent debate, he said he feared that "Secretary Clinton is too much into regime change."

President Obama has called failing to do more in Libya his biggest foreign policy lesson. And Gérard Araud, the French ambassador to the United Nations during the revolution, is deeply troubled by the aftermath of the 2011 intervention: the Islamic State only "300 miles from Europe," a refugee crisis that "is a human tragedy as well as a political one" and the destabilization of much of West Africa.

"You have to make a moral choice: a blood bath in Benghazi and keeping Qaddafi in power, or what is happening now," Mr. Araud said. "It is a tough question, because now Western national interests are very much impacted by what is happening in Libya."

A NEW WAR

It was late afternoon on March 15, 2011, and Mr. Araud had just left the office when his phone rang. It was his American counterpart, Susan E. Rice, with a pointed message.

France and Britain were pushing hard for a Security Council vote on a resolution supporting a no-fly zone in Libya to prevent Colonel Qaddafi from slaughtering his opponents. Ms. Rice was calling to push back, in characteristically salty language.

"She says, and I quote, 'You are not going to drag us into your shitty war,'" said Mr. Araud, now France's ambassador in Washington. "She said, 'We'll be obliged to follow and support you, and we don't want to.' The conversation got tense. I answered, 'France isn't a U.S. subsidiary.' It was the Obama policy at the time that they didn't want a new Arab war."

In the preceding weeks, a series of high-level meetings had grappled with the escalating rebellion, and some younger White House aides believed the president should join the international effort.

But a far more formidable lineup was outspoken against an American commitment, including Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr.; Tom Donilon, the national security adviser; and Mr. Gates, the defense secretary, who did not want to divert American air power or attention away from Afghanistan and Iraq. If the Europeans were so worried about Libya, they argued, let them take responsibility for its future.

"I think at one point I said, 'Can I finish the two wars I'm already in before you guys go looking for a third one?'" Mr. Gates recalled. Colonel Qaddafi, he said, "was not a threat to us anywhere. He was a threat to his own people, and that was about it."

Some senior intelligence officials had deep misgivings about what would happen if Colonel Qaddafi lost control. In recent years, the Libyan dictator had begun aiding the United States in its fight against Al Qaeda in North Africa.

"He was a thug in a dangerous neighborhood," said Michael T. Flynn, a retired Army lieutenant general who headed the Defense Intelligence Agency at the time. "But he was keeping order."

Then there was Secretary Clinton. Early in Mr. Obama's presidency, she had worked hard to win the trust of the man who had bested her in a tough primary campaign in 2008, and she sometimes showed anxiety about being cut out of his inner circle. (In one 2009 email, she fretted to aides: "I heard on the radio that there is a Cabinet mtg this am. Is there? Can I go?")

Mrs. Clinton had cultivated a close relationship with Mr. Gates. Both tended to be more hawkish than the president. They had raised concerns about how rapidly he wanted to withdraw troops from Afghanistan. More recently, they had argued that Mr. Obama should not be too hasty in dropping support for Hosni Mubarak, the embattled Egyptian leader, whom Mrs. Clinton had known since her years as the first lady.

But they had lost out to the younger aides — "the backbenchers," Mr. Gates called them, who he said argued that in the moral clash of the Arab Spring, "Mr.

President, you've got to be on the right side of history."

In Libya, Mrs. Clinton had a new opportunity to support the historic change that had just swept out the leaders of its neighbors Egypt and Tunisia. And Libya seemed a tantalizingly easy case — with just six million people, no sectarian divide and plenty of oil.

But the debate was handicapped by sketchy intelligence. Top State Department officials were busy trying to evacuate the American Embassy, fearing that the Libyan leader might use diplomats as hostages. There was no inside information on whether, or on what scale, Colonel Qaddafi would carry out his threats.

"We, the U.S., did not have a particularly good handle on what was going on inside Libya," said Derek Chollet, a State Department aide who moved to the National Security Council as the Libya debate began. American officials were relying largely on news reports, he said.

Human Rights Watch would later count about 350 protesters killed before the intervention — not the thousands described in some media accounts. But inside the Obama administration, few doubted that Colonel Qaddafi would do what it took to remain in power.

"Of course, he would have lined up the tanks and just gone after folks," said David H. Petraeus, the retired general and former C.I.A. director.

Jake Sullivan, Mrs. Clinton's top foreign-policy aide at State and now in her campaign, said her view was that "we have to live in a world of risks." In assessing the situation in Libya, he said, "she didn't know for certain at the time, nor did any of us, what would happen — only that it passed a risk threshold that demanded that we look very hard at the response."

So, after some initial doubts, Mrs. Clinton diverged from the other senior members of the administration.

The comparison with Mr. Biden was revealing. For the vice president, according to Antony J. Blinken, then his national security adviser and now deputy secretary of

state, the lesson of Iraq was crucial — "what Biden called not the day after, but the decade after."

"What's the plan?" Mr. Blinken continued. "There is going to be some kind of vacuum, and how's it going to be filled, and what are we doing to fill it?" Former Secretary of State Colin Powell's famous adage about Iraq — if "you break it, you own it" — loomed large.

More decisive for Mrs. Clinton were two episodes from her husband's presidency — the American failure to prevent the Rwandan genocide in 1994, and the success, albeit belated, in bringing together an international military coalition to prevent greater bloodshed after 8,000 Muslims were massacred in Srebrenica during the Bosnian war.

"The thing about Rwanda that's important is it showed the cost of inaction," said James B. Steinberg, who served as Mrs. Clinton's deputy through July 2011. "But I think the reason Bosnia and Kosovo figured so importantly is they demonstrated there were ways of being effective and there were lessons of what worked and didn't work."

'WE WILL BE LEFT BEHIND'

On the same March afternoon when Ambassador Rice was telling her French colleague at the United Nations to back off, President Obama and his security cabinet were arrayed in the White House situation room. Speaking on the video screen from Cairo was Secretary Clinton, just arrived from Paris.

The day before, at lunch with President Nicolas Sarkozy of France, she "was tough, she was bullish" on the idea of intervention in Libya — the "perfect ally," recalled Mr. Sarkozy's senior diplomatic adviser, Jean-David Levitte.

But now Mrs. Clinton did not directly push Mr. Obama to intervene in Libya. Nor did she make an impassioned moral case, according to several people in the room.

Instead, she described Mr. Jibril, the opposition leader, as impressive and reasonable. She conveyed her surprise that Arab leaders not only supported military action but, in some cases, were willing to participate. Mostly, though, she warned that the French and British would go ahead with airstrikes on their own, potentially requiring the United States to step in later if things went badly.

Dennis B. Ross, then a senior Middle East expert at the National Security Council, said he remembered listening to her and thinking, "If she's advocating, she's advocating in what I would describe as a fairly clever way."

He recalled her saying: "'You don't see what the mood is here, and how this has a kind of momentum of its own. And we will be left behind, and we'll be less capable of shaping this.'"

Mrs. Clinton's account of a unified European-Arab front powerfully influenced Mr. Obama. "Because the president would never have done this thing on our own," said Benjamin J. Rhodes, the deputy national security adviser.

Mr. Gates, among others, thought Mrs. Clinton's backing decisive. Mr. Obama later told him privately in the Oval Office, he said, that the Libya decision was "51-49."

"I've always thought that Hillary's support for the broader mission in Libya put the president on the 51 side of the line for a more aggressive approach," Mr. Gates said. Had the secretaries of state and defense both opposed the war, he and others said, the president's decision might have been politically impossible.

Having decided to act, Mr. Obama questioned military leaders about the effectiveness of a no-fly zone, the Europeans' favored military response. When they told him that it could not prevent a massacre, Mr. Obama directed his staff to draft a new, tougher United Nations resolution.

Late that night, Mr. Araud, the French diplomat, was astonished to get a second call from Ms. Rice: The United States would not only support intervention, but wanted United Nations support for more than a no-fly zone. Mr. Araud said the

turnabout had so shocked him and his British counterpart that they at first suspected a trick.

There remained only one real obstacle: Russia could block a Security Council resolution with a veto. Mrs. Clinton had done her best to develop a relationship with Russia's leader, Vladimir V. Putin, listening to his tales of tagging polar bears and tracking Siberian tigers.

"Her theory on Putin is, this is a person with some pa
going on those passions, your capacity to try and deal wit
Clinton aide said.

But the relationship remained difficult, and the secre
constantly with her Russian counterpart, Sergey V. Lavro
in her memoir "Hard Choices," was initially "dead set aga

"We don't want another war," she told Mr. Lavrov, st
was limited to protecting civilians.

"I take your point about not seeking another war," sh
"But that doesn't mean that you won't get one."

In the end, Mrs. Clinton would acknowledge that Col
helped win over the Russians, by giving a fiery speech jus
Council vote calling his opponents "the rats" and vowing
house, alley by alley."

On March 17, 10 members of the Security Council vo
authorizing "all necessary means" to protect Libyan civili
including Russia, abstained.

Two days later, Mr. Sarkozy met with Mrs. Clinton a
British prime minister, at the Élysée Palace in Paris to dis
French president emphasized that within a day or so, Col
would be inside Benghazi, mingling with civilians, makin
to use air power against them.

Hillary Clinton, 'Smart Power' and a Dictator's Fall

The president was wary.

The secretary of state was persuasive. But the ouster of Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi left Libya a failed state and a terrorist haven.

By JO BECKER and SCOTT SHANE

FEB. 27, 2016

Then he played his trump card. French fighter jets w
said. But, he added, "this is a collective decision, and I wi
me to," Mr. Levitte said. Mr. Sarkozy's maneuver had abruptly pushed forward the timing of the operation, but for all of Mrs. Clinton's irritation, she was not prepared to object.

"I'm not going to be the one to recall the planes and create the massacre in Benghazi," she grumbled to an aide. And the bombing began.

FAILURES OF DIPLOMACY

About the time the air campaign began, Charles R. Kubic, a retired rear admiral, received a message from a senior Libyan military officer proposing military-to-military negotiations for a 72-hour cease-fire, potentially leading to an arranged exit for Colonel Qaddafi and his family.

But after he approached the American military command for Africa, Admiral Kubic said, he was directed to end the talks. The orders, he was told, had come from "outside the Pentagon," though aides to both Mr. Obama and Mrs. Clinton said the offer had never made it to their level. He was baffled by the lack of interest in exploring an option he thought might lead to a less bloody transition.

"The question that stays with me is, why didn't you spend 72 hours giving peace a chance?" he said.

The answer, at least in part, was that the two sides had started from positions of mutual mistrust.

In the weeks leading up to the intervention, aides to Colonel Qaddafi had reached out to potential intermediaries, including Gen. Wesley K. Clark, who served as NATO commander under Mrs. Clinton's husband, and Tony Blair, the former British prime minister and longtime Clinton friend. Diplomats representing the United Nations, the African Union and a half-dozen countries discussed the chances,

however remote, of a political settlement. Even the Russian multimillionaire who headed the World Chess Federation got involved.

There was "envoy proliferation," said Mr. Chollet, who monitored such exchanges from the National Security Council.

The Americans did not believe that the Libyans purporting to speak for the leader could actually deliver a peaceful transfer of power. Colonel Qaddafi, the Americans thought, would simply use a cease-fire as an opportunity to regroup.

"My view is that there was never a serious offer from Qaddafi to step down from power," said Gene A. Cretz, who preceded Mr. Stevens as the American ambassador in Libya. "I firmly believe that none of those characters around him ever had the gumption to raise the issue with him personally."

For the Libyan leader and his inner circle, episodes like the one Admiral Kubic described were proof that the Americans had no desire to negotiate, said Mohamed Ismail, a top aide to Colonel Qaddafi's son Seif and frequent envoy to the West. "They just wanted to get rid of Qaddafi," he said.

The Libyans saw the threatened intervention not as a noble act to save lives, as Mrs. Clinton portrayed it, but in far darker terms. After all, Colonel Qaddafi, fearing the fate of Saddam Hussein, had abandoned his nuclear program and was sharing intelligence with the C.I.A. in the fight against Al Qaeda. Mrs. Clinton herself had publicly welcomed one of the leader's sons to the State Department in 2009.

Now Colonel Qaddafi saw deep treachery, ingratitude and mercantile revenge. He railed to anyone who would listen that he was Libya's only bulwark against extremism, that without him the country would become a terrorist haven.

In a further complication, the United Nations Security Council had recently voted to refer the attacks on protesters to the International Criminal Court, so both the leader and his inner circle might face prosecution if he ceded power.

"We were open to power sharing, but the minute that happened it was hard to go forward," Mr. Ismail said. A top American diplomat agreed, saying that the threat

of prosecution "boxed Seif into a corner."

Over the years, Mr. Ismail noted, Colonel Qaddafi had certainly found ways to offend nearly every country now allied against him. He had financed political opponents and been accused of plotting the murder of the Saudi king. And, Mr. Ismail said, he had recently reneged on oil and arms deals with the British and the French.

Then there was Lebanon and the matter of the missing Shiite cleric.

Back in 1978, a revered Lebanese imam, Moussa al-Sadr, had disappeared while visiting Libya. Lebanon suspected foul play, probably with government involvement. But the mystery had never been definitively solved.

In an interview with The Times, Mr. Ismail confirmed the Lebanese suspicions. "We said he left to go to Italy," Mr. Ismail said of Mr. Sadr. But that was a lie.

"He was killed," Mr. Ismail said, offering a chillingly succinct explanation: "There was an argument with the leader."

Mr. Ismail said he had learned of the cleric's fate long after the fact, and stressed that Colonel Qaddafi's family, including a son now imprisoned in Lebanon, had no involvement or knowledge.

The cleric's body, he said, was thrown into the sea.

THE MISSION SHIFTS

Early on, President Obama had declared that Colonel Qaddafi had lost his legitimacy and had to go. But the president was careful to point out that this was the administration's political position, not its military objective.

"We are not going to use force to go beyond a well-defined goal, specifically the protection of civilians in Libya," he said. Mrs. Clinton echoed that five days after the

Security Council resolution was adopted. "There is nothing in there about getting rid of anybody," she told ABC News.

The president directed the Pentagon to use its unique military capabilities to stop the feared massacre and, within 10 days, turn the operation over to European and Arab allies. An unnamed aide described this approach as "leading from behind," handing the president's Republican opponents an enduring talking point. But Mr. Obama was adamant that Libya would not become another protracted American war.

In fact, his limited goal was achieved far faster than planned. "We basically destroyed Qaddafi's air defenses and stopped the advance of his forces within three days," recalled Mr. Rhodes, the deputy national security adviser.

But the mission quickly evolved from protecting civilians in Benghazi to protecting civilians wherever they were. As the rebellion swelled and bystanders became combatants, the endgame became ever more murky. The United States and its allies were increasingly drawn to one side of the fighting, without extended debate over what that shift portended.

"I can't recall any specific decision that said, 'Well, let's just take him out,'" Mr. Gates said. Publicly, he said, "the fiction was maintained" that the goal was limited to disabling Colonel Qaddafi's command and control. In fact, the former defense secretary said, "I don't think there was a day that passed that people didn't hope he would be in one of those command and control centers."

Two of Mrs. Clinton's top Libya advisers said in interviews that they had harbored misgivings about the intervention precisely because of fears that the coalition would not be able to stop short of regime change, with no ability to manage the aftermath.

One was Mr. Gordon, the assistant secretary. The other was Jeremy Shapiro, who handled Libya on Mrs. Clinton's policy planning staff.

Mr. Shapiro said he had expressed his concerns to Mrs. Clinton's top policy aide, Mr. Sullivan. "Once you get into a fight where we basically say, 'We have to stop

a madman from killing tens of thousands of people in his own country,' how do you stop?" Mr. Shapiro said.

"Ultimately the logic becomes, Jesus, the Qaddafi regime is a real threat to civilians," he added. "It required nothing to escalate to that. It would have required an amazing force of will not to."

Practical military considerations also complicated Mr. Obama's in-and-out strategy. Though he had directed that the United States provide only unique capabilities that its allies did not possess, that turned out to be quite a bit: a continuing supply of precision munitions, combat search and rescue, and surveillance, Mr. Petraeus said.

By April, the president had authorized the use of drones, and, according to a senior rebel commander, C.I.A. operatives began visiting rebel camps and "providing us with intercepts of Qaddafi's troop movements."

The incremental escalation ran against Mr. Obama's instincts, and he did it reluctantly, said Mr. Ross, the former National Security Council official. Mrs. Clinton, he said, was less concerned that "every step puts you on a slippery slope."

"Her view is, we can't fail in this," Mr. Ross said. "Once we have made a decision, we can't fail."

ARMING THE REBELS

When Mr. Jibril and his Libyan entourage showed up in Rome in May to meet with Mrs. Clinton, they expected a 10-minute check-in. Instead, they talked for nearly an hour.

The opposition leaders had already given her a white paper setting out a spectacular future: Political parties would compete in open elections, a free news media would hold leaders accountable and women's rights would be respected.

In retrospect, Mr. Jibril acknowledged in an interview, it was a "utopian ideal" quite detached from Libyan reality. But Mrs. Clinton had been enthusiastic, according to those in attendance, and now she wanted to talk in greater depth about how to turn the vision into reality.

"She said, and I remember this, 'Let us brainstorm about Libya,'" said Mahmud Shammam, the rebel council's chief spokesman.

The opposition leaders wanted something more immediate. They wanted weapons.

Despite hundreds of coalition airstrikes, the fighting was at a stalemate. Every time the rebels gained some ground, government forces retook it. The rebels seemed unable to get past Brega, an oil port on the way to Tripoli, and they hoped more sophisticated weapons from the Americans would tip the balance.

The secretary of state heard them out. She "was very patient, very charming," Mr. Shammam said. "Always had a smile." In the end, though, she demurred.

But back in Washington, where a low-grade panic over the stalled fighting was setting in, Mrs. Clinton pressed the rebels' case, according to three senior White House officials and two State Department officials involved in the secret debate.

The American military involvement that Mr. Obama had hoped to curtail after 10 days had dragged on for months, and political support was waning. Some members of Congress were outraged over the administration's failure to seek approval after 60 days, as the War Powers Act seemed to require.

Onetime advocates of the intervention, including Ms. Slaughter, the secretary's former policy planning director, had grown disillusioned over the rebels' human-rights abuses.

"We did not try to protect civilians on Qaddafi's side," said Ms. Slaughter, who at the time called for a deal in which Colonel Qaddafi would have turned over power to one of his sons.

The international coalition that Mrs. Clinton had stitched together was also unraveling. Russia accused the United States and its allies of a bait-and-switch, and the Arab League called for a cease-fire and settlement.

"Regime change — that was not our business at all," Amr Moussa, who headed the organization at the time, said in an interview.

"There was a moment, around about June or July," recalled Mr. Shapiro, the State Department's Libya policy adviser, "when the situation on the ground seemed to settle into a stalemate and we weren't sure we were winning, or at least winning quickly enough."

Moreover, the United States' strategy of letting other countries arm the opposition was backfiring, creating a regional power imbalance that could come back to haunt Libya if the rebels did win.

Throughout the spring, the administration had effectively turned a blind eye as Qatar and the United Arab Emirates supplied the rebels with lethal assistance, according to Mr. Gates and others. But Mrs. Clinton had grown increasingly concerned that Qatar, in particular, was sending arms only to certain rebel factions: militias from the city of Misurata and select Islamist brigades.

She could hardly tell Qatar to stand down if the United States was unwilling to step in with lethal assistance of its own, one State Department aide said, "because their answer would be, 'Well, those guys need help — you're not doing it.'" Her view, often relayed to her staff, was that to have influence with the fractious opposition and Arab allies, you had to have "skin in the game," Mr. Ross said.

Former President Bill Clinton had publicly noted in April 2011 that the United States should "not rule out" arming the opposition, and in emails with Mr. Sullivan, her policy adviser, Mrs. Clinton discussed using private contractors to do just that. Mr. Ross, speaking generally, said she had frequently consulted her husband: "I'd say, 'Here's what I think we should do.' She'd say, 'That's what Bill said, too.'"

Now Mrs. Clinton took what one top adviser called "the activist side" of the debate over whether to counter Qatar by arming more secular fighters.

"If you didn't," Mr. Ross recalled her arguing, "whatever happened, your options would shrink, your influence would shrink, therefore your ability to affect anything there would also shrink."

But other senior officials were wary. NATO's supreme allied commander, Adm. James G. Stavridis, had told Congress of "flickers" of Al Qaeda within the opposition. Mr. Donilon, Mr. Obama's national security adviser, argued that the administration could not ensure that weapons intended for "the so-called good guys," as one State Department official put it, did not fall into the hands of Islamist extremists.

In fact, there was reason to worry. Mr. Jibril himself described in an interview how a French shipment of missiles and machine guns had gone awry. At a June meeting, President Sarkozy had agreed to "ask our Arab friends" to supply the Transitional National Council with the weapons, Mr. Jibril said. But, he said, the acting defense minister diverted them to a militia led by Abdel Hakim Belhaj, a militant Islamist who had once been held in a secret prison by the C.I.A.

Mrs. Clinton understood the hazards, but also weighed the costs of not acting, aides said. They described her as comfortable with feeling her way through a problem without being certain of the outcome.

President Obama ultimately took her side, according to the administration officials who described the debate. After he signed a secret document called a presidential finding, approving a covert operation, a list of approved weaponry was drawn up. The shipments arranged by the United States and other Western countries generally arrived through the port of Benghazi and airports in eastern Libya, a Libyan rebel commander said.

"Humvees, counterbattery radar, TOW missiles was the highest end we talked about," one State Department official recalled. "We were definitely giving them lethal assistance. We'd crossed that line."

Prompted in part by the decision to arm the rebels, the State Department recognized the Transitional National Council as the "legitimate governing authority for Libya." Mrs. Clinton announced the decision on July 15 in Istanbul.

"That very day, our troops had started to get inside Brega," Mr. Shammam recalled. "We told that to Mrs. Clinton, and she said — I remember her smiling — 'Good! This is the only language that Qaddafi is understanding.'"

'QADDAFI'S DAYS ARE NUMBERED'

One month later, Secretary Clinton appeared at the National Defense University with Leon E. Panetta, who had recently replaced Mr. Gates as defense secretary. She hailed the intervention as a case study in "smart power."

"For the first time we have a NATO-Arab alliance taking action, you've got Arab countries who are running strike actions," she said. "This is exactly the kind of world that I want to see where it's not just the United States and everybody is standing on the sidelines while we bear the cost, while we bear the sacrifice."

Mr. Panetta spoke of a "sense that Qaddafi's days are numbered."

Six days later, on Aug. 22, the cumulative efforts of the international coalition bore fruit when exuberant rebels stormed the Qaddafi compound in Tripoli. The dictator was still at large, but his reign was over.

Mrs. Clinton's old friend and political adviser, Sidney Blumenthal, who regularly emailed her political advice and vaguely sourced intelligence reports on Libya, urged her to capitalize on the dictator's fall.

"Brava!" Mr. Blumenthal exclaimed. As always, he was thinking about Mrs. Clinton's presidential ambitions. "You must go on camera. You must establish yourself in the historical record at this moment." She should be sure to use the phrase "successful strategy," he wrote. "You are vindicated."

READ PART 2 *of our examination of the American intervention in Libya and Hillary Clinton's role in it.*

Jo Becker reported from Cairo; Istanbul and Ankara, Turkey; Tunis; Paris; New York; and Washington, and Scott Shane from New York and Washington. Kitty Bennett contributed research.

Follow Jo Becker and Scott Shane on Twitter.

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