TRANSCRIPT
The Truth of the Matter

“Libya Conflict”

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Bob Schieffer: I’m Bob Schieffer.

Andrew Schwartz: And I’m Andrew Schwartz of the Center for Strategic and International Studies and this is The Truth of the Matter.

Bob Schieffer: This is the podcast where we break down the policy issues of the day since the politicians are having their say, we will excuse them with respect and bring in the experts. Many of them from CSIS people who have been working these issues for years.

Andrew Schwartz: No spin, no bombast, no finger pointing, just informed discussion.

Bob Schieffer: To get to the truth of the matter on what is happening in Libya today, we're going to talk with CSIS's Bulent Aliriza. Mr. Aliriza is the founding director of the Turkey project at CSIS. Previously, he served as a Turkish Cypriot diplomat in New York and in Washington.

Bob Schieffer: Mr. Aliriza, thank you for helping us getting to the truth of the matter on this particular issue. And I’ll give you full credit for bringing this to our attention. You stopped me in the hall the other day and said, "We really ought to start taking a look at what’s going on in Libya." And that's kind of the mission of this podcast. And that is to alert people to news that may be brewing under the surface and is getting no attention, mainly because there's other news that's just crowding it off the front pages and the TV news. And if ever there were a case when this is happening during this impeachment period, this is certainly it. So tell us why we should be thinking about what's going on in Libya. Because if I were to run a survey, I would guess, there are not many people in America right now who are thinking about it.

Bulent Aliriza: Well, I first visited Libya in the first decade of Gaddafi's rule, which lasted for over four decades. And I kept my interest in Libya, but recently it peaked because all the escalation of fighting over there, which not too many people, as you say have picked up on. And secondly, the embattled government in Libya, which is officially recognized by the United Nations, somehow secured the backing of Turkey, which became its main backer and essentially the guarantor of its very survival. So I mean that certainly peaked my interest. I wrote a CSIS commentary on it, accordingly. And frankly I think that more people should be interested because I mean this is a strategically located country. This is a country in which a longtime dictator, Gaddafi, was deposed by a NATO operation led by the United States back in 2011. Now, one can say that there was stability on the Gaddafi during the time that he was in charge.

Bulent Aliriza: It was sort of the piece of the grave, whoever opposed them was either killed or forced into exile or imprisoned. But there has not been stability since he's been overthrown. And the Arab Spring of which the change of regime in Libya was a part, has really turned into an Arab winter from one end of the Middle East to the other, including in Syria where there's still this ongoing
civil war. And the outcome of the current conflict in Libya, I think as I said, deserves more attention for a number of reasons.

Bulent Aliriza: I mean one is whoever controls that, will be a player in the Mediterranean basin and will be able to either lead the country through stability, avoiding the kind of problems that the country has created for its neighbors in the Arab world, as well as for its neighbors to the North. Beyond the Mediterranean, like uncontrolled, illegal migration, terrorism, and it is a factor in the oil picture. The Libyan sweet crude oil is important. Because of its proximity, it is relatively cheap compared to other sources of oil that come from elsewhere. And we'll see how much attention it will get as the situation worsens.

Bob Schieffer: Is there an American presence there is still? I mean we all remember Benghazi and the awful things that happened there when Americans died. It became an issue in the 2016 campaign and it is fact, is still an issue for the Trump folk. Who's there?

Bulent Aliriza: Not too many Americans. The killing of the ambassador, Ambassador Stevens occurred in 2012, he had actually gone out to Libya even before the civil war was over and had established a presence in the country and became the first ambassador. He was directed by the administration, the Obama administration, to go to Benghazi to find out what was going on and he was killed by a mob. And that led to the disenchantment of the Obama administration, which frankly was not that interested in staying in Libya beyond the overthrow of Gaddafì. It really was the origin of the phrase, "leading from behind" that the Obama team kept on using, to explain their foreign policy. Now Obama subsequently confirmed or admitted that not remaining engaged in Libya was one of his biggest regrets. The US maintained a presence for a little while longer. The US Embassy in Libya was relocated outside the country, of all places Malta, believe it or not.

Bulent Aliriza: There was some degree of interest in the counter terrorism operations. So there were special forces that were sent. Drones were used both in Sirte and in Derna to root out and eliminate ISIS elements, but even that has now been taken off the board. There are some oil companies that still maintain an interest there. Although they're engaging in minimal activities because of the civil war. Now you remember all the way back, some of the biggest companies like Exxon and Nelson Bunker Bunt from Texas were involved, Occidental was very much involved in Libya before Gaddafì and after Gaddafì, but there isn't much of an American presence there now.

Bob Schieffer: Andrew?

Andrew Schwartz: Thanks Bob. Bulent can you explain to us, who are the warring factions in Libya right now? Who are the opposing factions? What do they want and who does the US support?

Bulent Aliriza: What a great question, but unfortunately it doesn't have a simple answer. For the sake of argument, and for simplicity's sake, we could say there are two sides.
One is the Government of National Accord based in Tripoli to the West of Libya, under a man named Sarraj. And that’s the officially recognized government of Libya. But that recognition is almost meaningless because the writ of the government in Tripoli doesn’t go far outside Tripoli. Which is in fact, besieged by the forces of the other side, which is led by this very interesting character by the name of Haftar, who was a general in Gaddafi’s army, was captured in Chad, the CIA then a spirited him of the country, brought him to Northern Virginia where he stayed, became a citizen and after Gaddafi was overthrown, he flew back-

Andrew Schwartz: And he lived in Northern Virginia for like 20 years or something, right?

Bulent Aliriza: Yep. Yeah. He contributed to political campaigns. He voted in elections and to this day retains an American passport that he refuses to give up.

Andrew Schwartz: People used to talk about him as ... he was an asset. He was a CIA asset.

Bulent Aliriza: Never denied. In fact, he got involved in an effort, a secret effort by the CIA to overthrow Gaddafi, which failed. He continued to live in northern Virginia, right up to Gaddafi’s overthrow, and then he flew to Libya, ostensibly as he says, without the blessing or support of the CIA and then mounted this operation and put together these forces, which he calls the Libyan National Army, LNA, which is the other side, Andrew, of the war. And he’s actually captured most of the country.

Andrew Schwartz: And so he’s based in Benghazi and he’s working his way towards Tripoli as we talk.

Bulent Aliriza: Well, Libya is a very improbable country. I mean we don’t have time to go into its history, but it’s really made up of three different parts. Which, as I said, very different to each other. I mean there’s Tripolitania, Tripoli, to the west is the capitol of the UN recognized government. There’s Cyrenaica to the east next door to Egypt with Benghazi as its main city. And then there is Fazzan, the third province, which really has much more in common with a sub Saharan countries like Niger and Chad than with the rest of Libya. And essentially what we have is a war between Cyrenaica, where Haftar is based and Tripolitania because all the way back to the Romans and Venetians, these two provinces have never really got on.

Bulent Aliriza: The Italians invaded the country in 1911, put them together. That’s where the name Libya comes from. The Italians called it the fourth shore. It was their real crown jewel of their empire under Mussolini. And then the allied forces took over, in 1943. Ran it and then gave on the UN auspices, independence to Libya in 1951. But honestly, you cannot really understand the fighting between these two forces without reference to its past. Where really this is one of the most improbable states, certainly in the region, if not in the world.

Andrew Schwartz: So who does the United States back, if anyone in this clash?
Bulent Aliriza: Well, that’s where the complication ... one of the complications I refer to, comes from. Back in April, President Trump called Khalifa Haftar at the urging of President Sisi of Egypt, whom President Trump has called my favorite dictator, gave full support to him in his effort to root out the Islamist terrorists. In essence, backing his campaign. Now the state department, in fact, the US supports the UN backed government in Tripoli. But given the fact that Haftar has actually received this call from the president, he really has not taken onboard any of the advice that’s been given to him by various officials to cease and desist from the fighting. And he believes that if and when he does capture Tripoli, he will do so with the discrete support of the president of the United States.

Bob Schieffer: Let me go back and make sure I heard you right. The United States backs one group and the president of the United States has called the leader of another group and said he supports him.

Bulent Aliriza: Well, he put in a phone call to, him in April 2019. When Haftar began the push that has brought him to the outskirts of Tripoli. And saying, as Haftar publicized, "I support you in your effort to root out the terrorists from your country." The US government still continues to recognize the UN backed government in Tripoli, which has a seat at the United Nations and which has an embassy in Washington DC.

Bob Schieffer: What did they say about the President’s call?

Bulent Aliriza: Well, they were very annoyed and needless to say.

Andrew Schwartz: I would think so. Yeah.

Bulent Aliriza: But they have actually muted their criticism because they continue to maintain a dialogue with the United States. They send ministers over to Washington who fail to get the kind of high level meeting that Haftar had, at least at the telephone level. So you know, we can say the policy ... the US policy towards Libya, like with many other countries is confused and confusing.

Bob Schieffer: Oh, is there any chance that Haftar or whatever his name is, might be asked to investigate the Bidens?

Bulent Aliriza: So far as I know there was no Biden connection with Libya.

Andrew Schwartz: Yeah, Hunter hasn’t been there.

Bob Schieffer: But that’s astonishing though, to hear.

Bulent Aliriza: It is.

Bob Schieffer: I don’t know why should I be surprised by anything these days.
Bulent Aliriza: It is. The US is, beyond issuing declarations once in a while that the US would like to see a lasting ceasefire and a political settlement involving the parties and for Libya to return the stability, which is proved elusive ever since Gaddafi was overthrown. There’s not much US involvement. Like I said, there are no US diplomats, no US troops, even of the covert kind, no covert operations of the kind that we saw against the terrorists. And the oil workers that were there are not there. So the US is not as committed as certainly in 2011, to the future of Libya. And that is worrisome, much more to the government in Tripoli, which wants backing from the United States because after all, it’s the recognized government. Then to Haftar who thinks that the US will not mind if he takes over Tripoli.

Andrew Schwartz: Does that worry you that the United States is not engaged?

Bulent Aliriza: Yes, because my focus was really drawn back to Libya because of the agreement that President Erdogan of Turkey signed in November with the government in Libya and then began to send troops, as well as Syrian opposition forces through to that country. Now he’s had a couple of conversations with President Trump to try and coordinate his position on this issue. He’s backing the official government in Tripoli, but he’s failing to get it. He’s coordinating much more with Russia.

Andrew Schwartz: So in the absence of us, Turkey and Russia have a hand in Libya?

Bulent Aliriza: They do, but Andrew, to add one more complication, they’re on opposite sides of this conflict. The Russians are backing Haftar through the Libyan [inaudible 00:00:13:21], the little green men that Putin used so effectively in Ukraine, where he was officially denying that Russian forces were involved, except there were these elements controlled by the Kremlin who were there. In this case, the so-called Wagner Group, which is run by Putin’s chef, Prigozhin, who have been involved in fighting alongside Haftar’s forces. These are battle-hardened forces and they’ve really turned the tide for Haftar. So Russia seems to be betting on a Haftar victory. And Erdogan is trying to defend Sarraj and the government in Tripoli. And nonetheless, the two sides are trying to go operate on Libya just as on Syria where they’re again on opposite sides and the US is AWOL.

Bob Schieffer: Are there any other foreign powers that are meddling around there?

Bulent Aliriza: Absolutely. Haftar would not have been as successful as he has been without the backing of Egypt. Given the fact that Benghazi’s right next door to Egypt, that is obviously a key factor in the equation. President Sisi of Egypt who overthrew the Muslim Brotherhood government in Cairo, sees the government in Tripoli as a Muslim Brotherhood led government and would like to see Haftar overthrow it. The financial backing for Haftar comes from the United Arab Emirates. There are stories that Saudi Arabia is also involved, but it’s mostly Abu Dhabi and Dubai that are providing the funds. And also jets from the UAE have actually carried out bombing runs against Tripoli and gone back. And also I mentioned, Russia with the Wagner Group
and some French elements. Again, very discreetly who've been helping the Haftar forces. On the other side, Sarraj, the military level can only count on Turkey for its very survival as I said. But beyond that, although other countries recognize the government in Tripoli, very few are willing to send troops. They’re actually supported against Haftar.

Bob Schieffer: Now Chancellor Merkel of Germany called a summit of various people. And when was that? Was that [crosstalk 00:15:12] in January or-

Bulent Aliriza: January 19th, it was actually a very big gathering. It was officially called the Berlin Conference and it was extensively to bring the two warring parties together along with Russia and Turkey, which had met in Moscow with the two warring parties just one week before, along with the African Union, the European Union on the UN auspices. The conference itself was on the UN auspices-

Bob Schieffer: And this was January of last year? 

Bulent Aliriza: No, no. This year.

Bob Schieffer: This year.

Bob Schieffer: Well, this is obviously just an enormous mess here that nobody seems to be prevailing at this point. But where do you see this going?

Bulent Aliriza: This year. But both this conference, which came up with this very long communique of 57 points, I believe, and the Moscow meeting before, failed in essence, because the fighting continued. And in fact Haftar and Sarraj, who were at both meetings, both the Moscow meeting and then the Berlin Conference, even refused to be in the same room together. And Haftar left without committing himself to a ceasefire and then promptly cut off the oil exports by the government in Tripoli and mounted a missile attack in the very center of Tripoli. So clearly he’s intent on victory and not intent honoring any kind of ceasefire.

Bob Schieffer: Well, this is obviously just an enormous mess here that nobody seems to be prevailing at this point. But where do you see this going?

Bulent Aliriza: Well, the military equation is such that the government in Tripoli cannot go beyond survival to actually conquering the whole country and bring it under its control. This is not the case in Syria, where the Assad government, with Russian help and Uranian help, seems to be gaining control of most of the country. That is clearly beyond the capabilities of Sarraj and the government in Tripoli. But that’s not the case with Haftar. There is a possibility that Haftar could actually win this and take over Tripoli.

Bulent Aliriza: But you know, it might be a pyrrhic victory because the country was not in a good state before, after Gaddafi. After the prolonged civil war, it will be even worse. Now, it has oil, which they could pump up to the kind of levels that we had before. They went up to three million barrels a day under Gaddafi at one stage. That could provide revenue to help fix the country. I mean, clearly both the Russians and the Turks and the French, and I assume the Italians, as
the nearest and former colonial power, are interested in being part of the reconstruction, if and when Libya gets to that point. But at this moment, it's difficult to see if and when that reconstruction will come.

Andrew Schwartz: Other than the Libyans themselves, the only reason anybody's really interested is because of the oil, correct?

Bulent Aliriza: Oil and gas. There's a gas pipe then that takes some gas to Italy. But it's really mostly the oil that has attracted people to Libya. I mean, one little anecdote from the past, I think Andrew, will illustrate the point you just made. In 1951, it was literally the poorest country in the world and its main source of revenue was the scrap metal leftover from the second world war when Rommel's armies were fighting Monty's Desert Rats in the Libyan desert.

Andrew Schwartz: That's incredible. Well, why are we not there? Is it because this administration has taken the posture that we're going to withdraw from the Middle East? We're going to withdraw our forces everywhere we can. I mean, clearly, our air power can be there within 10 minutes. We have Souda Bay in Crete, which is just across the Libyan Sea. We can mobilize and be there very quickly, literally within minutes.

Bulent Aliriza: Aviano Air Base in Italy-

Andrew Schwartz: Yeah.

Bulent Aliriza: Is one of the biggest bases. Now there are drone bases in Northern Niger, which provides CT capabilities, but much as I'd like to say, it was the fault of this administration that there is a lack of interest on the part of the US in this important issue, but as I said, the Obama administration having helped overthrow Gaddafi as part of an international [crosstalk 00:18:57]-

Andrew Schwartz: Lost interest, yeah.

Bulent Aliriza: Said, "We're not interested in doing the kind of nation state building that the previous administration got involved in." And basically disengaged to the point that there was a mess. And the mess, like I said, really can be traced back to... not just to the civil war, not just to the overthrow of Gaddafi, but also at the beginning of the civil war in 2015, which is when Obama was in office.

Andrew Schwartz: So this is clearly across two administrations that there's a neglect of US interest in this country?

Bulent Aliriza: Not only is there no implementation of US interest and a coherent policy, but there hasn't even been a determination of what those national interests are. Which is, frankly outrageous. And ultimately it's going to be very dangerous because the US cannot disengage itself from this important country right in the middle of the Mediterranean, so close to Europe, with all sorts of terrorism, refugee and migration implications, without ultimately having to
come in, one form or another, to help clean up the mess. Which is what happened in 2011. Now before that, Andrew, there was a long period when Gaddafi was in charge where it was difficult to engage Libya. You know, Hillary Clinton had actually received one of his sons. You may remember, I think it was 2011, at the state department, which caused some consternation, but all the way from 1969 when he took over and moved against US interests, to when he was overthrown, there was very little engagement with Libya. There was that effort to actually get it to give up the nuclear capabilities that Steven [Capis 00:20:25] of the CIA had brokered, that Bolton referred to when he was trying to-

Andrew Schwartz: Right and that that was under George W. Bush.

Bulent Aliriza: Right.

Andrew Schwartz: Correct? And George W. Bush and Tony Blair actually brokered that deal.

Bulent Aliriza: Right. And Tony Blair-

Andrew Schwartz: Right. And Gaddafi went along with it.

Bulent Aliriza: And Tony Blair then visited Gaddafi in his tent. And then there was an engagement between the UK and Libya, and BP and British Gas were going to come in ... but it really didn’t come to too much and then Gaddafi was overthrown. But then there was no policy of re-engagement with a post Gaddafi Libya. Which is what should have been done, which is why Obama says he regrets it. And honestly, 10 years on, almost 10 years on, we still don’t have even the beginnings of the kind of review that will lead to a coherent policy.

Bob Schieffer: What is our interest in being there? If you were talking to a group of college students and they said to you, "Is this important to the United States? And if so, why?"

Bulent Aliriza: You remember that Reagan had actually bombed Libya because he had identified Gaddafi, and Gaddafi’s various efforts throughout the Middle East as being disruptive and contrary to US interests. Now, having a benevolent leader who is friendly to the US would be good, but the kind of neglect that allowed Gaddafi to stay in power for four decades and to engage in the kind of mischief that he was engaging in, which Reagan tackled but not in a decisive manner, was obviously contrary to US interests. Now either Libya will emerge as a country that will be a responsible member of the international community and produce oil, restrict illegal migration to Europe, cooperate with counterterrorism, or it will continue to be the kind of mess that will produce its version of ISIS.

Bulent Aliriza: [inaudible 00:22:20] remember when the US engaged in operations in Sirte and Derna, a few years ago in conjunction with the government in Tripoli, by the way, it did so against the ISIS elements. These weren’t people who had actually come over from Syria, these were locals who had established their own franchise against American interests, western interests. So neglect
Libya at your peril, one way or another, every one of these failed state countries, eventually it comes back to haunt the countries that ignore it and challenge your interests.

Bob Schieffer: Has Turkey so far shown much interest in this?

Bulent Aliriza: Oh absolutely. I mean Turkey has committed itself to the survival of the government. Now I think the question is still-

Bob Schieffer: We’re on the same side with Turkey on that?

Bulent Aliriza: Technically yes, in the sense that the US recognizes the government, that Turkey has committed itself to support. But two conversations between the Turkish president the and the US president have failed to work out a practical arrangement involving coordination in an effective way. And the fact is the Trump, by the sound of it, and by judging by the conversation he had with Haftar, would not mind Haftar overthrowing the government in Tripoli.

Bob Schieffer: We want to thank you for coming here today, for suggesting that we look at this whole issue. We really appreciate that and we always appreciate it when someone can come here and bring us the truth of the matter. I’m Bob Schieffer.

Andrew Schwartz: And I’m Andrew Schwartz.

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