

After Gadhafi, the West eyes the Libyan prize

Oil rich and deeply divided, the country is vulnerable to outside powers

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Contents

- [War for control, not oil](#)
- [A divided society](#)

The death of Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi will likely — though it's too early to know anything for sure — mean the end of the current stage of Libya's civil war. Whether it will set the stage for peace, national reconciliation, democracy, normalization with the region or other goals is far less clear. And what post-Gadhafi Libya's relationship with the United States and other NATO countries will look like remains uncertain.

A Libyan commentator on Al Jazeera this morning, celebrating the death of Gadhafi, described it as the “third fall” of dictators in the Arab Spring. But while the overthrow of Gadhafi's 42-year-old regime found its origins in the same Tunisian- and Egyptian-inspired nonviolent mobilizations as those still underway in Bahrain, Syria, Yemen and elsewhere, Libya's trajectory was profoundly different.

It began the same way, with a home-grown call for protests against a dictatorship responsible for terrible repression, the massacre of prisoners and more. But when Libyan protesters took up arms, and especially when leaders invited NATO and the U.S. to become the “air force of the Transitional National Council,” the links between Libya's rebellion and those of the rest of the Arab Spring began to fray.

Early on, the TNC's call for a “no-fly zone” had little popular support. Many described it warily as undermining the independence of Libya's revolution. But support appeared to grow with talk of an “inevitable” and “imminent” massacre in Benghazi, where the armed rebels were concentrated. Even among rebels, support for the U.S./NATO intervention was never unanimous, perhaps because of uncertainty about Gadhafi's intentions and, crucially, his capacity.

A massacre was certainly possible. But the people of Benghazi had already shown their ability to protect their city. When the first French-piloted NATO bombers attacked the four Libyan tanks outside of Benghazi, they were targeted in the desert outside the city precisely because they had already been driven out of the city by anti-Gadhafi fighters. The rebel military capacity at that moment was unknown, but the visible contradiction between that initial victory and the claim that only Western airstrikes could save the people of Benghazi may have been part of why the unease over the U.S./NATO role remained for so long.

The question now is whether and how the new post-Gadhafi Libya, having overthrown its longtime leader in essentially a civil war in which the U.S. and NATO backed one side, rather than through the kind of independent, and largely nonviolent revolutionary processes underway in the other countries of the Arab Spring, can claim pride of place within that regional awakening.

War for control, not oil

The U.S. was not the original instigator of the NATO intervention. That role lay in Europe, starting with France, whose president was still smarting from political attacks for his too-little-too-late response to the Tunisian uprising. Sarkozy's domestic popularity concerns were joined in the United Kingdom by the Conservative Party government, which was eager to claim a position in what they anticipated would be the winning side of the Libyan struggle. This set the stage for privileged European positions vis-à-vis influence with the new post-Gadhafi government and, of course, privileged access to Libyan oil.

So France and Britain took the lead in the U.N. Security Council, drafting an initial resolution calling for a "no-fly zone," ostensibly to "protect civilians" in Libya. The United States military was not thrilled at the prospect. Top U.S. officials, including Chief of Staff Michael Mullen, described how a "no-fly zone" by itself wouldn't work — that it would require bombing Libya first, to "take out" anti-aircraft weapons and protect the Western pilots. The White House showed little enthusiasm.

Then a State Department-based group led by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, U.N. Ambassador Susan Rice, and White House advisor Samantha Power, officials who had histories of often urging military action in response to human rights violations, won out. So instead of simply voting "no" on the resolution that the Pentagon agreed wouldn't work, the U.S. took the British-French draft and "improved" it by calling for "all necessary means" to protect civilians — a green light for the use of all weapons, against any targets, for as long as the Pentagon and NATO chose to stay in Libya. That marked the end of the Libyan Spring and the opening of a very difficult — and for civilians, deadly — civil war.

The U.S./NATO intervention in Libya was not a "war for oil." Access to oil wasn't even the main issue during the 1970s or 1980s, years of U.S. opposition to Libya's role in supporting national liberation movements during the Cold War, or through the 1990s when the U.S. isolated Libya for its involvement with terrorism. Libya's sweet light crude was always widely available on the world's oil market.

But after 2001, when the Bush administration was eager to round up new recruits for its "global war on terror," emissaries were sent to make nice to the long-excoriated Libyan leader. Within a couple of years, Gadhafi had been brought in from the cold. He had agreed to dismantle Libya's nascent nuclear program, he had offered compensation to families of the Lockerbie bombing, he offered normal diplomatic relations with his once-and-future enemies in the U.S. and Europe. By 2003 or so European and U.S. oil companies were standing in line to sign contracts. By 2007 and beyond, photos of Gadhafi arm-in-arm with Sarkozy, Tony Blair, Silvio Berlusconi — as well as both Bush and Obama and, famously, Condoleezza Rice — were staples of newspaper front pages and websites around the world.

For the United States in 2011, the strategic interest in turning on Gadhafi after years of chummy good relations was primarily rooted in fear of loss of control. Gadhafi was our guy now, yes — but Washington had to ask, What if? What if the mercurial Libyan leader, under pressure from anti-dictatorship democratization processes next door, reversed course and turned to Washington's enemies for strategic ties? China continues its expansion of investment and influence in Africa: What if? Gadhafi's opponents include Islamists of various stripes, including some Salafis, followers of the Saudi Arabia-based branch of extremist Islam favored by some militants: What if? Libya's own people might decide that an alliance with the West was not in their best interests: What if?

"What if?" quickly became "yes let's." And so it began. The new U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) had its first chance to show its stuff (although it appears AFRICOM's chief was replaced by the

commanders of U.S. airpower at NATO bases in Italy). The Libyan opposition leaders who first said, “We can do it ourselves,” started saying, “just a no-fly zone, but no foreign intervention” — even though top U.S. generals had already said you couldn’t have one without the other. And with UN Security Council Resolution 1973 including the expansive language of “any means necessary” regarding military attacks, the resolution’s other calls for negotiations and especially for an immediate cease-fire, were disregarded by Western powers. Of course, Gadhafi scorned a cease-fire too, but the U.N. resolution should have led to a much greater emphasis on negotiations to end the violence.

The question of whether, when and to what degree a new Libya can break free of its current dependence on Western militaries and other strategic backers remains unanswered.

A divided society

As was the case in Egypt and Tunisia, it appeared that most Libyans supported the calls for more democracy, more rights, even for an end to the regime. But not all. A significant number of Libyans clearly supported the regime, a situation closer to the ongoing crisis still playing out in Syria.

It would have been surprising if this had not been the case. In his 42-year reign, Gadhafi had concentrated power in his own hands, and had allowed little freedom of speech, freedom of assembly or political opposition. He had used Libya’s oil revenue to arm and train a set of geographically and politically separate militias, many of them commanded by his sons and other relatives but answerable only to him, while the official national army remained relatively weak.

But Libya’s oil wealth is massive enough, and its population small enough, that Gadhafi’s “Green Book”-style quasi-socialism, idiosyncratic as it was, still mandated national systems of healthcare, education and social security that led to top United Nations rankings in human development indicators. And because of the singular concentration of power in one person’s hands, Gadhafi was popularly credited not only with repression but also with providing jobs, access to hospitals, university scholarships and the like.

Certainly those economic and social rights were not equally available. Libya’s modern history as a unified nation was based on an often uneasy joining of Western and Eastern parts that had long histories, under colonial rule and before, as separate provinces. Gadhafi had always found stronger support in Libya’s west, including Tripoli, than in the eastern half of the country, where Benghazi is the largest city. His own hometown of Sirte, where he was killed Thursday, lies on the coast almost exactly half way between east and west. Sirte especially, and the western half of Libya more generally, had received relatively privileged access to the benefits of Libya’s petro-wealth.

The challenge facing post-Gadhafi Libya is daunting. The power, accountability and especially the legitimacy of the interim governing structure remains contested. The civil war created new divisions and consolidated others between parts of the Libyan population. Rifts between east and west have amplified, with the Benghazi-based TNC widely distrusted in other areas of the country. They have already had difficulty setting up shop in Tripoli, where anger remains at the disproportional Benghazi/Eastern Libya representation. The anti-Gadhafi militias largely remain independent of the TNC, with fighters from the western town of Misrata and the Nafusa Mountains, making public their lack of accountability to the TNC.

Divisions have been exacerbated between Arab and Tuareg Libyans, as well as between those with different languages, local tribal or clan or regional identities. The divide between lighter-skinned Arab Libyans and black African Libyans has been further worsened by the widespread attacks on

dark-skinned Libyans as well as on sub-Saharan African workers by anti-Gadhafi fighters accusing them of serving as mercenaries for Gadhafi. While African mercenaries were indeed part of some pro-Gadhafi militias, the vast majority of Africans in Libya are there as economic migrants, working in the lowest-paid and hardest jobs across the country. The racism inherent in those attacks is now a bleeding wound across Libyan society.

How will the TNC - or whatever governing structure follows it - include representatives of Sirte, which many in and around the TNC have condemned as being all Gadhafi loyalists? Certainly Sirte's population included many supporters of the ousted and now dead leader, but many had fled the city before the fighting escalated in recent weeks. They are now returning to find their city in ruins, with blocks of houses looted and destroyed .

The TNC has committed itself to holding elections within eight months of the "final liberation" of the country — expected to be announced sometime today or tomorrow. The U.S.-backed appointed prime minister has promised to step down immediately after that announcement. Whether those promises are kept, whether anything remotely resembling a free and fair election can be arranged in eight months in a country with no recent legacy of political parties or civil society institutions, remain huge challenges.

There was a fascinating Freudian slip on Thursday afternoon when Secretary of State Clinton, referring to Libya now being awash with weapons, described a U.S. "concern as to how we disarm" the country, only then catching herself and correcting her statement to "or how the Libyans disarm everybody who has weapons."

Whether U.S. and European offers of "help" will serve as cover for ensuring the election of a pro-U.S. government, maintaining Libyan dependence on the West, and thus keeping a U.S. foothold in the very center of the otherwise independent Arab Spring, are questions hovering just behind today's celebrations on the Libyan street.

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P.S.

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