

Goodbye Free Libya?

A Report from Benghazi

To the average American, Libya looks another Iraq: another American adventure against a totalitarian Muslim state with lots of oil and sand. The topography is similar too. The land is flat and parched, and the architecture dun and unloved architecture. Even the terminology sounds the same, as no-fly zones mission-creep rapidly into regime-change.

US war-mongering under Obama has seemed far smarter. Though of all the belligerent parties, its action has been the most

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punishing (it fired 100 Tomahawk missiles) and its demands the most uncompromising (Susan Rice, America's representative at the UN, added the clause in UN Security Council Resolution 1973 sanctioning "all necessary measures."), the US has hidden its bombing behind a bushel, and let others claim the credit. France launched the first bombs, and within days of the start of the campaign, the US quickly ceded responsibility for the action to NATO, declaring that Libya was primarily an Arab and European responsibility, since Europe consumed most of Libya's oil. Above all, rather than force a new order from the outside, as the Bush administration did in Iraq, Libyans were

seen acting within, and America as merely responding to their clamor for help. American demands for regime change in Libya have been no less emphatic than their previous ones in Iraq. But while Bush brashly led from the front, Obama leads from the back.

Certainly, the coalition the coalition has provided Libya's rebel movement significant support. It has beaten back Colonel Gaddafi's assaults on rebel towns and sent material support. Britain has provided the rebel's representative body, the National Council, with a secure communications network, and Qatar an Ericsson satellite so the Libyans in the rebel-held East will at last be able to receive international calls and reconnect to the internet. Qatar has also equipped the rebels with their own satellite television station based – of course – in Doha, and an FM radio outlet for Al-Jazeera in Benghazi, so that there's no sufficiently saturated by its rolling news on television, can tune in for more. Qatar, UAE and Italy have all offered to sell Libyan oil from the rebel-held fields to keep the East solvent, and Britain and the US are both considering the release to the rebels of some of Libyan funds they froze. And thanks to Qatar's supply of petrol, you can still fill a tank for US\$4; cars park with their engines running.

Dealing with Institutional Chaos

The largesse has partially helped the rebels fill the vacuum left by the departure of Colonel Gaddafi's managed chaos. Politically, the National Council acts as a sort of loose legislature, and the Crisis Management Committee as its executive body. A few courts have begun functioning, primarily for divorce



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hearings, with the same judges applying the same laws. The police, too, are venturing back to the streets, and though many are identified with the colonel's crimes their strictures are largely

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obeyed. The night-time percussion of machine guns has subsided, after the National Council erected billboards banning celebratory fire. Conforming with public notices on the roads, colleagues restrict friends who open fire. Banks have opened their doors albeit with long queues, since bureaucracy and limits on withdrawals are intended to prevent a run on the bank). And despite the no-flight zone, Benghazi's airport is now receiving international flights – almost a rarity under Gaddafi, whose animus against the East meant that international flights were routed through Tripoli ten hours away.

We Want Guns, Not Food

Largely because the past was so bad, the popular consent for and participation in the new order can seem overwhelming. At twilight, scores of volunteers for the front clamber aboard pickups assembled outside the 7 April barracks, named with Gaddafi's macabre sense of humor after the day in 1977 when he publicly strung treacherous students from gallows erected in Tripoli's and Benghazi's Universities. The less intrepid make do with carting cauldrons of food to the front. Naji Quwaida has offered his tugboat, the Shahhat, to ferry ammunition and penicillin the 240 nautical miles across the Gulf of Sitra between Benghazi and Misrata, the last rebel-held city in Western Libya. Facing a deficit of launchers for a profusion of Grads looted from the colonel's abandoned arsenals, car-mechanics have begun manufacturing their own.

But their internal and external support notwithstanding, the challenge facing the rebels is immense. The solitary nails and faded patches on the walls of empty government offices testify to the National Council's limited success in establishing a new authority. More worryingly, a gap is emerging between youth who led the uprising and the elite who appointed themselves leaders and claim to speak in their name. For the most part, the ranks of the latter appear drawn from the scions of old Ottoman grandees and the crony capitalists who returned from exile last decade tempted by promises of economic liberalization made by Saif al-Islam, Gaddafi's fourth-eldest son.

With international recognition and sanction to sell oil giving the rebel authority weight, positions on the National Council have become something worth fighting for. While Libya's oil fields burn, appointees inside the country squabble over who amongst them should be chief fireman. Easterners have a sense of their extra entitlement given their victimization under Gaddafi, and their heroic escape from it. Suspicion of Tripolitarians and more recent returnees abounds, as if they were upstarts and freeloaders seeking a share of the cake. There's a knee-jerk reaction against anything that smacks of government by family-business. Outside the courthouse, the which the National Council has made its principal seat, disgruntled students circulate a family tree mapping the multiple posts to which the Bugaighis and Gheriani families have appointed themselves. "They exercise power and control without transparency," says a disappointed Tripolitanian recently arrived from decades of exile in Europe. "Each brings his relations because they are the only ones they trust. It's beginning to feel like Gaddafi all over again."

They are backtracking, too, on their democratic promises. Initially, the National Council pledged that anyone working for its institutions would be barred from running for election. Spokesmen subsequently rowed back to say the ban applied only to the National Council's 30 members, not the Crisis

Management Committee, including its current head Mahmoud Jibreel, a former Saif al-Islam acolyte. Election date has been pushed back, pending Tripoli's capture. "If there is no final liberation, then the management committee will remain in charge," says Essam Gheriani, who sits on one of the new committees.

Meanwhile the obstacles are mounting. Some of Benghazi's 3,000 revolutionary committee members, who hitherto served as the Colonel's local facade, create havoc. A thousand are reportedly behind bars in the 7 April barracks, but others rampage through public institutions thwarting the national council's efforts to fill the vacuum. In his a former revolutionary committee building turned police operations room, Mohammed al-Mdeghari mans a hotline, answering frantic calls detailing attacks. They quickly exhaust his patience. "It's not a real emergency," he says, replacing the receiver on a housewife claiming arsonists were inside a school. "And besides we have no forces available." After a caller reported a case full of grenades had been abandoned in a public square, he had to beg the assistance of the Special Guard.

The health service is similarly malfunctioning, under the weight of years of neglect, the flight of nurses, who were mostly foreign, and mounting casualties from the front. It will take years to recover. In Gaddafi's Libya, doctors won their sinecures more for displays of loyalty than professionalism. Parents recount horror stories of children hospitalized with asthma attacks, only to inflate like balloons after injections.

Compounding the internal disarray is the bedraggled state of eastern defenses. The few thousand professional soldiers who did not flee with Colonel Gaddafi are as over-stretched as the police. No sooner had the National Council established a new National Oil Corporation empowered to sell oil from rebel-held fields, then its new head Wahid Bugaighis, shut down production following raids by the colonel's men. "We have shut down operations until military forces are deployed to protect the fields," he

said. Army liaison officers estimated 50 men each were required to defend the East's 14 major fields, most of which lie deep in the desert, but had no manpower spare. "We're afraid to go back to the oil fields without protection," says Mustafa Mohammed, an engineer who fled the raid on Misleh. "We don't have an army, and we

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have no assistance from NATO." Anti-aircraft batteries dotted across the East in preparation for the colonel's advance are also unmanned.

Microbuses haul volunteers to Benina's airbase for onward passage to the front bereft of boots and uniforms, let alone guns. In the distance a decrepit -Soviet helicopter struggles to lift off (despite the no-fly zone) before resigning itself to the ground. (When it finally succeeded, Gaddafi's forces claim they shot it down). "The Gaddafis said we heading to a civil war which would divide Libya, leaving us a third," says Col. Ahmed Bani, a rebel military spokesman, as if describing an optimistic scenario. "But our situation is so bad. We have no weapons to equal Gaddafi's brigades."

Easterners have gone too far to go back. Libyans fleeing East recount horror stories from the mountainous rebel redoubts near the Tunisia border of what happens when the Colonel strikes back. Water tanks have been shelled and wells poisoned with petrol. In Misrata, the only western city still under rebel control, loyalist forces are reported to have blocked sewage pipes, sending waste water spewing into people's homes. Wherever Colonel Gaddafi's forces have prowled, scores have reportedly disappeared, and husbands forced to watch while wives are raped.

But with the rebels increasingly dependent on external support for their survival, the less Libyan and home-grown the uprising has

become. And with machinations on the global stage beyond their control, easterners have fallen victim to ever wilder changes in mood.

Sometimes they are exuberant. Outside the courthouse where the rebels have their headquarters, marquees have sprouted like a medieval fair, testifying to the plethora of new guilds and protest groups that have sprung up. Libyan Airline pilots have a tent of their own inscribed with a placard thanking the UN for the no-fly zone. Women march with chanting “It’s our revolution, not al-Qaeda’s” and “We’re Muslims not terrorists.” Amateur poets recite samizdat literature, often allegories stored in their heads, where they hoped the Colonel wouldn’t gain access. Jamal al-Barbour, a 29-year-old air-steward, performs his collection entitled *Mr. Wolf*, dressed in shades and a black-and-white kifaya, as if still in hiding. “Who’s sleeping with his wife without my permission?” he recites. In a corner, youths play cards daubed with the names of Gaddafi’s henchmen: Saif al-Islam, the financial liberalizer, is ace of diamonds; Saadi, who overturned his father’s ban on football and runs his own team, is the ace of clubs. Gaddafi, of course, is the joker.

But when reports of the colonel’s advance ripple back to Benghazi, the mood rapidly sours. In the search for scapegoats, foreigners take the blame. Those that oppose NATO action bear the brunt: rebels captured a Chinese tanker which arrived to collect oil, and vowed to cancel the Colonel’s copious Chinese contracts. On 4 April, gun-toting anarchic youths still off school chased a Turkish ship away, before it could off-load its cargo of medicine and ambulances. “We want guns, not food,” they chanted, denouncing Prime Minister Rəcəp Tayib Erdoğan for sending baubles while protecting Gaddafi inside NATO. Crowds pelted the first heads of state to visit the rebel government with abuse, and there were no red carpets. Desperate for all the friends it can get, the National Council looked on powerless. “In Tripoli the people speak in the name of the government; in Benghazi, the government speaks in the name of the people,”

apologized Gheriani, before rushing off to the Turkish consulate to keep the rabble from torching it. “Don’t harm the consul,” pleaded a colleague.

Who to Blame?

Weaker foreigners are also targeted. Libyans abused by the Colonel for four decades have turned sub-Saharan African workers, whom Gaddafi treated as loyal dhimmis. The human detritus from past xenophobic bouts litters Egypt’s border crossing at Salloum, now a dumping ground for those Libyans cast out. Sodden bundles shiver in the midnight rain as I drive by in a heated Mercedes microbus. Egypt’s immigration hall has turned into a dormitory, carpeted with sleeping bodies, many there for over a month. Beneath arc lights, the floor quivers with restless babes and worried mothers, representatives of states whose governments – from Niger, Mali, Chad and Bangladesh – have neither time nor means for their discards. In a corner an Egyptian government clinic offers treatments for bronchitis and infectious diseases. As they run out of foreign targets, Libyans have begun blaming each other as well. Arguments over money are more common; and the volunteer spirit seems strained. The National Council covers hotel bills of favorites, while leaving others to battle proprietors alone. As nerves fray, a squabble in the market degenerates into brawls.

Which Way Will the Battle Go?

Which way will the battle go? Three times after NATO bombardments on Gaddafi’s forces, the rebels have rushed west towards Sirte, Gaddafi’s home-town, only to be repeatedly repulsed. In the tug-of-war across the Sirte Gulf, the frontlines have sometimes shifted 200-kilometres a day. More recently, they have lines have stabilized around Ajdabiya, the gateway to the rebel-held east.

NATO for the most part has acted as heavenly arbiter, preventing either side from delivering a decisive blow. Both sides appear to be largely reliant on equipment four-decades-old. Despite

rebel claims of fresh supplies reaching Tripoli from Algeria, the most sophisticated ordinance a UN-affiliated team found in the desert was a spigot – a Russian-made wire-guided missile some two decades old. Of late, Human Rights Watch has claimed Gaddafi's forces have also used more modern cluster bombs in Misrata.

But since the US ceded responsibility for operations to NATO in late March, the intensity of the attacks has declined. "It's obvious that NATO commanders have a different interpretation of UNSC to that of the US when it

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was leading the bombing. They take protecting civilians literally, and do nothing to protect the rebels," complains a fighter. With regime-change the declared goal, a diplomat still in Benghazi acknowledges that "airstrikes not enough". Compounding NATO's indecision are the fractures that dog the alliance between the most gung-ho such as France, and the most force-resistant, Turkey and Germany.

Moreover, despite the posturing of its commanders the rebels have struggled to inject discipline, military initiative or tactical planning into their warfare. A western security expert in Benghazi describes how during World War II, small British units fighting on the same terrain used amphibious lands and small desert raids to attack German supply routes traversing the narrow strip between the salt marshes and the sea on the Sirte to Brega road. A sense of rebel command often seems absent. One commander, Khalifa Haftar, spends much of his day holed up at lodgings in Benghazi's oil company, which offers free dinners. His rival, Gen. Abdel Fatah Younis, a loyal interior minister until he defected following the uprising, spends time with the media – a hazardous business, given that bereft of his planes, Gaddafi depends on live satellite

coverage to divine rebel positions. Shepherding an Al-Jazeera crew to the front last week, Gen. Younis' car was hit by a mortar, injuring one of his guards.

Amid increasingly setbacks, rebel commanders have looked to outsiders to blame. In a press conference, Gen Younis accused NATO of hampering rather than facilitating the rebel effort. NATO, he said, had ignored the coordinates rebels had sent of Gaddafi's attacks of civilians, denied the rebels few fighter-jets permission to fly to defend the oil fields, and boarded a fishing boat taking arms and medicines to Misrata. "If NATO does not act, I'll ask the government to request the UN Security Council hand the mandate to someone else. They are allowing Gaddafi to kill our people," he said. In mid-tirade, a protestor claimed that the general had raped and pillaged his family, which spoiled the dramatic effect. He was dragged away and silenced by the ex-interior minister's guards, whose methods did little to reassure observers that the new Libya had entirely dispensed with the old.

Devoid of leadership, rebels look to the skies – either for NATO or God – for guidance, not the ground. Volunteers scarper when the first mortar lands, depriving the remnant army's efforts on the front-line of their rear defense. "When they retreat, we retreat," says a son of one of the colonel's economy ministers who joined the soldiers at the front.

In contrast to the rebels' muddled rush, Gaddafi's forces have looked far more disciplined and innovative, mustering coordinated operations by land and sea and even air. On April 7, patrol boats arriving from Ras Lanuf opened fire on rebel positions from the sea while infantry units shot from the south. (In the chaos, Gaddafi's forces had a helping hand from NATO, which mistakenly destroyed the rebel's token tank force.) Gaddafi's forces, too, have adapted quickly to coalition bombing of their ranks, ditching tanks and motorized armor for pick-up trucks used by rebels. They have also swapped uniforms for civilian clothes, making it hard to distinguish between

fleeing rebels and those chasing after them. As successfully, they have adopted the mobile desert infantry tactics of Britain's desert rats during the Second World War, on occasion slipping amongst rebel lines waving rebel flags and opening fire. His forces have further fought to deny the rebels the comparative advantage

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of marketing their oil production. The Gulf of Sitra's oil installation, and particularly its jetties, have been badly damaged in the fighting, and light infantry units have conducted raids deep into the desert targeting at least four oil installations. Dodging NATO bombers by hiding their weapons and supplies in civilian container trucks, they have reached Misleh, one of Libya's highest quality fields and one of the few that had been operating, near the Egyptian border. "Only vultures control the desert," says a Council spokesman.

Overtime as the momentum of NATO drags and the colonel digs in his position and draws up fresh supplies around Adjabiya, his ability to threaten the East will likely increase. An expeditionary force might take advantage of the coming sandstorm season to escape NATO's detection and move on rebel population centers. The use of sandstorms after all this was a favored tactic of the Zaghawa tribe which aided by Gaddafi brought Chadian president Idriss Deby to power, and may now be repaying the favor.

Easterners who had only just begun reconciling themselves to a temporary separation and shoring up defensive lines are already trembling at the prospect of the colonel's return. Such a scenario would spell disaster not only for them but for opposition groups across the region seeking to spring-clean their autocratic regimes. Generals elsewhere might adopt the Colonel's model, and the authorities ruling Libya's neighbors, Tunisia and Egypt, whose peoples have swept their leaders but not yet their regimes from power, might yet take heart to stage a military comeback. Libyan revolutionaries like Arabs generally like to compare their uprising to that of Eastern Europe following the collapse of the iron curtain. A more frightening scenario is that Libya's Arab Spring resembles more that of Prague in 1968 before the Soviets returned in their tanks.