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RESEARCH PAPER

LIBYAN MYTHS AND REALITIES

By Dr. Bruce St John

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Libyan Myths and Realities

Before the outbreak of the February 17th Revolution, serious students of Libya could be counted on one hand. Over the last three decades, the same small group of scholars authored the books, wrote the articles, addressed the conferences, and advised public and private bodies on Libya. In recent weeks, this situation has changed radically with new Libyan “experts” appearing daily in the electronic and print media. As one reporter recently commented, “Libyan experts are like Elvis Presley, we get more and more sightings every day.” The problem is that many of these newly-minted experts don’t know their subject and too often deliver incomplete, inaccurate, or biased information.

Arab Spring

When we compare Libya to other Arab states where popular uprisings have occurred this spring, notably Egypt, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen, we note similarities in the multitude of problems facing citizens every day. All of these countries have long suffered from high unemployment and even higher underemployment, poor and limited housing, mounting food prices, and large-scale graft and corruption at the highest levels of government. The citizens of these other states are also similar in that they enjoy widespread access to the internet and have attained proficiency in exploiting social networking sites, like Facebook and Twitter, to communicate with each other and the outside world.

At the same time, there are highly significant differences among the states constituting the Arab Spring. First and foremost, Libya enjoys enormous hydrocarbon reserves, the largest known oil reserves and the second largest gas reserves in Africa, and these reserves make it a relatively wealthy state when compared to Egypt, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen. Second, contemporary Libya is a state with no operative civil society because civil organizations and institutions were systematically destroyed by the Qaddafi regime. In contrast, political parties, trade unions, and other civil bodies existed in Egypt throughout most of the Mubarak era. Third, Libya is a homogenous Muslim society with 99 percent of the population Sunni Muslims compared to the religious fissures found in Egypt (Coptic Christians, Sunni Muslims, and Muslim minorities) and Syria (Alawite, Shiite, and Sunni Muslims). Moreover, radical Islamist movements and al-Qaeda are weak to nonexistent in Libya, unlike Egypt (Muslim Brotherhood), Tunisia (Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb), and Yemen (Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula).

Fourth, while the leadership of the Libyan army bears some comparison to that of Syria in that the senior officers come from the ruler’s family, tribe, or sect, the similarity ends there as Qaddafi has never trusted his army. Consequently, he kept army units small and isolated from each other with few weapons and no ammunition. To limit the development of personal loyalties within individual units, the officer corps was rotated from unit to unit on a regular basis which also hampered the

development of the professionalization and institutionalization characteristic of the Egyptian and Tunisian armed forces. Fifth, tribal identities remain strong in Libya, like Yemen but unlike Egypt, Syria, and Tunisia. Finally, the protesters in Libya, after the government forces started shooting them, almost immediately began to call for the overthrow of the Qaddafi regime as opposed to a liberalization of the existing political system as was the case in Egypt and Tunisia.

Tempting as it might be to treat the 2011 Arab uprisings as a single movement, their ambitions, demographics, and patterns vary widely, and it behooves outsiders to understand and accommodate to the variations between them. The Arab revolts share similar economic grievances and a common call for personal dignity and responsive government, but their underlying social dynamics are the product of diverse encounters with the outside world as well as decades of oppression under unique political regimes. As a result, they face vastly different challenges moving forward, and the United States, the European Union, and the other states engaged with Libya need to understand these distinctions and to distance themselves from the idea that the revolts in Egypt, Libya, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen constitute a cohesive Arab revolt.(1)

February 17th Revolution

In mid-January 2011, Libyan demonstrators clashed with police in al-Bayda, east of Benghazi, demanding a more dignified way of life, including decent housing. Charging corruption and incompetence, they attacked the offices of the foreign contractors building new housing, many of whom were Koreans, and occupied hundreds of partially completed housing units. Less than two weeks later, a newspaper belonging to a media group founded by Saif al Islam al-Qaddafi, the Libyan leader's second son, announced that the government had set aside \$24 billion for housing construction. Earlier, in response to surging food prices, the government also had lowered customs duties and taxes on imported food products and reduced the price of food staples.(2)

During the first week of February, Jamal al-Hajji, an accountant and prominent political activist, was detained by the authorities in connection with political and human rights activities. Around the same time, WikiLeaks posted diplomatic cables originating from the United States embassy in Tripoli which documented the rivalry, greed, corruption, and extremism long suspected of the Qaddafi family. Following the arrest of Fethi Tarbel, a lawyer and convener of the families of the Abu Salim Massacre Group, a body seeking to address issues outstanding from the government slaughter in 1996 of several hundred prisoners at Abu Salim prison, new riots broke out in Benghazi.(3) Fresh demonstrations also occurred in al-Bayda, where police killed two demonstrators, and in Zintan, a town in the Nafusa Mountains southwest of Tripoli. The grievances of ethnic minorities like the Amazigh (Berber) in the Nafusa and the Toubou around Kufrah in southeastern Libya differ somewhat

from those of other Libyans in that minority groups have long been persecuted by the Qaddafi regime.(4)

In an abortive effort to placate the protesters, the Qaddafi regime released 110 Islamist political prisoners, allegedly through the efforts of Saif al-Islam al-Qaddafi, and pledged to distribute 150,000 laptops to Libyan youth. At the same time, it failed in attempts to block social networking sites, like Facebook and Twitter, which the protesters were using to communicate. The government also removed Al Jazeera from state-owned cable television; however, it remained accessible on satellite networks.(5) As the thrust of the protests shifted from complaints about a lack of housing, social services, and jobs to a call for Qaddafi to step down, the demonstrators proclaimed February 17 a day of rage. The government responded with force, killing as many as 50 demonstrators in Benghazi alone. On the following day, the death toll reached 100 after government forces opened fire on mourners leaving a Benghazi funeral for protesters killed on the day of rage. Over the next few weeks, the Qaddafi regime resorted to the harshest forms of repression, including repeated attacks on innocent civilians, in an effort to maintain itself in power. In response, the UN Security Council imposed a no-fly zone over Libya and authorized “all necessary measures” to protect civilians from Qaddafi forces.(6)

Civil Society in Libya

After seizing power in 1969, the Qaddafi regime systematically destroyed civil society in Libya. There were no political parties, independent trade unions, Kiwanis clubs, or parent-teacher organizations in Libya before the February 17th Revolution. Qaddafi was fond of describing a multi-party political system as one in which people are “rode on like donkeys” and derided the very idea of civil organizations, arguing his system of direct democracy made them redundant.(7) Afraid civil organizations would become centers of opposition, Qaddafi allowed only those organizations, like the Boy Scouts and the Red Crescent, which he approved and the regime controlled. The last one to be approved was the Qaddafi International Development and Charity Foundation, headed by Saif al-Islam al-Qaddafi and created over a decade ago. Denied civil organizations, Libyans turned to the family and the tribe for individual and group support.(8)

In a post-Qaddafi Libya, it will take time to develop the civil organizations helpful in promoting a democratic process and supportive of democratic institutions. In the rebel-controlled areas, this process has already begun with as many as 80 civil organizations reportedly operating in Benghazi and surrounding areas. In addition, around 10 daily newspapers, more than 30 weekly publications, and a new television channel have opened their doors since the revolution began. Reknown for his flamboyant dress, quirky views, and peculiar habits, Qaddafi has provided a rich vein for newly-liberated journalists in rebel areas who often refer to him as Qerdafi or Gerzafi, combinations of his name with the Arabic words for monkey and rat.(9)

Role of Tribalism

Libya is a tribal society, and its tribal element sets it aside from Egypt, Syria, and Tunisia. Following the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632, a generation of Arab armies carried Islam west from the Arabian Peninsula into North Africa. Cyrenaica was occupied in 633 and Tripolitania in 635, establishing Arab control over most of modern-day Libya. In 663, Arab forces moved south into Fezzan, forcing the capitulation of Germa, capital of the Garamantes, in what is now southwestern Libya. In the eleventh century, Libya experienced a second wave of Arab incursions when Bedouin tribes from Saudi Arabia, known collectively as the Hilalians, invaded North Africa.(10)

Recognizing the power of traditional tribal leaders and fearful they would oppose his radical reform agenda, Qaddafi initially tried to eliminate their role and influence. When those efforts failed, he reversed field and turned to them for political support. As early as the late 1970s, members of Qaddafi's own tribe, the Qadhadhfa, together with affiliated tribes, especially the Maqarha and Warfalla, were appointed to powerful political, military, and security posts. In the process, tribal identities were strengthened and tribal affiliation became increasingly important, reflecting both the prohibition on alternative civil organizations and the celebration of the tribe in *The Green Book*, Qaddafi's ideological manifesto.(11)

In 1993, the Qaddafi regime created a nationwide system of People's Social Leadership Committees (PSLCs), consisting of tribal leaders, heads of families, and other influential local persons, and in 1996, he brought the PSLCs together in a national organization with local committees sending representatives to the national PSLC. Even though the Qaddafi regime had been largely tribal based for more than a decade, the creation of the PSLCs marked the first time the regime officially recognized the political role of the tribes. It also marked the first time in the history of Libya that its 140 tribes had been organized into even a quasi-national structure. After 1993, the PSLCs were granted some power in the distribution of state largess, like student grants and subsidized housing; however, Qaddafi took a carrot-and-stick approach, also tasking them with ensuring social stability and containing tribal opposition. The Qaddafi regime assigned the PSLCs explicit responsibility for all tribal members, and if any of the latter opposed the regime, it was the duty of the tribal leadership to punish them. If tribal leaders failed to do so, Qaddafi threatened collective punishment for the entire tribe. For example, after Warfalla army officers were involved in an abortive coup in 1993, the regime pressured the Warfalla tribe to execute some of its own tribal members in 1997.(12)

Over the last few months, some tribes have joined the rebel movement while others have remained loyal to the Qaddafi regime; however, many if not most tribes have tried to remain neutral, either because they are too small or poorly placed to effect the outcome or because they are waiting to see which side gains the upper

hand. Consequently, both the rebels and the government, in a constantly shifting political milieu, have continued to court the tribes as one means to buttress their domestic and international legitimacy. In mid-April, 61 tribal representatives met in Benghazi where they issued a call for a “free, democratic, and united” Libya. In so doing, they explicitly rejected recent suggestions by Qaddafi that his regime was the only thing keeping the tribes from engaging in internecine violence. They also called for Qaddafi to step down and to end his attempts to divide Libya along tribal lines. Not to be out done, Qaddafi later convened his own tribal gathering in Tripoli with regime spokesmen suggesting that some 2,000 tribal chiefs representing 851 tribes and tribal factions were in attendance. Given there are only 140 tribes in Libya, the real size and actual composition of the Tripoli gathering remains in doubt. In recent weeks, Qaddafi has continued to propagate the myth that the tribes are solidly supporting him; however, the available evidence belies his claim.(13)

In contrast to the ambivalent stand of many of the tribes, the Amazigh minority who speak Tamazight and are concentrated in the Nafusa Mountains southwest of Tripoli have wholeheartedly joined the rebels. The Amazigh community has long been subject to discrimination and repression by the Qaddafi regime which in its zeal to promote pan-Arabism tried to erase Amazigh cultural identity and language. Looking to a Libya without Qaddafi, the key demand of the Amazigh is that their language have equal status with Arabic in a new Libyan constitution.(14)

Islamists and Islam

In the mid-1990s, the Qaddafi regime defeated a strong challenge from a number of separate Islamist movements, mostly centered in eastern Libya and largely comprised of *mujahideen* who had returned to Libya after the Soviets were driven out of Afghanistan. In addition to more established groups, like Islamic Group – Libya, Islamic Struggle, and Islamic Movement – Libya, the Islamist opposition included new groups, such as Apostasy and Migration, the Warning, and the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group. In successfully combating these fundamentalist groups, the Qaddafi regime steered a middle course between hardline religious opponents and a general population largely opposed to militant Islam. In 1997, the General People’s Congress passed a series of measures providing for collective punishment for individuals or groups harboring Islamists, and in 2000, the regime executed three of eight Islamist militants extradited from Jordan. Since that time, there has been little evidence of organized Islamist activity in Libya.(15)

Overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim, the Libyan people are conservative in outlook and religious in nature, but they have never shown any real appetite for the radical Islam advocated by Al-Qaeda or its North African affiliate, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Granted, Libyan nationals made up the second largest group of foreign fighters in Iraq after the Saudis; however, their opposition to the invasion and occupation of Iraq does not in itself portend an Islamist threat in Libya. A related

and more likely prospect is that some of the arms liberated from government arms depots could end up in the hands of AQIM supporters in neighboring states, like Algeria. Much has also been made of the presence of several former Guantanamo detainees in the rebel ranks; however, they appear to be fighting as individual citizens and not as an organized group.(16) There may be some public sympathy – even admiration – for these Islamist figures, but there appears to be little public interest in an Islamist alternative to the non-ideological February 17th Revolution. That said, if the rebellion deteriorates into a prolonged civil war or coalition forces intervene with “boots on the ground,” the potential for militant Islamist groups to increase the space in which they operate will grow. Hence, the risk of Al-Qaeda gaining a foothold in Libya stems more from rebel defeat than rebel victory.(17)

National Consciousness and National Unity

Formidable sea and land barriers, combined with desert sands and rocky plains, resulted in the early delineation of Libya into three regions, Cyrenaica in the east, Tripolitania in the west, and Fezzan in the southwest. Historically, Cyrenaica has tended to look eastward to the Mashriq or eastern Islamic world, Tripolitania has looked westward to the Maghrib or western Islamic world, and Fezzan has looked south to central and western Africa. The term “Libya” derives from the name of a single Berber tribe known to the early Egyptians; however, it was not formally adopted as the name of Italy’s colony in North Africa until 1929 when the separately administered provinces of Cyrenaica, Tripolitania, and Fezzan were joined under a single Italian governor. When speaking of Libya, it is important to recognize that the country, as an integrated administrative, economic, and political reality, is only 60 years old.(18)

Although regionalism has long characterized Libya, a growing sense of national identity marked Libya after independence in 1951 and especially after the Qaddafi regime came to power in 1969. The strength of this national feeling is apparent in the signs the rebels have displayed since the early days of the revolution, signs that read “Benghazi is with Tripoli,” “Libya is one Nation,” and “One Libya Undivided.” Recognizing the importance of national unity, the Transitional National Council has emphasized repeatedly that its goal is to represent all the people of Libya by engaging representatives from all regions and interests in its deliberations. On the other side, the Qaddafi regime has continued to warn that the fall of the regime would lead to civil war; however, from the outset, this has been more a scare tactic than a realistic prospect.(19)

Path to Democracy

Shortly after the rebels in eastern Libya liberated towns and cities like al-Bayda and Benghazi, they began to form popular committees to collect weapons, control traffic, and supply electricity and water. The structure and operation of these committees brings to mind the nationwide system of congresses and committees established

by the Qaddafi regime after 1973. Most Libyans were reluctant participants in the latter, which were organized and controlled by the regime; however, they did gain experience in managing local government institutions and functions which they are now putting to good use. In the rebel-controlled areas, judges, educators, lawyers, and other middle class opponents to the regime are directing this effort, and similar individuals can be expected to do the same as the rebel-controlled area expands.(20)

The Transitional National Council (TNC), which describes itself on its website as the only legitimate body representing the Libyan people, derives its legitimacy from the various local councils formed by the rebels. In recent weeks, a growing number of countries, including France, Gambia, Germany, Italy, Jordan, Kuwait, Maldives, Qatar, Senegal, Spain, and the United Arab Emirates, have recognized the interim government formed by the TNC in March as the legitimate representative of the Libyan people, and many other governments, including China and Russia, have made contact or extended some form of unofficial recognition. In late May, the United States invited the TNC to open a representative office in Washington, a welcome step forward in achieving much-desired and much-needed international legitimacy, and in early June, the US State Department declared the TNC the “legitimate interlocutor” for the Libyan people.(21)

In early May, the Transitional National Council unveiled a “road map” to democracy at a meeting of the 22-nation International Contact Group on Libya. The approach outlined in the road map called for the transition to an elected government to begin with the installation of an interim government made up of TNC members, select technocrats from the Qaddafi regime, senior military and intelligence officers, and a Supreme Court judge. While some observers questioned the inclusion of former regime officials, the involvement of technocrats – as distinguished from ideological stalwarts of the dictatorship – would benefit a country devastated by months of fighting. In contrast to the regime’s dire warnings of civil war if the rebels prevail, it would also send a message of national unity and healing as opposed to factional interests and petty retribution. The rebels need to learn from the Iraqi experience in which a mass purge of Saddam Hussein loyalists under an American-backed program of “de-Baathification” stripped tens of thousands of officials of their jobs and contributed to years of insurgency in Iraq.(22)

The road map calls for the interim government to hold municipal elections in rebel-held areas under UN supervision. With the defeat of the Qaddafi regime, it would then organize a national council of municipal representatives to elect a committee to draft a new constitution which would be submitted to a referendum. Preliminary work on a draft constitution is already underway with political scientists from Garyounis University in Benghazi who had worked on an earlier draft when Saif al-Islam al-Qaddafi was the regime champion for limited political reform in Libya

involved in the process. Once the Libyan people have approved the new constitution, parliamentary elections would be held in four months followed two months later by presidential elections. While there is evidence of dissension within the rebel movement in general and the TNC in particular, the proposed road map appears to be based on democratic convictions and the sincere belief that human rights are universal; consequently, it has helped to bolster the legitimacy of the rebel movement at home and abroad. Reflecting its ongoing concern for the appearance and practice of the rule of law amid mounting accusations of arbitrary arrests and torture, the TNC at the end of May issued guidelines on how rebel fighters should treat prisoners of war.(23)

Next Steps

The drafting of a new constitution will be a crucial step on the road to a more democratic Libya. In 1969, the Qaddafi regime replaced the 1951 constitution, the only one the country has known, with a constitutional proclamation. The latter document assigned all powers to Qaddafi and his fellow army officers on the Revolutionary Command Council and thus will be of no help. There is support in some Libyan circles for bringing back the 1951 constitution, but it was a flawed document which helped create the conditions leading to Qaddafi's 1969 coup d'état. It called for a hereditary monarchy with a federal form of government and joint capitals in Benghazi and Tripoli. As Libyan politics evolved into a form of benign despotism, political parties were outlawed, demonstrations banned, newspapers censored, and organized opposition suppressed. A unitary format later replaced the federal government; nevertheless, the graft and corruption continued. Libyans need to create an entirely new constitution, and this will take some time as there is little in their 60 years of independent life to guide them.(24)

In part to boost its legitimacy, the Qaddafi regime after 1969 promoted a more open, expansive, and inclusive role for women. While its efforts were especially noticeable in the field of education, other positive steps included legislation restricting polygamy and fixing for women the same minimum age for marriage as men. In 1998, the World Bank estimated that nearly 100 percent of all girls and boys were enrolled in primary education, and by 2002, adult female illiteracy has dropped to 29 percent. Even though female illiteracy was still 10 percent higher than male illiteracy, these were impressive results when compared to related statistics for neighboring countries. At the same time, the percentage of the Libyan labor force which were women grew from 14 percent to 27 percent in the two decades after 1986. While these numbers may be low by global standards, they are high for the Arab world where only Lebanon, Syria, and Tunisia have higher rates. Given this history, the Transitional National Council needs to do more to broaden the representation and participation of women in the political process in general and in the interim government in particular. From the outset, Libyan women have been at the forefront of the February 17th Revolution, demanding freedom and democracy together with

more rights for themselves. Consequently, female activists in Libya were dismayed when the rebels appointed only one woman to the interim government. Given the opportunity, they have much more to offer the revolution going forward.(25)

Following the meeting of the International Contact Group in Rome, local councils from 25 towns met in Benghazi in an effort to unify rebel ranks and to forge a common vision for the future of Libya. In a promising start, Mustafa Abdul Jalil, the chairman of the Transitional National Council, told participants that the membership of the TNC would be expanded to better represent all regions and interests in Libya. Following an open exchange on the military and political situation throughout the country, the meeting concluded with the participants reiterating their support for the TNC as the legitimate representative of the Libyan people.(26)

Billed as a “town hall” meeting, the local council gathering was an example of the TNC’s ongoing efforts to buttress its democratic credentials and to portray itself as the sole representative of the Libyan people. The chairman’s promise at the meeting to broaden representation on the rebel council was a welcome move; however, the TNC needs to take additional steps, including an increase in the inclusiveness, transparency, and accountability of its deliberations. TNC meetings are held behind closed doors with no minutes issued, and the rebel council has offered no accounting of how it spent money borrowed from the Libyan Central Bank or donated by Libyans living abroad.(27)

The TNC also needs to flesh out the proposed transition in the road map and to begin institution building. While the road map was a good first step, rebel plans in a post-Qaddafi Libya remain in an embryonic form and detailed, concrete governing and security strategies must be formulated for the chaotic and decisive days that will follow the end of the Qaddafi regime. Security in the form of a new police force will be an initial concern, but a functioning court system and impartial judges to uphold the rule of law must quickly follow. In conjunction with these efforts, a whole new set of institutions needs to be created essentially from scratch. This will be a time-consuming and imperfect process; however, the key is to begin the process now and improve on the end product as time permits.(28) The members of the coalition have an obvious role to play here, but it is vitally important to let the Libyans take the lead, providing advice and support as they request it.

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