

U.S. Policy and the Libyan Dilemma

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In the past few months, Egypt, Libya, and other North African and Middle Eastern states have come into the spotlight in international politics. Seemingly contagious social uprisings demanding government overhaul are springing up with the hope of bringing about the process of democratization. The African continent may be experiencing the beginning of a pivotal stage in its history, and the importance of how the United States handles this transformation cannot be underestimated. Renewed and revitalized African governments offer the United States a chance to renew and revitalize its relationship with these governments, which in some cases, is a much needed renewal.

Today, Libya offers the United States one of the most complex set of conditions to which diplomats have to respond. In order to fully appreciate the complexity and potential at stake, a short summary of the history of U.S.-Libya relations is in order, including the role of Muammar Gaddafi in this relationship. Next, the potential of the region will be discussed, and why it should be so important to the United States. Lastly, the author will address how the United States ought to treat the current situation in Libya.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Libya has rarely had the opportunity to be its own independent entity. Whether it was by the Phoenicians, Car-

thaginians, Greeks, Romans, Vandals, Byzantines, Arabs, or Italians, Libyan territory has been subjected to foreign rule for the majority of its history. Libya did not become an internationally recognized independent nation until 24 December 1951—and then only because the United Nations declared in 1949 that Libya should be independent. As an independent state, Libya has spent the majority of its history under the rule of Muammar Gaddafi, who came to power by a military coup on 1 September 1969.

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Since then, Gaddafi has led Libya towards his unique vision of a socialist, Islamist utopian state. Moreover, Gaddafi's dreams extended beyond the borders of Libya. He sought first to unify the Arab states, and also proposed a unification of Africa into what could be called the United States of Africa.¹ However, despite his considerable effort and craft towards these ends, they were never achieved, and he is now fighting to hold on to his position of power as rebellion inspired by the ongoing "Arab Spring" movements in Tunisia and Egypt seek to remove the Libyan dictator.

The history of United States' relations with Gaddafi is in itself complex—understandable only within its historical context. Gaddafi came to power in the middle of the Cold War. While Gaddafi identified himself neither with the United States' or Soviet Union ideologically, choosing instead to form his unique brand of government, he came into economic partnership with the Soviet Union, even purchasing Soviet Arms to use in his war against Chad.² Thus, from the beginning, the relationship between him and the United States was uneasy.

Gaddafi's support of international terrorism only made matters worse. Gaddafi was generally opposed to the West and the role that it played in the international arena. He pursued personal political objectives against the West through acts of terrorism. The bombing of a nightclub in West Berlin—targeting American GIs in attendance, and the bombing of a French Airliner-UTA (Union des Transports Aériens) flight 772 were responses of Gaddafi to the United States' and France's attempts to take down his regime.³ Most famously, the Lockerbie bombing of U.S. carrier Pan Am Flight 103 over

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Lockerbie, Scotland on 21 December 1988 marked the high point of Gaddafi-sponsored terrorism against the West.⁴

However, in the past decade, Gaddafi has made significant steps towards mending relationships with the West. In July 2007, Libya released five Bulgarian nurses and a Palestinian doctor who had been wrongfully convicted of infecting 400 children in Benghazi with the HIV virus. This release marked the resolution of a long-standing point of contempt between Gaddafi and the European Union. More importantly, in 2003 Gaddafi decided to dismantle his WMD programs, denounce terrorism, and sign international non-proliferation treaties. Since that time, Gaddafi had been significantly more cooperative with the West, and up until the recent revolution, had even taken a prominent role in the UN Security Council, and hosted African Union, Arab League, and Arab-African summits. Gaddafi even made a first ever visit to the United States in 2009 to deliver a speech at the United Nations General Assembly.⁵ It is somewhat ironic that Gaddafi's reign over Libya could end when political ties between Libya and the United States were at their strongest.

While Gaddafi's image may have been improving in terms of international diplomatic relations, popular resentment of his regime has only grown worse in the past few years. In February 2011, a breaking point was reached. The catalyst for revolt was the recent popular revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia--and, to be sure, many of the same factors that led to uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia were also present in Libya.

REASONS FOR REVOLUTION IN LIBYA

Despite Gaddafi's efforts to build a socialist state, distribution of wealth has

remained far less than equal. Libya has gained a vast amount of wealth from its petroleum resources, even becoming the world's 12th largest exporter of oil.⁶ And, to be sure, Libya does have one of the strongest economies in Africa. However, Libya is deemed a rentier state--one which receives its primary source of income by renting out its national resources rather than producing wealth domestically. Thus, the wealth gained from oil is distributed only to the elite, leaving the majority of the Libyan population in poverty.⁷



Among this poor segment of the population are the youth and young adults. Half of the Libyan population is under the age of 25.⁸ This is a powerful demographic that Gaddafi simply ignored. However, it is precisely this demographic that is inciting protest and rebellion, demanding its share of the country's relatively vast oil wealth.

Extreme rates of unemployment have also led to a drastic increase of economic refugees. Prior to the recent revolts, unemployment rates reached above 20%. Because of the high rates of unemployment, more than 33,000 families were driven to live in slums and shacks, unable to provide themselves

with stable incomes.⁹ Another contributing factor to the potential overthrow of Gaddafi's regime is that he has, like most dictators, generally disregarded concern for human rights. Opposition of his government or his policies was simply not tolerated. Many of the laws Gaddafi implemented were repressive in nature. Law 73 of 1973 outlawed dissent from the government--explicitly denying Libyans the freedom of expression.¹⁰ Law 20 of 1991 demanded the execution of any member of society whose continued existence would lead to the dissolution of Libyan society (one can assume that this law was interpreted loosely). Furthermore, the "Code of Honor" of March 1997 allowed the Libyan government to collectively punish organizations, families, even whole towns and municipalities for the wrongdoings of an individual. Clearly, there are no checks on Gaddafi's government's legislative power, and Gaddafi has used this power to abuse the human rights of his people.

Such arbitrary legislation has given Gaddafi title to pursue and neutralize political threats. The Libyan dictator has a history of ordering the assassination of dissidents. This form of political terrorization and control has extended beyond Libyan boundaries even onto United States' soil with the assassination attempt by a Libyan agent upon Faisal Zagallai, a political dissident and doctoral student at the University of Colorado in 1980.

Gaddafi has extended his political suppression by claiming complete control of the Libyan media and press. Prior to the revolution, all news, whether in newspapers or on television, was controlled by the government. Gaddafi has understood the power that the press yields and seized that source of power to serve his ends. He televised the executions of political dissidents nationally,

virtually frightening his people into obedient submission.¹¹ However, his excessive policies, in the end, only contributed fuel to fire the revolt.

The role of technology and communication in the current revolution is not to be underestimated. Despite Gaddafi's control over news and media, protestors were able to find their voices by means of social networking sites of the 21st Century. Those in favor of toppling Gaddafi's regime and creating a new and reformed government in Libya formed their own group on Facebook. This group, as of this writing, has well above 130,000 members, and is growing.¹² Protestors have used this site to post videos, cartoons, discussions, and generally comment on the inadequacy of the current Libyan government and the need for reform. Access can be granted to this revolutionary nexus by any smart phone or computer with internet--quite a prolific source of communication for any group acting under the radar of government control. Oddly enough, Mark Zuckerberg (creator and founder of Facebook.com) may have become one of the most significant contributors to government and cultural revolution in Libya and the rest of Africa and the Middle East. Indeed, the Arab Spring may become known as the Facebook revolution.

The importance of this technology was quickly recognized by Gaddafi, who promptly prohibited the use of internet in Libya. This drastic measure was implemented to prevent both the ability of Libyan protestors to further organize their revolt and the ability of the outside world to see what exactly was going on inside of Libya. However, blocking use of the internet was not entirely successful, and videos are still emerging from the chaos within Libyan borders--including one video of the remains of government officials who were allegedly burned to death after refusing to obey Gaddafi's orders.¹³

Another notable factor that likely contributed to the recent revolt against Gaddafi's regime is his age. Gaddafi has been in control of Libya for more than 41 years, but has no obvious successor. Gaddafi has said that his son Saif al-Islam will succeed him; however, Gaddafi is careful not to show his son support for taking on his supposed upcoming presidency, leaving a feeling of doubt regarding Gaddafi's true intentions for succession.¹⁴ This could likely leave the state in a violent power struggle after his death or removal. It is worth noting that Egypt's former president, Mubarak, was similarly situated before being driven from office by Egyptian revolutionaries.¹⁵

What began as protests in February 2011 has descended into all-out civil war between Gaddafi's loyalist forces and the revolutionaries. Fighting continues to

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rage across Libya as of this writing. The revolutionaries in Libya are fighting for a more liberal democratic form of government. A leader of the revolutionary forces and potential future king of Libya, Muhammad El-Senussi, has promised to pursue whatever form of government the people of Libya seek, to include a constitutional democracy.¹⁶

While NATO has decided to intervene using airpower against Gaddafi's forces and enforcing a UN established no-fly zone, intervention as of this writing remains limited, with U.S. involvement being underplayed by the media. The civil war in Libya has brought many challenges that the international community will have to address. Traditionally, the United States plays a central role

in the treatment of any global crisis, so an analysis of what concerns are at stake is first necessary before any evaluation of national policy can be formulated.

CONCERNS AND QUESTIONS FOR THE UNITED STATES

The first concern is the humanitarian aid needed for the thousands seeking safety in neighboring countries. Huddled masses have found their way to Libyan border regions, hoping to find respite from the violence of the civil war. An estimated 180,000 people are fleeing from Libya either as Libyan citizens who are now refugees, or as immigrant workers hoping to be repatriated to their countries of origin. This vast numbers of people at the borders, however, have created a logistical nightmare. How can this exodus be accommodated? International aid is already being provided--German aid ships returned Egyptian nationals from Libya, the British government chartered flights to move European refugees from Tunisia, and the World Food Program pledged \$38.7 million to assist refugees, while the European Union pledged another \$42 million for the same.¹⁷

The second problem is significantly more nuanced. To what extent should the international community, and the United States in particular, be involved in the overthrow of Gaddafi and the institution of a new form of government? The United States has already been engaged in regime changes and national restructuring both in Iraq and Afghanistan. In these instances, the United States has taken the lead role to replace former governments. Thus, the vast economic burden of rebuilding these states has fallen squarely on the shoulders of the American taxpayers. To be sure, rebuilding nations halfway around the world by use of expeditionary military forces is costly--especially

after ten plus years of engagement in Afghanistan and Iraq.

It is safe to say that the United States should not wish to undergo yet another global operation to overthrow Gaddafi's government and attempt to create in its place another liberal democracy. For one, the economic crisis that the United States is experiencing could not permit another full-fledged operation. More to the point, though, American interests in the region are not even close to what its interests were in Iraq or Afghanistan. The United States, then, must evaluate its interests in the region and formulate the best course of action to address the situation in Libya in a way that is agreeable in the international arena while simultaneously acting within the context of its interests.

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REGIONAL INTERESTS

So, what are the interests of the United States in Libya? There are both economic and political interests at stake--the more pressing of which is the latter.

United States economic interests in the region are, at present, marginal. The U.S. purchases less than three percent of Libya's export of oil, so oil is not the major concern. However, the price of oil is affected by the civil war in Libya, which initially rose slightly above \$100 per barrel as violence erupted against Ghaddafi, and this burden was relayed to Americans and others at the pump.¹⁸

Before dismissing Libya as a region without significant economic interest to the United States, one should first consider the potential economic benefits

of Libya being under a more liberal and just form of government. As was mentioned earlier, Libya is a rentier state.¹⁹ Its greatest source of wealth is from its oil reserves. However, this wealth is kept only by the elite who can benefit from renting out access to these resources. This resulted in the vast amount of poverty for the masses despite Libya's wealth of resources. This is the inequality that revolutionary forces in Libya are fighting to abolish. If they are successful in overthrowing Gaddafi's regime and establishing a government that is accountable to the people, then Libya's oil wealth could trickle down to the masses, and in turn enlarging and strengthening the middle-class.

A middle-class is an essential ingredient for a boom of economic growth and development of a stable democracy. Money reaching a new middle-class would stimulate a consumption of goods, which, in turn, would lead to further economic growth, allowing for pay raises and creating job opportunities to remedy the high unemployment rate in Libya. As the middle class is able to generate more and more income, the economy grows. This is precisely what is happening in India.²⁰ If Libya can turn itself into an economic asset to the global market, nations will be scrambling to take advantage of the opportunities in Libya--the United States included.

In fact, the United States has already exhibited interest in strengthening economic ties in North Africa. The North African Partnership for Economic Opportunity (NAPEO) was established in order to fully investigate just how much economic opportunity lies in the North African region and how to take advantage of that opportunity. Through this organization, entrepreneurs from the United States and Libya have already been talking and working together to create economic opportunities and growth in both the public and private

sectors.²¹ Initiative for taking advantage of economic opportunities in Libya has already been begun, but with the possibility of restructuring the Libyan government (and, thus, economy) to one that allows for a stronger and more influential middle class, the opportunity in Libya becomes exponentially greater. This opportunity should not be overlooked by United States policy, and ought to factor into overall U.S. analysis of national interests in the region.

However, the U.S. should also consider Libya as a potential ally in the region. Libya, having close ties to both the African and Arab communities, would be an extremely beneficial ally for the U.S. Generally, the United States does not enjoy a very healthy rapport with many Arab states. Most relationships are based upon the U.S. appetite for oil. While it may be a stretch, the ongoing revolution in Libya could be viewed as a potential turning point for U.S.-Arab relations.

On 6 April 2011, the Arab League hosted an "Arab-West Dialogue Forum" in its headquarters in Cairo. This forum was held in recognition of the extraordinary events occurring in the region, including the revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. Speakers at this forum advocated a rejuvenation of Arab relations with the West. These revolutions have given the West the opportunity to see a more humanized and relatable version of the Arab world. That is to say, the people of the Arab world also seek the traditionally Western ideals of democracy and recognition of human rights. Thus, Libya presents, not only an economic opportunity, but a political and diplomatic one as well. Speakers at the "Arab-West Dialogue Forum" hoped that the circumstances in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya could spark a new epoch in their relations with the West. U.S. policy should reflect this hope as well.²²

A PROPER RESPONSE

The best way for the United States to contribute to the stability (and hopefully the subsequent economic prosperity) of Libya is very much a “less is more” approach. Military intervention will only further the contempt of the Arab-African world for the West, viewing the U.S. as puppeteers of their leaders and acting recklessly and unapologetically in pursuit of national interests (a contempt dating back to the age of European colonialism in Africa). However, the United States does have interests in the area and would be acting prudently to pursue the realization of the potential of those interests.

First, military action by the United States should remain at a minimum. Cynicism towards United States military operations is already a problem in the Arab world. The U.S. has already assumed a backseat role in the establishment of the no-fly zone over Libya, but the sensitivity of Western military action is still evident. The Arab League and rebel forces in Libya have both pleaded for military intervention in the form of a no-fly zone, and this plea for Western assistance makes military intervention that much more politically palatable. However, Gaddafi was quick to skew this reality to fit his agenda, claiming that military involvement by Western powers would allow them to “take control of Libya and to steal their oil.”²³ The Arab League, though supporting the enforcement of a no-fly zone, criticized the implementation when it expanded to include the bombing of ground targets. While the destruction of these targets benefitted the mission of the no-fly zone, the Arab League claimed that this action was killing more civilians rather than protecting them. Clearly, military intervention is very sensitive. The best way for the United States and NATO to respond to this situation is to cooperate with the Arab League as much as possible. This will go a long way toward

changing the perception of the United States by Arab League member states.²⁴

However, though limited military action in the form of airpower is underway, what must remain under consideration is that, in order for the United States to realize the vast potential in Libya, Gaddafi must fall from power. In order to gain an ally in North Africa and a potential strong tie to the Arab League, the revolutionary forces must succeed in their overthrow of the Libyan strongman. If Gaddafi is able to somehow put down the revolutionary forces, the subsequent violence and bloodshed involved in the likely killing and persecution of anti-Gaddafi forces would be egregious, and the brutal dictator would remain in power, likely seeking to return to a past of sponsoring international

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terror and the proliferation of WMD.

Second, the bulk of the United States’ financial commitment to Libya should be geared towards humanitarian support for refugees. While greater military involvement remains a risky political endeavor, humanitarian aid to refugees is a politically safe way to take action and contribute where it is most needed. The “logistical nightmare” of the exodus of the refugees from Libya is a problem that the United States can and must continue to address, for, in many cases, the lives of the refugees depend upon it.²⁵

In order to pursue the economic potential in Libya, efforts should be made to strengthen economic ties to the region--essentially expanding upon

the work already begun by NAPEO. The economic potential in Libya ought to be tapped by American and European businessmen, and U.S. policy ought to encourage whatever possible to facilitate this process. American agriculture companies have the technological capacity to transform Libya’s nascent farming industry. With the help of the United States, Libya could stop having to import food (it currently imports 75% of its agricultural needs²⁶). Encouraging economic ties between American agriculture and Libya as well as investment by the American and European corporate (and perhaps governments) to build infrastructure necessary to support a rejuvenated agriculture and consumer industry will go a long way in restoring, Libya’s economy and weaning it from rentier state status. Moreover, it will do much to improve relations between the United States, Libya, and the Middle East.

The most important aspect of United States policy for the revolution in Libya is to simply view it as an opportunity to strengthen relations and gain credibility with the Arab League. The best way to achieve this is to cooperate with the the Arab League in efforts to remove Gaddafi and rebuild Libya. This relationship would allow for some much-needed growth of American influence and political clout in a turbulent region.

The worst thing that the United States could do at present would be to assume a leadership role. Not only can the U.S. not afford to do so in economic terms, but exploits in Iraq and Afghanistan have been controversial in the region and economically draining in domestic terms. Democracy is spreading organically in Libya and elsewhere in the region, greatly assisted by social media and networking. Perhaps the United States--if truly interested in the spread of democracy--should do nothing more than invest in the spread of commu-

nication technology and social media to those areas where human rights are being violated and the hopes of democracy remain stillborn. The United States, NATO, or even the United Nations cannot afford to intervene in every instance of human rights violations around the globe. The greatest contribution is to empower the voice of those oppressed. Social networking and improved means of communication and organization are proven methods for popular empowerment, and thus, modern communication tools may hold the key to the spread of liberal democracy.

CONCLUSION

The turning of the tide in Libya presents an opportunity for U.S. policymakers that cannot be ignored. American relations with much of Africa and the Middle East are tense, and Libya could hold a key to revitalizing those relationships, even strengthening the NATO partnership. Developing fragile and failed states is the greatest challenge that the international community will have to face in the coming years.²⁷ Given its current momentum, Libya provides a prime opportunity for the United States, NATO, the UN and EU to pull millions of people out of poverty and give them the political voice that they deserve. There is also much room for political and economic gain in the region. The iron is hot. The question ought to be, not if, but how the U.S. and international community might facilitate the process.

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Those who deny freedom to others deserve it not for themselves.
-- Abraham Lincoln