

**“Seeing Through the Fog:
Transitional Governments in Libya and Elsewhere”**

by

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There is something ironic about trying to understand Libya through comparison with other countries. For more than four decades, Libya’s leadership tried to make Libya *sui generis*, a country that defied convention to create its own peculiar form of government. Famously, Libya was not a republic, or *jumhuriya*, but rather a “*jamahariya*,” a neologism intended to signify a state of the masses. Moammar Gadhafi, who led Libya since he seized power in 1969, claimed to hold no official post in Libya, but only to give guidance to the government when asked. And that government had no traditionally elected representatives, but instead was a manifestation of direct democracy, a system of representation that supposedly began on the neighborhood level and fed all the way into a national system.

In point of fact, Libya was always more subject to the rules of reality than anyone in Libya ever wanted to admit. Libya had a genuine economy, distorted though it was, a fierce intelligence apparatus, and its emphasis on direct democracy was intended to divert attention from the fact that there was no democracy at all. Despite utopian aspirations, Libya had social problems as well. In the early days of a reestablished U.S. diplomatic presence in Libya, one intrepid foreign service officer even wrote a cable about prostitution in the country. It was memorably slugged, “To the Whores of Tripoli.”

The demise of the Gadhafi clique leaves us in a quandary as to what Libya’s future is, and what role the United States might play in steering things in a positive direction. Seen in isolation, Libya has never been a strategic asset or a strategic adversary of the United States. Libya has been troublesome and mercurial, but the United States government has found ways to work with or around it, as the situation dictated. Now, in a period of broader transition in the Middle East, a successful outcome in Libya can have a broader impact as a model for interactions between transitional governments and the outside world on the one hand, and between the United States and like-minded allies confronting complex contingencies on the other. To do so is to wade into the dangerous territory of making Libya into some sort of model, which it desperately but unsuccessfully tried to do for itself for more than four decades.

Even if Libya does not emerge as a new model, drawing on other experiences can and should help guide the way we think about Libya going forward. We have

important and enduring interests in Libya, from helping to restore access to Libyan energy to counterterrorism to getting a handle on the large volumes of Gadhafi's weapons that are draining out of storehouses and already appearing in conflict zones throughout the region.

There is no magic solution to make complex contingencies work, and there is no course of action that will guarantee success, or even make it likely. Still, there are some things to keep in mind that will help us avoid making obvious mistakes, and others that will help us right-size our expectations. I'd like to highlight six of them here. Three have to do with governmental transitions in general, and three have to do with the particulars of the Libyan case itself. None of them are determinative, but collectively they seem to me to advise modesty in the types of outcomes we should expect in Libya and in our ability to shape the new environment. Nevertheless, this analysis should help us prioritize where we invest our efforts and how we pace ourselves in the current period of regional turmoil.

The first issue involves the pace of transitions. It will likely take years for the character of Libya's transition to become clear and recognizable. The classic example of this is Iran, where there was considerable public hostility to the Shah in the United States for his poor human rights record and great optimism that a broad opposition coalition that included Ayatollah Khomeini, liberal nationalists and moneyed interests from the merchant class could lead Iran into a better future. Support for the Iranian revolution did not merely come from the radical fringe. Serious academics such as Princeton's Richard Falk and Columbia's Edward Said argued that the Islamic revolution in Iran should not be alarming, as it was based on aspirations for social justice. The first prime minister of revolutionary Iran, Mehdi Bazargan, served for nine months before he was purged for being insufficiently revolutionary. An article in the establishment-oriented *Foreign Affairs* in the autumn of 1980 advised it was not yet time to grow alarmed with Khomeini's consolidation of power behind a revolutionary religious establishment, because the country remained so beset with problems.

Other examples of slow-rolling revolutions are Cuba under Castro and Egypt under Abdel Nasser. In both cases, Americans initially saw the leaders as anti-imperialists and nationalists. As the United States has its own long history of being anti-imperialist and nationalist—at least in the eyes of most Americans—few in the United States saw the new governments these men led as threats. In the case of Fidel Castro, as shrewd an anti-Communist as Vice President Richard Nixon saw Fidel as a sympathetic figure, and viewed the real danger to be his brother Raul (who, ironically, is now dismantling much of the Communist apparatus his brother built). In Egypt, the U.S. government actively courted Gamal Abdel Nasser after the Egyptian coup of 1952, but British resistance to U.S. arms sales in the midst of negotiations over British troop withdrawals from

Egypt helped push Egypt toward the Eastern Bloc for weaponry. The non-aligned movement that Egypt helped create in 1955 was in clear contravention of U.S. plans for the developing world, and opened a period of Egyptian-American tensions that scarcely diminished for two decades.

Despite the slowness of these governments to reveal their true essence, they had an advantage that made the process clearer than the one we are likely to see in Libya. In each of these cases, the movements that took power had clear and charismatic leaders who led the government and the public toward a new status quo. In Libya, no charismatic figure appears to be in the leadership, and none appear to be on the horizon. It appears that the “charisma vacuum” is part of the legacy of Gadhafi, that the government shaped people’s professional development in such a way as to make true leadership impossible, except for The Leader himself, Gadhafi. Learning patterns of leadership, and adapting patterns of followership that are healthier than those that existed under Gadhafi is likely to extend this period of uncertainty even longer.

All of this is to say that while there will be keen scrutiny of the development of Libyan politics for the next year and beyond, the period of uncertainty and change is likely to endure long after most Americans and Europeans have moved on to other challenges. This isn’t to predict the success or failure of Libya’s transition, but rather to suggest it is likely to last far longer than anyone anticipates now.

The second point, related to the first, is that the United States government is often bureaucratically divided in its analysis of such moments of transition. This was especially clear in the case of Iran, where the State Department was relatively optimistic about the course a post-Shah Iran would take, and National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski was more skeptical. For her own part, first lady Rosalyn Carter reportedly carried on a private correspondence with the Shah’s wife before his abdication, surely confusing the Iranians as well as others in the U.S. government as to exactly what the policy of the U.S. government was.

It is worth unpacking this a little, because the problem is deeper than merely differences of analysis. Unsurprisingly, different government agencies maintain different contacts in foreign countries that help shape their view of the host government. This is true as much in normal times as in transitional situations. Times in which the leadership is uncertain and things are in flux should be precisely the time of maximum information sharing and comparing notes across agencies, so as to gain a more complete picture of an uncertain situation. In practice, however, the bureaucratic process tends to drive agencies to hoard information rather than share it, and use information to wage battles for influence that in some ways mirror the battles going on in foreign capitals.

One might argue that such differences of opinion are both natural and healthy, and that under such circumstances it is incumbent on the National Security Council to act as an arbiter of interagency disputes. In times of governmental transition, however, the NSC has more often taken on the role it did in the Iran case: It was a player in negotiations rather than the referee, it put forward its own analysis, and backed its own interpretation of the facts.

While the goal of the interagency process is to synthesize diverse sources and emerge with a fully vetted whole, in practice the interagency process has sometimes led to governmental paralysis. In that way, rather than having a wide variety of information about transitional governments helping the United States government to act effectively, it has more often prevented the government from acting much at all. Some would argue that such paralysis is healthy, curbing an overzealous interventionist instinct and preventing the United States from getting out of position. It does that, but perhaps more than would be ideal.

The third thing we know from other transitions is that neighbors have a profound effect on the outcome of such transitions. It stands to reason that proximity gives outsized influence, especially because it allows opposition groups and other political aspirants to have a safe haven outside a country's borders. In addition, neighboring countries often have relatively fine-grained understandings of the domestic politics of surrounding states. Linguistic, ethnic and family ties, reciprocal travel and sustained focus on neighbors are not determinative in every case, but in most cases give neighbors a better understanding of politics than countries half a world away. In addition, the stakes of a transition are almost always higher for neighbors than they are for global powers, focusing the mind on accomplishing positive outcomes.

Neighbors are important both for how they align with U.S. interests and complicate them. Iraq and Afghanistan are recent examples where neighbors have often been unhelpful, confounding the U.S.-backed transitions by supporting insurgents and meddling in the broader political process. Even earlier, during Yemen's civil war in the 1960s, it was the clash between Egypt and Saudi Arabia that did much to define how Yemen would fit into the regional balance of power, far beyond U.S. decisions to support either side. The same has been true of Saudi involvement this year in Bahrain, albeit in a different way.

All of these things tell us something about transitions in general: That they take time to evolve, that the U.S. government often constrains its own role through internal divisions, and that neighboring states often play an outsized role influencing outcomes. Yet none of these principles tell us anything specific about Libya. And while we've talked about Libya's uniqueness, even that uniqueness offers comparisons to events in other countries. I want to offer three here.

First, compared to other successful oppositions, Libya's opposition is of relatively recent origin and was forged out of a relatively short battle. Compare this to the Solidarity movement in Poland, which built itself over 15 years before taking power, Khomeini's supporters in Iran, who built their movement over more than a decade, and Fidel Castro's movement in Cuba, which built on six years of guerrilla activity. Think even of the ANC in South Africa, which built itself up in one form or another for over 80 years during apartheid. These gestational periods allow groups to forge and develop ideologies, to create internal leadership structures, and to form constituencies. Of course, running a secret movement creates its own pathologies. But it also creates leaders with genuine legitimacy, at least to their followers, and helps train them to speak effectively with broader publics. Equally important, these movements represent opportunities to develop an organizational culture, and for individuals to build relationships and trust across responsibilities that help governments function better when they come to power.

The fact that so few of such opposition movements succeed is not to be lamented. Rather, movements' success suggests that they have survived a Darwinian competition for allegiances and therefore have some capacity to lead. One might think of a long struggle for independence as a way to develop immunity from the ills that afflict new governments.

Libya's opposition did not undergo this same process of building immunities, but it is put into an environment swarming with pathogens. The TNC's ability to unite *against* a leader rather than *behind* a leader was one of its initial strengths in uniting diverse constituencies, but it presents a challenge in the post-Gadhafi milieu. Not only is the transitional government a broad coalition of groups, many of which are armed, but many also have different external sponsors. While the Contact Group process resulted in an international imprimatur for the TNC, it was not able to resolve differences within the body. In addition, many in the TNC's leadership came from senior positions in the Gadhafi regime, most notably Mustafa Abdel Jalil, who was formerly Libya's Minister of Justice and now the chairman of the TNC. Others were close to Gadhafi's modernizing son, Seif al-Islam, whom some Libyans saw representing the best chance for evolutionary change in the country. Having Libyans with internal political experience is not a bad thing. To the contrary, it holds out the promise of a more inclusive Libyan government at the end of the day. While a longer period of political struggle would offer more opportunities for former regime figures to gain bona fides as forces for change, short-circuiting this process will mean it will be a more contentious battle. This is not a recipe for failure, but it is a recipe for conflict, and there are few battle-tested political leaders to guide the resolution of those conflicts.

A second observation is that many insurgent political movements in other countries have had a deep nationalist core, and nationalism is an uncertain quality in Libya. The quintessential kind of nationalist movement is an anti-colonial struggle, and we've certainly seen that in the Middle East and beyond. Much of the same sentiment guided Eastern European political movements in the 1980s and 1990s, driven by a desire to reclaim national culture from the homogenizing effect of Soviet-inspired conformity. In Iran, in Cuba, and elsewhere, there was a deep sense that the leadership was obsessed with foreign approval and had somehow sought to undermine what was natural and good about the nation-state.

Yet, the Libyan nation-state, as we all know, is a colonial creation, the sticking together of three provinces under Italian rule in the 1930s. Libya did not win its independence through rebellion, but rather through the Italian loss of World War II. The United Nations handed independence to King Idriss in 1951. He ruled with a relatively light hand for eighteen years, before being pushed aside by Moammar Gadhafi who moved the capital from Benghazi to Tripoli and sought to destroy all remnants of the old order.

So what we have, rather than a deep historical memory, is a rather shallow nationalism that lionizes the anti-Italian rebel Omar al-Mukhtar, who died 80 years ago, and agrees on little else. Gadhafi so twisted the national identity in part by setting up Libya as a utopian and universalist model, and in part by playing Tripolitania off against Cyrenaica, that it is hard to understand what at all is left of the notion of Libyan-ness. Indeed, what seems to constitute most of Libyan national identity is having survived Gadhafi's leadership; how that essentially negative definition is replaced by something positive remains to be seen. Because there is so little past to rely on, a forward-looking nationalism may emerge to be more inclusive and optimistic than many other post-conflict situations, yet defining that nationalism will almost certainly be contentious as well.

Almost all of the foregoing suggests a difficult path ahead for the transitional government, and forces that argue for conflict if not dissolution of the state. A final factor worth keeping in mind about Libya is a unifying one. There is an awful lot of money in Libya, and a future stream of money that is likely to give huge advantages to whomever can control it. To give a sense of scale, the Gadhafi government had about \$70 billion in its sovereign wealth fund alone, some of which became the property of the TNC when it was recognized as the legitimate government of Libya. In addition, Libyan oil and gas production generates approximately \$37 billion in annual revenues to the state. The combination represents a huge resource base for the Libyan government, especially considering the fact that it need only be spread among some 6 million Libyan citizens.

This is not to say that oil will make it easier for Libya to be “successful,” whatever that means and however one wishes to measure success in Libya. There is an extensive academic literature on the “resource curse,” the short version of which is that countries that discover natural resources early in their political development not only rarely emerge as democracies, but they often remain quite poor. Time after time, a tiny number of people monopolize the resource proceeds, with most left to eke out a living. The problem is more acute the larger the proportion of the overall economy the resource revenues represent. In places such as Indonesia, non-resource-driven economic activities, and the diversity of resource-driven economic activities, have both allowed for broader economic and political development. In the Congo, the results have been much poorer.

In the oil-rich Arab states, we have seen a relatively high degree of diffusion of resources, but a relatively low degree of political pluralism. The Kuwaiti parliament, whatever its many failings, has actively pushed for greater distribution of oil wealth to Kuwaiti nationals. In Saudi Arabia, the ruling family is supremely wealthy, but a formerly impoverished Bedouin population is now urbanized, educated, and relatively well nourished. Libya followed much of this pattern, although the outrageous inefficiencies of Gadhafi’s state reduced the benefits individual Libyans realized from the country’s petroleum wealth.

In each of these circumstances, oil wealth has given rulers the ability to co-opt and coerce potential rivals, making the benefits of allegiance and the costs of opposition extremely high. Not surprisingly, the overwhelming choice of the public has been allegiance—even in situations where conflict would otherwise seem likely.

An interesting case study in this regard is Iraq, another state the colonial powers wove together from three Ottoman provinces. Iraq had a forceful integrating leadership in the post-war era, despite the ethnic and tribal diversity of the country. Yet, more than a decade of virtual independence for the Kurdish north, combined with the fact that Kurds remain ethnically and linguistically distinct from Iraqi Arabs, did not lead to the Kurdish separatism that many anticipated after the fall of Saddam Hussein. Oil money plays some part of this, as do oil disputes in mixed areas such as Kirkuk. The bottom line, it seems, is that the cost of dissolving Iraq would be high for all sides, and it is preferable to work out even financial arrangements based on the country’s abundant oil resources than rend the fabric of Iraqi life.

Oil, it seems to me, is a special kind of resource in a world of resource curses and the politics that flow from them. Oil is bulky and hard to move, and it requires significant infrastructure. Loading terminals often cost billions of dollars to construct, and pipelines, refineries and a host of other associated costs make

this the sort of project that only a government can undertake. There may be some small-scale smuggling to be sure, especially when products are available domestically for less than global prices, but insurgent groups cannot develop an oil infrastructure, and multinational oil companies are loath to invest in such an infrastructure where risk is unacceptably high.

Compare this, though, to diamonds, a valuable commodity that is easily transported. There can be conflict diamonds in West Africa for precisely that reason, testing territorial integrity and stoking civil war for years on end. For the same reason, it is hard to imagine that there can be "conflict oil." With oil, the advantages lie wholly with the governments, not those who seek to undermine that government.

What is absent from all of this is a clear sense of what will happen in Libya, or any way that the United States can help force a predetermined outcome. Rather than being a problem, though, that strikes me as a reflection of reality. For more than a half-century, our archetypal post-war reconstructions were in Germany and Japan. Through American efforts, deeply fractured societies were made whole, armies were demobilized, and warlike spirits that had worried neighbors for decades was transformed into peaceful economic engine that continue to help drive the world economy. Yes, it required large numbers of occupation troops, yes, it required the abject surrender of the countries' leaderships, and yes, it required a top-level U.S. focus that lasted for years. But we forget all that.

It's become popular to blame the prolonged and messy post-war environments in Iraq and Afghanistan on the Bush Administration's missteps, and there certainly were many. Yet, the true blame rests on those who failed to anticipate the likelihood of such environments after U.S. military action. By creating high expectations for the rapidity and cleanness of the post-war environment, the administration set itself up for failure.

To my mind, the Obama Administration has avoided many of these traps in Libya, playing a constructive role in reconstruction but avoiding ownership of it. The administration has also been blessed by good luck, not least in the relatively peaceful fall of Tripoli.

With looming budget battles, an unfolding political campaign, and challenges throughout the Middle East, it will be difficult for the administration to put a sustained focus on Libya for the next year. That, it seems to me, is appropriate, as we have few vital interests at stake and only a limited amount of influence on the ground. But we have some influence, with which we should engage with Libyans, their neighbors and our allies to help build a post-Gadhafi environment that is both orderly and peaceful. Libyans have a chance to get this transition right, and the United States has an opportunity to help, but we won't be able to

judge that effort for another decade. It is an uphill road but not an impossible one, and one for which Libyans, and not Americans, will decide the outcome.