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Libya, the West and the Narrative of Democracy

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Forces from the United States and some European countries have intervened in Libya. Under U.N. authorization, they have imposed a no-fly zone in Libya, meaning they will shoot down any Libyan aircraft that attempts to fly within Libya. In addition, they have conducted attacks against aircraft on the ground, airfields, air defenses and the command, control and communication systems of the Libyan government, and French and U.S. aircraft have struck against Libyan armor and ground forces. There also are reports of European and Egyptian special operations forces deploying in eastern Libya, where the opposition to the government is centered, particularly around the city of Benghazi. In effect, the intervention of this alliance has been against the government of Moammar Gadhafi, and by extension, in favor of his opponents in the east.

The alliance's full intention is not clear, nor is it clear that the allies are of one mind. The U.N. Security Council resolution clearly authorizes the imposition of a no-fly zone. By extension, this logically authorizes strikes against airfields and related targets. Very broadly, it also defines the mission of the intervention as protecting civilian lives. As such, it does not specifically prohibit the presence of ground forces, though it does clearly state that no "foreign occupation force" shall be permitted on Libyan soil. It can be assumed they intended that forces could intervene in Libya but could not remain in Libya after the intervention. What this means in practice is less than clear.

There is no question that the intervention is designed to protect Gadhafi's enemies from his forces. Gadhafi had threatened to attack "without mercy" and had mounted a sustained eastward assault that the rebels proved incapable of slowing. Before the intervention, the vanguard of his

forces was on the doorstep of Benghazi. The protection of the eastern rebels from Gadhafi's vengeance coupled with attacks on facilities under Gadhafi's control logically leads to the conclusion that the alliance wants regime change, that it wants to replace the Gadhafi government with one led by the rebels.

But that would be too much like the invasion of Iraq against Saddam Hussein, and the United Nations and the alliance haven't gone that far in their rhetoric, regardless of the logic of their actions. Rather, the goal of the intervention is explicitly to stop Gadhafi's threat to slaughter his enemies, support his enemies but leave the responsibility for the outcome in the hands of the eastern coalition. In other words — and this requires a lot of words to explain — they want to intervene to protect Gadhafi's enemies, they are prepared to support those enemies (though it is not clear how far they are willing to go in providing that support), but they will not be responsible for the outcome of the civil war.

The Regional Context

To understand this logic, it is essential to begin by considering recent events in North Africa and the Arab world and the manner in which Western governments interpreted them. Beginning with Tunisia, spreading to Egypt and then to the Arabian Peninsula, the last two months have seen widespread unrest in the Arab world. Three assumptions have been made about this unrest. The first was that it represented broad-based popular opposition to existing governments, rather than representing the discontent of fragmented minorities — in other words, that they were popular revolutions. Second, it assumed that these revolutions had as a common goal the creation of a democratic society. Third, it assumed that the kind of democratic society they wanted was similar to European-American democracy, in other words, a constitutional system supporting Western democratic values.

Each of the countries experiencing unrest was very different. For example, in Egypt, while the cameras focused on demonstrators, they spent little time filming the vast majority of the country that did not rise up. Unlike 1979 in Iran, the shopkeepers and workers did not protest en masse. Whether they supported the demonstrators in Tahrir Square is a matter of conjecture. They might have, but the demonstrators were a tiny fraction of Egyptian society, and while they clearly wanted a democracy, it is less than clear that they wanted a liberal democracy. Recall that the Iranian Revolution created an Islamic Republic more democratic than its critics would like to admit, but radically illiberal and oppressive. In Egypt, it is clear that Mubarak was generally loathed but not clear that the regime in general was being rejected. It is not clear from the outcome what will happen now. Egypt may stay as it is, it may become an illiberal democracy or it may become a liberal democracy.

Consider also Bahrain. Clearly, the majority of the population is Shiite, and resentment toward the Sunni government is apparent. It should be assumed that the protesters want to dramatically increase Shiite power, and elections should do the trick. Whether they want to create a liberal democracy fully aligned with the U.N. doctrines on human rights is somewhat more problematic.

Egypt is a complicated country, and any simple statement about what is going on is going to be wrong. Bahrain is somewhat less complex, but the same holds there. The idea that opposition to the government means support for liberal democracy is a tremendous stretch in all cases — and the idea that what the demonstrators say they want on camera is what they actually want is problematic. Even more problematic in many cases is the idea that the demonstrators in the streets simply represent a universal popular will.

Nevertheless, a narrative on what has happened in the Arab world has emerged and has become the framework for thinking about the region. The narrative says that the region is being swept by democratic revolutions (in the Western sense) rising up against oppressive regimes. The West must support these uprisings gently. That means that they must not sponsor them but at the same time act to prevent the repressive regimes from crushing them.

This is a complex maneuver. The West supporting the rebels will turn it into another phase of Western imperialism, under this theory. But the failure to support the rising will be a betrayal of fundamental moral principles. Leaving aside whether the narrative is accurate, reconciling these two principles is not easy — but it particularly appeals to Europeans with their ideological preference for "soft power."

The West has been walking a tightrope of these contradictory principles; Libya became the place where they fell off. According to the narrative, what happened in Libya was another in a series of democratic uprisings, but in this case suppressed with a brutality outside the bounds of what could be tolerated. Bahrain apparently was inside the bounds, and Egypt was a success, but Libya was a case in which the world could not stand aside while Gadhafi destroyed a democratic uprising. Now, the fact that the world had stood aside for more than 40 years while Gadhafi brutalized his own and other people was not the issue. In the narrative being told, Libya was no longer an isolated tyranny but part of a widespread rising — and the one in which the West's moral integrity was being tested in the extreme. Now was different from before.

Of course, as with other countries, there was a massive divergence between the narrative and what actually happened. Certainly, that there was unrest in Tunisia and Egypt caused opponents of Gadhafi to think about opportunities, and the apparent ease of the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings gave them some degree of confidence. But it would be an enormous mistake to see what has happened in Libya as a mass, liberal democratic uprising. The narrative has to be strained to work in most countries, but in Libya, it breaks down completely.

The Libyan Uprising

As we have pointed out, the Libyan uprising consisted of a cluster of tribes and personalities, some within the Libyan government, some within the army and many others longtime opponents of the regime, all of whom saw an opportunity at this particular moment. Though many in western portions of Libya, notably in the cities of Zawiya and Misurata, identify themselves with the opposition, they do not represent the heart of the historic opposition to Tripoli found in the east. It is this region, known in the pre-independence era as Cyrenaica, that is the core of the opposition movement. United perhaps only by their opposition to Gadhafi, these people hold no

common ideology and certainly do not all advocate Western-style democracy. Rather, they saw an opportunity to take greater power, and they tried to seize it.

According to the narrative, Gadhafi should quickly have been overwhelmed — but he wasn't. He actually had substantial support among some tribes and within the army. All of these supporters had a great deal to lose if he was overthrown. Therefore, they proved far stronger collectively than the opposition, even if they were taken aback by the initial opposition successes. To everyone's surprise, Gadhafi not only didn't flee, he counterattacked and repulsed his enemies.

This should not have surprised the world as much as it did. Gadhafi did not run Libya for the past 42 years because he was a fool, nor because he didn't have support. He was very careful to reward his friends and hurt and weaken his enemies, and his supporters were substantial and motivated. One of the parts of the narrative is that the tyrant is surviving only by force and that the democratic rising readily routs him. The fact is that the tyrant had a lot of support in this case, the opposition wasn't particularly democratic, much less organized or cohesive, and it was Gadhafi who routed them.

As Gadhafi closed in on Benghazi, the narrative shifted from the triumph of the democratic masses to the need to protect them from Gadhafi — hence the urgent calls for airstrikes. But this was tempered by reluctance to act decisively by landing troops, engaging the Libyan army and handing power to the rebels: Imperialism had to be avoided by doing the least possible to protect the rebels while arming them to defeat Gadhafi. Armed and trained by the West, provided with command of the air by the foreign air forces — this was the arbitrary line over which the new government keeps from being a Western puppet. It still seems a bit over the line, but that's how the story goes.

In fact, the West is now supporting a very diverse and sometimes mutually hostile group of tribes and individuals, bound together by hostility to Gadhafi and not much else. It is possible that over time they could coalesce into a fighting force, but it is far more difficult imagining them defeating Gadhafi's forces anytime soon, much less governing Libya together. There are simply too many issues between them. It is, in part, these divisions that allowed Gadhafi to stay in power as long as he did. The West's ability to impose order on them without governing them, particularly in a short amount of time, is difficult to imagine. They remind me of Hamid Karzai in Afghanistan, anointed by the Americans, distrusted by much of the country and supported by a fractious coalition.

Other Factors

There are other factors involved, of course. Italy has an interest in Libyan oil, and the United Kingdom was looking for access to the same. But just as Gadhafi was happy to sell the oil, so would any successor regime be; this war was not necessary to guarantee access to oil. NATO politics also played a role. The Germans refused to go with this operation, and that drove the French closer to the Americans and British. There is the Arab League, which supported a no-fly zone (though it did an about-face when it found out that a no-fly zone included bombing things) and offered the opportunity to work with the Arab world.

But it would be a mistake to assume that these passing interests took precedence over the ideological narrative, the genuine belief that it was possible to thread the needle between humanitarianism and imperialism — that it was possible to intervene in Libya on humanitarian grounds without thereby interfering in the internal affairs of the country. The belief that one can take recourse to war to save the lives of the innocent without, in the course of that war, taking even more lives of innocents, also was in play.

The comparison to Iraq is obvious. Both countries had a monstrous dictator. Both were subjected to no-fly zones. The no-fly zones don't deter the dictator. In due course, this evolves into a massive intervention in which the government is overthrown and the opposition goes into an internal civil war while simultaneously attacking the invaders. Of course, alternatively, this might play out like the Kosovo war, where a few months of bombing saw the government surrender the province. But in that case, only a province was in play. In this case, although focused ostensibly on the east, Gadhafi in effect is being asked to give up everything, and the same with his supporters — a harder business.

In my view, waging war to pursue the national interest is on rare occasion necessary. Waging war for ideological reasons requires a clear understanding of the ideology and an even clearer understanding of the reality on the ground. In this intervention, the ideology is not crystal clear, torn as it is between the concept of self-determination and the obligation to intervene to protect the favored faction. The reality on the ground is even less clear. The reality of democratic uprisings in the Arab world is much more complicated than the narrative makes it out to be, and the application of the narrative to Libya simply breaks down. There is unrest, but unrest comes in many sizes, democratic being only one.

Whenever you intervene in a country, whatever your intentions, you are intervening on someone's side. In this case, the United States, France and Britain are intervening in favor of a poorly defined group of mutually hostile and suspicious tribes and factions that have failed to coalesce, at least so far, into a meaningful military force. The intervention may well succeed. The question is whether the outcome will create a morally superior nation. It is said that there can't be anything worse than Gadhafi. But Gadhafi did not rule for 42 years because he was simply a dictator using force against innocents, but rather because he speaks to a real and powerful dimension of Libya.