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Imperial Hubris in Post-Gadhafi Libya

By John Glaser

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Here in the sixth month of [what was supposed to be a few days](#) of NATO's war in Libya, it seems Muammar Gadhafi may be on the verge of being ousted from power. The rebels have [expanded their control of a number of cities and towns](#) outside of the de facto rebel capital Benghazi and have now invaded Tripoli, Gadhafi's last stronghold. Rebels marched within two miles of the city center, as Gadhafi's defenders melted away, [his presidential guard surrendered](#), and [his two sons were arrested](#), according to rebels.

Meanwhile, a spokesman for Gaddafi's government, Moussa Ibrahim, [said](#) he was ready for immediate negotiations with rebels through the head of the National Transitional Council, and has asked NATO to convince the rebel forces to halt an attack on Tripoli. Signaling his desperation, he appears to recognize he has nearly lost.

These developments have prompted heads to turn to the Western powers that facilitated this war for what to do about a post-Gadhafi Libya. Having hitched the NATO wagon to a rather unimpressive star, concerns are rising that a rebel-controlled country is unworkable and undesirable.

The rebel group is [not a cohesive assemblage](#), but made of disparate factions. The main rebel group, based in Benghazi in the country's east, consists of former government ministers who have defected, and longstanding opposition figures, representing a range of political views including Arab nationalists, Islamists, secularists, socialists and businessmen. Their military forces are a hodge-podge of armed groups, former soldiers and freelance militias, including

amateur neighborhood gangs and former members of an Islamist guerrilla group crushed by Gaddafi in the 1990s.

An example of their divisions made headlines at the end of July, [when rebel military commander Abdel Fattah Younis was assassinated by his fellow comrades](#) on suspicion of being disloyal and having perhaps been responsible for an inadequate rebel performance in the east. More than division, the rebels have accumulated a record of [extrajudicial executions, suppression of free speech, beatings, and thievery](#), which have their Western enablers worried about their ability to run a just and humane country.

And such a task will be monumental. The economy is ruined, infrastructure has been bombed and destroyed, communications are disrupted, public services are damaged and heavily armed gangs loyal only to themselves are likely to remain at large. Political tasks, like a significant refugee problem and [a looming division of the country between eastern and western tribes](#), are also complicated undertakings, to say the least.

Some minor preparations have been made. The National Transition Council has spent months working on a post-Gaddafi plan that includes the establishment of a constitutional authority and UN-supervised elections. But the environment on the ground signals it may not be enough.

Uncertainty over who controls Libya, or doubts about whether they enjoy broad support, [could potentially undermine the stability of the embattled country](#). Such instability, being addressed by such an incompetent and fractured group, could not only produce a humanitarian disaster, it could lead to the emergence of new authoritarian government.

But the NATO-led intervention shows in and of itself that the U.S. and European powers perceive vital interests in Libya, [including oil and gas supplies](#). This virtually excludes any sort of “hands off” approach. And the impending political vacuum surely concerns those in Washington and the European Union, for a descent into chaos as was seen in Iraq circa 2006 is a political liability and a costly option.

This makes it extremely unlikely that the U.S. and NATO will simply pat the rebels on the back and wish them good luck in their new Gadhafi-free Libya. Actually, it has been known for some time now that NATO ground troops will eventually be necessary. U.S. Army General Carter Ham, who led the military mission until NATO took over, [predicted as much back in April](#). And [U.S. Admiral Samuel Locklear anticipated back in June that ground troops would probably be necessary after Gadhafi’s fall](#).

The European powers have expressed no desire to lead a nation building occupation in Libya, and their struggling economies are an excuse to take a back seat, which means America, the world’s military hegemon, will be looked at to do the job. Another U.S.-led NATO occupation in yet another Muslim country in the Middle East would be a disaster and would likely prolong a simmering civil war in Libya for a decade or more.

Furthermore, the costly, broken adventures in Iraq and Afghanistan prove that such interventionist, imperial campaigns are not only deadly, but also expensive. And Libyans surely

do not want to be run by foreigners. That sentiment has been coming back to bite America for more than a decade now, at terrible cost to blood and treasure and liberty.

The political and military elites in Washington, though, seem to think it a blessing that American troops, bases, and client states be set up in yet another country. Their hubris, if pursued in Libya, will be yet another piece in the puzzle of America's ruin.