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Libya and Iraq: The Price of Success

By George Friedman
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In a week when the European crisis continued building, the White House chose publicly to focus on announcements about the end of wars. The death of Moammar Gadhafi was said to mark the end of the war in Libya, and excitement about a new democratic Libya abounded. Regarding Iraq, the White House transformed the refusal of the Iraqi government to permit U.S. troops to remain into a decision by Washington instead of an Iraqi rebuff.

Though in both cases there was an identical sense of "mission accomplished," the matter was not nearly as clear-cut. The withdrawal from Iraq creates enormous strategic complexities rather than closure. While the complexities in Libya are real but hardly strategic, the two events share certain characteristics and are instructive.

Libya After Gadhafi

Let us begin with the lesser event, Gadhafi's death. After seven months of NATO intervention, Gadhafi was killed. That it took so long for this to happen stands out, given that the intervention involved far more than airstrikes, including special operations forces on the ground targeting for airstrikes, training Libyan troops, managing logistics, overseeing communications and both planning and at times organizing and leading the Libyan insurgents in battle.

Perhaps this length of time resulted from a strategy designed to minimize casualties at the cost of prolonging the war. Alternatively, that it took seven months to achieve this goal might reflect the extent of the insurgents' division, poor training and incompetence. Whatever the reason, the

more important question is what NATO thinks it has accomplished with Gadhafi's death, as satisfying as that death might be.

The National Transitional Council (NTC), the umbrella organization crafted to contain the insurgents, is in no position to govern Libya by any ideology, let alone through constitutional democracy. Gadhafi and his supporters ruled Libya for 42 years; the only people in the NTC with any experience with government gained that experience as ministers or lesser officials in Gadhafi's government. Some may have switched sides out of principle, but I suspect that most defected to save themselves. While the media has portrayed many of these ex-ministers as opponents of Gadhafi, anyone who served him was complicit in his crimes.

These individuals are the least likely to bring reform to Libya and the most likely to constitute the core of a new state, as they are the only Libyans who know what it means to govern. Around them is an array of tribes living in varying degrees of tension and hostility with each other and radical Islamists whose number and capabilities are unknown, but whose access to weapons can be assumed. It also is safe to assume that many of those weapons, of various types of lethality, will be on the black market in the region in short order, as they may already be.

Gadhafi did not rule for 42 years without substantial support, as the tenacity of those who fought on his behalf suggests. (The defense of Sirte could well be described as fanatical.) Gadhafi is dead, but not all of his supporters are. And there are other elements within the country who may not be Gadhafi supporters but are no less interested in resisting those who are now trying to take charge — and resisting anyone perceived to be backed by Western powers. As with the conquest of Baghdad in 2003, what was unanticipated — but should not have been — was that a variety of groups would resist the new leaders and wage guerrilla war.

Baghdad taught that overwhelming force must be brought to bear in any invasion such that all opposition is eliminated. Otherwise, opponents of foreign occupation — along with native elements with a grudge against other natives — are quite capable of creating chaos. When we look at the list of NTC members and try to imagine them cooperating with each other and when we consider the number of Gadhafi supporters who are now desperadoes with little to lose, the path to stable constitutional democracy runs either through NATO occupation (unofficial, of course) or through a period of intense chaos. The most likely course ahead is a NATO presence sufficient to enrage the Libyan people but insufficient to intimidate them.

And Libya is not a strategic country. It is neither large in population nor geographically pivotal. It does have oil, as everyone likes to point out, and that makes it appealing. But it is not clear that the presence of oil increases the tendency toward stability. When we look back on Iraq, an oil-rich country, oil simply became another contentious issue in a galaxy of contentious issues.

The Lesson of Baghdad

Regarding Libya, I have a sense of Baghdad in April 2003. U.S. President Barack Obama's announcement of a complete U.S. withdrawal from Iraq gives us a sense of what lies at the end of the tunnel of the counterinsurgency. It must be understood that Obama did not want a total withdrawal. Until just a few weeks before the announcement, he was looking for ways to keep

some troops in Iraq's Kurdish region. U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta went to Iraq wanting an agreement providing for a substantial number of U.S. troops in Iraq past the Dec. 31 deadline for withdrawal.

While the idea did appeal to some in Iraq, it ultimately failed. This is because the decision-making structure of the Iraqi government that emerged from U.S. occupation and the war is so fragmented it has failed even to craft a law on hydrocarbons, something critical to the future of Iraq. It was therefore in no position to reach consensus, or even a simple majority, over the question of a continued presence of foreign troops. Many Iraqis did want a U.S. presence, particularly those concerned about their fate once the United States leaves, such as the Kurds and Sunnis. The most important point is not that the Iraqis decided they did not want troops; it is that the Iraqi government was in the end too incoherent to reach any decision.

The strategic dimension to this is enormous. The Iranians have been developing their influence in Iraq since before 2003. They have not developed enough power to control Iraq outright. There are too many in Iraq, even among the Shia, who distrust Iranian power. Nevertheless, the Iranians have substantial influence — not enough to impose policies but enough to block any they strongly object to. The Iranians have a fundamental national security interest in a weak Iraq and in the withdrawal of American forces, and they had sufficient influence in Baghdad to ensure American requests to stay were turned down.

Measuring Iranian influence in Iraq is not easy to do. Much of it consists of influence and relationships that are not visible or are not used except in urgent matters. The United States, too, has developed a network of relationships in Iraq, as have the Saudis. But the United States is not particularly good at developing reliable grassroots supporters. The Iranians have done better because they are more familiar with the terrain and because the price for double-crossing the Iranians is much higher than that imposed by the United States. This gives the Iranians a more stable platform from which to operate. While the Saudis have tried to have it both ways by seeking to maintain influence without generating anti-Saudi feeling, the Iranian position has been more straightforward, albeit in a complex and devious way.

Let us consider what is at stake here: Iran has enough influence to shape some Iraqi policies. With the U.S. withdrawal, U.S. allies will have to accommodate themselves both to Iran and Iran's supporters in the government because there is little other choice. The withdrawal thus does not create a stable balance of power; it creates a dynamic in which Iranian influence increases if the Iranians want it to — and they certainly want it to. Over time, the likelihood of Iraq needing to accommodate Iranian strategic interests is most likely. The possibility of Iraq becoming a puppet of Iran cannot be ruled out. And this has especially wide regional consequences given Syria.

The Role of Syria

Consider the Libyan contrast with Syria. Over the past months, the Syrian opposition has completely failed in bringing down the regime of Presiden Bashar al Assad. Many of the reports received about Syria originate from anti-Assad elements outside of Syria who draw a picture of the impending collapse of the regime. This simply hasn't happened, in large part because al

Assad's military is loyal and well organized and the opposition is poorly organized and weak. The opposition might have widespread support, but sentiment does not defeat tanks. Just as Gadhafi was on the verge of victory when NATO intervened, the Syrian regime does not appear close to collapse. It is hard to imagine NATO intervening in a country bordering Turkey, Iraq, Jordan, Israel and Lebanon given the substantial risk of creating regional chaos. In contrast, Gadhafi was isolated politically and geographically.

Syria was close to Iran before the uprising. Iran has been the most supportive of the Syrian regime. If al Assad survives this crisis, his willingness to collaborate with Iran will only intensify. In Lebanon, Hezbollah — a group the Iranians have supported for decades — is a major force. Therefore, if the U.S. withdrawal in Iraq results in substantial Iranian influence in Iraq, and al Assad doesn't fall, then the balance of power in the region completely shifts.

This will give rise to a contiguous arc of Iranian influence stretching from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean Sea running along Saudi Arabia's northern border and along the length of Turkey's southern border. Iranian influence also will impact Israel's northern border directly for the first time. What the Saudis, Turks and Israelis will do about this is unclear. How the Iranians would exploit their position is equally unclear. Contrary to their reputation, they are very cautious in their overt operations, even if they take risks in their covert operations. Full military deployment through this region is unlikely for logistical reasons if nothing else. Still, the potential for such a deployment, and the reality of increasingly effective political influence regardless of military movement, is strategically significant. The fall of al Assad would create a firebreak for Iranian influence, though it could give rise to a Sunni Islamist regime.

The point here, of course, is that the decision to withdraw from Iraq and the inability to persuade the Iraqi government to let U.S. forces remain has the potential to change the balance of power in the region. Rather than closing the book on Iraq, it simply opens a new chapter in what was always the subtext of Iraq, namely Iranian power. The civil war in Iraq that followed the fall of Saddam Hussein had many dimensions, but its most strategically important one was the duel between the United States and Iran. The Obama administration hopes it can maintain U.S. influence in Iraq without the presence of U.S. troops. Given that U.S. influence with the presence of troops was always constrained, this is a comforting, though doubtful, theory for Washington to consume.

The Libyan crisis is not in such a high-stakes region, but the lesson of Iraq is useful. The NATO intervention has set the stage for a battle among groups that are not easily reconciled and who were held together by hostility to Gadhafi and then by NATO resources. If NATO simply leaves, chaos will ensue. If NATO gives aid, someone will have to protect the aid workers. If NATO sends troops, someone will attack them, and when they defend themselves, they will kill innocents. This is the nature of war. The idea of an immaculate war is fantasy. It is not that war is not at times necessary, but a war that is delusional is always harmful. The war in Iraq was delusional in many ways, and perhaps nowhere more than in the manner in which the United States left. That is being repeated in Libya, although with smaller stakes.

In the meantime, the influence of Iran will grow in Iraq, and now the question is Syria. Another NATO war in Syria is unlikely and would have unpredictable consequences. The survival of al

Assad would create an unprecedented Iranian sphere of influence, while the fall of al Assad would open the door to regimes that could trigger an Israeli intervention.

World War II was nice in that it offered a clean end — unless, of course, you consider that the Cold War and the fear of impending nuclear war immediately succeeded it. Wars rarely end cleanly, but rather fester or set the stage for the next war. We can see that clearly in Iraq. The universal congratulations on the death of Moammar Gadhafi are as ominous as all victory celebrations are, because they ignore the critical question: Now what?