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Libya: No Regrets

posted by Marko Attila Hoare at 29/11/2011



The evident domination of Islamist elements in post-Gaddafi Libya, symbolised by the announcement of National Transitional

Council chairman Mustafa Abdul-Jalil that Sharia would form the basis for legislation in the new Libya and that the law against polygamy was to be relaxed, raises the question of whether the West was wrong to intervene against Gaddafi. And the answer is that no, we were not.

When the uprising broke out in February against Gaddafi's dictatorship, it was clear that the latter had to go, just as it is clear today that Assad's dictatorship in Syria has to go. The only question over Libya then, as over Syria now, was how long-drawn-out, bloody and destructive the transition to a new order would be. Those of us who backed intervention in Libya did not do so in the belief that, if the revolution there were to succeed, Libya would turn overnight into Denmark or Holland. We did so in the belief that the alternative, of allowing Gaddafi a free hand against the rebels, was by far the greater evil. At the time of writing, over 3,500 Syrians have been killed by Assad's security forces, and we have no way of knowing how many more are going to die, and how much destruction the country will suffer, before the Ba'athist regime is overthrown and Syria can reach the point where Libya is today.

The more protracted, bloody and destructive the Syrian transition is, the more difficult it will be to build a healthy new order in Syria afterward. The ultimate danger is not a Libya or a Syria in which some form of political Islam is strong or in power, but an Afghan or Somali scenario in which the state is destroyed by civil war and collapses, creating a void that organisations such as al-Qaeda can fill. Only slightly less unpalatable is a Yemeni scenario, in which a discredited dictator holds onto power but loses full control of his county, allowing al Qaeda to gain a foothold. Yemen is the principal centre for operations of 'Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula', despite Ali Abdullah Saleh's pro-Western orientation.

Just as Bolshevik and Stalinist tyranny were the children of Tsarist tyranny, so the Islamist elements that have risen to the fore in Libya since Gaddafi's fall are the children of Gaddafi's system, which prevented any healthy, pluralistic system from developing and acted as an incubator for radical Islamism. Anyone who thought that Gaddafi's regime acted as a Hobbesian

Leviathan keeping Islamist elements in check was wrong: Gaddafi's Libya sent more fighters per capita to join the Islamist insurgency in Iraq than any other country, including Saudi Arabia. Despite being in power for forty-two years and wielding absolute control over his country, Gaddafi never got round actually to abolishing polygamy; he merely restricted it.

The foreign media has rightly highlighted the disgraceful treatment of [David Gerbi](#), the Libyan Jew who joined the rebellion against Gaddafi, but was then driven out of the country after trying to re-open a synagogue; yet it was Gaddafi who banned the return of Jews to Libya, confiscated all Jewish property in the country and drove out the few Jews who remained, thereby establishing a Libya that was [Judenrein](#). In 1972, in order to pursue his megalomaniacal regional adventures, Gaddafi established the 'Islamic Legion' as an international paramilitary force with an ideology blending Islamism and Arab-supremacist, anti-black racism; it fathered the Janjaweed, with which the Islamist regime in Sudan carried out the Darfur genocide. Given this legacy, it would have been a miracle if a post-Gaddafi Libyan regime were not tainted with Islamism.

We in the West had a humanitarian duty in February and March of this year to protect the Libyan people from massacre at Gaddafi's hands, and once we had embarked on that intervention, we could only ensure its ultimate success by bringing down the murderous regime. As John McCain said in April after visiting a hospital in Benghazi and seeing the dead and dying victims of the war, 'It argues for us to help them and to get this thing over with and Gaddafi out.' But now that we have helped the Libyan people to do what they could not do by themselves, saving their citizens from massacre and freeing them from a dictatorship, it is up to them to do what they have to do for themselves: build a healthy, functioning, pluralistic new order.

Western military intervention has helped maximise the chances of such an order emerging, but it cannot guarantee that it will. We cannot force Libyans or other Arabs to vote for secular parties, much as we would like them to do so. The struggle for a democratic Arab world will be slow and painful; it will be marked by setbacks and defeats, and Arab countries will not always make

the choices that we might want. That, after all, is in the nature of democracy. Realistically, democracy in the Arab world will have to accommodate political Islam in some form, but there is a whole range of phenomena that that term embraces, from Turkey's Justice and Development Party through the Muslim Brotherhood to al-Qaeda, and we should not see Armageddon coming just because of the NTC chairman's deplorable comments regarding Sharia law and polygamy – we are a long way from an al-Qaeda caliphate in Libya or Tunisia. Expressions of moderation by Mustafa Abdul-Jalil and by Libyan Islamists such as Abdel Hakim Belhadj and Ali al-Sallabi should be taken with a pinch of salt, but even insincere expressions of moderation indicate that Islamists are aware they do not have a blank slate, and that their agenda for the country is [far from uncontested](#).

The battle for the new order in Libya is only just beginning. We cannot predict or determine the outcome, but we should not regret that we helped to give the Libyan people the chance to fight it.

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