

# The 'Iraqisation' of Libya

Awash in weapons and riven by militias and regional rivalry, Libya's future looks grim. **Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou** warns of the factors pushing the country down a similar route to post-Saddam Iraq

**O**f all the uncertain courses that post-revolution Libya may choose to take, Iraq's path in recent years looms as a perilous example to be avoided. Each case of post-dictatorship politics is unique, of course, and each new beginning is delicate in terms of timing, societal empowerment and political liberalisation. And after 42 years of dictatorship, the new Libya needs more than wishful thinking about finding its way to vibrant democracy; wishful thinking is no substitute for arduous state-building in Tripoli or realistic policymaking in Western capitals.

Libya's overarching challenge is the very nature of the democratisation process. Revolutions are short-lived periods of energy whose closure is the fall of the old order; but transitions are highly complex, open-ended and require building skills rather than liberating actions. Successful transitions depend right from the start on factors that are still crucially missing in Libya – a relatively cohesive leadership, an active civil society and peaceful nation-wide unity. Failing that, the likelihood is that Libya, or to be more precise Tripolitania, Cyrenaica and Fezzan, will drift in the same way as Mesopotamia after Saddam Hussein. For the area suffers from persistent political division, volatile internal disorder and a multifaceted array of geopolitical factors.

Although what Libya needs as a priority is a strong political centre; right from the start of the uprising in February 2011 the country has been experiencing political atomisation. It conspicuously lacks the sort of civil society that could have led the uprising while planting the seeds for post-autocratic politics, as was the case in Tunisia and Egypt, and is indeed still the case in Syria.

The revolution in Libya was arguably infantilised all the more by NATO's intervention as the rapid shift from a spontaneous popular uprising to an elite-led movement that was chiefly connected to external support prevented the revolution from following the linear



Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou is Head of the Middle East and North Africa Programme at the Geneva Center for Security Policy

model seen in Tunisia and Egypt. So despite all the international support it managed to muster, the National Transitional Council (NTC) never achieved the levels of consensus needed to form a viable government.

It has suffered regular disputes internally, and only the fall of Tripoli was able to distract attention from the secrecy surrounding the NTC's membership and its decision-making process, together with its regular unverifiable announcements about arrests, reshufflings and so on. The opacity that surrounded the July 28 assassination of the Council's military leader Abdel Fatah Younis, with former Deputy Prime Minister of the NTC, Ali Issawi, among those named by the NTC's military prosecutor as suspected of involvement in the assassination were also tell-tale signs that pointed to the incipient fragility that resurfaced after Muammar Gaddafi's death last October.

Libya should take note of the way that Iraq's transitional arrangements featured ceaseless competition between figures vying for power. The likes of Iyad Allawi, Ahmed Chalabi, Jalal Talabani, Massoud Barzani and other tribal and religious figures in Iraq set in motion a dynamic which in 2010 left the country without a government for 249 days. Today, the new Libya appears set to experience similar intrigue-filled growing pains. The key element in this is the presence of a number of powerful political actors besides the NTC. The 20,000-strong Tripoli Military Council (TMC), which controls the country's capital, has been consistently independent of the NTC, and forced out its first foreign minister, Mahmoud Jibril. The rival Tripoli Revolutionists' Council (TRC), meanwhile, has warned that it would unseat any incoming government, by arms if necessary, should its demands for representation not be met. And Libya's Berbers, who account for 10% of the population, have already taken to the streets to denounce the new political arrangements and reject any system that does not accommodate their Amazigh ethnicity and language.

All these dissensions may well deepen once the existing political rivalries are compounded by two further factors. The first is the competing senses of entitlement to the fruits of the revolution claimed by the country's major cities – Misrata where the body of Gaddafi was displayed, Tripoli which hosted the liberation ceremony, and Zentan for detaining Saif al-Islam Gaddafi. What

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they all share, of course, are the unrealistic expectations of most Libyans that their newfound freedom will be an answer to all their socioeconomic problems.

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The second is that political power now resides overwhelmingly in the hands of competing militias. Libya may yet descend into the type of insecurity that Iraq experienced in the mid-2000s. The internecine rivalries that began in earnest last November between Zawiya and Warshefana fighters and among Tripoli’s various factions will be particularly difficult to tackle since the thowar (revolutionaries) – high-strung young men manning improvised random checkpoints and roaming the cities in armoured pick-ups – have rebuffed repeated NTC calls to disarm.

It is possible that Tripoli will increasingly come to resemble Baghdad circa 2005, with different groups each controlling their “turf” and running a “clientelist” neighbourhood political economy. Amongst these groups, the TMC headed by Abdel Hakim Belhadj – the founder and former emir of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group whose integration into Al-Qaeda was announced by Ayman al-Zawahiri in November 2007 – and the TRC, led by Abdullah Naker, have systematically put on military shows of force in the guise of the “national interest”, but primarily pitted against each other.

The militarisation of Libyan political power and the defiant independence of the militias are just the tip of the iceberg. Libya is awash in weapons, with unguarded caches, abandoned stockpiles, looted ammunition depots, and thousands of shoulder-fired heat-seeking surface-to-air missiles. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) had already seized the opportunity to secure some of this arsenal once the revolution started, and last November Mokhtar Belmokhtar, emir of the Moulathamoun Katiba of AQIM, confirmed this. Meanwhile, Libyan armaments have been funnelled to Tunisia and Egypt, and have reportedly also made their way to Sudan and perhaps to Nigeria, where the Boko Haram Islamist movement is gathering strength.

Iraq, it’s perhaps worth noting, had not suffered from terrorism under Saddam Hussein’s Ba’athist police state, but after his fall in 2003 experienced the highest levels of suicide attacks in history.



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The new Libya, by contrast, suffers from the presence of a pre-existing vortex of transnational terrorism in the Sahel, and this has of late been gaining momentum under AQIM leadership.

The ubiquity of weapons and the growing threat of terrorism, combined with the brigades' rivalry and the government's lack of a monopoly of force, are being made all the more problematic by the criss-crossing movements of battle-hardened Tuaregs who have formed themselves into a newly-led Popular Movement for the Liberation of Azawad in northern Mali and Niger. At the same time, AQIM operators and ancien régime sympathisers are being regularly invited in Bin Laden-style audio messages dispatched from Algiers by Gaddafi's daughter Aicha to rise against the new authorities. On top of this there is a Falluja-like resentment harboured in cities such as Sirte where, according to United Nations observers and the Human Rights Watch NGO, extrajudicial killings, lynchings, disappearances, and abuses affect several thousand people, notably Sub-Saharan migrants.

Much in the way that the U.S.-led takeover in Iraq contributed to that country's instability, Libya today finds itself the object of competing international agendas. With activists in Cyrenaica, the eastern part of the country, having pursued their own goals for a year now, the repositioning of Libya in Arab, African and Mediterranean terms, along with its newfound cosiness with the West, will add up to an inconsistent foreign policy in the short term at least. The roles

played by France, the United Kingdom, the United States, the Arab League, NATO and Qatar in Libya's transformation bring together a mix of actors whose aims beyond regime change are unlikely to be the same. In other words, Libya is liable to be pulled in several different directions, and that will further delay an autonomous and sustainable state-building process.

In truth, Muammar Gaddafi left a booby-trap behind him. Libyan society's long authoritarian rule has created a security vacuum and no functioning state apparatus – it is now a country wide open to international influence and corporate interests. Preventing Libya from staging a replay of the costly errors made in Iraq will require adroit leadership on the part of a government that has so far been unable to impose its authority. If the Libyan revolution is not to be put in jeopardy, the country must find a compelling new national vision that puts a stop to proliferating authorities, indisciplined militias and the sway of external influences. ■

mahmoud.mohamedou@graduateinstitute.ch

Commentary

## Libya isn't Iraq, but there are lessons to be learned from Saddam's legacy

**T**he temptation to draw parallels between Libya and Iraq is proving irresistible for many analysts. After all, both are Arab countries sharing many aspects of the same culture, and they also share a legacy of tyranny and dictatorship inflicted on them by two of the worst despots in modern history.

There are other distinctive characteristics, though, that make them more different than similar. These are things like the depth of tribalism, sectarianism and ethnic divisions that influence the social and political fabric of Iraq. Libya has to deal with certain low levels of tribal tension, but tribalism is not

and will not be a dominating factor either socially or politically.

But perhaps it's the way the two countries rid themselves of their dictators that will have the greatest impact on how they handle their transitions. In Iraq, the U.S. as an occupying force ejected Saddam Hussein from power, and then managed the transition and set the priorities. In Libya, the movement started as a popular uprising, just as in Tunisia and Egypt, and this turned into full-scale revolution and armed rebellion after the Gaddafi regime used military force against the demonstrators. Yes, NATO through the UN played a supporting role, but on the ground it was an all-Libyan struggle.



Fadel Lamem is President of the American-Libyan Council

Thus the transition in Iraq was imported from outside, led by the U.S. and the UK, whereas in Libya it's the Libyans themselves who have been taking the lead. Libyans' lack of political experience, and the decentralised way the revolution evolved has meant that in every city local communities were forced to develop their own councils and militias, with the result that a country once controlled by a central authority without central governance must now build central governance without central authority.

Libyans are fearful of a return to centralised authority because Gaddafi used the marginalisation of some regions as a collective punishment tool. But this residual fear can only be overcome through negotiation and assurances.

Iraq's militias have been either sectarian or ethnically based, while in Libya they formed geographically during the months of conflict, rather than for religious or ethnic reasons. But in Libya it is also true that these militias will probably try to cash in on their role in liberating the country by seeking to influence the country's future.

Iraq's "de-Baathification" was meant to rid the country of the old regime, and was in the view of many, including my own, a spur to civil war because it weakened national unity and hindered the national reconciliation effort. Libyans are looking very closely at this example, and are trying to avoid

making the same mistake of vilifying unnecessarily too wide a swathe of the population, or of creating a lose-lose situation for those whose support is needed to form a functioning new government.

Comparing the Libyan revolution with those of Egypt and Tunisia can be misleading, because in both of these cases the army sided with the people. In Egypt the uprising was hi-jacked by a military coup, while in Tunisia the more orderly transition being managed by civil bureaucrats and military leaders saw the military acting as stabiliser rather than leader.

Libya may either fail or go through hard times, but that won't be because it resembles Iraq. It will be because of the unique legacy that Gaddafi left behind him. Prof. Mohamedou puts it well when he writes: "Muammar Gaddafi left a booby-trap behind him. Libyan society's long authoritarian rule has created a security and no functioning state apparatus". As one Libyan civil servant put it to me recently: "Gaddafi isn't dead, he's still alive in everything around us." The Libyan people now have to understand that re-building their country on this inherited legacy won't be easy. They will need a lot of help from their friends to figure things out, but not the kind of help that was offered to Iraq. ■

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[americanlibyancouncil@gmail.com](mailto:americanlibyancouncil@gmail.com)