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Libya after the NATO invasion

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The 2010 UN Human Development Index – which is a composite measure of health, education and income – ranked Libya 53rd in the world, and first in Africa.

What was a predominantly rural and backward country when the king was deposed 42 years ago is today a country with a modern economy and high literacy. This single fact embodies the gist of Gaddafi's claim to the historical legitimacy of his rule.

The popular debate on Libya is today divided: one side stresses solidarity with an oppressed people, the other is opposed to another Western war.

Soon after the Western coalition imposed a no-fly zone on Libya, the *New York Times* published an opinion piece by a Libyan professor of political science at a US east coast college. Ali Ahmida divided Gaddafi's rule into two periods, each representing one side of the argument today.

Impressions of a young Gaddafi

In its first two decades, he wrote, the revolution brought many benefits to ordinary Libyans: widespread literacy, free medical care, education, and improvements in living conditions. Women in particular benefited, becoming ministers, ambassadors, pilots, judges and doctors. The government got wide support from the lower and middle classes.

The down side was a demagogic regime that revelled in rituals of hero worship and cynically embraced violence. Faced with successive coup attempts, it staffed security forces with reliable relatives and allies from central and southern Libya, a move that gradually transformed a national government into a tribal administration.

My first impression of Gaddafi was formed by a revealing incident I read several decades ago in a memoir by Muhammad Haykal, Nasser's famed press secretary.

Haykal recounts a conversation between visiting Chinese premier Chou en Lai and Nasser during a state reception.

Pointing to a young man in uniform, Chou en Lai asked: Who is he? Why, replied Nasser, that is Col Gaddafi who just overthrew the monarchy in Libya, and added, why do you ask?

It is difficult to forget Chou en Lai's response: Well, he just came over and asked me how much it would cost to purchase an atom bomb! The anecdote sums up Gaddafi's well-known erratic nature.

No rest for the revolutionary

Gaddafi saw himself as an anti-imperialist fighter, which is how the Gaddafi brand was marketed on the African continent. In practise, however, the Gaddafi regime supported whoever was willing to pay homage to his leadership.

The beneficiaries of his largess added up to a motley list: from Uganda's National Resistance Army, of which Gaddafi was among the earliest financiers, to the Revolutionary United Front of Sierra Leone, better known for its brutal savagery – chopping off noses, fingers and hands of supporters and opponents alike – to mercenary-type groups for which he was often the sole financier, such as the Arab Legion, an umbrella group under which sheltered several armed nomadic militias in Chad and Darfur.

Gaddafi came to see himself as the CEO of the 'liberation' camp in Africa. When Ugandans debated several years ago whether or not to amend the Constitution and remove the two-term limitation on the presidency, Gaddafi had no hesitation in intervening in the national debate. He pronounced: "Revolutionaries do not retire!"

Gaddafi's rapprochement with the West unfolded in 2003. In return for dismantling nuclear facilities and inviting a string of US, UK and Italian companies – Occidental Petroleum, BP and ENI – Gaddafi was welcomed back into the Western fold.

As the external face of the dictatorship shifted from an anti-imperialist to a pro-Western orientation, Gaddafi went so far as to join the American-led 'war on terror'.

But when the crunch came and his new patrons turned against him, Gaddafi was without nuclear weapons to fend off military reprisals or powerful friends to stand up for him in the Security Council.

Lessons from the periphery

It may be too late for Gaddafi to draw lessons from these developments, but not so for others.

One such lesson was offered by a North Korean foreign ministry official who accused the US of having removed nuclear arms capabilities from Libya through negotiations as a precursor to invasion.

The spokesperson told Pyongyang's official Korean Central News Agency that "the Libyan crisis is teaching the international community a grave lesson."

Claiming that it vindicated North Korea's military-first policy, the official went on to sum up the lesson: "The truth that one should have power to defend peace has been confirmed once again."

Uganda's Yoweri Museveni, one of America's closest allies in Africa, draws a similar lesson: "I am quite sure that many countries that are able will scale up their military research and in a few decades we may have a more armed world. This weapons science is not magic.?"

The irony is that the invasion mounted to save civilian lives in Libya is likely to end up making the world more insecure.

But what about civilian lives in Libya itself? How effective will the NATO intervention be in saving these?

Premeditated intervention

To begin with, there is the case of the grand marshal of the NATO invasion, Sarkozy, who has over the past few months resembled a man looking for an opportunity to flex his military muscles, no matter the cause.

His first offer of "French security forces expertise" came in January and it was to help Tunisia's president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali keep rebellious civilians under control.

When nothing came of it, Sarkozy switched steps without the blink of an eye, offering that same expertise to save rebellious civilians in Benghazi at the head of the NATO invasion.

Given the haste with which the no-fly resolution was passed at the UN Security Council, one may ask: How much evidence, aside from Gaddafi's blood-curdling hyper-rhetoric, was there of an unfolding genocide or a 'crime against humanity' in Libya?

Perhaps the most telling comment during the UN debate on a no-fly zone came from India's deputy ambassador to the UN.

In a speech welcoming the appointment by the UN secretary-general of an envoy to Libya, Manjeev Singh Puri regretted that the envoy's work had been short-circuited by Resolution 1973:

We have not had the benefit of his report or even a report from the Secretariat or his assessment as yet. That would have given us an objective analysis of the situation on the ground... The Council has today adopted a resolution that authorises far-reaching measures under Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter, with relatively little credible information on the situation on the ground in Libya.

The intervention that followed has been about more than just policing Libyan skies to save civilians on the ground.

In an obviously coordinated move, the British went for the person of the Libyan leader with a cruise missile, the French targeted his army and the Americans blew the Libyan air force to smithereens.

Together the NATO allies have made sure that no matter its identity, the regime that follows its humanitarian mission in Libya will be without a credible means of national defence.

For the people of Libya, there can be no quick fix. Not only will the post-invasion Libyan state lack the means to defend its sovereignty externally, a post-invasion Libyan government will need to accommodate a highly fractured society through patient coalition-building, if Libyan society is not to disintegrate into an Afghan-style civil war.

That necessary work will have to be political, not military. For that work to begin, the first prerequisite is an end to the NATO invasion and a ceasefire.