



THE MIDDLE EAST

An Arab Spring Challenges its Brutal Winter!

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Operation Odyssey Dawn managed to grab our full attention once more just as much of the world was trying to cope with the devastating earthquake that hit the north-eastern region of Japan almost two weeks ago. Every news channel today spends interminable hours - at times almost testosterone-driven and even gleeful hours - dissecting in forensic detail the attacks on Colonel Qadhafi's command and control systems in Libya that aim to degrade his defence capabilities and therefore ostensibly render the enforcement of the no-fly zone in that piece of the sky safer.

Today, though, I will neither analyse those ever-shifting and fast-paced developments nor make hasty assumptions about what the West should do now or how all Libyans could react to this multilateral intervention. After all, you can read my articles and listen to my pod-casts on this - and other - topics. Instead, I am simply going to posit a few statements and submit a few questions and then leave it to readers to draw their own conclusions. Some of my points are admittedly quite prosaic whilst others might help look at the conflicts of this region a tad more laterally.

Let me start off by underlining that the attack against Libya today is not legally identical to the invasion of Iraq that was jointly spearheaded in 2003 by President George Bush Jr and Prime Minister Tony Blair. In this case, UNSCR 1973 (and its antecedent Resolution 1970) provides ample legal authority for this operation. Moreover, the Arab League - in a rare moment of awakening from its habitual torpor - parted ways with the Organisation of African Unity and reflected instead the popular sentiments of the majority of Libyans as well as the Libyan Interim National Council by helping midwife this critical UN Resolution.

There is no doubt that this assault has already isolated and scattered the Libyan forces loyal to Colonel Qadhafi let alone avoided a bloodbath in Benghazi had those forces entered this eastern metropolis of the country that is the size of Alaska but with a population less numerous than that of New York.

However, the 'rebels' fighting against Colonel Qadhafi's forces remain by and large an unknown motley of ragtag groups: some of them are well-meaning and brave volunteers whilst others are former fighters from Afghanistan whose past let alone future loyalties remain questionable. Besides, their overall political stratagem remains unclear and I now wonder whether Moustafa Abdul Jalil and his team who aspire for a Qadhafi-free Libya would be able to govern the country once its erstwhile leader, his sons and followers, are debarred in one way or other from exercising their tyranny. Will it be an ideological, religious, secular or hybrid system? Or will we run the real prospect of chaos and clashes in this somewhat artificial country?

After all, the geostrategic dangers facing Libya are compounded by its tribalism since a long and seething history of rivalries among 140 largely unknown tribes and clans lurks behind the thin façade of a modern oil-rich state. Colonel Qadhafi has kept them in check with a combination of brutal repression and generous payoffs. But once he is forced out, the historical divisions between those tribes could well come to the fore and

they end up fighting one another for the spoils of the oil industry. This would not only destabilise the country further, but some tribes might end up forming, Iraq-like, unhealthy alliances with al-Qa'eda.

But let me also ask another question: is the imposition of a no-fly zone the objective of this operation as Amr Moussa, Secretary-General of the Arab League, has asserted on a couple of public occasions? If so, how will it differ from the 12-year no-fly zone that was imposed on Iraq but still led to a bloody and messy war? What about the Bosnian experience when UNSCR 816 also applied a no-fly zone in October 1992 but which did not prevent the Srebrenica massacre of July 1995 either? Do our politicians think that this would be enough to fulfil the mandate of the UNSCR and at the same time protect civilians?

Can we also honestly deny any moral equivalence in our decisions on Libya? Although I am aware of the counter-arguments that have already been ably put forth by some politicians, is it not true that we in the West have attacked Iraq and Libya - two major oil-rich countries - whilst we seem to overlook the bloodletting in other countries such as Yemen (with its beleaguered President Ali Abdullah Saleh), Bahrain (with a GCC-propped up Khalifa dynasty) or Syria (with a regime of emergency laws dating back to 1963) where the atrocities might not yet be as shameful as those of a rather unhinged and loathed Libyan leader but where the leaders are still killing scores of their own people and depriving them of most of their citizenship rights? Can we justify fully the distinctions we make between our stances? Does the fact that Bahrain houses the US Fifth Fleet, that Yemen is at the vanguard of the global fight against al-Qa'eda affiliates and that Syria is the hypothetical card both for Middle Eastern peace and against Iran, have anything to do with our selective choices or the duality of our choices? For that matter, and going outside the MENA region, can a politician explain with any measure of serious credibility why we chose not to act in Burma for instance? Or what about Congo and Zimbabwe for that matter, or those parts of the world where egregious violations have taken place over many decades and yet we have provided those regimes with arms and even support?

But let me also go back to 2005 when the UN approved a new doctrine called the 'Responsibility to Protect', nicknamed R2P, declaring that world powers have the right and obligation to overlook state sovereignty and intervene when a dictator decimates his people. This concept is slowly becoming part of customary International law, so could one not also argue that the Libyan intervention is putting some teeth into this fledgling concept? After all, it took us three-and-a-half years to respond forcefully to the slaughter in Bosnia but roughly three-and-a-half weeks to respond in Libya. Is this a timid sign of progress?

Equally importantly, is there a genuine consensus over this operation today? Or are we dealing with a package deal that we put together almost on the hoof? Is it not true that Germany and Turkey - two major NATO allies - expressed their initial reservations about this operation and that the USA is not keen to lead a campaign against yet another Muslim country after Iraq and Afghanistan? As such, my misgivings are further exacerbated when I ask myself the simple question: what is the implicit objective of this operation as allowed by the UNSCR that overrides its explicit one? In how many creative ways can we "interpret" this Resolution and could we then assume that taking out Colonel Qadhafi becomes allowable?

Let me now take this scenario even further in terms of command and control capabilities and assume that the air attacks will check if not also degrade Libyan forces, and the rebels start advancing westward toward Tripoli and in the process cause many civilians casualties too. Would we then attack the rebels to protect the civilians? In other words, which civilians are we mandated to protect according to Resolution 1973?

But if we avoid regime change, or if the hoped-for defections within Colonel Qadhafi's forces do not occur either and the higgledy-piggledy group of untrained and unquantifiable rebels are unable to impose a real change across the whole country or topple their erstwhile leader, would we send our troops in? Or would we

witness the emergence of a split into two Libyas - the eastern parts staying with the rebels and the western larger regions staying with Colonel Qadhafi? Besides, where would the split take place? Would it secure the water supplies or the oil fields? Would Sert, Colonel Qadhafi's tribal home, serve as a thin line in the sand?

Historically, the eastern regions were a Greco-Roman colony and the western regions were a Romano-Punic colony before Benito Mussolini unified Libya in 1939 anyway. In fact, let us not ignore that 500,000 Libyans died under Italian rule from 1911 till 1943 and one of the leaders of the Libyan resistance, Omar al-Mukhtar, was martyred in 1931 for telling the Italian occupiers that Libyans would not surrender but would either win or die. This almost rings contemporary bells with me in terms of some of Colonel Qadhafi's bluster and rhetoric. But those lofty principles of Libyan independence became derailed in the 1980's under Colonel Qadhafi's rule who lost the principles of his bloodless coup and perpetrated horrendous massacres (such as those at the Abu Salim prison in Tripoli in 1996) as well as wholesale abuses against his people.

But Libya is not the only country at a crossroads today since there are other bloody uprisings taking place in the MENA region. Whilst the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt passed more peacefully - at least in their initial phases - they are far from complete with serious flaws persisting and new problems arising (including those affecting women's rights) that require much vigilant follow-up. But we are now facing the upheaval of 'people power' in places like Yemen, Bahrain, Syria, Jordan, Morocco and other countries that are teetering on the slippery edge between hurried reforms for possible survival or entrenchment and possible collapse.

In fact, it is clear that the momentum for change is now well nigh irreversible, but its download time and manifestation will differ from one country to another since there is little homogeneity in the overall makeup of this region. In fact, the tectonic shifts taking place today can best be captured by Lenin's saying that "sometimes decades pass and nothing happens, and then sometimes weeks pass and decades happen".

So let me now also touch briefly upon the faith-based dimension of some of those uprisings. To do so, let me solely refer to the Chicago Initiative of 12th March that raised serious concerns about the future of the minority - largely indigenous and Christian - communities in countries such as Egypt and Iraq. Would their future for instance be safeguarded in the wake of those emerging albeit dusty realities or would they be inimical to their fundamental freedoms let alone to their very physical safety? Would the MENA region turn into a model of democracy, good governance and coexistence reminiscent of those pictures of crosses and crescents rejoicing together at Tahreer Square in Cairo or would a segregationist political Islam take over? Would the amended Egyptian Constitution [of 1971] - that garnered 14 million ayes and 4 million nays but was opposed by Mohamed El-Baradei and Amr Moussa - become a chart for promoting fundamental freedoms or one that oppresses further the basic rights of, say, Coptic Christians? Would the new realities emulate the facts of a Libyan town such as Darneah that is Islamist in nature but tolerant in outlook, or would they merely pump up the volume of anti-Christian, anti-West and anti-minority belligerence and take us back to where we were a few months ago - or worse, where we still are today in some other countries.

Indeed, from a Christian perspective, does such an operation fulfil the Augustinian principle of a just war? For any war to become just in Christian juridical understanding, it should include, inter alia, an end-game objective as well as a reasonable hope for success and the conviction that peace would ensue after the war. Do those criteria apply today to the UNSCR let alone to the combat operations on the ground?

Crucially at this stage, I must also ask what I deem to be a key question that underlies the harsh facts challenging us today. How did we in the West back, use and encourage the brutality of Arab dictators over long decades? To what degree did the cynical encouragement of despots foster the very jihadist wave that our Western societies and powers sought to curb? How do we deal with this inevitable tactical hypocrisy and

how will we deal with it in future? The answer to those uncomfortable questions might go a long way toward explaining the realities we are compelled to face in Libya and elsewhere in the MENA region today.

Symon Hill, the associate director of Ekklesia, a think-tank that promotes conflict transformation and nonviolent responses to injustice, recently raised some questions that are pertinent to our policies in the MENA region. He cautioned that, "It is local movements for change that lead countries away from tyranny. Freedom cannot be imposed top-down, least of all by a military intervention. More bombs will mean more deaths, not more democracy. The British Prime Minister is bombing Libya only a few months after authorising the sale of arms to the Gaddafi regime. Saudi forces are currently suppressing peaceful protests in Bahrain with armoured vehicles made in Newcastle. If the government wishes to demonstrate a commitment to opposing dictatorship on the world stage, ending all arms sales to oppressive regimes should be the priority, rather than risky military adventurism."

He then pressed on with what I personally would qualify as the crunch of his apposite argument. He stated that many American and European citizens whose governments are associated with Operation Odyssey Dawn will also find it puzzling let alone alarming that money has been found for another war at a time when it apparently cannot be found for the disability living allowance, higher education, rape crisis centres or libraries.

Today, some colleagues predict that we might end up in the MENA region by substituting one group of autocrats with another group of autocrats. Or, as Lu Xun, a Chinese writer expressed it elegantly after the toppling of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), "Before the revolution, we were slaves, and now we are the slaves of former slaves".

This could well happen and I might be proven wrong, but I still disagree with such pessimistic long-term analyses. Whilst it is true that the MENA region has in its history been a breeding place for Arab Caligulas the likes of the Fatimid Caliph Hakim as much as for ruthless dictators, delusional autocrats and benevolent despots, it has also produced inspiring and reformative polymaths, philosophers, scholars, scientists and leaders who have harnessed the resources of this vast region and placed it squarely on the global map. One such name is Ibn Khaldoun, appropriately enough a Tunisian philosopher, whose *Muqaddimah* (known as *Prolegomenon* in English) is a masterpiece on universal history and was reportedly described by the British historian Arnold J Toynbee as a philosophy of history which is undoubtedly the greatest work of its kind that has ever yet been created by any mind in any time or place.

Yet, revolutions are also not walkovers; rather, they could become long walks with many stumbling blocks, pitfalls and setbacks. So much as we might pass judgment on what is occurring today, and even make predictions of success and failure or analogies with events that happened in Eastern Europe almost two decades ago, I recall Zhou En Lai, the Chinese Communist prime minister, once commenting on the French Revolution that "it is too early to tell".

Readers can rightly draw their own conclusions. For me, though, the Arab spring will at best become a slow but transformative success. Or at worst, it will have at least challenged the brutal Arab winter and morphed some turgid realities on the ground. But one lesson I have already learnt suggests that ... any freedom is simply not free!

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