

Qaddafi's Death is Only the Beginning in Libya

Written by Robert W. Murray and Aidan Hehir

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ROBERT W. MURRAY AND AIDAN HEHIR, OCT 23 2011

As the images of celebration reach the world in the wake of Colonel Qaddafi's death, there is a common misconception that this marks the end of NATO's mission in Libya. For some, NATO involvement in Libya was a perfect example of how successful humanitarian intervention can be and could potentially set the stage for an operational framework for both the UN and NATO in the future when atrocities are committed. On closer inspection, however, the situation in Libya is only partially complete and the death of Qaddafi represents the transition from military intervention to nation-building, which is likely to be far more difficult than most expect.

When Resolution 1973 was passed by the UN Security Council, and NATO member states agreed to take over the operational side of the intervention, it was expected that Libyan military forces under Qaddafi would be defeated without much difficulty or loss of life. To achieve victory with the least cost, NATO's strategy involved the establishment of a no-fly zone rather than a boots-on-the-ground approach to intervention, which would have incurred heavier losses for NATO. Intelligence from within the alliance's member states suggested that the Libyan military was not very strong and that anti-aircraft defences could be eliminated by strategic strikes, even from 35,000 feet. While the military campaign was certainly longer and more extensive than many anticipated – to the extent that terms of the military force sanctioned by resolution 1973 were stretched beyond credibility – the campaign against the Libyan army was obviously a success. Indeed, the true fight for Libya has been over for some time now, as states and international institutions have openly recognized, and engaged with, the National Transitional Council as the legitimate governing authority in Libya since July 2011 and in some cases even earlier. It was only a matter of time until Qaddafi was found, and it comes as little surprise that he was killed.

The death of Qaddafi robs the world of an opportunity to learn more about the nature of Libya's role in the *war on terror*. Tony Blair's meeting with Qaddafi in 2004 was hailed as evidence of the efficacy of the war on terror as, we were assured, it demonstrated that rogue regimes feared the wrath of the US-led coalition and were thus impelled to reform. It is increasingly clear, however, that Qaddafi provided the US and UK with lucrative revenue opportunities as well as a venue to engage in interrogation techniques prohibited in most states. The cessation of Libya's chemical weapons program, though obviously significant, thus appears to have been a bargaining chip in a grand trade-off which enabled Qaddafi to continue to exercise tyrannical control in Libya without Western censure and, ironically, to enable Western intelligence agencies to avail of his regime's odious methods.

The death of Qaddafi is, naturally, a very public symbol that his reign of oppression is over and will not return, but this is not the end of the story for Libyans, the UN or NATO. In many ways, this is only the beginning. The campaign to maintain peace between the various factions united against Qaddafi could prove to be more difficult than the defeat of Qaddafi's forces. Since 2001, two nation-building experiments have proved, beyond any doubt, that the overthrow of a deviant regime is barely scratching the surface when it comes to establishing a functioning, democratic state. The overthrow of the Taliban in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein ousting in Iraq represented pivotal moments in their respective state's history, but for the intervening forces, the true battle had only begun. It is worth noting too that earlier exercises in statebuilding in both Bosnia and Kosovo took place in situations where, like Libya, the majority initially welcomed the international community. Nonetheless, the international presence in Bosnia is now in its 17th year while in Kosovo it is in its 12th. In the context of a "West" plagued by economic chaos it is doubtful whether such a commitment is feasible in Libya.

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The decision by the National Transitional Council to announce that elections will be held within eight months may seem like a triumph for democracy but one may well wonder at the logic of holding what are bound to be divisive elections in the immediate aftermath of a bloody civil war. History suggests that elections held in such a climate can degenerate into ethnic or tribal clashes dominated by power-hungry populists. The unity forged during the revolt against Qaddafi could be quickly shattered leaving NATO policing a fragmented (and armed) country with a negligible civil society through which societal divisions can be ameliorated. Presently, there is no national identity for the National Transitional Council as the governing authority in Libya. Many areas of the country have made it expressly clear that they would refuse to recognize the authority of the Council, leading to immediate civil divisions. One monster is gone, but the new problem in Libya is the uncertainty as to what comes next and how long NATO will have to remain.

A sense of finality about the Qaddafi era is now complete, but what comes next is entirely unclear. NATO has little choice but to remain for the time being, or else it risks the eruption of civil war and the emergence of a new authoritarian regime. NATO member states should prepare themselves for another nation-building quagmire; where they have both the resources and the resolve for such a mission is questionable.

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