

Musings on Gaddafi's death and Libya's future

Written by Zachary Keck

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ZACHARY KECK, OCT 26 2011

The death of former Libyan strongman Muammar Gaddafi and the Libya operation in general are interesting case studies from a number of different perspectives. The editors thought we'd raise some of the issues involved and encourage readers to share their own thoughts on these matters in the comment section below.

The first is the manner in which Gaddafi died.

Gaddafi was initially apprehended alive as evidenced from the videos that appeared online showing a badly injured Gaddafi being paraded around, punched, and spit on by joyous rebels. By the time he had reached the hospital, however, the former Libyan dictator was dead with bullet wounds to his head and chest.

The rebels interim body, the Transitional National Council (TNC), claim that Gaddafi was fatally wounded during a gunfight that ensued between regime loyalists and rebels Gaddafi was being transported to the hospital. International Human Rights Groups have cast doubt on the TNC's version of events and are calling for independent investigations into the manner, as is the U.N. human rights council and the United States.

So was Gaddafi executed and, if so, does it matter? After all, Gaddafi committed unspeakable atrocities' against the Libyan people for years. He certainly did not extend due process to these countless victims? Is it right, then, that he be denied it also?

Another aspect to this is that the International Criminal Court (ICC) had a warrant out for Gaddafi's arrest. On the one hand, Gaddafi's death renders moot what was shaping up to be a bitter dispute between the ICC and the TNC over who would get to try Gaddafi. Nonetheless, this potentially comes at the price of making the ICC look even more impotent at carrying out its mission.

Secondly, what does the Libyan operation say about NATO's future? The operation was notable for being the first in the alliances' history where the United States did not take the lead. Although Washington did carry out much of the initial stage of the operation- which entailed destroying Libya's anti-aircraft defense systems- it quickly ceded operational control to the European nations; principally France the United Kingdom.

At times Europe's years of defense cuts were painfully obvious. A mere weeks after the operation began, for instance, NATO officials warned they were running out of bombs. This problem continued to plague certain European nations later in the operation. At one point Swedish jets sent to Italy to participate in the Libyan operation remained grounded in Sicily because no compatible fuel was available. The European nations also lacked adequate reconnaissance aircraft to gather intelligence.

Nonetheless, the military objectives of the missions were eventually achieved, giving the alliance a badly needed success after a decade of indecisive fighting in Afghanistan. Does Libya therefore pose a template for future NATO operations? With the U.S. military facing budgetary pressures, and Washington's desire to refocus attention on Asia, will Europe take the lead in NATO operations moving forward? And if so, will it prove adept at handling more complex missions? Will Europe's own fiscal difficulties further erode the continent's military capabilities? And, if Europe is able to handle military operations without Washington, does a trans-Atlantic military alliance still make sense? Is it time for

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a purely European force?

More generally, does Libya represent a new formula by which NATO provides air and logistical support to indigenous forces trying to overthrow their leaders? If so, can China and Russia then also claim this right? Could, for example, China's People Liberation Army intervene in support of Vietnamese rebels trying to overthrow their less than democratic government in Hanoi?

Finally, what does Gaddafi's death mean for the future of Libya? While few tears will be shed for his loss, might his death turn out to be a curse in disguise? Will the loss of their common enemy lead the Libyan rebel forces to unravel?

History is instructive in this regard. For example, many different Iranian groups helped topple the Shah in 1979. Soon after the Shah fell, however, this unity gave way to violent battles as each group sought to impose its vision on Iran. Perhaps even more similar to Libya is Afghanistan. The various groups in the Mujahedeen cooperated to some extent in fighting the Soviets during the 1980's. After toppling the Soviet-backed communist regime in Kabul in 1992, however, they quickly turned against each other. Afghanistan subsequently was held at the mercy of warring, vicious warlords. The situation became so dire that the rise of the Taliban regime was seen as an improvement.

Will Libya fall into the same trap? Some factors to look for include: Is Libyan nationalism stronger than tribal or clan loyalties? Are their visionary and capable leaders among the TNC? Can it establish a reasonable effective government? Can this government be democratic given all the divisions within Libya society? Can oil revenue be used to create more sustainable economic opportunities for the Libyan people?

And, if things do fall apart in Libya, how will this affect the Arab spring in other countries? Will Arab population's watching the disintegration of Libya grow weary of change in their own countries? Furthermore, if Libya does take a turn for the worse, what, if any, are NATO's obligations to the country? On Friday NATO officials announced their current operation will end on October 31; will they soon be returning?

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