

Libya's Post-Qadhafi Challenges

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Brief Analysis

Libya's challenges are immense, but Washington can take steps to facilitate the transition while ensuring that U.S. interests are not sidelined by other actors.

On Monday, the prime minister of Libya's National Transition Council (NTC), Muhammad Jibril, handed off power to a new interim leader, Abdul Rahim al-Keib. That same day, intense fighting broke out between militias from Zintan and the NTC's Tripoli Brigade at the capital's central hospital, with anti-aircraft guns brought to bear. As the outgoing prime minister soberly warned, Libya has entered "a political battle" in which "the rules of the game are not clearly defined." At this moment of flux, the United States can help smooth the country's hazardous transition by helping Libyans build good governance and political capacity, treating more of the wounded, and playing a more assertive role, rather than allowing other actors to negatively influence events on the ground.

Zones of Control

The NTC's authority is limited apart from Benghazi (where it has based its headquarters) and the western and eastern borders (where it enforces visa requirements at crossings controlled by young, barely uniformed rebels). For example, in response to Muammar Qadhafi's execution -- which itself underscored a lack of widespread NTC control -- the council declared, "Whoever is responsible for that will be judged and given a fair trial." Yet according to the rebel who reportedly pulled Qadhafi from his hiding place, the council's forces "won't come near us," even though the identities of the Misratah natives who killed Qadhafi is widely known.

More broadly, Libya's urban centers are controlled by a variety of groups. In Benghazi, the police and the Benghazi Protection Brigade have secured the city, giving it a semblance of normalcy. Yet in Tripoli, numerous militias direct traffic in the capital and maintain loose control of the neighborhoods. Although the NTC has blessed the Tripoli Military Council (TMC) with securing the city, tensions persist between the two. The TMC consists of several Islamist brigades reportedly totaling 8,000-10,000 fighters, led by the controversial Abdul Hakim Belhaj, a veteran of the Afghan jihad. In addition, local rebels and the Tripoli Revolutionists Council compete with both the NTC and TMC. The Revolutionists Council is led by Abdullah Ahmed Naker, an Islamist who claims to represent seventy-three

factions comprising some 20,000 fighters.

Meanwhile, the territory between Tripoli and Benghazi resembles the Wild West:

- *The Misratah district.* Young fighters can be seen clogging Misratah's main thoroughway with ad hoc military parades while tanks aimlessly roam the town, ripping up asphalt amid continued sounds of celebratory gunfire. According to Antar Abdul Salaam al-Beiri, commander of the 300-strong group Amir Katibat Misratah, there are around 200 brigades in the district ranging from 100 to 500 fighters each, totaling approximately 25,000 armed rebels. Although the Misratah Military Council claims control over the area, there is no true authority. On October 28, the NTC announced a "turn in your weapons for cash" day, but few rebels participated: al-Beiri has made clear that he and other commanders will not hand over their arms until after a legitimate government is formed and elections are held, even if this means waiting a year.
- *Gulf of Sirte.* Qadhafi's birthplace of Sirte has been completely destroyed; even two weeks after its capture, it remains a ghost town with the lingering smell of death. Towns loyal to Qadhafi, the rebels, or a mix of the two dot the coastline between Sirte and Benghazi.

Outstanding Security Concerns

Remnants of Qadhafi's arsenal, along with a deluge of weapons from outside the country, continue to threaten stability. Despite NTC attempts to secure loose weapons, journalists reporting from south of Sirte have described "SCUD missiles and chemical weapons spread throughout the desert." Qadhafi's forces, in a rush to strip off their uniforms and melt back into the population, have hastily abandoned many bases, leaving artillery for the taking.

In addition, Western diplomats are concerned over attempts by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) to establish a "green belt" across southern Libya. AQIM is profiting from Tuareg tribal distrust of the rebels, the absence of authority in the south, and the availability of weapons, especially shoulder-fired antiaircraft missiles that can take down commercial airliners and which have apparently been found on al-Qaeda fighters in Algeria and Chad.

Meanwhile, many rebels and other Libyans are currently serving in security roles on a volunteer basis "out of national duty," though some may receive a small stipend from the NTC. Commander al-Beiri stated that his fighters "would be willing to work without pay for a long time." Yet some diplomats worry that once the euphoria subsides and Libya's economic situation settles in, the many easy-to-assemble checkpoints currently manned by untrained rebels may be used to facilitate theft -- or, worse, to control areas for self-serving purposes and exclude tribal foes. Reintegrating the rebels into society is unlikely absent political and economic progress.

Future Fault Lines

Although Libyans were unified in their hatred of Qadhafi, the old and new tensions coming into play since his death may divide them once again. Libya's preexisting fault lines include tribal, ethnic (Arab versus Berber), and geographic (east versus west) fissures. And new concerns have emerged over potential reprisals. For example, the 75,000 Sirte residents who fled during the revolution are now returning to an inhospitable city. One resident warned, "The people of Sirte are Bedouins, and the Bedouin man does not forget to avenge injustice... We will not forget what happened in Sirte." Moreover, the rebels are still holding some 7,000 prisoners of war. And in Misratah, rebel forces recently shot, arrested, beat, and detained unarmed displaced residents of the nearby pro-regime town of Toarag.

In addition, Libya's Islamists are armed and assertive in seeking the political power denied them under Qadhafi. One leading Islamist rebel stated that his forces "must have a political role in the coming stage," even as an unnamed NTC official warned that "a growing Islamic influence in Tripoli could lead to a political and military breakdown." Meanwhile, Islamists in Tripoli have threatened to kill journalists affiliated with the newly founded liberal newspaper *Arous al-Bahr*, which has criticized followers of TMC leader Belhaj. At the same time, NTC chairman

Mustafa Abdul Jalil has warned of "a stolen revolution."

Recommendations for U.S. Policy

Libyans are desperate for normalcy after forty-two years of eccentric rule and international isolation. They strongly believe that Qadhafi intentionally avoided investing in the country's infrastructure and education system, and therefore have high expectations that Libya will benefit from joining the international community. Accompanying this post-revolution euphoria is widespread goodwill toward those involved in the NATO operation, as well as a desire for continued cooperation. This represents an opportunity for the United States.

Yet talk of a Qatari-led international coalition in Libya following the end of NATO's mandate and recent U.S. overtures could point to one weakness of "leading from behind." The \$135 million in pledged U.S. nonmilitary assistance has been dedicated to locating weapons stockpiles and treating Libya's war wounded. The latter issue is so pressing that the NTC has already sacked a temporary minister who apparently did not address it sufficiently; in addition, the council created a new Ministry of Martyrs and Wounded. Directly providing more treatment assistance would win considerable goodwill for the United States.

Additional assistance -- technical rather than financial -- should be dedicated to developing good governance and political capacity, the necessary prerequisites for unifying Libya's rebels into national military and security institutions. After stability sets in, Washington should also encourage the establishment of high-quality educational institutions, much like the new Turkish and U.S. educational facilities in Iraq.

Leaving the task of rebuilding the country to other actors would represent a loss of U.S. influence on the ground. Qatar, which recently revealed that it had "hundreds" of representatives "in every region" of Libya, assertively seeks to play a role in the revolution's outcome. This could be problematic given Qatar's support for Islamists such as Belhaj and Ali Salabi (an influential cleric who previously lived in exile in the emirate), as well as other actors who have openly opposed the NTC and favor an Islamic state over a democratic state with Islamic values.

Andrew Engel, a former research assistant at The Washington Institute, is a Beirut-based analyst who recently traveled across Libya. ❖

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