

Libyan War reveals psychedelic dusk of pax Americana

Written by Zainab Cheema

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In the grand old days of colonialism, European nations used all sorts of elaborate excuses for occupying the fabulously wealthy territories of Africa and Asia. Rudyard Kipling called it the “white man’s burden” to transmit (European) culture and civilization to the unwashed natives. If the trains and other instruments of progress happened to cart all their resources to the northern hemisphere, well, that was an unfortunate side-effect of entering modern history.

At times, it happens that wide-enough cracks appear in the mirror of illusions to allow both the emperor and the public to perceive that the kingly body is stark-naked. This usually happens in the dusk of power, when the emperor becomes just another actor in the dimming footlights of the stage. In his novel, *Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad described such a moment when the underbelly of the decaying colonial powers was clear to see. Kurtz, a colonial administrator in Africa, crosses out a paragraph in his elaborate booklet on uplifting the natives with the words: “Kill those savages!”

The Libyan war presents such a Kurtzian moment for NATO dubbed as the greatest military coalition in history. NATO’s campaign to unseat Colonel Muammar Qaddafi unraveled from a project of a few weeks into an embarrassing six-month slough that illustrated the combined desperation of the US and EU. Despite the tactical advantage gained by opening the club to Qatar — which obligingly turned al-Jazeera into a military mouthpiece a la BBC — Libya spotlights pax Americana as endless war to stave off an economy in crisis.

Libya may have lost the war — as of writing this article, the rebel army announced that it had arrested two of Qaddafi’s sons, while Qaddafi himself is in hiding. Pitched battles erupted in Tripoli between rebels and Qaddafi supporters. Meanwhile The New York Times is celebrating “the prospective end of Muammar Gaddafi’s rule” while splashing celebratory photographs of the rag-tag “rebels” from the 70 or so armed gangs propped up by NATO in Benghazi.

Regardless of the ultimate outcome, this expedition has been no Mediterranean cruise, as Nicholas Sarkozy, David Cameron, and Hillary Clinton discovered. A far cry from the victory within weeks a la Iraq, predicted by the NATO commanders. Vincent Jauvert of *Le Nouvel Observateur* wrote that that French intelligence services assured Sarkozy that “from the first [air] strike, thousands of soldiers would defect from Qaddafi. They also predicted that the rebels

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would move quickly to Sirte, the hometown of Qaddafi, and force him to flee the country.”

It took considerably more bombs than that — even while pretending to be involved in only a supporting role, the US has had to bankroll \$2 billion a day to fund the bombing campaigns, arms sales to Benghazi, and military coordination. Even with a NATO victory it won't be a clean affair — it is possible that an angry Libyan population will turn it into dog food.

The setting for this tale is the broader geopolitical strategy, titled “Remodeling the Greater Middle East,” which was first unveiled after September 11, 2001. The plan is a veritable roadmap of post-9/11 US military intervention and was first announced on television by General Wesley Clark, the NATO Commander of the Kosovo operation.

Despite odds (and even sense), the US has moved along implementing regime changes at the heart of this Middle Eastern refurbishing. Iraq and Afghanistan already bear US bootprints. Sudan has been partitioned, and Somalia verges on the brink of collapse. The attack on Iran has been deferred because the US and EU economies presently lack enough juice to fund the effort. Libya and Syria were slated for a simultaneous attack, removing the pro-Iran Bashar al-Asad and the non-aligned Qaddafi who has held off oil corporations and financial behemoths for 40 years.

After the US, France, and Britain drew breath following the toppling of Genral Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, they decided that the “Arab Spring” presented an opportunity. In their war-rooms, they schemed to use the popular uprisings and camouflage regime-change in Libya and Syria. But Qaddafi proved to be a wily foe — despite NATO carpetbombing of his palaces and residences, he eluded assassination by sleeping in an assortment of hospital beds and hotel rooms.

When NATO bombed the vehicles of the Libyan army, he promptly bought thousands of Toyota pickup trucks from Niger and Mali. “It is a stroke of genius: the trucks are identical to those used by the rebels,” admitted a French officer involved in the expedition, noting that NATO was hard-pressed to figure out which trucks belonged to which side. When NATO bombed the state television, Qaddafi resorted to radio to exort his people to fight back and not to let their country be turned into anther Iraq. “We will fight to the last drop of blood,” he declared, “We will never give up.”

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Apparently, the Libyans were listening — the pitched battles in Tripoli between the city's civilians and the Benghazi gangs is a stark contrast to Saddam's Iraq, which offered scant resistance to US troops entering their territory. The shock-and-awe tactics were the same. On August 22, a Libyan government spokesman gave his account of the speedy rebel "push" into Tripoli. "NATO has intensified its attacks in and around Tripoli, giving immediate and direct support to the rebel forces to advance into [our] peaceful capital," announced Moussa Ibrahim. "The death toll is beyond imagination. Today, [after]... eleven hours of violence, 1,300 people were killed in Tripoli alone, with 5,000 people injured. The hospitals cannot even cope [with the numbers injured]."

"These armed gangs wouldn't be able to move a meter if faced by our army and our tribes and our families and our volunteers," said Ibrahim. "But because NATO kills anything that moves before the rebels, these rebels are able to move forward." To the death toll should be added the thousands of kilos of depleted uranium spread over Libya via NATO armour-busting missile heads. But if the Libyans have fought back, it is evident that they must be shocked but not awed.

Even with the impending defeat, Qaddafi must be given his due — he played his cards well. In the beginning of the Libyan war, mainstream media replayed Benghazi propaganda about Qaddafi spilling rivers of his people's blood. However, the anti-colonist Brother Leader, as he styles himself, avoided the trap that Bashar al-Asad fell into. Instead of waging pitched battles with the Pentagon-armed rebels posing as civilians, he began organizing mass demonstrations in Libyan cities that peaked at 1.75 million; quite an undertaking in a country with a population that totals 6 million.

Operation Mermaid Down, NATO's scorched earth bombing campaign that enabled the rebels to push into Tripoli, was a reaction to Qaddafi's decision to resort to political means in order to win the conflict. It is supposed that he had General Abdul Fatah Younus, a one-time crony who was appointed the top Benghazi commander after defecting in April, assassinated. Younes' death discomfited NATO's top brass — he was the only figure with enough charisma and authority to hold together the assorted gangs in Benghazi. Even with the congratulatory articles in US press, there is an open worry about whether the rebel groups will be able to gel together as an orderly client.

NATO commanders were also aghast when tribal leaders who came to pledge allegiance to the Transitional National Council (TNC), promptly made peace with Qaddafi when popular demonstrations in his favor gathered steam. They compounded their misreading of the fluid networks of power on the ground, with the disadvantage of their track record in Iraq and

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Afghanistan. It is an object lesson to the Muslim East at large that laying down arms is no guarantee of peace or preservation of human life.

Qaddafi distributed arms to civilian volunteer groups, snapped photo-ops with admiring Libyan women who declared their willingness to die for their Brother Leader, and persistently gave speeches to people waving green flags and chanting laudatory slogans. This made CNN, al-Jazeera et al, who had set out to portray him as an isolated loony-bin out of touch with reality, look rather stupid. Over the past six months, it became clear that Qaddafi actually enjoys a high degree of popular support among his people — as high as 70% in Tripolitania and 40% in Cyrenica. Unlike US-clients Mubarak and Ben Ali, who were outright despised by their populations, Qaddafi mixed his authoritarian (and at times brutal) rule with strong social welfare policies for Libyans, impressive public projects, and anti-colonial credentials.

The non-aligned policies followed by the secular, pan-Africanist Qaddafi made him an eyesore for the financial and military elite of the US and its allies. Libya provides free education and medical care to its citizens, in addition to social support such as over \$50,000 in non-interest loans to any couple getting married. His public works include the \$33 billion Great Man Made River, an underground river designed to supply drinkable water to the arid country. He was one of the main political forces behind the African Union, and numbered as one of the major roadblocks in the new scramble for Africa.

In one of his boldest moves, which set him against the currency wars to keep the petrodollar afloat, he pushed Muslim countries to reject both the euro and the dollar as oil trading currencies in favor of a gold-backed dinar. Nicholas Sarkozy went so far as to call Qaddafi a threat to the financial security of mankind (an oxymoron if there ever was one). Little wonder that the Libyan mint was one of the first targets destroyed by NATO bombing. With US power dangling from a thin thread on the petrodollar — the dollar's hegemony as the world's oil trading currency — this alone was enough to set him on the short order for regime change, apart from US and EU lust for unfettered access to Libyan oil and gold.

On its part, the six-month NATO campaign to unseat Qaddafi is by now, thoroughly unmasked as a desperate grab-bag to stall the impending collapse of the financial markets since the 2008 debacle. Kurtz's signature is clear to read in this modern retelling of Conrad's Heart of Darkness. As soon as the mainstream media predicted victory on Monday, August 22, the tailspinning stocks stabilized at the prospect of guzzling Libyan oil.

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Unfortunately, Clinton, Sarkozy et al were not able to disguise the war of conquest under the myth of humanitarian intervention on behalf of a suppressed Arabian population. The war dragged on too long, and the longing for oil and gold, along with the complete loss of perspective, was too naked. Qaddafi may not have won against “the greatest military coalition in history,” but he forced the wreath of charity to drop from steeled visages and mailed fists.

As a counterpoint, there is the NATO intervention in Kosovo, waged at the height of US power in the 1990s and flush after the integration of the European Union. The mask of NATO’s humanitarian response to the ethnic cleansing of the Kosovars did not drop for a second; the media remained hermetically sealed to ethnic tensions manipulated by Pentagon Inc. leading up to the war, and the wider objectives of carving out a military base in one of the world’s prime resource reserves. Not only does Kosovo offer a route for Caspian gas, but boasts lush coal reserves and the famous Trepca Mines, which have since been turned over to the Washington Group, a US defense contractor with partners in France and Sweden.

An interesting trivia about pax Americana, the American peace that has prevailed over the globe since WWII, is that the US has been at war every year of this 66-year time period. Leaving aside the armed gangs from Benghazi, the Libyans are under no illusion about NATO forces orchestrating destruction from the comfortable distance of air power. Having relentlessly bombed civilian targets — council meetings of religious scholars, schools, homes, and hospitals — no one entertains arguments as in 2003 Iraq, of the NATO godfathers being “better than Saddam.” Barack Obama can speechify about the “democratic and peaceful future of the Libyan people” all he wants. These days, no one seems to pay much attention to him anyway.

Unlike Kosovo, which is still perceived as a “good war,” the Libya war will prove to be a bitter pill to swallow for Pentagon Inc. Unlike the former Yugoslavia, the people have not been weakened by the poverty inflicted by IMF-economic reforms; nor crippled by economic sanctions as in Iraq. Qaddafi has psychologically mobilized the population on anti-colonialism; and despite the stresses of the past six-months, the Libyan population still has the highest literacy rates and health indexes of North Africa. The corporations may move in, but it is possible that the people are prepared to give them hell in return. The moral of this little report is that flashy bombs cannot solve conflicts — the twilight battlefield of blood, sweat and raw human will is far more contentious.

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