

Review Essay

Could Libya's Decline Have Been Predicted?

Ben Fishman

The Libyan Revolution and its Aftermath

Peter Cole and Brian McQuinn (eds). New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. £30.00/\$49.95. 320 pp.

The 2011 Libyan Uprisings and the Struggle for the Post-Qadhafi Future

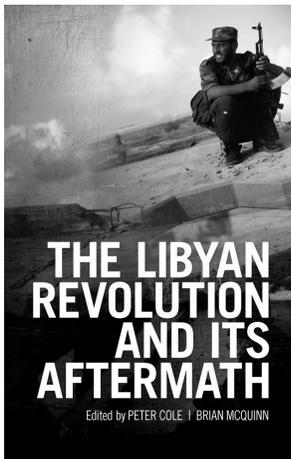
Jason Pack (ed.). London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. £60.00/\$76.00. 276 pp.

The improbable Libyan revolution has undergone several phases in the past four and a half years: a burst of political activity with the discovery of new-found freedoms; a growing period of divisiveness over the pursuit of political power and the spoils of war; an inability to form a cohesive government to establish basic security and provide economic well-being for a resource-rich country; the outbreak of civil war; and the ensuing political chaos that gave space for Salafi jihadists and ultimately the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) to gain influence across the country's vast territory. Politicians and pundits accordingly look at Libya now through the lens of failure, attempting to identify where the revolution ran off course – or to reinforce the view that intervening in the country was misguided in the first place.

The US Congress has held innumerable hearings on the attacks in Benghazi on 11 September 2012, during which US Ambassador Chris Stevens and three other Americans were killed. The hearings have grilled American officials

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not just on the circumstances of security at the US mission, but on the focus of US policy in Libya. The Foreign Affairs Committee of the UK Parliament has initiated its own inquiry into the presumed failures of UK government policy in Libya.¹ Mainstream media, such as the *Washington Post*, regularly editorialises that the US failed to invest enough in Libya's post-conflict stabilisation, asserting that this contributed to the current spiral of instability.² Most profoundly, US President Barack Obama told Tom Friedman of the *New York Times* that one of his greatest foreign-policy regrets was not investing sufficiently in Libya after the fall of Muammar Gadhafi and not



recognising the extent to which Gadhafi's regime had stripped Libyan society of all semblance of political culture and civil society.³

The question of what more the international community could have done – or done differently – to stabilise Libya in the aftermath of Gadhafi's death is certainly worth examining.⁴ But those who believe that the West is solely to blame for Libya's chaotic state overlook the most important factors shaping Libya's past and future: the specific traits of the Libyan people; their collective history under an impulsive and brutal 42-year regime; and the scrum for power that Gadhafi's

demise unleashed in a society that suppressed freedoms, ambitions, and even tribal and religious identities for decades. By assigning no agency to the Libyans themselves, politicians or commentators who seek to lay the blame for Libya's demise on, for example, Obama, Hillary Clinton, the UK, France, the UN, Qatar or Egypt etc., obscure the overwhelming responsibility – and opportunity – the Libyans had to shape their own future.

Two recent books begin to correct this overly simplistic narrative by telling the Libyan side of the story of the 2011 uprising against Gadhafi and the initial years following it. They do so by collecting primary research from a group of authors who focus on the individuals and groups that played principal roles in an improbable story. This new scholarship on Libya stems from a flood of interest in the country and a new-found level of access afforded to researchers that would have been unthinkable under the old regime.

Peter Cole and Brian McQuinn, editors of *The Libyan Revolution and its Aftermath*, stress that each of their contributors spent at least three months doing field work in Libya on their respective subject areas. Similarly, Jason Pack, editor of *The 2011 Libyan Uprisings and the Struggle for the Post-Qadhafi Future*, structures his volume around themes, communities and actors, with authors selected for their expertise on the relevant subject matter. Both volumes feature the advantages and disadvantages of edited books; they struggle to maintain a balance between at times fascinating (but other times dizzying) detail with an overall narrative voice that continues to remind the reader why a particular tribal or village alliance, for example, is relevant to the overall story of Libya's revolutionary and post-revolutionary experiences.

Nevertheless, for those seeking a detailed account of the Libyan revolution from the perspective of the Libyans – and all their internal divisions – these volumes prove extremely valuable. Neither work predicts the current extreme chaos and dysfunction in Libya, partly because their authors tell the story of 2011–13, but they do identify the main challenge that Libya still faces: to establish stability under a governing arrangement irrespective of the participation of the international community.

The struggle to re-establish central authority

Libya's revolution was a complex story of multiple uprisings from geographically, ideologically and tribally distinct areas, as the authors in both volumes repeatedly stress. The various groups had only one common enemy: Gadhafi, who was in the 42nd year of his dictatorial rule. As Pack titles his book and repeats often, the *uprisings* (emphasis on the plural) denote the differences among the various theatres of the 2011 war. Cole and McQuinn take this logic further by organising their chapters principally around the various locales of the fighting, from the formation of the National Transitional Council (NTC) in Benghazi; to the pitched battles in Misrata, Libya's third-largest city; to the Nefusa mountains in the west that proved an important base for rebel resistance; to the ultimate assault on and anti-climactic capture of Tripoli.

Cole and McQuinn's contributors offer compelling narratives that portray the main actors and the rivalries within and between each of these

camps. At times, these descriptions are gripping, such as McQuinn's chapter on the months-long siege of Misrata, which experienced some of the most severe combat of the war. McQuinn reports on the urban-insurgency tactics used by poorly armed neighbourhood defence forces, such as trapping heavy tanks in narrow alleys to defeat the regime forces who lacked motivation despite belonging to one of the so-called 'elite' protection forces led by Gadhafi's youngest son. In one passage, McQuinn relates how the Misratan resistance cleared out the tallest building in the city, the Insurance Building, which the regime used as a nest for snipers. Misratans gradually surrounded the tower at night and attached flashlights to animals to force the snipers to waste ammunition and reveal their positions. The resistance ultimately burned the ground floors of the building to force the remaining regime troops to surrender or starve. (Cole and McQuinn, pp. 247–9).

In the course of this narrative, McQuinn reveals a key theme of the revolution: the establishment of an experienced fighting cohort of more than 40,000 members in Misrata by the end of the war, making the city's brigades some of the most battle-hardened in Libya. It was therefore unsurprising that these brigades sought to maintain their relevance and influence in shaping Libya's future affairs (an issue replicated in the city of Zintan, the brigades of which would become rivals for influence with Misrata). The NTC and later the General National Congress (GNC) and its elected government in Tripoli had few independent military resources of their own, so central authorities repeatedly conceded to these militias.

The story of Misrata reflects the broader struggle that the NTC, based in Benghazi (with active outposts in Doha and Dubai), had in establishing influence over the uprisings in the rest of country. As Peter Bartu, an academic and adviser to the UN relates (in Cole and McQuinn, chapter 2), the NTC did a laudable job transforming itself in its incipient days from a group of lawyers and activists into a political and diplomatic movement able to obtain support from the West and the region. It never established a semblance of command and control over the fighting, however, even in Benghazi. The challenge for the NTC was exacerbated by the assassination in July 2011 of the first rebel chief of staff, Abdel Fattah Younes, whose defection to the rebel side in the early days of the revolution created space

for the anti-Gadhafi movement to emerge. Younes, interior minister under Gadhafi, was not killed in battle, but most likely by Islamist members of the opposition who resented his role in the regime's prior crackdowns against their comrades. This episode forecast another cleavage between so-called revolutionary fighters who opposed Gadhafi even before the revolution, in particular members of the Islamic resistance during the 1990s, and those soldiers and former regime technocrats who defected and participated actively in the revolution. Neither side trusted the other, which added to Libya's struggles to establish coherent security forces after the revolution.

Peter Cole and Umar Khan detail another example of the NTC's inability to exert command and control in their description of the fall of Tripoli. According to Cole and Khan, the NTC's executive-council head, Mahmoud Jibril, and his associate Aref Nayid established detailed planning teams who aimed to restore governance, economic activity and security upon the fall of the city. Jibril and Nayid's group worked with the UN and international agencies to provide immediate aid and restore key functions to the city, but their Islamist opponents prevented them from assuming permanent roles. More significantly, despite military plans coordinated by Qatar's military chief of staff to keep all but Tripoli-originated brigades from entering the city, when the uprisings began the chaos provoked brigades from Misrata and Zintan to join in and occupy strategically valuable parts of the capital, making it virtually impossible to dislodge them later (Cole and McQuinn, pp. 91–3).

Both books usefully emphasise the theme of the divisiveness of Libya's revolution and the resulting struggle to establish central authority. Pack describes the phenomenon as an ongoing struggle between the 'centre' and the 'periphery' (Pack, pp. 9–11). Dirk Vandewalle, long-time historian of Libya, offers an especially prescient view of the post-conflict period:

In Libya, the ability to shape the political landscape and fill this vacuum was a race against time: a window of opportunity to restructure and



refashion political and social institutions before the disintegrative, centrifugal forces of subnational or supra-national loyalties – whether tribal or geographical, linked to circles of patronage to Islamic movements – could assert and consolidate themselves (Cole and McQuinn, p. 20).

Unfortunately for post-revolutionary Libya, if the race is not already over, it is certainly approaching its final stretch.

The role of Islamists

Islamists represent one of the key subgroups that emerged over the course of the revolution and in its aftermath. Two of the most illuminating chapters in each volume cover this subgroup. Broadly speaking, Libyan Islamists fall into three sometimes-overlapping categories: the organised Libyan Muslim Brotherhood, the main members of which lived mostly in exile under the Gadhafi regime and sought active political participation in the new Libya; the former members of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) who used their influence in the revolution to gain key governmental posts; and a younger generation of violent Salafi jihadists who would form the ranks of Ansar al-Sharia in Benghazi and separately in Derna.

In the best chapter of Pack's book, Noman Benotman, Pack and James Brandon relate the complicated and poorly known history of the LIFG, made all the more credible by Benotman's past membership of the group. The LIFG cohort emerged in the group of Libyans returning from battling the Soviets in Afghanistan alongside Osama bin Laden, and set Gadhafi as their next target. When the regime's intelligence forces 'randomly' discovered an LIFG cell in 1995, according to Benotman et al., the returnees from Afghanistan were prematurely dragged into a revolt and were routed and imprisoned. More than a decade later, as Gadhafi's son Saif gained influence, he initiated a reconciliation process with the LIFG mediated by the Islamist cleric and prominent Al-Jazeera commentator Ali Sallabi. The regime pledged a series of prisoner releases and, in exchange, the LIFG forswore violence and terrorism and formally disbanded. Ironically, the last prisoners were released in February 2011 just as the revolution was

commencing in Benghazi, enabling the former LIFG members to regain prominence during the revolution.

The former LIFG members became an organised cohort during the revolution, and chose to pursue elected office in its aftermath. More importantly, they recognised the importance of obtaining key positions in the security ministries, enabling them to continue support for key militias and obstruct the formation of a truly national army. This division between the Islamist camp and the non-Islamists, including Mahmoud Jibril, proved to be a schism that would continue to plague Libya.

The politicians of the Muslim Brotherhood and the former LIFG militants now face a larger struggle – against those Salafi jihadis who reject any form of political participation. These include Ansar al-Sharia groups and more recently the rise of a branch of ISIS in Libya, which is now fighting Ansar al-Sharia for dominance over the jihadi sphere. Unfortunately for readers of these two volumes, the narratives stop in 2012–13 when the fault lines were just beginning to emerge. Mary Fitzgerald, the contributor covering Islamists for Cole and McQuinn, predicted the challenges well:

As the Muslim Brotherhood and much of the former LIFG contended with more radical elements, both critical of their engagement in politics and determined to disrupt the country's democratic trajectory, the latter's behavior risked further damaging the image of the entire 'Islamic current.' This struggle within will continue to define Libya's Islamist landscape for some time to come. (Cole and McQuinn, p. 204)

In contrast, writing in 2013 after the murders of US Ambassador Chris Stevens and three other Americans by so-called 'fringe jihadists' (as the authors describe them), Benotman et al. suggest that the growth of the so-called 'freelancers' will compel the more mainstream Islamists to 'reach out to more liberal actors like the National Forces Alliance against the destabilizing role of the Salafists and freelance jihadists' (Pack, p. 223). Unfortunately, such an alliance between moderates has yet to emerge, allowing space for the even-more dangerous ISIS to join the so-called 'fringe jihadists' (and in some cases fight them for prominence) to threaten Libya's stability and potentially initiate terrorism beyond Libya.

International responsibility

The role of the international community looms large over Libya in terms of assisting with both the country's liberation and its reconstruction. There are, however, some common misperceptions in this regard that need correcting.

Firstly, the military action that NATO and its Arab allies conducted in Libya was a civilian-protection mission, not exclusively a no-fly zone, as many authors describe it. Obama recognised that establishing a no-fly zone over Libya would do little to prevent the impending catastrophe in Benghazi since the main threat to the population came from Gadhafi's ground forces.⁵ As such, he ordered his diplomatic team to seek broader language in what would become paragraph four of UN Security Council Resolution 1973 authorising member states to 'take all necessary measures ... to protect civilians and civilian populated areas under the threat of attack'.⁶ Indeed, Gadhafi's air force and air-defence systems were neutralised in the opening hours of the war; NATO continued with civilian protection for the next six months until regime forces no longer posed a threat.

In a revealing chapter in the Cole and McQuinn volume, Frederic Wehrey describes the evolving coordination between NATO and the various elements of fighters on the ground. Wehrey highlights how the brigades were frustrated by NATO's apparent inactivity until small elements of French and Qatari forces inserted themselves on key fronts, allowing for more effective targeting (they did so on a national basis since NATO's guidelines prohibited direct coordination with the rebels. As such, there was little visibility on these developments in planning meetings in Washington, where the US also became increasingly frustrated with the slow progress in the fighting).

A second common misperception is that it would have been easy for the international community to play a significant role in the stabilisation of the country without encountering local resistance. In fact, after the conclusion of hostilities Western countries offered a range of assistance on all the key issues, including demobilising militants, collecting weapons, revitalising the economy, and reforming Gadhafi's 'justice' and penal systems. Libyan foot-dragging, lack of political will and bureaucratic incompetence set back

each of these efforts. It is true, as Obama admitted, that the international community could have used more leverage to impose more heavily on the Libyans. But there remains no guarantee that such an approach would have been any more effective in moving Libya forward. Moreover, no outside power was willing to lead a peacekeeping or enforcement mission in Libya, nor did Libya appear to need one at the time.

Facing such initial resistance in late 2011 and early 2012, the West leaned heavily on the UN for assisting Libya's reconstruction, creating a UN Security Council-mandated UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL). In the Cole and McQuinn volume, the mission's first chief, the respected UN official Ian Martin, describes UNSMIL's first year on the ground. The chapter reads more like a progress report to the Security Council than a reflection of his time in Libya or an analysis of the impending situation there. That is perhaps because Martin adhered to the principle of 'national ownership' – whatever the UN or donor countries proposed must be developed and supported by the Libyans themselves. Given the tendencies described above, that was a recipe for political paralysis in an admittedly transitional period. If any group could have pushed the Libyans more aggressively, it could have been the UN. Interestingly, the UN has adopted a more assertive approach under Spanish diplomat Bernardino Leon, one of Martin's successors. Leon has used his office to spearhead negotiations to form a national unity government after the political breakdown in 2014 that split the country between two rival governments, each insisting on legitimacy.

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The shortcoming of both edited volumes is their timing. Libya's outright civil war did not develop until mid-2014, whereas the narratives in both books stop mainly at the time of the landmark election for the GNC and the following months. The books offer plenty of granular detail on the various elements of Libyan society and their respective roles in the revolution, but they do not answer two fundamental questions. Was the revolution doomed to fail given all these disparities? And if not, what could have been done differently to salvage the bright hopes of a newly freed people?

Notes

- 1 UK Parliament, Commons Select Committee, 'Committee Launch Inquiry Looking at Foreign Policy Regarding Libya', 23 July 2015, <http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/foreign-affairs-committee/news-parliament-2015/libya-tor/>.
- 2 'Libya Spirals Downward as the West Looks the Other Way', *Washington Post*, 12 January 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/libya-spirals-downward-as-the-west-looks-the-other-way/2015/01/12/49869b98-9a8f-11e4-96cc-e858eba91ced_story.html.
- 3 Thomas L. Friedman, 'Obama on the World: President Obama Talks to Thomas L. Friedman About Iraq, Putin and Israel', 8 August 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/09/opinion/president-obama-thomas-l-friedman-iraq-and-world-affairs.html>.
- 4 Derek Chollet and Ben Fishman, 'Who Lost Libya? Obama's Intervention in Retrospect', *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/libya/2015-04-20/who-lost-libya>.
- 5 The best narrative of the decision-making surrounding the Libya intervention is Christopher S. Chivvis, *Toppling Qaddafi: Libya and the Limits of Liberal Interventionism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).
- 6 United Nations, 'Security Council Approves "No-Fly Zone" over Libya, Authorizing "All Necessary Measures" to Protect Civilians, by Vote of 10 in Favour with 5 Abstentions', 17 March 2011, <http://www.un.org/press/en/2011/sc10200.doc.htm>.