Middle East Studies

at the Marine Corps University

To the Shores of Tripoli?

by Amin Tarzi

On 17 March 2011, UN Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1973 authorized a no-fly zone over Libya. Shortly thereafter, the airstrikes against targets in that North African country began. And the United States, as the initial lead in this effort, finds itself back near the shores of Tripoli. For Marines, this may conjure up images from the Corps' exploits during the 19th Century conflicts against Barbary pirates and have them humming the Marine Corps hymn. The second line of the Marine Corps hymn – "To the Shores of Tripoli" – refers to a march led by Marine Lieutenant Presley O'Bannon from Alexandria in Egypt to the Fort of Derna, currently a small town in northwestern Libya. The Marines were successful at capturing Derna in 1805, forcing the Bey of Tripoli to capitulate.

While both instances have U.S. forces operating near the shores of Tripoli, the purpose behind the missions are vastly different. Two centuries ago Marines were sent in to protect U.S. ships and international shipping lanes from attacks by pirates. Today, U.S. forces, in support of UNSC mandated operations, are to "protect civilians and civilian populated areas under attack" in Libya. Additionally, the United States, while currently taking the lead in the air campaign and calling for the Libyan leader Colonel Muammar al-Qadhafi to relinquish power, has insisted that there are no plans to use ground forces in Libya. Thus any comparisons between the 19th Century Barbary Wars and Operation Odyssey Dawn – as the military action underway in Libya is dubbed – should indeed be relegated to history only.

Yemen's Coming Crisis

by Adam C Seitz

Following the successful ousting of Presidents Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, anti-government protests continue to challenge the rule of long-standing regimes throughout the Middle East and North Africa. The 32-year rule of Yemen's President Ali Abdallah Saleh is no exception. Widespread corruption, growing economic and resource inequality, and internal fragmentation have pushed anti-government protestors into the streets demanding the immediate ouster of President Saleh, challenging the stability of a country already on the brink of becoming a failed state.

MES Notes

MES Iran Lecture Series

MES at MCU is hosting an Iran Lecture Series throughout the 2010-2011 Acedemic Year entitled "Framing the Iranian Challenge".

The next Lecture in the series will be presented by Dr. Trita Parsi on 21 April from 1400-1530 at the Gray Research Center, Quantico, VA.

Further information and resources pertaining to the MES Iran Lecture Series, as well as the 2010 MES AfPak Lecture Series, are available at: http://www.mcu.usmc.mil, under the Middle East Studies tab.

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MES at MCU Disclaimer

Libya in Context

Since 1969, Qadhafi has ruled Libya. When the current wave of protests broke out throughout North Africa and the Arab Middle East, Libya and its government were not immune. However, what is happening in Libya differs from what has happened elsewhere in the region. In Tunisia and Egypt, leaders Zayn al-Abidin bin Ali and Hosni Mubarak either chose or were not able to use excessive force against their own populations and left the political scene without much resistance. In case of Mubarak, the Egyptian Armed Forces played a crucial stabilizing role and became the protector of people and thus ending the three decade dictatorship with skill and honor. While parallels can be drawn between Libya and Yemen in the role of tribal affiliations in the opposing forces, the similarities end when the response from President Ali Abdallah Saleh's of Yemen is compared with that of Qadhafi. Bahraini opposition is almost exclusively based on sectarian differences between the ruling elite and majority Shiite population. The Bahraini response is a combination of strengthening the ability of that kingdom to secure the country while offering a list of compromises designed to respond to some of the grievances of the opposition. Unlike other situations in the current popular upheavals in a number Arab countries, the Bahraini situation also has a strong foreign dimension; while Manama has sought military assistance from a number of Gulf Cooperation Council member states and is currently being assisted by forces from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, the opposition historically and currently is receiving support and encouragement from Iran. Sultan Qabus of Oman by all accounts remains a very popular leader, and the core of the current disenchantment most likely is caused by economic concerns first and perhaps political freedoms second.

In contrast the Libyan leader has both the capacity through his armed forces and the will to use excessive force against his own population, and he is not stepping down. He has not only refused to compromise with the opposition forces, but has called them "rats" and "cockroaches" who should be eliminated. Qadhafi has compensated for the loss of the loyalty of part of his civilian and military cadres by arming local and foreign militias. Additionally, the four decade, almost personal rule by Qadhafi has stripped Libya of most of its civic institutions and the potential for leaders independent from the current regime to develop. Consequently, the Libyan opposition has no unified leader who commands international recognition, nor is it clear that the opposition forces can agree on much beyond the ouster of Qadhafi.

Beyond the No-Fly Zone

Despite its lack of previous civic responsibilities, the Libyan opposition has managed the affairs of cities under its control, especially Benghazi, in a remarkable fashion. Under the threat of Qadhafi's forces, the disparate opposition might very well have learned the skills of leadership in the battlefield as well as have become an agent for change with international credentials to lead Libya into a new era and out of its forty-two years of schizophrenic existence. With current operations enforcing the UN-mandated no-fly zone over Libya, the opposition might very well have the chance to survive and entrench itself in western Libya and perhaps elsewhere in that country. But, to what end? If Qadhafi falls, Libya's future will be determined by these various opposing forces' ability to unify under a long term strategic vision for Libya because currently their focus and agreement seems to be limited to the short term goal of removing Qadhafi from power. There is a danger of sparking an intense, internal struggle to fill the power void.

If Qadhafi decides to end attacking the opposition either to abide by the UNSC demand or because he simply runs out of options due to the success of Operation Odyssey Dawn, then what are the options of the international coalition? I see two potentialities: One is to intervene on behalf of the Libyan opposition beyond the mandate of UNSC Resolution. This might require more extensive attacks on the Libyan government and their supporting factions beyond attacks related to its airpower. Such expansion has a good chance for forcing one or more of the states involved to use limited ground assets. And second, the international coalition – while ensuring the safety of civilians – could stop engaging targets in Libya. Both scenarios could lead to a civil war or a de facto disintegration of Libya, and both may require renewed and protracted military responses. Thus, the stakes are high and require a fully-informed, clear strategic policy before moving forward.

Even before Yemen was swept up by the wave of protests rolling through the region, the Saleh regime had been faced with a number of daunting challenges: a slew of economic and social issues, the Islamist al-Houthi rebellion in the north, a resilient secessionist movement in the south, and a resurgent al-Qaeda offshoot seeking to take advantage of Yemen's domestic conflicts and demographics.

In the past, Saleh has been relatively effective in managing the issues his regime has faced through power-sharing arrangements brokered with various tribal leaders, Islamist groups and political factions. Recently, however, shifting alliances have put this system to the test.

Since 9/11, Saleh has become an important ally in the U.S.-led global war on terror, with his government receiving significant amounts of aid to combat al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula. The regime's relationship with Washington has made it all the more difficult to maintain its strategic domestic alliances with Islamist supporters and northern tribal leaders, who increasingly perceive the Saleh regime as a U.S. and Saudi puppet. Such perceptions have only contributed to the government's domestic weakness and put added stress on an already fragile system.

Although the Saleh regime has announced a series of unprecedented concessions, notably regarding presidential term limits, hereditary succession and constitutional reforms, due to the trust deficit that Saleh has built up over his three decades as president, such statements have had little effect in satisfying protestors' demands. As security forces have turned to violent and hard-handed tactics to restore order, support by tribal leaders and even top military commanders has increasingly shifted in favor of the opposition. Yemen's top military commands, security services and intelligence agencies are held by Saleh's relatives and close allies in the Sanhan tribe; thus, the high-level defections currently taking place do not bode well for the regime.

It appears ever more likely that a negotiated exit by the President Saleh is the only way out of the current crisis. But because there is no clear or popular alternative leader to navigate the complex social, economic, and security issues that Yemen would continue to face even after Saleh's departure, a peaceful transition of power seems unlikely. Unlike Egypt, Yemen's military lacks the capability and legitimacy to act as a viable transitional power. The Yemeni political and social landscape is teeming with tribal leaders and Islamist groups that have the arms and the power to turn the situation into an all-out civil war. Such a situation would benefit al-Qaeda greatly – as did the war between the Saleh regime in the north and southern separatists in 1994 – and would pose a serious threat for Yemen's neighbor to the north, Saudi Arabia.

MES Past Events

01 February 2011

Dr. Tarzi presented a lecture entitled "6+2 Revisited: Afghanistan and Its Region" to the Commanders Course, MCB Quantico.

08 March 2011

MES hosted the Near East South Asia Center for Strategic Studies Executive Seminar on Central Asian security for discussions on Iran and the AfPak Region.

11 March 2011

Dr. Tarzi participated in a Panel entitled "Intervention and the Dilemmas of Security in Afghanistan" with Dr. Gilles Dorronosoro and LTC Patrick Kelley hosted by Weiser Center for Emerging Democracies at University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI.

23 March 2011

Dr. Tarzi presented a lecture entitled "Afghanistan and Its Neighbors: Save Me from My Friends" at University of Mary Washington, Fredericksburg, VA.

As attention has turned from the transitions taking place in Egypt and Tunisia to the Western-led military operations in Libya and the Saudi intervention in Bahrain, the rapidly deteriorating situation in Yemen has been lost in the headlines. Over the past 32 years, the Saleh regime has been faced with one crisis after another and has been able to survive, but the coming crisis of a post-Saleh Yemen will have far reaching implications and should not be underestimated, especially not by policymakers in Washington and Riyadh.

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Clarity of Strategic Aim

The push to punish Qadhafi for attacking his own people came from a number of European states, led by France and the United Kingdom. Resolution 1973 was cosponsored by the two aforementioned states and Lebanon, the sole Arab state in the UNSC, bringing with it the rare support of the League of Arab States for an attack on one of its member states. Support by a majority of Arab League member states for the U.S.-led coalition to liberate Kuwait being the only other notable exception. For the two major European powers, the Libyan decision has domestic as well as international dimensions and with it responsibilities both at home and abroad. Not only is Libya a source of energy for a number of European countries, but also instability in that country would directly impact southern Europe, from the potential influx of refugees to Libya's becoming a potential haven for international terrorists near Europe's southern shores. The Arab League, while supportive of the operations initially, may renege its support if the strikes on Libya result in increasing casualties among Libyan civilians. For the Arab side, the longer foreign forces pound another country in their midst, the less enthusiastic their support of UNSC Resolution 1973 will be.

Here clarity of mission by the Western-led coalition would go far to contain Arab conspiracy theorists and maintain good will. If the goal is to set Libya on a track where the majority of its people can determine the fate of their nation, then it would seem that a combined European-Arab leadership with support from the United States and UN would be the answer. In such a group, major European players such as France, United Kingdom and perhaps Italy can illustrate that they are able to lead a humanitarian intervention in support of the Arab people working directly with Arab states. For Arab states such as Egypt, Qatar and Lebanon, working to restore normalcy in Libya in cooperation with European states would usher a model of problem solving in which responsibility is shared and military intervention is supported only for an internationally-binding, specific aim. More ambitious and vague plans may plunge Libya into chaos; alienate Arab states, some of which are dealing with their own domestic challenges; and at the end may help forces whose identity and aim go counter to the interests of greater international peace and security.

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Measuring Perceptions about the Pashtun People

by Amin Tarzi and Robert D. Lamb

Afghanistan and Pakistan are sites of intense conflict — and intense international interest. Because the epicenter of the Afghan war is along Afghanistan's southern and eastern border with Pakistan, and because important combatants use Pakistan's tribal areas for sanctuary, there is correspondingly intense interest in better understanding the people who live in this border region. The dominant ethnic group there is the Pashtuns, who have experienced a long series of wars and other major disruptions since the 1970s. What little academic research has been undertaken about Pashtuns during this period is sorely outdated. Knowledge about Pashtuns affects policies and strategies in the region — including counterinsurgency — so it is important not only to study Pashtuns but also to study what is believed about them.

This report documents the results of a study about beliefs about the Pashtun people. The purpose was to identify the range of perceptions or misperceptions about Pashtun communities by cataloging "stereotypes" about Pashtuns held by English-speaking policymakers, experts, and other opinion leaders. The authors interviewed 52 officials and experts in the United States, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, and analyzed 138 articles drawn from recent academic and popular sources. Pashtuns were most commonly characterized as proud, victimized, sectarian, tribal, and hospitable; they were not stereotyped as warlike, misogynous, illiterate, conservative, or medieval. Pashtun diversity was generally acknowledged, as were the changes Pashtuns have experienced in recent decades. Some saw Pashtuns as natural allies of the Taliban, while others considered them more opportunistic, which suggests there are competing schools of thought about counterinsurgency in the region (i.e., population-centric versus enemy-centric strategies). The report concludes by noting the absence of broad, deep, and, most importantly, current knowledge about the Pashtuns. Having such knowledge would be a good in itself, but would also help policymakers and strategists avoid having to make untested assumptions about how important populations might respond to different activities — whether military or political.

Full Report available at: http://csis.org/publication/measuring-perceptions-about-pashtun-people or via the MES website under the Publications tab.