

Whence Libya? Why Libya? Whither Libya?

Since the Libyan regime was established by a coup d'état in 1969, Americans and Europeans -- with a three-year intermission from 1986 to 1988 -- found it acceptable enough to recognize it, sell it arms and buy its petroleum. In that one interval, on April 15, 1986, the American government under President Ronald Reagan attempted to kill Colonel Muammar Qaddafi by bombing his residence and did wound his wife and kill about 75 Libyans including his adopted daughter. Two years later, Qaddafi retaliated by bombing an American airliner. That attack killed 270 people including 190 Americans among whom were at least four intelligence officers. These were just the major events; there were many others. Of course, Americans and Libyans took very different views of them. But both sides eventually smoothed over their angers, and relations again became profitable and "correct" on both sides, as they remained until early this year.

So, what is the basis of those attitudes and the causes of those actions? Who are the Libyans anyway? And what is the position of Qaddafi among them? What motivates the Libyans? What governs their action? And what is likely to be the outcome of the revolt, the regime's resistance to it and the Western intervention?

With the prejudice of a historian, I find that seeking answers to these questions requires at least a glance at the past. That is the aim of this essay.

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Let me reveal my prejudice. As it happened, I was in Tripoli a few years before the coup. I had been sent by our government to figure out what we should do with the huge airbase we had rebuilt and were running to train pilots assigned to NATO. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara wanted to close it down. I concluded that he was right. One look at the base convinced me, as I reported back to the Policy Planning Council, that the base made a coup against the pro-American, decrepit and very corrupt monarchy almost inevitable: on one side of the base were scores of the latest jet fighters and bombers (ours) while across the tarmac were half a dozen puny trainers (theirs). Any Libyan nationalist, particularly a military officer, like then Lt. Muammar Qaddafi, was bound to want, at least, to "level the playing/air field." That is what he eventually did by throwing out the old king and bidding us goodbye.

The Libyans were ecstatic. Those then alive had grown up on tales of generations of greed, violence and humiliating foreign rule. So what was the historical substance of those memories?

For centuries, "Libya" had been a loose collection of poor outposts of the Ottoman Empire on the Mediterranean coast. The Ottoman Turks wisely confined themselves to minimal government. That suited the nomads in Cyrenaica and the deep interior who were opposed to the very concept of government. In the coastal towns and villages, such resistance to Ottoman rule as existed was both feeble and sporadic. While probably not "popular," the Ottoman Turks were at least fellow Muslims and, over the years, the garrison in Tripoli had become fathers of many of the inhabitants. Merchants and artisans occasionally voiced resentment over the level of taxation and abuses of arbitrary

administration, but the Libyans had yet to discover that exciting and lethal elixir, nationalism.

Nationalism, however, had already been discovered by other Ottoman populations. One by one, the several Balkan ethnic groups and the Greeks had broken away from the Empire.. Everywhere in Europe nationalism was in the air.

Among the late comers were the Italians. Only half a century after they had achieved a formal union, the Italians had become assertive nationalists (or, more accurately, revanchists); that is, they had begun to dream about repossessing the Roman Empire. This dream got them into a war in 1911 with the decrepit Ottoman Empire which still occupied much territory that had been Roman.

Right across the Mediterranean – which the Italians were coming to think of as our sea, *mare nostra* -- was the collection of Ottoman port-towns. At that time, few outsiders knew anything about them, but Italian antiquarians thought that in Roman times, at least some of them had been agriculturally rich. Led by this dubious view of history, Italian politicians saw them as answers to the quest for imperial glory for themselves and agricultural land for the poverty-stricken Italian peasants. By the early years of the 20th century, Libya had become an Italian national obsession.

The other European states, particularly Britain and France, were slightly more realistic. While they were trying to turn similar imperial dreams into reality elsewhere in Africa and Asia, they had no serious objections to an Italian push into a more or less empty piece of North Africa between Britain's Egypt and the Sudan on the east and France's Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco and central Africa (modern Niger and Chad) on the west and south. The reason for their indifference was their evaluation of the "the prize." Libya hardly seemed worth the effort to collect it.

Italy paid no attention to their views and in 1911 belatedly joined the race for North Africa by sending an expeditionary force of 35,000 men with whom it assumed it could overwhelm the garrison of 7,000 Ottoman Turkish soldiers. Neither the Italians nor any of the other Europeans then thought much about the natives. At least for the Italians, that proved to be a major mistake: there was a remarkable invigorating movement among the Libyans, the *Sanusiyah*.

The *Sanusiyah* or Sanusi Brotherhood was a powerful example of what is known in Islam as a *Salafi* movement. *Salafiyah* ("Salifi-ism") is difficult concept for outsiders to comprehend. The word itself comes from the verbal "root," *salafa*, that means "to take the lead" but also "to keep pace with" and "to return to origins." Westerners usually place the emphasis on "return," that is, on backwardness. But the sense is "return to first principles" and, as defined by Muslim thinkers, the implication is "in order to advance." If this seems awkward or unlikely, consider the European counterpart. Protestant reformers in 16th and 17th centuries also thought that "purifying" the present by going back to origins was necessary to be able to advance. That concept sparked the great commercial and intellectual revolution in Holland, Belgium and North Germany. The *Salifis* were not so interested in commerce; their aim was to recapture the power and dignity of the days when Islam was a world leader. They believed that by stripping away the shroud of dark ages, they could advance toward a magnificent future.

One of several revivalist movements in 18th and 19th century Islam, the *Sanusiyah* was founded by the scholar, poet and mystic Sayyid Muhammad bin Ali al-Sanusi who was born in what is now Algeria in 1787. After study in Fez, he left in haste when the authorities became disturbed by his revolutionary pronouncements.

On his way east toward Mecca, al-Sanusi moved from town to town along the North African coast, through Egypt and into Arabia, preaching and gathering adherents. After two long periods of study in Mecca and having worked with other *Salafi* groups, al-Sanusi had achieved sufficient fame by 1837 to found the order that bears his name. Leaving Arabia, he intended to return to Morocco but stopped in Tripoli when he learned of the French invasion of Algiers.

Thus, having spent years in fear of Moroccan, Egyptian and Arabian religious and secular authorities, and now worried about the incursions of Europeans, he found himself, one might say by historical accident, in Libya. There, he decided to establish his new religious organization in as remote an area as he could find. He picked the hump of Libya sticking out in the Mediterranean, Cyrenaica. But, since the northern part of Cyrenaica is relatively well watered and relatively densely inhabited, he moved south to where the cultivated land fades into the Sahara. In the then-uninhabited oasis of Jaghbub, he established a *zawiya*. The word is usually translated as “lodge,” but more accurately it means a settlement focused on a mosque.

To Jaghbub came devotees and students from the core of Africa and, as they graduated, they established new *zawiyas*. Through his teaching and their proselytizing, a religious society was born. This community overlaid the Bedouin tribal divisions so that, in a way similar to what the Prophet Muhammad had done a millennium before, al-Sanusi was able to effect a supra-tribal community of “brothers,” *ikhwan*. And just as the Prophet Muhammad had found, the Bedouin who became his followers were content to leave mysticism and theology to him and his acolytes but gave him intense loyalty because his cause seemed to them to take on transcendental purpose.

By the end of al-Sanusi’s life, about 150 *zawiyas* had been created in oases scattered across the landscape from Tunis in the West across what is now Libya through Egypt to Mecca in the east. The expanse was enormous. Measured in the means of contemporary means of travel – by camel caravan -- it was months wide. So it could be held together only by an active religious organization and a shared faith. To promote these, al-Sanusi created a religious university to which students flocked from all over the Islamic world.

For years after al-Sanusi’s death, the order prospered and, as it did, its effects were increasingly felt by the French (who had moved into West and Central Africa), the British (who controlled Egypt) and the Italians (who after 1911 had begun colonizing the Libyan coast). All three saw the *Sanusiyah* and the tribesmen it inspired as obstacles to imperial ambition.

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So what was the “Libya” in which this Sanusi-led coalition was based? We can describe it roughly as Caesar summarized that other object of imperial Rome, Gaul. As Caesar wrote, *Gaul est omnis divisa in partes tres*. Libya similarly could be divided into three: Cyrenaica (including Benghazi), Tripolitania (including Tripoli) and the vast steppe and desert interior.

In the early years of the 20th century, the only real city was Tripoli which then had a population of about 40,000 while the main eastern town, Benghazi did not reach 16,500 until 1911. Smaller towns and villages were scattered along the coast. European travelers reported that most of the townsmen were not natives but recent arrivals. They included Arabs from Egypt and Algeria, *qulaughla* (Turco-Arabs), *shawashna* (Negro-Arabs), a few European *renegados* (converts to Islam and/or refugees) and Jews.

The steppe and desert interior supported the other and much larger division of the population. Most of these people were semi-nomads who lived part of the year in spring-fed oases where they raised millet, vegetables and dates and around which they herded sheep. The true nomads, the people the Arabs differentiate by their reliance on the camel, ranged widely from the Nile all the way to southern Morocco. They had to move because only by nomadism could people and animals survive in the desert. This was because the Sahara does not receive enough rainfall to sustain agriculture or sufficient grass, brush and water in any one place for camels and the people who are their parasites. Rain, being both scanty and sporadic, set the pattern of life.

This pattern of life, as throughout the steppe and desert lands of North Africa and the Middle East, gave rise to a particular way of life, tribalism. Generally far from any form of government, each group of people had to be small because resources of water and fodder could not support many. This group of kinsmen is what we call a clan. In Libyan Arabic it is called a *bait* -- literally, a household, the family with whom one sleeps. Groups of clans, a tribe (Arabic: *qabilah*), could gather in temporary congregations only in the rainy season, if rain actually fell which it often did not. Most of the time, each *bait*, composed of perhaps 50 to 100 men, women and children, was on its own. To protect what little it had, it either was prepared to fight fiercely or it died out. It was the intense loyalty of members of a *bait* -- *asabiyah*, as the great medieval North African historian and student of the nomads, Ibn Khaldun, identified it -- that enabled it to survive.¹

What was politically important about the *Sanusiyah* was that it afforded an acceptable way for groups that were necessarily hostile to one another to "turn their faces in one direction," as the Arabic expression has it, and unite against foreigners. That is precisely what had given Islam its Bedouin-based power in the time of the Prophet Muhammad.

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We associate the attempt by Italy to create an African empire with Fascism and Mussolini, but the attack on Libya began 12 years earlier. Indeed, it was there, on November 1, 1911

¹Beginning my research for a doctorate in the Lebanese mountains some 60 years ago, I became a close friend of Stella and Emrys Peters who had just completed two remarkable studies of the Bedouin of Cyrenaica. Stella's was on the concept of the *bait* while Emrys, who would later become Professor of Social Anthropology at Manchester University, had made the most complete analysis yet done of Bedouin society. A posthumous collection of his writings survives as *The Bedouin of Cyrenaica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). Then, later when I was a student at Oxford, I became a close friend to their teacher, Edward (later Sir Edward) Evans-Pritchard, then Professor of Social Anthropology and previously, during the Second World War, a Political Officer in Cyrenaica. This had resulted in his book, *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1949). These friendships much influenced not only my views of Libyan affairs but also of the craft of the historian. I owe a great deal to the inspiration of all three of these remarkable scholars.

that the Italians invented the new kind of warfare which we are still employing -- aerial bombing -- when an Italian pilot tossed a grenade out of his plane at a Bedouin. That episode illustrates the disparity between the forces, but still the Italians lost some 8,000 men and wasted roughly half of their gross domestic product on their venture into Libya that year. It did not much impress their local opponents, but the Italians moved to establish the legality of their invasion by resurrecting the ancient name "Libya," aiming to show that it was, after all, Roman.

The Italian invasion and the Turco-Bedouin-Sanusi resistance morphed into the First World War. In that great conflict, Libya was a backwater, but it was not unimportant to either side. In 1915, Italy declared war on Austria and joined the Allied side. Although they became bogged down in the ghastly "White War" with Austria where they lost nearly a million men, the Italian government did not dare to pull back from Libya for fear of being charged by Italy's virulent journalists with lack of patriotism. So they sent over another 20,000 soldiers. (Ironically, Benito Mussolini, then still a socialist, was put in jail for urging dock workers to oppose the invasion. He soon abandoned socialism and came out in favor of the Libyan war.)

At the same time, the British were beset by still-formidable Ottoman forces and feared that the *Sanusiyah* might stimulate dangerous uprisings among its thousands of followers in Egypt so it seemed sensible to work with the Italians in Libya. At the same time they were beginning relations with the *Sharif* of Mecca, they tried to initiate talks with the *Sanusiyah*. These talks could not succeed because of the British alliance with the Italians and because they were fighting the *Sanusiyah* in Egypt, but their attempt had the effect of splitting the *Sanusiyah* leadership.

Meanwhile, the Ottoman Empire was fighting for its life. Having already lost Egypt, it was desperately holding onto the Levant and the *pashaliks* that became Iraq. The Turks thought that in Libya the Sanusi-inspired tribesmen might, at least, create a diversion and thus relieve British pressure on their eastern front. So, they smuggled arms into Cyrenaica (even by submarine) and sent officers to teach the tribesmen how to fight in a more modern way. But by 1916, reeling from defeats in the Middle East, the Empire had few resources left and so recalled most of the remarkable officers it had sent to Libya.² The few remaining Turkish soldiers and their Bedouin allies were attacked by the relative vast 35,000 man British army in Egypt, by a smaller French colonial army driving north from central Africa and by the Italians along the coast.

For the tribesmen, the Italians were the nearer of their three enemies. The war, in their eyes, was local: it was to defend their way of life, their religious brotherhood and their dignity against the European intruders. Early in the war, the *Sanusiyah* led this struggle, but when the leadership split, one faction, led by the man who later became King Idris, began to play the British game. Judging that his followers had no hope of defeating the Italian-British-French coalition, he began -- like other Arabs in Egypt, Lebanon and Arabia -- to negotiate with the British.

² Among the officers who served in Libya were two of the most important of the later Turkish leaders, Ismail Enver, who would become the Turkish equivalent of prime minister and would lead the resistance to the Soviet conquest of Central Asia, and Kemal Atatürk, as he became known, would become the president of post-Ottoman Turkey.

As the First World War ended, the major issues in Libya were unresolved. But the Libyans were exhausted. So, with British help, Idris began negotiations with the Italians. To have someone with whom to deal effectively and to end the fighting, the Italians were forced to recognize the *Sanusiyah* as a de facto government and to recognize Idris as *amir*. In short, the Italians did what the British were doing in Transjordan and Iraq, using Idris to create a façade for their rule. He would get a title, a handsome allowance and various marks of prestige while the coastal peoples would be offered limited self-rule and even Italian citizenship. Provided, of course, that he could deliver Libya to Italy.

Idris could not. Knowing that, he equivocated as long as he could. By 1923, the incoming Fascist Party, led by Mussolini, decided to force the issue; so the second phase of the Italo-Libyan war began. For the Fascists, Libya became a test of their right to rule. To be sure of victory, they committed still more soldiers who were armed with the latest equipment, machine guns, armored cars and aircraft.

Against this modern European army and then more or less abandoned by the *Sanusiyah* leadership, the Bedouin could employ only classical guerrilla tactics. They probably never had as many as a thousand men under arms at any one time. But their war against the Italians – in which the coastal, settled peoples played no part -- was to last for a decade, from 1923 to 1932. Students of insurgency will find nearly exact parallels to Iraq, Afghanistan and other African and Asian conflicts.³

Mussolini's Marshal Rodolfo Graziani used all the tactics of counterinsurgency to break the insurgents -- favoring the coastal people, whom the Italians called the *sottomessi* (the submissive), empowering Quislings, playing off the leadership of the *Sanusiyah* while punishing, starving, "regrouping" (Graziani's invention) or killing the tribesmen they called the *ribelli*. Graziani was a master of this brutal game. He built a barrier to cut the Bedouin off from their migration and supply routes into Egypt, filled in and cemented their water wells and dug metaphorical *solci di sangue* – channels of blood -- among the tribes, hoping that they would defeat one another.

Unable to stand against large well armed formations, the insurgents learned new tricks. They stole and carried identity cards to pretend to be "reconciled" to Italian rule, struck without warning and at night – it is from such tactics that we got the expression "guerrillas own the night" -- concealed their weapons and pretended to be just herdsmen in daylight or when outgunned and forced the *sottomessi* to shelter them, furnish intelligence and give them supplies. Even when the leadership of the *Sanusiyah* abandoned them, the tribesmen fought on. Indeed, they created for themselves a new form of the *Sanusiyah* under the leadership of one of the least known of the great anti-imperial patriots, Umar al-Mukhtar. Like the leaders of the Afghan Taliban, he was both a man of religion, an *alim* (or as the Afghans would say, a *mulla*) and a warrior, a *mujahid*.

Under al-Mukhtar's leadership the Sanusi brotherhood proved to be a flexible bond, responding with arms when possible, fleeing when nearly overwhelmed but never giving up. Of Bedouin background and also a Sanusi "brother," he became Libya's hero. In a decade of almost daily fire-fights against the Italian army, it fair to say that Libya itself was

³As I have set out in my book, *Violent Politics* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007 and 2008). In Libya, the guerrillas called themselves the *muhafaziyah* or, roughly, the "Defenders." In Arabic, the word is more loaded with meaning than the translation: another form of the same word used of those who memorize the Quran and so embody the essential values of the faith.

born. But it also nearly died. In desperation, the Italians decided on a campaign of genocide. Putting nearly the whole Bedouin population in concentration camps, the Italians slaughtered the herds on which the Bedouin lived and killed tens of thousands of men, women and children. Finally, they wounded, captured and hanged al-Mukhtar.⁴

The long campaign of infiltration, bribery and assassination has left a bitter residue: to the generation of the 1960s, Qaddafi's generation, it appeared as a clash of Africa versus the West, the poor versus the rich, the weak versus the strong, Islam against Christianity. Fertilizing that crop of hatred were the bones of about two in three of the Bedouin population. This is the national epic on which young Muammar Qaddafi grew to manhood. He would proclaim his coup d'état in the name of Umar al-Mukhtar.

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The decade of unremitting war had turned Libya into an empty husk. This was precisely what the Italians intended as they wanted to send Italians to inhabit it. But, even the Fascist state had difficulty persuading Italians to settle in Libya. Finally, only about 100,000 went, and most of them, despite all the help they were given by the state, left as soon as they could.

The big influx of Italians was in the army. So fragile was their hold on Libya in the 1930s that the Italians stationed a quarter of a million soldiers there – ironically their need to garrison Libya enabled them, when they declared war on Britain in June 1940, to attack the 86,000 troops the British had in Egypt. Their overwhelming numerical advantage lasted less than a year because in February 1941 the whole Italian 10th Army surrendered. Thereafter, it was the Erwin Rommel's *Afrikakorps* that did most of the fighting. After the great battle of al-Alamain, the British moving along the coast and the French coming up from central Africa had captured all of Libya by February 1943. Ironically, the British then found themselves administering what remained of the colonial Fascist state.

In 1945, the victorious Allies met to decide what to do with Libya. The United States wanted to turn it over to the United Nations; the Soviet Union demanded that it become the Libyan "trustee;" France wanted to turn it back to the Italians; the Italians wanted it back; and the Russians, hoping that the Italian Communists would assume power, changed course and adopted the Italian option. As the Cold War began to dominate thinking of the Western powers and the surge of the Italian Communists petered out, the British swung over to the French plan to return it to Italy. But this idea evoked memories of too-recent and too-painful events so "The Libyan Problem" was turned over to the United Nations. There it was decided to give the country independence and to bring back from exile the surviving Sanusi leader who had spent the war under British protection in Egypt. He would become King Idris I.

Idris's rule was marked from the beginning by petty tyranny, corruption and charade. No outsiders then much cared. This was, at least partly, because Libya didn't seem worth much consideration. It then produced nothing of any serious value, it had a total population smaller than most Western cities and it posed no threat to anyone. Weighed in the balance of all the other world problems, it drew no attention.

⁴A Hollywood version of his life and death, *A Lion of the Desert*, was made in 1981 and starred Anthony Quinn, the Mexican actor who routinely portrayed all darker-hued foreigners.

But then the US Strategic Air Command rediscovered the air base. Located just outside Tripoli, the old Italian-German-RAF-American field was within bomber range of the Soviet Union. Moreover, with Libya's nearly perfect flying weather, it also was an ideal place to train NATO pilots. So the Americans took over the field and enormously expanded it, eventually placing nearly 5,000 Americans in it. It was described by the then American ambassador as "a Little America...on the sparkling shores of the Mediterranean." It was upon seeing it, as I have mentioned, that I became convinced that the government that had rented it to the Americans could not itself long continue. It didn't, but the airfield itself did continue. Ironically, it would later be used by the Soviet air force and still later (on April 5, 1986 and in March 2011) would be bombed by the United States.

The airfield was not the only attraction of Libya to postwar foreigners. Stimulated by the discovery of oil in Algeria, French, British and American companies began to search for oil in Libya. In one of those curious "might-have-beens" of history, the Italians had come close to finding oil in the late 1930s and had the Afrikakorps taken up their research, they could have solved the shortage of fuel that was the major cause of their defeat.⁵ (Allegedly, they thought the curious oily taste of water in the wells on which they drew was because the British must be trying to poison them.) It was 17 years later, in 1959, that Esso struck the first field and 2 years later opened a pipeline to the little Mediterranean port of Brega. Other discoveries quickly followed.

As oil flowed out, money flowed in. The relatively enormous inflow of money greatly increased the capacity of the coterie of officials around King Idris to enrich themselves. As the late American journalist John Cooley observed,⁶ "Concession brokers and influence peddlers operated in the near fringes of the royal court. The sudden infusions of huge amounts of cash were dramatic in a poor country that, by some estimates, had only a forty-dollar per capita income as it completed its first years of independence...For poor tent-village-dwelling families like that of [Muammar Qaddafi's parents] Abu Meniar and Aissha al-Qaddafi, this was rubbing silt into the wounds of poverty."

The disparity between rich and poor multiplied by corruption, the empty puffery of the leadership, the government's pandering to foreigners, its weakness and petty tyranny were all too evident in the Libya in which Muammar Qaddafi grew to manhood.

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During his long reign in power, Qaddafi evolved from the young revolutionary who overthrew the aging monarch until finally becoming an aging (and virtual) monarch himself. He has always presented a puzzle to outside observers. He is not an easy study. My aim is not to pass judgment, but to try to understand how he sees events so that we can predict what he will do. Clearly, it is important that we understand as much as we can if we are to work toward a viable solution in Libya.

In my time in Government in the early 1960s, the CIA attempted to psychoanalyze rulers of other countries. Buried somewhere in its vast headquarters building in Virginia, was a

⁵The British had broken the German codes and so could exactly pin-point and sink supply ships sailing from Italy. It was largely because they were in danger of running out of fuel for their tanks that the Afrikakorps narrowly missed taking Egypt and cutting the Suez Canal.

⁶*Libyan Sandstorm* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1983), 47.

team of “shrinks” who, at vast distance, with no personal contact and depending only on diplomats’, agents’ and journalists’ reports, tried to understand their proclivities. The analysts probably worked assiduously. I never saw their reports, but I think most of my State Department colleagues found them merely amusing. However, it does not seem to me to be beyond the wit of man to understand enough about what influenced Qaddafi to get a reasonable view of his thought and perhaps to predict his likely actions. These are the points that strike me:

Qaddafi told us in his first pronouncement, announcing the coup, that he was guided by the hero of the war against the Italian Fascists, Umar al-Mukhtar. This was no abstract identification since he proudly proclaimed that his father was a companion of al-Mukhtar. What al-Mukhtar meant to him and to the cadets and young officers of his generation, I suggest, came to two main points: al-Mukhtar and the tribal *ribelli* were the true nationalists and no matter how terrible their ordeal they did not surrender.

Like al-Mukhtar, Qaddafi and most of the young officers were of tribal origin. Surely, from tales told by relatives and friends of the vicious Italian campaigns that came close to wiping out their people, they imbibed a deep suspicion of foreigners – not only the Italians who still sought to control Libya even after the end of the Second World War but also the French who occupied the Fezzan (the vast interior) until 1955. Under the pallid skins of all Westerners, they suspected, beat the heart of imperialism.

So how does this translate into current events? After all, to us, our intervention seems justified (by Security Council resolution 1973) and certainly moral (to protect the rebels who at least initially were unarmed civilians). To Qaddafi and his supporters, it seems different. Is there any substance in their feeling?

They know, because it was leaked to the press, that the British had a plan (code named “the Radford Plan,”) to intervene in Libya to prevent precisely what Qaddafi did, overthrow the monarchy. Like most Middle Easterners, the Libyans generally believe – those opposing the current regime, happily, and those upholding it, angrily – that Western secret agents are constantly being infiltrated into the country. In recent days, these beliefs have been certified: a British MI-6 team was caught red-handed in a most embarrassing way while the US government has acknowledged that it has CIA operatives and Special Forces troops now on Libyan soil. So, whether we like it or not, what is often derided as Arab paranoia is grounded in both history and current events. The Libyan government must ask how could such agents be effective? The answer is ‘only if supported by some Libyans.’ Absent local supporters, foreign agents don’t survive long. It is obvious today that their supporters are the rebels against the regime.

So the question arises, how does Qaddafi identify these rebels. Obviously, he has a view different from ours. To us the rebels may seem incipient democrats, although, we really do not know much about them because they seem to be a very loose collection of individuals and groups. We are so unsure what they stand for that we have found it necessary to warn them not to engage in killing innocent civilians – or, we hinted, we would also attack them. But they appear to share one attribute: they want a role in running their lives beyond what Qaddafi is willing to allow.

To Qaddafi, I believe, these non-tribesmen seem unpatriotic agents of foreigners. By the men of his father’s generation, Qaddafi would have been regaled with tales about the people the Italians called the *sottomessi*, the settled, coastal people, who contributed to

the Italian conquest and occupation. I suspect that he must view his opponents as essentially the same group. Moreover, I imagine that he is furious over what he must regard as their lack of appreciation for what he has done for them. When I visited Libya in 1963, even Tripoli was a city of slums with many of its houses made from scrap and most without running water or electricity. When he took power, Qaddafi enormously improved the lives of the settled, coastal people. Today, they live beyond the dreams of their fathers and grandfathers. Finally, I suspect that Qaddafi sees their revolt not so much as a quest for participation in government (which we believe it is) as proof that they are just another generation of collaborators with foreigners who want to gain unfairly from Libya's oil. Whether this is true or not is to some extent irrelevant: I think those views are what governs his action.

In addition to Umar al-Mukhtar, the second "role model" for Qaddafi, as he told us, was the Egyptian leader, Gamal Abdul Nasser. At the time of the coup, Westerners were as hostile to Nasser as they later became to Qaddafi, but to most Arabs, Nasser was an almost supernatural figure, orator, guide, font of inspiration and movie star wrapped in one. Qaddafi adored him. Indeed, in the first moments of the seizure of power, he and his colleagues wanted to turn Libya over to Egypt and themselves become Nasser's lieutenants. That this did not happen was apparently because Nasser, having been burned in the abortive merger with Syria (the United Arab Republic) and his intervention in Yemen (which set up his defeat by Israel), did not want deep involvement in Libya.

Nasser was, of course, an authoritarian ruler. There are few living rulers in Africa or Asia who are not. Qaddafi is certainly an authoritarian figure. Worse, he is a true believer. He is sure, I think, that what he is doing is right and that those who oppose him do so for selfish, unpatriotic motives. This makes it difficult for him to contemplate sharing power – just as it does for the leaders of Iran, China and many other countries. We think that representative government is inherently universal, but in fact it is a fragile concept; it took centuries to grow in the West and often broke down even there. It suffers in much of the rest of the world from the heritage of imperialism, the lack of popular non-governmental organizations, lack of experience, poverty and other problems. We must hope that it will grow, but the growth is very slow and often takes forms very different from ours.

To Qaddafi, what was important about Nasser, I think, came down to two points: he was a true nationalist and he was not corrupt. Qaddafi carried out his coup for the same reasons Nasser carried out his. What has happened over the years since then in both Egypt and Libya is less edifying. Nasser's successors, Anwar Sadat (whom Nasser despised) and Hosni Mubarak wallowed in corruption; evidence is growing that Qaddafi himself or at least his family have evolved from the Nasserist to the Sadat-Mubarak pattern.

The Israel-Arab conflict also played a part in Qaddafi's intellectual and emotional development. Libya had a significant Jewish population in the 19th century, but I find no indication that Qaddafi had contact with those few who remained in Libya after the 1948-1949 Palestine war. Rather, I think, he shared the emotional commitment of most Arabs, particularly those at a distance, to the Palestinians. He probably equated the Israelis to the Italians: both colonized Arab lands and both used overwhelming military force against its defenders. Multiplying these deeper feelings, I think, would have been the Israeli defeat of his hero, Gamal Abdul Nasser in the 1967 war.

And what about terrorism? President Reagan memorably referred to Qaddafi as "the mad dog of Africa." His attack on a nightclub in Berlin and, above all, his blowing up the Pan

American aircraft over Scotland were strongly and rightly condemned. But, Qaddafi hardly invented terrorism. The CIA practiced it to the fullest extent in his youth and early days in power. It tried to murder Nasser, did murder Lumumba, overthrew governments, and engaged in various kinds of black propaganda, seeking as the US government admitted, to overthrow his regime. As President Reagan said, he wanted Qaddafi to “go to bed every night wondering what we might do.” From the point of view of most of the world’s weaker peoples, the distinction we draw between such government actions as our shooting down an Iranian passenger plane and their planting bombs on one of ours is specious. Both are certainly horrible.

Some things American governments did not choose to do directly but wanted to have happen was sometimes done under their auspices and often with their connivance by Israel. Israel routinely carried out “operations” in the Arab countries in which it murdered Arab leaders. It also shot down or at least caused the crash of a Libyan commercial airliner in 1973, killing 108 people. Israel had its own agenda, of course, and even turned on its American patrons as when, in 1954, its agents set fire to an American government building in Alexandria to try to turn the American government against Nasser and when in 1967 it attacked and tried to sink an American Naval ship in the Mediterranean. The British MI-6 and the Soviet KGB also joined in, indeed virtually invented, this dangerous game.

Finally, there were mercenaries, like the “Dogs of War” led by the English soldier-of-fortune and former commando, Colonel (later Sir) David Sterling. The group associated with Sterling tried to overthrow Qaddafi’s government and kill him in the summer and fall of 1970. Ironically, it was the British, Italian and American intelligence forces that then squashed this freelance (and partly-Moroccan-funded) attempt. But the very success of the “formal” intelligence services in suppressing the mercenaries must have convinced Qaddafi, if he needed any convincing, that the real world more resembled the fictional world of Ian Fleming’s “OO7” than the law-abiding world proposed by Thomas Jefferson or Alexander Hamilton. As even President John F. Kennedy repeatedly showed, the excitement and seeming effectiveness of a “James Bond” was addicting. Qaddafi certainly became addicted.

Being one himself, Qaddafi was fascinated by revolutionaries. He identified with and contributed to a number of revolutionary groups including the Palestinian *Intifada*, the Basque ETA, the Irish IRA and the Philippine Moro Islamic Liberation Front. But, of course, he did not create these organizations. They grew on native soil. And, where he moved over from financial and propaganda support to “dirty tricks,” he often employed foreigners – including former CIA and US Special Forces officers.

Espionage can be a profitable game – at least temporarily – for those engaged in it, but it is a dirty game that corrupts those who employ it, deludes otherwise reasonable leaders and poisons international relations. Moreover, its record of “success” is very near zero. It needs to be abolished everywhere by everyone. Qaddafi is certainly guilty of many wicked acts, but he joins a notable crowd of statesmen including our own. As with nuclear arms control, we would do well to begin with ourselves in the quest for getting others to go straight. In the meantime, we are right to punish those who engage in it.

There is another, brighter, side of Qaddafi’s record. Qaddafi poured Libya’s oil money into projects to uplift his people. Under his regime, Libya evinces a remarkable record of development in almost every aspect – education, health care, infrastructure, job creation – and usually with a commendable sense of social justice. Some of the projects were

grandiose. One, particularly, was to build a massive pipeline to bring water from aquifers from Kufra oasis, deep in the Sahara, to the settled people on the coast. Libya is often described as “Egypt without the Nile” so, having the money and the water, Qaddafi moved to change geography. “The Second Nile” as it was termed, has often been derided as the Libyan equivalent of building a pyramid and showed Qaddafi’s madness. But, as a matter of fact, the project was first proposed not to Qaddafi but to the Libyan monarchy by the highly successful and eminently practical American oil man, Armand Hammer. Moreover, today the Spanish government is planning to do exactly the same thing, build a massive pipeline to bring water from a river in the north of Spain to the parched farmers in the south. Perhaps the pipeline is not so clear an example of Qaddafi’s flight from sanity.

To manage Libya’s one major resource, energy, Qaddafi essentially continued the very intelligent policy devised by the monarchy. It had aimed to create competition among a number of prospecting companies so that no one company could dominate and so set the scale of its production not on the needs of Libya but according to its own world-wide marketing needs as, for example, British Petroleum (then known as AIOC) had done in Iran. Under the monarchy this was accomplished by dividing the country into a large number of lease areas and opening bidding on them to a wide variety of American and European oil companies. Qaddafi carried this policy to the next logical step: as oil was discovered he moved cautiously to increase the government involvement in production and refining by purchase or nationalization. What Libyans could not do – handling the highly technical work of field maintenance – he left to foreign companies. It is notable that the essential features of his program were copied by most of the oil and gas producing countries throughout the world.

In political affairs he was less pragmatic than in economic matters. Like the rulers of other authoritarian states, China, Egypt, Syria, Iran and others, Qaddafi was not willing to allow participation in governance. His people could live well, even get rich, but they were not to be allowed to challenge his authority. There is a joke that sums up the situation: ‘when a dog ran all the way over to Tunisia, the Tunisian dogs were baffled. Why, they asked did he come? After all, they pointed out, they had no more to eat than dogs elsewhere. It was not for the food, the migrant replied. He came to bark.’ “Barking” was not allowed in Libya but having a voice in their national affairs is what the younger generation wants to do.

If these influences give some hints on Qaddafi’s youth and, in part, during his years as Libya’s ruler, one should ask “what happened to him” that caused him to appear bizarrely costumed and erratic in behavior later in life? The usual explanation is that he went insane. Another widely quoted witticism explained how his practical policies meshed with his bizarre behavior -- “he may be insane but he is not crazy.”

Of course, losing one’s mind sometimes happens to rulers as it happens to other humans. And to modify the great English historian’s dictum that “power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely,” one could say that the sycophancy with which statesmen, and particularly absolute rulers, are surrounded promotes eccentricity that occasionally borders on lunacy. But that answer seems to me inadequate. I confess I do not have a satisfying answer. But the more interesting question, I suggest, is directed at what he was doing in Libya rather than how he was dressed. The answer there, it appears, was that he was a victim of his own success. He got too rich, became too much of a king, and like many men occupying supreme power began to believe his own myth. In short, aging, he became the King Idris he had struggled as a young man to overcome.

As, as he did, he narrowed the circle of his advisers and listened only to praise. Thus, as I infer from the press, he was genuinely shocked when those he thought he was leading and whom he had so much helped to better their lives, demanded more and loved him less. I imagine that he really believes much of their motivation is foreign inspired. Given his upbringing and his experience, Qaddafi will undoubtedly attach much, perhaps excessive, importance to the role of foreigners. The long history of Western intervention, dirty tricks and subversion will be at the forefront in his and his supporters' thoughts. We would be wise not to strengthen his evaluation.

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So what is likely to follow when the bombing stops? At worst, the fighting will continue. The senior US Air Force commander warned that air power alone would be unlikely to defeat the Libyan government and the US Secretary of State, presumably speaking for President Obama, has ruled out a ground invasion. It is clear, at least so far, that even with powerful support, the rebels have not been able to defeat the regime and the defections to their side are limited. Even if the opposition groups are armed by the Western powers, my hunch is that Qaddafi will hark back to his Bedouin mentor, Umar al-Mukhtar, and wage a guerrilla war. If that should happen, it seems to me likely that Britain and France, whether under a NATO umbrella or not, will decide to intervene with ground forces. If they do, I suspect that this will energize rather than quiet Qaddafi's loyalists among the tribes. Libya, we must realize, like Afghanistan, is a tribal society and the tribesmen are Qaddafi's people. It will be very difficult or perhaps even impossible for the opposition, which is made up of coastal people, to cope with the people of the vast interior. The cost to the Libyans will be enormous.

Then there is the question of legality: even if they deploy overwhelming force, do the Western states and particularly the United States have the right to "regime change" Libya? Already questions are being posed by the "other" powers, particularly Turkey, but also China and Russia, on the extent and purpose of the UN Security Council resolution. If the questions are simply ignored as they were in Iraq, the cost to the already weak sense of a comity of nations will be heavy. Just at a time when we need more than anything to work together on the great and urgent challenges of surging population, declining natural capital of water and productive land and dangerous climate change, the consensus will fray.

And then there is the monetary cost to Britain, France and the United States. Accurate and inclusive figures are impossible to get, as they still are for Afghanistan and Iraq, but we are told that the war has so far cost – probably at minimum – the United States alone \$100 million a day. Not only America, mired in foreign debt with associated domestic problems, but France and Britain are struggling with severe economic shortfalls and are cutting back on programs that many of their peoples regard as essential for an acceptable pattern of life. The attack on Libya has already added about \$20 a barrel to the cost of oil. If that price is sustained, the ripple effect will derail attempts to cut back on "dirty" fuels, coal and shale oil, and so hasten the process of climate change. Libya is more than a straw on the already faltering camel's back.

And what follows this "straw?" The press is already drawing attention to the similar autocratic regime in Syria; Yemen is in virtual revolution against another strong man whom the US is unlikely to keep supporting; the majority population of Bahrain has been

repressed, at least so far, by Saudi military intervention; the war in Iraq is by no means over; nor is the war in Afghanistan. And beyond these nearby issues, what about the regime in Myanmar (Burma) which surely is far worse than Qaddafi's or the Ivory Coast where the arguments for "humanitarian intervention" are far stronger than in any of the other countries. Where will it stop? Foreign policy specialists of my generation used to think that there could be no more Vietnams, that we had learned our lesson. But we did not.

It also is worth considering that leaders of some of these countries will ask themselves whether it is wise to follow Qaddafi's decision to give up nuclear weapons. Would he be under attack today if he had gone ahead and developed them? I think it unlikely. That is surely not the message we want to give to those nations that can but have not yet gone nuclear.

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Finally, what is the alternative today in Libya? At this point there are no attractive or easy alternatives. That was true in Vietnam and Iraq; it is certainly also true of Afghanistan. So the easy thing is to keep on doing the same thing. But doing the same thing also causes the costs to rise and only rarely produces conditions conducive to policy change. A more sensible course of action is to try to stop digging the hole into which one is falling.

Supplying arms to the insurgents and bombing Qaddafi's army may lead, indeed is likely to lead, to more protracted and more bloody engagements. "Leveling the playing field" will only enable the "game" to go on. That will mean more misery, more destruction, more death. Rather than furnishing still more arms to the rebels – after having sold so many for so long to Qaddafi – it is certainly worth exploring whether peace-seeking might still be possible. Negotiation may not work, but it is always preferable to killing. Both sides (and we) have something to gain – and much to lose if we do not try. Attempting to jump into a "quick fix" is probably not going to work and is apt to create new problems. Moving with "all deliberate speed" is the best course and probably will involve a cooling off period to quiet inflamed passions. We have the tools to enhance the preconditions of peace during such a period. We should keep in mind the purpose of diplomacy: negotiation is not needed when people agree; it is needed when people don't. The cost to the Libyans, to us, and to the world community of nations is simply too high not to try.

William R. Polk, March 31, 2011