

Gaddafi's Last Stand: Symptom of a Revolutionary Arab World

I began this analysis on February 18. It has finally been updated!

"If there is no struggle there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet depreciate agitation are [the ones] who want crops without plowing up the ground, they want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters... Power concedes nothing without a demand... The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress.." Frederick Douglass, 1857

The pattern of political upheaval has continued unabated in the Arab world with the current turmoil on the sands of Libya seemingly at odds with the achievements to-date of the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions.

Events continue to unfold in Yemen, Libya and Bahrain, with limited protests in Jordan and, surprisingly, a flaring in Oman .

In an earlier post I touched upon the theme of a potential redrawing of the map of the Middle East. It is important to note that the last redrawing of the borders of the region took place just under a hundred years ago at the end of World War I. It was then that states like Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon were born and colonial spheres of influence were agreed by the victors at the expense of the defeated Ottoman Empire.

Today 4 months separate us from the demarcation of the borders of Sudan and birth of a new nation, South Sudan. Yemen is in serious danger of breaking up once again. Libya has been effectively divided into opposing spheres of influence between Colonel Muammar al-Gaddafi and his opponents in the east of the country.

Jordan can never effectively put to rest the fears that it will become an alternative homeland for the Palestinians. The demonstrations in the country unfortunately always hold the risk of degenerating into a Hashemite-Jordanian/Palestinian-Jordanian clash, something that can't be too far away from King Abdullah II's mind. That football matches descend into Jordanian vs Palestinian riots is indicative of the simmering tension in the country. The demonstrators' chant, "The people want to reform the regime" may be slightly reassuring as it omits the word "depose", that is until one finds out that they are calling for a constitutional monarchy, something which will, no doubt, not appeal to the king.

In the Gulf the situation in the small Kingdom of Bahrain set alarm bells ringing, prompting a quick coming-together of the member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council. It is significant that Saudi Arabia reiterated yesterday that Bahrain's security is one and the same as Saudi Arabia's. In a display of regional unity Bahrain's Crown Prince visited Doha on Wednesday despite the two countries not always seeing eye-to-eye in the past.

The Saudi King, Abdullah, was also quick to telephone Sultan Qaboos of Oman to offer his support to the Gulf's longest-serving ruler. The Emir of Kuwait Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad has put all his tremendous diplomatic experience into closing ranks in the crucial Gulf region and has stepped in to mediate in the dispute between Oman and the United Arab Emirates. Yesterday he flew into Muscat and brought together Sultan Qaboos and Abu Dhabi's influential Crown Prince Sheikh Muhammad bin Zayed al-Nahyyan and the UAE's Vice-President Muhammad bin Rashed al-Maktoum to clear the air between the two countries after a spat that began last January when Muscat said it had broken up a

UAE-backed spy ring.

Events in the Gulf must also be viewed through the prism of Iran which has never had truly amicable relations with the Gulf states. During the Shah's era Iran was the “policeman” of the region even disputing the sovereignty of Bahrain and occupying 3 islands claimed by the UAE. After Ayatollah Khomeini established the Islamic Republic in 1979 relations deteriorated even further with Tehran embarking on a campaign to Export the Revolution. Clashes between Iranian pilgrims and Saudi security In Islam's holiest city, Mecca, during the Hajj.

Yemen:

The face-off in Yemen has the potential hallmarks of a civil war in-the-making. The nature of Yemeni society, divided along tribal and patriarchal lines, makes this country the most susceptible to civil strife pitting countryman against another. Perhaps more than any other Arab country witnessing such turmoil, the supporters of President Ali Abdullah Saleh are genuine and truly fervent. Saleh's tribal supporters would fear that toppling their representative in the power structure would seriously endanger their standing and privileges and are therefore likely to fight tooth and nail to preserve Saleh's position at the head of the state. This does not preclude the possibility of them privately pressuring Saleh for reforms and more power-sharing.

The security apparatus of the state has come down on the side of the pro-regime demonstrators with the result being an uneven showdown in which the anti-Saleh protesters have been mauled.

Unfortunately for the president, his tribal defensive perimeter does not extend to all parts of the country, and especially not to the secessionist south whose bid for independence was forcibly crushed in a bloody war in 1994. Southern secessionists are once again agitating against the north's hegemony. A mass uprising in the south would cause a truly dangerous situation for Ali Abdullah Saleh, especially if it coincides with a resurgence of the clash with the Houthis.

Any change in Yemen must take into account Saudi Arabia's interests, a long-time player on the scene. However, the Saudis proved incapable of ensuring a dignified exit for Hosni Mubarak. Whether they can guarantee a more agreeable outcome in Yemen remains to be seen. Yemen's strategic location is of vast importance on the world stage. Hence Washington's support for Saleh and the decade-long Soviet backing of South Yemen when the country existed.

The bottom line is that President Ali Saleh has failed in his decades in power (12 years president of North Yemen, 21 years president of unified Yemen, 33 years total).

Yemen continues to languish at the bottom of the world table in almost every respect; poverty, illiteracy, corruption, unemployment, development, etc. Unfortunately where Yemen rises to the top of the league is in the consumption of that terrible curse to Yemeni society: Qat.

In summation, Ali Abdullah Saleh is in not guaranteed perpetual popular support, even from his own kinsmen. If an arrangement acceptable to most parties can be arrived at by the tribes, then Saleh could well find his president title adorned with the now-terrifying “ex” prefix all Arab leaders dread.

Whatever his fate, the implications of Yemen's breakup are huge and could very well be earth-shattering. It will not only affect the country but also its powerful neighbor Saudi Arabia as well as Oman. Factor in al-Qaeda and that the country overlooks the turbulent Horn of Africa and you get an

idea of the potential mess a destabilized Yemen will put the whole world in. The country will sooner or later forge ahead without Ali Abdullah Saleh who, sensing the winds of change in the region, quickly pledged not seek another term or bequeath the presidency to his son. An agreement on the future of the country in which opposing tribal power centers are consulted is the wisest outcome. As for the south, it has to be accorded the special recognition and development it warrants and its share of say in the affairs of the state. Either that, or autonomy or even independence. In real terms the south's instruments of state were disassembled over 2 decades ago and its leaders no longer a force to be reckoned with. In the long term, tribal incursions into the minutiae of the state have to be gradually severed and the building blocks of education, development and the eradication of qat, ie of a modern state, need to be laid. Failing that Yemen will continue to be anchored to that dark, bottomless pit in which it has wallowed for decades.

Libya:

While Libyan society is also divided along tribal lines, President Muammar al-Gaddafi has concentrated virtually all powers in the hands of his tribal minority and effectively disassembled everything that a country should be.

Gaddafi came to power in a coup that toppled the Senoussi monarchy in 1969. In 1977 he turned the Libyan republic into the world's only super- or ultra-republic, a *Jamahiriyya*, or a state of the masses where all power is supposedly held by the people. According to the regime, it is the first *jamahiriyya* in the history of the world. It will soon enough also become the first and last.

What Gaddafi basically did was eradicate all the intrinsic instruments and institutions of a state, take Libya out of the modern world and therefore consolidate all powers in his hands while promoting the charade of a popular democracy.

The Libyan leader has always kept the military at arm's length and sowed its higher ranks with his supporters. Gaddafi will seek to crush this uprising using internal security forces and revolutionary committees. There are reports that mercenaries have been involved in the efforts to suppress the uprising although no significant proof of that has materialized. That the evidence is lacking does not mean that mercenaries are not helping the Libyan leader wage his final battle.

Gaddafi has now lost virtually the whole of eastern Libya. So far his attempts to strike back at the rebellious east have been to send what seem to be ill-prepared raiding parties that have been repulsed with relative ease by the eastern rebels. The Libyan air force has been utilized on bombing runs aimed at taking out ammunition depots. According to a BBC report I was watching a couple of days ago one such dump was repeatedly attacked over several days which goes a long way towards showcasing the incompetence of Gaddafi's pilots who have never acquitted themselves well in their air missions. During the ill-fated involvement in Chad they would not engage in effective bombing runs for fear of anti-aircraft defenses, and would resort instead to ineffective high-altitude bombing. If the Libyan air force is hitting its targets now then it may well be due to the reports that Ukrainian pilots are now flying the Libyan jets.

I stand by my earlier assessment that Colonel Gaddafi will keep the bulk of his forces for the defense of Tripoli, i.e. his own survival, and I believe this has been borne out by the fact that there has been no concerted military campaign to retake the rebellious eastern regions through a combined effort of Libyan armor, infantry and air power.

It is worth remembering here the raid by 3 Iraqi armored divisions, with no air cover, into Saudi Arabia and the ensuing Battle of Khafji, in Saudi Arabia, between January 29 and February 1, 1991. It took the efforts of Saudi and Qatari forces backed by US Marines and Rangers as well as American air power to defeat the Iraqis. While Saddam knew he had no hope of holding Khafji after initially capturing it this action did rattle the coalition. Gaddafi has done nothing of the sort although he is supposedly fighting to regain control of his country.

It is a country blessed with great wealth, a small population and large tracts of land, some very fertile. Libyan oil is among the very best in the world, it is “light” crude and is more valuable and sought after than the Saudi “heavy” crude, for example.

In Libya time is up for Colonel Gaddafi. The *Brother Leader of the Revolution* is now a dead man walking. The West which rehabilitated him in exchange for petro-dollars and -euros despite his transgressions of the 1980s has now disowned him, and even the Arab League, in an unprecedented move, has suspended Gaddafi's Libya.

He is so out of touch with reality that in his 3-hour speech two days ago he dismissed the basic rights of Libyans and claimed that they are more interested in getting a house or buying a car than in democracy or a free press. He continues to blame popular uprisings on a combination of hallucinogenic tablets (The Gaddafi regime says it has intercepted millions of Tramadol tablets which is a habit forming painkiller) and al-Qaeda. His is now a 2-prong strategy: 1. buying allegiances and popular subservience with massive infusions of cash and benefits and 2. employing the repressive security apparatus that he has carefully cultivated for decades to put down dissenting voices.

Gaddafi, like Ben Ali and Mubarak before him, is for all intents and purposes finished. Unfortunately for the Libyan people he can inflict much damage before he departs the scene. And unlike Egypt and Tunisia, there is no Libyan Army to speak of that can halt the regime's instruments of suppression and repression and preserve the stability of the country.

The traditional Libyan opposition in-exile, much like the Iraqi opposition before the fall of Saddam Hussein, has never been taken seriously and has always been viewed as fractious and ineffective, to say the least.

So far no real leadership has emerged. I find it disturbing that in the liberated areas of eastern Libya where the international media has deployed in great numbers, there are still no signs and no pictures of an organized fighting force despite the reported defections of many military units to the cause of the rebels. What I am mainly observing are civilian Toyota pickup trucks serving as paramilitary vehicles and the occasional shoulder-held or ground-based antiquated anti-air weaponry.

Political direction is also lacking among the opposition and what see are armed fighters discharging their weapons in chaotic fashion into the air. That is never a good sign.

Bahrain, Oman and the Gulf:

The situation in Bahrain pits the traditional Sunni ruling family against the country's Shia majority population. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) quickly rallied in support of member-state Bahrain and the subsequent emergency meeting of the foreign ministers in Manama did not mince words. It backed the monarchy in unequivocal terms and warned against any foreign (read Iranian) intervention in the internal affair of Bahrain. This is a potentially regionally explosive situation. Bahrain is the

regional headquarters of the US Fifth Fleet and right across the Gulf from Iran who has always considered Bahrain Persian territory and only grudgingly acknowledged its independence.

The initial reaction, the stunning dawn crackdown on the protesters in Pearl Roundabout and subsequent deployment of the Bahraini military, was a clear indication that the al-Khalifa leadership would brook no dissension in this matter. However subsequent events have shown that the government in Manama realized that shedding its citizens' blood was counterproductive, to say the least.

Saudi Arabia will also be carefully watching the developments in the tiny island to which it is linked by the King Fahd Causeway. The fact that the Causeway is only 25 km long highlights how vital the situation in Manama is to Riyadh. The issue at heart is, of course, Saudi Arabia's own Shia population who have agitated frequently in the past.

Unfortunately for the mourners in Manama, the centuries-old Shia cry of “*Hussein!*” gives their protest, rightly or wrongly, a sectarian tone and will not win them many sympathizers in the overwhelmingly Sunni Arab world.

In Bahrain, the star in the crescent of the GCC, international *realpolitik* will take precedence over protesters' deaths, demands and grievances for as long as is sanely possible. This, in my estimation, is not unrelated to Iran, which has sagaciously remained generally quiet about the upheaval in Manama. Not that it would be prescient for it to agitate in the face of its own disgruntled opposition, people in glass houses should not throw stones.

Notwithstanding the death of protesters, the authorities have successfully opened a window of opportunity to bring the situation to an end and begin a process of national dialogue as the crown prince promised. But the situation is precariously in the balance. The Shia leadership in Bahrain are now faced with the choice of going for all-out rebellion or reading the tea leaves of international politics and trying to arrive at an accommodation with the ruling al-Khalifas. The government, in turn, knows that it is time to offer more substantial concessions.

The outcome will be watched closely; Bahrain's Shia have the opportunity to show the overwhelmingly Sunni Arab world that their opposition is an internal Bahraini matter that has the country's interests at heart and not one with sectarian overtones in which Iran is the protesters' benefactor and possibly instigator. Indeed, this is a golden opportunity to begin defusing some of the Shia-Sunni tensions that have plagued this region for hundreds of years. If the Bahraini model is successful it will have important consequences for Lebanon where the Shia form a unified front against the Sunnis of the country, with virtually not a single Shia personality of any political weight exhibiting any dissension within the ranks, something that cannot be said of the Sunni Muslims or Christians.

So far the Crown Prince Sheikh Salman bin Hamad al-Khalifa has acquitted himself well. He has been thrust into the fray and has shown himself to be more than capable in dealing with a very explosive situation. Unlike the disastrous threats of Saif al-Islam Gaddafi to his people.

Egypt:

The situation in Egypt, until yesterday, seemed to be heading towards a survival of President Hosni Mubarak's regime, minus the president. However, the threat of popular action to remove Mubarak's appointee Prime Minister Ahmed Shafiq and his cabinet seems to have convinced the Higher Council of the Armed Forces to move quickly. It is an indication that the revolution in Egypt is alive and well

and continues to bear fruit. I continue to hold high hopes for Egypt to regain its leading position in the Arab world, the one which it relinquished during the era of mediocrity ushered in by Hosni Mubarak.

Iran:

There is a view that Iran is watching with glee the unfolding events in the Arab world. I believe the opposite; that Iran is seriously worried about the empowerment of the Arab people. Much like the West, Iran was always happy to deal with a single autocratic leader who exercised total control and domination over his people. In the face of its own internal dissent Tehran is treading a fine line, paying lip service to the Arab people's revolts and claiming they fall in line with Iran's revolutionary credo while, in my humble opinion, it is seriously worried about a rejuvenated Arab world that is seeking to right the wrongs of decades past and forge ahead in a new direction of openness and Arab-style democracy. Those expecting an uprising in Iran similar to what the Arab world is witnessing are sadly mistaken. Student demonstrators alone will not bring down the regime although they will allow it to show its ugly face to the world. It is well worth remembering that the revolution that toppled the Shah 32 years ago was a grassroots revolt that encompassed all sections of Iranian society. As a matter of fact it was not an Islamic revolution to begin with. But the key factor was the revolt of the clergy, the mullas of Iran, that gave sanction to the rebellion.

Any successful challenge to the government of the Islamic Republic must have amongst its ranks reformist elements of the clergy and regime (a la Mehdi Karroubi and Mir Houssein Moussavi) as well as the peasants and bazaar merchants.

Conclusion:

It took an unknown street vendor's act of self-immolation in one of the Middle East's less significant and least populated countries to stoke the fires of liberty in the Arab world.

Tunisia has always been on the fringes of the region in terms of political clout. And yet it was this progressive society that started the New Arab Revolution. It is my belief that we have to thank a man who was always ahead of his time for the courage and vision of the Tunisians. It was Habib Bourguiba who set Tunisia on a path of social reform that stressed the importance of progress, education and equality.

What we are witnessing now is the end of the so-called Arab republics born in the 1950s and 1960s in military coups posing as revolutions. Real revolutions are happening now and they have taken the whole world by surprise. **No country or entity saw them coming.** The barrier of fear has been broken and people have been emboldened to break through the chains of submission thrust upon them by the republics of fear. "The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress."

The leaders of the Arab republics rode in on the backs of tanks, abandoned their military uniforms, donned suits and set about establishing autocratic regimes. They held sham presidential elections every few years and garnered ridiculous figures of 99.5% or so of the popular vote. After decades in power they developed the audacity to herald the dawn of the hereditary republic. The first such succession took place in 2000 upon the death of Syrian President Hafez al-Assad, whose son Bashar replaced him. As the saying goes, great minds think alike. Soon enough Hosni Mubarak decided to promote his son, Gamal, from within the ranks, obviously grooming him for the highest post in the land. There was talk of Yemen's Ali Abdullah Saleh handing over the reins of power to his son Ahmed. The *jamahiriyya* has been swept for years with more than talk of Muammar Gaddafi keeping the post of president in the

family. It was widely assumed before he was deposed in the American invasion of 2003 that, upon his eventual demise, Saddam Hussein would land one of his sons, probably Qusay but maybe even the psychopath Uday, in the driver's seat.

The hereditary republic is now dead. Gaddafi's last stand may last a while but the real question is what will follow. I believe that just like in 1969 when a 27-year-old Gaddafi along with equally inexperienced army officers toppled the monarchy and turned to President Nasser for guidance, the New Egypt can have a positive influence on the post-Gaddafi Libya. To what extent depends on how bloody the denouement of the current situation is. I sincerely hope that some frantic behind-the-scenes politicking is taking place now to present a unified Libya in Gaddafi's aftermath. The alternative is a Libya divided and open to various forms of influence and intervention.

The Gulf countries are virtually the only shining spot in a world economy that is still trying to rise onto its wobbly legs after the spectacular Crash of 2008. World powers will do their utmost to preserve stability in this most vital of the globe's regions. However, they will, no doubt, in the aftermath of the end-result push for real reforms. The aging rulers of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Oman need to establish clear lines of succession and tackle their own internal problems. A few days ago at the annual book fair in Riyadh [religious hardliners stormed the event](#), harassed patrons and harangued the minister!

The leaders of Sudan, stripped of its southern half, will doubtless become more insular. That there is an international arrest warrant for its president, Omar Hassan al-Bashir, a long-time ally of Gaddafi, does not bode well for the Sudanese President.

The examples of Tunisia and Egypt are, so far, showcases for civilized, peaceful change in the region. But this may not hold true for wherever the tidal waves of change crash next. Libya is an anomaly, a country removed by its bizarre and ruthless leader (described as a “wolf in sheep's clothing” by someone who met him once) from the order of human civilization. But other regimes have well-established credentials in repression and brutality too and should not be expected to self-reform or become suddenly benevolent entities. As the popular proverb goes, you cannot straighten a dog's tail. Ultimately the dreams and aspirations of the Arabs are no different from those of people from Tokyo to Tallahassee, Manila to Manchester.

Several countries are missing from this analysis; Algeria, Morocco, Syria, Iraq and Lebanon to name a few.

Lebanon is the beach ball of the Middle East. It is lightweight, colorful and entertaining. It is also extremely susceptible to the neighboring winds and where it lands depends on the surrounding currents and waves.

As for the others, this is not a waiting game. The time is over for reactionary measures. The Arab people are no longer the beasts that the regimes have always perceived them to be, easily corralled with cattle prods. Fair warning.

This is an opportunity to start with a clean slate. The traditional forces will not be uprooted without a fight. But it is important to concede that there are forces of extremism and intolerance within our Arab societies that are also in opposition to these republics of fear. It would be inexcusable if these forces ultimately manage to co-opt the will of the people and start a new decades-long reign of repression complete with their own fiery slogans, maybe even holy ones at that.

That the Tunisian and Egyptian people are still successfully guardians of their revolution is a sign of hope.

Tunisia, Egypt, Mubarak, Ben Ali, Arab world, Arabs, Bourguiba, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Libya. Gaddafi, Saif Gaddafi, Oman, Sultan Qaboos, UAE, Ali Abdullah Saleh