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THE BROTHER LEADER'S END GAME

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This is the first of two MEI Insights examining Qaddafi and the events leading to his demise.

Captain Abu Minyar Muammar Qaddafi launched his 42-year reign by means of a bloodless military coup that ousted King Idris I in 1969. His first act was to promote himself to the rank of Colonel. As unveiled in the *Green Book*, which chronicled his unique political philosophy, he also bestowed upon himself dozens of honorifics, of which the best known include “Brother Leader,” “Dean of the Arab Rulers,” and “King of the Traditional Kings of Africa.” Following the coup and titular change, Qaddafi rapidly consolidated power and eliminated potential rivals through any means, including murder—thus instilling fear in Libyans. He also schooled his subjects in his ideals of a socialist-Islamic state, which he claimed he did not run; rather, he asserted that the people themselves operated the political system through a so-called “direct popular democracy.” Of course, Libya under Qaddafi was a dictatorship and nowhere near a democracy.

The Brother Leader’s political shrewdness as well as Libya’s vast oil revenues shored up his narcissistic power. Yet, for all his sly (and violent) tactics and spending sprees, his ignorance, greed, and self-imposed isolation from the Libyan people ensured a negative outcome. After more than four decades in which he spent in excess of four trillion dollars, all that remained was his crude rhetoric, vulgar behavior, and continued assertion that Libya could not survive without him. Indeed, during his final radio address before his disappearance on 20 August, Qaddafi referred to the Libyan rebels as “rats,” revealing that even during a moment of great uncertainty he still adhered to his dogma. But while Qaddafi had been preparing to celebrate the 42nd anniversary of his 1969 coup on 1 September, the “rats” prevented him from enjoying the monumental event. His death on 20 October at the hands

of the rebels ended the Brother Leader's reign for good. Below, I seek to shed light on the miscalculations that led to Qaddafi's demise.

The battle of Tripoli was delayed six months. The uprising, which began on 17 February, intended to move swiftly toward the Libyan capital to force Qaddafi out of power. During the first days of turmoil, it seemed that this goal would be accomplished. Events in Benghazi—the capital of the country's eastern province and the hub of the opposition—resembled those that led to the fall of autocratic leaders in Tunisia and Egypt, and Qaddafi's bewilderment during the first two weeks of the rebellion indicated that a similar scenario could well be achieved. When popular defiance erupted in the majority of Libyan towns, mediators from within the regime attempted to lead initiatives to find an exit strategy.

However, the man who was born in the desert tent quickly regained his initiative. He proceeded to launch a counterattack, fighting in every part of Libya except Tripoli, which remained under his tight control. Shortly before NATO intervened, Qaddafi's battalions had begun to advance toward Benghazi. Qaddafi played a multi-faceted game, drawing on lessons learned from countless wars waged at home and from former conflicts with Chad, Sudan, and other African states such as Somalia and Zimbabwe.

Qaddafi used several stratagems that delayed his inevitable fall, including capitalizing on the tenuous positions of his once close associates, such as Mustapha Abdul-Jalil and Major General Abdel Fattah Younes, who had become his political opponents. Abdul-Jalil, Qaddafi's Minister of Justice from 2007 through February 2011, had been made the chair of the National Transitional Council (NTC) in Benghazi after his defection. The rebels, however, questioned Abdul-Jalil's legitimacy due to his past involvement in the regime. Younes, a former member of the Free Officers Movement that ousted King Idris I, also defected in February, having been sent by Qaddafi to Benghazi to break the rebels' siege. The rebels also mistrusted him as a former key supporter of the regime. Younes was assassinated in July under mysterious circumstances, and Abdul-Jalil continues to lead the NTC.

Qaddafi tried to use these defections to his advantage, calling attention to Abdul-Jalil and Younes' questionable loyalty and attempting to frame their defections and the revolution as a whole as a secessionist movement. In this way, he revived the idea of tribal animosities and divisions between Libya's east and west. Though he was able to manipulate and neutralize a

considerable number of tribes (particularly those in Sabha and Sirte), he was unable to completely penetrate the east of Libya. In general, he did not prove that his opponents were mere hybrid factions that would fade over time.

Qaddafi was more successful at mobilizing support for himself by emphasizing his role as a guarantor of the survival of Libya's unity and stability, both internally and regionally. To this end, he attempted to sell to the Western powers an image of his opponents as Islamist extremists. Indeed, he accused al-Qa'ida of inciting the unrest and succeeded in making this claim a public issue. For several months, widespread concerns circulated among the international coalition that radical Islamists could be the alternative to the dictator; as a result, NATO forces toned down their military campaign, with the United States transferring control of the operation to France and Britain. The Western powers also began scrutinizing the organization and behavior of the rebels, training new fighters, providing them with up-to-date intelligence, and watching out for any extremist elements in order to deprive Islamists the honor of ousting the Colonel. Meanwhile, Qaddafi consolidated his power in the western part of the country and restored key positions in the central and eastern areas.

Furthermore, Qaddafi led the fight with a single and effective idea, namely that he would remain the steadfast element in the struggle, regardless of the might of his opponents and their Western backing. His goal was to emerge as the sole interlocutor of any political configuration after the conflict. To this end, he called for the intercession of international actors—Turkish, Russian, African, Arab, French, British, and American. While Qaddafi was achieving tactical victories, actors such as the Special Envoy of the Secretary General of the United Nations, British and French intelligence operatives, and Libyan defectors in towns such as Jerba in Tunisia, Paris, London, Rome, Moscow, and various African capitals were trading solutions regarding a political settlement. The question consistently raised among them over the first few months was whether there could be a political solution *without* Qaddafi. And, with the mounting obstacles of rebel fatigue, divisions within the ranks, a lack of military professionalism and political cohesion, and, above all, a haphazard NATO campaign that cost dearly in human life as well as in financial resources, the enthusiasm of NATO's members began to fade.

Finally, Qaddafi aimed to demolish his foes at all costs. He did not lie when he promised that he would fight “inch by inch, home by home, and alley by alley.” However, when Qaddafi vowed to leave but a pile of stones, sending

Libya back to the medieval era, he miscalculated the will and determination of his people. When he used excessive violence against them, this only served to strengthen their resolve to resist him.

The dictator also hoped to turn the trend of events in his favor by damaging oil wells and infrastructure, thus thwarting the West by blocking its access to Libya's oil. But the NATO allies were well positioned for such behavior, with hundreds of American, European, Russian, and Turkish firms, as well as companies from the Gulf, preparing to sign contracts for reconstruction. Indeed, in September a French newspaper published an article about an agreement between President Nicolas Sarkozy and the NTC that would give French companies favorable treatment in exchange for their help in ousting Qaddafi.¹ If anything, the destruction of Libya's infrastructure and the vast reconstruction effort that will materialize provides major corporations with a golden opportunity.

The damages incurred throughout Libya from the Qaddafi regime's scorched-earth policy are estimated to cost more than 480 billion dollars.² Entire cities located in the western mountains have been wiped off the map; practically the entire city of Misrata was razed to the ground, as was the Berber city of Zlitan. The need for rebuilding is omnipresent, with roads, hospitals, and other components of public infrastructure requiring urgent attention. Such reconstruction demands a tremendous amount of financial resources. Libyan oil seems subject to the countries that engaged in the military campaign, while Libya's foreign assets will be devoted to, among other things, paying for the cost of Western military hardware as well as building and equipping the new Libyan armed and security forces. In this regard, some observers have compared post-Qaddafi Libya to Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein. In other words, the danger is that Libyans will not be the main decision-makers of their destiny, and will rather find themselves shackled with heavy political and financial constraints, unable to escape from these obligations at least in the short and mid-term. The triumph over Qaddafi is partially attributed to the military assistance from NATO, and thus the main contributors to that campaign look forward to reaping the benefits.

¹Vittorio De Filippis, "Pétrole: l'accord secret entre le CNT et la France," *Liberation* (1 September 2011). Available at: <http://www.liberation.fr/monde/01012357324-petrole-l-accord-secret-entre-le-cnt-et-la-france>, accessed 8 October 2011.

²This is according to a statement made by Mahmoud Jibril, Chairman of the Executive Board of the NTC, on 22 May 2011 on Al Jazeera.

In sum, the art of *divide et impera* masterly manipulated by Qaddafi for more than four decades, as well as other strategies including fear-mongering and relentless violence, failed this time to immunize his regime from the virus of freedom that has spread across the region. The Brother Leader left behind a country bereft of a constitution, political parties, and an independent judiciary.

The NTC can take lessons from the Iraqi debacle. The failure of different Iraqi governments to control militias in the aftermath of Saddam's fall led the country into civil war. NTC leadership can avoid this same mistake by reinforcing control over the various armed groups. While the sectarian rift between Sunni and Shi'a is not applicable in post-Qaddafi Libya, animosity and distrust between groups from the provinces of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica as well as the western mountains could worsen if one or more thinks that its say has not been considered in how the new Libya will be run.

Only time will tell whether the NTC and its new interim government appointed on 1 November will be able to manage such a power game. Furthermore, the international community—particularly the main contributors to the NATO campaign, such as France, Britain, and the United States—should not favor one faction at the expense of others to avoid further instability. Treating state building in a post-conflict environment with Iraqi methods could easily generate similar outcomes.

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