

## Syrian Civil War: Ghost of Libya Back to Haunt

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### Abstract

There is no end to the current Syrian civil war in sight, after four years of conflict. Quite expectedly, some people have been calling for the removal of Assad. In Libya, even though Gaddafi was removed years ago, life after his reign has not quite been what Libyans expected. There is still a lot of killing, fighting, and civil strife in Libya. This paper sets out with a brief background of the civil wars in Libya and Syria. An attempt is made at comparing the events culminating in the removal and death of Gaddafi in Libya and the events in Syria presently which have led to agitation and call for the removal of Assad. This paper concludes by cautioning against making the removal of Assad the solution to very complicated crises in Syria. An attempt is also made to remind us of lessons that should have been learned from events in Libya, so that Syria will not continue to burn, even long after Assad has been removed.

### Introduction

There are quite a few similarities between the Syrian civil war and the Libyan civil war. What differs so far has been the response of the international community; the fact that a military intervention has not happened in Syria yet, even though by international standards it was swift in Libya. This paper aims to draw similarities between the civil war in Libya and Syria, highlighting in particular the origins, some events that took place during the civil wars, military intervention and possible aftermath of the Syrian civil war. The civil war in Libya was a part of the Arab Spring; a wave of protests, demonstrations and riots in the Arab world. It began on 18 December 2010. The revolutionary protests were not limited to the Middle East, but spread to North Africa too. As at January 2015, oppressive regimes have been ousted from power in Tunisia, Yemen, Egypt and Libya. Presently the civil war in Syria is still raging on. Almost all of these demonstrations and uprisings have been met with violent responses from authorities, and these attacks too have been answered with violence from protestors. (Almasmari, 2011)

### LIBYAN CIVIL WAR BACKGROUND

Gadaffi came to power in 1969. In 1975, he published his green book, which contained his party manifesto, and all Libyans were expected to read, identify and live by it. Gaddafi ruled for 42 years, and to be fair, there were some achievements under his rule. Under his regime, illiteracy rates were at an all time low. Estimated literacy rates were at 88%, and average life expectancy rose from 51/54 in 1969 to 74/77. (Macfarquhar, 2011) However, human rights abuses were inevitable under a totalitarian regime and there are numerous examples under Gaddafi's government. In 2009 and 2011, the Freedom of the Press Index rated Libya the most-censored state in the Middle East and North Africa. The government sometimes executed dissidents through public hangings and mutilations and re-broadcast them on public television channels. (Eljahmi, 2006) In addition, a large portion of the profit from the sale of oil was spent on arms purchases, and on sponsoring militant groups around the world. (The Economist, 2011) It has also been alleged that a large part of the economy is controlled by Gaddafi, his family and the government. (Rheannon, 2011)

### THE CIVIL WAR

On 26 February, 2011, protests broke out in Libya's second largest city, Benghazi. Hundreds of protesters came out to support human rights activist and lawyer, Fathi Terbil who had been detained. Crowds were armed with petrol bombs and threw stones. Marchers hurled Molotov cocktails in a downtown square in Benghazi, damaging cars, blocking roads, and hurling rocks. Police responded to crowds with tear gas, water cannon, and rubber bullets. Many people sustained injuries of various degrees. Over the next few days, demonstrations spread from Benghazi to other parts of Libya. Eventually, the demonstrations spread to Tripoli, where there were clashes with government forces. On 25 February, most of eastern Libya was reported to be under the control of protesters and rebel forces. (Al Jazeera, 2011)

The National Transitional Council (NTC) was established on 27 February 2011. This was an attempt to coordinate and consolidate the actions of those opposing the Gadaffi regime. The rebels were composed primarily of civilians, as well as police officers and soldiers that defected from the Libyan Army and joined the rebels. (Lourdes, 2011) The Libyan Islamic fighting group was also considered part of the rebels (Justin, 2011) Gaddafi on his part insisted Al Qaeda fighters were made up the bulk of the rebels. The Libyan government were

reported to have employed snipers, artillery, helicopter gunships, warplanes, anti-aircraft weaponry, and warships against demonstrations and funeral processions. (Meo, 2011) Amnesty International also reported that security forces targeted paramedics helping injured protesters. Gaddafi forces were documented using ambulances in their attacks. (Vella, 2006) During the siege of Misrata in May 2011, Amnesty International reported "horrifying" tactics such as "indiscriminate attacks that have led to massive civilian casualties, including use of heavy artillery, rockets and cluster bombs in civilian areas and sniper fire against residents. (Amnesty International, 2011) It was also reported that soldiers who refused to fire on protesters were executed. (Agence France-Presse, 2011) On June 2011, a more detailed investigation carried out by Amnesty International revealed that a lot of the allegations against the government lacked credible evidence and were false or fabricated. (Cockburn, 2011) One thing is certain; both sides used the civil war to commit numerous atrocities.

19 March 2011 marked the beginning of a multi-state coalition and military intervention in Libya. This was a direct result of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973 which demanded for "an immediate ceasefire" and authorizing the international community to establish a no-fly zone and to use all means necessary short of foreign occupation to protect civilians". (Roth, 2011) Initially, at the beginning of the coalition, only Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Italy, Norway, Qatar, Spain, United Kingdom and the United States were involved. This will eventually rise to a total of 19 states. On 22 August 2011, rebel fighters had entered Tripoli. However, Gaddafi had fled the capital. On 20 October 2011, Gaddafi was captured and killed while attempting to flee.

### **AFTERMATH**

Libya's *de facto* Prime Minister, Mahmoud Jibril announced that consultations were under way to form an interim government within one month, followed by elections for a constitutional assembly within eight months and parliamentary and presidential elections to be held within a year after that. (Al Pessim). On 7 July 2012, Libyans voted in their first parliamentary elections since the end of the rule of Muammar Gaddafi. The election formed an interim 200-member national assembly. The purpose of this assembly was to replace the unelected NTC, name a Prime Minister, and form a committee to draft a constitution. The General National Congress (GNC) replaced the NTC. The mandate of the General National Congress (GNC) was to expire on 7 February 2014. (Eljarh, 2014) On 23 December 2013, the GNC decided to extend its mandate till 24 December 2014. There were public protests after the GNC refused to step down on the agreed date. A consequence of the civil war is proliferation of armed volunteers, militias, brigades and vigilantes. There were reports of sporadic clashes between these groups. (Meo, 2011)

On March 2012, the Secretary-General on the United Nations Support Mission in Libya reported that: "Intermittent clashes between the brigades and other incidents continued to pose a challenge to the authorities in their efforts to contain the overall security situation and to manage the risks associated with the continued proliferation of weapons on the streets and the large number of armed brigades whose lines of command and control remained unclear."(UN, 2012)

On 9 January 2013, the Libyan Ministry of the Interior reported that the number of murders has risen from 87 in 2010 to 525 in 2012, a 503 per cent increase, while thefts over the same period have risen from 143 to 783, a 448 per cent increase. (Libya Herald, 2013) The state of lawlessness and security in Libya was so bad that On 10 October 2013, the Prime Minister of Libya, Ali Zeidan, was captured by an armed group. He was released from captivity some hours later. (Gall, 2015) Thousands of suspected Gaddafi supporters are still being held in detention centres outside the control of the NTC. They are denied due process and are subjected to torture. According to the UN, about 8,000 people were still being held in Libya's detention centres as of October 2013.

As at January 2014, the GNC (an Islamist government) was still in power in Libya. In May, Khajifa Haftar, a general in the Libyan army launched a campaign against Islamist forces called "Operation Dignity." He gained control of Tripoli and disbanded the GNC. New elections were held. The results of the new elections did not favour the Islamists, whose numbers were reduced drastically in the new government. In July, Islamist militias launched "Operation Dawn" and they eventually successfully retook Tripoli. The GNC was then reinstated, and the previous government was declared void. As a consequence, the majority of the Council of Deputies was forced to relocate to Tobruk, aligning itself with Haftar's forces and eventually nominating him army chief. (BBC News, 2013). Around October, Islamist groups based in the city of Derna declared their allegiance to the Islamic state of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Presently, the country is governed by two different factions; with Tripoli and Misrata controlled by forces loyal to Libya Dawn and the new GNC in Tripoli, while the international community recognizes Abdullah al-Thani's government and its parliament in Tobruk.(Al Jazeera, 2015)

### **SYRIAN CIVIL WAR**

#### **BACKGROUND**

The Assad family comes from the minority Alawite religious group, an offshoot of Shi'ite Islam that comprises

an estimated 12 per cent of the total Syrian population. (Heneghan, 2011) The Assad family has been in power in Syria since 1970. Bashar Al-Assad succeeded his father as president in 2000 after the latter's death. It has maintained tight control on Syria's security services and economy in general, generating resentment among some Sunni Muslims (Worth, 2011) a religious group that makes up about three-quarters of Syria's population. Ethnic minority Syrian Kurds have also protested and complained over ethnic discrimination and denial of their cultural and language rights. (Reuters, 2011) In recent times, the economic situation in the country has been a great source of discontent. Economic policies benefitted the minority of the population who had connections with the government. The rate of youth unemployment had skyrocketed. The country was under emergency rule from 1963 until 2011, banning public gatherings of more than five people, (Reuters, 2011) and effectively granting security forces sweeping powers of arrest and detention. Before the uprising, human rights were routinely abused and violated. Rights of free expression, association and assembly were rigidly controlled by the government. Human rights activists and critics of government are detained without due process and tortured. (Human Rights Watch, 2005)

### THE CIVIL WAR

Before March, the protests were relatively modest. The Arab spring was sweeping through the Middle East and parts of North Africa, and Syria was not left out. Major unrest began on 15 March in Damascus, Aleppo, and the southern city of Dera'a, sometimes called the "Cradle of the Revolution. (BBC, 2015) The protests were triggered by the incarceration and torture of several young students, who were arrested for writing anti-government graffiti in the city, "The people want the fall of the regime." (Fahim and Saad, 2013) Demonstrators clashed with the authorities. On 20 March, a mob burned down the Ba'ath party headquarters and other public buildings. Security forces responded by firing live ammunition at the crowd. (The New York Times, 2011) By 25 March, the protests had spread nationwide. About 70 protesters were reported dead. (Slackman, 2011) During the uprising, Syrian law was amended to allow security forces to arrest and detain civilians for 8 days without a warrant. Thousands of people have been arrested. (The New York Times, 2012)

As the months progressed, the Syrian army cracked down hard on civilian protesters employing the use of tanks and snipers and inevitable killing hundreds. By 24 May, more than 1000 people had been killed according to the National Organization for Human Rights in Syria. (Al Jazeera, 2011) Opposition fighters also became more equipped and organized. On 29 July 2011 a group of defected officers announced the formation of the free Syrian Army (FSA). Their aim is to remove Bashar Al-Assad from power. (World Tribune, 2011) Violence continued on both sides and by 15 July 2012 the international committee of the Red Cross declared that the fighting had gradually become so widespread that the situation should be regarded as a civil war.

A UN commission of inquiry investigating alleged human rights violations has evidence that both sides have committed war crimes. On August 2013, hundreds were killed when rockets filled with the nerve agent sarin were used. (BBC News, n.d.) Almost 4 million people have fled Syria, since the crisis started, most of them women and children. Another 11 million people are displaced within Syria. So far, the death toll exceeds 200000. (Reuters, 2015) At the moment, there are many different actors and players in the ongoing conflict in Syria. What began as a rebellion against the Assad regime has been transformed into a sectarian war in which none believe they can survive in a Syria dominated by their foes. (Jenkins, 2014) Fighting on the side of the Assad regime are:

#### 1. Assad forces

At the beginning of the conflict, it was estimated that the state theoretically could call up 1.7 million fighters. (Holliday, 2013) The Syrian army was well armed; with thousands of battle tanks and armored personnel carriers. Assad placed loyal forces in command of the important and strategic army units, such as the missile systems, armored units and airpower. Less reliable Sunni conscripts make up the bulk of the infantry. Limitations on deployable manpower have made the government abandon large portions of the country to defend strategic areas. The regime has also exploited the use of militias. Local militias operating beyond rules of engagement and supported when necessary by government airpower or artillery, can slaughter under the radar while giving the regime a thin veil of deniability. (Jenkins) Of course there is the very real possibility that these same militias can easily turn into dangerous gangs with access to weapons when the conflict is over, but the regime is preoccupied with quelling this uprising with little thought for the future.

#### 2. Russia and Iran

The fall of Assad will be devastating to Iran. Assad is an important ally of Iran. Furthermore, Iran fears the fall of Assad could inspire a domestic movement and protest in Iran too. Iran has continued to support Assad financially, militarily and even managed to convince Hezbollah fighters to fight for the Assad regime. Russia's support for Assad too isn't surprising. Assad is Russia's last ally in the Middle East. In addition, Russia sells weapons worth billions of dollars to the Assad regime. In addition to providing Assad with political cover by blocking UN Security Council resolutions that would have condemned the Syrian government for its mass killing of civilians and its use of chemical weapons, Russia has continued to ship military supplies to the Syrian military, including helicopters, air-defence systems, and fuel, and has provided military advisers to man the air-

defence systems and to teach Syrian military officers how to use other Russian weapons. (Jenkins)

### 3. Hezbollah

The Lebanon based group depends on Assad and Iran for weapons and has crossed into Syria and joined the battle against rebels. There is no question that Hezbollah provides the Syrian military with a force of fighters who are well trained, well equipped, and battle-hardened.

The opposition forces include

#### 1. The Free Syrian Army

The Free Syrian Army (FSA) is an umbrella group of fighting organizations nominally represented abroad by the Syrian National Coalition (SNC), which comprises the first generation of rebels, augmented, as the rebellion spread and the fighting intensified, by tens of thousands of defectors from the Syrian armed forces. According to Jenkins, Many of the defectors were Sunni conscripts who opposed Alawite domination and may have calculated that the regime would fall quickly. A major problem without this coalition of rebel forces is lack of a truly central command. They lack appropriate coordination and this has impeded advancement.

The opposition is disorganized and has been unable to form a credible national interim government for the areas it controls, although some rebel groups have set up the machinery of local government. Increased fighting within the opposition has also increased the rebels' difficulties. The main cleavage is between the more-secular components of the opposition forces, represented in the field by the FSA, and the various jihadist groups, some of which are directly linked to Al Qaeda (Jenkins). The most prominent rebel group linked with Al Qaeda is Jabhat Al-Nusra.

The Jihadists appear to be a more prominent force in the opposition. Some attribute this to the foreign support they are receiving, in contrast to the cautious support the more-secular rebels are receiving from the West. Others attribute the jihadists' ferocity to their ideological fervor, while still others assert that the Western news media, eager for gruesome stories of jihadist atrocities but unable to check facts, are exaggerating their importance. Some rebel groups may pretend to be jihadists simply to attract wealthy Gulf sponsors, which are the main sources of funding for the jihadist groups. (Zisser, 2013)

#### 2. The Islamic Front

The Islamic Front (formerly The Syrian Islamic Front) comprises a number of organizations, including the Army of Islam, Ahrar al-Sham, Suqour al-Sham, Liwa al-Tawhid, Liwa al-Haq, Ansar al-Sham, and various other smaller brigades and battalions. These groups can be described as *Salafist*, that is, they believe in a literal interpretation of the Quran, reject Western political concepts that place man above God (e.g., democracy), and support the strict imposition of Islamic law, or Sharia. (Jenkins) By March 2015, the Islamic Front was described as being virtually defunct, with the three largest member groups, Ahrar ash-Sham, Tawhid Brigade, and the Army of Islam remaining separate entities, and with the smaller IF factions, Liwa al-Haqq, Suqour al-Sham, and the Kurdish Islamic Front absorbed into Ahrar ash-Sham. (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2015)

#### 3. The Kurds

The Kurds are the largest ethnic minority in Syria; about 10 to 15 percent of the population. The Kurds have, over the years, been persecuted and harassed by the government. (Human Rights Watch, 2009) On 7 October 2011, Kurdish leader Mashaal Tammo was gunned down in his apartment by masked men widely believed to be government agents. During Tammo's funeral procession the next day in the town of Qamishli, Syrian security forces fired into a crowd of more than 50,000 mourners, killing five people. (Huffington Post, 2011) The Kurds were initially slow to armed and violent protests. However, this changed when the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and Kurdish National Council (KNC) signed a cooperation agreement on 12 July 2012 that created the Kurdish Supreme Committee as the governing body of all Kurdish controlled areas. Since then, Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) have fought to defend their territory against government forces, FSA rebels, and, increasingly, jihadist militants who have declared the Kurds to be traitors to the jihad. (Jenkins) The main goals of the Kurds are self-defense, self government and eventual independence. These goals obviously can't be achieved without conflict with a government that has long oppressed them

#### 4. International Support for the Rebels.

Saudi Arabia and Qatar have been providing funds to the rebels. One reason for this support according to some writers is that these countries see the Syrian crises as an opportunity to reverse Tehran's growth and influence since the 2003 Iraq war. In addition, some United States and Israeli strategists also see an opportunity for a regime change to weaken the Lebanese Hezbollah because Syria currently is the most important transit route for arms and supplies. (Asseburg and Wimmen, 2012) The United States of America has also supported the rebels. In June 2013, the White House announced that having determined that Syrian government forces had used chemical weapons in small amounts; the United States would begin providing "military support" to moderate elements among Syria's opposition forces. (Jenkins) Naturally, the United States has been cautious about supplying weapons because of the fear that they might fall to jihadist elements that have a perpetual grudge against the West.

Then of course, we have the Islamic state of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). In August 2011, Al-Baghdadi,

leader of ISIL, began sending members experienced in guerrilla warfare into Syria. They are led by a Syrian by the name of Abu Muhammad al-Julani. The group has recruited fighters and established cells all over the country. (Abouzeid, 2014) On 23 January 2012, the group announced its formation as Jabhat al-Nusra li Ahl as-Sham. According to journalist Sarah Birke, there are "significant differences" between the al-Nusra Front and ISIL. While al-Nusra actively calls for the overthrow of the Assad government, ISIL "tends to be more focused on establishing its own rule on conquered territory". ISIL is "far more ruthless" in building an Islamic state, "carrying out sectarian attacks and imposing Sharia law immediately". While al-Nusra has a "large contingent of foreign fighters", it is seen as a home-grown group by many Syrians; by contrast, ISIL fighters have been described as "foreign 'occupiers'" by many Syrian refugees (Birke, 2013) In any case, ISIL has capitalized on the chaos to carve out large territories in Eastern and northern Syria and ruthlessly imposing Sharia law. Naturally, there have been clashes between the rebels and ISIL. We have the Assad regime fighting to keep control of the country, the rebels fighting to oust the regime, and ISIL who simply want to conquer territories in furtherance of Jihad.

## **MILITARY INTERVENTION.**

Libya.

In March 2011, a multi state coalition began a military intervention in Libya to implement United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973. Many questions have been asked as to whether it was justified. Naturally, there have been many theories as to the objectives of the West in intervening in Libya. In this paper I will be examining whether there was a legal basis to intervene. It is unfortunate that it seemed the success of such intervention ultimately came to depend on regime change and ouster of Gaddafi. First of all, the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty has put forward a test to determine the justification for military intervention. This test requires that there be circumstances of actual or apprehended (a) "large-scale loss of life," with or without genocidal intent, which is the product of deliberate action or neglect, or (b) "large-scale ethnic cleansing," whether carried out by killing, forced expulsion, or acts of terror or rape.(Pattison, 2010)

Furthermore, there is a norm in international law called the responsibility to protect. It espouses the fact that a state can forfeit parts of its sovereignty when it fails to protect citizens from mass atrocity crimes and human rights violations. (UN) Libya was the first case where the Security Council authorized a military intervention citing the Responsibility to protect. Some may argue that the responsibility to protect is just a norm and not legally binding. However, Chapter 7 of the UN Charter provides a framework within which the Security Council may take enforcement action. The Security Council can "determine the existence of any threat to the peace, breach of the peace, or act of aggression" and take military and non-military action to "restore international peace and security". On the 17<sup>th</sup> of March the measure was unanimously adopted with ten Security Council member countries voting in the affirmative, five abstaining, and none opposing. From the above, it is clear that there was a legal basis for intervening in Libya, whether or not there were other motives in intervening Syria.

UN military intervention in Syria seems unlikely. Russia and China can be reliably expected to veto any such resolution. They have vetoed 4 resolutions on Syria so far. Russia is opposed to sanctions against Syria, claiming that it will be a ploy for military intervention. The last was an attempt to refer the crises in Syria to the International criminal court. (The Guardian, 2014) Russia's reasons are not farfetched. They have been highlighted elsewhere in the paper. As for China, their reasons appear more nuanced. They do have some financial ties with Syria, but it's not enough to explain their dogged refusal for UN intervention. It appears they are simply determined to press for a political solution without international interference, although that possibility keeps waning with time.

## **CONCLUSION**

Perhaps one or two lessons shouldn't be forgotten from the situation in Libya. It is obvious that, like in Libya, some are convinced that the crises in Syria can only be resolved by a regime change. However, this is far from the truth. Let's say Assad is removed, how do you solve the problem of the disunity amongst the rebels? It is almost certain that there will be a bloody scramble for power as soon as Assad is gone. All the factors that has plunged Libya into an unending civil war are present in Syria. The only difference is that Assad hasn't been removed yet.

Again, there is the issue of some of the Al-Qaeda linked rebel groups. In addition the grievances of the Kurds have to be addressed too. Then there is ISIL. It is obvious that the immediate removal of Assad isn't going to solve the crises in Syria. I am not an Assad apologist. His regime is an oppressive one and the people of Syria have endured it long enough. However, a more important issue is a concrete and viable plan to stop the multidirectional violence, and rebuilding Syria after the war.

Personally, at this present time, I think the priority should be getting all the relevant parties to agree to a ceasefire; the rebels and the Assad regime have to stop the killing first. The government and rebels should then

focus their attentions on getting rid of ISIL and the fundamentalists among the rebels too. It really doesn't matter which side is victorious, governance can hardly be possible with the presence of ISIL. Beyond this it is hard to have more concrete recommendations or predict what will possibly happen in Syria. It doesn't look like Assad and his cohorts will willingly relinquish power for the sake of peace. The rebels are determined to remove him too, with some international support. Hopefully something will change the dynamics of the civil war, and circumstances will change the course of the conflict. But as things stand, it appears the parties are at an impasse.

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