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Libya, Searching for a Political Map

*Abdel Sattar Hatita**

Libyan Colonel Muammar Gaddafi left his country in a political vacuum as he banned the establishment of political parties for over forty years. He started his term by suspending the parliament and the constitution, without replacing it with a new constitution or permitting political opposition. At the present time, while major states demand that he step down given the huge popular opposition to his rule, it is difficult for any observer to imagine the possible future of Libya.

Since Libya is located in front of Europe and stretches over nearly two million square kilometres with a population of approximately six million people, this matter is of concern since there are no political parties, and particularly following the publication of several Western reports warning of the presence of Al-Qaeda in the country. Even those who downplay the value of these reports cannot easily respond to questions about the nature of the opposition that has been fighting since February 17th, 2011 to bring down the regime of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi.

At best, it seems that the opposition has liberal political leanings but remains, according to data from the ground, fragile and incoherent, or arguably is still in the process of being formed, not yet having fused into a single movement. It is true that the movement that everyone is currently rallying around seeks to remove the Gaddafi regime, which came to power following a coup against King Idris al-Sanusi in 1969. However, this movement splits into various groupings when it comes to prove answers to questions such as: What after Gaddafi? Who will rule, how, and in what way?

Although Idris al-Sanusi, the King of Libya, cancelled “multi-party politics” before Gaddafi, this step was not stipulated in the constitution and he did not make it a criminal offence, as Gaddafi did in 1972 when he imposed the death penalty as punishment for forming or joining a political party. The political vacuum and ban on political parties in Libya represented an opportunity for groupings in the country that were based on tribal and religious affiliations, and allowed for the emergence of alliances that were held together by no goal other than to “get rid of the Gaddafi regime.”

* Novelist and Journalist.

The result was an absence of any blocs with a clear political platform. The first chapter of the Green Book, which Gaddafi wrote at the beginning of his rule and which he considers to be equivalent to a constitution for the state, states that, "The party is a contemporary form of dictatorship. It is the modern instrument of dictatorial government. The party is the rule of a part over the whole. It is the latest dictatorial instrument. As a party is not an individual, it creates a superficial democracy by establishing assemblies, committees, and propaganda through its members. The party is not a democratic instrument because it is composed only of those people who have common interests, a common perception or a shared culture; or those who belong to the same region or share the same belief. They form a party to achieve their ends, impose their will, or spread their beliefs in the society as a whole. Their aim is to achieve power under the pretext of implementing their program."

According to the Green Book, of which the Libyan authorities have published millions of copies and to which hundreds of commentaries have been devoted, "The struggle for power by the political parties results in the destruction of any achievements of the people and of any socially beneficial plans. Such destruction is used by the opposition party as a justification to undermine the position of the ruling party so that its rival may take over. The parties in their struggle resort, if not to arms, which rarely happens, then to denouncing and depreciating the actions of each other. This is a battle which is inevitably waged at the expense of the higher and vital interests of the society."

The simple answer that is being advocated by spokesmen for what has become known as the National Transitional Council, formed in the wake

of the revolution, amounts to a broad, nebulous outline of the new regime – if they are indeed successful in toppling Gaddafi's regime – which entails "establishing the rule of law", "creating a modern constitution", "building a democratic state", and "establishing political pluralism". Very good. But are there forces on the ground equipped to bring this about? And to what extent can Libyan civil society, which was suppressed and deactivated throughout the past four decades, help to achieve these aspirations?

In an attempt to clarify the picture of the political future that may emerge in Libya, it is necessary to shed light on the main groups that have been active on the scene from the onset of the revolution of February 17th to today.

The Muslim Brotherhood

The Muslim Brotherhood in Libya has undergone two phases. The origins of the Muslim Brotherhood in Libya date back to the 1940s, but its existence was not officially announced until 1968. Nonetheless, the movement, which originated in the region of Barqah in the east of the country, did not enjoy the active presence it had in Egypt for example. Gaddafi dissolved the group in 1973, thereby ending the first phase. Thereafter the regime continued to deal with the Muslim Brotherhood as a political organisation that was contrary to the principles of the Green Book.

The second phase of the Brotherhood's activity began only in the early 1980s, because of the expansion of the Salafist movement in Libya and in other Arab states. The Libyan regime began to pursue members of the group as part of a major campaign to eliminate those they labelled "heretics", a label given to Islamists in general. The persecution of

the Brotherhood by the authorities ended with the sentencing of its supervisor general to the death penalty and imprisonment of its senior members.

The Brotherhood's middle and lower-level leadership dispersed, going into exile in several Arab and foreign countries. During a recent visit to the cities of Benghazi, Tobruk, al-Baydah and Shahat in eastern Libya this February and March, however, I observed that members of the group had become active once again. They are taking part in the fighting against Gaddafi's forces and joining popular and security committees set up to administer towns that lie beyond Gaddafi's control. However, the leadership that grew up outside the country over the course of almost two decades has not yet returned to Libya.

The Muslim Brotherhood in Libya is considered an important tributary of other Islamic movements. A number of its leaders began to return to Libya from 2005 onwards on condition that they refrain from attacking the Gaddafi regime. However, the Brotherhood sided with the opposition movement from the first day of the Libyan uprising, and said in a statement that, "We proclaim our total solidarity with these protestors and stand with them."

The Brotherhood subsequently called for an arrest warrant to be issued against Muammar Gaddafi, his sons and the leaders of his security apparatus for committing crimes against humanity. It further urged the international community to withdraw its recognition of the Gaddafi regime as a representative of the Libyan people, and to restrict the diplomatic movements of members of the regime and those associated with it. Members of the group have taken up arms against Gaddafi, contrary to its

previous approach of peaceful action and a renunciation of violence.

The Libyan Islamic Fighting Group

The Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) was established in the early 1990s in Afghanistan by the "Libyan Afghans" who joined the Arab fighters in the Afghan war. After the return of the Arab Afghans to their countries, the Libyan Afghans became concentrated primarily in the east of Libya, in particular in the cities of Benghazi, al-Baydah and Darnah. In 1995 they entered into clashes with the security forces.

The Libyan armed forces chased down the remnants of the group in al-Jabal al-Akhdar with aircraft and heavy weaponry, killings dozens and arresting over 3,000 of them across the country. However, observers in Benghazi stated that the majority of them were not Libyan Afghans, but rather members of various Salafist movements that dared to openly voice their opposition to Gaddafi in the east of the country.

The most infamous of the harrowing stories pertaining to this branch of the Islamists is the uprising that was staged by Islamist prisoners incarcerated at the Abu Salim prison in 1996, which caused around 1,200 deaths among prisoners, according to international human rights reports. The process of releasing the Islamists began only three years ago, when the group conducted ideological revisions in which it abandoned violence against the state, similar to the revisions that were carried out in Egypt between the state and al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya. However, the LIFG was quick to join the fighting against Gaddafi's forces, despite the announcement by leaders stationed in the town of Darnah that they did not seek to rule or to establish Islamic emirates, as Gaddafi has claimed.

According to observers, Gaddafi is scaremongering in the West to the effect that the end of his rule would create fertile ground for al-Qaeda that would threaten the security of Western states, particularly those in southern Europe.

Although there is no reliable information on the numbers of Jihadists in Libya, field reports from my visit to the east of the country indicate the presence of a general Salafist movement that is regarded as part of the fabric of Libyan society and is not inclined to violence. Now, however, it is the fuel of the armed rebels, though it is apparent from the field of combat that they lack the experience in battle that Jihadist groups are known for. In any case, these Salafist fighters are different from the armed forces that split off from the forces of Colonel Gaddafi, and which are dominated by secular and civil elements. It seems that American and Western reports about the presence of Islamic extremists in the midst of the fighters in Libya are not based on serious data, but were founded against a backdrop that dates back to the generation of Libyans that fought in Afghanistan around twenty years ago, and those Libyans that were able to infiltrate Iraq up until 2007.

With the outbreak of fighting between the Libyan rebels and Gaddafi's forces, and Gaddafi's warnings to the West about al-Qaeda, leaders associated with the Jihadists rushed to deny the allegations in public statements. The former militant in Afghanistan Abu Mas'oud al-Masri stated in an exclusive interview with myself following the publication of a strongly-worded statement against Gaddafi's regime that, "This is not a war for the establishment of an Islamic regime, as some in the Gaddafi regime and in the West claim. What we want is help in ridding the Libyan people of Gaddafi, and then to let

Libyans decide their own destiny." Anis al-Sharif, a member of the political bureau of the Libyan Islamic Movement for Change, stated to London-based newspaper *Asharq Al-Awsat* at the time that talk of establishing an "Islamic Emirate of Barqah" in the east of Libya was an attempt by the Libyan regime to tarnish the February 17th revolution by implying that armed terrorist organisations were behind it. He further stated that Islamists were fighting with the rebels alongside the rest of the people, since this was not a revolution of political parties, organisations, Islamists or fundamentalists.

When I met him during my visit to Libya last month, Abdul Hakim al-Hasadi, the former leader of the LIFG, said that he rejected claims made by Gaddafi and his son that he intended to establish an Islamic emirate in the east of the country.

Al-Hasadi is from Darnah. The people of the town are well-known for their involvement in militant movements, whether against the states that colonised Libya in the first half of the 20th century, or movements fighting the "occupation" of Arab countries (Iraq) and Muslim countries (Afghanistan). When the revolution broke out in Libya and with its transformation into an armed movement, the local radio in Darnah called on anyone with previous experience in combat abroad to join the rebels in combating Gaddafi's forces.

The Arab Nationalist Movement

The Arab Nationalist Movement (ANM) emerged early in Libya, specifically after Israeli gained international recognition in 1948 and the rise of nationalism that followed the revolution of Gamal Abdul

Nasser in Egypt in 1952. The nationalists quickly succeeded to overthrow the reign of King Idris al-Sanusi in the revolution that brought Colonel Muammar Gaddafi to power in 1969, as some in their ranks were members of the newly-formed Libyan army.

Gaddafi was to dispose of his nationalist comrades in various ways throughout his over forty years in power.

A number of members of the Revolutionary Command Council still remain alongside him in power, including Abdul Salam Jalloud, who was long known as the second-in-command to Gaddafi. Others joined the new revolution that erupted this February, including Abdel Moneim al-Honi, who has held the post of Libya's envoy to the Arab League.

At the current time, a number of Arab nationalists (Libyans) of the older generation continue to operate from within several Arab and foreign states, and believe that the time is not yet ripe for their return to Libya. However, members of the new "Arabist generation" have been able to enter Libya from the country's eastern border, which is controlled by forces opposed to Gaddafi's regime.

The National Front for the Salvation of Libya

The National Front for the Salvation of Libya (NFSL) was formed in 1981 and made up of former officials who worked with Gaddafi, most notably Dr. Mohamed Yusuf al-Magariaf. The front held its first conference in Rabat a year later, where it adopted a resolution to overthrow the Gaddafi regime. The group attempted to assassinate Colonel Gaddafi in 1984 at his Bab al-Azizia headquarters in Tripoli. The attempt

failed and represented a setback for the NFSL and its members in Libya. As a result, it once again focused its efforts on work outside the country, only to suffer a further setback with a failed attempt to stage a coup against Gaddafi a year later.

Nonetheless, despite being displaced and shifting from country to country, in 1988 the front managed to recruit Colonel Khalifa Heftir and roughly a thousand of his officers and soldiers, to form what is known as the "Libyan National Army". Heftir was a frontline commander in the Libyan war with Chad at the time. Heftir, who had previously made several attempts to oust Gaddafi until the early 1990s, when the operation of the NFSL's Libyan National Army was suspended, is one of the most senior military commanders in the Libyan National Army today, loyal to the February 17th revolution in Libya. It was apparent from my visit to Benghazi, the rebel stronghold, that Libyans are counting on Colonel Heftir and his forces, which have been well trained abroad.

The dynamic of action after Gaddafi

Gaddafi's rule was based on the cooptation of tribes, which in itself is disconcerting for anyone contemplating the future of Libya. As stated by the writer Abdul Munsif al-Buri, "It is not an exaggeration to say that the situation in Libya will be fraught with dangers, difficulties and problems however good the intentions are, and however good and bright our hopes, wishes and dreams."

Gaddafi belongs to the Gaddadfa Tribe. Throughout his rule he has been allied to the Magariha tribe, whilst the relationship between Gaddafi and other tribes have ebbed and flowed depending on each tribe's share of governmental positions, economic spoils, scholarships, etc. This state of affairs has produced a

system that is based largely on the tribe, rather than anything else of an institutional nature, be it the political party or otherwise.

Libyan leaders do not assume their place in power through elections or any other democratic means, since Gaddafi rejects the concept of parliamentary representation. According to his thinking, the existence of parliament means the absence of the people. The Green Book stipulates rule of the people by the people through congresses (local councils) and people's committees (districts). There are 22 districts in Libya, each of which is divided into many "basic people's congresses". The general conference of the people's congresses represents the "parliament", while the general people's committees are regarded as the "government". However, what is known as the "Revolutionary Sector", headed by Colonel Gaddafi, dominates all the other bodies. In the past, the Revolutionary Sector was composed of members of the Command Council of the 1969 revolution. Now, it is composed of those who are part of the narrow circle surrounding Gaddafi, particularly his sons, most of whom were not yet born when the Sector was formed nearly 40 years ago.

Most Libyans, who did not consider confronting Gaddafi's regime in the past decades, and have recently found themselves in the midst of a spontaneous uprising of rage against his rule that is turning into an armed conflict, are not thinking about the way in which the West views developments in the country. In an exclusive interview, Abdel Salam Nasr, the former Deputy Governor of Tobruk who has joined the rebels, said that, "Gaddafi sold us illusions without giving anything in return with which to serve the people on the ground."

The former Deputy Governor told me tales of corruption within the regime, dismissing Gaddafi's claims about the people governing themselves and that he is not an official as empty talk. It's Gaddafi who selects members of the government, and popular and executive officials in the districts. "We are good people and we don't like problems. We used to say that what is important is not what Gaddafi says but what he can do for the Libyan people, particularly since 1969 revolution gave Libyans hopes and dreams of a better future. But this has never materialized. We listened to him and waited, but things only got worse. Gaddafi began to give himself titles and epithets, and there was no harm in it at first, but he started to take it to extremes because Libyans kept silent."

And about the reasons for the strong opposition to Gaddafi, despite the lack of an organised opposition in Libya to rally the people in demonstrations, Nasr said, "What has happened is that the people have let out their thoughts, which were held captive in their chests and minds for so many years, and shouted them out loud. They have come out onto the streets in public for the first time since 1969, because this ruler does not want to believe that he is a human being like every other human being on the planet and can be right or wrong. In broad daylight, which is unprecedented, they stated that Gaddafi had used the wealth of the Libyan people to buy protection from presidents of foreign States, and used oil detrimentally to the political and economic interests of Libya. They say that he reduced economic, political and social activity in the country to that of his sons, who control all kinds of projects and activities inside Libya or overseas. On February 17th, Libyans went out determined to end Gaddafi's rule, regardless of the cost."

The Deputy Governor also spoke about what he referred to as the poor treatment of certain regions. He said, "Things get more complicated in some regions because of bribery and the degree of loyalty to the ruling regime. Yes, something dangerous was happening, and we could see it leading Libya towards the unknown. The aim of this policy was to create sensitivities and feuds between the peoples of the various regions. It was used to debase the people and to force them to obey Gaddafi and remain loyal to his regime. As for the people's committees, as a theory one can read and enjoy their rhetoric. But when you think about it, you find that Gaddafi mixed capitalist ideas together with Marxist ideas, and used them to develop theories that aimed at a single purpose: to serve his rule and hold onto power to the end. Members of the general people's committees (the government) are chosen entirely by Gaddafi himself. He would take pen and paper and place a tick next to a name he approved of or mark it with a cross. Gaddafi would say whether or not such-and-such a person had or had not been appointed to a certain government position and he alone. It's the same with the general people's congress (the parliament), whose members are handpicked by Gaddafi."

Nasr then added, "The resolutions of the general people's congress are drafted in advance, and it won't issue decisions that don't correspond to Gaddafi's wishes. The same also applies to the people's congresses in the districts (the local councils), since their members are chosen from among loyalists to the Gaddafi regime. And this exposes the theory of the rule of the people. The people only actually choose the members of the very, very small local committees (the basic units). But, as we recently discovered, even with this procedure that he left for the people, Gaddafi aimed

to create rivalries between citizens, tribes and families and to distract the people from thinking about their own situation and that of their nation."

Writer Abdul Munsif al-Buri stated that, "Citizens, for example, have started to turn to people from their tribe who hold positions or have influence in the regime in order to provide for their needs, interests or desires of any kind. Tribal patronage has become a critical process given the marginalised role played by the official institutions that provide services to all citizens without discrimination." He believes that this issue "is extremely grave, especially in terms of the future, i.e. the future of political action, if Libyans are fated to witness a new political regime¹."

There are three main geographical regions in Libya: Barqah, Tripoli and Fezzan. Gaddafi has warned that the revolution against him could result in the partition of the country and lead to civil war. However, the opposition says that one of the most important principles on which their method of administering those cities from which they have expelled Gaddafi's forces is based is "not asking questions about people's tribal or regional backgrounds, religious affiliation or political orientations."

When I asked a question about tribal representation in the council that is running the town of al-Baydah, or what other movements were present within the council, the answer from all of the seven members responsible for security and economic affairs in the town was, that "This was Gaddafi's strong point throughout his rule. We now choose the best candidates, whatever their affiliations." Bearded and clean-shaven men were sitting together around the table, some smoking cigarettes next to conservatives. It was as if each of them

was looking at what the political map of Libya might be in the post-Gaddafi era.

¹ *Shu'un Libya al-Fasliya* (Spring 1995)
