After Gaddafi – three questions for Libya and one on the region

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As Colonel Gaddafi's 42 years in charge of Libya draw to a seemingly climactic end – the dramatic scenes in Tripoli leave a series of questions that need to be urgently answered.

(1) If Gaddafi supporters in/outside the regime did not fight, where are they and what are their plans?

Resistance collapsed relatively quickly on the road to, and in, Tripoli, but that does not mean that the regime as a whole and across the country has been comprehensively defeated. The rebels clearly have the upper hand now and momentum is on their side, but there is a danger of setbacks.

Looking at the most recent, and most traumatic, transitions of a similar kind, in both Iraq and Afghanistan regime loyalists of varying kinds resurfaced. In Iraq, they were partly defeated and partly co-opted after a very violent civil war drawing in significant foreign forces; in Afghanistan this process is still far from resolved. Both cases also demonstrate that al-Qaeda and its upshots are very adept at exploiting the instability that usually follows violent regime collapse, if only to establish (temporary) alliances of convenience to further their own agenda.

(2) How united are the rebel forces and who is in overall command?

Rebel forces have advanced on Tripoli from three sides—this does not only reflect geographical divisions. United by the will to oust Gaddafi, it is not clear how much of a common vision for a new Libya there is among the diverse rebel forces, how much they trust each other, and the extent to which the transitional council is recognised widely inside Libya (as opposed to internationally) as the new legitimate government.

Rebel unity is not about an identical political agenda shared by all, but about a basic agreement on ground rules. This needs to include a commitment to an inclusive political process, to institutions for a transitional period before elections, and to respect for the rule of law rather than wanton retribution on former members and supporters of the Gaddafi regime. Some thought also needs to be given on how to deal with those who are unable or unwilling to sign up to such basic principles.

The rebel leadership needs to manage this transitional period carefully, they need to accept the principle of inclusive government, and step back from maximalist demands. This will also require managing the expectations of their own constituencies and respecting the need for their allies in the movement to do the same. If this can be achieved, it will lay a significant foundation for a new political culture in Libya.

(3) Who will lead the international post-conflict reconstruction effort in support of a new Libya?

So far only vague statements have emerged about learning the lessons from Iraq and Afghanistan, about existing preparations, about the need for the UN and the contact group to lead, and about NATO willing to continue protecting civilians. This does not amount to a coherent and coordinated strategy even for the short term when the foundations will be laid for the new Libya that will emerge.

The nature, level, and sustainability of a civilian international effort in the aftermath of the fighting in Libya will be important for the country itself, but no less impactful for the region as a whole. Making a success of Libya's revolution will primarily depend on Libyans, but also on the kind of support they receive internationally. In many a country, internationally-led post-war reconstruction has not completely failed, but it has not had a stellar record of achieving sustainable peace, development and democracy either. The lessons are there, ready to be learned—as are, unfortunately, the mistakes to be repeated.

International support is not only a Western 'business'. Libya's neighbours (and that includes the European Union) and the Arab world as a whole will want, and need, to play a role, as will China and Russia. Overall UN leadership is likely to provide legitimacy, but not necessarily effectiveness. While a joint UN-EU-AU-Arab-League mission is conceivable, it is important to bear in mind that the multi-organisational effort in Kosovo headed by the UN and involving the European Union, NATO and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe offered more problems than solutions.

(4) What do developments in Libya mean for the Arab Spring and the Middle East more broadly?

While Libya has commanded much media attention over the past 2-3 days, it is not the only country experiencing significant upheaval. In Syria, the regime appears to be firmly in control—unsurprisingly given the lack of a similarly well-organized and armed opposition and the absence of NATO military support. Yet it is not clear how sustainable Assad's rule is especially if Saudi Arabia and Turkey increase pressure. A transition here might still be possible, although probably in the form of a more gradual, negotiated process.

In Yemen, President Saleh has been out of the country for more than a month, but the opposition is deeply divided and has very different aims. The Houthi rebellion in the North and the secessionist movement in the South precede the democratic opposition by years, al-Qaeda has a very strong base in the country now, but, despite its alliance with the southern secessionists, shares otherwise very little with the forces confronting the Saleh regime. A regime collapse here is unlikely to usher in either democracy or stability in this strategically important country.

At the same time and in the shadow cast by the events in Libya, there has been a significant escalation in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—Israeli approval of expanded settlements, Palestinian attacks in Eilat and Israeli counter-attacks, the latter also leading to the killing of several Egyptian border guards and a consequential deterioration of relations between Egypt (another Arab Spring country) and Israel. In the run-up to a Palestinian push to achieve UN recognition as a non-state member at the General Assembly in September, this is hardly helpful, albeit not utterly surprising as the sides stake out their positions.

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