

PERSPECTIVE

WESTERN AGENDA

Libyan rebels examined



PATRICK COCKBURN

Special to Times of Oman

In keeping with the British Government's well-established record of comical ineptitude in dealing with Libya, William Hague chose to recognise the rebel leaders in Benghazi as the legitimate government of the country at the very moment some of them may have been shooting or torturing to death their chief military commander.

The exact circumstances surrounding the killing of General Abdel Fattah Younes remain murky, but he appears to have been lured from his operational headquarters at the front and arrested. As Gaddafi's long-term defence and interior minister, who gave a crucial boost to the insurrection by defecting in February, he knew he was a target for assassination, but may have misjudged the likely identity of the assassins. Believing he was on his way to answer allegations of still being in touch with Muammar Gaddafi, he and two of his senior aides were murdered and their bodies burned. "You killed him," shouted some of his soldiers as they burst into the hotel where the Transitional National Council (TNC) had been meeting. Probably they are right and it is difficult to believe claims by the TNC that pro-Gaddafi gunmen had infiltrated Benghazi and assassinated the commander-in-chief.

Regardless of the circumstances of his death, the murder should begin to raise questions about who Britain and other foreign powers are backing as a replacement to Gaddafi in Libya. What regime will follow his long-delayed fall, when and if it happens? Will a new regime be able to control the country? Is there any reason to suppose that it will have general support, given the bitterness of the civil war? Will the rebels not be as reliant on foreign powers in peace as they have been in war?

Remember that neither Saddam Hussein nor the Taliban were popular in Iraq or Afghanistan at the time they were driven from power. But what followed in both cases was prolonged and murderous anarchy because of the weakness of their Western-backed replacements. William Hague, once again displaying a striking ability to get Libya wrong, had praised the TNC leaders – as he recognised them as the Libyan government – as showing "increasing legitimacy, competence and success". Presumably, his information came from the same source that led him months ago to inform journalists that Gaddafi was already on his way to Venezuela.

Illuminate differences

The accusations of treason against General Younes and his subsequent murder illuminate divisions within the rebel leadership that they have so far been surprisingly successful in concealing. The last time I saw him was at a press conference in Benghazi where he exuded a confident sense that the rebels were on the road to Tripoli. Burly and commanding, he was the one rebel leader who looked as if he was on top of events.

As he described the military situation, it was difficult to keep in mind the real situation on the frontline. The chaotic forays and retreats of the brave but hysterical rebel militiamen that I had just seen south of Benghazi, were portrayed by Younes as if they were well planned military manoeuvres. Soon, the advance on Tripoli would begin again. There was one mystery: Younes had supposedly defected with 8,000 soldiers under

his command but there was never any sign of them and no explanation as to what has happened to them.

The Libyan rebels are even weaker than those in Afghanistan and Iraq where the Western-backed opposition had a core of loyal and well-trained fighters. In Afghanistan, these were the mostly Tajik forces of the Northern Alliance and in Iraq the Kurds had a well organised and well led army in the north of the country. In Libya, rebel forces have always been more meagre, inexperienced and often appear to be one side in hitherto obscure tribal confrontations which have turned into mini civil wars.

The nature of the civil war in Libya has been persistently underplayed by foreign governments and media alike. The enthusiasm in some 30 foreign capitals to recognise the mysterious self-appointed group in Benghazi as the leaders of Libya is at this stage probably motivated primarily by expectations of commercial concessions and a carve-up of oilfields.

These were the understandable motives which led Tony Blair, Nicolas Sarkozy and so many others to kow-tow humiliatingly to Gaddafi prior to the uprising, and to treat his bizarre personality cult with respect. A foreign no-fly zone and limited no-drive zone to defend Benghazi against Gaddafi's tanks could be justified in the early stage of the war, but this rapidly changed into a dubious decision to overthrow Gaddafi, relying on Nato air power and a few thousand rebel militiamen. The supposition was that Gaddafi would go down quickly, and when this did not happen it became a question of throwing good money after bad in the hope that his forces would cave in.

It has not happened yet and, with Ramadan beginning tomorrow, it is unlikely that fasting militiamen will be able to fight their way to Tripoli. Worse, the rebels' only strong card is Nato air power, so any cessation of the war in order to open the way for negotiations is against their interests.

In one respect, the foreign media has been more culpable than governments in giving credibility to the TNC as an alternative to Gaddafi's regime. Official rebel statements and claims have been treated with respect, as if they were not geared to winning the propaganda war. Atrocity stories, such as the use of the mass rape of women as a weapon of war, were broadcast uncritically by CNN and others. Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International as well as a UN commission, found there was no evidence for the allegations, but there was no retraction by the media.

How could it be that for month after month Gaddafi's forces were still fighting when he was meant to have no support? One answer was that he had hired mercenaries from black Africa. Frightened labourers with no documents were arrested and presented by the rebels at TV press conferences as mercenaries and later quietly released. In contrast to their limited military capabilities, the rebels have proved extremely effective in cultivating the foreign media.

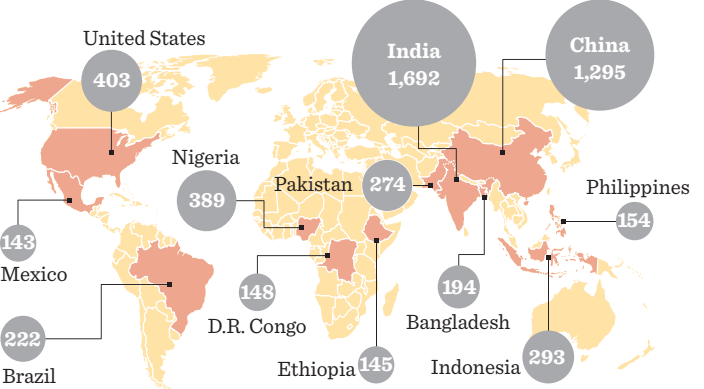
Will the strange death of Abdel Fattah Younes, whoever killed him, puncture the myth that the rebel leadership is fully capable of replacing Gaddafi and ending the war in Libya? Unfortunately for Libyans, the answer is probably no because too many foreign governments are now committed to installing the rebels in power and too many foreign journalists have portrayed them as freedom fighters battling an evil despot.

— The Independent

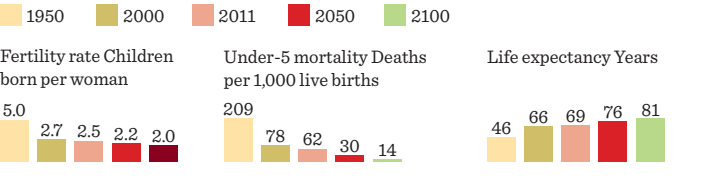
Global population seven billion and counting

The world is experiencing a demographic explosion, with the number of people on the planet set to reach **7 billion** this year and **9.3 billion** by 2050.

Most Populous Countries In 2050 (Millions)



Demographic indicators



Source: Science Magazine, United Nations Population Division Graphic News / Graphics

NANO EDIT

Peace in Kirkuk

It will be a high-level gamble for the Iraqi government to deploy its new multi-ethnic security force, the Golden Lions, in Kirkuk when the American forces withdraw. The dramatically named force will face a major challenge if ever the security situation in the city disintegrates. Kirkuk is the flashpoint for Iraq's future, where the simmering tension between the Sunnis and Shiite-backed Baghdad government will come up against the determination of the Kurds to manage their own autonomous territory in the north of Iraq. The Kurds' desire to bring Kirkuk into their provinces is not just about controlling territory or numbers of people, but about controlling the valuable oil reserves buried below Kirkuk. A major factor for the future success of any Iraqi (or Kurdish) government is that it will control the huge oil revenues, and be able to spend the money so as to attract support from Iraq's many warring militias and ethnic and religious groups. Kirkuk is ethnically split between Kurds and Arabs, and in the last general election the Kurds took about half the seats in the city. — Gulf News

QUOTE OF THE DAY

“Default is far less of a possibility now than it was even a day ago because the leaders are talking, and talking in a constructive way

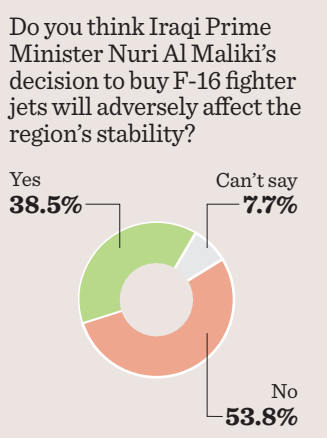
Charles Schumer, US Democrat Senator

OPINION POLL

Do you think you latest attack in China's Xinjiang region will unravel the social order of that country?

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YESTERDAY'S POLL RESULT



When newsmen become news of the world



MEHRE ALAM

“As one tries disseminating the symptoms, the traces of a common virus become visible, rather ominously

With all due respect to this lexicon that has somehow found its way into Queen's English, a dog, actually, doth not eat a dog!

As the consequences — both short term and long term — of the *News of the World* fiasco become more and more opaque, and the dust refuses to settle down, one idea that often strikes us, we journo, is precisely that very saying: dog eat dog.

As always, spin doctors are ready and set with their bows — already shooting off, in fact — aiming at those running without a cover (cover, shall we say?).

'We told you so!'

'These journo, most of them, are like that only; they can go to any extent chasing a story!'

The credibility question, or crisis, as many would like to call it, is going to haunt our fraternity for long. However, the roots of the current thunder, I strongly believe, are not confined to the land of the River Thames alone. It's a truly global 'equation'.

The rot, as it turns out, is somewhat like an LPG gas pipeline crisscrossing continents, breaking the barriers of geography.

As one tries disseminating the symptoms, the traces of a common virus become visible, rather ominously.

We have 'all' given up. That's the first thing; resigned to the dictates of the 'management', often the corporate management, for a long while now.

Aren't we supposed to get it ingrained in our minds that we are, after all, working on a product that is sold like anything else: a toothpaste, for example, or detergent, or a soft drink!

And, don't we know these are the 'Dumbing Down' times?

Muster up courage

Let us come to it straight away. How many times are we able to muster up the courage — and, as a corollary fail to gobble up that — to nail down a Big Entity, while we are armed with plenty of supportive evidence?

In these times of compromises, it's rather an uncompromising choice to keep aside "those lofty" ideals of the profession (that we had fooled ourselves into believing they existed, before starting to peddle the new boat). And if we do not, where shall the boat head to?

'Does it sell?' they ask.

'Why not?' you retort back.

'Does it matter?' they prod.

'How do you know it doesn't?' you quip.

"Do it this way!"

And that's it. Full stop!

The point is, the best of the talents probably no longer join this profession of pen-pushers anymore.

It was the freedom of pushing the boundaries that was the big pull. Rising every morning believing that this day one would probably end up doing something that'd give one a bout of professional pride. That, one was able to make a difference to the lives of some in a meaningful and positive way.

But that, alas, is no longer the mantra. Either you take it ('do it this way'), or go scouting for a new destination, and designation, mind you!

The problem is, there are too many pulls and pressures on the journalist today. While they can still battle it out on the external front, it's often the 'internal battles' that leave them completely sapped, helpless, confused, fearful, status-quoist, unimaginative, and as it turned out in the case of the *News of the World*, deceitful and conniving.

Dog eat dog!

FROM OUR ARCHIVES



AUGUST 1996

GOYSCA SUMMER CAMP CONCLUDES MUSCAT: The month-long summer programme, organized by the General Organisation for Youth, Sports and Cultural Activities (Goysca) at the Seeb Club, since the beginning of this month, concluded yesterday. A ceremony was held at the club, under the auspices of Salim bin Nasser Al Maskary, secretary general of Sultan Qaboos University Council, to present certificates and gifts to the winners of various competitions held during the course of the summer programmes. The 120 youths, nominated by various clubs in the capital, were given a chance to participate in different cultural and sports activities such as arts, painting, theatre, wall journal, billiards and football during the month. Sheikh Hilal Al Amri, director general of Cultural and Social Affairs at Goysca, said the conclusion of this summer programme would not halt the ongoing cultural trips to various destinations in the interiors of the country for local youth.