

Libya, Real Problems, No Answers

By David McReynolds

Sheila Cooper was my first indirect contact with Libya - back in the 1980's. Sheila had great secretarial skills, she enjoyed that work, and had been the essential person to serve as back-up to Peggy Duff. (I just checked Wikipedia for Peggy - an interesting entry but a deplorable "evaluation"). Peggy was a great person, a close personal friend, and when she died, not only did I lose a friend, but Sheila Cooper lost the only really interesting job she had had.

Looking for a job that would bring in enough to allow her to buy a tiny Greek island and retire, she took a secretarial job in Libya, which paid very well. I kept in touch with Sheila with the occasional letter, and saw her once during one of her return visits to London. She never gave me any suggestion, either when I saw her in London, or in her letters, that Libya was hell on earth, or a totalitarian nightmare. Sadly, she contracted breast cancer and died before she could retire.

It was due to Sheila that I had my second indirect contact with Libya. Sometime in the 1980's I got an invitation (with a free air ticket!) to a conference on something about "liberation and disarmament" - the exact title escapes me - to be held on Malta. I thought it smelled a bit odd (even very odd) but I found out from Sheila that the Libyans had asked her for suggestions as to who ought to be invited, and she had given them a list of all her friends, including a Japanese contact, myself, Daniel Ellsberg, and a number of others. I went and am glad I did - as someone with what might be termed a "limited income", I'd never otherwise have seen Malta, which was a real treat.

My suspicions, however, were right. No sooner did I get to the first class hotel where the conference was being held (each of us was assigned our own luxurious private suite) than I saw, on the table at the entrance, the famous Green Book on display. For those new to the discussion of Libya, let's move to the fairly immediate past - the establishment of modern Libya. From 1911 to 1951 Libya was a colony of Italy. There was courageous resistance to the Italians, a resistance which was ruthlessly suppressed. One historian estimated the Italian military killed half the Bedouin population directly or through disease in the camps where captives were held.

During World War II Libya was the site of some of the famous desert battles between Generals Montgomery and Rommel. (The warring parties also left behind a vast number of land mines, and then refused to ever turn over to the Libyans the maps that would allow them to be detonated. A number of Libyan farmers lost their lives in consequence). At the end of the war Italy surrendered control to the Libyans and the first (and only) monarch, King Idris. The US found Libya a good place for its Wheelus Air Base. The discovery of oil in 1959 made Libya an area of great interest to the British and Americans. King Idris concentrated wealth in his own hands and it was, perhaps, not surprising that on September 1, 1969, a small group of military officers led by Muammar Gaddafi took power. Gaddafi was then 27 years old.

In 1977 a certain amount of confusion set in as to what to call Libya, as it officially became the "Great People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya". (I have never had a satisfactory definition of "Jamahiriya"). And Gaddafi authored his famous "Green Book", which I have tried to read but

found not worth the effort (perhaps it makes better sense in Arabic). What is certain - and this accounted for the Malta Conference I attended - is that Gaddafi did not align himself with the Soviet Bloc but sought a kind of "active neutrality". I do not recall anyone from the Soviet-dominated World Peace Council at Malta.

It was, one must say, a fairly odd "active neutrality". At various times Gaddafi has sought to politically unite with Egypt, tried to incorporate Chad, funded various Muslim movements as distant as the Philippines, and terrorist groups in Europe, including Northern Ireland. In fairness, many countries have funded terrorists - virtually all of the Arab states have been involved, and so has Israel (which was among the early supporters of Hamas, hoping it might weaken the Palestine Liberation Organization). The history of the CIA has involved a good deal of support of terrorists. However one of the aspects of Libyan policy of which I was aware some years ago was that Gaddafi sent out hit squads to eliminate Libyan dissidents who had fled to other countries, a form of terrorism not many countries engaged in.

As I went through the 32 page summary of Libyan history in Wikipedia, it is clear that it has been recently and extensively revised, and shows an obvious bias to reflect recent events. President Reagan ordered air strikes on Libya in 1986 in retaliation for the alleged Libyan involvement in a bombing of a night club in West Berlin. Gaddafi was the target of the attacks. He escaped unharmed, but his daughter was killed, and a number of civilians. That damage I saw when in Libya in 1989.

The terrorism came home to me in the 1988 bombing of Pan Am Flight 103. Friends of mine lost their only child, a daughter, who had been on the flight returning home. This destroyed the parents, who continue to live but in many ways died when the plane disintegrated in mid-air over Scotland. We must keep in mind that the US has had its own hand in similar bombings. Cubana Flight 455 was destroyed on October 6, 1976, by a terrorist bomb. CIA documents that were released in 2005 made clear the agency had advance information on the plans for this attack. Four men were arrested, two given 20 year prison terms in Venezuela but Orlando Bosch was acquitted on technical grounds and lives - would you guess it? - in Miami, Florida. Luis Pasada Carriles fled before his final sentence and came to the US where he was finally brought to trial on a minor charge but even that trial has been postponed. Both men had direct ties to the CIA. None of this excuses any involvement Libya may have had with the Pan Am bombing - it is only important that those who point to Libya as a sponsor of terrorism must understand the same words apply directly to the United States. And parents in many countries still grieve lost children.

In 1989 an invitation came for the Fellowship of Reconciliation to send a team to Libya to "see for ourselves". We raised our own funds for the flight to Rome, but, as I remember it, the flight from Rome to North Africa and then by land to Tripoli, was covered by the Libyans. We went with an expert on Libya, Dirk Vandewalle, an Associate Professor at Dartmouth College. Prof. Vanderwalle is an author of one of the most carefully researched books on Libya. You can track down his recent comments on Libya by going to Wikipedia. President Obama might consider talking directly to Prof. Vanderwalle.

We stayed in a good hotel in the center of Tripoli. Perhaps ironically, since the West sees Libya

as a fearful totalitarian state, one of our party told me they thought the park next to the hotel was a gathering place at night for homosexuals. I went down and checked it out, and found it true - not a pick up site on the edge of town, but close to our hotel. I also took note that while Gadaffi had emphatically deplored the use of Islamic head coverings, terming them "rags", a number of young women wore them. We were able to walk through Tripoli freely - which doesn't mean we weren't followed, but it does mean we did not have "official minders" with us at all times, and if there were followers they weren't obvious.

Granted this was twenty two years ago, it seems to remain true that the standard of living in Libya is high - the population of six and a half million people has a per capita income of nearly \$15,000. During the time we were there we met with most of the key government officials, though not with Gadaffi himself. Our discussions were informal, and none of us felt the people we talked with were afraid to be candid. The literacy rate, at 82% of the population, is the highest in North Africa. Basic education is free and is compulsory to the secondary level. Medical care seems to be very good.

Gaddafi himself may be mad (an easy charge to make, a hard one to prove), but if so he is also very committed to his sense of Libya's mission. I would say his foreign policy has been appalling but while there is no political freedom in the sense that we understand it, I have not seen credible documentation of the kind of wide spread torture of which Egypt was guilty under Mubarak. And our tax money funded Mubarak - not Gadaffi. (And when we talk about prisons, I think the US, with the largest prison population in the world, is skating on very thin ice).

My problem with the response to the current crisis is that everyone seems to bring their own view of the world to Libya. Some of the same hard line Marxist/Leninist groups which had defended Serbia (and even Saddam) now defend Gaddafi, while other socialist groups, from a more Trotskyist tradition, have been swift to see in the opposition to Gaddafi the same kind of opposition we saw in Egypt. The problem for me is that I really do not know much about the Libyan opposition - while we knew, very early, a good deal about the Egyptian opposition.

There is no doubt at all that Libya has used violence, including air strikes, against the uprising but the main population is in Tripoli and at this point that seems to be still in Gadaffi's hands (this may, of course, shift at any moment). There have been a number of Libyan officials who have sharply denounced the use of violence and defected - but it is clear from the fact Gaddafi has appeared in public that he still has a strong base of support. And while in the early days of the civil disorder there were few Western journalists in Libya, a number have been invited in by the government and are now reporting from Tripoli.

Perhaps the oddest division is in the US, where liberals such as Senator Kerry have called for a no fly zone (and of course Senator McCain, but one tends to discount him these days). One of the key Republicans, Senator Richard Lugar from Indiana, has come out strongly against the US going to war. The Defense Secretary has seemed to put himself at odds with the President, saying that we lacked solid evidence that air strikes had been directed against civilians and also cautioning against a no-fly zone.

The President made a basic mistake in thinking he had either the power or the right to tell Libya that Gadaffi had to leave. Libyans are, for very good reason, cautious about such efforts by foreign powers to determine their government. And while I would say that much of Gadaffi's foreign policy has been foolish, or violent, or simply dead wrong (among his past allies have been - to name just one - Idi Amin), I'm not sure that there is strong evidence that the people of Libya itself see things this clearly.

Libya is a large country, with the population spread out along the coast, with the largest concentration in Tripoli. We are not dealing here with Egypt, where the uprising began in the capital, in a nation which historically has centered around Cairo. Nor are we dealing with Tunisia, where the government fell almost without violence and almost overnight. Here we have a society divided along tribal lines, not along religious, class, or political lines.

My basic position is that the future of Libya is in the hands of the people there. I hope - based on my own political values - that Libyans have free elections, and that such elections would result in entirely new leadership. Gadaffi has been in power too long. But that is my view, and I live in New York, not in Libya.

The Problems with the No-Fly Zone

It is easy for the Americans or the British to say all we have to do is "even the playing field" by establishing a no-fly zone. But this leaps over several realities. First, a "no fly" zone is an act of war. To make it stick you must bomb all the air defense installations Libya has, with a good deal of bloodshed. And given the record of the "accuracy" of the American pin point bombing, we are talking about a good many civilian deaths. There is also the serious problem of how legal such a no-fly zone would be, and who would authorize it. The UN? NATO? The US acting unilaterally?

But suppose a no-fly zone doesn't tip the scale. Suppose that it encourages the opposition to continue fighting - and to continue losing, as I think they are at this point. Don't we then have some obligation to come to the aid of people we have, by our actions, encouraged to continue fighting? Perhaps we help by sending in arms? (The US has already asked Saudi Arabia to do this). At what point does this become, not only one more foreign war we didn't need to fight, but a foreign war which becomes, as with Iraq and Afghanistan, "our" war.

Why not a no-fly zone for Gaza?

Once the Americans decide we should provide a no-fly zone for Libya, what do we do the next time Israel launches another criminal, enormously bloody attack on Gaza? Don't we then have an obligation to tell Israel we are setting up a no-fly zone there? And if not, why not? Do American liberals mean to tell us there is one rule for a country that doesn't have nuclear weapons and a strong Congressional lobby and another rule for a country which does have such weapons and such a lobby? OK, and then aren't we really saying our morals are very expedient? That we will only attack countries we know we can attack safely? I note that among the strong advocates of a "no fly zone" is Senator Lieberman - I do think that if there is any land action needed in Libya, we let Lieberman, McCain, and Obama land on the beaches and head toward the action. I'm

weary of seeing young men and women sent off to die while the politicians make the speeches.

And finally, the three letter word for our real motives. Only the very young and innocent think nations go to war for moral reasons. They go to war for two reasons only. One, they have been attacked and must defend themselves. Two, they see some value from getting into a war. And what is the value that might lead us to attack a country which has not attacked us? It is a three letter word - OIL. The same reason we attacked Iraq. But then we aren't doing this for reasons of compassion and decency and concern for human rights. If we were, I can list several other countries it might make more sense to attack. I can suggest Obama might consider a greater public concern for human rights in Saudi Arabia, where public beheadings are still much in order.

I'm not happy with the fact I don't have answers for real problems. History doesn't always give us answers. One of the grave problems of having military power is that if you have it, then all the problems you see look like nails, and you think of your power as a hammer. But that makes for very bad politics. Look at the record: Vietnam, Cambodia, Panama, Iraq, Afghanistan (to name but a few). Finally, look here at home, where the poverty rate is high, where the hunger rate is much much higher than in Libya. I can't solve Libya's problems. But our problems here take priority in my mind.