Libya and All That

Libya has loomed suddenly, late in the Presidential campaign, as a major issue - with inaccurate statements from both the White House and Romney. Let me take a short trip down a factual memory lane. If, like me, you lived through World War II, Libya is remembered as the last stop before Cairo, a desert territory that filled countless old movies featuring generals such as Montgomery and Rommel. The names are familiar from that time - Tripoli, Tobruk, Benghazi. Lots of camels, lots of sand.

Of course real people lived there, between tank battles. The Nazi and Allied armies left behind millions of land mines, which continue to blow up when farmers hit them by accident. Shortly after the end of that war, Libya achieved its independence from Italy, which had been a brutal overlord. And soon after, a young Colonel, Gadaffi, seized power, ushered in a complex kind of "Green Socialism", tossed the US Air Force from its base, gave the imperial powers their walking papers, and Libya became the great puzzle for the West.

Gadaffi carried out what must be called an eccentric foreign policy, sending his support to Muslim rebels in the Philippines and the IRA in Ireland. At one point he sent troops into Chad. He provided a refuge for Idi Amin. (As, one might note, the US provided a refuge for the discredited Shah of Iran). President Reagan accused Libya of a night club bombing in West Berlin, which cost American lives, and, in retaliation, in 1986 he sent jets to bomb Tripoli, including Gadaffi's home. BBC reported more than a hundred Libyans were killed in that attack. So much for imperial terrorism.

A far more tragic act of terror brought down a Pam Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, killing all on board (and some civilians on the ground). The only daughter of close friends of mine was among the victims. There has always been serious question of whether Libya was actually the responsible party for the Lockerbie bombing, though it admitted responsibility, paid the victims' families, and sent one Libyan for trial in Scotland. The bombing remains both a profound tragedy and a somewhat mysterious one.

In recent years Libya sought a reconciliation with the West, dismantled any programs for possible weapons of mass destruction, and Gadaffi himself was embraced by Tony Blair and other Western leaders. But in 2011, as the Middle East saw the emergence of the Arab Spring, violence broke out in Libya. The Western media presented this is a revolutionary surge, similar to that in Egypt.

Here I'd like to step back nearly twenty five years, to a visit I had made to Libya in 1989, as part of a team from the Fellowship of Reconciliation, seeking to ease the tensions. Our group met with a high level set of Libyan leaders (though not Gadaffi), we stood in the ruins of Gadaffi's home, which had been hit by the jets Reagan sent, we saw the damage to the French Embassy from those jets, and to civilian housing, far from Gadaffi's home, which had been destroyed. We were there a week, traveled outside of Tripoli, visited the university, walked around Tripoli.

I would be the first to admit that any such tour can be "guided", and is designed to give a good impression. But there were clear signs to me that this was not a fearsome, monolithic totalitarian

state. For example, while Gadaffi had come out publicly against women wearing the Islamic coverings of the head, we saw so many young women wearing precisely such coverings that it was clear Gadaffi's words were hardly law. I was amused to find that the park next to our first class hotel was a cruising ground for Libyan homosexuals. We did not, in our extensive discussions with our hosts, get a sense of fear, or a hesitation in speaking frankly. One of the touching aspects of the visit was to hear from the Libyans how many wanted to revisit the US, where they had gotten their education. They wanted to see old classmates, visit their old campuses. (Our visit occurred at a time when direct air travel to Libya was illegal, and Libyans were banned from travel to the US).

In addition, I had an old friend, Sheila Cooper, of England, who was a secretary and had gone to Libya because the secretarial pay was good and she hoped to retire on it. Her letters to me were funny, were frank, and didn't sound at all as if she was writing from "the heart of the beast".

So when the news of the "revolution" broke out I had doubts. Granted, much can change in the 25 years since I'd visited, but usually such changes are toward the easing of restrictions. It seemed to me that we were watching regional and tribal conflicts breaking out - not a unified and coherent revolution, as had been the case in Tunisia and Egypt.

I was further alarmed at the speed (and illegality) with which NATO moved. There were no NATO issue involved, no threats to Europe. But NATO first declared the air space closed, then after a clear and public agreement that it was not seeking regime change, NATO (with the US very much involved) tried to murder Gadaffi with air strikes, and gave substantial military aid to the rebels. There were doubts, early on, about the nature of the rebels, the degree to which Islamic extremists were taking control. The media did not report on those issues but I could pick them up from other reports coming in.

Now let's leap forward to the murder of Gadaffi and the establishment of a "free" Libya, and then the truly tragic murder of the US Ambassador and three other Americans. It is the duty of an honest observer to note that the NATO attacks had caused the death of many innocent Libyans – so the murder of the US Ambassador becomes one of many tragedies.

Why was the State Department unclear what had happened? Why did first reports suggest the events in Benghazi were caused by the same US film which had inflamed Egypt? It is easy for those of us who have never traveled to an area of chaos to assume that "everyone knew what was happening". In fact, no one in the US knew - and this includes the highest levels of the US intelligence community. That community had not expected the attack, it did not, at first, know what had happened or who was involved. In the chaos it was a CNN reporter, risking his life, who visited the Consulate compound and found personal files from the Ambassador.

If one reads the New York Times from the two weeks following the attack, it becomes clear that there is no government, there is no police force, there is no real Libyan army. No one really has control. The result of the massive influx of NATO arms has been to set up a dozen or more private militias, representing local and tribal interests. There is no central Libyan government able to disarm those groups. Nor was there any coherent Libyan police or military force which could have been sent to Benghazi. There still isn't. The US had relied on private "contractors"

(and still does) to provide some protection. So while Romney talks as if the US should have known at once what was happening, the reality is that no one knew.

For his part, Obama was clearly in the wrong in not admitting much earlier that the murder of the Ambassador was not the result of mob attack, but rather a fast, hard-hitting strike by Islamic militants. He hadn't wanted to admit this, since it undermines his story line that he has been able to keep the Islamic militants in check.

And Romney, who has almost no experience in foreign policy, and has chosen to rely on a team of hawks left over from the Bush Administration, has fallen back on the charge that Obama has been apologizing (??) for the US, and has hinted that it was a mistake to "allow" free elections in Egypt which brought an Islamic leader to power. (That is the danger of free elections - who knows, in the US they might bring Romney to power).

One must - in looking forward beyond the mess in Libya - realize that the "failure of US policy in the Middle East" (and it has indeed been a failure) has, at its center, the failure of the US to take the Palestinian issue seriously, to let it slide for fear of alienating American Jewish voters. Yet at some point the priority of the Palestinian issue must be faced, and Israel confronted. It is not a US ally but rather a serious US problem.

In the meantime, the tragedy in Libya resulted directly from the mess created by Western nations, eager for Libya's oil, and happy to see in tribal conflicts a revolution which never existed.