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LIBYA AT THE CENTRE

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Introduction

This briefing examines the aftermath of the death of Osama bin Laden and developments in Syria, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. The main focus, however, will be on Libya. Is the continuing stalemate in the Libyan War the more important development?

Bin Laden and al-Qaida

At the beginning of the month, bin Laden was killed by a CIA/Special Forces unit operating in Pakistan, his body removed from the scene and later buried at sea. He and members of his family and a small number of associates had been living in a compound close to a Pakistani military academy in the garrison town of Abbottabad a few miles to the north of the capital, Islamabad. His death raised many issues concerning US/Pakistan relations including the probability of collusion by some senior Pakistani officials in concealing his presence. At the same time, the US intervention affronted many Pakistanis, as well as leading to retaliatory raids, which included a major attack on a Pakistan Navy air base in Karachi which, in turn, raised questions over the security of military bases.

The killing of bin Laden was hugely welcomed in the United States, where it was seen as providing a degree of closure after nearly a decade of war that followed the 9/11 atrocities. It gave a substantial short-term boost to the standing of President Barack Obama and provided his administration with an opportunity to downgrade the significance of the on-going war in Afghanistan. Indeed, it made it possible to disconnect that war from the evolution of the al-Qaida movement and more likely that the administration would achieve its aim of substantial troop withdrawals before the 2012 Presidential election campaign got fully under way.

In spite of the euphoria in the United States over the killing of bin Laden, there was unease elsewhere at the failure to bring him to justice. On this basis, the more effective response should have been sustained international policing and legal actions, directly countering the movement's aim to be seen as a noble endeavour motivated by deep religious conviction. In this context, an outcome in which bin Laden was detained and brought to trial by an international court would, it is argued, have served to severely limit the risk that his death at the hands of US troops would confer martyr status and maintain this religious element.

More generally, at the time of bin Laden's death, in spite of the jubilation in the United States, both the Afghanistan/al-Qaida connection and the significance of bin Laden to al-Qaida were seriously overblown. The al-Qaida movement was already much diminished and greatly dispersed. It remained a focus for dissent and anti-western attitudes, but it was experiencing a serious challenge from the Arab Spring, since that arose from a broadly based civil society movement, rather than a narrow Islamist perspective. In such a context, al-Qaida faced a substantial degree of irrelevance unless the Arab Spring failed and resulted, instead, in bitter frustration at the impossibility of peaceful social change.

Syria, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia

During the course of the month, the Ba'athist regime of President Assad in Syria engaged in sustained repression of dissent and remained in control, although resistance continued. Furthermore, the regime was undermined in the wider world by an International Atomic Energy Agency report that the plant destroyed in an Israeli air raid in September 2007 was "very likely" a nuclear reactor under construction.

Under an IAEA safeguards agreement, Syria is required to notify the Agency of such construction plans, and the matter could now be referred to the UN Security Council.

Although with relatively less violence, the Bahraini authorities continued to suppress dissent in their own country, aided by police and army units from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. There was relatively little criticism of Bahrain by western politicians, contrasting with strong views expressed on Syria. Of long term significance was the trend for Saudi Arabia to work assiduously to support regimes facing problems of internal dissent. Since the start of the Arab Spring, the Kingdom has sought to increase its support for monarchies in Jordan and Morocco, to encourage the military leadership in Egypt to maintain stability and even to offer some support for the Assad regime in Syria.

The Saudi motivation for such support stems from two factors. One is concern that the upwelling of demands for emancipation across the region will threaten its own stability, and the other is the fear of resurgent Shi'a influence across the region that aids Iran in seeking to increase its own regional status. The Saudi actions are illustrative of a region-wide resistance to the further progress of the Arab Spring, but this does not mean that the emancipatory process has ended.

While Tunisia and Egypt are facing difficult economic circumstances as they undergo rapid political change, the impact of public pressure remains. This was shown by the manner in which the military administration in Egypt was forced to respond to public pressure to detain former President Mubarak and leading members of his own family. This action, coming from the public domain, was, a particularly worrying development for other regional elites. Furthermore, there are specific concerns in Israel at the manner in which Egypt has helped broker a Hamas/Fatah deal and is re-opening the Rafah crossing into Gaza.

Thus, by the end of the month and some five months after the start of the disturbances in Morocco, progress in political reform was continuing, but with a counter-reaction from elite regimes. In such circumstances, it might be expected that the strong western support for rebel forces in Libya would be seen as a positive aspect for the region as a whole. Here was external support for progressive change in a country where dissent had been rigorously suppressed. The fact that it is not seen that way across the region is of considerable significance.

Libya

By the end of May, western intervention in Libya was entering its third month with strong indications that a stalemate had developed. As early as mid-April, there were indications from within NATO that the operation would stretch to at least six months and this seems now to be proving to be the case. The relevant UN Security Council resolution that relates to protection of civilians, and initial air operations, especially near Benghazi, directly supported this. However, two factors changed the situation. One was the clear statement by French, US and British political leaders that the Gaddafi regime was unacceptable and had to be terminated, and the second was the decision by the Obama administration to cease front-line air combat operations, leaving it to European members of NATO.

Since then, it has become clear that NATO's air power is insufficient to do more than limit the regime's capability to displace rebel forces from Misrata and Benghazi. What has emerged, during the course of May, is that any attempt to terminate the regime focused on the use of air power must involve an extension of the campaign, including sustained attacks on a wide range of targets, much as happened with NATO action against the Serbs towards the end of the Kosovo War. Around the middle of May, air operations intensified over the greater Tripoli region, most of the small Libyan navy was destroyed and there were raids on command centres that seemed intended to kill leading regime members including Gaddafi himself. Furthermore, the French and British military, as leaders in the NATO air operations, decided to introduce Tiger and Apache helicopter gunships. This was to counter the regime's tactics of

transforming its regular army units into paramilitary forces that could be embedded in neighbourhoods and, thus, very difficult to attack using high-flying strike aircraft.

Regional Significance

By the end of May, there was some indication that the Gaddafi regime was willing to engage with the African Union in seeking a compromise solution, but the issue for NATO was that any outcome that did not involve regime termination accompanied by political transformation would be unacceptable. Meanwhile, the regional impact of the war is growing in a manner that is almost entirely unrecognised in western states. In countries such as Britain and France, the Libyan War has receded from the headlines – there may be concern over getting “bogged down” in yet another conflict, but it is not a major political issue, and there is little more than cursory media coverage of the continuing air operations.

Across the Middle East it is very different, with extensive coverage on the highly influential satellite TV news channels such as Aljazeera. Daily reports of the bombing are adding to the impact of the war which is being seen in two quite different ways. One is that there is still a genuine repugnance with the Gaddafi regime. This is felt by regional elites but also extends to wider public opinion. The other is a deep unease merging into anger that Libya is yet another example of an Islamic state being subjected to attack by western forces. What is really important here, and is not understood in the West, is that the longer the Libyan War continues, the more the balance alters between the two factors, in the direction of popular opposition to western intervention.

Memories of the Iraq War are still raw, with its huge civilian casualties, widespread detention without trial, torture and prisoner abuse and millions of refugees. Furthermore, the continuing drone strikes in Pakistan and Afghanistan, the extensive Special Forces operations and even the killing of bin Laden, all serve to reinforce this view of western control.

If the war in Libya is resolved in the next month or so, perhaps by African Union intervention, then these criticisms will probably recede. If not, and the war drags on for many months, then the impact is likely to grow. Moreover, the Gaddafi regime knows that time is on its side. NATO is therefore facing a dilemma - the extent of which is hardly appreciated among the western political classes.

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