

Libya: History repeats itself, with mistakes of Iraq rehearsed afresh

With Gaddafi at large, a guerrilla war eroding the new powers is inevitable

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Doomed always to fight the last war, we are recommitting the same old sin in Libya.

Muammar Gaddafi vanishes after promising to fight to the death. Isn't that just what Saddam Hussein did? And of course, when Saddam disappeared and US troops suffered the very first losses from the Iraqi insurgency in 2003, we were told - by the US proconsul Paul Bremer, the generals, diplomats and the decaying television "experts" - that the gunmen of the resistance were "die-hards", "dead-enders" who didn't realise that the war was over. And if Gaddafi and his egg-headed son remain at large - and if the violence does not end - how soon will we be introduced once more to the "dead-enders" who simply will not understand that the lads from Benghazi are in charge and that the war is over? Indeed, within 15 minutes - literally - of my writing the above words (2pm yesterday), a Sky News reporter had re-invented "die-hards" as a definition for Gaddafi's men. See what I mean?

Needless to say, all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds as far as the West is concerned. No one is disbanding the Libyan army and no one is officially debarring the Gaddafi-ites from a future role in their country. No one is going to make the same mistakes we made in Iraq. And no boots are on the ground. No walled-off, sealed-in Green Zone Western zombies are trying to run the future Libya. "It's up to the Libyans," has become the joyful refrain of every State Department/Foreign Office/Quai d'Orsay factotum. Nothing to do with us!

But, of course, the massive presence of Western diplomats, oil-mogul representatives, highly paid Western mercenaries and shady British and French servicemen - all pretending to be "advisers" rather than participants - is the Benghazi Green Zone. There may (yet) be no walls around them but they are, in effect, governing Libya through the various Libyan heroes and scallywags who have set themselves up as local political masters. We can overlook the latters' murder of their own commanding officer - for some reason, no one mentions the name of Abdul Fatah Younes any more, though he was liquidated in Benghazi only a month ago - but they can only survive by clinging to our Western umbilicals.

Of course, this war is not the same as our perverted invasion of Iraq. Saddam's capture only provoked the resistance to infinitely more attacks on Western troops - because those who had declined to take part in the insurgency for fear that the Americans would put Saddam back in charge of Iraq now had no such inhibitions. But Gaddafi's arrest along with Saif's would undoubtedly hasten the end of pro-Gaddafi resistance to the rebels. The West's real fear - right now, and this could change overnight - should be the possibility that the author of the Green Book has made it safely through to his old stomping ground in Sirte, where tribal loyalty might prove stronger than fear of a Nato-backed Libyan force.

Sirte, where Gaddafi, at the very start of his dictatorship, turned the region's oil fields into the first big up-for-grabs international dividend for foreign investors after his 1969 revolution, is no Tikrit. It is the site of his first big African Union conference, scarcely 16 miles from the place of his own birth, a city and region that benefited hugely from his 41-year rule. Strabo, the Greek geographer, described how the dots of desert settlements due south of Sirte made Libya into a leopard skin. Gaddafi must have liked the metaphor. Almost 2,000 years later, Sirte was pretty much the hinge between the two Italian colonies of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica.

And in Sirte the "rebels" were defeated by the "loyalists" in this year's six-month war; we shall soon, no doubt, have to swap these preposterous labels – when those who support the pro-Western Transitional National Council will have to be called loyalists, and pro-Gaddafi rebels turn into the "terrorists" who may attack our new Western-friendly Libyan administration. Either way, Sirte, whose inhabitants are now supposedly negotiating with Gaddafi's enemies, may soon be among the most interesting cities in Libya.

So what is Gaddafi thinking now? Desperate, we believe him to be. But really? We have chosen many adjectives for him in the past: irascible, demented, deranged, magnetic, tireless, obdurate, bizarre, statesmanlike (Jack Straw's description), cryptic, exotic, bizarre, mad, idiosyncratic and – most recently – tyrannical, murderous and savage. But in his skewed, shrewd view of the Libyan world, Gaddafi would do better to survive and live – to continue a civil-tribal conflict and thus consume the West's new Libyan friends in the swamp of guerrilla warfare – and slowly sap the credibility of the new "transitional" power.

But the unpredictable nature of the Libyan war means that words rarely outlive their writing. Maybe Gaddafi hides in a basement tunnel beneath the Rixos Hotel – or lounges in one of Robert Mugabe's villas. I doubt it. Just so long as no one tries to fight the war before this one.

Robert Fisk

P.S.

* The Independent blog, Thursday, 25 August 2011:

<http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/fisk/robert-fisk-history-repeats-itself-with-mistakes-of-iraq-rehearsed-afresh-2343459.html>