Viewpoints

Libyan fractured identity: air power and the role of pop-up government

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Introduction

The state of Libya is a modern political construct. It is also a somewhat precarious one. The nation currently faces societal challenges considerably greater than those witnessed by many of the other countries that became involved in the wave of revolutionary activity that is now referred to as the Arab Spring which are largely as a consequence of its complicated and turbulent history. For those taking an interest in the future development of Libya, an understanding of the cultural politics - or human terrain - is critical. Acknowledging the fundamental weakness of the state as a meaningful and trusted concept in the eyes of many of the populous is a helpful starting point, leading, as it ought, to a concentration of effort in creating meaning at the local level, rather than the frequently preferred, but overly simplistic top-down institution-building activity so often witnessed in the aftermath of international interventions. It is the premise of this article that air power has the potential to play a vital role in enhancing the relationship between the citizen and the state and, in doing so, can assist the efforts of the Libyan people and their international supporters in fostering social reform.

It is perhaps inevitable that those advocating such a constructivist approach in Libyan affairs would require those functions associated with the state to become heavily decentralised in their delivery. Yet there is a balance to be struck, as caution must also be exercised when considering a complete devolution to any type of autonomous regional government (or the premature embracing of a philosophy of localism which would risk compromising the strengthening and development of essential centralised institutions of national governance and increase the risk of

social fracture and future conflict). Qaddafi's regime recognised the importance of the local and focused much political and economic energy on pacifying the regions. This occurred concurrently with brutal repression of any dissent or criticism of the centralised regime. The Libyan people have therefore had plenty of exposure to rhetoric encouraging popular participation throughout the Qaddafi era, and came to profoundly distrust the veneer of democratic engagement which existed in the Jamahiriya system, despite real power resting within the repressive Revolutionary Command Council.[1] How then, are those responsible for governance in the fourth largest country in Africa, 95% of which comprises desert,[2] to increase the reach of the state sufficiently to begin to construct an identity that is both meaningful and valuable to its relatively small and disparate population, and in doing so become truly democratic? In order to explore some of the possibilities, examples of how related challenges have been overcome by other nation states will be presented. The core argument that state-managed air assets (be they civil or military) are critical enablers in this process, will aim to open up new debate relating to the role of air power in supporting anthropocentric nation-building activity.

History as Prelude

Prior to independence in 1951, the 3 ancient Ottoman provincial identities of Tripolitania, Cyrenaica and Fezzan were largely autonomous in nature. They were governed separately by successive imperial powers and were home to a number of quasi city-states, such as Tripoli and Misrata.[3] Those responsible for the establishment of the newly independent Libya[4] sought to create a unifying, state-based identity, disregarding the existing ancient tribal networks when introducing the 22 administrative regional units and heavily centralising government functions. This situation was described by Emerson shortly after Qaddafi's 1969 revolution as one whereby 'authority and sovereignty have run ahead of self-conscious national identity and cultural integration'.[5] In many ways, this state of affairs persisted throughout the eras of both King Idris and Col Qaddafi, and continues to be one of the fundamental challenges facing those responsible for governing the newly democratic country today.

The Qaddafi years (1969-2011) saw attempts by the regime to foster a growing sense of national consciousness in line with pan-Arab ideology, however the regime also simultaneously destroyed an essential component of state-based identity - civic society (taken to mean civic groups such as charities, political groups, civic clubs, independent educational organisations etc), in order to minimise the opportunity for political opposition. This has left an institutional vacuum in modern Libyan society – the exceptions to this being Islam and the tribe (specifically kinship bonds) often being reflected in the surname of an individual. These two identities are therefore the established primary referent for many individuals in Libya, particularly for those residing in the more rural and conservative areas of the country. Therefore, despite the rhetoric frequently espoused by the new elite, and many optimistic observers to the contrary, Libyan national identity continues to be fragmented and fragile; a problem illustrated when the majority of Libyans used recent ballots to vote in accordance with traditional tribal affinities.[6] The emerging middle classes may articulate a rejection of tribal identity but in fact continue to pursue politics along these lines.[7]

This poses significant challenges to those seeking to foster a stable, democratic, state based system of government following the overthrow of Col Qaddafi in 2011, as the concept of the nation-state in such circumstances is not one that can be said to have a shared meaning for all and neither is the state (yet) performing an indispensible role in the lives of the majority. Such an environment is equally as challenging for those within the international community that now wish to engage in major trade agreements or capital works projects, as the authority for the enforcement of property or contractual rights remains similarly ambiguous. In order for an authentic, credible and respected system of governance to develop, the dominant concerns in each provincial region, and for the 140 existing tribes, will need to be first identified and then appropriately addressed by recognised state actors.

Examples of these entrenched regional perceptions have been well documented, and although seeking to identify any type of regional characterisation is frequently unhelpful and overly simplistic, certain general observations have been attempted. Oakes reflected that, prior to 1951, the Tripolitanians were deeply concerned with the fear of dominance from Cyrenaica - and vice versa - and suggests that this is a fear that is still very much alive today.[8] St John described Tripolitania as 'a volatile mix of ethnic groups, together with a more urbanised culture'[9] which was characterised by tensions between urban-dwellers and pastoral tribal communities. Neighbouring Cyrenaica has similar, but more distinct, antagonism between the desert and the town,[10] and has traditionally taken pride in a history of internal opposition, particularly one that finds a unified outlet through Islamic groups (which may not always be extremist in nature).[11] Prior to independence in 1951, the Cyrenacians largely rejected the idea of a unified Libyan state, with many preferring self-government. However, faced with the threat of continued interference from colonial powers should unification not occur, an uneasy compromise was negotiated. It is therefore relatively unsurprising that much of the initial and heaviest resistance to the Qaddafi regime in 2011 could be found within the Cyrenacian city of Benghazi. Vandewalle[12] consequently refers to Libya as being an 'accidental' state; that is to say one without a shared sense of national identity and that has not undergone an organic process of unification. Vandewalle uses this term in reference to the turbulent history of the Libyan state and the fact that the country was manufactured by the great powers after the Second World War, essentially for their own strategic purposes. Vandewalle emphasizes the critical point that Cyrenaica and Tripolitania had very little in common and, indeed, after they were put together into the kingdom of Libya, remained suspicious of each other.[13]

Finally, the southern-most Fezzan region is traditionally seen as the most African of the provinces, with a mix of Tuareg, nomadic tribal traditions, isolated static oasis-based farming communities and numerous migrants from sub-Saharan Africa, whose presence was encouraged by Qaddafi.[14] It is sparsely populated, as well as being geographically and culturally remote from the other provinces. As a consequence, the people have been described as being 'fiercely independent, they stand apart from other Libyans and maintain their links to their homelands in the Tibesti and Ahaggar mountain retreats of the central Sahara.'[15]

Strengthening the State – Reaching the People

A great deal of research has been conducted into the importance of the citizen's perception of legitimacy when addressing issues in fragile and insecure environments, and how best to promote the state as a legitimate authority. 'Reach' in this sense therefore refers to both the physical and the psychological, as it is not possible to strengthen the legitimacy of the state without first strengthening the citizens' capacity and interest to engage with it.[16]

If we accept O'Neill's proposition that 'all politics is local'[17], key state functions, such as administering justice, the provision of health care, and of education, are much more likely to be effective in fostering intra-state engagement when shaped by local needs and requirements, than by centralised policies. Yet in order to reach diverse communities, scattered over inhospitable terrain and a large land mass, the state must first invest in the means by which to do so. It is essential that it is the state, and not regional powers, that are seen to be delivering such localised services, in order to avoid the risk of inadvertently bolstering destructive provincial factionalism. It is this practice that I therefore have labelled 'pop–up government'. By this, I mean state-sponsored activity that is directed towards addressing the balance between local community prioritisation (for example, in many nations, kinship ties and local communities are largely perceived as being stable, permanent and trusted sociological structures) and central government management (often experienced by the populous as being unrepresentative, repressive and temporary in nature). In other words, fostering a healthy relationship with the citizen does not necessarily require embryonic central governments to be ubiquitous in nature, but it does require the state to be present and effective when the individual expects or requires it to be. This is an even greater challenge when required to govern remote populations inhabiting expansive areas of hostile terrain. It is therefore essential that state actors operating in such circumstances have reliable access to the speed, mobility and reach offered by state-funded air assets, be they departmental, military or commercial in nature.

Air Power and Governance

This is not a challenge that is unique only to fragile or developing nations. In seeking to assist Libyan efforts to build a new nation, evidence can be sourced in the methods pursued by other nations when trying to overcome similar geo-sociological difficulties. In December 2007, the Australian Government made a commitment to 'close the gap"[18] between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians, a policy that acknowledged the inadvertent exclusion of geographically remote indigenous communities from state-delivered services. Indeed, even when offered, the centralised provision often proved to be culturally inappropriate and was therefore shunned by the community or imposed upon them, a situation Hughes described as 'welfare colonialism'.[19] The new model adopted by the Australian Government required agencies to work with aboriginal communities to identify local requirements, which are then delivered by a 'single government interface'[20] representing the Australian State or Territory governments. These agents are overseen by a Coordinator General in central government, who is required to report formally twice a year on the progress made.[21]

The geographical challenge facing the delivery of these locally-prioritised/state-delivered functions to such remote communities has been overcome through constructing delivery policies that are heavily dependent upon, or inextricably linked to, the provision of accessible air transport services. Examples include: the Department of Infrastructure and Transport offering a weekly air service for citizens living in isolated areas, delivering post, fresh produce and passenger services; the Department of Education providing the option of air travel to teachers appointed to schools north of the 26th parallel and the Department of Health Royal Flying Doctor Service offering emergency evacuation, remote medical consultation and primary health clinics.

In order to facilitate these services, each region has a combination of air platforms; for example the Queensland government operates 8 light fixed wing aircraft and 5 helicopters in support of the Government Air Wing, Police Air Wing and Emergency Management Services. Therefore, the importance placed upon air mobility assets in the delivery of state services is clear, a priority restated by the central government in 2010,[22] when it identified 5 funding components in the Regional Aviation Access Programme – air transport services, aerodrome upgrading and three airstrip components linked to inspection, maintenance and upgrade. Without these, the state would be unable to support the 255 remote communities it currently services, and would undoubtedly be seen as having failed in its duty in the eyes of those residing there.

Other established nations that rely upon state sponsored air assets to enhance state-citizen relations include, amongst others: Malaysia, through the Ministry of Transport funded Rural Air Services; Nigeria, where a number of state governments operate air ambulances in partnership with the social enterprise Flying Doctors Nigeria; and Namibia, with the Ministry of Works and Transport running the Government Air Transport Service.

Although the focus of such activity falls largely into the domain of wider governance and human security as opposed to the more commonly recognised and traditional air power functions of policing and defence, it is reasonable to suggest that both these hard and soft air power-generated security responsibilities remain impossible to deliver without suitable air assets. In this sense, these emerging practices (categorised by the USAF as a requirement to 'train, advise, assist and equip"[23]) are of increasing value to upstream and post-conflict activity. Indeed, it could be argued that such functions are inheriting the original tasks identified and undertaken at the very inception of modern military air power operations, to act as a 'swift agent of government'.

Conclusion

In summary therefore, the nascent state structures that will emerge in Libya from decades of dictatorship and centuries of imperial rule will have the highest of expectations placed upon them. The social and historical divisions that had caused such concern in 1951 remain in existence today, enduring as they did in a state of suspended animation throughout

Qaddafi's rule. The failure of the old regime, and with it the associated rejection of Pan-Arabist and leftist ideologies, to deliver on (unrealistic) promises of modernisation and equality must not be replicated in this new era if a contemporary, unifying Libyan identity is to be established. It is thus critical that the new Libyan state is uniformly responsive to the needs and priorities of each of the disparate communities inhabiting all of the provinces, but more importantly, it is perceived to be as such.

It will be impossible for the state to immediately supply comprehensive welfare, security and governance services at each locality, and therefore the concept of pop-up government is worth considering, particularly within the realm of welfare provision. The key to this will be a visible, prompt and effective state response to popular concerns, whereby the population begins to value the reach of the state, rather than being intimidated by it – the means by which this can be best delivered is through air power.

Notes

[1] "A History of Modern Libya" Dirk Vandewalle Cambridge University Press 2012.
[2] "Unseen Sahara" Charles Bowden. National Geographic Oct 2009 – www.nationalgeographic.com. Last accessed 6 Nov 12.
[3] "Countries and their Cultures" www.everyculture.com accessed 8 Nov 12.
[4] Prior to independence, the Libyan constitution was drawn up by a Provisional National Assembly under the supervision of a Dutch UN Commissioner – Adrian Pelt and guided by the UN Council for Libya. "Patterns of Libyan National Identity" Frank Ralph Golino Middle East Journal Vol 24 No 3 (Summer 1970) pp 338-352.
[5] "The Problem of Identity, Selfhood and Image in the New Nations: the Situation in Africa" Rupert Emerson Comparative Politics Vol II No 3 (1969) pp 305-310.
[6] "Tribal Loyalties Supersede National Identity in Libya Vote" Noureddine Jebnoun 20 Jul 2012. Centre for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University. www.alakhbar.com
[7] "Tribal Political Culture and the Revolution in the Cyrenaica of Libya" Dr Thomas Husken, University of Bayreuth. Paper presented at the "Libya – from Revolution to State Building" Conference, 7-8 Jan 2012.
[8] "Libya – The History of Gaddafi's Pariah State" John Oakes, The History Press, 2011.
[9] "Libya – from Colony to Revolution" R B St John, Oneworld Publications, 2008.
[10] "Countries and Their Culture" William G Dalton www.everyculture.com
[11] Ibid.
[12] "A History of Modern Libya" Dirk Vandewalle Cambridge University Press 2012.
[13] Ibid - Vandewalle.
[14] "Libya's Fezzan: a Bulwark of the Gaddafi Regime" Martin W Lewis 1 Mar 2011 www.geocurrents.info.com Accessed 7 Nov 12.
[15] Countries and Their Cultures (ibid) – The Tuareg pose an interesting political quandry to the concept of the geographical state. As well as being nomadic and roaming across the entire Sahara, they remain matriarchal in nature, with the men frequently going veiled. This is at odds

with the traditional Islamic culture that traditionally dominates in other Libyan communities.
[16] "Fragility at the Local Level: Challenges to Building Local State-Citizen Relations in Fragile Settings" M A Oosterom 2009 Governance and Social Development Resource Centre **www.GSDRC.com** Accessed 7 Nov 12.
[17] "All Politics is Local: And Other Rules of the Game" Thomas P O'Neill Jr. papers – Biographical Note. John J Burns Library, Boston College Online Archives, retrieved 6 Nov 2012.
[18] Co-ordinator General's Priorities 2012/13 - **www.cgris.gov.au** accessed 9 Nov 1
[19] "Self-Determination – Aborigines and the state in Australia" Ian Hughes, Doctoral Thesis, University of Sydney - Dec 1997.
[20] Role of Co-ordinator General – What is Remote Service Delivery? **www.cgris.gov.au** accessed 9 Nov 1
[21] **www.cgris.gov.au** accessed 9 Nov 12.
[22] National Aviation Policy White Paper: Flight Path to the Future 2010 **www.infrastructure.gov.au**
[23] "Airpower in Counterinsurgency and Stability Operations" General N.A. Schwartz. PRISM 2, No 2 Mar 2011.