



## **Policy Forum Report** *April 27, 2011*

### ***Background***

On April 27, 2011, the International Center for Religion & Diplomacy (ICRD) and American Muslims for Constructive Engagement (AMCE) convened the second in a series of private, off-the-record Policy Forums bringing key young leaders from the Washington policymaking community together with selected representatives of the American Muslim community to engage in focused discussions of current issues bearing on US relations with the Muslim world. This month's Forum topic was Libya, and participants from the Legislative Branch, Executive Branch, and the American Muslim community were joined by a former member of the Libyan government and a Libyan-American expert. The following is a summary of the insights that emerged from the discussion.

### ***Libya—A Popular Uprising, Not a Civil War***

The current crisis in Libya is a popular uprising against an oppressive government, not a civil war. In contrast to democratic uprisings elsewhere in the Arab world, the Libyan people directly requested military assistance from the international community in response to a severe military crackdown by the Libyan government. This assistance has been delivered with multilateral support from the UN, NATO, the United States, the EU, and the Arab League. The decision by the international community to intervene should be viewed as a direct response to unique circumstances and not as a template for future military intervention elsewhere.

### ***Qadhafi's Removal Seen as Essential to Resolution of the Conflict***

In light of the severity of the conflict and the oppression that preceded it, Libya cannot return to the status quo. A large fraction of the population will never again agree to live under Qadhafi. His departure will be an indispensable prerequisite to any democratic transition that reflects the aspirations of the Libyan people. Thus, even if a military stalemate persists, political and economic pressure should continue. Time now appears to be on the side of the rebels rather than Qadhafi—they are not in imminent danger of defeat as was the case in March.

Currently there is no peace plan on the table for discussion. The plan offered by the African Union was deemed unacceptable by the rebels because it allowed for the possibility of Qadhafi retaining power. The question of whether Libya will be a failed state without Qadhafi or whether it is already a failed state was also discussed. Whatever the outcome of such a debate, the brutal response of Qadhafi's regime to the uprising represents a humanitarian crisis of major proportions.

### ***US Involvement—Key Issues that Must be Addressed***

The US administration has been simultaneously criticized for doing too much and for doing too little in Libya. Key issues that weigh in these assessments include the following:

- *Clarification of US Goals*—President Obama has already stated America's political goal to be that of regime change. Some participants feel that US military action should support this goal. Although, no one advocated U.S. "boots on the ground", this qualification should not

interfere with providing arms and training to the rebels. Others pointed out that the focus of the related UN Security Council Resolution was that of protecting civilians, not regime change and that the United States should clarify how regime change aligns with the mission to protect civilians. An argument was made that protecting civilians could not be assured without Qadhafi's departure and that Libya is, in fact, a failed state with a major humanitarian crisis. It was suggested that there is, in actuality, an alignment of US national interests, international interests, and Libyan humanitarian interests.

- *The Pressure of Time*—Despite criticism by some that US action has been too slow and cautious, much has been done within the past five weeks. In addition to the military strikes, Secretary Clinton has met twice with National Transitional Council (NTC) leader Mahmoud Jibril; diplomatic missions are actively working to support the rebels on the ground; and meaningful aid efforts have been implemented. However, the need for accelerated action is made all the more urgent by two growing challenges: (1) The longer the conflict and US involvement continues, the greater the cost in US money and public support, and (2) The War Powers Act, which prohibits the US President from ordering military action that lasts longer than 60 days without a declaration of war or Congressional authorization, is a legal concern that raises the questions of whether the clock started on or before March 19 and whether the War Powers Act applies to a US NATO involvement.
- *Humanitarian Crisis*—Both the Libyan rebels and civilian bystanders have suffered devastating attacks by Qadhafi's forces, and some areas have been under siege for more than seven weeks. Many protestors now find themselves engaged in battle without adequate training or equipment. Beyond the no-fly zone, the rebels need food, medicine, arms, and ammunition. The growing humanitarian crisis is also producing refugees—at least 5.5 million by some estimates—that the United States and its allies will eventually be forced to deal with, if the issue is not addressed soon.

Humanitarian aid efforts are already underway, but they are complicated by slow bureaucracies and the reinstatement of sanctions against Libya which have acted to restrict some of this aid. A member of one humanitarian NGO mentioned that his organization has received considerable funding from donors intended for Libya but faces major difficulties in distributing it without greater clarity from the Treasury Department and, more specifically, the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) as to what material support can be provided to Libya in light of the current uncertainties. Americans also want greater clarity as to what aid is being provided by their tax dollars. NGOs working in Libya also need clearer channels for sharing relevant intelligence learned on the ground with the appropriate authorities.

- *Recognition of the National Transitional Council (NTC)*—Some participants supported a cautious stance with respect to recognizing the NTC (the political body designated to represent the "political face of the revolution"), citing imperfect knowledge about who the rebel leaders are and what attempts are being made to make the NTC more inclusive; concerns about the possible infiltration of the NTC by Al-Qaeda or other militant groups; uncertainty as to the appropriateness of the United States allying itself with any single Libyan group; and the fact that once recognition is given, it cannot easily be rescinded.

Others indicated that the NTC is already overseeing daily affairs in rebel-controlled Libya in cooperation with local councils, and that formal recognition of the NTC would enable sympathetic Libyans to be more effective and autonomous in addressing their own needs. Further, unfreezing Libyan assets for use by the NTC would enable them to procure and appropriately channel needed arms, training, and humanitarian assistance. It would also support a smoother transition of power post-Qadhafi. US recognition is seen as essential to empowering the NTC, since other countries will then follow suit. With regard to extremist infiltration, it was noted that an initial review of key NTC leaders found that (1) most of them are lawyers, doctors, and other professionals; (2) the rebel leadership is aware that they will not succeed if they allow extremists in their ranks; and (3) disaffected Libyans are fighting Qadhafi on the battlefield rather than joining Al-Qaeda-type groups.

*Lessons of History*—It is important to draw upon what can be learned from previous conflicts, while recognizing the uniqueness of the Libyan situation. A major mistake in Iraq was the U.S. preoccupation with the removal of Saddam Hussein to the all-but-total neglect of what would come after. That same mistake should not be made in Libya. However, as one expert opined, a post-Qadhafi Libya will not face the same sectarian tensions as did post-Saddam Iraq, since Qadhafi does not have a major inner circle that will cling to power comparable to the Sunnis privileged under Saddam. Iraq also provides an example of US alliances with selected “unsavory” elements in order to root out the remnants of Saddam’s regime and Al-Qaeda—a model that may or may not apply in Libya. Lessons can also be learned from the case of Somalia, in which the fall of that government led to a failed state. By the same token, it was its bad experience in Somalia that inhibited U.S. intervention in Rwanda; and the humanitarian consequences were devastating.

- *Costs of Intervention*—With America already involved in two wars and political upheavals rampant across the Middle East, the opportunity costs of intervening in Libya are every bit as telling as the financial costs. USG policymakers and staffers responsible for dealing with Libya are often the same people who are responsible for dealing with Egypt, Tunisia, and Syria. Addressing so many crises at once with limited human resources can reduce effectiveness.
- *Public Opinion*—Some US policymakers’ constituents are questioning US involvement in a third war, especially since American lives are already being lost in Iraq and Afghanistan. In response to this difficult “sell”, it was emphasized that unlike Afghanistan, Libyan intervention will not involve American troops on the ground.
- *Regional and International Implications*—Instability in Libya represents a threat to nascent democracies developing in neighboring countries by offering increased opportunities for the extremists. Al-Qaeda-type groups have the opportunity to gain influence when others are repressed or when conflict leads to a failed state. The willingness of Libyans to fight and die for their freedom should be acknowledged and respected and their efforts supported by those with a stake in regional stability. Protecting the interests of EU allies in Libya, such as those relating to the influx of refugees, was also cited as a US interest. Further, the international community should find constructive ways to deal with those countries that are providing military or mercenary support to the Qadhafi regime, such as Syria, Algeria, and Chad.

Turkey, though it lost some credibility in supporting the possibility of Qadhafi's son assuming the presidency, could also play an important role as a NATO member of strategic importance.

- *US-Muslim World Relations—the Larger Implications of Libyan Intervention*—In contrast to other US interventions which have often been seen as interfering in Muslim affairs, its intervention in Libya in response to direct requests from the Libyan people—demonstrating that Libyans/Arabs and Americans are on the same side—is said to be viewed favorably and to have improved the US image in the Muslim world. Significantly, US flags are now being waved by Libyans. One participant also quoted an Al-Qaeda supporter in Libya who is said to have remarked: “Before, I was 100% against the United States, but now I am maybe 50% against.”

### ***Post-Qadhafi Transition***

Effective governance will be needed to avoid a failed post-Qadhafi state, to meet the daily needs of the Libyan people, and to transition to representative government. Participants were encouraged to share their respective ideas and strategies with those in a position to communicate with and influence the Libyan rebel leadership.

\*The International Center for Religion & Diplomacy (ICRD) is a Washington-based NGO which addresses identity-based conflicts that escape the grasp of traditional diplomacy by incorporating religion as part of the solution. American Muslims for Constructive Engagement (AMCE) is an informal group of Muslim community leaders and scholars that seeks to foster a constructive partnership between the American Muslim community and the US Government in advancing the national interest. The views expressed in this brief reflect diverse opinions expressed during the Forum and may not necessarily represent the views of ICRD or AMCE.