

**International Security Monthly Briefing – 31 March 2011**

## **LIBYA, BAHRAIN AND NATO**

Paul Rogers

### **Introduction**

The February briefing (*After Egypt*) looked at the immediate consequences of remarkable political transformations in Egypt, as popular protest saw the end of an enduring and autocratic government. The fall of the Mubarak regime was sudden, but was followed by the military taking power in an orderly fashion. What was not clear was whether the Egyptian military, with all its economic power, would accede to popular demands for reform and progressive democratisation. What was evident, however, was that although the senior military commanders were all too used to the trappings of privilege, they also recognised that there was a connection between the middle ranks of the military and the wider population, not least in the refusal of those middle ranks to do the bidding of the Mubarak regime in its final days. As a consequence, the Egyptian military leadership is now conscious of its potential vulnerability should the slow process of reform be such as to bring about a further period of popular protest.

Partly for this reason, the February briefing concluded on a positive note:

“What is at least positive in all of this is the sense of popular power that has been released so rapidly across the region. Whatever happens in the early part of March in Libya, that release has been an act of transformation that is as significant as it is unexpected. The deep-seated problems of divided societies, extreme poverty and unsustainable economies remain, but there is a prospect of positive change that will not easily go away, whatever the setbacks in the coming weeks.”

The process of change has continued during March; there have been many developments across the region, with the main focus of attention being Libya. While examining the issues there later in this briefing, the initial focus is on the wider region.

### **Protest Across The Region**

Among the numerous expressions of “people power”, some regimes have made political changes to respond to the unrest. There has, for example, been some modest political change in Jordan, where the monarchy retains some prestige. This has limited the extent of further demonstrations, and this has also been the case in Morocco. Of the two countries, Jordan is the one that remains more likely to succumb to public anger, not least because the general perception of corruption is stronger and support for the monarchy rather weaker.

In Oman there had been unexpected and extensive demonstrations in February, but these were brought under control to the extent that the regime did not seem under threat by the end of March.

In Syria, by contrast, March saw continued protests, mainly in provincial centres such as Deraa and Latakia, but with some extending to the capital, Damascus, in spite of the pervasive power of the security forces and the use of considerable force against protestors. It was not clear that the Assad regime would be threatened, but by the end of the month that seemed feasible, unless substantial reforms were put in place. The Syrian regime is in a particularly weak position in that, unlike Algeria with its oil and gas exports, it does not have a sufficiently strong economy to be able to respond to the rising prices of basic commodities such as flour and sugar. While these are not at the root of popular unrest they are certainly contributory factors. However, President Assad in his speech on 30 March, in which he vowed to defeat a “plot” against his country, acknowledged the demand for reform but he did not

announce the lifting of emergency legislation as some had expected. He has directed a legal committee to look into lifting the emergency laws by 25 April.

In Yemen, large-scale protests continued throughout the month, directed primarily at the government of President Saleh, although the situation is further complicated by the southern secessionist movement centred on Aden and a persistent conflict with tribal groups in the north of the country, a long-lasting confrontation that has involved action by the Saudi air force in support of the Saleh regime. There is considerable concern among western states that Yemen, with its large population and singularly weak economy, has severe problems of governance and stability, such that there is scope for radical Islamist groups to make progress. Elements allied to the al-Qaida movement operate in the country and this is one of the reasons why Yemen has received considerable help from the United States and some western European countries, in spite of the autocratic nature of the Saleh regime. Such countries would want to encourage a transition to a more responsive government, but their efforts to do so have so far achieved little.

## **Bahrain**

The February briefing reported on the violence in Bahrain, a small Gulf monarchy of limited oil resources, but with a reasonably successful industrial and service economy, dependent largely on business from neighbouring states. While the popular protests, which were suppressed with considerable force, stemmed from a broadly based concern with limited freedoms, they were complicated by the population make-up in which a Shi'a majority is relatively marginalised while the monarchy is Sunni, as are most of the wealthier sectors of Bahraini society. Unrest in Bahrain therefore causes concern in Saudi Arabia not least because its substantial Shi'a minority is concentrated in the oil-producing regions in the east of the country, close to Bahrain.

Even so, the previous briefing pointed to the likelihood of concessions by the monarchy and took the view that:

“As an air of compromise emerged in Bahrain by the end of February, so there was a slight diminution in concern in the neighbouring countries.”

This assessment was not borne out by subsequent events. In the middle of the month and following further expressions of public dissent, the Bahraini authorities took the decision to suppress the opposition with considerable force. This was accompanied by the entry into the country on 14 March of 1,000 Saudi security personnel and 500 police from the United Arab Emirates. With this force available to guard key installations and thus free up the Bahraini police and army to control the protests, the authorities moved against opposition groups that had gathered at the Pearl roundabout in the centre of Manama. There was considerable violence, with serious loss of life and many injuries. Leading opposition figures were subsequently arrested. While the authorities reported that calm was restored across the country, this was only achieved by a violent process of control aided by the forces from Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Following the suppression of dissent, the Bahraini government immediately demolished the Pearl statue that had become a symbol for the protestors.

Bahrain's actions were condemned by many countries, including those such as the United States, Britain and France that have very extensive links with all three countries, but there was little evidence of direct political pressure being applied. Those links include a long history of arms sales and, especially in the case of Saudi Arabia, extensive support in the training of the country's armed forces. Thus key western governments are directly involved in supporting regimes that have together clamped down severely on protests in Bahrain. This provides an important context for the western response to the public protests and subsequent uprising in Libya.

## Libya - Descent Towards Civil War

Early in March, the widespread public protests against the Gaddafi regime in Libya evolved into a country-wide process of dissent. This was concentrated mainly in eastern Libya and centred on the country's second city of Benghazi, but there were important centres of protest in the west of the country. By the middle of March, the Gaddafi regime had responded by concentrating its control of the greater Tripoli district that accounts for nearly a third of the country's population, it also moved aggressively against protestors elsewhere in the west of the country while beginning the process of gaining military control of the eastern region.

Instigated primarily by the French, but with strong support from the British and nuanced support from the United States and the Arab League, discussions in the UN Security Council resulted in a strongly worded statement, Resolution 1973, endorsing air strikes to control the capacity of the regime to harm civilians. The resolution also used the terminology "all necessary means" which allows for variable interpretations of what further action is allowed to protect civilians. The resolution was followed immediately by a meeting of interested states in Paris on 19 March, and on that same day air operations were initiated by French, British and US forces.

At the start of this international development of the conflict, powerful Libyan Army units were moving towards Benghazi, and French air strikes destroyed many of these elements, probably avoiding serious civilian casualties in the city. There followed extensive cruise missile strikes by US and British forces against Libyan air power and the supporting command and control centres, with these supplemented by numerous air operations, including US B-1B stealth bomber raids from the continental United States.

In the following week, US, British and French forces, aided by some other states, engaged in repeated attacks on Libyan armed forces that extended well beyond the maintenance of a no-fly zone to include targeting munitions dumps, tanks and artillery. Controversy developed over the war aims, with diminishing support coming from Arab League members, concern expressed by NATO members such as Turkey and Germany, and opposition to the enlargement of coalition actions by Russia. Nevertheless, NATO eventually agreed to take over the command and control of the entire operation, with the Obama administration anxious to take a lesser role.

By the time of a major conference in London on 29 March, it appeared that the manner in which NATO air and missile capabilities were targeting the Gaddafi regime's armed forces was having the effect of providing sustained air cover for rebel forces, and these were therefore able to make rapid progress along the Mediterranean coast of Libya from Benghazi towards Gaddafi's main centre of power in Tripoli. The regime now appeared threatened and during the course of the London conference, political leaders such as Sarkozy and Cameron made it clear that they believed Gaddafi had to stand down. In effect, NATO was now supporting regime termination.

This process was thrown into doubt in a rapidly changing situation at the end of the month as Gaddafi's forces successfully repelled the ill-equipped and poorly trained rebel forces, forcing them back towards Benghazi. It seemed likely that a stalemate would result, with the regime unable to unify the country but the rebel forces unable to threaten the survival of the regime, even when supported by overwhelming NATO air power. With this in prospect, western political leaders raised the question of arming the rebel forces, although it was questionable as to whether UN Security Council Resolution 1973 allowed this.

Among the many issues raised by the evolving civil war in Libya, two deserve particular attention. One is that there is a tendency in Western Europe to assume that Gaddafi runs a deeply repressive regime with minimal public support that is kept in power by a narrow coterie of loyal supporters backed by relatively small but highly capable elite military forces. In reality, what is undoubtedly a repressive regime is also

one that has considerable public support in the west of the country and has distributed largesse from the oil wealth over many years, thereby retaining the commitment of many Libyans.

The second is that NATO has taken over the military operations just as they are evolving from a narrow but widely supported concept of humanitarian protection towards a more general aim of regime termination. That is a very major change and is supported by the recent raised notions of arming the rebels. It is always possible that the Gaddafi regime may suddenly lose internal support but, if not, then NATO is embarking on an endeavour that is as uncertain in its outcome as the ISAF operation in Afghanistan.

### Conclusion

Although there was substantial support for initial coalition actions against Gaddafi's forces, especially when they threatened civilians in Benghazi, the Libyan War is now developing into a much wider operation. It also seems likely that the more it becomes a matter of attempted regime termination by NATO forces, the less support there will be across the Arab world. Furthermore, it has been paralleled by suppression of dissent in countries where autocratic regimes have strong support from those very countries now seeking regime termination in Libya, the most notable example being Bahrain. Above all, NATO has now embarked on its second major out-of-area operation since the end of the Cold War following Afghanistan. What began being seen as a narrow but essential humanitarian military intervention seems unlikely to end there, and this may have consequences right across the region and also for the future of NATO.

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