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Why Libya Surprised Us, and Why Syria Won't

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It is not enough for Western leaders to speak wishfully about democracy taking root in the Arab world; rather, democracy requires action.

Who could have foreseen that Libya, within just one year of Muammar Gaddafi's death, would join the community of democratic nations? Virtually everyone predicted that the Islamist tide would sweep through Tripoli as it had done through Tunis and Cairo. But it was not to be. Instead, the Libyan people made fools of us all.

To our surprise and delight, it was the moderate National Forces Alliance (NFA), not the radical Justice & Construction Party (JCP), which swept to victory in last year's elections for Libya's General National Congress. And, when the Congress convened to elect a new Prime Minister, the NFA's Mahmoud Jibril utterly trounced the JCP's Awad Barasi, who failed even to scrape his way into the second round of voting. In the end, it was Ali Zidan, a liberal, who took up the premiership.

How did this happen? How was it that, of all countries, Gaddafi's Libya – described as the “Worst of the Worst” by Freedom House – could become the success story of the Arab Spring?

Firstly, military intervention by the West significantly reduced the dependence of the Libyan opposition on pro-Islamist Qatar. Although Doha did its best to influence the outcome of the revolution by supplying vast quantities of guns and cash to Islamist militias fighting Gaddafi's regime, the eight-month uprising was simply too short for Qatar-backed radicals to build up the necessary momentum. Indeed, Libyans regarded Abdel Hakim Belhaj and Sheikh Ali Salabi – both prominent oppositionists heavily supported by Qatar – with such indifference that their Homeland Party failed to win even a single seat in post-Gaddafi elections to the General National Congress.

Secondly, the West's formal recognition of the Transitional National Council as a “legitimate representative” of the Libyan people did much to deprive Islamist factions of the leadership

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role to which they aspired. The Council – formed not in exile, but by local activists in Benghazi – gave Libyans crucial ownership of their revolution. By recognising the legitimacy of this endogenous body, the West sent a clear message to the world that Libya's future was not up for grabs by foreign-backed opportunists.

Turning now to Syria, it is through analyzing the success of the Libyan Revolution that we can begin to determine why the Syrian Revolution is, and will be, such a catastrophic failure.

Unlike in Libya, there has been no Western military intervention in Syria. As a result, more than two years of bloody civil war have now passed without the slightest prospect of relief for Syria's beleaguered population. But Syria's loss is the Islamists' gain; as the conflict has dragged on, the once-marginal radicals have grown in strength, to the point where they now effectively control the armed opposition. Consequently, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) is no longer an army of would-be liberators, but of oppressors-in-waiting.

As for the Syrian National Council, it is fundamentally unlike the Transitional National Council. Formed by exiles in Turkey and dominated by Islamists from its inception, the Council was almost totally irrelevant to those who were actually risking their lives to overthrow the regime of Bashar al-Assad; when asked in mid-2012 to name a Syrian opposition group, only two percent of Syrians gave the Council as their answer. By contrast, the FSA was named by eighty-three percent of those surveyed.

Although Western states have now withdrawn their endorsement from the Council, the damage, regrettably, is already done. When the European Union embraced the group as a "legitimate representative" in February 2012, the Council's president thanked the EU for "giv[ing] us added momentum," and called for "all other Syrian opposition groups to work with the SNC." Not at all coincidentally, the FSA – until then largely secular – announced soon afterwards that it would team up with the Council to form a joint civilian-military command. By conferring undue legitimacy upon the Syrian National Council, the West had empowered the Islamists to hijack the Syrian Revolution.

For these reasons, it is doubtful that Syria will surprise us in the way that Libya did. We can only hope, therefore, that an important lesson has been learned. It is not enough for Western leaders to speak wishfully about democracy taking root in the Arab world; rather, democracy requires action.

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