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Qaddafi’s Libya in world politics*

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The need to understand Libyan foreign policy has never more pressing than at present, as Tripoli sheds its position as a pariah in Africa and as its eccentric leader presses on with his programme of African continental unification from his position at the head of the African Union. However, Libyan foreign policy has always been rather opaque, and the Arab journalist Ghassan Chebel rightly noted that Libyan politics can provide the most seasoned observer with the ‘mother of all surprises’.

Although there are several studies on Libyan foreign policy or Libyan politics, none is as comprehensive as this penetrating study by Yehudit Ronen, who seamlessly integrates domestic and foreign issues and shows how the one impacts on the other. In this authoritative study Ronen provides a sweeping and comprehensive overview of Qaddafi

since he came to power on 1 September 1969, through his relations with the United States, the Soviet Union and Arab states, his quest for unity and leadership in Africa and finally to the rise of his son Saif al-Islam. Ronen also discusses the reformist bloc around him, consisting of among others Foreign Minister 'Abd al-Rahim Shulqam and Prime Minister Shukri Ghanem. An aspect of this book which contributes to its unique character is that the information to a large extent comes from Libyan and other primary Arab sources. Thus it should be no surprise that this book provides the reader with a unique insider-outsider perspective of Libyan foreign policy.

Immediately after the 1969 revolution, Libyan foreign policy was informed largely by ideological, political and emotional affiliations. Buoyed by its huge oil reserves and the charismatic personality of its leader, Tripoli’s foreign policy became ever more grandiose. However, given the ideological straitjacket (anti-West, anti-Israel, pan-Arab and now pan-African) in which Libyan foreign policy was acted out, this resulted in more reversals than success for Tripoli. Qaddafi allied with the Soviet Union to balance the growing hostility from Washington and certain Arab states, but the result was that Libya was caught up in the maelstrom of East–West relations. Ultimately the result was that the US designated Libya as a threat to its interests in the region, earning the ire of pro-Western Arab states in the process.

Moreover, its strategic dependence on the Soviet Union catapulted the Qaddafi regime into a major crisis situation after the disintegration of the USSR. In this time of crisis, and unable to change his ideological approach to foreign policy making, it was left to Saif al-Islam to steer Libyan foreign policy in the post-Cold War environment. Guided by more pragmatic national interest considerations, Saif al-Islam and his team of reformists successfully reoriented Libyan foreign policy along more pro-West lines. The settlement of the Lockerbie dispute, coming clean on its past nuclear ambitions and various economic initiatives to liberate Libya from its moribund socialist economic underpinnings, were all part of this process.

It is important to note that ideological considerations have not been eliminated in Libyan foreign policy. Rather, it is being used in more traditional ways to further the national interests of the Libyan state, as Qaddafi’s ‘United States of Africa’ vision and his quest for African leadership attest. While it fits into his pan-African perspective from an ideological point of view, it also served to rehabilitate Libya’s image. Qaddafi has for example been able to successfully mobilise African diplomatic support to press for the lifting of UN-imposed sanctions.

Despite Saif al-Islam’s success in reorienting Libyan foreign policy along more pragmatic lines, it is not certain whether the reforms will hold. In authoritarian political systems, personalities often matter more than institutions and policies and one can hardly predict the future of Saif al-Islam in Libya’s labyrinthine politics. As Yehudit Ronen notes, it is
still not clear whether Qaddafi will follow in the footsteps of Syria’s Hafiz al-Asad and bequeath Libya’s leadership to his son.

Ronen’s book is a veritable tour de force and a must-read for all who seek to understand Libya’s position in world politics as the regime prepares to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the revolution in 2009.

Reviewed by Professor Hussein Solomon,
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Contemporary piracy and maritime terrorism: The threat to international security*

Martin N Murphy

Martin Murphy asks what threat piracy and maritime terrorism poses to international security. This question has generated much interest recently, with the increased pirate activity around the Gulf of Aden. In exploring this question, Murphy examines the potential development of maritime terrorism through opportunities presented by piracy. He concludes that neither piracy nor maritime terrorism on their own represents a significant threat to global security, but that piracy can facilitate the development of those environmental factors which would make maritime terrorism plausible. Murphy suggests that the threat to regional security and the potential for overspill are sufficient to warrant concern about generalised maritime disorder, especially in the face of ‘increasing pressure on coastal waters’ (p 10).

Murphy begins by examining piracy and terrorism as two separate phenomena. He sketches the geographic, political and social factors favourable to the development of both, and then provides a breakdown of the methodology of piracy. Instead of focusing on maritime safety, Murphy examines the security threat posed by piracy. This includes a vulnerability assessment of states and regions as well as a threat assessment based on the possibility that piracy may extend beyond the borders of a littoral state, for instance through its effects on a fragile international shipping industry. These observations are ably supported by case studies of South-East Asia and Somalia. Murphy shows that the evaluation of piracy and its effects are problematic, but that taken as a whole, the financial cost of piracy is in itself not significantly damaging to the global economy.

According to Murphy (p 44), the international community has only been affected indirectly so far by piracy and this is unlikely to change. Common piracy is a menace to its victims and an irritation to littoral states and shipping companies, but is not usually a wider concern. This does not mean, however, that piracy does not pose a threat to international security, for the organised nature of crime required for sophisticated piracy does indeed constitute a threat that has a wider reach than only littoral states and the shipping industry.

In establishing the methodology and targets of maritime terrorism, Murphy categorises ships as iconic, economic or mass casualty targets, as well as potential weapons in themselves. He explores the possibility of terrorists making use of seaborne assets for weapons delivery, including weapons of mass destruction, and developing non-state ‘navies’ such as the ‘Sea Tigers’ (the naval force of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka). According to Murphy some of the actors involved in terrorism or insurgency activities at sea include the Abu Sayaf Group, who was responsible for the SuperFerry 14 bombing, and al-Qaeda, who was responsible for the attacks on the USS Cole and MV Limburg. While these attacks show that maritime terrorism is indeed possible, Murphy is sceptical of many of the scenarios put forward for potential acts of terrorism at sea because the ‘sinking of a large cruise ship or ferry, killing thousands of Westerners, the bombing of a warship, the successful delivery of a nuclear or radiological device to a major port, or the execution of multiple and harmful attacks on the world’s maritime transport system are all scenarios that are less easily brought about than equivalent events on land’ (p 69). Murphy is therefore of the opinion that maritime terrorism on the whole is an overstated threat.

At a local level, in contrast, he is of the opinion that the threat of terrorism at sea is understated – although this an argument that has lost some force recently, as many of the actors listed in this article have either split up and disappeared from the scene (the Abu Sayaf Group for instance), or have been destroyed (as in the case of the Sea Tigers). Nevertheless, Murphy notes the land-based link between terrorist and criminal organisations could manifest in the marine environment. In this regard he is especially
concerned that piracy could cause regional instability, something that would obviously suit the purposes of a terrorist organisation. ‘Piracy might be a second-order problem on its own, but in its context of wider criminal networks, it is both cause and symptom of state-weakness, which in its turn helps terrorism and organised crime to flourish’ (p 86).

Murphy concludes that piracy alone does not represent a significant threat to international security – a rather interesting assessment, given the current international focus on the matter. He also provides a succinct picture of maritime terrorism which debunks many of the unrealistic ideas of container-bound nuclear weapons and hijacked supertanker-sized improvised explosive devices that contribute to an overstatement of the threat.

He nevertheless shows that piracy and maritime terrorism share similar requirements for sustainability. Chief amongst these is state and regional instability, which, if allowed, can lead to piracy becoming a threat to international security. Murphy concludes that the threat of piracy and maritime terrorism is a warning against the continued problem of maritime disorder. Although he explores some tentative international efforts to resolve this, Murphy ends with a more generalised complaint against weak states that are unwilling or unable to handle their responsibilities.

Reviewed by Conway Waddington,
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Africa: Altered states, ordinary miracles*

Richard Dowden

In the past decade, a huge number of books and articles has been published on Africa in which its social and political environment has been depicted as rife with disease, wars, corruption and other failures. In contrast, Richard Dowden provides a more balanced view of African history and its future. He shows two sides to the history of every country that he analyses, contrary to the usual practice of portraying the more sensational side only. Dowden further highlights the idea that external assistance always ignores the internal realities of the various countries. Aid frameworks are replicated without taking into account the specificities of conflicts and peoples in the particular country. He states time and again that foreign interference by the United Nations and Western countries has on the whole had a negative impact on the African country in question.

Dowden begins by making the point that the social context and human values in Africa combine with a rich history and culture to define the continent. These complexities vary from country to country and region to region, and Dowden emphasises that the continent is not one homogenous entity but a landscape of varied experiences, attitudes and lifestyles. The one aspect that stands out is the humanity of people, their optimism in the face of tragedy and insecurity and the extremes of good and evil that characterise their societies.

The evil is epitomised by the violence that extends to relationships with autocratic leaders who are often forcefully removed and the foundations of which lie in a turbulent colonial history. The latter is still apparent in the Western agendas and lifestyles that continue to shape the direction which leaders and even ordinary people take. The leaders use politics as a personalised vehicle for gaining access to power and ordinary people sacrifice opportunities in the quest to be more Western and less African, under the false impression that this is the answer to the woes that plague the continent.

The good lies in the humanity that Africa offers to the world, in the welcoming embrace it gives to outsiders and in the communal process of decision making. ‘I think, therefore WE are’ constitutes the ‘African’ way of life. Because this does not fit the Western electoral pattern, it results in the failure of African governments to effectively implement a Western system of governance – it is in the final analysis a system that is not suited to Africa’s complex identities.

Dowden then explores the histories and political and social environments of specific countries, from Sudan to South Africa and Senegal to Somalia. The author shows that the history of no African country is the same as that of any other and no political transformation takes the same course. These differences result in different developmental paths for different countries. For example, Botswana, which is a model of democracy on the continent, has similar characteristics to Somalia with regard to the homogeneity of their peoples as most belong to one ethnic group. Nonetheless, their different contexts have produced very different results, with Somalia being regarded as the example of a failed state. However, as he does throughout the book, the author highlights positive aspects from Somalia, stressing the resilience of Somali people, the continued presence of doctors, drivers and non-governmental organisations who remain in the country to support their people. He also stresses the positivity of the Somali diasporas, stating that the little development that has occurred, has been possible thanks to remittances; making the claim that international interference has contributed to the war; and not to ending it. Unfortunately the author neglects to mention the important contribution that Somali women have made towards peace.

The chapter on Zimbabwe also breaks away from typical accounts of the country’s demise by focussing on the intertwined histories of South Africa and Zimbabwe. According to
Dowden the crux of the problem is not, as is usually postulated, mismanagement and corruption, but rather that truth and reconciliation is lacking in Zimbabwe. As proof of his argument he contrasts the Zimbabwe democratisation process with that of South Africa and the latter’s success in dealing with past injustices.

The discussion on largely ignored facets of African conflicts continues in the chapter on Sudan, where the author offers a comprehensive outlook of the various actors. In his view the ‘saviours’ of the people of the South are as authoritarian as the northernners that they are fighting. He delves into the complexities of the Darfur situation and the relationships between the North and the South, providing an insight into the tensions through his analysis of the factors contributing to the conflict. The sad reality is that civilians are caught in the middle and suffer the brunt of the fallout between elitist groups over access to power and resources.

The elitist battle also forms the central theme in the chapter on Angola and its long war. Again, the author departs from typical narratives by analysing the complex relationship between African states and their ex-colonial masters. This is a relationship which has since independence been characterised by external interference in leadership races which has in many cases contributed to the eventual conflicts. Again, civilians suffer the brunt of the impact of the wars which are fought in their name but not necessarily for them. The author also exposes the reality of rebel leaders who in their actions mirror the autocrats they are fighting to remove.

He further rebuts the claim that ethnicity is at the heart the problems experienced on the continent and demonstrates that bad leadership is to blame for the tensions and stresses. Africa’s wealth lies not in dollars but in its people, in their trust, their survival instincts, optimism and capacity for forgiveness even after the worst atrocities. In this lies also the solution to conflicts, according to Dowden. He further stresses that more attention should be paid to environmental concerns, as this would in the long term be more beneficial than becoming involved in political tussles for power and the economic effects that flow from it.

The author also uses the balanced view to provide an outlook for the future. On the one hand, he makes it clear that issues such as HIV/AIDS, poverty, corruption and the lack of an institutional infrastructure will continue to hamper progress on the continent. Other issues that negatively impact on progress are the ‘resource curse’ and the desire to emulate Europeans and a Western way of life. On the other hand the author highlights the leadership role that women and mechanisms such as the African Peer Review Mechanism could play in improving the lot of ordinary Africans. He makes the point that the focus appears to have shifted from ordinary people to regional bodies such as the African Union and Regional Economic Communities, but should return to grassroots level for this is where sustainable change will start.
Dowden states positively that Africa continuously surprises the world by countering the negative expectations of it. While he concedes that one cannot predict the direction the future will take with any degree of certainty, he ends on a positive note by suggesting practical solutions that would make a secure future a reality.

The easy style and simplicity with which Dowden sketches the realities of the continent make this book accessible to all, without detracting from the importance of the points he makes. This brilliant publication has a place in the bookshelves of scholars and laymen alike and provides a fresh outlook on a continent which is generally viewed with pessimism.

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