Qadhafi, Libya, and the Politics of Change in the Middle East:

A Conversation with Ambassador David Mack

MARCH 10, 2011

This interview was conducted before the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1973 and initiated a military intervention in Libya.

FLETCHER FORUM: *Both Muammar al-Qadhafi and Hosni Mubarak had been firmly entrenched leaders for decades. Looking at social media, WikiLeaks, and other developments, what do you see as the key catalyst of change?*

AMBASSADOR DAVID MACK: The key change has been demographic, as the youth bulge emerged. In almost all of these countries, and certainly in both Libya and Egypt, there is a disproportionate number of people aged 16 to 30. That's an age when young people have lots of energy and lots of ambition. If their energy and ambition are thwarted and don't have the outlets that most of them are striving for—which include marriage

Ambassador David Mack *served for more than thirty years in the U.S. Foreign Service, including assignments as deputy assistant secretary of state for Near East Affairs (1990-93), ambassador to the United Arab Emirates (1986-89), and second secretary in Libya (1969-1972). Mack arrived in Libya six weeks before the September 1969 revolution to serve as political officer and interpreter for the U.S. ambassador; during three years in Tripoli and Benghazi, he attended meetings with Muammar al-Qadhafi and other Libyan leaders. Since 2005, Mack has been honorary chairman of the U.S.-Libya Business Association. He is a Middle East Institute scholar and the organization's former acting president and vice president.*

and starting a family, and also gaining some kind of advancement in a job or a profession—it will emerge in other ways. This can often be destabilizing. Economists will tell you that this can be a very powerful force for economic development if it has the right channels, such as we saw in the ASEAN countries, which had similar youth bulges that accompanied periods of greatly increased economic development and employment. But this has not been the situation in the Middle East, and so it has found other outlets, including rebellion against parents and rebellion against authoritative governments. In my view, that's been the single most important change.

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The explanation of why this has spread so fast from one country to another does have a lot to do with the new media, which governments strive to control but really are seldom able to do so outside of a few places like North Korea. So, you have a situation in which all of the claims of pan-Arabism came out and suddenly blossomed, and we saw that there was a genuine linguistic and cultural pan-Arabism. Just to take one example, the same chant that was raised by the Tunisian demonstrators ("Ash sha'ab yurid isqat an'nidham!"), which is a revised Standard Arabic sentence ("The people want the overthrow of the regime"), is not the way that you would say it in the Tunisian dialect or the Egyptian dialect or the dialect in Bahrain. But it has been the same chant that has been used in all three countries, so it has obviously spread from its origin in Tunisia throughout the rest of the Arab world. That's an example of how the media have created this unified political area and have sped up the process of change.

FORUM*: Despite that pan-Arabism on a people-to-people level, do you see a growing rift between the more democratic Arab states and the autocratic ones? For example, Algeria and Syria helping Qadhafi crush the uprising; what do you see as the long-term implications of this kind of rift?*

AMBASSADOR MACK: There are several ways in which Arab governments can respond to the call for greater political freedom. One way is basically the Chinese or Iranian example, which is severe repression. We, as Americans, are very quick to say, "Oh, that won't work in the long term," but, in fact, it has worked for a very long time in China and Iran, and it worked very well for the father of the current president of Syria. Hafez

al-Assad used this dramatically by bombing the population of the city of Hama, which had been a center of Muslim Brotherhood activity that posed a serious threat to the Syrian regime in the 1970s. Assad simply eliminated the core of the threat. With other repressive actions, that's worked very well for Syria. The Algerians faced down a similar threat from radicalized extremist groups that were using violence. The Algerian military also used very severe repression. So, that is one possibility.

Another strategy that has been successful for countries that have great economic means is to allow a significant degree of economic liberalization and then smother any calls for political reform with lots of money. The cradle-to-grave welfare programs—including free medical care, free education through university graduate school, grants, and low-cost loans for housing—have been used quite successfully by several Arab governments. Notably, these are the governments of the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, and Qatar. With the exception of Kuwait, in the Gulf States there are very limited political rights. However, by using money and economic liberalization, these petro-welfare states have successfully dealt with the demands for change. They face the same kind of demography, the same new media, and yet this strategy seems to have worked. The U.S. government would argue that their wealth also gives them the time and flexibility to introduce political reforms, but it is a fact that the citizens of these countries express relatively little discontent with their limited political rights. Saudi Arabia provides a test for this strategy, since it has a lower per-capita GDP and a large ruling family that would have to either give up lots of its wealth in redistribution or share power, or pursue a combination of both strategies.

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A third strategy is what you might call a quick capitulation when the demands seem to become too intense. That's essentially what they did in Tunisia and Egypt, and all it did was feed the demand for more change. So, that has not had a particularly good record. The demonstrations continue in both Tunisia and Egypt with an increased emphasis on non-political grievances. It is worth noting that the toppling of Ben Ali and Mubarak created only two job openings: theirs. If the tourists and foreign investment do not quickly return, the fruits of democratic reform may seem rather sour.

The fourth model would be a degree of proactive political reform. Kuwait has long had a strong, elected parliament, even though the executive power is still hereditary. The country that has done the best in recent years in proactive political reform has probably been Morocco. Along with Kuwait, Morocco is fairly well along the road to being a constitutional monarchy. To a degree, and with some backsliding, Jordan has also followed that pattern. This is obviously the preferred alternative from the point of view of the United States, but it is not clearly the one that is likely to be the most successful from the point of view of governments keen to keep power.

We must remember that people usually think in the short term—that's true of political leaders in Washington and political leaders in the Arab world. It also tends to be true of broader populations in these countries, where history teaches them to fear rapid change because of the turmoil and destruction it often brings. The hope of the U.S. government in dealing with our important security and economic partners in the Arabian Peninsula is that they have both proactive political reforms and use economic liberalization in a very generous way to redistribute their wealth in order to maintain social peace. This is the route that we hope Saudi Arabia will take; there are some signs that King Abdullah is a political reformist at heart. That also seems to be the course that the Sultan of Oman might take. Kuwait, for historical reasons, is well advanced on the path to having a constitutional monarchy and is likely to continue in that direction. We would like to see countries like Qatar and the United Arab Emirates do the same, and we're desperately hoping that Bahraini King Hamad will follow in the same path.

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Each of these countries faces different political realities. One of the realities in most of these countries, and certainly in Bahrain, is that there is substantial opposition to political reforms from large parts of the population, to say nothing of the ruling family. And in Bahrain you have a serious sectarian divide between Sunni and Shia, which aggravates the problem.

So, there will be different ways of dealing with the current string of crises. The Libyan regime has clearly chosen to use repression. The regime could have engaged in some kind of proactive political reforms coupled with a far more generous redistribution of wealth, but their problem was complicated by the fact that Qadhafi's radical utopian socialist phase had

basically abolished private property and torn down government institutions. As a result, you don't have a private sector that can respond very well to economic liberalization, and you don't have a government bureaucracy capable of effectively redistributing wealth in terms of housing, education, and medical care. At the end of the day, Qadhafi turned toward repression as the one strategy that seemed to offer a way to stay in power.

FORUM*: Having known Qadhafi as a young revolutionary in the early 1970s, did you see this coming or do you think, in retrospect, he could have responded to the crisis with anything other than severe repression?*

AMBASSADOR MACK: When I first met him, in September 1969, we were both in our early twenties. I recognized that he was personally ambitious, but he was also ambitious for Libya and for the Arab world, and he had a lot of idealism. This was mixed in with a lot of resentment against Italian colonialism, against the Western military bases and U.S. support for Israel, and so on. It was a mixture of idealism, resentment, and nationalism. He could have gone in a direction of constitutional democracy and pluralism for Libya that could have left him with a legacy more like that of Habib Bourguiba in Tunisia, but with more economic means to deal with the problems. For some complicated reasons, he followed another path. As we grow older, most of us become a little more cautious, more aware of our personal limitations and the limitations of our country, and more concerned about risk-taking. Qadhafi did so very slowly and incompletely. It took him several decades to realize that his support of international terrorism and attempts to get weapons of mass destruction were not making Libya any safer and were certainly not giving him more of a leadership role in the world. So, beginning in the 1990s, he modified his external political behavior and foreign policy in the way that the international community—led by the United States—wanted him to change. But he didn't change his internal policy.

FORUM*: What do you think is going through Qadhafi's mind right now? Does he see martyrdom as his legacy or does he envision something else?*

AMBASSADOR MACK: I think martyrdom is an attractive outcome to Qadhafi—certainly more attractive than the uncertain security and sure isolation of exile in a country like Zimbabwe, one of the few places with a leader who might offer Qadhafi refuge. When Qadhafi considers the interests of his family, however, he might reach a different conclusion.

It's easy but misleading to leap to the conclusion that Qadhafi is only holding onto power through means of terror. In fact, he has a very large constituency of tribal groups and rural people who have prospered very

significantly under his rule since 1969. The situation of the monarchy, which he overthrew in September 1969, was one in which particular tribes tended to dominate; together with the family of King Idris and some of the urban elite in Tripoli and Benghazi, they basically controlled the country and were benefiting from Libya's new wealth. There was some redistribution of wealth to rural areas, but certainly tribes like those of Qadhafi in the center of the country, and those in the south and western rural areas of Libya, had really not benefited very much. You make a lot of mistakes when you have money, but money helps, and it was very hard, from 1969 until the present, not to improve the lives of these people who had been so miserably poor and brutally treated under Italian colonialism. There has been a lot of advancement by patronage of government infrastructure programs. Education has become far more general for women as well as men, which wasn't at all true in 1969, when only a tiny minority was able to attend the one university. So, a lot of people who are supporting Qadhafi are doing so because they do not want to see a return of their region, of their tribe, to being marginalized, as they were before Qadhafi came to power.

FORUM*: How much influence do you think the United States can have on the course of events?*

AMBASSADOR MACK: I think that the Obama administration is correct, first of all, in resisting the urgings of all kinds of people that this should become an issue of Obama versus Qadhafi. That's exactly what Qadhafi would like. Obama has been very wise to insist that the struggle is between the Libyan people and Qadhafi. Obama is also correct that unilateral action by the United States is not a successful recipe for dealing with this kind of problem. We saw this in Libya in the 1980s. On the rhetorical, political scale, you can hardly get much stronger than President Ronald Reagan, who called Qadhafi the "mad dog of the Middle East." We bombed the country; we had unilateral economic sanctions; we had covert action programs to support Libyan opposition elements trying to overthrow the regime; and it did not change Libyan behavior one iota for the better. By the end of the decade, there was much suffering among the Libyan people, with strong resentment of U.S. policy, and there were more dead Americans.

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In the 1990s, we pursued what I think was a much more effective

approach, which was to mobilize the United Nations and most governments of the world and implement well-crafted, multilateral economic sanctions and isolation that did change Libyan behavior very much for the better in terms of terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, and so on. The test now is to see whether this kind of international approach can change internal Libyan political behavior; that remains to be tested. We know that it didn't work very effectively with Iraq and Saddam Hussein. Over time, people began to blame the international sanctions for the problems, and the Hussein regime figured out how to make use of the sanctions themselves for internal purposes.

The policy alternatives are not great. However, the basic approach being followed, which is to say, "This is not between Qadhafi and Obama, it's between the Libyan people and Qadhafi," is a bit of an exaggeration, but it is a good political position to take. And the role of the United States is to mobilize the international community to support the Libyan people in their struggle against Qadhafi's political domination. That has considerable promise for eroding the support base around Qadhafi. As time goes on, just as was the case with sanctions in the 1990s, people are not going to want to suffer for maintaining Qadhafi's political power. They're going to want to break away from him and cut a deal with other Libyan leaders who have risen up against his political power. But this is going to take time.

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I know some people in the Transitional National Council (TNC) in Benghazi, and they're very responsible and effective experts, but there are other forces jousting for power. Even within the TNC, I think the political leadership is still very inchoate and coming together. We need to find out a lot more about them before we start granting the very substantial demands that they're making of the United States and the rest of the international community, because they are not asking for small things. They're not asking for recognition of their control over eastern Libya, they're asking for recognition that they are the sole, legitimate government of all Libya, despite being essentially self-appointed. And they're asking for a lot of material support, including material support that could lead to many dead

Americans at the end of the day. So, I think we have to proceed cautiously. I'm firmly in favor of not rushing into any military action, whether in the air or on the ground. We have to be quite careful with what we're doing.

FORUM*: Do you think the bloodshed in Libya will preclude further democratic movements in the region?*

AMBASSADOR MACK: I think that there may be an adverse effect on nascent democratic movements in places like Algeria and Syria. Elsewhere in the region, it's not likely to have much of an adverse effect. In a sense, the genie is out of the bottle. It's way too late for most governments elsewhere in the region to choose severe repression as a tool for staying in power. The time that this could have been done is blessedly well behind us, even though both Tunisia and Egypt are effectively under military rule for now. Certainly, the great power and considerable prestige of the Egyptian armed forces had the means to repress dissent. To a very substantial degree because of the influence the United States had on the Egyptian military, they didn't go that direction. Everybody from Secretary Gates to Admiral Mullen down to U.S. Army lieutenant colonels who had attended Staff College with Egyptian officers were tasked to call up their counterparts and say, "Whatever you do, don't use force against the demonstrators." In addition to being part of the peace agreement we brokered between Egypt and Israel, I think the 1.3 billion dollars in annual military aid for all these years gave us considerable political influence.

FORUM*: It seems like we got it right in Egypt. Is there anything else you'd like to add?*

AMBASSADOR MACK: I would hope that as we approach problems like the one we're approaching in Libya, we bear in mind the lessons of history. Because there *are* lessons of history, not only in our failures and successes in dealing with Libya, but also lessons that transfer from one country to another. The lessons we should have learned in Iraq and Afghanistan are not that old, and yet, in many respects, they seem to be ignored by lots of people in the media and by members of Congress who are pressing for urgent, immediate action, or pressing for a quick recognition of a self-appointed and untested rebel leadership. There are calls to give arms to rebels who have a great deal of courage and enthusiasm, but who have to be described as an armed mob. Giving them more arms just makes them a better-armed mob, and doesn't turn them into an effective fighting force. These are lessons we should have learned from Afghanistan and Iraq and elsewhere in the world, and yet, a lot of people would be inclined to repeat the same mistakes.

A big lesson I have absorbed from the past fifty years is that it is vastly harder to affect internal political change in authoritarian regimes than to affect their international behavior. This is because they often view the former as an existential challenge and will fight to the bitter end.

The best example I know is Cuba. Every U.S. president since Eisenhower has wanted to moderate the policies of the Castro regime. We have managed to curb the negative aspects of Cuban policy in the region and even as far away as Angola and other countries in Africa. On the other hand, we made no progress at all in trying to change Castro's authoritarian rule over the Cuban people. This is a country only ninety miles from our shores with a vastly inferior economy and military capability, and with borders porous to the influence of U.S. soft power, including our politically influential, economically successful, and culturally dynamic Cuban-American community. If we were not able to spur internal change in Cuba, it should say something about our ability to do it elsewhere. And yet, people keep expecting the United States to snap its fingers and end regimes like those in Iran and Libya. And although we did so in Iraq, the outcome there is still uncertain after huge costs for the Iraqi people and the United States.That should make us a bit more modest in what we expect of U.S. influence abroad. Where it has been successful in promoting democratic change, it was largely the long-term result of our example to the world combined with educational exchange and other forms of interaction that spread the idea of a better way for people to organize their political systems. This slower and less dramatic approach is what gives me hope for political evolution in key Arab states as diverse as Morocco, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. ■

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