

October 21, 2011 | *Wall Street Journal*

Gadhafi and the Swindle of Dictatorship

by **Fouad Ajami**

Ahmad, a man from Aleppo, on hearing of Moammar Gadhafi's end, posted a note on Al Jazeera's blog: Congratulations, he said, to the Libyan people, may the same thing happen in Syria.

The end of despots is always odd—exhilarating to those who suffered their tyrannies, and to those who hold despotism in contempt, and anti-climatic at the same time, the discovery that these tyrants were petty, frightened men after all. We are told that Gadhafi cried, "Don't shoot! Don't shoot!" when his pursuers caught up with him.

This was from the script of Saddam Hussein, who had strutted on the world stage, visited death and destruction on his people and others beyond, but had come out of a spider hole telling his captors that he was the president of Iraq and that he wanted to negotiate. Dictatorship is a swindle to the bitter end, the bravado of the tyrants mere pretense and bluff.

He had risen out of poverty, Moammar Gadhafi, a semi-literate desert boy who had made his way to the military academy. He had come into power, in 1969, against the background of the time—an era when the Arab world still believed that rough men from the military would dispense justice, upend the old order of kings and notables, and bring about a "revolutionary" society. Libya had had a benevolent monarch, King Idris, an ascetic, a reluctant ruler. But the crowd wanted a different order of things. "Better the devil than Idris" was the slogan of the time. The crowd could not have known how the heavens would oblige.

The Libyan upstart modeled himself after his legendary idol to the east, the charismatic Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt. And when Nasser died in 1970, Gadhafi anointed himself, and was seen by radical Arabs of his generation, as an inheritor of the revolutionary mantle.

The desert domain that was now his was sparsely populated, made up of three distinct provinces—Tripolitania in the West, Cyrenaica in the East, and Fazzan in the desert to the South. Oil gave Gadhafi means and a place in the world. He hacked away at the old social order, annulled the rights of private property and constructed a security state of "revolutionary committees" and informers that turned Libya into a big prison.

All the while, he was just the "Brother Leader." He held no official position, and power was supposedly in the hands of the masses.

No deliverance appeared in sight for the Libyan people, they had been reduced to spectators to their own destiny. The tyrant was being rehabilitated, his oil reserves and the national wealth he treated as his own brought him deference in the councils of power. Western intellectuals with a weakness for exotic strongmen made their way to Tripoli, and the Brother Leader in his tent flattered them by telling them that he had been reading their books. But fortune smiled on the Libyans last February: To their west, the Tunisian strongman had made a hasty escape from his country, but more importantly to their east, the Egyptian despotism had fallen in a brilliant display of popular protest in Cairo.

The city of Benghazi conquered its fear and rose in rebellion. It was then that Gadhafi committed the mistake of his reign. He announced a coming bloodbath for the defiant city. In a stunning surprise, the Arab League gave a warrant for a military operation that would provide protection for the people of Libya.

This hadn't been a mission that President Obama, the steward of American power, had wanted, but the threat of massive slaughter, and the pressure from France and Britain, settled the matter. This was the luck of the Libyans. America was half-in and "led from behind," but the dictator's fate was sealed. In truth, Gadhafi was owed a measure of American retribution. The Pan Am 103 flight his operatives brought down in December 1988 took a toll of 270 lives, of whom 189 were American citizens.

Tripoli is a faraway shore, but the name of that city on the Mediterranean should resonate for Americans who know and savor their history. Chroniclers tell us that it was in Tripoli, in 1805, that our flag was flown over a foreign battlefield for the first time. The Barbary pirates had been raiding American merchant ships, and the U.S. government had decided to end the practice of paying extortion money.

An expeditionary force of Marines landed in Tripoli and marched across 600 miles of Libyan desert to the city of Derna to liberate the crew of the frigate USS Philadelphia. (The frigate had run aground.) Derna was stormed by First Lt. Presley O'Bannon and his force. A grateful chieftain, Prince Hamet Bey, was able to reclaim his rightful throne as ruler of Tripoli. The sword he gave Lt. O'Bannon would become the ceremonial weapon of the U.S. Marine Corps.

The fight for right and freedom may not be the animating passion of the moment in Washington. There is little taste at the helm of our government for burdens abroad. This awakening—the Arab Spring—is being second-guessed at every turn. Islamists stalk these rebellions, we are told. The Arabs do not have freedom in their DNA, the "realists" tell us, their revolutions are certain to be hijacked and betrayed.

But this is the Arabs' 1989—the time when they give freedom a try, and for the first time accept responsibility for their own history. America didn't make these rebellions, but these rebellions are owed a measure of respect. And Arabs should be given the time to break out of the habits of tyranny and servitude. We needn't dispatch our forces to all lands of trouble, but our burden of celebrating liberty on foreign shores endures. Good riddance to Gadhafi. He had the end he deserved.

Mr. Ajami is a senior fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution and co-chairman of Hoover's Working Group on Islamism and the International Order.