

PUBLIC LIVES

April 7, 2011

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Gadhafi's sons and Libya's future

In view of the current stalemate and worsening civil war in Libya, the quest for solutions has turned to the prospect of a political settlement that will drive Moammar Gadhafi into exile while making room for one of his sons to sit in a transition government. This possibility has focused world attention on the eccentric dictator's seven sons.

Gadhafi is known to have eight biological children – 7 sons and 1 daughter -- and two adopted children. His only daughter, Ayesha, became the wife of Idi Amin, Uganda's butcher, when the latter fled to Libya in 1979 following the collapse of his brutal regime. Gadhafi supported Amin for a long time, treating him as a brother, ally, and fellow revolutionary. Ayesha divorced her polygamous husband, and went on to become a lawyer. She later joined the legal defense panel of Iraq's dictator, Saddam Hussein, after he was dislodged from power by the US invasion. Idi Amin left Libya and, on the invitation of the king of Saudi Arabia, moved to Jeddah where he lived as an exile until his death in 2003.

Of the Gadhafi sons, four in particular have caught the public eye. The best known of them is Saif al-Islam (Sword of Islam) who often played the role of Gadhafi's all-round global emissary. Saif heads the Gadhafi International Foundation for Charity Associations (GIFCA), which negotiated the release of the Sipadan hostages who were abducted by the Abu Sayyaf and taken to Jolo in May 2000. Closely following Saif in prominence is the fourth son Moatessem-Billah, currently the national security adviser, who met with US state secretary Hillary Clinton about a year ago. Less known is Khamis Gadhafi, the youngest son, who heads the elite anti-rebel force known as the "Khamis Brigade." But the one who took a different route is the sixth son, Saif al-Arab (Sword of the Arabs), a soldier who is reported to have defected to the Libyan People's Army.

Clearly the father's favorite and the one groomed by the West as a modern ruler is the British-educated Saif al-Islam, second to the eldest. He studied engineering at al-Fateh University in Tripoli, earned an MBA in Vienna, and was awarded the PhD degree in 2008 by the London School of Economics for a thesis titled: "The role of civil society in the democratization of global governance institutions: From soft power to collective decision-making." Doubts about the worthiness of this thesis recently surfaced after it became known that the LSE had availed itself of an initial installment of 300,000 British pounds from a 1.5 million donation pledged by Saif's foundation to LSE's Center for the Study of Global Governance.

As a graduate student in England, Saif was feted by royalty and was hosted by the British elite. He became friends with former prime minister Tony Blair. The famous British sociologist Anthony Giddens, the ideologue of Blair's "New Labor," visited Libya as a guest of Saif and his father. Together with some American academics from the most reputable universities, British professors were frequent visitors to Tripoli. It is not farfetched to think that they fancied themselves as modern regents to a Gadhafi scion who would move Libya's archaic political order closer to the ways of the West.

Such hopes were however instantly dashed by the appearance of Saif on television days after the anti-Gadhafi demonstrations exploded in public squares in Tripoli and Benghazi. Echoing his father's preposterous line that the young protesters had been fed drugs by the al-Qaida, Saif questioned the existence of a civil society-led uprising. He said that Libya had been at peace until these drug-crazed trouble-makers started to make noise. The notions of "soft power" and "collective decision-making" that his doctoral thesis grandly celebrated quickly gave way to their brutal opposite.

The suave 39-year-old bespectacled Gadhafi son was on television again the other night answering difficult questions posed by BBC's John Simpson. He acknowledged that his country is at war, but he stressed that

the battle is not between Libyans. This is, he said, a war of aggression launched by the West against a sovereign nation on behalf of a dubious bunch of rebels. The so-called rebels, he said, are from two groups: escaped prisoners and Islamic militants. The Libyan officials who had sought asylum abroad, he said, were “old and sick men” who were merely running away from trouble. He waved off any suggestion that his family was contemplating exile to a friendly country. He was confident that the regime his father established 41 years ago would prevail in the end, so long as the UN coalition did not exceed the terms of the Security Council resolution creating a no-fly zone.

It may be assumed that this man knows whereof he speaks. The Gadhafi war machine, beefed up by France in recent years, may have been degraded, but it has not been totally crushed. It has sought cover behind civilian structures, and continues to pose a serious threat to the retreating and ill-trained rebel forces. The US has turned over operational coordination to Nato. President Obama, who seeks a second presidential term, is careful not to be seen as having started another costly war. Having pulled out of direct combat missions, American planes are now confined to air refueling functions.

Nato thinks that short of deploying ground forces, the next best thing would be to arm and train, and thus organize the rebellion. There are grave reservations about this for it clearly oversteps the UN Security Council mandate. And so, for now, a whole nation burns as one family fights to keep it in its grip.

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