

Libya's War for "The Abaya": Women's Rights and NATO's Support of Pro-Islamist Rebels

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For European bankers, it's a war for Libya's Gold. For oil corporations, it's a war for Cheap Crude (now threatening to destroy Libya's oil infrastructure, just like Iraq). But for Libya's women, it's a fierce, knock down battle over the Abaya— an Islamic style of dress that critics say deprives women of self-expression and identity.

Hillary Clinton and President Sarkozy might loath to admit it, but the desire to turn back the clock on women rights in Libya constitutes one of the chief goals for NATO Rebels on the Transitional Council.

For NATO Rebels—who are overwhelmingly pro-Islamist, regardless of NATO propaganda (see www.obamaslibya.com) — it's a matter of restoring social obedience to Islamic doctrine. However the abaya is more than a symbol of virtue and womanly modesty. It would usher in a full conservative doctrine, impacting women's rights in marriage and divorce, the rights to delay childbirth to pursue education and employment—all the factors that determine a woman's status of independence.

That makes this one War Libya's women cannot afford to lose. For those of us who support Islamic modernity, there are good arguments that Gadhaffi would be grossly irresponsible to hand over power to a vacuum dominated by NATO Rebels. Given the savagery of their abuses against the Libyan people (www.obamaslibya.com) —and the Rebel's agenda to reinstate Shariah and retract women's rights, Gadhaffi has an obligation to stand strong and block them for the protection of the people.

Indeed, it's somewhat baffling that France or Italy would want to hand power to Rebels, outside of an election scenario. Elections would be a safeguard that would empower Libyan women to launch a leadership alternative that rejects the Abaya. That's exactly what the Rebels fear, and it accounts for their deep, abiding rejection of the election process. Democracy poses a real threat to NATO's vision of the "New Libya."

The abaya carries so much weight in the battle for Islamic modernity that Gadhaffi pretty much banned Islamic dress from the first days of his government. Getting rid of the abaya was part of Gadhaffi's larger reform package supporting women's rights—one of the best and most advanced in the entire Arab world. The transformation of women's status has been so great that the Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran imposed a fatwa against Gadhaffi years ago, declaring his government blasphemous to Islamic traditions.

To gain insider perspective on Gadhaffi's reforms for women, members of a fact-finding

delegation in Libya spoke with Najat ElMadani, chairwoman of the Libyan Society for Culture and Sciences, an NGO started in 1994. They also interviewed Sheikh Khaled Tentoush, one of the most prominent Imams in Libya. Imam Tentoush has survived two NATO assassination attempts, one that was particularly revealing.

Tentoush said that he and 12 other progressive Imams were traveling to Benghazi to discuss a peaceful end to the conflict. They stopped for tea at a guest house in Brega— and NATO dropped a bomb right on top of them, killing 11 of the 13 Imams, who had embraced Islamic reforms that empower women's rights and modernity.

There were no military installations or Gadhaffi soldiers anywhere nearby that would have justified NATO bombing. This was a deliberate assassination of Islamic leaders who give religious legitimacy to Gadhaffi's modernist policies, and therefore pose a great threat to the conservative ambitions of Islamic Rebels. NATO killed them off.

What's got radical Islamists so upset in Libya? Here's a primer on women's rights under Gadhaffi:

No Male Chaperones in Libya

- In Libya, women are allowed to move about the city, go shopping or visit friends without a male escort. Unbelievable as it sounds, throughout most of the Arab world, such freedoms are strictly forbidden. In much of Pakistan, for example, a 5 year old male child would be considered a suitable chaperone for an adult woman in the marketplace. Otherwise she'd better stay home. In Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, women are frequently locked in their apartments while their husbands, brothers or fathers go off to work. Yes, there are exceptions. Some families individually reject these practices. However, before readers protest this characterization, you must be honest and acknowledge that the Taliban in Afghanistan and the Saudis/Kuwaitis aren't the only groups that constrain women's freedoms in the Arab world. This is common social behavior throughout large swaths of Arab society.
- In Libya, women are never locked in their homes, while their husbands, fathers and brothers go to work. Gadhaffi forbids restricting women's mobility.
- In Libya, women have full legal rights to drive cars—unlike their sisters in Saudi Arabia. In a lot of Arab countries, a woman's husband holds her passport. So she cannot travel outside of the country without his approval.

Marriage Rights

- Tragically, in Kabul, Afghanistan, a young woman can be locked in Prison for rejecting her father's choice of husband. Until she changes her mind, her prospective mother in law visits the prison every day, demanding to know why her son is not "good enough" for this girl. Why does she disobey those who know what's best for her? That poor woman stays locked up in Kabul prison until she changes her mind. And it happens right under the noses of American and NATO soldiers. A NATO Occupation won't protect Libyan women, either.

- All over the Arab world—from Yemen to Jordan to Saudi Arabia to Iran— fathers and brothers decide what age a young woman will be given away in marriage, usually as soon as she hits puberty— She has no choice in the most important decision of her life. Frequently a young girl gets married off to one of her father’s adult friends or a cousin. Throughout the Arab world, it’s socially acceptable for a shopkeeper to ask a young Muslim girl if she has started to menstruate. A good Islamic girl is expected to answer truthfully.
- Not in Libya. To his greatest credit, bucking all Islamic traditions—from the first days of government, Gadhaffi said No Way to forced marriages. Libyan woman have the right to choose their own husbands. They are encouraged to seek love marriages. Under strict Libyan law, without exception no person can force a Libyan woman to marry any man for any reason.
- Forced marriages have been such a problem throughout the Arab world, that in Libya, an Imam always calls on the woman if there is an impending marriage. The Imam meets with her privately, and asks if any person is forcing her to marry, or if there’s any reason she’s marrying this person other than her desire to be with this man. Both Najat and Imam Tentoush were very adamant on these points.
- In Libya, the Imams are expected to protect the woman from abuse by relatives.

Right to End a Marriage

- Divorce is brutally difficult for a woman throughout the Arab world. A husband can beat or rape his wife, or commit adultery or lock her in a room like a prison. No matter what a woman suffers, as a wife she has no legal rights to leave that marriage, even for her own protection. When her father negotiates that marriage contract, she’s stuck for life. A man can divorce a woman in front of two witnesses by repeating three times: “I divorce you. I divorce you. I divorce you.” He can text that message on a cell phone, and it’s over. The woman has no reciprocal freedom. She’s stuck in that marriage until her husband lets her go.
- Not so in Libya. A Libyan woman can leave a marriage anytime she chooses. A woman simply files for divorce and goes on with her life. It is very similar to U.S. laws, in that a man has no power to stop her. It’s completely within her control to initiate a divorce.
- In Libya, if a woman enters a marriage with her own assets and the marriage ends, her husband cannot touch her assets. The same is true of the man’s assets. Joint assets usually go to the woman.

These “abnormal” marriage rights stir deep anger among conservative Libyan men. Rebels particularly hate Gadhaffi’s government for granting marriage rights to women. But consider how delaying marriage impacts women’s opportunities in society.

Delayed marriage means delayed childbirth, which empowers young women to continue education and gain employment. Not surprisingly then, Libyan women enjoy some of the

best opportunities in the Arab world. That might also cause simmering resentments among conservative Libyan men.

Education of Libyan Women

- In Libya more women take advantage of higher education than men, according to Najat. There are professional women in every walk of life. Many Libyan women are scientists, university professors, lawyers, doctors, government employees, journalists and business women. Najat attributes that freedom and the range of choices to Gadhaffi, and his government's insistence that women must be free to choose their lives and be fully supported in those choices. Najat and Tentoush said that some Imams in Libya would like it to be otherwise—especially those Imams favoring the Rebels— but Gadhaffi has always over ruled them. For example there are many women soldiers, and they are very strong and fully capable of contributing to the military defense of the country.
- Women receive education scholarships equal to the men's. All Libyans can go abroad and study if they so desire— paid for by Gadhaffi's government. Single women usually take a brother or male relative with them, and Najat said all expenses are covered for both the woman and her companion.
- In Libya, women are not required to seek a husband's permission to hold a job, and any type of job is available to her. In contrast, many employment opportunities are proscribed in many other Arab countries, because work puts women in daily proximity to men who are not their husbands. That eliminates many types of job opportunities.

Bashing Women's Rights

These are some of the reasons why Rebels consider Gadhaffi an "infidel." They frequently express a desire to reinstate the Shariah. It's an open secret in Arab circles. In ignoring this point, NATO resembles the three monkeys. See no truth. Hear no truth. Speak no truth. But the Arab community understands this dynamic. Rebels are going to pat Hillary Clinton and Sarkozy on the head right up until they capture power. Then they're going to do exactly what they started out to do. Reinstate Islamic law—under the protection of the United States and NATO governments. Conservative social codes will be enforced just like Afghanistan.

Libyans understand this point, even if Americans and Europeans are lost in denial. It should surprise no one, therefore, that some of Gadhaffi's greatest support comes from Libyan women. Nor should it surprise Libya watchers that Gadhaffi's not exactly "clinging to power" as the corporate media likes to suggest. Quite the contrary, Gadhaffi's support has skyrocketed to 80 or 85 percent during this crisis. President Obama, Sarkozy and Bersculoni would be thrilled to enjoy such intense popular support.

NATO bombing has backfired and alienated the Libyan people from the Rebel cause, destroying community infrastructure that Libyans are truly proud of. Rebels are chasing pro-Gadhaffi families out of Benghazi, a sort of political cleansing. But they have no street credibility that would give them power in negotiations with other Libyans, because losers

don't get to dictate the terms. NATO can propagandize until Sarkozy falls over in a fit, but the people have resoundingly rejected these Rebels.

NATO is pushing a political resolution, because Europe wants off the merry-go-round. In truth, the music is getting uglier every day. NATO never should have jumped on this bandwagon in the first place. There's no sense to it. They're fighting Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, and embracing Al Qaeda and conservative Islam in Benghazi.

Those of us who support Islamic modernity should be relieved that Libya's people are smarter and savvier than NATO bureaucrats. And we should all say a prayer that Gadhaffi holds on.

Susan Lindauer covered Libya and Iraq at the United Nations from 1995 to 2003, and started negotiations for the Lockerbie Trial. Lindauer is the author of "[Extreme Prejudice: The Terrifying Story of the Patriot Act and the Cover Ups of 9/11 and Iraq.](#)"

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