This is the published version:


Available from Deakin Research Online:

http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30036724

Reproduced with the kind permission of the copyright owner.

Copyright: 2011, Internet Thinking Pty Ltd.
ON LINE opinion - Australia's e-journal of social and political debate

Gaddafi is not mad, just lost in translation

By Abe Ata
Posted Monday, 11 April 2011

The labels "mad-dog of the Middle East", "psychopath", and "maniac" are often affixed to Gaddafi, but in fact there is no evidence that he is suffering from a psychiatric disorder. He, like Saddam before him, is not impulsive, very patient, and acts only after considered calculation. He's not stupid with regards to politics and isn't afraid to speak out. During the last two years he seems to have got along much better with the outside world than ever before, and far more than Ahmadinejad ever will.

Gaddafi was born to a Bedouin herder from the central Libyan coast around Surt, with little experience outside the Arab-African world. He seized power from King Idriss in 1969; redesigned the laws, instituted a system of "peoples committees" so as to overcome tribal differences and favours which served the previous regime. He has always practiced the old Arab (Libyan) tribal maxim: "My brother and I against my cousin, my cousin and I against the stranger." As with Saddam, and other regimes in the Middle East, he surrounded himself by his two sons, select administrators and henchmen who are cowed by his brutality, and are afraid to contradict him - criticism was equated with treason and disloyalty. His control over his countrymen has been total; his worldview always myopic.

When I wrote about al-Hilali two years ago (remember him?) a similar thought crossed my mind. I wondered then, if Gaddafi had only spoken clear, concise English like King Abdullah of Jordan, Europe and America would have been little more reluctant to attack.

This brings me to the raise a key question, namely 'what place does the Arabic Language have in making the conflict between Gaddafi and the West non-negotiable?'

I wrote once that Arab social scientists have argued that Arabic is more than a secular tongue; it is the language of Islam as chosen by God to speak to his creation. It influences how a person views the world and expresses reality.

Fuoud Ajami, a US based Lebanese academic says "This pompous and stilted Arabic language, a language that has become an aim in and of itself (rather than a means of communication), has provided both ablation and excuses for the Arabs, allowing them both to ward off their impotence and run away from it", he concludes.

This became obvious when recently Gaddafi intoned "I am an international leader, the dean of the Arab rulers, the king of kings of Africa and the imam (leader) of Muslims, and my international status does not allow me to descend to a lower level."

Ajami may find it easy to locate the root cause of Gaddafi's self flagellation above but he fails to provide a remedy. Others, like Nizar Qabbani, a Syrian diplomat, poet and publisher, is more forthright in his assessment. He calls the Arabic language "the language of abuse and insults'.

Indeed Gaddafi loyalists (in Tripoli and elsewhere) made me realise that language is largely an understanding between members of a community that they share the meanings assigned to certain symbols. When the community does not like the symbols they can change them because they are the ones that created them.

Speaking the impenetrable (to Westerners) language of Arabic led many to over-demonize him, was what occurred to me. After all, if your enemy speaks in an incomprehensible babble, what's not to misunderstand?
Gaddafi might not make sense to us, but that is because we aren’t speaking his language...

The Arab world places great stock on expressive language. The language of courage is a hallmark of Libyan and other Arab leadership, and there is great value attached to the very act of expressing brave resolve against "the crusaders" in and of itself. There is no necessary connection between courageous verbal expression: "there will be rivers of blood; till the last breath and child" and the consequence of the response.

Said an ordinary Libyan: I think people who use abusive language find it hard to explain their point of view or find it hard to express themselves. It doesn't necessary mean they're stupid as I know someone who is very smart but swears a lot and I think its his upbringing etc.

Like English, Arabic can be whatever Gaddafi wants it to be. It is mostly a reflection on the state of his mind which he readily "communicates" to his people.

Gaddafi was quoted by the London Al-Hayat Arabic-language newspaper as saying that since Obama became President any dispute between Libya and the United States had vanished, "Now, ruling America is a black man from our continent," he explained, "an African from Arab descent, from Muslim descent, and this is something we never imagined – that from Reagan we would get to Barakeh (Arabic for Barack) Obama." He called Obama's presence in the White House "a major historical gain."

As the world leaders assign psychopathic attributes to Gaddafi they need to ask these questions: What kind of impression did Gaddafi's accent have on the masses? Did he sound like an uncouth village boy and did Hitler sound like a heavily dialectal hillbilly from the countryside? Or did they sound (in their own language) as erudite as Churchill and Menzies seemed to us?

Abe W Ata was a temporary delegate to the UN in 1970 and has lived and worked in the Middle East, America and Australia. Dr Ata is a Senior Fellow Institute for the Advancement of Research, and lectures in Psychology at the Australian Catholic University (Melbourne). Dr Ata is a 9th generation Christian Palestinian academic born in Bethlehem.

© The National Forum and contributors 1999-2011. All rights reserved.