

Libya's Reconciliation with the West: Implications for U.S.
Foreign Policy

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As current events continue to unfold, a part of the Arab world is at a major crossroads, pursuing a change in foreign policy and a new attitude toward the West not witnessed in at least three decades. A departure from international isolation is preceding a steadily growing rapprochement with the world's military hegemon. This poses the prospect of a future as a key player in not only its own regional affairs but in major global politics, as well as the opportunity for greater economic growth and development and the establishment of integrated multilateral trade. But the country in question is not Iraq or Iran or any of the other familiar members of the Persian Gulf- it is Libya, one of the most isolated and overlooked states in the politically vital Middle East and North Africa. But Libya may not play such a trivial role for long, as recent events have demonstrated a significant turning point in Libyan relations with the West and toward Great Britain and the United States in particular. Fortunately for all three nations, this shift in policy has been one of improving relations, the consequences of which are likely to usher in a new era in Libya's political history as it moves to take on a new role regionally and globally.

Policy Background

By all accounts, what is unfolding between Libya and the outside world today is a departure from isolation and a moving toward normalization of relations with the West and integration within the international community. Moreover, it is a redirection in policy that has not taken place since the 1969 coup that brought Colonel Muammar Qaddafi to power and led to three decades of political, diplomatic, and economic isolation from much of the world, strained to downright hostile relations with the West, and demonization over terrorism- problems that the country is just recently beginning to

escape. Libya's reconciliation with the West is most important in the aspects of relations with the United Nations, the United Kingdom, and the United States, which will be the greatest focus of this paper.

In 1942, the Allies of World War II ousted Italy from Libya, a colony it had held since 1911, and France and Britain began to administer separate parts of the country. After becoming the first country to gain its independence through the United Nations in 1951, Libya entered a short period of constitutional monarchy under King Idris al-Sanusi. In 1959, the discovery of oil led the previously poor Libya to become extremely wealthy as oil began to be transported via pipeline and exported to foreign markets. U.S.-Libyan relations between 1951 and 1969 were relatively good both politically and economically. The U.S. supported the U.N. resolution giving Libya independence and both countries ultimately established embassy-level missions in one another's capital.¹ U.S. access to Libya's oil market was also strong as two American companies were granted 14 million acres of oil fields.²

But unequal distributions of wealth within the country as well as pan-Arab ideas rejecting Western influence soon fueled popular resentment and led to revolution. In 1969, Idris was deposed in a bloodless coup by a small group of army officers led by 28-year old Colonel Mu' ammar Abu Minyar al-Qadhafi, whose regime embarked on a radical new domestic and foreign policy based mainly on an agenda of socialism, pan-Arab nationalism, and the removal of foreign influence. First, Qaddafi removed foreign

¹ Background Note: Libya. United States Department of State: Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs. November, 2003. <<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5425.htm>>.

² "Timeline: Libya." BBC News Online. 10 January 2004. <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/1398437.stm>>.

involvement in Libyan affairs with the closure of U.S. and British airbases and military installations, the nationalization of all foreign oil and commercial interests, the expulsion of several thousand Italian settlers and the confiscation of their property, and the closing of libraries and cultural centers operated by foreign governments.

Second, Qaddafi pursued a socialist domestic policy of “social justice, non-exploitation, and an equitable distribution of wealth,” while effectively turning the country into a military dictatorship.³ Once in power, Qaddafi formed the 12-member Revolutionary Command Council (RCC), led by himself as the de facto chief of state of the new Libyan Arab Republic. In 1973, he declared a “cultural revolution” which included the formation of “people's committees” in schools, hospitals, universities, workplaces and administrative districts to oversee the public administration of those institutions. Then in 1977, he declared a “people’s revolution,” replacing the RCC with a new representative body, the General People’s Congress (GPC), and renaming the country the Socialist People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriyah. The Jamahiriyah, or ‘state of the masses’ was intended to be governed by the populace through local councils.⁴

Still, Libya’s political system banned parliamentary democracy and political parties, as was prescribed by Qaddafi in Part 1 of his *Green Book*, a three-volume collection of the leader’s political philosophy on democracy, socialism, and nationalism which appeared the following year.⁵ More importantly, though, almost total control over

³ Background Note: Libya. United States Department of State: Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs. November, 2003. <<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5425.htm>>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ “The Green Book.” Country Studies: Libya. United States Library of Congress: Federal Research Division. Copyright 2003. <<http://countrystudies.us/libya/80.htm>>.

government was exercised solely by Qaddafi, the ‘de facto chief of state’, either directly or through manipulation.⁶ Holding virtually complete control over the economy, Qaddafi has nationalized the petroleum-marketing, banking, housing and real estate, insurance, advertising, and publishing industries, seized control of water rights and infrastructure, and even attempted to eliminate all retail and wholesale private commerce.⁷

Third, Qaddafi pursued the goal of pan-Arab nationalism and unity, inspired greatly by the ideas of Egypt’s Gamal Abdul Nasser. In fact, Qaddafi has been the primary endorser of Arab unity among Arab leaders since Nasser, but because his counterparts were considerably less interested in the formation of an Arab federation, this aspect of Qaddafi’s policy proved one of his greatest failures.⁸ In the 1970’s, Libya’s regional foreign policy consisted of several failed attempts to form Arab unions with certain states while at the same time pursuing a somewhat more successful political and military intervention in neighboring Chad. 1971’s proposed Federation of Arab Republics (FAR), comprising Libya, Egypt, and Syria, 1972’s agreed-upon merger with Egypt, 1974’s agreement to create a unified “Islamic Arab Republic” with Tunisia, and 1980’s agreed-upon merger with Syria, all failed to materialize.⁹ It was only in 1989 that Libya succeeded in forming a pan-Arab merger in the form of the Arab Maghreb Union, consisting of itself, Algeria, Morocco, Mauritania and Tunisia.¹⁰

⁶ Background Note: Libya. United States Department of State: Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs. November, 2003. <<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5425.htm>>.

⁷ “Role of the Government.” Country Studies: Libya. United States Library of Congress: Federal Research Division. Copyright 2003. <<http://countrystudies.us/libya/59.htm>>.

⁸ “Libya and Arab Unity.” Country Studies: Libya. United States Library of Congress: Federal Research Division. Copyright 2003. <<http://countrystudies.us/libya/80.htm>>.

⁹ “Timeline: Libya.” BBC News Online. 10 January 2004. <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/1398437.stm>>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Libya's regional activities during the 1970's and 1980's were instead dominated by conflict with southern neighbor Chad, which since the late 1960's was fighting a civil war that pitted the Arab-Muslim north bordering Libya against the Negro-Christian south.¹¹ In 1973, Libyan forces occupied the Aouzou Strip in the north of the country, annexing it in 1977, and began to supply weapons in 1973 to northern rebels of the Chadian National Liberation Front (Frolinat), which waged a guerilla war against the south. In 1979, Libya backed a Muslim northerner to overthrow the Christian southern president, and sent its troops to support the new president against a rival coalition forming in the north. After being forced out of almost all the northern region by Frolinat, the Chadian government, France, and the U.S. in 1987, Libya began to back another overthrow in Chad. Libya has largely ended intervention in Chad since the current president won Chad's first multiparty election in 1996, save for its 2002 brokering of a peace deal between the government and Movement for Democracy and Justice in Chad (MDJT) rebels to end another civil war that broke out in 1998.¹²

U.S.-Libyan relation became strained almost immediately after Qaddafi rose to power. One important reason was Libya's increasingly close relationship with the Soviet Union, which involved the purchase of a considerable amount of weapons used in the war in Chad and the presence of Soviet military advisors in Libya. Another major reason was Qaddafi's opposition to the existence of Israel and his support for the Palestinian cause. The most important reason in the breakdown of U.S.-Libyan relations, however, was

¹¹ "Country profile: Chad." BBC News Online. 27 February 2004.
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/country_profiles/1068700.stm>.

¹² "Timeline: Chad." BBC News Online. 27 February 2004.
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/country_profiles/1068745.stm>.

Qaddafi's general hostility toward the West and his support and implication in several instances of international terrorism.¹³ Once Ronald Reagan took office in 1981, Qaddafi immediately clashed with the administration's hard-line approach to U.S. foreign policy, earning the moniker "mad dog of the Middle East" by the president.¹⁴ The U.S. State Department has called Qaddafi's principal foreign policy goals "Arab unity, the elimination of Israel, advancement of Islam, support for Palestinians, elimination of outside- particularly Western- influence in the Middle East and Africa, and support for a range of 'revolutionary' causes."¹⁵

Libya's crumbling relations with the United States in the 1970's involved the withdrawal by the U.S. of its ambassador and the imposition of export controls on military and civil aircraft equipment.¹⁶ The U.S. also withdrew embassy staff after a mob-led arson attack on its embassy in Tripoli and declared Libya a "state sponsor of terrorism" in 1979. Libya's affairs with the West especially took a turn for the worst as the U.S. and Britain formally severed diplomatic relations in the 1980's. In 1981, the U.S. broke off relations when it closed the Libyan People's Bureau, or embassy, in Washington, D.C. and expelled Libyan diplomats for supporting terrorism. Britain broke off diplomatic relations in 1984, following the deadly shooting of a British policewoman outside the Libyan embassy in London.

¹³ Background Note: Libya. United States Department of State: Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs. November, 2003. <<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5425.htm>>.

¹⁴ Keller, Paul. "Libya's two decades as a pariah state." BBC News Online. 6 January 2004. <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/3371269.stm>>.

¹⁵ Background Note: Libya. United States Department of State: Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs. November, 2003. <<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5425.htm>>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

U.S. warplanes shot down two Libyan aircraft over the Gulf of Sidra in a dispute over the international status of Libya's surrounding waters, and in response to alleged Libyan involvement in the bombing of a Berlin nightclub that killed two American soldiers, the U.S. bombed military and residential areas of Tripoli and Benghazi in 1986, striking Qaddafi's compound and killing his adopted infant daughter. Libya further became suspected of sponsoring international terrorism when one of its ships was found to be transporting 150 tons of weapons to the Irish Republican Army.¹⁷ And in 1989, it was suspected in the bombing of a French airliner, UTA Flight 772, which killed all 170 on board when it exploded over the Sahara desert in southern Niger.¹⁸

By far the most devastating event for not only Libyan relations with the U.S. but with the West, however, was the bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland on December 21, 1988, in which 270 people were killed, most of them Americans. Two men alleged to be Libyan intelligence agents, Abdelbaset Ali Mohmed Al Megrahi, and Al Amin Khalifa Fhimah, were charged by Scottish prosecutors in 1991 with carrying out the attack, although only Megrahi was later found guilty.¹⁹ The U.N. Security Council took action against Libya as the United States, Britain, and France pushed through a resolution calling on Qaddafi to hand the men over for trial and cooperate with authorities in their prosecution. But Qaddafi refused, prompting the U.N. to impose limited sanctions, including an air embargo and a ban on the supply of equipment for the Libyan

¹⁷ "Why no-one's reading the Libya dossier." BBC News Online. 11 September 2003. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/3099746.stm>.

¹⁸ Reynolds, Paul. "UTA 772: The forgotten flight." BBC News Online. 19 August 2003. <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/3163621.stm>>.

¹⁹ Mason, Barnaby. "Analysis: Lockerbie's long road." BBC News Online. 31 January 2001. <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/1144147.stm>>.

oil industry, and relegating Libya to the international sidelines as a 'pariah state' for most of the 1990's.²⁰

Libya was also being subjected to economic sanctions by the U.S. since the 1980's, as well as a ban on American travel to the country imposed in 1981. A ban on imports of crude oil, which account for about 95% of Libya's worldwide export earnings, and of some U.S. exports, was ordered.²¹ In 1986, further sanctions by the Reagan government froze Libyan assets in the U.S. and mandated that Americans were prohibited from exporting to Libya all goods, services, and technology, including working in the country, and from importing goods or services of Libyan origin. The passage of the Iran and Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA) by the Clinton Administration in 1996 allowed sanctions to be enforced against any foreign company that invested more than \$40 million, later amended to \$20 million, in Libya yearly or violated the U.N. sanctions that were in place at the time.²²

Current Relations

Libyan foreign policy began to take a more benevolent approach toward the West in the late 1990's and since the turn of the century. The most important events in Libya's rapprochement with the West, however, have taken place since the events of September 11th and the U.S. and British- led invasion of Iraq. The two major milestones in Libya's change in foreign policy have been its cooperation in the Lockerbie case and its decision to abandon the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. With Libya

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Background Note: Libya. United States Department of State: Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs. November, 2003. <<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5425.htm>>.

²² Ibid.

finally agreeing to hand over for trial the two suspects accused of the Lockerbie bombing in April 1999, U.N. sanctions were suspended and British diplomatic ties restored.²³

Libya's acceptance of responsibility, statement of apology, and offering of economic compensation in the amount of \$2.7 billion for the Lockerbie bombing in a letter to the U.N. Security Council in August 2003 was a much welcome move for the international community, which reciprocated by rewarding Libya economically and politically. Most importantly, U.N. sanctions were lifted in September 2003, although U.S. sanctions have remained in place.²⁴

Libya's most recent move, the renouncement of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons programs by Qaddafi in December 2003, earned it an even greater public relations reward. The decision followed months of secret talks with U.S. and British officials as well as trips to Libya in October and December by U.S. and British arms control experts in which they were shown materials and technology for the production of WMDs. The visits revealed that Libya's greatest development had been in chemical weapons, especially mustard gas and nerve agents. The inspectors also discovered that Libya's nuclear program was more advanced than previously thought when they visited ten sites that contained components of a uranium-enriching centrifuge system, albeit not a fully-operational one.²⁵

The resumption of diplomatic contacts and high-level dialogues with both British and

²³ "Timeline: Libya sanctions." BBC News Online. 20 December 2003.
<<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/3336423.stm>>.

²⁴ "Timeline: Libya." BBC News Online. 10 January 2004.
<<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/1398437.stm>>.

²⁵ "Q&A: Libya's secret WMD." BBC News Online. 20 December 2003.
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/3336109.stm>.

American officials followed Libya's announcement of plans for disarmament. Secret negotiations concerning Libya's abandonment of WMD programs among U.S., British, and Libyan officials commenced soon afterward, and the meeting of Libya's Foreign Minister with British Prime Minister Tony Blair and Foreign Secretary Jack Straw took place in March 2003, the first cabinet-level contact in more than 20 years.²⁶ American diplomats were stationed in Tripoli for the first time since 1979, and a 23-year long standing ban on travel to Libya by American citizens was lifted. Washington also granted permission to American oil companies to resume business in the country in February.

In late February, with the supervision of the U.N., Libya began the destruction of 3,000 empty chemical bombs.²⁷ On March 5, it submitted a declaration of its chemical weapons stockpile- including 20 tons of deadly mustard gas and chemicals used to make nerve gas such as sarin- in a report to the U.N. Pledging to totally destroy all remaining WMD supplies within three years, Qaddafi has sent the first shipment of materials to the U.S. for destruction.²⁸ The meeting of U.S. Special Envoy to the Middle East and Assistant Secretary of State, William Burns, with Libyan leaders in Tripoli on March 23 represented the first visit of a high-ranking U.S. official to Libya since the 1969 coup more than 30 years ago.²⁹ But it was the meeting of Blair and Qaddafi in a Bedouin tent

²⁶ Biles, Peter. "Libya edges out of the cold." BBC News Online. 9 February 2004. <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/3474001.stm>>.

²⁷ Marcus, Jonathan. "Libya destroys chemical weapons." BBC News Online. 4 March 2004. <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/3533947.stm>>.

²⁸ "Libya ships out last WMD parts." BBC News Online. 7 March 2004. <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/3539799.stm>>.

²⁹ "US envoy on historic Libya visit." BBC News Online. 23 March 2004. <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/3561587.stm>>.

in Tripoli on March 25 that really showed just how far Libya had come toward normalizing relations with one of its former enemies. It was the first visit by a British prime minister since Libya's independence, when Winston Churchill came to the country in 1943.³⁰

Long-Range Shared Interests

There are several incentives for friendly relations and close cooperation between the U.S. and Libya: long-range shared interests between the countries include economic prosperity, free trade, political and diplomatic cooperation, peace and national security, political stability, nonproliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and opposition to terrorism.

Economic cooperation and free trade is naturally among the most important common goals between the U.S. and Libya, given the continuation of sanctions imposed by the U.S. Investment and contracting opportunities for American firms and the return of trade will foster Libyan modernization and economic development, supporting Libyan incomes and improving quality of life. There is foreign business investment interest in a number of sectors, including oil and gas, airports, ports, logistics, education and training, healthcare and tourism.³¹ Interest in oil and gas, however, is probably greatest, considering that Libya has a large but underdeveloped supply of petroleum, plentiful reserves that are cheap to recover, and is located close to European markets.³² American companies, however, will not be the only ones with an interest in developing Libyan oil-

³⁰ "Blair hails new Libyan relations." BBC News Online. 25 March 2004. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/3566545.stm>.

³¹ "UK plc eyes Libya." BBC News Online. 25 March 2004. <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/3565759.stm>>.

³² Ibid.

European oil firms and contractors are eager to step in before their U.S. rivals get re-established in the country. Indeed, the Anglo-Dutch giant Shell has already agreed a deal with the Libyan national oil company worth up to 550 million pounds for gas exploration rights off the Libyan coast- the very same day of the historic Qaddafi-Blair meeting, in fact.³³

Another benefit of economic cooperation is the development of Libya's tourism industry, which is currently almost non-existent. As Washington and London have warned against travel, Libya is currently one of the least-visited countries in the Mediterranean region, and the few Western visitors that did visit were there exclusively for business reasons. Besides the American ban and the British strong advisory against travel, Libya's presence on the U.S. list of countries that sponsor terrorism is not good for its image as a vacation spot. And Libya's economic and political barriers are just as huge. Credit cards are not widely accepted, hotels and restaurants are scarce, flights are rare, and English is not widely spoken. But more importantly, just the act of entering the country is extremely difficult because of Libyan restrictions that make visas difficult to acquire (especially by individuals not traveling on business or with an organized tour group), and require the arrangement of an "invitation" into the country and the translation of passports into Arabic. Not unlike many Arab countries, Libya also denies the entry of individuals with Israeli visas in their passports.³⁴

Yet Libya has the possibility of a future as a tourist destination- albeit perhaps not a mainstream one- if it could at least remove the barriers to just getting inside the country.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Coughlan, Sean. "Packing your bags for Libya?" BBC News Online. 26 March 2004. <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/3568509.stm>>.

One of the greatest draws would be Libya's rich classical heritage represented in its ancient monuments. There are five U.N. "world heritage sites," including remnants of the ancient city of Leptis Magna, claimed as one of the finest Roman sites in the Mediterranean, and the city of Cyrene, an ancient Greek site.³⁵ Closely related to tourism, increased Libyan openness toward the U.S. and the West would mean greater cultural and educational exchanges and the furthering of cross-cultural understanding and communication. Correspondingly, since the opening of commercial trade and tourism would herald the free exchange of both commodities and ideas, and since trading partners rarely go to war against one another, trade, tourism, and the exchange of cultural commodities between the U.S. and Libya would also establish important ties that would help prevent a military conflict.³⁶

But progress on the economic front cannot be made until Libya escapes its political and diplomatic isolation from the West. That is why the normalization of relations between the two sides is probably the most important goal in the mutual interest of both Libyans and Americans. If Libya continues to cooperate with the U.S. and the rest of the international community, the Bush administration is expected to finally lift U.S. sanctions, freeing Libya of its remaining external restrictions on foreign trade. Assuming further cooperation, the Bush administration is also expected to remove Libya from its list of state sponsors of terrorism, a major step in legitimizing the Libyan leadership and helping it leave its image as a 'pariah state' behind.³⁷ Political and

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ "Firms to 'sign deal with Libya.'" BBC News Online. 28 March 2004. <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/3576211.stm>>.

³⁷ Biles, Peter. "Slow and painful change for Libya." BBC News Online. 30 December 2003. <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/3358219.stm>>.

diplomatic cooperation between Libya and the West, especially with the United States, is the first and most important step in establishing peace and economic prosperity for Libyans, for their neighbors, and ultimately, for the entire world.

That is because it is very likely that closer ties would help Libya cut its ties to terrorist groups, end its support for international terrorism, and finally do away with its terrorist past. In reality, Qaddafi's Libya has already been moving in this direction. It immediately condemned the September 11th attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Center and rushed to share intelligence on al-Qaeda and other Islamic militant groups with American and British intelligence agencies.³⁸ During Qaddafi's meeting with Blair, he stated that he believes al-Qaeda is almost as much a threat to Libya as it is to the West.³⁹ Furthermore, the U.S. State Department acknowledges that "there have been no credible reports of Libyan involvement in terrorism since 1994, and Libya has taken significant steps to mend its international image."⁴⁰ One of the most important actions Libya could take to secure U.S. support and to demonstrate its opposition to terrorism is to continue to contribute to the war on al-Qaeda, including monitoring terrorist activity and sharing intelligence with Western governments, as well as putting pressure on extremists within its own borders.

Like the condemnation of and disassociation from terrorism, Libyan disarmament and future non-proliferation will ensure that it will be less of an actual, potential, and

³⁸ St. John, Ronald Bruce. "Lessons from Gaddafi." Asia Times Online. 20 March 2003. <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/EC20Ak02.html>.

³⁹ Marr, Andrew. "Blair's momentous week." 26 March 2004. BBC News Online. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/3563823.stm>.

⁴⁰ Background Note: Libya. United States Department of State: Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs. November, 2003. <<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5425.htm>>.

perceived threat to peace and security for individual states, regions, and the international community. This is especially true in light of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq over the controversial and so far uncorroborated claim that Saddam Hussein was developing nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons with the intent to use them against the U.S. and other Western nations. Libyan cooperation in non-proliferation is being viewed as a signal, a precedent, and an incentive to other potential proliferators, especially regional ones like Iran and Syria. All states with nuclear ambitions, including North Korea, will very likely feel increased pressure from the U.S. as a result of Libya's decision. In a speech praising Qaddafi's decision, President Bush made reference to Pyongyang and Tehran when he stated that he hopes "other leaders" find an example in Libya.⁴¹ Just recently, in her opening statements to the commission investigating the September 11th attacks, National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice declared that "because we acted in Iraq, Saddam Hussein will never again use weapons of mass destruction against his people or his neighbors, and we have convinced Libya to give up all its weapons of mass destruction-related programs and materials."⁴²

As Rice implies, Libya's move is believed by many policy makers to be in some way influenced by pressure from the invasion of Iraq. The Libyans, however, insist it was due to economic reasons, since WMD programs were becoming too costly to implement and sustain and since concentration on economic development, only possible through the lifting of sanctions, was now being prioritized by Qaddafi and other officials.⁴³ The

⁴¹ "Q&A: Libya's secret WMD." BBC News Online. 20 December 2003. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/3336109.stm>.

⁴² "Dr. Condoleezza Rice's Opening Remarks to Commission on Terrorist Attacks." 8 April 2004. The White House: Office of the Press Secretary. <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/04/20040408.html>>.

Libyan Prime Minister, Shukri Ghanem, has also explained that the decision to abandon WMDs was made to make Libya “look better in the eyes of the world” and to set an example for other Middle Eastern states, “especially Israel.”⁴⁴ Diplomats have also remarked that Libya’s change in policy began before the second Iraq war even became an issue and disarmament may have taken place regardless of the U.S. pressure on Iraq. The influence on Libya’s foreign policy of the toppling of the Saddam Hussein regime cannot be totally ignored, however. In a sense, it is somewhat irrelevant if the Libyans were or were not reacting to the war on Iraq, because the connection between the two events will ensure it be perceived that way. “It was perhaps no coincidence that he approached Britain and the United States in March, the very moment that Saddam Hussein was being driven from power,” emphasized a BBC correspondent.⁴⁵

Long-range Conflicting Interests

Although, there are several points of mutual interest, there are also many conflicting interests between Qaddafi’s Libya and the U.S., including the issues of democratization, economic reform, human rights, the privatization of oil, the Arab-Israeli conflict, regional alliances, and regional power ambitions.

Democratization and economic reform within Libya is obviously a point of dispute between the U.S. and Qaddafi, but it is an issue which is not relatively a priority even for the Bush administration. The rhetoric of the Bush administration has focused much more

⁴³ “Full transcript: Libyan PM interview.” BBC News Online. 24 February 2004. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/3517101.stm>.

⁴⁴ Biles, Peter. “Slow and painful change for Libya.” BBC News Online. 30 December 2003. <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/3358219.stm>>.

⁴⁵ Reynolds, Paul. “Gaddafi: In from the cold.” BBC News Online. 20 December 2003. <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/3336493.stm>>.

on the importance of Libya's renouncement of weapons of mass destruction and of terrorism than of its acceptance of political and economic reforms. In fact, despite his talk of democratization in the Arab world, Bush is probably more likely to choose the possibility of a Middle East that is undemocratic, yet relatively familiar and compliant, than that of a Middle East with unpredictable democracies capable of electing radical Islamists. That is not to say that closer ties between Libya and the West would not help Libya institute some reforms on its own. Although these reforms would probably be limited, improved human rights practices and perhaps some privatization of the economy could be a by-product of a more friendly U.S. relationship.

Another major conflicting interest, a factor for Washington's relations with any Arab state, is Libya's opposition to Israeli policy in the Palestinian Territories, and to some extent, to Israel's very existence. The destruction of Israel was, after all, an important aspect of Qaddafi's personal ideology since his formative years. At 14, he took part in anti-Israeli demonstrations during the Suez crisis of 1956. Since taking over Libya, he has called for the destruction of Israel, met with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, and supported Palestinian terrorist groups including the Palestinian Popular Struggle Front (PPSF), and the more prominent Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command (PFLP-GC), two organizations that were implicated in the Lockerbie bombing.⁴⁶

Main Policy Problems

Besides the conflicting interests between the United States and Libya already

⁴⁶ Asser, Martin. "The Palestinian Connection." BBC News Online. 15 May 2000. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/749363.stm>.

outlined, the most obvious obstacles to furthering the U.S.-Libyan relationship are establishing trust on both sides and, for Western leaders, risking political damage by allying with Qaddafi. For one, mending the relationship with Libya will take years and even decades, given Qaddafi's history of hostility toward the West and the manifestation of that hatred. Since the terrorist acts in which Qaddafi's Libya have been implicated are relatively recent and the country's image as a sponsor of terror is fresh in the minds of Westerners, it is difficult to make such a dramatic turnaround in relations dependent on trust which simply cannot grow overnight. For the British, it was a mere two decades ago that Qaddafi was advocating the bombing of London and providing weapons to the IRA. For the families of the 270 victims of the Lockerbie bombing, most of them Americans, Libya's actions will never be forgotten and perhaps never forgiven.

Uncertainty abounds as to whether Qaddafi has changed and whether a supporter of terrorism is even able to change and to abandon this particularly violent means of attempting to influence policy. Qaddafi has frequently been characterized as unpredictable, individualistic, mercurial, rebellious, and prone to quick changes in policy. There is also much pressure on Qaddafi, given the unpopularity of the U.S. and Britain in the Middle East and especially since the invasion of Iraq, to not ally with the West. On the other hand, since he has also isolated himself from his Arab neighbors to an extent, there may not be great incentive to maintain hostility toward the West. Moreover, Qaddafi may rule Libya as a dictator but he is not immune from the possibility of being unseated. Libya's political and economic isolation could very well become a serious political liability for him.

There is also a significant political risk for Western leaders in warming to Libya,

which is especially acute for Blair and Bush. Internationally, there is still fresh criticism over their handling of Iraq. At best, their policy toward Libya may be seen as hypocritical if people perceive Qaddafi as being just as dangerous as Saddam Hussein. At worst, it may be seen as a reckless deal with a terrorist state that threatens American and British national security and puts ordinary citizens in danger. In this regard, there is the relative similarity of Qaddafi's regime to Saddam's Iraq. Qaddafi has ruled Libya as a result of coup for thirty-four years, longer than Saddam's twenty-four. And his image marks almost every street in the center of Tripoli, much like Saddam's did until just recently. An important aspect of how the U.S. deals with Qaddafi is therefore just how much it perceives Qaddafi to have in common with dictators like Iraq's deposed Saddam Hussein. Domestically, Bush and Blair have the reactions of their respective constituencies to consider, and warming to Libya may not be seen favorably by either British or American citizens. It will certainly cause some family members of victims of terrorism to take personal offense.

Finally, it is quite ironic that Blair's meeting with Qaddafi was more cordial than his preceding engagement with the new Spanish Prime Minister, Jose Luis Zapatero, who Blair was unsuccessful in persuading to keep Spanish troops in Iraq since the Socialists were elected on the pledge of pulling them out. The war on Iraq and on terrorism and their intersection will continue to have long-lasting political repercussions on the balance of power, including the shifting of alliances and straining of relations that fly in the face of years and decades of generally stable and consistent foreign policies. This turbulent current reality may actually give hope to the possibility of a future of friendly relations between Libya and the West.

Policy Options and Recommendations

In light of apparent developments in Libyan foreign policy that have brought the Qaddafi regime into closer agreement with the goals of the United States and steps taken by Great Britain and the United Nations, the U.S. faces an urgent need to reexamine its current policy to Libya. While the U.S. should approach a more cooperative relationship with Libya with full faith and determination, it should enter into any new relationship with Libya with vigilance and suspicion. At the same time, the U.S. must not fall far behind Great Britain in its relations with Libya, since this would endanger the U.S.-British alliance and the fate of the war in Iraq. A gradual suspension of American sanctions should be enacted, as well as the promotion of travel and the importation of oil. Full U.S.-Libyan diplomatic relations should also be restored following senior-level meetings between the national security team and Qaddafi, his advisors, and members of the General People's Congress. Links between the private sector and cultural and civil groups should also be formed, but pressure on Qaddafi to institute political and economic reforms should be postponed until relations completely normalize and should thereafter be applied very gradually.

Recently, Qaddafi and the leaders of other Arab states have drifted apart, while Qaddafi has sought a stronger connection to Africa, especially sub-Saharan Africa. If Qaddafi wants to help the continent of Africa, the best way he can do so is to choose the consistent path of a foreign policy of good will toward the West and use his heightened influence to lobby for policies beneficial to African peace and economic development.



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