

Libya and the U.S.: The Unique Libyan Case

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At first glance, recent U.S. diplomatic success with the Libyan government seemed easy. After two decades of international pariah status, Libya committed in 2003 not only to forswear terrorism and abandon its weapons programs but also to reveal those programs to U.S. inspectors. In the process, Libya divulged secret procurement networks and allowed U.S. and British intelligence specialists to compare their analysis of Libyan proliferation against actual facts on the ground.

The operation looked like the type of success that Washington might seek to repeat with other regimes that aim to develop chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons: Syria and Iran in the Middle East, and North Korea farther afield. Paula DeSutter, assistant secretary of state for verification and compliance, expressed hope. “We only hope that states with even more advanced nuclear programs like Iran and North Korea will learn from Libya’s example and agree to rejoin the community of civilized nations and give up these terrible weapons,” she told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.¹ But how relevant is the Libyan model to these other cases? An understanding of the factors leading to Libya’s change of policy suggests the Libyan experience is not as applicable as some would argue.

Although not obvious at the time, Libya represented an unusually attractive target for U.S. engagement. Unlike with Tehran and Damascus, Washington’s grievances against Tripoli were discrete and not especially urgent. U.S. and Libyan officials could sequence resolution of their differences so as to build confidence, and the prospective rewards were large enough to create an incentive to resolve the outstanding differences. Agreement with the United States would also open the way to renewed foreign investment in Libya and a huge financial gain for the Libyan state. With regard to Damascus and Tehran, Washington’s concerns are less isolated and more difficult to sequence, and the rewards less clear. In addition, significant domestic constituencies in the United States, Iran, and Syria have complex and often hostile attitudes toward these bilateral relationships. The politics surrounding rapprochement with Iran and Syria would be far more difficult to manage than were those with Libya.

¹ Paula A. DeSutter, assistant secretary of state for verification and compliance, “U.S. Relations with Libya,” testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Feb. 26, 2004.

From Ally to Enemy

Libya was not always considered hostile and unpredictable. After independence from Italy in 1951, the Libyan government allowed both the United States and the United Kingdom to maintain their military bases at Wheelus Field and Cyrenaica. As the Cold War developed in the Middle East, King Idris cast his lot with the Western powers rather than join the rising anti-Western, pan-Arabist tide. The discovery of large quantities of oil in the late 1950s drew the Libyan monarchy even closer to the West. Oil wealth proved a mixed blessing, though. It widened the gap between rich and poor and raised some Libyans' aspirations more than their incomes. The windfall overwhelmed the state and led to the king's downfall.²

On September 1, 1969, the Free Officers' Movement toppled the monarchy and installed 29-year-old Colonel Mu'ammarr Qadhafi as head of a Revolutionary Command Council. The new Libyan government cast aside Libya's relationship with the West, expelled U.S. and British forces from its bases, and embraced a Nasserist path. The Libyan government declared itself neutral in superpower conflicts, pledged its support for the Palestinians, and vowed to act against any form of colonialism or imperialism at home or abroad.

Yet, it was Qadhafi's hostility to the United States rather than his neutrality that led to his isolation. Libya's loose ties to an alphabet soup of terrorist groups from around the world, as well as his government's sanction of the December 1979 attacks on the U.S. embassy in Tripoli, led the Carter administration to designate Libya as a "state-sponsor of terror" when it created the list later that month.³ In August 1981, two Libyan jets fired at U.S. aircraft in the Mediterranean; U.S. fighters shot them down in response. In 1986, President Ronald Reagan ordered an air strike on Libya after investigators tied the Libyan government to a bombing that killed two U.S. soldiers in a Berlin nightclub.

What provided focus to the U.S.-Libyan tensions for more than a decade, though, was another, more audacious attack: the 1987 bombing of Pan Am flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland. The attack killed 270 people, including several U.S. government employees and a student group from Syracuse University. The investigation found numerous ties to two Libyan intelligence agents, Abdel Basset Ali al-Megrahi and Lamem Khalifa Fhimah.⁴ International insistence that Libya accept responsibility for the bombing and hand over the two men to an international court for trial became the basis for a durable set of United Nations-imposed sanctions.⁵

Though Qadhafi later distanced himself from direct support for terrorism, he was a frequent thorn in the side of U.S. administrations. He pursued work on a range of weapons of mass destruction programs, the parameters of which remained unclear to the U.S. intelligence community. While Qadhafi claimed that Bill Clinton's 1992 electoral victory would mark a new chapter in U.S.-Libyan relations, he spoiled any rapprochement when he announced that Libyan dissidents who moved to the United States were worthy of slaughter.⁶ In 1993, Libyan agents

² See Dirk Vandewalle, *Libya since Independence* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1998), ch. 3.

³ Export Administration Control Act of 1979, as amended (Title 50, U.S.C., App. 2401 et. seq.)

⁴ See, for example, *Middle East Economic Digest*, Apr. 17, 1992.

⁵ U.N. Security Council resolutions 731, 748, and 883.

⁶ Ronald Bruce St. John, *Libya and the United States: Two Centuries of Strife* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), pp. 168-9, 173.

kidnapped—and presumably killed—one such oppositionist, Mansur Kikhia.⁷ Qadhafi’s refusal to extradite the Lockerbie suspects remained a constant irritant in its relations with the United States and Europe. Qadhafi’s unrepentant and unpredictable behavior became one inspiration for the State Department’s “rogue regime” moniker.

Opportunity

With so much bad blood between Washington and Tripoli, diplomatic re-engagement began slowly in the late years of the Clinton administration and resumed with renewed vigor after the 9-11 terrorist attacks. The fundamental diplomatic challenge faced by both the U.S. and Libyan sides was how to build trust. To many U.S. observers, Qadhafi was as erratic as he was dangerous, and many feared that any effort to conclude an agreement with him would only be a prelude to embarrassment. Qadhafi had his own fears. Libya had remained for two and a half decades on the U.S. list of state sponsors of terror. While the secret talks aimed at rapprochement were being held in London, senior officials such as John Bolton, undersecretary of state for arms control and international security, described Libya as a “rogue state intent on acquiring weapons of mass destruction” and reiterated the President’s warning, “America will do what is necessary to ensure our nation’s security... I will not wait on events while dangers gather. I will not stand by as peril draws closer and closer.”⁸ Qadhafi’s government, therefore, sought guarantees that U.S. gestures were not a trick to subvert and destroy the regime.

Yet, despite these problems, Libyan and U.S. negotiators enjoyed several advantages. By the time George W. Bush came to office, impediments in the bilateral relationship were relatively straightforward. Negotiators had already worked out a compromise whereby Libya would turn over intelligence operatives implicated in the Lockerbie bombing for an international trial. That trial had concluded. The remaining issues in that file were Libyan acceptance of responsibility for the bombing of Pan Am flight 103 and payment of compensation to the victims’ families.

Other concerns revolved around Libya’s illicit weapons programs. Varying reports circulated about activities at Rabta—once described as the largest chemical weapons factory in the world—and Tarhuna. Despite uncertainty about their scope, they were thought to be of sufficient scale to warrant repeated mention in Congressional testimony delivered by directors of Central Intelligence John Deutch and George Tenet.⁹

These baskets of concerns shared several attractive characteristics. First, they lent themselves to clear metrics. Paid compensation can be measured, as can weapons systems and documentation. There is little qualitative judgment involved. Secondly, they were verifiable. Libyan compliance on these issues could be judged with relative confidence by both overt and covert means. Third, the bilateral issues were discrete. Difficult though these issues were, they did not contain references to vague issues like “political openness” or human rights.

⁷ Ibid., p. 173.

⁸ John Bolton, undersecretary of state for arms control and international security, “[Beyond the Axis of Evil](#): Additional Threats from Weapons of Mass Destruction,” remarks at the Heritage Foundation, Washington, D.C., May 6, 2002.

⁹ John Deutch, “[Worldwide Threat Assessment](#) Brief to the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence,” Feb. 22, 1996; George Tenet, testimony before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, Feb. 5, 1997; George Tenet, “[The Worldwide Threat in 2000](#): Global Realities to Our National Security,” testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Mar. 21, 2000.

In addition, a period of relative bilateral calm also facilitated rapprochement. Libya had retreated enough from supporting acts of international terrorism that a White House official could confide to this author in the spring of 2004 that Libya had been “out of the terrorism business” for approximately a decade. Libya had ended direct support and military training for groups such as the Irish Republican Army and the Palestine Liberation Organization by the late 1990s; its relations with other groups such as Abu Sayyaf in the Philippines were harder to fathom, and therefore less objectionable to many. In any event, as Qadhafi often complained to visiting Americans, the groups he had once supported had all abandoned armed struggle, joined political processes, and made their journey to the White House while he remained internationally isolated.¹⁰ While some aspects of Libyan behavior remained objectionable, such as meddling in African politics,¹¹ it never challenged U.S. strategic interests. Concerns over such activities would color ongoing diplomatic discussions, but they would not derail discussions over the strategic relationship.

Another advantage the negotiators had was the luxury of time. U.S. and Libyan negotiators could sequence the resolution of their differences, and the resolution of each distinct problem built confidence and eased agreement on the next. The issues resultant from Libya’s bombing of Pan Am 103 could come first to mitigate the U.S. political environment; weapons issues could follow. Issues related to Libya’s actions in the Middle East and Africa could wait longer. Libya, meanwhile, could space out its compensation payments to the Pan Am 103 victims’ families to ensure that the U.S. and international community complied with their obligations as well.

Years of cool detachment also provided a window of opportunity. Libya’s maintenance of a consistent negotiating team created a channel to the Libyan leadership in which confidence grew with time.¹² Both Washington and London came to understand that their Libyan interlocutors—Intelligence Chief Musa Kusa, ambassador to Rome Abdul-Ati al-Obeidi, and ambassador to London Muhammad al-Zwai¹³—enjoyed Qadhafi’s support, and that the Libyan leader would abide by their commitments. Such confidence was important since U.S. negotiators had experience with insincere or impotent mediators in the 1980s in Iran and in the 1990s in the Palestinian Authority.

The Libyan leadership also enjoyed growing trust in their interlocutors. In the mid-1990s, Britain negotiated an end to Libyan support for the Irish Republican Army and won Libya’s acceptance of “general responsibility” for the shooting of a British police officer in front of the Libyan embassy in London in 1984. These steps, combined with Libya’s turning over the Lockerbie suspects for trial, prompted the British government to lead efforts in 1999 to suspend United Nations sanctions on Libya.¹⁴ Throughout the negotiations between the U.S. and Libyan governments, the British government’s position—and its actions—stood as a testament to the notion that adversarial relations could be reversed and as a guarantor that the U.S. would abide by its commitments.

¹⁰ Background interviews with U.S. government officials, Rome, Italy, Dec. 2004.

¹¹ Christian Blanchard, “CRS Issue Brief for Congress: Libya,” Apr. 14, 2005, pp. 13-5.

¹² George Tenet, “[The Worldwide Threat 2004](#): Challenges in a Changing Global Context,” testimony before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, Feb. 24, 2004.

¹³ *Financial Times*, Jan. 27, 2004.

¹⁴ Background comments of a British government official, Rome, Italy, 2004.

In addition, the clear and consistent benchmarks outlined by the U.S. and British side helped convince the Libyans that demands by their negotiating partners were directed toward discrete goals, not part of a covert effort at regime change. Rewards for positive Libyan behavior built further confidence that the outcome of the negotiating process would be the positive pathway forward outlined by the governments.

Contributing to the window of opportunity for U.S.-Libyan rapprochement was the relative quiescence of U.S. domestic politics. Congress had rushed to add Libya to a 1996 bill aimed at sanctioning Iran, and until the end of their term, Clinton administration officials were fearful of the political consequences if word of their contacts leaked out.¹⁵ Yet, through more than two years of negotiations during the Bush administration, Congress remained on the sidelines.

Much of the credit in this regard goes to Libya's success at outreach among the families of the victims of Pan Am 103. The families were a disparate group with varied interests and diverse goals. Libya won these families' acquiescence by coming forward with a generous compensation package of \$10 million per victim, albeit one with a twist. The Libyan government would tie payments to diplomatic normalization: Tripoli would pay \$4 million upon the lifting of U.N. sanctions, \$4 million upon the lifting of U.S. sanctions, and the remainder when the U.S. State Department took Libya off its list of state sponsors of terrorism.¹⁶ While many families remained angry, the prospect of a multi-million dollar settlement, combined with the Libyans' acceptance of responsibility, represented a form of closure that most families supported. Some families even began to lobby the U.S. government, which, while not a party to the settlement, could, nevertheless, influence how much the families were paid.¹⁷

Were the families to unite against rapprochement, or were they to split on the issue, it would have been hard to pursue a U.S.-Libyan track without a Congressional outcry. Instead, strong and ongoing bipartisan support for a settlement kept the broader political process on track. In point of fact, many of the families seem to consider the \$8 million they have already received as adequate and are happy to keep Libya on the terrorism list as punishment for their loss.

Also contributing to an environment ripe for rapprochement was the financial value of any deal. On the financial side, Libya's pariah status was a persistent obstacle to modernizing its economy and developing its oil industry. Durable international sanctions may have cost the regime a total of \$33 billion in lost revenue,¹⁸ and rising oil prices through the early years of this decade made the opportunity costs of isolation increase steeply. Large though its \$2.7 billion settlement to the Pan Am 103 families was, Libyan officials say that they will recover the full amount in just a few months of renewed economic activity.¹⁹ Such a situation was also beneficial to the U.S. government. Washington would not have to reward Tripoli directly. The private foreign investment would be enough.

Two additional elements helped set the stage. First, a growing set of common interests drove Washington and Tripoli together. Principal among these was the global war on terrorism,

¹⁵ Iran-Libya Sanctions Act, PL 104-172, enacted Aug. 5, 1996.

¹⁶ "Libya," [Country Reports on Terrorism](#), Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, U.S. Department of State, Apr. 27, 2005, chap. 5B.

¹⁷ Background discussions with U.S. Department of State, White House, and Congressional officials, 2003-05.

¹⁸ Ray Takeyh, "The Rogue Who Came in from the Cold," *Foreign Affairs*, May-June 2001, p. 64.

¹⁹ Arik Hesseldahl, "[Time to Go Back to Libya](#)," *Forbes Online*, Mar. 7, 2002.

in which Qadhafi felt as much of a threat from radical rejectionist groups as did Washington. Both the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group and the Islamic Martyrs' Movement sought to replace Qadhafi's regime with an Islamist state. The latter injured Qadhafi in a 1998 assassination attempt that may have been linked to Al-Qaeda.²⁰ It was no coincidence that the Libyan government unleashed a flurry of approaches to the Bush administration in the month following 9-11.²¹ Washington and Tripoli were coming to have the same enemies.

Second, the Libyans were keenly aware of overwhelming U.S. power, both in terms of intelligence capacity and military might. The U.S. interception of a German ship carrying Malaysian-made nuclear centrifuges from Dubai to Libya in October 2003²² was a clear indicator to the Libyans that they could not be sure of what Washington knew about their proliferation networks. In such an event, trying to "game" the United States would likely fail. U.S. military success in Iraq was a further demonstration of capabilities, and while much of the negotiation process began long before even a potential military action against Iraq, U.S. military capacity could not have been in doubt.

Is the Libyan Experience Applicable Elsewhere?

Given the success the U.S. government had resolving its most vital differences with Libya, some commentators have suggested that the Washington-Tripoli rapprochement was the result of a robust policy of force projection. Conservative columnist Charles Krauthammer, for example, said, "By amazing coincidence, Qadhafi's first message to Britain—principal U.S. war ally and conduit to White House war councils—occurs just days before the invasion of Iraq. And his final capitulation to U.S.-British terms occurs just five days after Saddam Hussein is fished out of a rathole."²³ Similar force projection, they imply, would create comparable compliance from other regimes.²⁴ For their own part, Libyan officials have been quick to suggest that their experience could create precedent for other countries with long-strained relations with the West that might desire rapprochement.²⁵ Could building on the Libyan example win a similar strategic turn from longstanding foes such as Syria, Iran, and North Korea? In practice, U.S. success in each case would be far more difficult to achieve.

Syria. At first glance, Syria appears to be a good candidate for "the Libya treatment." Some advocates say that Syrian president Bashar al-Assad has the right inclinations but needs to strengthen his hand against conservative and reactionary forces in his own government.²⁶ While there are rumors that Washington may dangle such a deal,²⁷ for a variety of reasons, Syria may not be a good candidate from which to seek such a strategic turn.

²⁰ Yehudit Ronen, "Qadhafi and Militant Islamism: Unprecedented Conflict?" *Middle Eastern Studies*, Jan. 2002, pp. 1-16.

²¹ Interview with Lisa Anderson, "[Qaddafi, Desperate to End Libya's Isolation](#), Sends a 'Gift' to President Bush," Council on Foreign Relations, *CFR.org*, Dec. 22, 2003.

²² *BBC News*, [Feb. 12, 2004](#).

²³ *The Washington Post*, Dec. 26, 2003.

²⁴ Spencer Abraham, U.S. energy secretary, news briefing, Y-12 National Security Complex, Oak Ridge, Tenn., [Mar. 16, 2004](#).

²⁵ Background conversations with Libyan government officials and academics, Washington, D.C. and elsewhere, 2004-05.

²⁶ See, for example, arguments outlined in Flynt Leverett, *Inheriting Syria* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2005).

²⁷ *Times* (London), Oct. 15, 2005.

First, Bashar al-Assad may not enjoy control over the breadth of government and security services to the same extent that Qadhafi does. Constantly under scrutiny for willingness to make the concessions his father was unwilling to make, it is hard to imagine the younger Assad feeling the freedom to be so bold. Indeed, the Syrians' apparent belief that they have few diplomatic cards to play leads them to act with extraordinary caution, for fear that they will waste a card with little result. Assad faces a slew of potential internal foes, from members of the domestic intelligence services to the military to members of the business elite, and keeping those forces in check appears to take most of his energies, even absent a dramatic change in policies.

Second, the U.S. agenda with Syria is far messier than its agenda with Libya. Not only are U.S. concerns tied to Syria's chemical weapons program, but they are also intertwined with infiltration of insurgents from Syria into Iraq,²⁸ Syria's involvement in Lebanon,²⁹ and Syrian involvement in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Unlike Qadhafi, the Syrian regime cannot point to a decade of relatively good behavior. Instead, critics point to Syria's daily activities endangering the lives of U.S. military personnel, Israeli civilians, and even U.S. civilians in Israel, Iraq, or beyond. Progress one month seems to yield to backsliding the next. Consequently, it would be harder to sequence a U.S.-Syrian rapprochement, especially with such strong and persistent voices in the United States and Syria calling for greater confrontation rather than reconciliation.³⁰

Finally, Syrians seem to be seeking a larger payoff for a strategic reorientation than either the United States or any possible combination of countries would be willing to pay. On visits by this author, Syrian interlocutors repeatedly describe the country as "potentially America's best friend in the Middle East." But Syria is not Libya. Syrian oil reserves are a diminishing resource³¹ and do not compare in magnitude to those enjoyed by Libya or other regional states. Multinational corporations, held back by U.S. policy, will not be paying for access. For a rapprochement to be lucrative to Damascus, they would probably seek a big U.S. government payout, similar to what Egypt received following the Camp David accords. It is unlikely that Washington would repeat such a deal, though.

Iran. Another candidate for strategic reversal is Iran, which has had strained relations with the United States for a quarter century. But for many reasons, Iran is an even worse candidate for such a reversal in the near term than Syria.

Iranian politics have grown increasingly fragmented over the last decade. Multiple power centers in the government, combined with shifting alliances, give little confidence that a deal struck, for example, with the Foreign Ministry would carry over to the intelligence services or the Revolutionary Guards. The system of checks and balances that thwarted the will of the reformist parliament in the early part of this decade could scuttle a deal with the United States, raising fears that any bilateral agreement would represent a pact with only a single faction and invite entrepreneurial efforts by other factions to win their own gains.

²⁸ Gen. Richard Meyers, *CNN Late Edition*, Apr. 18, 2004.

²⁹ Implied by UNSC Resolution 1559, confirmed by secretary-general letter S/2005/331.

³⁰ Zalmay Khalilzad, U.S. ambassador to Iraq, briefing, Washington, D.C., [Sept. 12, 2005](#); Syrian Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act of 2003, PL 108-175.

³¹ Moshe Efrat, "Syria: Economic Development, Achievements, Problems and Prospects," in Moshe Maoz, Joseph Ginat, and Onn Winckler, eds., *Modern Syria: From Ottoman Role to Pivotal Role in the Middle East* (Portland: Susser Academic Press, 1999), p. 88.

Second, the U.S. agenda with Iran is far more complex than its agenda with Syria. Some specialists argue that Iran is within five to ten years of developing a nuclear weapons capacity;³² it already has robust chemical weapons ability.³³ Claims persist that Iran supports groups that have killed U.S. and Israeli civilians.³⁴ Iranian assets are involved in Iraq, threatening the lives of U.S. troops and endangering a variety of U.S. strategic interests.³⁵ It would be near impossible to narrow the agenda and sequence a U.S.-Iranian rapprochement because of the difficulty in putting any of the vital issues aside while others are resolved. Doing so would raise charges that lives were being put at risk as a consequence. The bilateral history of mistrust makes the politics of U.S.-Iranian rapprochement a sensitive issue in both countries.

An additional issue in the Iran case is timing. If Iran is developing a nuclear capacity, its leadership would likely wait until it has such a capacity to consider a strategic reorientation, rather than bargain it away preemptively. They might reason that Pakistan and India managed to test nuclear weapons in 1998 without incurring dramatic costs, and North Korea has seen its bargaining power grow since it announced a nuclear weapons capacity in 2003. Iranian leaders feel no urgent need to negotiate. High oil prices have swelled their treasury and Asian interest in Iranian oil has mitigated the government's isolation.³⁶

Conclusion

Although less clear five years ago than today, Libya may have been a kind of low-hanging fruit among regimes from which one could win a strategic reorientation. For years, the missing ingredient had been understanding regime motivation. Many Western leaders had written off Qadhafi as unfathomable and mercurial, and for that reason, had been reluctant to engage in any dialogue. Their distaste for the Libyan leadership, however, seems to have obscured the many ways in which Libya was a problem that lent itself to resolution.

The benefits of the Libyan turn have been massive. Not only has the United States won important cooperation from the Libyans on counterterrorism, eliminated uncertainty over proliferation in North Africa, and helped secure justice for the families of victims of Libyan-sponsored terrorist acts, but the discovery and subsequent disruption of proliferation networks that had been supplying the Libyan government has had ripple effects beyond North Africa to the Persian Gulf, Africa, and Asia. All together, the benefits of U.S. engagement with the Libyans have exceeded many of the expectations not only of skeptics but also of advocates. From the Libyan side, most of the benefits have come indirectly—not from the U.S. government but from corporations seeking to enter the Libyan market. Libya has shed its international pariah status, and Tripoli in five years is unlikely to bear much resemblance to its current state.

But Syria and Iran are more complex problems. While the Libyan experience suggests the possibility of positive change even with unsavory leaders, tasks must be contained and

³² *The Washington Post*, Aug. 2, 2005.

³³ *Patterns of Global Terrorism, 2004* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of State, Apr. 2005), pp. 88-9.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

³⁵ Anthony H. Cordesman, "[Iran's Evolving Military Forces](#)," Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, D.C., July 2004, p. 15.

³⁶ Dan Blumenthal, "China and the Middle East: [Providing Arms](#)," *Middle East Quarterly*, Spring 2005, pp. 11-9.

sequenced. The Libyan case holds other lessons as well. The size of carrots and sticks are not the sole factors that determine success. Regime motivation, issue complexity, and the international environment are also critical. The Libyan case demonstrates, though, that even barren diplomatic landscapes can hold the seeds of a diplomatic reorientation. Nurturing such seeds requires luck, will, and patience.

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