

# Libya and the Gulf Crisis:

## The Strangest Bedfellow

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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Barry Rubin was a senior fellow at the Institute from 1988-1993 and a visiting fellow frequently thereafter. He passed at the age of 64 in February 2014.

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### Brief Analysis

**A**s yesterday's vote in the Security Council again demonstrates, the cohesion of the anti-Iraq coalition is far stronger than most observers had originally predicted. Even Libyan dictator Muammar Qadhafi, the most maverick, anti-Western Arab leader, has been cooperating with the coalition, respecting the UN sanctions against Iraq and calling for its immediate withdrawal from Kuwait. The reasons behind his behavior give insight not only into Libyan policy but also Arab politics generally.

Qadhafi is as eccentric as ever, but his idiosyncratic style has been modified by an ability to learn from experience. The two main factors affecting Qadhafi's recent policies have been the regime's economic weakness and the shock from the U.S. bombing of Libya in 1986.

Qadhafi came to power in 1969, when huge oil revenues began pouring into Libya. This gave him the resources for his grandiose military purchases and international ambitions, as well as for raising the living standard of the relatively small Libyan population. By the mid- 1980s, however, his mismanagement of the economy -- including closing flourishing retail enterprises in favor of inefficient state-run stores -- and lower oil prices forced Libya into austerity.

At precisely this moment, when the country was already disgruntled by cutbacks and shortages, the United States bombed Libya in retaliation for its sponsorship of anti-American terrorism. The impact on Qadhafi was dramatic: for the next two years, Libya refrained from its long pattern of backing terrorism. Even thereafter, while Qadhafi's passionate anti-American rhetoric has continued, his more cautious behavior suggests a healthy respect for U.S. power.

The Gulf crisis has split the Arab world and forced Qadhafi to choose sides. In doing so, he has been influenced by his political instincts, not ideological imaginings. To escape political isolation he has sought a rapprochement with neighboring Egypt, a pillar of the anti-Saddam camp. Qadhafi also urgently needs Western technology and spare parts for his oil industry, another incentive for cooperating against Iraq. Moreover, his new-found appreciation for American power leads him to bet that Washington will emerge as the victor over Baghdad in any confrontation.

Losing Soviet support has also influenced Libyan behavior. While never a Soviet puppet, Libya did depend on

Moscow and its East European satellites for large amounts of advanced weapons, internal security assistance, and as a superpower counter to the United States. The Soviet umbrella was diminishing as early as the 1986 U.S. raid, when Moscow let Washington know that it would not act to protect Qadhafi in a clash. The post-Cold War situation makes Libya far more vulnerable to U.S. power.

As a result of all these factors, the current situation is quite remarkable. Qadhafi -- a leading pan-Arab nationalist -- is siding with the U.S.-led coalition against a brother Arab country. A staunch anti-imperialist, Qadhafi is backing Western forces in conflict with another Third World state. A prime advocate of the Palestinian cause, Qadhafi is joining a front led by pro-Israel America and opposed to the PLO.

Obviously, respect for international law and opposition to Iraqi repression in Kuwait are not the main factors motivating Qadhafi. He has often used ruthless repression at home and tried to assassinate exiled opponents abroad. Nor is he, in principle, opposed to the seizure of one Arab state by another. He frequently advocates the merger of Arab states to unite them into one country. He has also tried to take over neighbors, both Arab and non-Arab, including backing an invasion of Tunisia by surrogate forces and conducting a long military campaign against Chad.

But Qadhafi has also, to a more limited extent, suffered the same kind of isolation that Saddam Hussein now confronts. The Arab world was quite passive after the U.S. raid on Libya; more anti-American protests occurred in one European capital than in the entire Middle East. This lack of sympathy was due to the fear and disdain Arab leaders have for Qadhafi's aggressive and ambitious posture. Those states now threatened by Iraq are taking the same position.

Qadhafi's jealousy of Saddam also affects his calculations, illustrating another basic principle of Arab politics. After all, Libya's pan-Arabism did not prevent it -- as well as Syria -- from supporting non-Arab Iran during the Iran-Iraq war. In Qadhafi's eyes, it is he, not Saddam, whose supposed to be the leading pan-Arab nationalist. Apparently, Qadhafi would rather see Saddam fail and America win a major victory than see the triumph of a perceived Arab rival.

Libya's policy in the Gulf crisis is not an obscure topic, but an important indicator of the shape of the post-Cold War Middle East. If narrow self-interest and state interests are dictating Qadhafi's policy, they will almost certainly be the prime determinants for other Arab regimes. The trends of the 1990s in the Arab world should therefore include the following: continued divisions among Arab states; the prime concern of each state and ruler for selfinterest at the expense of ideology; a respect for U.S. power; and relative indifference in practice to the Arab-Israeli conflict and the U.S.-Israel alliance.

Barry Rubin is the senior fellow at The Washington Institute. Among his most recent publications are the Institute study *Inside the PLO: Officials, Notable, Revolutionaries* (Policy Focus #12, 1989), *Islamic Fundamentalism in Egyptian Politics* (St. Martin's Press, 1990) and the forthcoming *Revolution until Victory: The Politics and History of the PLO*. ❖

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