

# Gaddafi's Grand Vision

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In recent days, Washington has experienced a media blitz by the Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, including an op-ed in the New York Times and his first US videoconference in months. In the wake of the Obama transition, the "Guide of the Revolution" is reaching out to the new administration, using his stance towards Israel as the bait. Libyan, Israeli and American relations form a fateful mix, with Libyan-Israeli relations seeing an improvement as a result of US-Libyan rapprochement. Despite some positive developments, the nature of Libya's moves towards Israel suggests the limits of the transformative power of engagement.

Libyan-Israeli relations have clearly seen a shift. Under Gaddafi, Libya has been among the staunchest enemies of Israel -- in action and in rhetoric. Inspired by Nasser, Gaddafi long viewed Israel as an imperialist implant in the Arab world that must be destroyed through collective Arab action. According to the Libyan leader, the objective would be "the return of the Jews of Europe to the countries whence they came." Yet now, the man who once sponsored the Munich massacres, provided shelter to terrorists such as Abu Nidal and broke off relations with Arafat because the latter was too moderate, has jettisoned his commitment to armed struggle.

These days, Gaddafi is promoting a grand vision that no longer focuses on an armed struggle. This plan, first revealed in his 2002 White Book, proposes the integration of the two entities into one state, a solution he pithily dubs "Isratine." This, according to the Colonel, is necessitated by Israel's size, security needs and the demands of the Palestinian refugees. In his editorial, seemingly oblivious to the connotations, he described Isratine as the "final solution" for the region.

That this apparent change in emphasis coincided with Libya's attempts to reconcile with the US is no coincidence. Apparently, Gaddafi assumed that the road to good relations with Washington hinged on a less militant stance towards Israel. So in 1999 Libya expelled the Abu Nidal group, and Gaddafi started making conciliatory statements such as "I take no stance against the US or the Jews". Then, in 2004 -- during a crucial period of US-Libyan engagement -- rumours emerged that meetings were held between high ranking Israelis and Libyans, including with Saif al Islam, Gaddafi's son and heir apparent.

Yet Gaddafi's role in Israeli-Palestinian relations still remains extremely problematic for Washington, highlighting that engaging Libya has had limited impact. Libya remains virulently opposed the notion of a two state solution, promoted by both America and the Arab League. Gaddafi has declared "as long as I am alive I will never recognise either an Israeli state or a Palestinian one," and he continues to brand moderate Arab states working towards a solution as "collaborators." Tripoli has also continued to play an unhelpful role in the UN, where it compares Israel to

the Germany's Third Reich. Moreover, during the recent Gaza crisis, Gaddafi demanded that Arab governments "open the door for volunteers to fight alongside the Palestinians," though he took no steps to recruit or send Libyan citizens to the frontlines.

Regardless of the nature of Israeli-Libyan relations and regional developments, Gaddafi appears eager to maintain the Libyan-American side of the bargain, in which Gaddafi committed to end his WMD programs and pay compensation to American terror victims. This was clearly manifested in Libya's reaction to the Gaza crisis. Libya was eager to lead the condemnation of what it referred to as the "Zionist holocaust in Gaza," but when it came to concrete action, Libya limited itself to offering medical help to Gazans.

Gaddafi directed his ire towards Israeli and Arab governments who "should be ashamed of themselves," not the US. Organised demonstrations in Libya took place in front of the Egyptian embassy, and the Mauritanian embassy was eventually stormed by angry mobs. American interests in the country remain undisturbed. The Gaddafi Foundation, run by Saif al Islam, demanded that Libya sever all ties with the Czech Republic, after an official expressed support for Israeli actions. Libya made little comment on the official US position.

As recent events testify, regional developments will probably not derail a Libya that is keen to mend fences with the US. Yet contrary to US interests in the region, Libyan relations with Israel, while veering away from armed attack, will remain ideologically committed to removing the "poisoned dagger" that Israel constitutes. Gaddafi's latest foray suggests that when it comes to regional peace, ties with Washington can moderate rejectionism, but it is not necessarily a panacea. The bond that ties the three states together also sheds light on the overall impact of renewed Libyan-American relations -- some good news, but far from the absolute victory that former President Bush declared.

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