

Meeting Qadhafi:

Blair's Kiss of Acceptability

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Brief Analysis

On March 25, British prime minister Tony Blair will meet with Col. Muammar Qadhafi in Libya, marking an important moment in the process of bringing Libya back into the international community. The March 23 meeting between Qadhafi and U.S. assistant secretary of state William Burns suggests that the United States and Britain are moving in parallel. Although Burns reportedly handed Qadhafi a letter from President George W. Bush, so far there is no sign that the two leaders will meet anytime soon. Indeed, it also remains unclear what role Qadhafi will play in the region.

Blair's Visit

Qadhafi probably relishes the notion that the world's leaders are now coming to visit him. Why his meeting with Blair cannot be held on neutral ground is unclear; plans for the trip appear to have been brought forward several weeks, if not months, ago. Whatever the reason, the meeting enables Blair to make the argument that, despite this month's bombings in Madrid and the surprise electoral victory of Spanish socialists, the international community can nevertheless celebrate Libya's voluntary surrender of its weapons of mass destruction.

Meeting Qadhafi is politically risky for Blair. The British public remembers all too well the 1984 shooting of a British female police officer on duty outside the Libyan embassy by a yet-to-be-prosecuted assailant; the 1988 bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over the Scottish town of Lockerbie, for which one perpetrator is now in a British jail; and the transfer of Libyan arms to Irish terrorists, only one consignment of which was intercepted. The opposition Conservative Party has warned that the timing of the meeting, after a memorial service today for the victims of the Madrid attacks, is astonishing, and has suggested that Blair should "sup with a long spoon" -- an expression that, if used in full, would cast Qadhafi as the devil. Moreover, although Blair has spoken about extending the hand of friendship, there is incredulity regarding whether Britain will offer training to the Libyan military.

Seif al-Islam's Role

A key player in the rapprochement is clearly Qadhafi's eldest son, Seif al-Islam. Nominally a student at the London School of Economics, Seif has attended at least one of the discreet meetings held between Libyan, British, and former

U.S. officials in various locations throughout Britain or other parts of Europe over the past two years. Financed by Tripoli, the meetings helped press home the message that Libya had to change its behavior and could be rewarded if it did. In fact, it was Seif, with his comments to Arab journalists in Qatar, who first alerted the world's media to the prospect of a meeting between Blair and his father.

Seif delights in diplomacy, although he holds no formal position other than being the head of the Qaddafi Foundation, described as a charity. Some of the Qaddafi Foundation's actions are controversial. It helped secure the release of European hostages held by Muslim terrorists in the Philippines by paying a ransom -- money that then apparently financed further terrorism.

While addressing a London think tank in 2002, Seif stated that, although Libya was accountable for the man sentenced in the Lockerbie bombing because he was a Libyan government employee, Tripoli was not responsible for the bomber's actions. He went on to suggest a plan for Middle East peace involving a "Federal Republic of the Holy Land." One of its constituent states would have Tel Aviv as its capital and would be called "Sharon." In a related comment, he told Qatari newspapers that Libyan Jews should return home "to their ancestral land and abandon the land they acquired from Palestinians." Another idea called for a Greater India, to include Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka as well as India. This idea, he said, would solve the Kashmir dispute.

In contrast, some of Seif's comments are quite sensible, such as a statement in an interview to the pan-Arab daily newspaper al-Hayat earlier this month: "We have seen that the armed struggle of the Palestinians, which lasted fifty years, did not produce results such as those obtained by means of negotiations that lasted five years." He went on to extol the virtues of reform: "Libya must be a democratic and open country" or it will become "a reactionary, dictatorial, and fascist Arab country." These statements provide a good opening for British and U.S. officials to push Libya for substantive progress on reform. One Libyan dissident -- sentenced in 2002 to five years in prison for publicly stating that reform in Libya would require a constitution, free speech, and democracy -- was released earlier this month under U.S. pressure. Yet, Libyan authorities continue to threaten his wife and family and interrogate Libyans who visit him. Amnesty International was recently permitted to send a team to Libya, and it made a variety of suggestions about human rights issues worthy of followup.

Which Way Libya?

The old Qadhafi supported international terrorism and secretly tried to develop weapons of mass destruction. Whatever his future policies might be, the rhetoric of the new Qadhafi does not appear to have changed. This week, the official Libyan news agency referred to Israel as the "Zionist terrorist war machine." At the same time, many were encouraged by the fact that the Burns visit went ahead as planned, given that many in the Arab world were bitterly criticizing the U.S. government for its ambiguous stance on the Israeli killing of Hamas leader Shaykh Ahmed Yassin.

In the short-term, Libya's role as an oil exporter is expected to be a driving force. It is currently one of the OPEC cartel's smaller producers, with a quota of only 1.258 million barrels per day. U.S. oil companies were previously crucial to Libya's oil sector and are anxious to return now that most sanctions are in the process of being lifted. (Libya remains on the list of terrorism-sponsoring states, which prevents the issuance of license for dual-use equipment, including some items used in the oil industry.) Yet, Libya is asking for a "financial fee" from U.S. companies wanting to exercise this privilege. U.S. secretary of energy Spencer Abraham is expected to visit Libya soon, but in the meantime Blair is reportedly looking to win an opening for the British oil company Shell.

Simon Henderson is a London-based associate of The Washington Institute.

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