

Gadhafi's Failed African Ambitions

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While the international media focus on the Israeli-Palestinian fighting in the West Bank and Gaza, at least 600 Africans have been killed in riots in Libya. The massacre of African immigrants may have wider reverberations and foster important changes in Libya's foreign policy. Since his return to the international stage in 1999, Colonel Moammar Gadhafi has pursued the dream of being the leader of a unified Africa. While the carnage against Africans on Libyan streets may have evaporated the Africa dream, the tumult in the West Bank and Gaza has provided an opening for radical Arab leaders such as Colonel Gadhafi who always have dismissed peace with Israel and insisted on armed struggle as the only path to the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Since the removal of the Lockerbie sanctions in April 1999, the Libyan leader has pursued an assertive policy on Africa. He has accepted about 1.5 million African immigrants who have found Libya to be attractive as they fled civil strife, ethnic conflicts and massive poverty. While Colonel Gadhafi proclaimed himself the champion of African unity, his Libyan constituents are irritated by the new arrivals and curse the colonel for opening their cities to African laborers. Predictably, the Libyans blame the African immigrants for the spiraling crime rate and accuse them of bringing AIDS and gang violence to the urban centers. In essence, the African immigrants have become the target of Libyans' social and economic resentments. Indeed, the best manner of offending Libyan is to call him an African.

The tensions between the Libyans and African immigrants exploded September 24 into what was the most intense anti-foreign riots in Libya since the eviction of Italian settlers in 1969. The violence erupted in the northwest city of Zawia, when a rampaging gang of Libyans screaming "blacks must go" attacked an African settlement, killing at least 50 Sudanese and Chadian workers. The violence proved contagious and gradually led to the targeting of other African immigrants. On September 25, about 1,000 Libyans attacked and set fire to a Ghanaian settlement, killing 10 residents. Perhaps the Nigerians have suffered the most from the recent wave of violence. By October 6, the ongoing assault against the migrant workers had resulted in the death of at least 500 Nigerians. The Libyan security forces that engage in their own version of racial profiling looked on passively as the riots raged. A repatriated Nigerian complained, "The only way to describe Libya is hellfire." Tripoli's only official response has been to begin deportation of thousands of migrant African laborers. The principal casualty of the riots has been Colonel Gadhafi's pan-African ambitions. The African states always have been wary of the eccentric Libyan revolutionary, with his scant respect for their sovereign rights.

Nigeria and South Africa have their own claims to African leadership and plans for continental economic

development that eschews Colonel Gadhafi's utopian vision of a United States of Africa.

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has demanded an independent investigation of the recent events in Libya and was to dispatch a high-level delegation to Tripoli. Nigeria has gone even further, with its foreign minister, Chief Dubem Oniya, emphasizing, "We will definitely reciprocate. This government will not sit back to watch any Nigerian maltreated." Even the more pliable Jerry Rawlings of Ghana and Idriss Deby of Chad, long accustomed to Libyan mistreatment, have been forceful in their condemnation and have made provisions for repatriation of their citizens from Libya. So now the Libyan leader that has made pan-Africanism his foremost priority stands isolated from the mainstream of African politics.

If the colonel's African dreams have ended, the Palestinian rioters have offered him a path for returning to the Arab roundtable. The escalating crisis in the Middle East coincided with Colonel Gadhafi's tour of the region, where he received an enthusiastic welcome from the Arab masses. His message is consistent with the sentiments of the Arab street. He condemned Israel at every stop and decried the peace process by claiming that they "told us Hebron, Ramallah and Nablus have been liberated. All that has come out as a lie. The Israelis will only withdraw from the West Bank and Gaza with the battle of the century, such as what happened in South Africa, or with war."

The collapse of the peace process can only radicalize Arab politics and provide opportunities for militant regional actors such as Iraq, Iran and Libya. Rebuffed in Africa, the colonel finds the current Arab political landscape a fertile ground for his radical ideology and dogmatic opposition to Israel and the United States. After all, Colonel Gadhafi is now the longest serving Arab ruler, with impeccable anti-Western credentials that are much appreciated among much of the Arab populace.

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