

# Qadhafi at the European-African Summit: Is He Moderating His Stand?

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Apr 17, 2000

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## Brief Analysis

**M**ercurial Libyan leader Mu'ammar Qadhafi continues to disappoint those who hope for moderation. His April 3 speech at the Africa-European Union (EU) summit, much heralded as a sign of where Libya is headed, was old-fashioned bombast. Although much may have changed in the international community, Qadhafi's commitment to "anti-imperialism" and revolutionary struggle against the West remains intact.

Libya's Diplomatic Successes. Since the arrest of the Lockerbie suspects, Libya has enjoyed a string of diplomatic successes. The suspension of the United Nations sanctions in 1999 has paved the way for the return of European investors to Tripoli. As a growing number of European firms began competing for lucrative contracts, issues such as Libya's complicity in the 1989 UTA bombing and the killing of British policewoman P. C. Fletcher were quickly resolved. The president of the European Commission, Romano Prodi, claimed that "there is a general feeling that we need to have a peaceful area in the Mediterranean, and Colonel Qadhafi has sent a message, and we have to receive this message with an open mind." The colonel's European interlocutors argued that Libya has abandoned its past practices and is now a force for progressive change in North Africa.

There were also signs of progress in long-severed U.S.-Libyan relations. In early April, a State Department delegation arrived in Tripoli to determine whether the U.S. travel ban to Libya should be rescinded. The American emissaries were graciously received in Tripoli by Ali Abdal-Turiki, the Minister of African Affairs who is in charge of foreign policy since Qadhafi abolished the Foreign Ministry last month. Turiki labeled the U.S. move as "a very positive and good gesture."

Qadhafi's Cairo Speech. The Africa-EU summit meeting held in Egypt on April 3-4 was designed to mark symbolically Libya's full political rehabilitation. In the month preceding the sixty-seven-nation gathering, Libyan diplomats alerted the international press about constructive initiatives that Tripoli would unveil at the meeting. Behind the scenes, EU officials, in contact with Libyan and Egyptian diplomats, stressed that the colonel's speech would be an important indicator of his new-found moderation.

But when Qadhafi arrived in Cairo, he shattered the optimism that was so assiduously fostered by his spin-doctors. In his much-heralded address, Qadhafi jolted his audience with a tirade against Western colonialism and its legacy of hostility toward Africa. The colonel was dismissive of American calls for an end to Africa's wars and professed that "Africa is not a ping-pong ball to be hit once by Europe, once by the U.S." Similarly unimpressed by the EU's call for

human rights improvements in Africa, he upbraided Europe for its lack of concern about the weak, complaining, "Every day they kill six bulls in Spain." Undaunted by diplomatic protocol, Qadhafi singled out French president Jacques Chirac and Portuguese prime minister Antonio Guterres, saying it is "hard to believe that people with such a colonial past can say that they are genuinely concerned about Africa today." As for democratic reforms, the colonel declared, "We do not need democracy; we need water pumps."

Despite its intemperate rhetoric, the speech does reflect Qadhafi's core ideological beliefs. The colonel's political philosophy and views of the West have been shaped by Libya's bitter colonial struggle, leading him to develop a deep suspicion of the West. Although Qadhafi is capable of tactical modifications, opposition to the United States defines the essence of his worldview. For the colonel, the international order dominated by the United States is iniquitous and thus Libya is not necessarily bound by its rules and conventions.

A Gesture to Israel? One of the more bizarre developments during the Cairo summit was the sudden press reports announcing that the secretary general of Israel's Labor Party, Raanan Cohen, had been invited to Tripoli as a guest of the Libyan parliament. The summit participants warmly welcomed the purported invitation as another indication of shifting attitudes in Tripoli. The Qadhafi enthusiasts, led by the European Commission's Romano Prodi, proclaimed that the invitation reflected Libya's move toward constructive bilateral dialogues.

Despite the professions of European officials, the Libyans were adamant that no such invitation had taken place. Shortly after the news of the invitation broke out, Libya's news agency dismissed the reports as "a lie and a ridiculous joke that does not deserve further comment." Finally, Qadhafi ended all the speculation, stating, "This is a joke, a line based on the first of April. We cannot recognize a state based on racism—I refuse to defy the world on this level."

The colonel's statement may have confounded his Western supporters, but it is consistent with his historic approach toward Israel and the Middle East peace process. Since the 1969 Libyan Revolution, Qadhafi has systematically characterized Israel as both an ideological and a strategic challenge. Israel is seen as fracturing the unity of the Islamic 'umma (community or nation) and obstructing attempts to reformulate the Middle East along Qadhafi's Third Universal Theory and its emphasis on Arabism and Islam. At a time when Libya is mired in the thorny Lockerbie dispute, the colonel may lessen ties to militant Palestinian groups who share his anti-Israeli animus, but in the long run, his ideological convictions will propel him toward opposition to Israel and to the diplomatic efforts to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Conclusion. In the post-Cold War period, many policymakers and analysts are prone to dismiss ideology as an unimportant factor in international relations. Nationalism and religious fundamentalism seem more compelling determinants of international behavior. In this sense, Qadhafi is a throwback to an earlier generation of Third World leaders. The colonel simply has not made the transition from a revolutionary leader to a statesman. As with other revolutionaries, Qadhafi finds the task of governance and compromise mundane relative to the exhilaration of challenging the international order and its guardian, the United States. Although capable of pragmatic adjustments, Qadhafi's historic conduct should not inspire hope that Libya is prepared to dispense with its radical heritage and assume a constructive place in the community of nations.

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