

Is Qadhafi Changing His Spots?

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Dec 21, 1999

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Brief Analysis

In the past ten days, Libyan leader Mu‘ammar Qadhafi has made progress in his efforts to achieve international respectability. After fifteen years, a British ambassador, Richard Dalton, arrived in Tripoli pledging to help Libya return to the “mainstream of the international community.” And Colonel Qadhafi’s status as mediator of thorny regional conflicts was further enhanced when Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak flew to Tripoli to consult with Qadhafi on the imposition of emergency rule in Sudan.

Has the leader that Ronald Reagan labeled the “mad dog of the Middle East” tempered with age and grown into an elder statesman preoccupied with resolving African crises and reconciling with old nemeses? Perhaps: at the celebrations of the thirtieth anniversary of the Great Revolution on September 30, 1999, Qadhafi dropped the usual bombast and fiery declarations, replacing them with a call for new international investments and greater tourism. More importantly, Libya arrested in 1997 and handed over to British authorities in 1999 the two Libyans accused of downing Pan Am 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland in 1986 and whose trial in the Netherlands before a Scottish judge is scheduled to begin in May.

Nevertheless, the best way to understand where Qadhafi stands is to go beyond the headlines and examine Libya’s approach toward the Middle East peace process, international terrorism, arms buildup, and relations with the West.

International Terrorism: Qadhafi has always insisted that he does not support terrorism, viewing his policy as assisting those elements struggling against Western imperialism. Even in the recent final settlement on compensation for the victims of Libya’s 1990 bombing of the French UTA airliner and the 1984 killing of a British policewoman in front of the Libyan embassy in London, the Libyan regime never acknowledged direct responsibility.

In fact, Libya continues to maintain installations employed by various Arab and African paramilitary groups. The colonel made this point clear in a June 19, 1999 speech in which he stressed, “Libya houses camps. We will never deny this fact. We acknowledged this with pride because these people are freedom fighters. The camps here are the camps of people who fight for their independence. We are very proud of this fact and we are always ready to house all freedom fighters.”

In the past few months, Libya has expelled Abu Nidal’s organization and partially restrained the Palestinian rejectionist groups operating in its territory. But this is a typical pattern of Qadhafi’s conduct. He periodically suspends relations with problematic insurgency and terrorist groups when he is embroiled in a particularly acute international dispute, but there is no clear evidence that the colonel has completely severed ties with such

organizations. He may well resume his support for terrorist activities once the Lockerbie controversy passes.

Furthermore, in the continent of Africa, Qadhafi has exhibited little restraint as he actively funnels weapons to armed groups in Sierra Leone, Guinea-Bissau, Eritrea, and Sudan.

Arms Buildup: One clear indication that Qadhafi's intentions are less than altruistic is Libya's launching of a significant remilitarization program. Since the effective removal of UN sanctions, Libya has sought Russian assistance in modernizing and augmenting its military arsenal. Tripoli and Moscow are on the verge of completing a contract for the purchase of S-300 defense missile complexes and ninety MiG-31s, Russia's most sophisticated fighter-bomber. As Yuri Rodin-Sova, a leading Russian defense contractor, confessed, "I won't make any secrets . . . Now that United Nation sanctions are gone, Libya has become first on our list." In the meantime, Qadhafi continues to refuse to sign chemical weapons treaties.

The Middle East Peace Process: Since the 1969 revolution, Qadhafi has been a consistent and vociferous critic of Israel. Soon after gaining power, the colonel placed Israel's isolation at the top of his agenda and made Libya's aid to third countries contingent on breaking diplomatic ties with Jerusalem. In the oil boom era, as Libya's aid exceeded Israel's offerings, many African states acquiesced to Tripoli's demands and severed relations with Israel. This fixation with the Jewish state has not abated as the colonel has taken the lead in condemning Mauritania's establishment of diplomatic ties with Israel as a "coup directed at the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU)." As the next likely president of the AMU, Tripoli has pledged to work for Mauritania's exclusion from the North African association.

Meanwhile, Qadhafi continues to stress his rejection of the current peace process. On August 26, he said, "What is happening is not a peace process . . . It is a surrender." Given the primacy of Lockerbie in the colonel's calculations, he may remain silent as the trial in the Netherlands progresses, but the long-term policy of Libya is antithetical to Israel's integration into the Middle East.

Libya and the West: Since the 1997 arrest of the Lockerbie suspects, Tripoli has launched a successful diplomatic offensive aimed at generating European investments and Third World support in international forums. Through these relations, Qadhafi has sought to protect his regime from a potential reimposition of the UN sanctions if things go badly in the Lockerbie trial. Qadhafi's overtures to Europe and developing nations, however, do not imply that he has changed his revolutionary orientation. In a defiant October 28 address, the colonel emphasized that "the Arab world has been colonized once more and it needs to be liberated with rifles . . . like before the First World War."

But it is still America that tops the list of Qadhafi's ideological anxieties. Qadhafi perceives that the Afro-Arab bloc cannot secure its interests and play an active role in international affairs unless it escapes the domineering shadow of American political and economic prowess. For Qadhafi, normalization of relations with the United States would contravene deep-seated ideological precepts and political commitments. Although the colonel is capable of significant tactical modifications, such dramatic ideological metamorphosis would be a stretch. So long as Qadhafi remains in power, Libya is likely to fail to meet U.S. preconditions for normalized relations and instead will actively attempt to frustrate American objectives in the Middle East and Africa.

Conclusion: Despite the much heralded emergence of the "new Qadhafi," the colonel remains an ideologue who sincerely believes that Third World interests would best be served through the diminution of U.S. influence, and he is prepared to use violent means to that end if necessary. Although Qadhafi has made certain tactical modifications as the result of the Lockerbie trial, he has not abandoned his ultimate objectives. Indeed, under the auspices of his "new diplomacy," the colonel has been active in putting together the building blocs of an assertive foreign policy. Given Qadhafi's historical conduct and continued ideological commitments, Libya is likely to remain a political and security challenge for the United States.

 Ray Takeyh was a 1999 Soref fellow at The Washington Institute.

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