

Libya and Africa

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"I have no time to lose talking with Arabs.... I now talk about Pan-Africanism and African unity." With this declaration, Mu'ammar Qadhafi apparently proclaimed a new era in Libya's foreign policy. In recent weeks, the colonel has buttressed this statement by attempting to mediate the conflicts in Congo and the Horn of Africa while hosting a series of African leaders for discussions of issues of common concern. The critical question that must be explored is whether Qadhafi's African policy will contribute to regional stability? After decades of professing Arabism, is Qadhafi's African orientation genuine or yet another tactical alteration by the ever-mercurial colonel.

The starting point for addressing these questions must be an examination of Qadhafi's ideology. While most leaders tend to base their international policy on pragmatic calculations, Qadhafi has largely remained committed to an ideological approach to international relations. An examination of the role that Africa has historically played in Libya's foreign policy will reinforce this claim and demonstrate that in the past Libya's impact on the continent has been more divisive than constructive. Only after such an evaluation can we have a better understanding of the purpose behind Qadhafi's most recent foray into Africa.

Qadhafi's Ideology: During the last three decades, Libya's international policy has been difficult to comprehend, as it has seemingly lacked logical objectives and a coherent framework. Probably more than any other state, Libya's foreign policy is drawn from the ideas and experiences of its leader. Qadhafi's political philosophy has been shaped by Libya's bitter colonial struggle, leading the colonel to develop a deep suspicion of the West. For Qadhafi, the international order dominated by the United States is iniquitous, and thus Tripoli is not necessarily bound by its rules and conventions.

Despite a bewildering change of tactics and alliances, a careful reading of Qadhafi's speeches and writings does reveal a continuity of themes. Qadhafi's political universe has always featured three competing arenas: the Arab realm, the Islamic sphere, and Africa. The colonel hopes, that through greater cohesion, the Afro-Arab bloc could use its collective advantage to emerge as an important player on the international scene. It is Libya's historic mission as the vanguard revolutionary state to assist the emancipation of this bloc and to reshape its political institutions. In Qadhafi's conception, the factors that have obstructed this elusive unity have been Western imperialism and the conservative local rulers who have cooperated in sustaining Western influence. Qadhafi's definition of imperialism is rather expansive, as it encompasses European and American military presence as well as private corporations, foundations, and missionary societies. In order to overcome the power of the West, Qadhafi has systematically attacked Western interests as well as conservative African and Arab leaders whom he commonly derides as "lackeys of imperialism." This can partly explain Libya's support for a variety of opposition movements, secessionist forces,

and terrorist organizations in states ranging from Argentina to Philippines. The primary qualification for Libyan support seems to be opposition to the United States and the established order as opposed to a progressive agenda.

Despite professions of Pan-Africanism, Arabism remains the core of Qadhafi's ideology. All the historic steps -- Libya's national independence, the quest for unity in the Maghreb, and the plethora of confederation schemes -- are mere antecedents to Arab unification. After all, it is the Arab east that is the birth place of Islam and the guardian of the Arabic language. To Qadhafi, however, Arab unity has been obstructed by Arab obduracy, Zionism and American imperialism. To reach his ambition of transforming his political philosophy into a governing dogma for the Third World, Qadhafi may have to turn else where: A conflict-stricken Africa where a combination of dollar diplomacy and careful mediation could still offer the colonel a platform for reclaiming his international status. It is important to note that whether in African or the Middle East, Qadhafi sincerely believes that, through reduction of Western influence, these regions can best assert their interests and claim a place in the international scene commensurate with their resources.

Qadhafi's Approach Toward Africa: Historically, North Africa has been connected with Sub-Saharan Africa through trade and religion. The arrival of European states severed these links as economic relations were redefined according to imperial needs and Christian churches obscured Islam's influence. The essence of Qadhafi's African policy is to reverse this historic process and reformulate Africa's political, cultural, and economic landscape according to the perceived indigenous patterns. All aspects of Qadhafi's arsenal- such as supporting a variety of factions, military intervening, dispensing aid, and propagating Islam -- are designed to achieve that fundamental objective.

Libya's historic approach toward Africa can be conveniently delineated into two phases: a revolutionary posture and a more pragmatic phase. The 1970s and 1980s were the height of Libya's revolutionary activism as it sought to undermine African regimes it found objectionable. The 1990s witnessed a subtle shift in Qadhafi's approach as Libya sought to promote its long-standing goal of regional cohesion through a more constructive participation in multilateral arrangements and mediation of conflicts that have devastated the continent. As such, for the first time in three decades, Libya is seemingly serving a progressive role in Africa and has emerged as a source of stability. A more detailed survey of Qadhafi's approach to Africa will reveal that whatever posture the colonel embraces, he has long perceived that African interests will best be served through a recession of Western power.

During the 1970s, Libya's African policy was driven by Qadhafi's intense hostility to Israel. It is important to recall that in the 1960s Israel had successfully escaped its isolation in the Middle East by developing an extensive diplomatic and economic presence in Africa. The Israeli technical aid and modest financial subsidies established an important connection between Israel and the nascent economies of Uganda and Ethiopia. In the meantime, Israel and South Africa developed substantial cooperative relations. The muted African response to the 1967 War reflected the success of Israeli policy of neutralizing Africa from the Arab-Israeli conflict. Soon after arriving in power, Qadhafi energetically assaulted Israel's presence and made Libya's aid contingent on breaking diplomatic ties with Jerusalem. In the era of oil boom, Libya's aid exceeded Israel's offerings, and many African states, particularly those with sizeable Muslim populations severed their relations with Israel. In the end, twenty African states broke diplomatic relations with Israel, making the 1970s the nadir of Israel's influence on the continent.

Along with a fixation with Israel, the 1970s also featured the other facets of Qadhafi's ideology as Libya devoted itself to negation of Western influence and propagation of Islam. Tripoli quickly became an important source of opposition to the conservative African rulers and generously assisted liberation movements seeking to overthrow the white minority regimes of South Africa, Rhodesia and Angola. At a second and complementary level, Libya emerged as a major supporter of Islamic movements and states. The overemphasis on themes of pan-Africanism or Arabism should not detract attention from the fact that Libya has been one of the most determined exporters of Islamism.

Although Qadhafi's ideas on Islam radically contradict mainstream Sunnism, through the establishment of the Association for Propagation of Islam, the Jihad Fund, and the Islamic Legions, Libya has assisted Islamist forces for many decades. By the late 1970s, Libya became the most significant Arab state in to Sub-Saharan Africa, focusing particularly on the states with significant Muslim populations where it could combine its radical ideology with its anti-Americanism.

By the 1980s, the aggressive nature of Qadhafi's policy began to cause concern among the African states. Libya's intervention in Chad and its continuous interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states through subsidization of insurgencies caused many countries to sever relations with Tripoli. In the meantime, Libya's Islamic propagation exacerbated the internal difficulties of the religiously diverse states and contributed to African disenchantment with Qadhafi.

In addition to its foreign policy, even Libya's economic assistance became a source of contention. In the past, Libya's contributions have taken the form of direct financial assistance, oil concessions, and joint venture firms. Although all forms of Libyan aid come with ample strings, the joint ventures are particularly problematic as they reflect Tripoli's attempt to gain access to the mineral deposits of participant states. Given that Libya is the majority owner in all such dealings, the investments are a means of enhancing its political objectives and of gaining access to the region's natural resources. At any rate, by the late 1980s, the decline of the oil prices began to place restraints on Qadhafi's munificence, limiting an important avenue of Libya's influence in Africa.

The 1990s have been a difficult time for Qadhafi's regime. The revolutionary economic policies and the attempt to create an egalitarian order inflicted substantial structural damages on Libya's economy which the decline in oil revenues fully crystalized. The economic dislocation began to erode the national standard of living as Libya's unemployment and inflation rates approached 25% and 40% respectively. In the meantime, the austerity program which led to the freezing of salaries and reduction of public expenditures caused further discontent among the colonel's restive constituents. On the international level, Libya found itself under a sanctions regime and international ostracism arising from the 1988 Lockerbie affair. The confluence of these factors led Qadhafi to embark on yet another tactical shift and focus on rebuilding his base among the non-aligned states, particularly Africa. A more chastened Qadhafi departed Chad and intimated to the Organization of African Unity (OAU) his readiness to accept certain rules of conduct. In turn, the OAU was the first regional organization to defy the sanctions, and South African President Nelson Mandela took the lead in resolving the Lockerbie crisis and lifting the debilitating sanctions on Libya.

The post-Lockerbie period has witnessed a continuation of Libya's pragmatic diplomacy. Qadhafi has emerged as one of the leading mediators of African crises. The colonel brokered the accord leading to departure of Chadian forces from Congo and an apparent reconciliation between Kinshasa and Kampala. Qadhafi has also been instrumental in convincing the many internal factions in Congo to resume discussions with an eye toward some type of reconciliation. In the Horn of Africa, Libya has attempted to craft a settlement ending the conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea. The critical question is whether Qadhafi has abandoned his revolutionary radicalism and metamorphosized into a force for peace and stability?

The first explanation for Qadhafi's activism is that, rebuffed in the Arab world, the colonel is seeking an international role through visible mediation efforts and pledges of resuming high levels of aid to African states. This explanation is not entirely accurate, as Qadhafi has used his relationship with President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt to escape his isolation in the Middle East. Libya has close relations with Syria, Iran, Iraq, Sudan, Saudi Arabia. Even the moderate regime of Jordan and the Gulf sheikhdoms have similarly embarked on a rapprochement with Libya. Thus, the notion that Qadhafi is seeking a role in Africa because he is denied a position at the Arab round table is misleading. Although the colonel has recently made comments on the impracticality of pan-Arabism, he is still disinclined to

abandon the Arab realm.

Qadhafi's determination to play a prominent role in Africa must be viewed as part of a comprehensive diplomatic initiative that encompasses both the Arab and African realms. The basis of the new diplomacy may still be the Lockerbie imbroglio. Despite Qadhafi's feigned indifference to the trial, the Lockerbie affair looms large in his calculations. It is important to stress that the arrest of the two suspects does not end the Lockerbie issue, as the ebbs and flows of the trial can still affect the sanctions regime. The United States and the international community are unprepared to permanently lift the sanctions, which implies that evidence emerging from the trial or a potential conviction of the suspects could still confront Libya with the resumption of the economically coercive sanctions regime. In any potential conflict with the United States, Qadhafi will require the aid of the African states and the support of the OAU. Thus, the rehabilitation of Libya's image on the continent and construction of alliances buttressed by aid could prevent Libya from being isolated in a potential confrontation with the United States.

Beyond such calculations, the second cause of Qadhafi's involvement in Africa may be to gain strategic advantage. Certainly, in central Africa, the coalition of states- Angola, Zimbabwe and Sudan- that have attempted to maintain Laurent Kabila's regime in Congo, have close relations with Tripoli. For Qadhafi, Kabila is a more acceptable ruler than the alternatives, as the relationship between the two goes back to the 1980s when Libya was one of the few states to support Kabila's obscure rebellion. Moreover, Kabila's ideas seem compatible with Qadhafi's, as he also speaks of regional solidarity and exhibits a suspicion of the United States that for decades supported Mobutu's dictatorship. Thus, a negotiated settlement that keeps Kabila in power is likely to be in Libya's interests. A nexus of Libya, Sudan, Zimbabwe, Angola, and Congo is consistent with Qadhafi's ideological and strategic objectives. Such an alignment can provide Qadhafi a base of operation in the heart of Africa as well as an important bloc of support in the OAU.

A combination of motives may similarly account for Qadhafi's involvement in the Horn of Africa. The conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea is most unfortunate, as the initial relations between the two states were promising and hopeful. Certainly, a high-profile mediation role could further enhance Qadhafi's mantle of statesmanship. As with Central Africa, Libya may also be seeking to maximize its influence in a critical region that is the scene of competition between a number of states. At any rate, it is important not to exaggerate Libya's role in any of Africa's conflicts. Both the northern and central African crises have complex roots; none were initiated by Libya nor are likely to be resolved through Tripoli's individual efforts.

Conclusion: It is still unclear whether Libya will be a stabilizing force in Africa. Clearly, the need to escape his international isolation and the possibility of another round of confrontation with the United States has led Qadhafi to embark on a new diplomacy. Through his recent mediation efforts, the colonel has made a notable contribution to the cause of African peace and progress. However, the evidence at hand cannot yet support the claim of a fundamental Libyan reorientation. Qadhafi remains an ideologue who sincerely believes in the applicability of his ideas to the Third World. 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 dramatic tactical alterations, Qadhafi's historical conduct does 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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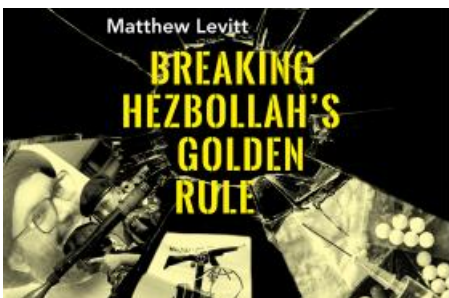
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