



THE ATLANTIC COUNCIL

OF THE UNITED STATES

BULLETIN

Vol. XIII, No. 3
April 2002

The War on Terrorism: The Libya Case

William H. Lewis. Ph.D.

Libya is a key test case in the war on terrorism. After more than a decade of Libyan terrorist attacks, the United Nations (UN) imposed strict sanctions on Libya in 1992 – demanding that it cease acts of terrorism and stop harboring terrorist groups. Libyan compliance with these demands was set as the necessary condition for it to regain access to the international community.

Accordingly, over the last several years, Libya forswore terrorism, expelled foreign terrorists and is working to meet the remaining criteria for regaining normal relations with the international community. In response to Libyan cooperation, UN sanctions were suspended in 1999, although unilateral U.S. sanctions remain in place. If Libya further demonstrates its bona fides by compensating the families of the Pan Am flight 103 bombing victims, which would also amount to acknowledging responsibility for the act, the United States should respond by restoring diplomatic relations, removing the travel ban and dropping trade and investment sanctions.

If the United States reneges on its promises and sets additional conditions for normalizing relations, it will send a strong signal to other problem states that the United States is unreliable and that cooperation will turn out to be counterproductive. Placing additional conditions on Libya would also harm U.S. interests by making U.S. allies less confident in the utility of multilateral cooperation.

Ending the Cycle of Violence

During the mid-1980s, Mu'ammarr Qaddafi's Libya appeared to be involved in several terrorist attacks against the West, including explosions at the Rome and Vienna airports and the 1986 bombing of a discotheque in Berlin, which killed two U.S. servicemen. In response, the United States launched an air strike on Libyan military installations that killed 70 people, including Qaddafi's daughter.

These incidents were followed by the 1988 destruction of Pan Am flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, which killed 270 people, including 189 U.S. citizens. A French airliner was downed in a similar attack less than a year later, again with suspected

Libyan involvement. Such Libyan-supported acts of terror were compounded by Qaddafi's generally aggressive behavior, which included invasions of neighboring countries. Qaddafi thus created a wide set of enemies in Libya and abroad.

By the early 1990s, the international community joined together in order to stop Libyan violence. In particular, three UN Security Council resolutions (731, 748 & 883) demanded that Libya "cease all forms of terrorist action and all assistance to terrorist groups." Libya was also ordered to demonstrate, "by concrete actions," its renunciation of terrorism and to "cooperate fully in establishing responsibility" for the bombing of the U.S. and French aircraft. The United

States then introduced a non-binding annex to the first resolution demanding that Libya pay compensation to its victims and accept responsibility for the bombings. (This annex was incorporated into the second resolution by reference.) The third and final resolution provided that UN sanctions would be suspended if Libya ensured the appearance of the bombing suspects before a British or U.S. court. However, in addition to UN sanctions, the United States imposed its own unilateral travel, trade and investment bans.

Libya was isolated as a result of the concerted action of the UN member states. Even commercial airline connections with Libya were curtailed in an effort to pressure Qaddafi's government to change its ways.

Has Qaddafi Changed?

Libya was one of the first countries to condemn publicly the devastating September 11th terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. More importantly, the Libyan government offered the support of its clandestine services in the U.S.-declared war against global terrorism. For example, Musa Kusa, Qaddafi's director of external intelligence, was sent to London for talks with senior U.S. officials. At the same time, Libya muted its criticism of U.S. policies in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. These initiatives are consistent with Libyan efforts over the last four years to improve relations with the United States and to fulfill the UN requirements for the suspension and eventual removal of sanctions.

Beginning in 1998, Libya ceased terrorist acts, closing all terrorist training camps on Libyan soil and expelling the Abu Nidal terrorist organization. Qaddafi terminated his support for Hamas and Hizbollah and, in 1999, surrendered two intelligence officers for trial by a Scottish tribunal in the Netherlands in connection with the Pan Am flight 103 attack. One of the two officers, Abdel Baset al-Megrahi, was subsequently found guilty and his conviction was recently upheld following an appeal. Furthermore, the Libyans are conducting serious negotiations with representatives of the Pan Am 103 families for the payment of compensation. Qaddafi's son is directly involved in the talks and Libya is

reportedly offering \$3.5 billion, although the families are holding out for considerably more. Libya reached a similar compensation deal after the conviction of six Libyan agents for sabotaging a French airliner. France considered this as representing tacit Libyan acknowledgment of responsibility for the attack.

Qaddafi has forsaken terrorism for good reason and tried to improve relations with the West. After inspiring terrorist methods and groups, Qaddafi found himself the target of terrorist violence. The Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, for example, conducted a lengthy insurgency and attempted on several occasions to assassinate him.

Furthermore, the depressed Libyan economy stands to benefit from better relations with the West in general and particularly with the United States. The decline in the Libyan economy and in Libyan living standards can be attributed directly to Qaddafi's mismanagement. The corresponding loss in public confidence could lead to adverse political consequences for Qaddafi and his regime.

Even so, it is easy to be skeptical about whether Mu'ammār Qaddafi has changed fundamentally. His long record of anti-American words and deeds speaks volumes about his beliefs and attitudes. Understandably, these words and deeds also provide a solid basis for the tendency of U.S. leaders to personalize the problems inherent in international conflicts. Like Fidel Castro and Saddam Hussein, Qaddafi has made it easy for Americans to view him in simple, evil terms.

Problem state behavior does not, however, result from bad leadership alone. This flawed perception creates the misleading expectation that problem state behavior can only be corrected by changing the regimes in power. The United States should focus more on the specific problematic behavior of states—in this case terrorism—and less on the individuals running those states. Qaddafi's *volte face* in regards to acts of terrorism is indeed proof that the behavior of a problem state can in some cases be altered without forcing a change in regime.

In meeting the many complex challenges of defeating terrorism, the United States needs international cooperation. This cooperation is likely to be enhanced by the encouraging examples of former state sponsors of terrorism that have changed their ways and that now cooperate in dealing with this long-term problem. The recent reversal of U.S.-Pakistani relations demonstrates the willingness of the United States to mute political differences and drop economic sanctions in favor of anti-terrorist cooperation. Similarly, Libya can be a positive example of the benefits of such cooperation.

The United States stands to reap substantial gains from Libyan intelligence on al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations. Information that Libya may possess on key individuals, financial networks, "sleeper agents," plans, targets, and linkages among various terrorist groups would be useful.

Don't Move the Goal Line

Despite Libya's recent cooperation in the war on terrorism, some in the United States will not be satisfied with Libyan responses to U.S. demands and will seek to withhold the possibility of better relations until Qaddafi personally confesses his guilt in atrocities such as the bombing of Pan Am flight 103. But the guilty verdict against a Libyan intelligence officer in this case, combined with payment of compensation to the affected families, should satisfy U.S. national interests (although not the personal interests of all Americans) without more explicit Libyan acceptance of responsibility. After all, the top current U.S. interest is that Libya cease all acts of terrorism, stop its support for extra-national terrorist activities and cooperate with the United States and other countries in the war on terrorism. Qaddafi's Libya appears to have already done just that.

The manner in which the United States deals with a more cooperative Libya is important because it will have a significant impact in the Middle East and in the Muslim world more broadly. If the United States places additional conditions on restoring diplomatic

relations and removing sanctions, it would undermine the prospects for future multinational cooperation against state-sponsored terrorism, especially from Muslim states.

The success of this key test case in the war on terrorism hinges on the explicit linkage between Libya's renunciation of terrorism and the lifting of U.S. sanctions. Libya seems very close to complying with the demands established by the UN, though the United States may be tempted to impose additional conditions (or unreasonably strict interpretations of existing conditions) on Qaddafi's government before lifting the sanctions and travel ban. These conditions would probably be related to chemical weapons facilities and missile programs because of the dangerous linkage between terrorism and weapons of mass destruction, noted by President Bush in his State of the Union address. In particular, Bush cited Iraq, Iran and North Korea in this regard as an "axis of evil." Libya was significantly and specifically not included in this group because of the dramatic changes in Libyan behavior noted over the last four years and particularly since the September 11th terrorist attacks on the United States.

U.S. concerns about chemical weapons and missiles *are* justified, but they should be dealt with separately from the terrorism-sanctions deal. There is room for optimism regarding these troublesome issues. For example, Qaddafi has indicated that he will sign the Chemical Weapons Convention, which would lead to intrusive international inspections and should induce a good measure of Libyan self-restraint.

Libya is only one front in the war on terrorism, but it could provide an important example to other state sponsors of terrorism. The United States should thus recognize the positive steps taken by Libya. Should it fail to do so, the United States risks creating exasperation with its demands on the part of states such as Libya and increasing reluctance to cooperate on the part of the international community.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. William Lewis is a retired foreign service officer who served in Libya and has published several books, studies and articles on the Middle East and North Africa.

The author's views presented herein do not necessarily represent those of the Atlantic Council.

RECENT PUBLICATIONS

This bulletin is part of a series of projects on “Reversing Relations with Adversaries”, run by the Program on International Security of the Atlantic Council of the United States. Recent publications in this series include:

Libya

- *U.S.-Libya Relations: A New Chapter*, William H. Lewis, May 2001.

Iran

- *Managing Proliferation Issues with Iran*, C. Richard Nelson and David H. Saltiel, January 2002.
- *Moving Past Dual Containment: Iran, Iraq and the Future of U.S. Policy in the Gulf*, David H. Saltiel and Jason S. Purcell, January 2002.
- *Thinking Beyond the Stalemate in U.S.-Iranian Relations: Volume II - Issues and Analysis*, Elaine L. Morton, July 2001.
- *Thinking Beyond the Stalemate in U.S.-Iranian Relations: Volume I - Policy Review*, Elaine L. Morton, May 2001.
- *U.S.-Iranian Relations: An Analytic Compendium of U.S. Policies, Laws and Regulations*, Kenneth Katzman, December 1999.

Cuba

- *A Road Map for Restructuring Future U.S. Relations with Cuba*, Kenneth Weisbrode (Rapporteur), July 1995.

For a full text online version of this or other Atlantic Council publications, please visit www.acus.org
