

Libya Comes in From the Cold

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After decades of sowing terror abroad while crushing dissent at home, Libya is finally coming into the international fold. In 2003, the wily, enigmatic, and forever eccentric Col. Muammar al-Qaddafi renounced terrorism and his weapons of mass destruction. He and his regime have also made good, in part, on reparations to families of the Lockerbie disaster and the 1986 bombing of a Berlin discotheque that killed two United States servicemen. In fact, Libya has even been hosting talks aimed at resolving the crisis in Darfur.

At the same time, the Colonel Qaddafi's son, Saif al-Islam, a Westernized, self-styled reformer, has made numerous public statements and policy announcements ostensibly intended to repair Libya's dismal human rights record—along with repeated overtures to Washington. Libya has plenty of other things to offer, too—including significant natural resources, strong intelligence assets in one of the most volatile parts of the Arab world and a shared interest in neutralizing Al Qaeda, its loyalists, and its emulators.

But when it comes to rapprochement between the North African nation of 5.7 million and the United States, many lawmakers, State Department officials, and policy experts are concerned that Washington is dragging its feet over domestic concerns—namely, passions over the 1988 explosion that destroyed Pan Am Flight 103 and claimed 270 victims, mostly Americans.

Moreover, say experts, by hindering full diplomatic relations with Libya, bitter memories of the Lockerbie tragedy are effectively sabotaging vital American interests in the region. And time may be running out.

This political pressure was readily apparent on Oct. 16 when Alejandro D. Wolff, the deputy American ambassador to the United Nations, refused to say how the United States voted after Libya was overwhelmingly elected by United Nations member states to serve a two-year term on the United Nations Security Council.

"We look forward to working with all new members that are elected," he said, according to *The New York Times*.

Some cooperation is already underway. In addition to garnering the "rendition" of Libyan Islamists from places like Afghanistan, Thailand, and Hong Kong, Libya is participating in an American effort to track Islamist militants across the Sahara. Libyan intelligence agents, meanwhile, have helped American interrogation of detainees at Guantanamo, according to *The Economist*. But many in Washington say the United States needs to do better—and soon.

W.M.D.'s and a Diplomatic Opening

Four years ago, Colonel Qaddafi—the longest-ruling leader in the Middle East—officially renounced Libya's terrorist activities and weapons of mass destruction (W.M.D.'s). The White House and its Republican allies on Capitol Hill immediately trumpeted Libya as a shining consequence of their preemptive war against Iraq—while ignoring evidence that Libya may have had other motivations.

International sanctions have been lifted, and United States scientists have quietly begun to dismantle Libya's nuclear and chemical weapons facilities—designed, in part, with technology from Pakistani rogue nuclear scientist A. Q. Khan and North Korea. In the process, they are gaining valuable insights into the intricacies of W.M.D. programs in other parts of the world. Diplomatic engagement between Washington and Tripoli has since begun in earnest.

"We wanted to show you can have a rogue nation—a supporter of terrorism with weapons of mass destruction—coming in from the cold to our side," said David Mack, a Libya expert at the Middle East Institute and a former translator for the United States ambassador to Tripoli. "It wasn't initially our prime candidate, but it became our prime candidate."

Still, he added, "I think we should be moving faster—for the sake of U.S. strategic interests." Well before, European Union countries began infusing enormous amounts of money into Libya. These funds are flowing in by the billions: not only in development aid, debt forgiveness—and, of course, comprehensive investment in the former Italian colony's oil and natural gas sectors—but also in sales of military hardware. In addition, the French are helping the Libyans build nuclear power.

By contrast, Washington has a staff of only half a dozen State Department officials operating out of makeshift offices at the Corinthian, a four-star Tripoli hotel. As a result, even high-ranking Libyan officials must make lengthy trips to neighboring Tunisia—which shares no air links with Tripoli—to initiate the long-drawn-out process of applying for a United States visa.

The reason rests in the Senate. In July, four Senate Democrats, led by Frank Lautenberg of New Jersey, renewed their pledge to block President Bush's nominee to be ambassador to Libya—Gene Cretz, currently deputy chief of mission at the United States Embassy in Israel—pending full compensation to the relatives of victims of Lockerbie and terror attacks in the 1980's. So far, the Libyan government has reached a settlement to compensate the families of the Pan Am 103 victims to the tune of \$10 million per victim. However, Tripoli has yet to pay the last \$2 million to each of the Lockerbie families who believe they are owed.

"Libya must no longer be allowed to drag its feet," said Lautenberg, Reuters reported, "and the U.S. must not pursue fully normalized diplomatic relations with Libya until they fulfill their legal obligations to American families."

Lautenberg enjoys powerful support on Capitol Hill. His allies include Democratic Senators Robert Menendez of New Jersey, Hillary Clinton and Charles Schumer of New York, Carl Levin of Michigan, and Joseph R. Biden of Delaware.

"Libya needs to understand that the way forward must finally and fully account for the past," said Biden, who is also chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, in a statement. "The bombings of the Pan Am flight and La Belle discotheque in Germany are unforgivable and unforgettable."

Others, however, say full diplomatic relations is part of the solution—not the problem.

"It's important to keep in mind that an ambassador to a country isn't a reward—it's a tool," said Nicole Thompson, a State Department spokeswoman. "We believe having an ambassador in Tripoli is important to resolving bilateral issues."

Republican Senator Richard Lugar of Indiana, the ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee agrees. "We cannot allow that nation's success story to falter in any way," he said at a conference sponsored by the United States-Libya Business Association in Washington on Nov. 6, according to *U.S. News and World Report*. He recalled a 2005 meeting with Colonel Qaddafi in which the Libyan leader complained, "A great deal has been given up, and not much has been attained."

David Goldwyn, executive director of the United States-Libya Business Association, also says the Libyans are losing patience. "What they hear from other countries in the neighborhood is 'you gave up all this stuff and what did you get for this?'" he said. "This is a parent-child relationship, not a fellow country relationship—and the longer we wait, the less likely they are to listen to us." Goldwyn and others say the potential of loss of influence over an economy with such vast natural resources cannot be overlooked.

Indeed, with proven reserves one-sixth the size of Saudi Arabia's, enhanced access to Libyan oil markets, some have suggested, could be the antidote America needs to curtail at least partly its energy dependence on the country that produced 15 of the 19 Sept. 11 hijackers.

Much more of a wait could also trump any influence Washington might have over Libya's sorry human rights record, according to Libya-watchers like Mack of the Middle East Institute. "You can't do it on the cheap, you have to have normal relations to engage people with what can be embarrassing issues," said Mack. "In Libya, where we don't have an ambassador in a hotel, where they can't issue visas, it all becomes that much harder."

And then there is terrorism.