



LIBYA: REVOLUTION FORTY YEARS ON

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Living With Libya

While British Prime Minister Gordon Brown struggles to hold his government together after only two years in power, Libya's Colonel Qaddafi has no such worries. He has outlived the majority of his Cold War compatriots and stands as the longest-serving leader in the Arab and African worlds. Protected by the politics of oil, Libya is buying its way back into the international arena. Qaddafi's power lies not in his own strengths, but in the weakness of others.

ON SEPTEMBER 1, MUAMMAR Qaddafi will celebrate his fortieth year in power after ousting King Idris al Sanussi in a military coup. Having marched back onto the world stage with all the ceremonious pomp and glamour befitting a self-appointed colonel, the Leader and his Revolutionary Command Council will have plenty to celebrate and will no doubt be entertained by the satirical nature of historical irony.

After being crippled by over a decade of international sanctions, Libya has taken to restoring its international credentials by acquiring a string of United Nations posts. Four short years after relinquishing its own weapons of mass destruction programme, Libya served on the International Atomic Energy Agency's Board of Governors.

Its ascent to the world stage was further marked by its controversial two-year non-permanent appointment to the UN Security Council, beginning in January last year. Next came Libya's chairmanship of Durban II, the UN anti-racism conference, soon to be followed in September by the presidency of the UN General Assembly. Qaddafi's daughter, Ayesha, is also set to be appointed a UN goodwill ambassador.

Whether or not Qaddafi makes an appearance at the UN headquarters in New York to celebrate his country's accomplishments is uncertain. Regardless, his status as an international statesman was sealed at the G8 summit of leading economies in July, when he attended as the presiding Chairman of the African Union.

SAFEGUARDING INTERESTS

When Qaddafi first came to power in 1969, Britain and the United States were committed to safeguarding their interests and maintaining friendly relations with whoever was in power, even if it involved the unashamedly unconstitutional overthrow of the Libyan monarchy, an ally of 23 years. Initial acceptance of the coup was based on the distinction between ideology and nationalism as the driving force behind revolutionary upheaval, and the assumed manageability of the latter.

Envoys advocated toleration of the regime, believing in their ability, right and duty to help guide Libya's political transition from a traditional to a modern state. However displeasing, dealing with a Bedouin who drank the contents of his fingerbowl was ultimately tolerable, not least because he was a rich revolutionary.

Forty years on, little has changed. Britain and the US continue attempts to align their interests with Libya's inescapable process of change. Energy, security and regional stability remain profitable and politically viable tenets of a policy that frames a multitude of partnerships with the regime.

Foreign assistance to Libya contributes to the development of the national economic

strategy, public administration reform and the modernisation of the health, education and banking sectors. Belief in the western advantage remains undeterred, even in the face of Iraq and Afghanistan. With the current global financial downturn, Libya's vast oil wealth is as attractive as ever.

KEEP ENEMIES CLOSE

The major question for policy-makers forty years ago was not where Qaddafi was heading, but whether he had the means to lead others there. Very quickly dismissed by his Arab brethren as a 'nut-case', initial apprehension about his ability to cause mischief in the Arab world was gleefully given 'a snowflake's chance in hell' of succeeding by Foreign Office officials in Tripoli. Attempts today to lead a United States of Africa are not expected to fare any better.

But while Qaddafi's dream of African unity is politely dismissed as fantasy, he has offered more tangible contributions to stability and security across the continent. Europe and the US have found a particularly valuable ally in their fight against Islamist extremism.

The intelligence partnership with Libya has developed openly but quietly and has proved particularly valuable in the fight against Al Qaeda. It was the Libyans who first requested an international arrest warrant for Osama bin Laden in 1998 and they have since continued to support the international crackdown on radical groups and Al Qaeda operatives in the region.

But while Libyan intelligence officers have reportedly been allowed to interrogate Libyan prisoners at Guantanamo Bay, the former head of the country's Foreign Intelligence Service, Mussa Kussa, is himself still banned from visiting the US because of his suspected involvement in the 1988 Lockerbie PanAm airliner bombing. He is now Foreign Minister.

OLD FRIENDS, NEW FRIENDS

Foreign envoys based in Libya describe living with Qaddafi as 'difficult', 'irritating' and at times downright 'depressing'. That was forty years ago. Today, few disagree, but political correctness and protocol prompt official ambassadorial commentaries to term the experience 'unique', 'challenging' and 'challengingly non-transparent'.

Nevertheless, seemingly unfazed by the potential for future disruption and believing once again in the superior quality of western

International Events

August-September

AUGUST 7 First anniversary of confrontation between Georgia and Russia

AUGUST 20 Presidential election in Afghanistan

SEPTEMBER 17 Non-Aligned summit in Cairo

SEPTEMBER 24 G20 Summit in Pittsburgh

SEPTEMBER 24 Trial of two Congolese warlords expected to start at International Criminal Court

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technical assistance, policy-makers are determined to concentrate on living with the new Libya. And judging by the exponentially increasing number of guests each year for official celebrations of the revolution, so is everyone else. In these times of global financial crisis, who says money cannot buy friends?

Much of the confidence and optimism surrounding this 'new' relationship with Libya is based on an underlying assumption about its political future: that the next Libyan leader will be more manageable, not least because any ideological commitment to the Green Book will die with the Colonel.

Proponents of present policy therefore argue that a new relationship is in fact being developed with the next generation of Qaddafis – not the Colonel but his sons. Seif al-Islam al-Qaddafi and Mutassim Billha al-Qaddafi are seen as the two most likely successors.

Seif, who is Chairman of the Qaddafi Foundation for International Charities and Development, a quasi-government entity, has been the public face of Libya's international agreements over the past few years, including compensation negotiations with the US and Europe.

Mutassim Billah, Minister of the National Security Council, is a more recent contender, forgiven for his alleged involvement in an Egyptian-backed coup against his father. While Mutassim has a lower international media profile than Seif, he does have the military credentials his older brother lacks. Both are heavily supported by a multitude of consultancy firms.

Thus despite previous ambassadorial urgings to establish a new relationship with the regime built on a 'different' and 'more durable footing', the approach to the younger faces of the Qaddafi regime remains eerily familiar. This new chapter of British-Libyan relations already bears the imprint of the well-worn tale of 'good dictatorships', democratic compromise and lucrative financial returns.

British policy today is based on the same assumptions and presumptions it was forty years ago, and while this is not to say that it cannot move forward, it would be unwise for London to believe that it is immune to any of the risks and misjudgements of the past.

SQUARING THE CIRCLE

The revolution came as a 'surprise' but 'no real shock' to either the US or British intelligence services. The desperate need for modernisation was certainly familiar to western



envoys, confirmed by their own observations over the preceding years. The frustration of younger elements with widespread corruption was understandable.

The nationalist credo of the revolution was unmistakably born of domestic underdevelopment and, as such, the transition to modernity was a cause to which Britain and the US could both align themselves and contribute. Perhaps they still can.

There is a head of steam behind attempts at sensible reform-building today, but vested interests slow the process and risk stifling it to nothing more than a cough. Libya's civil reformers argue that, contrary to facilitating development in the political sphere, current economic reform programmes and bilateral trade negotiations have so far only served to strengthen the existing political system. The practical and operational problems of the old regime remain; there is no discussion of alternative government structures under a dictatorship that leaves little room for genuine development.

For the diaspora, their country's reintegration into the international fold was received with a mixture of relief, excitement, hope and cautious curiosity. The decision to return is a personal one, but many have been drawn to the promise of reform, the potential it provides and the desire to contribute in some way to the development of their homeland. As a step in Libya's political development, the revolution was irreversible, as is its return to the international fold.

