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QADHAFI'S CHRISTMAS GIFT: WHAT'S BEHIND LIBYA'S DECISION TO RENOUNCE WMD?

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Mu'ammar al-Qadhafi has once again captured the international limelight. On 19 December 2003, on the eve of the 15th anniversary of the downing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, he surprised the world by announcing his decision to dismantle Libya's weapons of mass destruction (WMD). This dramatic declaration was greeted by widespread approval from the international community, particularly from the United States, at which the Libyan announcement was primarily aimed. Concurrently, Libya also announced its decision to halt its drive to develop missiles with a range exceeding 300 km. and to open up all its WMD stockpiles and programs to international inspection in order to ensure their elimination. If all these measures are carried out, Libya will be able to divert resources and energies to internal construction, to rehabilitate relations with the US, and to reap the rewards in almost every facet of Libyan life.

Libya's acknowledgement of WMD marks a dramatic shift from Tripoli's longstanding policy of unequivocally denying the possession of any such weapons. Allegations to that effect have been repeatedly raised in the West, especially by the US. In an interview in *The Washington Post* in early 2003, Qadhafi was asked by Lally Weymouth about Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's claim that Libya, with the help of Iraq, would be the first Arab country to develop nuclear weapons. The Libyan leader responded by saying that Sharon was crazy and that Libya did not have enough money to manufacture weapons of mass destruction.

In spring 2003, Saif al-Islam al-Qadhafi -- the Libyan leader's son and possible successor, who is already playing a leading role in his country's foreign policy -- repeated the official position that Libya possesses neither WMD nor the means to deliver them. Although his unequivocal denial was not exceptional, it was of special interest since it was given in an article published in *Middle East Policy* and was aimed, first and foremost, at the American policy-making establishment, as part of a broader effort to resolve the chronic conflict between Tripoli and Washington. To further underscore Libya's disinterest in acquiring WMD, Saif al-Islam stressed the fact that his country had signed the nuclear non-proliferation (NPT) and test-ban (CTBT) treaties as well as the agreement barring biological weapons. Against this background of persistent denials, however, a "senior

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Administration official" in Washington insisted that Libya's nuclear weapons program was "much further advanced" than US intelligence had previously thought and that it included centrifuges and a uranium enrichment program, all necessary components in a nuclear weapons program.

This gap between Libyan and American versions of Libya's WMD programs recalled the controversy in the late 1980s-early 1990s over American accusations that Libya was constructing a chemical weapons plant in Rabta, southwest of Tripoli. Libya also denied those allegations and clung to its explanation that the plant was confined solely to the production of pharmaceuticals. At the height of the Rabta controversy, a fire broke out in the plant, causing extensive damage. The smoke screen of ambiguity that enveloped the incident left unresolved the question of whether the blaze was an accident or had been caused by sabotage. Libya was then reported by Western sources to be building a second chemical-weapons facility in a remote desert location in Sabha, south of Tripoli. Libya flatly denied that claim, as well.

Until his latest pronouncement, Qadhafi had consistently affirmed the importance and legitimacy of acquiring WMD, either through production or procurement abroad. He noted that no one had objected to Israel's acquisition of chemical weapons and insisted that not only Libya but the entire Arab nation had the right and the duty to acquire WMD, particularly since Israel also had nuclear capability. During the 1990s, he therefore encouraged any company or state to come to Libya to build a chemical factory, promising to sign the contract personally and to pay one billion (currency not specified). Moreover, he repeatedly called on the Arab world to develop a deterrent force, including a nuclear bomb. He went a step further and encouraged university students and faculties throughout Libya to work day and night to intensify efforts to manufacture a nuclear weapon in defiance of America and Israel.

This position was fully consistent with a broader posture of provoking and defying the American leadership and challenging its ideological perceptions and essential interests in the Middle East. Qadhafi's posture was nourished by his belief – expressed on many occasions during the last decade – that the United States was determined to eradicate him politically.

Given this history, Libya's recent announcement constitutes an about-face that is explained, in the first instance, by fear of an American military attack. The American bombing of Tripoli and Benghazi on 15 April 1986 is still fresh in Qadhafi's mind, and the crushing defeat of Iraq in 2003 almost certainly reinforced his fears of a new attack. Moreover, if Libya's renunciation of WMD proceeds smoothly, it will lead to the long-sought removal of US sanctions, both those imposed in 1986 by the Reagan Administration and those specified in the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA) of 1996. Once that happens, Libya can reap a variety of economic and political rewards and might even gain new access to defensive weaponry. Libya also urgently needs substantial injections of technological equipment and know-how for its oil industry and oil-related economy. Having just celebrated his 34th anniversary in office, Qadhafi needs to revive some sense of political and economic dynamism in order to reinvigorate his hold on power, particularly against his Islamist opposition. Only a friendly US can help him achieve these crucial goals.

While the Libyan decision definitely signals a major victory for US foreign policy, it also gives Libya, itself, an opportunity to make important gains. In the wake of Qadhafi's dramatic declaration, his mouthpieces, *al-Jamahiriyya* and *al-Shams*, proclaimed that by taking such a courageous decision, the Great Jamahiriyya will serve as a role model that should be emulated by the big powers, even before the smaller ones, in order to bring about a more civilized world free of the threat of weapons of mass destruction.

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