

Editor: **Mark A. Heller**

May 25, 2006

THE RENEWAL OF US-LIBYAN DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS: A NEW CHANCE FOR LIBYA

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Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi's relations with American presidents, which have had their ups and downs since the 1970s and 1980s, reached a new peak with the May 15 announcement that Washington was renewing relations with Tripoli. On the same occasion, the US removed Libya from its list of state sponsors of terrorism. Since the US had also taken the initiative of breaking relations two and a half decades ago, this step closed a circle of enmity, terror and serious clashes of interest between two states so different, not only in their internal political character and power in the international arena, but also in their social and economic world-views, their religious and ideological cultures, and their regional and global agendas. That circle of enmity had encompassed a variety of conflicts fed, in no small measure, by the Cold War, during which Libya had sided with the Soviet Union, and by a religious-cultural contradiction that Qaddafi termed "the war between Christianity and Islam."

The renewal of relations serves both sides but its timing was decided by Washington following growing signs of frustration by Qaddafi that his unprecedented efforts at conciliation – especially

his renunciation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in December 2003 -- had not produced the promised benefits. The US, grappling with Iran and North Korea's unwillingness to give up the nuclear weapons they have or aspire to, could not allow itself any longer to withhold from Libya the "grand prize." As Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice emphasized in announcing the renewal of ties, Libya ought to serve as a model of emulation for Iran and North Korea.

The renewal of relations consummated a process that began with the end of the Lockerbie trial in early 2001, more than twelve years after the explosion of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland. The US and Britain claimed that Libya was responsible for the bombing and demanded that the two suspects, both Libyan agents, be handed over for trial to one country or the other. Libya adamantly refused and Washington and London responded by pushing through a UN resolution imposing international sanctions on Libya in an effort to force it to hand over the two men. The sanctions regime was one of the strictest ever imposed on a Middle Eastern state and it lasted for seven years, from 1992 to 1999. Sanctions, especially the embargo on air traffic,



Published by TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY

The Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies & The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies
through the generosity of Sari and Israel Roizman, Philadelphia

www.tau.ac.il/jcss/

www.dayan.org/

hit at the soft underbelly of Libya, headed by Qaddafi since 1969. As their grip tightened on the economic and political arteries of the regime, the growing distress of the population worked to the advantage of the Islamist opposition, to the point where it threatened Qaddafi's hold on power. Several assassination attempts shook Qaddafi's self-confidence, as did the infiltration of Islamists into the ranks of the army – his traditional power base – and the drastic drop in oil revenues, which account for about 95% of national income. Isolated following the collapse of the Soviet Union and deserted by the Arab world, Qaddafi was ultimately persuaded that he had no choice but to compromise: the two suspects were extradited to the Netherlands for trial. In early 2001, one of the men was sentenced to life imprisonment.

That marked the beginning of change. The US quickly presented Libya with a list of conditions but made it clear to Qaddafi that if he complied, the US would cancel the sanctions that it had imposed in the 1980s and were still in effect and would also work to rescind the UN sanctions that had meanwhile been suspended but never officially canceled. American terms included Libyan acknowledgement of responsibility for the Lockerbie bombing and payment of financial compensation to the families of the victims, as well as an end to involvement in international terrorism and the opening up of WMD stocks to international inspection. This last demand was part of an ongoing campaign since the 1980s against the giant chemical weapons production plants that the Americans claimed were constructed in Rabta and Tarhouna, southeast of Tripoli. Until then, Qaddafi had vehemently denied the American charges but insisted on Libya's right to develop WMD, including nuclear weapons, because "the Zionist enemy" allegedly already had such weapons and the

Arabs were obliged to protect themselves.

However, the break-up of the Soviet Union in the late-1980s/early-1990s, which deprived Libya of its main foreign support, and the terrorist attacks in the United States on 11 September 2001 dramatically changed both the individual agendas of Libya and the United States and that of their bilateral relations. Libya, seriously weakened by the decline in oil revenues and the loss of its superpower patron, urgently needed to repair its standing in the West because it needed massive inflows of capital and of technological know-how, which only the West could provide.

As a result, Qaddafi hastened to offer Libya's condolences to the American people after the 9/11 attacks, an indirect declaration of his decision to abandon any involvement in international terrorism and to adopt new patterns of behavior. The two states, each for its own reasons, found common ground after 9/11 and, paradoxically, the man whom the US had viewed as an international terrorist and whom Ronald Reagan and his successors had branded a threat to American national security was transformed into a respected partner in the fight against international terrorism. Back-channel diplomatic contacts and periodic meetings between Libyan security agencies and those of the US and Britain bore fruit for both sides. Qaddafi worked to eliminate extremist Islamist elements that threatened his regime and the US gladly relied on his help to track down terrorists who threatened American interests at home as well as friendly regimes in the Middle East and elsewhere.

Qaddafi had for decades insisted on calling the White House the "Black House." The renewal of relations is the culmination of his decision to repaint that House white.

KEYWORD: Libya