



Editor: Bruce Maddy-Weitzman

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Qaddafi and his Nuclear Program: Second Thoughts?

Yehudit Ronen

A political cartoon entitled “The West Threatens to Step Up Sanctions on Iran” appeared recently in a Kuwaiti newspaper. It depicted Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad tied down to a bed by flimsy ropes while a strong Western or American hand tickles the soles of his feet with a soft feather, causing him to laugh hysterically.

How might Libyan leader Mu`ammar al-Qaddafi react to this cartoon? What memories and associations have been provoked in Tripoli by the issue of sanctions on Iran? How does Qaddafi assess the strategic and political outcomes of his renunciation of Libya’s clandestine nuclear weapons program in 2003, an exceptional case in the annals of the global nuclear order? Does he regret his action? Would he act differently today, particularly against the backdrop of Iran’s determined drive to advance its nuclear program and the weak Western efforts to inhibit it? More importantly, is Qaddafi at all

contemplating the possibility of a renewal of his own program in line with his repeatedly declared principle of “the right of any state to acquire a nuclear program for civilian goals?” Or are these statements merely a tactic to persuade the US to supply Libya with advanced weaponry and civilian nuclear technology, as Libya claims to have been promised in return for agreeing to abandon its WMD program?

Libya’s surprising decision to dismantle its WMD program, including the nuclear component, was announced on December 19, 2003. It came on the eve of the 15th anniversary of the explosion of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, and four years after the suspension of crippling UN Security Council sanctions on Tripoli, following the handing over of two Libyan intelligence officials for trial before a special Scottish court sitting in the Netherlands. In retrospect, the decision had considerable logic. Seven years of Libyan diplomatic and economic isolation from the international community had taken its toll on the country: growing socio-economic grievances, which generated political resentment and resulted in the emergence of a dangerous radical Islamic opposition, threatened the regime’s survival. Moreover, Qaddafi had extracted whatever possible political gain from his unceasing religio-nationalist confrontation with “evil Western imperialism”. Hence, the time was now ripe for Tripoli’s engagement in a direct dialogue with Washington and London.

With the passage of time and following the end of the Lockerbie crisis and the ultimate cancellation of the UN sanctions, their triangular dialogue eventually resulted in the Libyan decision to renounce its WMD program. This dramatic act caught much of the international community by surprise on several counts. Not only had Libya surprised the international community by dismantling its clandestine program, it had also demonstrated its capacity to acquire advanced

nuclear technology and materials, including centrifuges for enriching uranium, notwithstanding seven years of tough sanctions and international isolation.

At the time, Qaddafi portrayed the renunciation as a “win-win deal” and a “courageous” step towards building “a green, peaceful and stable planet.” Moreover, he called on Syria, Iran and North Korea to follow in Tripoli’s footsteps. His prime minister at the time, economist and prominent reformist Shukri Ghanem, even described Libya’s action in terms of the Prophet Isaiah’s vision of the End of Days, “the turning of our swords into ploughshares.” Obviously, Qaddafi and his son and heir apparent Saif al-Islam expected to reap substantial and prompt rewards for what they regarded as their country’s huge political and military sacrifice.

Six years later, however, on the eve of a January 2010 visit by Iran’s Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki to Tripoli, Libya’s ambassador to Tehran found the moment appropriate to declare that “Libya has not frozen its nuclear program.” Yet, in the same breath, Tripoli clarified that it had no intention of developing nuclear weapons. Still, the ambassador’s statement, obviously made with the approval of his superiors, indicated Tripoli’s accumulating frustration and even rage over what it views as the West’s flagrant failure to reward Libya for having sacrificed its clandestine program. Qaddafi publicly vented his feelings on a number of occasions, including one in which he professed the right of a future Palestinian state to be militarized. In another statement, he objected to the possibility of any military action being taken against Iran, apparently having in mind the still traumatic American air attack on Libya in 1986.

While expressing disappointment and a sense of betrayal by the West, and in

particular the US, for what he perceives to be a breach of their commitment to Libya, Qaddafi has remained careful not to relapse into a confrontation mode. Attempting to exert pressure on Washington, even while further rebuking it, the Libyan leader revealed to a Western interviewer that he had appealed to Iran and North Korea, at America's request, to halt their nuclear weapons programs, but had been rebuffed with a counter-question: "What had Libya earned from its renunciation deal?" In other words, in Qaddafi's view, the deal with the West had not been fully implemented. Qaddafi made the point even more explicitly to another Western media outlet, declaring that Libya "did not receive any reward from the world".

While still hoping to be rewarded according to his expectations, and having been strengthened by his country's flourishing economy, internal political stability and the important inputs of his son into the handling of Libya's domestic and foreign affairs, Qaddafi has become increasingly vocal in challenging Western efforts to block Iran's nuclear program. As Tehran continues to proceed with its efforts, Libya, as well as other countries in the Middle East and beyond, are watching and apparently drawing conclusions. Libya's Defense Minister, General Abu Bakr Yunis, recently visited Moscow, where he purchased nearly \$2 billion worth of Russian arms and military equipment. Although no details were given, and although no formal reference was made regarding the newly-established military cooperation between Libya and Russia, Tripoli's wish to acquire nuclear technology gives room to assume that the subject was high on the agenda of their bilateral discussions..

With Iran striding towards acquiring a nuclear weapons capability, one may assume that other Middle Eastern states are likely to follow suit. This, in turn, might turn the Middle East into a poly-nuclear region. Is Libya going to give

life to its long-standing insistence that all states, including the Arab ones, may legitimately possess nuclear weapons?

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