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THE LIBYAN-SAUDI DIPLOMATIC RUPTURE

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On 22 December 2004, Saudi Arabia expelled the Libyan ambassador from Riyadh and withdrew its own diplomatic envoy from Tripoli. The expulsion followed Saudi accusations of a Libyan plot to assassinate Crown Prince Abdallah bin Abd al-Aziz Saud and other prominent members of the Saudi Government. The alleged conspiracy was first exposed in summer 2004 but the Saudis claimed that they needed half a year more to complete their investigation and officially charge Libya. However, the Saudis, though determined to lodge a strong protest and send an effective deterrent message, did not want to overreact, and they insisted that their action was a "limited measure" which did not amount to severing diplomatic relations. This "restraint" was explained by Saudi Arabia's respect for the Libyan people and its desire not to harm their ability to perform the annual Hajj pilgrimage.

Startled by the new crisis, Libya unequivocally denied any role in the "fabricated accusations," emphasizing its "sheer surprise" at the whole event. But it also took the opportunity to attack Riyadh by implying that the Saudi accusations were an attempt to distract attention from the growing political violence and terrorist attacks within the Kingdom itself. Thus, Libya vented

its anger not only at the immediate diplomatic embarrassment, but also at Riyadh's American and Middle Eastern policies. It also appealed to the Arab League to investigate "this strange matter" so that Saudi Arabia "will disclose the [real] reasons that prompted it to recall its ambassador."

There was measure of irony in this appeal given that Libya had in recent years snubbed the Arab League and repeatedly threatened to withdraw from that "impotent" organization because of its failure to support the Libyan cause during the 1990s, when the UN had imposed debilitating sanctions. But the Arab League saw in this appeal a golden opportunity to repair its ties with Qadhafi and to enhance its prestige in the Arab world, and it hurried to meet the challenge.

The alleged Libyan plot was first outlined by US investigators in their case against a prominent American-Muslim activist, Abd al-Rahman al-Amoudi, sentenced earlier in July 2004 for business dealings with Libya at a time when the country was still subject to sanctions. Al-Amoudi allegedly served as a go-between for Saudi dissidents and Libya, which was suspected of providing the plotters with "hundreds of thousands of dollars." The alleged plot unfolded against a lengthy background of tension and



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rancor in Libyan-Saudi relations stemming from sharply conflicting ideologies and interests, with Riyadh's political and military cooperation with the US as the most glaring source of division.

Still, Libya's motives for the alleged plot on Abdallah's life are far from clear. Libya has recently made strenuous efforts to rid itself of the damaging label of state sponsor of terrorism and to gain international rehabilitation, especially in the eyes of the US. On the other hand, it has made no attempt to conceal its continuing animosity to the "ruling royal family" in Riyadh. For example, Libya flatly rejected any political settlement with Israel, including Abdallah's peace initiative presented at the Arab League Summit in Beirut in March 2002, which revisited the idea of "land for peace" already embodied in King Fahd's proposal in 1981. And while Libya was still embroiled in a long-standing conflict with the US and was still under the US-sponsored, UN-imposed sanctions, Saudi Arabia was cooperating closely with Washington on a broad range of issues and constituted one of the mainstays of US policy in the Middle East.

These tensions came to a head at the Arab League Summit at Sharm al-Shaykh in March 2003, which was devoted to a discussion of Arab attitudes toward the imminent US war in Iraq. During the Summit, Qadhafi attacked Abdallah for making "a pact with the American devil," and Abdallah retorted by calling Qadhafi a liar who should not speak on subjects he knew nothing about, accusing Libya of itself being an agent of imperialism, and concluding in a fury of emotion directed at the Libyan leader: "the grave is in front of you." This exchange was caught live by the media, thus further aggravating Qadhafi's grudge against the Saudi ruler.

The most recent crisis has been particularly embarrassing for Qadhafi because it erupted in the wake of successful efforts to gain worldwide diplomatic respectability and shed his image as a chronic *terrible enfant*. To his dismay, Qadhafi now finds himself again accused of terrorism and

by a state intimately linked to the US -- just after Libya restored diplomatic ties with Washington (in mid-2004) but before it has managed to overcome all the obstacles to a normal relationship with Washington. For example, just days before the Saudi announcement, Qadhafi had publicly complained about Washington's failure "to reward Libya appropriately" for giving up its weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs in December 2003. According to Qadhafi, the US should "transform the [benefit of the] atom for Libya's civilian purposes" in return for Libya's alleged help in securing the reelection of George W. Bush. In Qadhafi's view, the "Libyan card" of renouncing WMD had "determined 50% of the election results."

The December 2004 dispute with Saudi Arabia followed other outbursts of hostility in Tripoli's ties with the Arab world throughout 2003. For example, a quarrel with Kuwait because of latter's staunch support of the US war in Iraq culminated in the expulsion of the Kuwaiti chargé d'affaires from Tripoli. And the Libyan feud with Lebanon revived because of repeated accusations that Libya had been involved in the disappearance of Musa al-Sadr, a leading Muslim cleric and inspiration for Lebanese Shiites, during a visit to Tripoli in 1978. Libya's efforts to reconcile with its Arab neighbors were also undermined by Mauritanian accusations of Libyan involvement in a coup attempt.

The latest clash with Saudi Arabia has certainly tarnished Libya's refurbished image as a country striving for peace and respectability. Notwithstanding the political embarrassment, however, it does not constitute a critical setback to Qadhafi's redefined foreign policy agenda. After all, at the beginning of 2005, relations with the Arab world in general, and with Saudi Arabia in particular, are no longer high up on Libya's list of priorities.

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