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September 3, 2009

## **A Moment of Contentment: The 40th Anniversary of the Qadhafi Regime**

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September 1, 2009 marked the 40th anniversary of Muammar al-Qadhafi's overthrow of the Libyan monarchy and establishment of the "Great Socialist People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriyya". Four days of lavish commemoration, complete with a military parade, marked the event. For Qadhafi, the achievement has been singular. No head of state in the world today (apart from the Sultan of Brunei) matches his longevity in power.

Looking back on Qadhafi's military *coup d'etat* in 1969, almost nobody in Libya, let alone outside of the country, had heard of the young army officer, who had burst forth - literally and metaphorically - from the depths of the Libyan desert. With unprecedented nationalist, Arab and Islamic zeal, he seized the reins of power from King Idris al-Sanusi, who had led the country since independence in 1951. At that moment, the Libyan state and society embarked on an entirely new journey in all facets of life, which would be marked by wide vicissitudes encompassing both significant successes and profound, even catastrophic failures.

In contrast to 1969, Qadhafi's Libya is today most definitely "on the map." Neither Africa, nor the Arab world, nor major international powers have been untouched by Qadhafi and his policies.

Qadhafi's successful accumulation of power over his country's domestic and foreign policies, and his resulting impact internationally, stemmed from a variety of factors, including: his nationalization, early on, of Libya's immense oil resources, which enabled him to accumulate unprecedented power (for Libya) in the military-security realm; his charismatic and unconventional personality, along with a militantly revolutionary and "anti-imperialist" agenda; and the important backing provided by the Soviet

Union in its global competition with the United States during Qadhafi's first twenty years in power.

Libyan political life during the 1970s and 1980s was highlighted by a number of developments: the implementation of Qadhafi's "People's Power" political system, in line with his self-styled revolutionary ideology, which included the propagation of the "Third Universal Theory" as formulated in Qadhafi's three-part *Green Book*, which he touted as the only genuine democratic rule in modern times; the substantial upgrading of the socio-economic fabric of life and overall welfare of the Libyan population; the construction of "the Great Man-Made River" to transfer water from aquifers under the Sahara in southern Libya to its populated coastal areas in the north; an iron-fisted crackdown against Libyan opposition figures and groups, whether at home or abroad; and initial steps to suppress the first manifestations of a radical Islamic insurgency, which would seek to eradicate Qadhafi's "infidel" regime, notwithstanding its sworn Islamic character.

One of the most prominent features of Libyan foreign policy during these initial decades was Qadhafi's continuous efforts to shape the Arab world and African politics according to his own pan-Arab, anti-Western and anti-Israeli predilections. These included military interventions in Africa (highlighted by disastrous wars in Chad and Uganda ); chronic hostility with Egypt, which even escalated into a brief military confrontation in 1977; active subversion of pro-Western regimes in Africa and actions to undermine Israel's interests on the continent; strategic and political collaboration with the Soviets; and involvement in international terrorism, particularly directed against the US, with whom relations had run a troubled course from the very moment of Qadhafi's ascent to power.

Indeed, the Libyan-American conflict reached two peaks during this period, challenging Qadhafi's hold on power in an unprecedented fashion. The first was the American air raid on Tripoli and Benghazi on 15 April 1986. The second was the Lockerbie dispute, which came to the fore in the wake of American and British accusations of Libyan responsibility for the explosion of Pan Am flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland while on route from London to the US in December 1988.

The last twenty years has witnessed a dramatic alteration of Libya's domestic and foreign affairs. In the wake of the demise of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, Libya was left alone and defenseless in international politics. In view of the Lockerbie-induced UN sanctions against Libya, imposed in 1992, and America's two military campaigns (1991, 2003) against Iraq's Saddam Hussein, Qadhafi internalized the fact

that the US was capable and willing to flex its muscles in the Middle East against states deemed hostile to its interests. The tangible political inputs of his son and possible heir, Saif al-Islam, were also influential in the evolution of Libyan policies.

It took seven years of UN sanctions to compel Qadhafi to extradite to Scotland two of Libya's citizens suspected of responsibility for the Lockerbie explosion, in return for the sanctions' suspension. Even so, the Lockerbie dispute would remain a central issue on Libya's foreign affairs agenda, as well as have an enormous impact on the country's domestic affairs, including Qadhafi's continued political survival.

In early 2001, the Lockerbie trial concluded with a guilty verdict and lengthy prison sentence for Abd al-Basit al-Maqrahi. (He has just been released from prison in Scotland on the grounds that he suffers from terminal prostate cancer, and was greeted with open arms upon his return to Libya.) The verdict, accompanied by mounting threats and pressures, compelled Qadhafi to alter his conduct in favor of diplomatic engagement with the West. These pressures included the growing menace posed by Libya's violent Islamist opposition, the fears of becoming the "next Iraq", i.e. being militarily invaded by the US, and economic difficulties stemming from the devastating combination of UN sanctions and the cumulative decline of the country's oil revenue as a result of chronically sluggish global oil prices.

Dramatic results were not long in coming. In late 2003, Libya announced its decision to dismantle its clandestine nuclear and other WMDs program, halt its drive to develop long-range missiles and open all weapons stockpiles to international inspection. As a quid pro quo, Libya was removed from the US State Department's list of state sponsors of terrorism. This, in turn, enabled Qadhafi to proceed apace towards his economic goals and attain greater political stability at home, while reaping a series of diplomatic gains in foreign affairs.

Hence, Libya can no longer be considered a pariah state. After 40 years of tumultuous times, Qadhafi is the Great Survivor of contemporary international politics, and is now contentedly celebrating his ascent to power.

*TEL AVIV NOTES is published with the support of the V. Sorell Foundation*