



Editor: Bruce Maddy-Weitzman

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Qadhdhafi Goes to Moscow

Yehudit Ronen

At the beginning of November 2008, Libyan leader Muammar al-Qadhdhafi pitched his tent in the garden of the Kremlin. What drove him to return to Moscow, after an absence of almost three decades? What did he discuss with his hosts? Did he arrive with a shopping list? Was it a successful visit, from his point of view? And what can we learn from the visit about Libya's foreign policy?

Beginning in the early 1970s, Qadhdhafi linked his country's fate – strategically, politically and militarily, albeit not ideologically – to the Soviet Union. The architect and manager of Tripoli's relationship with Moscow was Abd al-Salam Jallud, an army officer who was Qadhdhafi's right-hand man in the coup that overthrew the monarchy in 1969. His frequent trips to Moscow produced considerable military aid and strategic and diplomatic cooperation that swiftly transformed, and in an unprecedented fashion, Libya's regional and international status. However, Jallud's removal from the center of the regime during the latter half of the 1980s, along with growing tension between Tripoli and Moscow following Libya's inability to pay its debts (close to \$5bn.) for arms and equipment purchases, clouded bilateral relations.

The collapse of the Soviet empire and the end of the Cold War at the turn of the decade left a gaping hole in Tripoli's foreign policy. Libya was now bereft of its Soviet patron, and at the very moment when its confrontation with the US was reaching new heights. American "imperialist aggression", according to

the Libyan lexicon, designed to promote US hegemony world-wide, reached new heights when US-led coalition forces rolled back Iraqi forces from Kuwait. The US action created great anxiety in Tripoli. Qadhafi now felt alone and defenseless against the “international policeman”, as he angrily characterized the US, and was convinced that Libya, too, was a target for regime change. The trauma of the American air attack on his home-headquarters in Tripoli in 1986 was still fresh, and reinforced his fears. The “Black House” in Washington, he was convinced, would exploit his weakness in the Arab and international arenas and redouble its subversive efforts against the “Libyan Revolution”.

Over the course of the 1990s, Qadhafi was forced to cope with increasing threats to his political standing within Libya, and even to his life. His political difficulties derived from a dangerous combination of domestic and international troubles. The primary factor in these troubles was the tightening ring of Western-led “Lockerbie sanctions” against Libya, imposed in 1992 to force Libya to extradite two of its intelligence agents suspected in the downing of a Pan-Am jet over Lockerbie, Scotland more than three years earlier (one agent was eventually found guilty, the other innocent). The sanctions placed a choke-hold on Libya’s hydrocarbon-dominated economy. Income declined, thanks also to a drastic slump in oil prices. The ensuing economic and social hardship resulted in increased support for Libya’s Islamist opposition, which sought to overthrow Qadhafi the “heretic”. This was Qadhafi’s most difficult time, as he was forced to combat a number of military revolts and attempts on his life.

Hence, the Libyan leader was compelled to soften his hostility towards the West. Agreement was reached on the primary issues of contention, which included compensating the victims of the Lockerbie bombing while offering up Libyan agents for trial, Libya’s abandonment of support for international terror, and the dismantlement in 2003 of its clandestine nuclear weapons program. In return, Western governments renewed diplomatic relations with Tripoli and injected capital and technology into the country. In addition, the US removed Libya from its blacklist of nations that support terrorism. Qadhafi breathed a sigh of relief and expected to be further rewarded for his unprecedented and far-reaching “good behavior”, particularly by the US. However, his expectations were not borne out, neither diplomatically nor with regard to his desire to acquire advanced military equipment and technology.

Along with Qadhafi's growing disappointment with the US, Washington also lost some of its luster in his eyes. The lack of American ability or will to block

Iran's and North Korea's nuclear programs, and the failure to impose stringent and effective penalties against them, not only undermined American prestige in Libyan eyes, but also angered Qadhafi, as well as exposing him to criticism by radicals at home and in the Arab world for having allegedly surrendered to the US and abandoned its "right of nuclearization". In addition, America's continued military presence in Iraq, its inability to prevent the Taliban's resurgence in Afghanistan, the growing instability in neighboring (and nuclear) Pakistan, and the continued existence of jihadi terrorist networks damaged America's image in Libyan eyes. Still, Qadhafi was well aware of the West's strength and thus was careful not to undermine the process of normalization with it. This process was especially important for the well-being of Libya's oil industry, the backbone of the Libyan economy. Libya's depositing of \$1.5bn. in the US, the last portion of the Lockerbie compensation payments, and on the very day of Qadhafi's visit to Moscow, provided stark proof of the importance which Tripoli placed on maintaining good relations with Washington.

Qadhafi had always had difficulty coming to terms with the disappearance of his former Soviet patron and the resulting negative consequences for his regime. Indeed, he continued to view Russia as a superpower which he expected to rise again. The jump in oil and gas prices at the beginning of 2008 and Europe's growing need for Russian energy supplies strengthened this image of Moscow, and not just in Libya. So did Russia's military thrust against Georgia in August. "The Russian Bear is Back", declared a headline in one of the Arab world's newspapers. Others proclaimed that "The honeymoon between Russia and the West has Ended," and that Russia was now "playing a new geopolitical game," suggesting the renewal of the old East-West tension which characterized the Cold War era. Qadhafi shared these views.

During the first half of 2008, Libya was among the beneficiaries of the spike in oil prices that directed unprecedented sums into its treasury and prompted the initiation of massive development projects. Western and Asian interest in these projects grew accordingly. US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's official visit to Tripoli in early September coincided with the anniversary celebrations of Qadhafi's ascent to power, an extraordinary gesture by the US which demonstrated its interest in obtaining a portion of the development project contracts for American firms. Nonetheless, to Qadhafi's dismay, the US did not hurry to respond to Libya's requests to purchase military equipment or to other requests important for the regime's prestige. Recognizing Russia's desire to renew its involvement in the region, Qadhafi was happy to host Prime Minister Vladimir Putin in April 2008 and restore cooperation in the areas of

energy and military purchasing. The Libyan army, whose most recent conflict, in neighboring Chad in 1987, ended with a stinging defeat and the loss of one-third of its equipment, was in dire need of the renewal of military aid and the restoration of its standing.

It was against this background that Qadhafi traveled to Moscow, armed with a two billion dollar shopping list, which included requests to purchase advanced anti-aircraft missiles, helicopters, tanks, submarines and even a nuclear research reactor for peaceful purposes. One report stated that a contract for the reactor's sale was signed and that Russia had erased Libya's outstanding debt to it in return for two billion dollars worth of purchases. In Russian eyes, Qadhafi was an excellent buyer, able to not only inject large amounts of hard currency into the state treasury but also provide a Mediterranean naval base for the Russian fleet. Russia was also interested in attaining Libyan participation in a proposed international natural gas cartel, along the lines of OPEC.

The deepening global economic crisis has not bypassed either Libya or Russia. Still, for Libya, it has also created new commercial possibilities, with both the West and Russia. In Libya's case, expanded trade will also provide diplomatic possibilities that can strengthen the standing of the regime at home, regionally and internationally. Qadhafi's declaration on the eve of his departure to Moscow and the US presidential elections that "Libya and the US are neither friends nor enemies" was a clear signal to Washington that Libya was not in its pocket, and that Qadhafi intended to derive the maximum benefit from his relations with both Washington and Moscow, an echo, perhaps, of his old hero, the late Gamal Abdel Nasser, and his 1950s policy of "positive neutralism."

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