

Personalities and Politics: Qadhafi, Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak (1969–2000)

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Various factors have shaped relations between Libya and Egypt since Mu‘ammar al-Qadhafi’s advent to power in 1969. Differences in geo-strategic location, social and economic conditions, demographic processes, political structures and national resources, as well as contrasts in regional and international outlook, were substantial in generating bilateral conflict. On the other hand, a common denominator of religious and cultural identity and the supreme interest of both countries’ regimes to combat the challenge posed by radical Islam, were significant in supporting rapprochement. Not surprising, therefore, were the oscillations in ties between tension and affinity. Notwithstanding the major effect of these factors on the moulding of bilateral relations, the impact of the personal leadership in each of the countries during this three-decade period should not be overlooked. The article examines, therefore, the role and effect of the wide scope of factors responsible for shaping the course of relations between Tripoli and Cairo, as well as their implications, which have transgressed the bilateral context, reaching the broader regional and international arenas.

Libyan leader Mu‘ammar al-Qadhafi and Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser enjoyed a brief honeymoon period. Relations between Qadhafi and successive Egyptian presidents, Anwar al-Sadat and Husni Mubarak, however, oscillated between hostility and limited co-operation. Various factors undoubtedly contributed to conflict and rapprochement between Libya and Egypt but the impact of the Libyan and Egyptian leaders in shaping bilateral relations cannot be underestimated.

During his three decades of power, Qadhafi’s ideological and political outlook has shifted. This article examines his interaction with three Egyptian leaders, each differing in character, leadership style, ideology and political agenda. Given the scope of the subject, this article does not provide a systematically detailed account of these relationships; rather, it surveys the major milestones on the bumpy road between Cairo and Tripoli.

The Nasser–Qadhafi Era (1969–70)

To the inexperienced Qadhafi, Nasser seemed a model leader. Qadhafi, who

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seized power in September 1969 at the age of 27, perceived the 51-year-old Nasser – who had risen to power in 1952 – as a father figure who had freed Egypt from Western imperialism. Moreover, Qadhafi admired Nasser for spearheading Arab unity and enhancing Arab nationalist pride, and wholeheartedly supported his policies. In addition, the friendship of the mighty Egyptian neighbour was a priceless asset for the regime in Tripoli during the highly sensitive phase of consolidating power. Thus, Qadhafi became Nasser's willing disciple.

The admiration and active support of the young Qadhafi strengthened Nasser's prestige at home and in the Arab world. Furthermore, sparsely populated but oil-rich Libya represented a potential source of income and economic aid for over-populated and poverty-stricken Egypt. Libya could also provide Egypt with strategic depth and even military assistance without posing a threat.

The complementary interests of Libya and Egypt and the strong mutual affinity of their leaders led to unprecedented co-operation. Nasser immediately recognised Qadhafi's government and committed political and security assistance. The common outlook of the two leaders towards various issues pertaining to the Arab world was reflected in their ardent promotion of Arab unity. At the end of 1969 Nasser visited Tripoli. Together with Ja'far al-Numayri – who had seized power in Sudan in May through a military coup – Nasser and Qadhafi established the Revolutionary Arab Front, which became the framework for the Tripoli Charter.

During this period, Libyan and Egyptian leaders exchanged repeated declarations of praise: Qadhafi referred to Nasser as 'the pioneer of Arab nationalism',¹ while Nasser described Qadhafi as 'a young Arab, a son of this nation, who has emerged to raise the flags of Arabism and Arab nationalism'.²

By mid-1970, however, as Qadhafi's political and personal confidence was increasing, he began to exhibit the first signs of independent thinking and assertive policies towards the Arab world. For example, he attempted to impose on Nasser an immediate union between Egypt, Libya and Syria. The Libyan leader criticised the dependency of Arab countries, including Egypt, on the Soviet Union, and began to develop a plan for the pan-Arabisation of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Qadhafi was also angered by certain Egyptian policies, such as acceptance of the American Rogers initiative and the August 1970 cease-fire, which terminated Egypt's war of attrition with Israel.³ Nevertheless, he refrained from public criticism of Nasser. Nasser's sudden death on 20 September 1970, shortly after Qadhafi celebrated his first anniversary in power, ended the brief and unique chapter in the relationship between Egypt and Libya.

The Sadat–Qadhafi Era (1970–81)

Sadat's rise to power in the immediate aftermath of Nasser's death opened an entirely different chapter in relations between Egypt and Libya. Qadhafi, who regarded himself as the true heir to Nasser, tried to impose his interpretation of Nasserism on Sadat. The latter rejected this pressure; relations between their countries were soon dominated by the political and personal rivalries of the two leaders. Ideologically and politically, the Libyan and the Egyptian leaders diverged on most major issues:

- the preferred formula for the political and socio-economic structures of their countries;
- Arab unity;
- the Arab–Israeli conflict; and
- regional and international orientations.

Obsessed by his vision of Arab unity, Qadhafi again pressured Egypt to initiate a tripartite union with Syria. These efforts appeared to bear fruit in 1971 when Egypt, Libya and Syria announced the formation of the Federation of Arab Republics. Sudan, which refrained from joining, for domestic reasons, subsequently became an important arena for the evolving rivalry between Egypt and Libya.

Before long, however, Qadhafi realised that the federation was lifeless. Possessed by the idea of Arab unity, he attempted to persuade Sadat to create an 'amalgamated union' (*wahda indimajiyya*) between Egypt and Libya. In July 1973, he also mobilised several thousand Libyan citizens to march toward Cairo. The aim of the 'holy march and historic procession', as described by Tripoli, was to deliver a statement to Sadat, written in 'blood of Libyan citizens'.⁴ The procession, however, deteriorated into a violent and stormy demonstration, curbed by Egyptian road-blocks.

The October 1973 war in the Middle East marked a new ebb in the already strained relations between Sadat and Qadhafi. Not only did Sadat conceal the planning of the war from Qadhafi; he also failed to accord Libya any military role in the actual fighting. Notwithstanding, Qadhafi who regarded himself as a devoted fighter against Israel, swallowed his pride and pledged Libyan oil and financial support to Egypt and Syria. This pledge, Qadhafi stated, was 'an inescapable national duty... We have no alternative but to give whatever we can to gain victory.'⁵ However, when Sadat reached a US-prompted disengagement arrangement with Israel, a furious Qadhafi announced in early 1974 that 'there was no justification for providing Egypt with aid' due to the violation of the 'three no's' of the 1967 Khartoum conference – 'no peace, no negotiations and no recognition of Israel'.⁶

Sadat's decision in April 1974 to grant Egyptian citizenship to the exiled Libyan monarch, Muhammad Idris al-Sanusi, deposed by Qadhafi five years earlier, injected a new dose of tension into the already troubled relationship. Egypt subsequently accused Libya of complicity in an assassination attempt on Sadat. The contrasting orientations of Sadat and Qadhafi towards the two superpowers also strained their relationship: Libya was gravitating towards the USSR while Egypt was distancing itself from the Soviets, and identifying more closely with the US. The increasing hostility between Sadat and Qadhafi was illustrated by a series of mutual claims of harassment and punitive measures. From late 1975, active subversion and military build-ups across the Libyan–Egyptian border steadily intensified.

In early 1976, tension between Sadat and Qadhafi reached a new peak of animosity. Egypt provided asylum to 'Umar al-Muhayshi, a former member of the leading political body in Libya – the Revolutionary Command Council – who fled Libya in August 1975 after staging a failed coup. Muhayshi was granted access to the Egyptian media, which he used to criticise Qadhafi. He stated, for example, that 'at the age of 12 [Qadhafi] fell off a camel. Since then he suffers nervous breakdowns and sudden fits in which he tears up his clothes and destroys everything in his office.'

Relations between the two countries worsened in the aftermath of a major coup attempt in Khartoum in July 1976, in which Libya allegedly played a major role. Sadat described Qadhafi's alleged complicity as 'a tool in the game of a major power' [that is, the Soviet Union].⁸

Concurrently, politico-military tension mounted around the issue of security on the Red Sea. Egypt (and its ally, Sudan) were concerned that Libya was helping the Soviets increase their influence in Africa and the Middle East. In addition, Sadat was troubled by what he perceived as Libyan support of the clandestine, Egyptian-based militant opposition movements.

This acute political friction and personal animosity culminated in border hostilities between Libya and Egypt in the summer of 1977. In an unprecedented attack, Egypt struck within Libyan territory on 21 July. Following mediation by Algeria, Kuwait, and the Palestine Liberation Organisation, and possibly pressure from the US and USSR, the actual military crisis ended on 24 July. Relations between Qadhafi and Sadat, however, continued to be eclipsed by strong recriminations. It was at this juncture that Sadat compared Libyan propaganda assaults against Egypt with those that paved the way to the 'tripartite aggression' (by France, Britain and Israel) against Egypt in 1956.⁹

Relations between Sadat and Qadhafi appeared to have reached rock bottom, but the final blow came with Sadat's dramatic trip to Jerusalem on

19–21 November 1977. Qadhafi could not accept Sadat's peace process with Israel. Libya referred to Sadat's arrival in Israel as an 'unbelievable shock', portraying the event as a 'disgraceful and treasonable visit'.¹⁰ Libya subsequently unleashed a particularly aggressive anti-Egyptian propaganda campaign, accusing Sadat of betrayal and collaboration with what it labelled American imperialism and the Zionist enemy. It did not take long for Egypt to break off its diplomatic ties with Libya. Furthermore, the Israeli–Egyptian accords signed in October 1978 at Camp David (which Libya renamed 'Stable David')¹¹ fuelled hostility and led to a further escalation of tension along the Libyan–Egyptian border.

The period of 1980–81 signalled a break between the regimes of Cairo and Tripoli. Hoping to boost his damaged political and personal prestige, Qadhafi shifted the focus of Libyan foreign affairs to Africa. Most noteworthy was the Libyan military encroachment and efforts to unite with Chad. The Libyan presence in Chad, Sudan's neighbour, exacerbated concerns between Egypt and Libya. (Both Egypt and Sudan regarded Libyan involvement in Chad as a mutual security concern.) The stormy chapter of relations between the leaders in Tripoli and Cairo ended abruptly, however, with the assassination of Sadat on 6 October 1981, which evoked in Qadhafi a sense of 'overflowing joy' and great relief.¹²

The Mubarak–Qadhafi Era (1981–2000)

Husni Mubarak, Sadat's vice-president and designated successor, assumed the presidency on 14 October 1981. Like Sadat, he maintained strong antagonism toward Qadhafi, supported the peace process with Israel, as well as close political and military co-operation with Sudan. With an anti-Libyan Sudanese regime in power, the significant strengthening of Egyptian–Sudanese ties during the first half of the 1980s caused Qadhafi much consternation.

In the spring of 1985, to Qadhafi's great relief, relations within the Egyptian–Libyan–Sudanese triangle changed. The Sudanese head of state was toppled by a military coup; his successors urged rapprochement with Libya, adversely affecting Sudanese relations with Egypt. Again, mutual suspicions between Egypt and Libya were aggravated, manifested by bouts of mutual accusations and denouncements. With increasing militancy, Qadhafi expelled thousands of Egyptian workers from Libya; a move designed to damage the Egyptian economy and Mubarak's political stability. Qadhafi also sharpened his rhetoric towards Mubarak, calling him 'Husni al-Bariq', Husni the sick.¹³

The withdrawal of Libyan troops from Chad in 1987 caused great relief in Cairo but did not mitigate the political distrust and personal dislike

between Mubarak and Qadhafi. Indeed, other divisive issues continued to nourish the bilateral strain. One such bone of contention was the Palestinian question, which hit the headlines throughout the late 1980s due to the *intifada*, the violent uprising by Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. Qadhafi presented himself as a devoted guardian of Palestinian interests, condemning the Israeli–Egyptian peace process and accusing Mubarak of ‘selling out Palestine, Jerusalem and God’.¹⁴

At the beginning of the 1990s the Libyan leader made efforts to reconcile with Mubarak for the sake of political expediency. This sharp policy shift echoed Qadhafi’s acute distress, domestically and abroad. Not only had internal problems in Libya increased enormously, mainly due to continual decline in the country’s oil revenues, but so had regional and international pressures, primarily as a result of the collapse of the USSR, Libya’s international patron.¹⁵ Given that the USA – Qadhafi’s sworn enemy – had become ‘the sole policeman of the world’,¹⁶ Tripoli’s apprehensions increased.

Qadhafi was somewhat mollified, however, by Mubarak’s openness during this period to political courting. Threatened by the growth of radical Islamic movements, both at home and in neighbouring Sudan and Libya, Mubarak discovered common interests with Qadhafi who also faced a growing militant Islamist opposition.¹⁷ Communication gathered momentum and the two leaders engaged in a series of meetings.¹⁸ Nonetheless, the 1991 Gulf crisis strained relations again. Although Qadhafi shared Mubarak’s objection to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and also demanded that Iraq withdraw, Libya opposed the decision to dispatch Egyptian troops to the Gulf to join the US-led anti-Iraqi international coalition.

By the spring of 1992, Qadhafi’s need for political assistance had grown significantly. The imposition of sanctions by the UN Security Council left Libya regionally isolated.¹⁹ To Qadhafi’s flagrant disappointment, Mubarak fully complied with the sanctions. The Libyan leader therefore launched a spate of verbal assaults and punitive measures. For example, he imposed strict border controls at Masa‘id, where a border station had been abolished a year earlier, in a gesture of friendship toward Egypt. He also imposed custom duties on Egyptian goods, allegedly halted the remittances of Egyptian workers, and condemned Mubarak’s ties with Israel.

Nonetheless, Egypt remained the only potential mediator in the dispute between Libya and the West; Egypt also alleviated Libya’s pariah status by serving as a land link to the outside world. Eager to encourage Egypt to advocate diplomatically for Libya in Washington, Qadhafi resorted to carrot and stick tactics. On the one hand, he offered various economic incentives to Egypt; on the other, he issued a veiled threat to Mubarak that if he failed

to promote Libyan interests, Libya might again expel Egyptian migrant workers. This did not, however, boost active Egyptian support for Libya in Washington. Furious, Qadhafi decided to implement the expulsion strategy. In September 1995 he deported 10,000 Egyptians, a relatively small proportion of the estimated one million Egyptians working in Libya. The figure was too small to cause a full-blown crisis, but sufficient to coax Cairo into providing some diplomatic support for Libya. This became evident when Mubarak defended Qadhafi during the US campaign against the alleged building by Libya of a chemical weapons plant in 1996. Cairo insisted that the American accusations were unsubstantiated, indirectly reinforcing the Libyan claim to be the innocent victim of a political witch-hunt by Washington. Qadhafi hurried to praise Mubarak for 'heroically standing up to the unjust US imperialist stance against Libya'.²⁰ Encouraged by Mubarak's backing, Qadhafi blatantly defied the UN air embargo, travelling by air to Egypt in mid-1996.

Qadhafi continued to regard Egypt as an essential ally. Nonetheless, throughout 1997-98 he was infuriated at what he perceived as Egypt's lackadaisical performance in Washington with regard to the Lockerbie dispute. This bitterness was further heightened by Mubarak's relative indifference to what Libya regarded as a major achievement – the ruling of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) at the Hague in February 1998, which affirmed Libya's right to present its grievances regarding the dispute to the court.

Tensions surfaced in March 1998 when the Libyan press accused Egypt of collaborating with the Israeli secret service (Mossad) and American intelligence.²¹ In the summer of 1998 Qadhafi postponed a planned visit to Cairo twice in less than a week. Moreover, six months later, Qadhafi recalled the Libyan ambassador to Cairo, Sayyid Qadhaf al-Damm, leaving the diplomatic post vacant.

Qadhafi's disillusion with Mubarak due to his failure to help Libya break the UN sanctions was further sharpened throughout 1999. Qadhafi did, however, travel to Cairo, on a rare visit abroad, between 5 and 13 March 1999. The timing of this visit was not accidental: it reflected an attempt to mobilise political support, internally and externally, for an imminent dramatic change of policy. After seven years of refusal, Qadhafi was about to agree to hand over the two Libyans suspected of the Lockerbie explosion. He therefore sought an injection of legitimacy from Mubarak's government to enhance his prestige at home. He also used the occasion to upgrade diplomatic relations between Egypt and Libya, appointing Jum'a al-Fazzani as ambassador to Cairo.

Throughout the year 2000 the diplomatic and economic euphoria in Libya following the suspension of the sanctions, and Libya's subsequent

diplomatic and economic embrace by Europe and Africa, downgraded the political importance of Egypt on Qadhafi's foreign policy agenda. Mubarak's significance was also undermined by the fact that Libya had achieved a relative degree of success in curtailing the activities of Islamist militants during 1999–2000.

Conclusion

Various factors have contributed to tension between Egypt and Libya: differences in geo-strategic location, economic conditions, demographic processes, political structures and national resources and environment. Moreover, the ideologies upheld by the leaders of both countries, both past and present, have been at the very least incompatible and for the most part, mutually exclusive. Libya and Egypt have also been divided over regional and international orientations, most markedly over the Arab–Israeli conflict. Thus, in terms of fundamental outlooks on domestic and foreign policies, successive leaderships in Cairo and Tripoli have been almost diametrically opposed.

Nonetheless, many sources of mutual affinity may also be detected. The two states are both located on the southern shores of the Mediterranean, close to Africa. Egyptians and Libyans alike speak Arabic and practise Sunni Islam, thus sharing a firm cultural and religious basis. In addition, the two countries share a strong legacy of hostility to Western imperialism, although different in scope and essence, which has substantially shaped their respective nationalist experience. Other factors supporting rapprochement, relevant to the 1990s, include the need to combat a common challenge posed by radical Islamic movements, and the mutual interests that evolved due to the UN-imposed sanctions on Libya.

Despite these factors, the impact of personal leadership on Egyptian–Libyan relations cannot be overlooked. A genuine assessment of this factor, however, raised difficulties since it is so closely intertwined with the interests of each of the countries and their regimes. During the three-decade period discussed in this article, three different presidents – Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak, ruled Egypt. Each stamped his own personal and political views on Egyptian foreign policy. Qadhafi, who maintained control of Libya throughout the entire period, also underwent various changes in his leadership style, ideological and political agenda and operational methods, both domestically and in foreign affairs.

Analysis of the Qadhafi–Nasser era might suggest that the charismatic Egyptian president, wielding an immense, albeit controversial, influence throughout the Arab world, dominated relations with Libya. The conspicuous asymmetry between the leaders was an accepted game: the

politically inexperienced Qadhafi adored Nasser's leadership and became his willing disciple. The interpersonal dynamic inevitably influenced Egyptian–Libyan relations.

Qadhafi's self-imposed humility dissipated, however, with Sadat's advent to power. Due to enhanced self-confidence and political strength, economic prosperity and a perceived sense of mission as Nasser's heir, Qadhafi attempted to dictate his own Pan-Arab agenda to Sadat. Sadat acted no less assertively to rid Egypt of Qadhafi's interventionist and militant presence. These conflicting perceptions and interests soon dragged them into a maelstrom of hostility. The two leaders confronted each other on almost every level, reaching unprecedented peaks of enmity. Common wisdom would attribute this animosity to Sadat's engagement in the peace process with Israel, which Qadhafi unequivocally opposed. It should be noted, however, that Sadat's peace initiative was launched in November 1977; fighting between Egypt and Libya – which symbolised the climax of their conflict – took place four months earlier. Thus, the virulent personal and political enmity between Qadhafi and Sadat went far deeper than their dissent over the Arab–Israeli conflict.

Qadhafi's relations with Mubarak differed yet again. Qadhafi's growing distress, in domestic as well as in foreign affairs, required him to shelve his familiar ideological and personal aversions in favour of a more pragmatic stance. Mubarak, more than his predecessors, sought economic co-operation with Libya and collaboration in combating the radical Islamic threat. Nevertheless, the Egyptian president eventually failed to meet the Libyan leader's expectations to play an effective role in the US to break the UN-imposed sanctions. Qadhafi perceived this as betrayal; unlike previous occasions, however, Qadhafi did not allow personal insult to halt relations with Cairo altogether. Aware of the need for political rapprochement with Egypt in order to succeed in other vital policy areas, primarily with Islamic militants, Qadhafi continues to foster ties with Mubarak's regime. Libyan reliance on Mubarak's government decreased since April 1999 due to the suspension of sanctions, the diplomatic embrace of Libya by Europe and Africa, the economic overtures to Libya by Western companies and governments, and a tangible decline in the Islamist threat to Qadhafi's regime. It is therefore largely due to circumstances rather than personalities that in the year 2000 relations between the leaders of Egypt and Libya appeared to have reached a new political norm.

NOTES

1. R. Bayda, *Libya*, BBC radio programme, 1 Sept. 1969, Summary of World Broadcasts, BBC, 3 Sept. 1969.
2. R. Omdurman, *Sudan*, BBC radio programme, 1 Jan. 1970, BBC (3 Jan. 1970), while visiting Khartoum.
3. The Rogers plan was a proposed solution to the Arab–Israeli conflict submitted by the US Secretary of State, William Rogers, in October 1969 to Egypt, Jordan and Israel (and the Soviet Union), and was accepted by them in July 1970. For the plan's main points, see Y. Shimoni and E. Levine (eds.), *Political Dictionary of the Middle East in the 20th Century* (New York: Quadrangle/The New York Times Book Company 1974) p.329.
4. R. Tripoli, 17 July 1973, quoted by *Arab Report and Record* (London 1973) p.321.
5. R. Tripoli, 7 Oct. 1973, BBC radio, 10 Oct. 1973.
6. *Al-Fajr al-Jadid*, 22 Jan. 1974, Tripoli.
7. *Al-Jumhuriyya*, 18 March 1976, Cairo.
8. *Akhbar al-Yawm*, 10 July 1976, Cairo. For more details on the complicated relations between Libya, Egypt, and Sudan and the role of the 'Soviet Danger' in aggravating these relations, see Y. Ronen and H. Shaked, 'The Democratic Republic of Sudan', in Colin Legum (ed.), *Middle East Contemporary Survey, 1976–77* Vol. I (New York and London: Holmes and Meier Publishers 1978) pp. 586–603.
9. *October*, 7 Aug. 1977, Cairo; Sadat's memoirs.
10. *Arab Report and Record*, 1–30 Nov. 1977, p.912.
11. Interview with Libya's foreign secretary (minister), 'Ali 'Abd al-Salam al-Turayki, *Al-Anba*, 8 Oct. 1978, Kuwait.
12. H. Adel, *Ightiyal Ra'is* (Cairo: Sina' Publishing House 1985) p.49.
13. *Al-Fajr al-Jadid*, 19 Nov., 27 Dec. 1986.
14. Tripoli TV, 28 March 1988; *Daily Report: Middle East and Africa*, 29 March 1988.
15. For details, see Y. Ronen, 'Libya', in Ami Ayalon (ed.), *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1990–94* Vols. XIV–XVIII (Boulder, CO: Westview Press 1992–1996).
16. For example, *al Fajr al-Jadid*, 17 April 1996.
17. For details on the Islamist opposition and Qadhafi, see G. Joffé, 'Islamic Opposition in Libya', *Third World Quarterly* 10/2 (April 1988) pp. 615–31; M.K. Deeb, 'Militant Islamism and its Critics: The Case of Libya' in J. Ruedy (ed.), *Islamism and Secularism in North Africa* (New York: St Martin's Press 1994) pp. 186–97; Y. Ronen, 'Libya', in B. Maddy-Weitzman (ed.), *Middle East Contemporary Survey, 1996–97* Vols. XX–XXI (Boulder, CO: West View Press 1996–2000).
18. Most noteworthy among them was Qadhafi's trip to Cairo in summer 1990, his first to Egypt's capital in nearly a decade and a half. Qadhafi had vowed not to visit Cairo while the Israeli flag waved there, but in 1990 political considerations superseded emotion and ideology. Qadhafi apparently visited Cairo in order to request a check to a feared Israeli–American retaliatory attack on Libya, in response to his alleged involvement in the abortive Palestinian sea-borne raid on the Israeli coast in May 1990.
19. The sanctions, aimed at enforcing Tripoli to extradite to US or UK jurisdiction the two Libyans suspected of the explosion of the Pan American aircraft over Lockerbie, Scotland, in late 1988 and included, *inter alia*, an air ban. For more details on the sanctions affair, see Y. Ronen, 'The Lockerbie Endgame: Qadhafi Slips the Noose', *Middle East Quarterly* 9/1 (Winter 2002) pp.53–9.
20. At a press conference held in Tripoli, Middle East News Agency, Cairo, 17 April; *Daily Report: Middle East and Africa*, 19 April 1996.
21. *Al-Zahf al-Akhdar*, Tripoli, 15 March 1998.