

**DETECTING LIBYA
THE STRATEGIC CULTURE OF
MUAMMAR QADDAFI**

by
Craig R. Black, Commander, U.S. Navy

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Deterring Libya The Strategic Culture of Muammar Qaddafi

Craig R. Black

Introduction

In September of 1969, Muammar al-Qaddafi—then a virtually unknown army officer in his late twenties—rose to the leadership of Libya. Armed with a vision of Arab unity and anti-colonialism, he led a small group of his fellow officers who called themselves the Free Officers' Movement. In a virtually bloodless coup, they ousted the aging (and absent) King Idris Al-Sanusi and established Libya as a republic. During the 30 years since, Qaddafi has emerged as a charismatic and complicated leader. Considered by Westerners to be bizarre and irrational, he has been branded a terrorist and a rogue. Among some of his fellow Arabs, he is praised as a virulent anti-Zionist and anti-imperialist, while others condemn him as a plotter and an adventurer whose zealous pursuit of Arab, African, and Islamic unity has only resulted in destabilization.

Qaddafi remarked in 1976 that “atomic weapons will be like traditional ones, possessed by every state according to its potential. We will have our share of this new weapon.” In 1987 Reuters quoted him as saying: “The Arabs must possess the atom bomb to defend themselves, until their numbers reach one thousand million and they learn to desalinate water and until they liberate Palestine.”¹ Qaddafi places little faith in his armed forces and dreads a repeat of the 1986 U.S. air strikes against Tripoli and Benghazi. Reflecting on the air strikes, Qaddafi has wistfully spoken of possessing a ballistic missile capability that could threaten New York.² Few state leaders have expressed such single-minded determination to obtain chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons. This determination, coupled with Qaddafi's long-term association with terrorism, has caused grave concern among other nations—especially the United States and Israel.

In this essay, I will analyze Qaddafi's personal history, his leadership style, and the support structure of his regime. From this analysis, I will attempt to identify methods to deter him from employing weapons of mass destruction.

Libya Today

Libya has been described as an accidental and reluctant state. It was created in the aftermath of World War II at the behest of the Great Powers, its three culturally diverse provinces—Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, and Fazzan—loosely joined under the monarchy of King Idris. Independence occurred in 1951. Oil was discovered in 1959, soon to be followed by extensive investment by western oil companies.³ After the 1969 revolution, a 12-member Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) was established and one of its first actions was to demand the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Wheelus Air Force Base near Tripoli. Washington acquiesced.⁴ During the 30 years since then, relations between the U.S. and Libya have been marked by one crisis after another: Qaddafi's efforts to overthrow moderate Arab regimes; Libya's apparent collusion with the Soviet Union during the Cold War; attempts to restrict freedom of navigation within the Gulf of Sirte; sponsorship of international terrorism; and pursuit of weapons of mass destruction.

Libya exists today as an isolated and distrusted nation, its economy strained by the cumulative effects of a depressed oil market and the UN sanctions imposed for its alleged complicity in the bombing of a Pan Am 747 over Scotland. On its western border is Tunisia—capitalistic and pro-Western. To the east is Egypt, a friend of the U.S. and the first Arab state to recognize Israel. Algeria, Libya's other neighbor on the Mediterranean, is the source of much of the Islamic extremism that threatens the Qaddafi regime.

Personal History

Qaddafi was born during World War II in a Bedouin tent in the desert, about 20 miles south of the seaside town of Sirte. His parents, descendants of the Qathathfa tribe, were herders of camels and goats, eking out an existence in one of the poorest countries in the world. Qaddafi attended a Koranic elementary school followed by high school at Sebha in the Fezzan, Libya's southernmost province. There, at the age of 15, he began to listen to Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser on the radio, memorizing the speeches and reciting them, word for word, to his classmates whom he had organized into a revolutionary cell. Among his

classmates were Abdel Salen Jalloud, who would become Qaddafi's most trusted deputy; Mustafa al-Kharoubi, who would be his intelligence chief; and Abu Bakr Yunis Jabir, the future commander-in-chief of the armed forces.⁵

Qaddafi insisted that his fellow cell members observe what he called "revolutionary disciplines," avoiding alcohol and dissolute ways. Qaddafi's puritanism has been attributed to his Bedouin origins as well as to a reaction against the creeping corruption spread by the foreign oil companies and contractors, maneuvering for positions and favors under the monarchy. Qaddafi would be expelled from Sebha for political trouble making, in particular for leading demonstrations against King Idris for his lack of support for Nasser and the Palestinian cause against Israel.⁶

A summary of his early ideology:

He had soaked up the Arab revolutionary ideas which poured out of Egypt under Nasser and, although he seemed to have no clear ideology of his own, he had produced a potent cocktail of revolution and Islamic extremism. He was disciplined and immensely hard-working, and he had tapped into the reservoirs of underground discontent that existed in Libya under King Idris. He was poised to plan the revolution and, taking the advice of his mentor, President Nasser, and his Egyptian schoolmaster in Sebha, he decided that the most fertile ground lay in the Libyan armed forces.⁷

Qaddafi attended military college in Benghazi where he continued his dissident activity, establishing the beginnings of the Free Officers' Movement. After graduation in 1966, he traveled to England for several months of training with the British signal corps. He was a poor soldier, frequently being put on report for rudeness and insubordination and even for suspicion of complicity in the summary execution of a fellow soldier. It is clear that Qaddafi's intention was not to serve a distinguished career in the service of the monarchy, but to overthrow it.⁸

During the next three years, Qaddafi molded his group of fellow officers into a full-fledged underground movement, ultimately overthrowing the monarchy. He would turn this coup into a revolution, attempting to change Libya from a conservative, colonial state into a

modern, progressive one. This involved a major transformation of society—changes in roles, attitudes, and behavior—all codified in *The Green Book*, Qaddafi's philosophy of the Revolution. Qaddafi initially put the RCC in charge of the government and ruled by decree, campaigning to rid the country of corruption and the symbols of Western imperialism. The Americans and British left, the Italians were expelled, and Arabic was restored as the official language. Corrupt politicians and military officers were purged. Oil leases were renegotiated and many of the companies nationalized. With the suspension of the constitution and the outlawing of political parties, Qaddafi made himself the undisputed leader and architect of his country's future.⁹

Ideology and Style of Government

Since 1969, Qaddafi has dominated Libya's policies by the sheer force of his personality and leadership, seizing every opportunity to implement his revolutionary ideology. He has devoted Libya's considerable oil wealth to building roads, schools, and hospitals. Villages have been electrified and the desert irrigated. He has done as much as any other Arab leader for women's liberation and providing for popular decision-making in government.¹⁰

Initially, as chairman of the RCC, Qaddafi controlled both the legislative and executive functions of the government, experimenting with the socialist policies employed in Nasser's Egypt. But beginning in 1973, dissatisfied with the level of revolutionary zeal displayed by the Libyan people, Qaddafi launched his "Cultural Revolution." He dismantled the traditional apparatus of government and reorganized the country's political structure to follow his Third Universal Theory—a disavowal of capitalism and communism in favor of socialism, popular democracy, Arab unity, and progressive Islam. He set up what he envisioned as a direct democracy, in which the instruments of government were placed in the hands of the people. People's Committees and popular congresses were formed at the local, regional, and national levels to promote mass participation in the nation's decision-making process.¹¹ What resulted though was a stifling, overly rigid system that proved to be better at promulgating top-level policy than it was at cultivating popular participation.¹²

Although Qaddafi renounced all official posts and titles in 1979, he has continued to dominate the political scene in his capacity as the “The Leader of the Revolution.” A journalist with unprecedented access reports:

Called simply “the Leader,” he (Qaddafi) is not, technically the head of state. The ministers report to the people’s congresses, not to him, and diplomats do not present him their credentials. Western diplomats say he probably has a veto power over official acts and that certain security agencies still report to him. Yet few Libya-watchers pretend to understand his precise role.¹³

Qaddafi is supported by an extensive security network consisting of his personal bodyguards, several elite military units, and the various local People’s Committees. The result is multiple and overlapping layers of surveillance that monitor and control the activities of anyone deemed a threat to the regime. The regime’s security forces are regularly accused by international human rights organizations of murder, torture, and intimidation.¹⁴

Qaddafi’s inner circle is made up of long-time revolutionary colleagues who have survived his frequent purges. A clear chain of command is difficult to draw since the members of his inner circle and security apparatus go by a misleading system of ranks and titles. A lieutenant colonel might report to a captain who works for another official with no rank at all. No one outside Libya—and perhaps even inside—knows for sure who controls exactly what. The vagueness and obscurity of this system is said to be of Qaddafi’s own design, intended to confuse potential competitors within the regime.¹⁵

A generation of younger, more hard-line regime members is reported to be moving up. Qaddafi keeps these ambitious underlings in check by playing them off one another. No political heir has been designated and there does not appear to be any blood relatives capable of taking the reins. A report from a U.S. news magazine emphasizes this point:

For sheer intrigue, none of the succession struggles in the Mideast can top Libya’s. The erratic but cunning Col. Muammar Qaddafi, 56, has survived several assassination attempts. If one finally succeeds, it is unlikely that any of

his five sons will be able to hold power. The oldest, Saif al-Islam, has inherited his father's quirkiness: He bought two rare Bengali tigers, named Fred and Barney, for \$15,000 from a Milan zoo and brought them along when he studied in Austria. U.S. officials point to one incident when asked what to expect if Qaddafi disappears from the scene: In July 1996, two of his sons, backing opposing soccer teams, got into a dispute over a referee's call. The match ended in a shootout between each son's retinue of bodyguards.¹⁶

Qaddafi has managed the personnel assignments within his regime by paying close attention to tribal membership thereby consolidating alliances and, by ensuring that no single tribe holds a monopoly on key positions, guaranteeing his security.¹⁷ The predominate tribe within the regime and the one critical to Qaddafi's survival is his own, the Qathathfa. From the Qathathfa, Qaddafi has promoted junior officers in the armed forces and entrusted them with sensitive military posts. Making up a core of colonels responsible to the preservation of the regime are, among others, Ahmad Qathf al-Damm, responsible for the Cyrenaica region; Masoud Abdul-Hafith, commander of military security; Misbah Abdul-Hafith, responsible for the Benghazi sector; Khalifa Ihneish, commander of armaments and munitions; Omar Ishkal, Al-Barani Ishkal, commander of domestic security; Mohamad al-Majthoub al-Qaddafi, leader of the revolutionary committees; Sayed Qathaf al-Damm, director of information and propaganda; and Ali al-Kilbo, commander of the Azazia barracks and in charge of protecting Qaddafi's residence. These assignments feature a great deal of overlap and are subject to frequent revision making it difficult for even members of Qaddafi's own tribe to gain leverage over him. Qaddafi has had to eliminate at least one member of his extended family when his primacy was threatened. His cousin Hassan Ishkal, in charge of domestic security and Libyan troops in Chad, was gunned down by regime supporters after it became clear that he was no longer willing to adhere to Qaddafi's orders.¹⁸

Other important but less strategic positions within the regime have been filled by the Warfala tribe which enjoys blood ties to the Qathathfa. A third tribe from which regime members have been recruited is the Magharha.¹⁹

Qaddafi has had a falling out with Abdel Salen Jalloud, his number two man since the revolution. Jalloud, a member of the Magharha tribe, was often cited as a possible successor to Qaddafi and as such, was perhaps perceived by Qaddafi as a competitor. He has been stripped of his power and replaced by Abdallah al-Sanussi, another member of the Magharha tribe and Qaddafi's wife's brother-in-law.²⁰ Sanussi is said to lead a "dirty tricks department" that acts on Qaddafi's authority. Sanussi, along with five other Libyans, was recently convicted in absentia by a French court for the 1989 bombing of a UTA DC-10 over Niger. He has kept a low profile in recent months, perhaps to distance Qaddafi from the bombing or even because he has been banished from the inner circle.²¹

Abu Bakr Yunis Jabir, another revolutionary comrade of Qaddafi's, continues as the commander-in-chief of the armed forces but is said to possess little real power. Mustafa al-Kharoubi has retained his position as head of military intelligence but, like other members of the original RCC, is struggling for his political survival.²² Two members of the original RCC, Omar al-Maheshi and Bashir Hawadi, have led coup attempts, earning themselves life prison terms and execution for their followers.²³ It would appear that Qaddafi distrusts long-serving regime members, especially those from tribes other than his own. Influence and political standing are no doubt what attracts a regime member to the inner circle but, once attained, guarantee his decline.

Libya-watchers describe Qaddafi's decision-making process as being haphazard and rarely following any given theory or ideology. His quirkiness and idiosyncrasies make great news copy. He receives Western journalists and African dignitaries in a camel-skin tent, attired in a Bedouin robe over western-style casual wear. His admirers claim that, by living an austere life, Qaddafi is being true to his Bedouin nature. His critics dismiss the tent, the rugs, and Bedouin garb as conceit.²⁴

Insight into his personality can be gained by examining the policies of this regime. Two examples of Qaddafi's idiosyncratic leadership:

(In Qaddafi's Libya) the Gregorian calendar has been replaced with a new solar calendar that begins with the migration of the Prophet Mohammed in 622. The names of the Gregorian months have been replaced with names invented by General Qaddafi. The traditional Lunar Islamic calendar used by all Muslim countries have also

*been changed to begin with the death of the Prophet rather than his migration. Hence, the simple task of determining the day and date has become confusing because Libya neither follows the standard lunar Islamic calendar nor the global solar calendar. Every year a new set of rules and regulations telling Libyans what to wear, eat, say, and read is enacted by the regime.*²⁵

*The domestic policies of the Libyan regime have often bordered on fiction. A case in point is a 1977 edict whereby the Libyan leader suggested that in order to achieve self-sufficiency every Libyan family had to raise chickens in the home. The cages and birds were imported and, for an obligatory fee of fifty-seven dinars (\$150 at the 1977 exchange rate), were distributed by the government to Libyans. To many city dwellers in small apartments, raising chickens in their kitchens was a difficult if not impossible affair. The result was that many ate the birds and found other uses for the cages.*²⁶

Qaddafi's ideology and rule are constantly changing, sometimes in different directions. Always experimenting, he tinkers with the Revolution and its ideological mix, employing Islam, socialism, and populism in varying degrees to suit the situation at hand. The Revolution of today is unlike the Revolution of 10 years ago, and almost certainly unlike what it will be 10 years from now.

Foreign Relations

Not since Nasser has an Arab leader attempted such an ambitious foreign policy as has Qaddafi. Driven by his opposition to colonialism and Zionism, as well as his vision of Arab unity, Qaddafi has pursued a world order in which Libya and other Arab nations would take top billing. But his revolutionary zeal and temperamental personality have progressively isolated his regime.

Libya's relations with its North African neighbors have been volatile. He has plunged into armed conflict with five of his six neighbors. Niger, the only neighbor he has not clashed with, is too weak to stand up to Libya

and has adopted a policy of accommodation towards the Qaddafi regime.²⁷ Qaddafi has threatened to support opposition groups in Algeria and Tunisia as penalty for not supporting Libya against the UN sanctions.²⁸ Egypt, Libya's closest friend during the early years of the Revolution, attacked Libya in 1977 in a brief, punitive war after Israeli intelligence informed President Sadat that a Libyan assassination attempt was brewing.²⁹ Libya has staked claim to the Auzo strip of Chad since 1974 for ideological reasons and economic gain from Chad's rich uranium deposits. A protracted conflict ensued, ending in a devastating and embarrassing defeat for Qaddafi's forces.³⁰

Qaddafi has meddled in the internal politics of virtually all of sub-Saharan Africa. In an effort to undermine Western and Israeli influence on the continent, he has provided aid, both military and economic, to a veritable *Who's Who* of African bad guys—Amin in Uganda; Bokassa in the Central African Republic; and Mobuto in Zaire.³¹ These efforts earned him the dubious distinction of being the first political leader to be denied the chairmanship of the Organization of African Unity (OAU).³²

In the greater Arab world, Qaddafi's insistence on a violent solution to the Palestinian problem has alienated Libya from the governments of Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and the Gulf States; while Libya's support for Iran during the Iran-Iraq war turned even Saddam Hussein against Qaddafi.³³

Cut off from the world by UN sanctions and resentful at the Arab world for turning its back on him, Qaddafi has attempted to redefine his foreign policy efforts in Africa. Evidently abandoning pan-Arabism for the time being and embracing "pan-Africanism," he has reached out to South African President Nelson Mandela and attempted to mediate conflicts in Congo, Sierra Leone, Eritrea, Liberia, and Sudan. At the June 1998 OAU summit, African leaders declared that they would ignore the UN airline embargo against Libya. In gratitude, Libya rewarded African heads of state with large cash gifts for each visit that violated the embargo.³⁴

Qaddafi's association with state-sponsored terrorism has earned him the enmity of both the Arab world and Western democracies. He is reported to have supported some 50 terror organizations and subversion groups, in addition to more than 40 radical governments in Africa, Asia, Europe, and America.³⁵ Among the terrorist groups that continue to receive direct support from his regime are Abu Nidal and Hamas.³⁶ An

analysis of the terrorist groups and causes Qaddafi has supported does not reveal a clear ideological pattern. His indiscriminate sponsorship of groups as diverse as Hamas (the liberation of Palestine), the Irish Republican Army (Irish independence), and the Red Brigades (Marxist upheaval) suggests that he considers terrorism not so much as a tool to advance the Revolution but as a weapon to be used against his perceived foes—Israel and the Western democracies.

Libya's alleged involvement in the 1986 bombing of a Berlin nightclub that killed two U.S. servicemen resulted in U.S. air strikes against Tripoli and Benghazi, killing 36 Libyans, including Qaddafi's 16-month-old daughter.³⁷ Less violent but even more damaging to Libya were the UN sanctions prompted by the 1989 Pan Am bombing. UN sanctions, in effect from 1992 to 1999, crippled the Libyan economy and isolated the country from the world community.³⁸

But the incidence of Libyan-sponsored terrorism during the 1990's appears to have declined, if not ceased. This could be a result of UN sanctions and/or the U.S. air strikes. An Australian study of world-wide terrorism, conducted in 1996, shows that Libyan-associated terrorist groups were substantially less active during the 20 months after the air strikes than before. The terrorist activity that persisted shifted away from acts of high and medium severity toward acts of low severity—evidence that military force might have some value in deterring terrorism, at least for the short term.³⁹ In interviews with western journalists, Qaddafi and his ministers insist that if Libyans have been involved in terrorist acts, they were not implementing Libyan policy.⁴⁰ This contrasts sharply with Qaddafi's public rhetoric of the 1970s and 1980s when terrorists were exalted as heroes and martyrs.

Qaddafi has paid a high price for his revolutionary zeal. He has virtually no friends or allies outside of Libya's borders. His support for terrorism, rather than advancing the Revolution and enhancing his political clout, has increased Libya's isolation, leading to a crippled economy and emboldened internal opposition groups. Although Qaddafi has displayed relatively good behavior for the past 10 years, his hatred of imperialism and Zionism likely remains the root of his ideology and the driving force of his foreign policy.

Threats to the Regime

Qaddafi, though possessing a monopoly on wealth and power, faces opposition from multiple segments of Libyan society. The regime's redistribution of property and the nationalization of virtually all industry and commerce have alienated Libya's middle class. Intellectuals and students have been scarred by a series of barbaric hangings carried out at the country's universities. The Muslim clergy view Qaddafi as a heretic for his reinterpretation of the Koran. Military officers are infuriated by Qaddafi's plans to raise a people's militia to replace the regular army.⁴¹

As Qaddafi has become more isolated, he has become less tolerant of criticism, repressing Islamic extremist groups and imposing brutal control over ethnic and tribal minorities. Tribes such as the Berbers, Tuaregs, and Warfalla are the bedrock of Libyan social structure and their growing disenchantment with the regime does not bode well for Qaddafi.⁴² The tribal tension has even extended to his own Qathathfa tribe whose members have been accused of plotting to assassinate him.⁴³

One of the many inconsistencies in the Qaddafi regime's policies has been its long-standing support of international Islamic opposition groups. Within Libya, though, the same groups have been the objects of brutal repression. Although by all accounts a devout Muslim, Qaddafi has long been distrustful of religious organizations since they often become involved in politics, breeding factionalism, and undermining his revolutionary objectives. As part of his campaign to eliminate independent sources of power that could challenge his ideology and leadership, Qaddafi has attacked the Islamists as agents of reaction and obstacles to the progress of the Revolution.⁴⁴

Religious groups, especially the Muslim Brotherhood, have objected to Qaddafi's efforts to concentrate religious power in his own hands and to make himself the sole interpreter of the Koran. They are resentful of the socialist changes that have taken place and critical of Qaddafi's promotion of his doctrine over that of traditional Islamic teachings. The Brotherhood's appeal is growing among city dwellers and the poor who respond to its vision of reformulating Arab institutions along Islamic ideals.⁴⁵

The National Salvation Front is the other group that poses a threat to Qaddafi. Established in 1981, this party has attempted to craft a platform that accommodates both secular and Islamic opponents of Qaddafi. Of special significance has been this group's effort to establish connections

with members of the Libyan armed forces. Two recent arrivals on the Libyan political landscape are the Islamic Martyrdom Movement and the Libyan Islamic Group. Both of these mysterious organizations seem to be focusing their recruiting efforts on poverty-stricken Libyan veterans of the Afghan conflict.⁴⁶

During the past few years, anti-regime violence by Islamic extremists has reached new levels of intensity. Guerrilla forces have clashed with Libyan troops and are rumored to have attempted to assassinate Qaddafi.⁴⁷ Although the level of violence has not reached the same scale as it has in neighboring Algeria, the ability of the Islamic guerrillas to obtain advanced weapons and conduct raids against Qaddafi's security forces are reasons for the regime to worry.

Despite the recent surge of extremist violence, the army still holds the key to the future of the regime. Qaddafi's ill-fated adventures in Chad have caused considerable discontent among officers as has his attempts to reduce the power of the army by creating an alternative popular militia. Although the military has the power to challenge Qaddafi, it lacks a coherent ideology to legitimize its rule and attract support from other disaffected groups. This has led military challengers to seek an alliance with an opposition group that possesses legitimacy and ideological appeal—the Islamic extremists.⁴⁸

The Primacy of Oil

Qaddafi has long known the political power of oil. His regime maintains a monopoly on the distribution of oil revenues, the country's primary source of income. He has used these revenues to bankroll spectacular, if wasteful, development. Billions of petrodollars have gone to finance the causes of liberation, terrorism, and Islam throughout the world and have paid for Libya's nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons programs. Qaddafi has distributed oil revenues in ways to influence tribal leaders and placate those who question his eccentric political concepts, foreign policy adventures, and lack of economic planning. But Libya is a slave to the price of oil. Depressed oil prices and a production complex hobbled from embargoes have put Qaddafi in a difficult position.⁴⁹

Qaddafi is running out of money. The state runs almost all the economy and does so badly. Black marketeering and corruption are

rampant. Huge sums are spent on eccentric schemes such as the construction of a \$25 billion “Great Man-made River Project” across the Sahara.⁵⁰ Without the huge inflow of petrodollars he has been accustomed to, Qaddafi will find it difficult, if not impossible, to keep his support base content.

Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD)

In spite of sanctions, embargoes, and a moribund economy, (not to mention the Non-Proliferation Treaty which Libya ratified in 1981), Qaddafi continues to pursue attainment of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons. In his own words, the primary threat to Libya is “Israel’s arsenal of nuclear weapons and missiles capable of hitting targets in Libya.”⁵¹ He evidently believes that these weapons can raise his international stature, deter U.S. and Israeli attack, intimidate his neighbors, and serve as cheaper alternatives to more expensive conventional forces. But even after 30 years of trying to develop a nuclear weapon, Libya’s nuclear program remains in the embryonic stage. It has succeeded only in providing some training to a number of students and technicians and the establishment of a nuclear research center, which includes a small Soviet-supplied research reactor under International Atomic Energy Agency safeguards.⁵² Progress has been hampered from mismanagement, lack of spare parts, and the reluctance of foreign suppliers to provide assistance.

Qaddafi does not appear to have abandoned his goal of acquiring nuclear weapons. There are reports that Libya tried to buy a nuclear bomb from China in 1970 and Russia in 1992.⁵³ Libya assisted Pakistan in its development of nuclear weaponry, through direct financial aid as well as by serving as an intermediary in the procurement of Niger-mined uranium. This was no doubt with the hope that Pakistan would one day provide Qaddafi with a nuclear weapon or at least the expertise for him to develop his own.⁵⁴ But with the execution of Pakistani prime minister Ali Bhutto in 1979, Libya’s hopes for an “Islamic Bomb” from Pakistan appear to have diminished.⁵⁵

Although Libya is a signatory of the Biological Weapons Convention, it has pursued development of biological weapons for many years. Its program remains in the early research and development status though, primarily for want an adequate scientific and technical base. The program

suffers from the same difficulties as the nuclear program in acquiring needed foreign equipment and technical expertise.⁵⁶ This is scant reassurance since biological weapons are a great deal easier to produce than nuclear weapons and can be done clandestinely with equipment otherwise used for commercial industry.

Available evidence suggests that only Libya's chemical warfare program has made any real progress. During the 1980s, it succeeded in producing up to 100 tons of blister and nerve agent at its Rabta facility, although many of the precursor chemicals were obtained from foreign sources.⁵⁷ The focus of intense media attention, Rabta was shut down in 1990—ostensibly because of a fire—only to be reopened in 1996. While Rabta was inoperative, Qaddafi's efforts shifted to the construction of a hardened, deeply buried facility at Tarhunah, southeast of Tripoli.⁵⁸ Over a hundred tons of mustard and nerve gases are believed to be stockpiled at Tarhunah. As if this were not enough, the facility is reported to be capable of producing up to 1,000 tons of mustard gas, 90 tons of sarin, and 1,300 tons of soman nerve agent per year.⁵⁹

In addition to his quest for WMD agents, Qaddafi has been shopping for suitable delivery vehicles. Libya's only operational ballistic missile system is the Scud-B, acquired from the Soviet Union in the mid-1970s. These missiles are at the end of their service life and suffering from a host of maintenance problems. In January 2000, only a few days after Libya and Britain exchanged ambassadors for the first time in 15 years, Libya was caught trying to smuggle Scud components from China through London.⁶⁰ Efforts to procure the North Korean No Dong missile have been unsuccessful. UN sanctions have stymied Libya's efforts to develop the Al Fatah, a missile of its own design.⁶¹

WMD Strategies and Scenarios

Five WMD strategies have been identified that might be used by a state like Libya against the U.S. and its allies.⁶² The first would be to fracture the allied coalition. Within the range of Libya's missiles and aircraft lie North Africa, southern Europe, Israel, and Turkey. By holding these nations at risk, Qaddafi could coerce them into refraining from joining any coalition against him. Without the participation of North African and Mediterranean members, a U.S.-led coalition against Libya

would suffer from a perceived lack of legitimacy or even be labeled as U.S. aggression.

The second WMD strategy would be to defeat the U.S. at home. High U.S. and Allied casualties caused by WMD attack, or merely the fear of high casualties, could damage U.S. public support of the war effort. Qaddafi surely took note of the quick U.S. withdrawals from Lebanon in 1983 and Somalia in 1993 that were spurred by the deaths of U.S. servicemen.

The third strategy involves using WMD to shatter a U.S. expeditionary force. Qaddafi's armed forces are weak and would be no match for those of a U.S.-led force in a conventional engagement. A massive WMD attack against the invading army would go a long way toward leveling the playing field. Aimed at troop concentrations, either on the battlefield or at a point of debarkation, the WMD attack could inflict thousands of casualties and set the U.S. war effort back months (if it doesn't provoke nuclear retaliation). During the time it would take to rebuild the expeditionary force, U.S. public opinion might force a compromised peace to be negotiated.

Another strategy would be the use of WMD to secure the endgame. Qaddafi, when faced with an impending military defeat, could gain negotiating leverage by threatening to go down in a blaze of WMD glory. U.S. and Allied leaders, even though victorious on the battlefield, might be tempted to allow Qaddafi to remain in power rather than suffer additional casualties.

A final strategy for Qaddafi might be to use WMD to avenge the defeat of his regime. Samson-like, he could strike out against those nations he perceives as responsible for his overthrow. With nothing left for Qaddafi to lose there would be little that could be done to deter him.

When these strategies are applied to Libya's domestic and foreign affairs situation, three WMD scenarios become evident. The first involves Qaddafi employing WMD to defeat or repel an invading force or, as discussed above, to secure the endgame after his forces have been overrun. The only known instance of Libyan use of WMD occurred in 1987 during Libya's military operation in Chad. Chadian forces, with French and U.S. support, had turned the tide against their Libyan opponents and launched a surprise attack against a military base inside Libya. In response, Qaddafi ordered a chemical weapons attack—mustard gas delivered by a transport

aircraft.⁶³ This suggests what the Libyan response would be against an attack by the U.S. or Egypt.

Warning signs preceding such a response are difficult to predict given the shroud of secrecy that cloaks the Qaddafi regime. Increased activity at the Tarhuna and Rabta facilities might be an indicator. So might be a protective withdrawal of his air force which, until his missile capability improves, is his most reliable chemical weapons delivery capability.

There have been unconfirmed reports that the Great Man-made River Project, with its hundreds of miles of tunnels, is not merely an eccentric irrigation scheme but a method to store and transport WMD out of sight of Western intelligence sensors.⁶⁴ If this is the case, close attention must be paid to that system's nodes and service points.

The second WMD scenario involves a revenge attack against Western or Israeli targets. Following the 1986 U.S. air strikes, Libya launched two Scud missiles at the Italian island of Lampedusa.⁶⁵ Although both missiles fell short of their target (intentionally?), the attack demonstrated Qaddafi's willingness to lash out at third party populations in an attempt to fracture coalitions and shake public resolve. A twist to this scenario might have Qaddafi utilizing his terrorist connections to carry out the attack. This could even be ordered after his overthrow, either from a hiding place within Libya or while in exile abroad. An intelligence community observation:

Whereas Tripoli employs its own intelligence officers to eliminate opposition figures, it employs surrogates for its nastiest operations. Deviation from this norm, as in the Lockerbie bombing, has proved disastrous. Consequently, if Tripoli wishes to mimic the Tokoyo underground gassing, it will turn to a third party like the Abu Nidal faction.⁶⁶

The third scenario has Qaddafi using WMD to eradicate opposition groups. According to dissident and diplomatic sources, armed opposition to the regime is growing. Libyan air force fighter-bombers and helicopter gunships have repeatedly struck suspected militant hideouts in the Green Mountain region.⁶⁷ It is difficult to determine how effective these operations have been but, given the weakness of the Libyan military and the growing threat from dissident groups—both tribal and religious, it is conceivable that Qaddafi might one day be forced to take a page from

Saddam Hussein's playbook and employ chemical weapons against his own people.

Since no single opposition appears capable of ousting Qaddafi, a coalition of groups would have to be formed. A WMD attack against one group would likely discourage other dissident groups from joining the cause. Such an attack would probably be prompted by an opposition victory over regime forces and prefaced by an increase in Qaddafi's revolutionary rhetoric, both through speeches and the state-sponsored media. His favorite euphemism for enemies that he desires to kill is "Mad Dogs," a label he has applied to Islamic extremists. He is also prone to accuse his enemies—before he eliminates them—of collaborating with U.S. or Israeli intelligence.⁶⁸

Is Qaddafi Deterrable?

Qaddafi has frequently been characterized by Western governments as being irrational or insane. His policies often seem senseless and counterproductive. His most brazen acts of terror—the Pan Am and UTA bombings—are nihilistic and self-destructive. He has used chemical weapons; he continuously defies international norms; he sponsors terrorist groups. For these reasons, he might be deterrable only to a degree.

A study of Qaddafi's personal history does not show a leader who is willing to go down in flames for his beliefs, but one who has repeatedly modified his ideology to safeguard his position as the Leader of the Revolution. His variable standing on Islam, for instance. When it was necessary to legitimize his ideology, he embraced Islam and was an enthusiastic proponent of strict Koranic law. But when the Muslim clerics criticized his Third Universal Theory, arguing that it was counter to Islamic doctrine, Qaddafi jailed them and proclaimed that, with Islam, people could speak directly with Allah and therefore did not require clergymen as intermediaries.

Qaddafi, although complicated and difficult to read, seems to possess a degree of pragmatism. He will adjust the mix of his ideology—a little socialism one day, some Islam the next, a heavy dose of populism—to keep the revolution (i.e., his life and power) alive. He is not likely to do anything that will destroy all he has worked for. Hobbled by UN sanctions and his pariah status, he appears to have come around to the view that

conciliatory diplomacy might be more effective in furthering Libya's influence than proclamations of support for terrorists and revolutionaries.

To deter Qaddafi, something of his that he holds dear must be held at risk. His military would make a poor target as it has become so weak and ineffectual that it is incapable of harming anyone except perhaps his own regime. Counterforce strategies against Libya's WMD facilities could be useful if the weapons were stored someplace more accessible than Tarhunah, the design of which is said to have been constructed from Soviet bomb shelter blueprints and therefore virtually impregnable to conventional air attack.⁶⁹ Pressure applied to Qaddafi's international support base would be effective if such a base existed. Qaddafi has been so ostracized by the leaders of the Arab world that they are unlikely to jeopardize their international standing to support him. Although Qaddafi claims that Libya is the gateway to Africa and that he is an African above all else, the affinity displayed toward him by African leaders exists only in proportion to how much financial aid Libya doles out. Qaddafi's domestic support base is provided chiefly by the three tribes from which his inner circle members hail. Tribal support depends a great deal on how well the tribes fare economically under the regime. They are not likely to cause trouble if their leaders and members are well cared for. All things considered, there appears only one prop holding up the Qaddafi regime—oil.

As we have seen with the UN sanctions and the decline in oil prices, when oil revenues dry up, so does the ability of the Qaddafi regime to provide financial benefits to its support base—tribal leaders, the urban poor, and politicized youth. Oil revenues finance his security police and military, placate potential opponents, and keep his friends happy. Oil is clearly Qaddafi's source of power and the key to deterring him.

Before we go any further, we must consider what a Libya without Qaddafi would look like and if such a situation would be more desirable than the one that exists now. Qaddafi has succeeded in disturbing the political environment in such a way as to prevent the emergence of a civilian opposition. The greatest threat to his regime is a coalition of Islamic extremist groups and the military. If and when these factions link up, Qaddafi's days are numbered. Given the regional destabilization threatened by Islamic extremism and the specter of religious fanatics in

possession of Libya's chemical weapons stocks, it can be argued that the region would be worse off without Qaddafi than with him.

Military strikes against Libya's oil industry could target the pipelines, port facilities and the oil fields themselves. But with any military operation there exists the risk of WMD retaliation, either against the U.S. or its allies. And even if Qaddafi does not lash out with WMD, he can improve upon his pariah status by claiming that the U.S. is bullying him and, by destroying his oil industry, is responsible for the suffering of thousands of Libyans.

The method to deterring Qaddafi appears to be the judicious use of sanctions. Sanctions applied directly toward Libyan WMD production are difficult to enforce since many of the technologies involved have legitimate applications within civilian industry (this is especially true for chemical and biological weapons, less so for nuclear). The sanctions should take advantage of the Qaddafi regime's dependence upon petrodollars and specifically target Libya's oil production industry—production equipment, technical assistance, access to foreign markets, etc.

For these sanctions to be effective, they must be multilateral. This is evident by the relative ineffectiveness of the U.S. embargo against Libya, in effect since 1986. Even in the face of American pressure, there have always been nations—some of them U.S. allies—willing to trade with Libya. It was only with the UN sanctions, in effect from 1992 to 1999, that Qaddafi was squeezed into what resembled respectable behavior. For the first time, Libyans could not blame solely the U.S. and Israel for their problems but had to face the fact that they were international outcasts. In April 1999, the sanctions produced their desired effect with the turnover of the two Libyan suspects in the Pan Am bombing, and were suspended.

The key to preventing Qaddafi from misbehaving in the future is an efficient process of reinstating the sanctions. A healthy level of fear for the survival of his regime will keep Qaddafi on his best behavior.

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