



Notions of Islam and the West in the US-Libyan Relationship: An Historical Perspective

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INTRODUCTION

"Oh my God, they found me, I don't know how, but they found me," frantically sputters Dr. Emmett "Doc" Brown, the eccentric inventor of the time machine car in Robert Zemeckis' highly successful 1985 film *Back to the Future*, "[It's] the Libyans!"¹ As Alan Silvestri's background music crescendos, the camera cuts to a Volkswagen bus slowly and sinisterly weaving down a well-manicured, deserted backroad toward the empty Twin Pines Mall parking lot where at 1:15 AM the Doctor and his young protégé Marty tinker with the plutonium-powered time machine. Suddenly the hat-covered head of an unnamed, swarthy, machine-gun-wielding Libyan emerges from the roof of the careening bus as unintelligible, crazed Arabic words vaguely including 'Allah' pass between him and the

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driver, presumably verifying that the white-haired man in the lab coat and yellow rubber gloves is indeed the same Doc Brown who took their plutonium and provided them with an atomic bomb consisting of little more than pinball

machine parts! After an inordinate number of shots, Doc Brown is taken for dead and Marty hops into the time machine car under hot pursuit from the Libyans who cannot manage to eliminate the unarmed witness as they screechingly circle around the JC Penney department store, cursing both the "damn Soviet gun" and the "damn German car."² Finally, Marty achieves the critical speed for time travel and in the bright flash of light the Libyans lose control of the Volkswagen and dramatically crash into a Fox Photo booth promising one-hour photograph development to suburban Californian families.

How did Libyans come to occupy the position of archetypal terrorist in this 1985 film typecasting

them as unreasonable, unskilled and unable to defeat ordinary American citizens against a backdrop of contrasting suburban order and calm unfazed by foreign objects and people? How did an otherwise obscure Third World country previously ruled by a pliant monarch come to constitute a major enemy of the powerful United

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States for over twenty years, notwithstanding the paradoxical portrayal of its terrorists as both incompetent and threats to national security? What factors were behind the US casting of Libyan Leader Muammar al-Qadhafi in the following successive roles: ingénue junior military officer turned head of state; ideologically-driven pariah bent on shaking up the international system by any means possible including terrorism; dangerous and unstable “Mad Dog of the Middle East”³ requiring armed response; globally-shunned despot seeking nuclear and chemical weapons willy-nilly as his country’s economy and infrastructure, not to mention citizenry, crumbled; and, most recently, elder statesman having seen the light and wanting to play nicely in the international arena with only occasional recourse to diatribe and unsavory allies? If Libyans were to make a cameo in a movie now, would it be as Western-dressed Libyan intelligence agents tipping off the White House Situation Room in perfect English on a sleek cell phone as to Osama Bin Laden’s whereabouts in the spirit of thwarting common enemy Al Qaeda in the Global War on Terror?

As the above metamorphosis in US-Libyan relations suggests, the idea of an overarching Islam versus the West civilizational divide or a cultural bias as the primary driver of relations with Libya would be difficult to substantiate. Stepping back and considering Libya as an Arab and Islamic country, and taking a panorama of US relations with other Islamic countries, clearly religious affiliation and civilizational identity do not hinder political alliances. For example, the United States has been a staunch ally of the archconservative, antidemocratic guardians of Islam, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, since its inception, and enjoys mostly stable relations with the Jordanian and Egyptian client states as well. Until the 1979 revolution, Iran numbered as a close ally of the United States. Saddam Hussein of Iraq rode the

roller coaster of overlapping and then divergent interests until finally he was forcibly removed from power in 2003. Pervez Musharaff of Pakistan constituted another example of support, albeit fickle, for an Islamic head of state.

Yet despite the chiefly interest-driven relations with Islamic polities, a cultural bias exists, selectively manifest during times of strife, more latent during times of cooperation, and varying across countries. Media and public opinion reveal such a bias, as do films. But, to what extent are biased views primordial, held by the majority of Americans based on inherent perceptions of Islamic civilization, or instrumental, stirred up by foreign policy elites and fanned via the media to justify certain policies? And as for the lately eminent notion of civilizational divide, is this something pundits proffer as an oversimplified heuristic to understand world affairs at a particular time and place, or does it evoke a fundamental, ever-present viewpoint only now taking the front burner as international relations primarily take place in the majority-Muslim-inhabited Third World given the denouement of the Cold War? Under what circumstances has a major world religion, Islam, leapt to the forefront of international political problems, and what accounts for the vastly differing treatment of its leaders and followers over time?

This paper seeks to explore cultural bias in the context of changing political relations between the United States and the Islamic state of Libya. Periodization of the relationship will be undertaken to illuminate amplification or downplaying of cultural differences in light of particular political circumstances, as well as to address the above questions of an essentialized civilizational divide. Although Libya as such did not exist before its independence in 1951, the paper will look at the initial Libyan-American encounter as it occurred under a different balance of power and prior conception of Islam. The monarchy under King Idris will also be covered as an era of near

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clientelism in relations, quite unlike the following decades of Qadhafi's rule, which will be treated in the rest of the paper. So, the main focus will be when and under what circumstances do relations ebb and flow with Libya and how do these fluxes relate to cultural bias.

US-LIBYAN RELATIONS PRIOR TO QADHAFI'S 1969 COUP

A balance of power favoring Tripoli and a more worldly impression of Islam comprise the chief differences of early nineteenth century US-Libyan relations. At this point in time, the United States lacked the resources to outfit a navy strong enough to withstand the Barbary Pirates primarily associated with Morocco, Algiers, Tunis and Tripoli, and Congress could not afford to pay continually the tribute demanded. Prior to resorting to armed conflict, Thomas Jefferson and John Jay had gone to London to negotiate with the Tripolitanian Ambassador who offered that, "[i]t was written in their Koran that all nations which had not acknowledged the Prophet were sinners, whom it was the right and duty of the faithful to plunder and enslave; and that every mussulman that was slain in this warfare was sure to go to paradise...and that the Devil aided his countrymen in these expeditions, for they were almost always successful."⁴ Thus, Tripoli was a force to be reckoned with: indeed the US victory in the first Barbary War was proudly memorialized in the famous Marine Corp Hymn opening with, "from the halls of Montezuma to the shores of Tripoli."⁵ Despite the Tripolitanian Ambassador's Islamically-construed justification for exercise of worldly power, the US policy driver was avoiding the tribute and did not excessively dwell on the Muslim nature of the adversary, and in addition it was contemporarily commonplace to speak of God and the Devil.

It is interesting to note that these Islamic Barbary States had a connotation of places of mundane pleasure and lacked any fundamentalist or ascetic imagery of today. The Barbary Coast became a word describing, "a part of a city that is

notorious for gambling dens and brothels and saloons and riotous nightlife"⁶ (later applied to raucous San Francisco during the 1848 California Gold Rush). One could imagine puritanical New Englanders expressing indignation at the bawdy lifestyles of the pirates and the North African regencies with their harems and comfort in milking advantages conferred by worldly power. What this suggests rather than a civilizational divide is common cross-civilizational perception conditioned by power realities. In other words, the decadence associated with a later-phase civilization is generally rejected on moral grounds by an earlier-phase civilization. For example, shortly after Qadhafi came to power in what some consider the first fundamentalist Islamic revolution in the region, the nightclubs and bars associated with Western presence were closed and, as an aside but indicative of the extent to which Western influence was actively routed, in 1970, twenty-five young men were arrested for "copying the Beatles in their queer appearance" as part of an initiative to combat "effeminate youth."⁷ Yet instead of seeing Qadhafi's program as arising in response to feared Western encroachment, a Deputy CIA Director precluded the possibility of a worldview stemming from beyond one's primary civilization,

and informed Washington that these purification measures occurred, "presumably out of deference to Islamic fundamentalism,"⁸ thereby essentializing something that was actually very much a product of the times.

Lastly with regard to this nineteenth century skirmish, some have cited it as the opening round of a long relationship of discord. However, although Tripoli possessed cultural continuity with present-day Libya, it was not the modern nation-state of today. Moreover, after the second Barbary War ended in 1816, a 165-year era of peace ensued until the 1981 Gulf of Sidra incident in which the United States shot down two Libyan fighter planes over a territorial conflict in the Mediterranean. Relations dulled to the point that the US Embassy in Tripoli was closed in 1882 due

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to inactivity, as its main duties consisted of raising the American flag on Independence Day and on the anniversary of the Battle of New Orleans.⁹ Therefore, the recent idea of ongoing, intractable conflict likely serves as an explanation for more contemporary clashes. For example, when Qadhafi's son recently wrote that, "Libyan schoolchildren learn that our first encounter came in 1800, when American warships entered our harbors to bombard Tripoli and Derna,"¹⁰ he described more the Qadhafian narrative of Libyan national history. In fact, in the aftermath of the US attacks on Libya in 1986, Libya came out with postage stamps entitled "American Aggression," one of which contained a representation of the US *Philadelphia* ship sunk off the coast of Libya in 1803!¹¹ In addition, the title of a prominent American historian's book, *Libya and America: Two Centuries of Strife*,¹² speaks more to post-9/11 narratives than to history. Thus, history highlighting conflict gains traction in times of trouble and fades away during more stable times.

In sum, looking at the early encounter adds value to the analysis by suggesting that notions of Islam and the West, far from being static, are much informed by power realities, and that Islam itself has been cast differently from within and without over the years due to circumstance. The next US-Libyan situations to be examined will be World War II and the post-independence monarchy of King Idris. Prior to World War II, the United States had been remote from the Middle East, while European powers further colonized the declining Ottoman Empire. General points relevant to the following analysis are that the colonial experience led to defensive definitions of Islam by its overtaken adherents, that at the time of World War II the United States was seen by Middle Easterners as a non-European power with dissimilar designs on the region, and that the United States had relatively little knowledge and experience with the Middle East before embarking on its post-World-War-II leadership role there.

Given the complementary relationship between Hollywood and the US government during World War II, a synopsis of 1942 Hollywood B-movie *A Yank in Libya* reveals much about the way Libya figured into the American

outlook on the world at the time: earnest American correspondent "Mike" arrives in Libya and stumbles upon a Nazi German scheme to assist tribal leaders in a coup against the British occupiers; Mike purloins one of the guns imported by Nazis to add to the in-cave stockroom of the co-conspiring Sheikh (who, in a typical pre-modern rivalry, is the son of the British-friendly Sheikh) and leaves it off at the apartment of an attractive female British intelligence officer named Nancy, who also serves as the unrequited love interest of the British-friendly Sheikh who spares her from death when the gun is found in her apartment; Mike tries to warn the British Consul who brushes him off since the British have a coup of their own in the works; and, finally, Mike wins Nancy and the Nazi coup is thwarted, but not without seeing some belly dancing and meeting an American undercover agent from Brooklyn posing as a razor salesman to the bearded Muslims of Libya!¹³ Salient to note are the stereotypes of Arab culture, the sense that history is acting upon rather than at the behest of Libya, and the image of Americans as stumbling onto an international stage full of danger and intrigue by the more duplicitous and less-principled Europeans.

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Further on the notion of cultural bias and following up on the previous citation of another of the very few films to address Libya, the work of Jack Shaheen regarding stereotyping of Arabs in American films lends veracity to the idea of an American cultural bias toward Arabs. In his study of virtually every Hollywood film made portraying Arabs, Shaheen finds Arabs dehumanized and villainized in ninety-five percent of the films, a caricature remaining essentially unchanged through the myriad

international events of the twentieth century.¹⁴ Of what do these stereotypes consist? “Pause and visualize the reel Arab. What do you see? Black beard, headdress, dark sunglasses. In the background – a limousine, harem maidens, oil wells, camels. Or perhaps he is brandishing an automatic weapon, crazy hate in his eyes and Allah on his lips.”¹⁵ The latter description applies particularly well to *Back to the Future!* Why have these stereotypes endured? According to Shaheen, the post-1948 violence and upheaval in the Middle East captured on television news reinforced stereotypes and “serve[d] as both a source and excuse” for filmmakers.¹⁶ In addition, Shaheen notes the lack of civil society response, in terms of uncritical movie reviews, scarcely mobilized Arab-Americans, and weak to nonexistent Arab-American participation in the movie industry.

Shaheen’s argument buttresses the notion of an ingrained American cultural bias against Arabs, although it is worth considering to what extent the views of the few in Hollywood influence the many Americans. Yet regardless of whether the bias is initially held by many or few Americans, the bias is not rejected in public discourse by those Americans digesting the stereotypes. So another question to be explored later will be why Americans are so predisposed to accepting these caricatures. As a final related point, despite Department of Defense collaboration with Hollywood at times, the Hollywood elite is sufficiently removed from the foreign policy elite to obviate the idea of an entirely instrumental cultural bias hammered down from above to suit policy exigencies, though the bias may certainly be reinforced from time to time. Furthermore, the exercise of speech freedoms by many Americans especially media members would make such a scenario difficult to achieve except during wartime or conditions where conception of the national interest are closely and uniformly shared by journalists and policy makers. One caveat to this would be government-planted disinformation, which will be addressed in the next section.

Returning to the project of setting the scene for the entrance of Qadhafi, let us review relevant postwar details. The Libyan trusteeship was

created pursuant to the 1945 Potsdam Conference to check Stalin’s North African ambitions, with Great Britain and America serving as trustees. A 1950 memo to Secretary of State Dean Acheson noted that “[o]ur prestige is probably higher in Libya than in any other part of the area because of U.S. support of Libyan independence.”¹⁷ American backing of independence was tempered however by a realpolitik policy goal of maintaining military base rights considered essential in light of the Cold War. The trusteeship soon gave way to the Kingdom of Libya, led by King Idris who, reminiscent of the “good” sheikh of *A Yank in Libya*, had supported the Allies in World War II. Unlike Qadhafi, Idris saw working with Western powers as the best way to restore Muslim political position.

The US-Libyan relationship during this era mainly consisted of much-needed economic aid in exchange for base rights. Interestingly, Secretary Acheson lamented how major assistance the US provided to Libya, including decisive grain shipments during a severe drought, went unnoticed by the US press. Indeed much of the US-Libyan

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relationship of this period lacked media attention, possibly due to the axiom of bad news selling more than good news, or to Libya’s obscurity. Moving on from aid to base rights, a chief US diplomat in Tripoli attempted to essentialize the Libyan government’s position in 1954 as, “tantamount to blackmail and showing little change from [the] barbary pirate tradition,”¹⁸ yet this was not entirely accurate as the base was a fait accompli and the aid was more a well-meaning palliative than a blackmail payment. In sum, prior to 1969, Libya figured as a key US ally in the Middle East, mitigating challenges posed by the Cold War, Nasserism, and anti-Israeli sentiment, as well as presenting the prospect of a

steady supply of oil given the exploration and development by American oil companies.

Germane from the foregoing are the inherent tensions of a US policy simultaneously advocating self-determination while carving out a sphere of military control to counter an external, non-Libyan threat, and that Islam is not intrinsically anti-Western as shown by religious leader Idris' cooperative stance which differed quite a bit from the eighteenth century Libyan Ambassador's comment that Islam enjoined enslaving non-believers. Also worth noting is the complete lack of issue with King Idris being an explicitly Muslim leader ruling under a legitimacy conferred by religious status, suggesting that Islamic credentials per se pose no problem, especially when coupled with satisfaction of geostrategic goals. Ultimately, the difficulty of upholding pro-Western policies in a pan-Arab environment, anachronistic foreign military bases, shifts in socioeconomic conditions due to newfound oil wealth, allegations of corruption and incompetence in the government, and incomplete ambit of the Eastern-Libyan-based Sanusi religious order, led to vulnerability and precipitated the 1969 coup.

US-LIBYAN RELATIONS FROM QADHAFI'S 1969 COUP TO THE PRESENT

If graphed on an x-axis of time and a y-axis ranging from normal to worsening relations, US-Libyan affairs between 1969 and 2008 would resemble an asymmetrical Everest starting out at low elevation, steadily climbing until about 1980, steeply ascending until the sharp peak of armed attack in 1986, descending only minimally through the 1990s, plummeting down an escarpment toward normalcy in 2003, and then slowly approaching ground level thereafter. Six phases roughly correspond to the 'gradation' changes: the orientation period following the coup, gradual souring, full-on antagonism, backburner hostility, rehabilitated quasi-ally, and

uncertain non-enemy. This section will not look at every rock in the mountain. Instead, disproportionate emphasis will be placed on the earlier phases of the relationship due to continuity in Libyan rule, enduring themes of conflict, and Libyan isolation after 1986 as well as withdrawal of US Ambassadorial representation between 1972 and 2008. Finally, since Qadhafi has been king of the hill the entire period, factors affecting cultural bias and notions of civilizational divide will be more clear given one less variable to consider.

Riding on Nasser's coattails, Qadhafi came to power in 1969 also to promote "freedom, unity, and socialism," and stated that, "[t]he true cause of the revolution lay in the backward Arab life which reduced the Arab to an almost complete lack of affiliation with the twentieth century. It is by turning to the three slogans that the Arab world rediscovers [its] dignity and [its] place in history."¹⁹ Significant to note are the perception of decline and the lack of immediately antagonistic tone toward the West. Policy orientation for the new regime

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centered on positive neutrality and non-alignment in the Cold War, armed support for the Palestinian cause, and sustenance for what were deemed freedom and liberation movements worldwide. Qadhafi presented a people's Islam as opposed to an establishment Islam, undertaking measures to nationalize *ulema* property, encouraging the masses to rebel against *ulema* authority and take over the mosques, and levying a state-organized religious tax to support *jihad* in Palestine. At a 1970 Islamic Conference, Qadhafi stated that, "we must correctly interpret Islam and the Quran ...Islam is a continuous revolution...[i]t is the mother of all ideologies."²⁰ These last Islam-related details are listed because they show the malleability of Islam and challenge any notion of a nativist return to an immutable Islam opposed to the West, although there is a fine line between cultural authenticity and xenophobia. Despite these audacious claims to transform Libya, Qadhafi was a junior military

officer of humble origin under the age of thirty with minimal exposure to international affairs, so from the outset pragmatism and polish were wanting.

The inexperience of the junta complicated matters for Nixon administration policy makers unsure of how to receive the new regime. For the United States, chief concerns raised by the coup centered on the disposition of Wheelus Air Force base and the British bases, protection of nearly USD 5 million American investments in the Libyan oil industry, continued access to high-quality Libyan oil for European allies, any militant stance toward Israel, and general Arabist agitations including the overthrow of friendly conservative regimes like Saudi Arabia. A 1970 Department of State memorandum suggestively noted that the Libyan government may have renamed Wheelus “‘Ukba ibn Nafia’ after the 7th century Arab conqueror of North Africa (who also expelled the Christians from there).”²¹ It is worth noting with regard to civilizational casting that the air force base is now named after a young girl who lived nearby and died from an American military accident. Qadhafi was not initially described as an Islamic threat, nor were his Islamizing measures on the radar screen, perhaps because the context in which the Islamizing measures were made did not threaten vital interests, as for example the 1979 Iranian Revolution would. The main menace posed by the new Libyan government was whether it would creep leftward toward the USSR, which was dealt with in a less panicky manner given National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger’s policy of détente. In the press, coverage largely addressed the fate of King Idris, American Jewish groups’ outcry against anti-Israel statements and possible arms deals with the French, and the evacuation of the Peace Corps; this news was a far cry from the sensational stories to come.

Although publicly the new government was recognized, measures to influence if not alter the regime were discussed. In a recently declassified “Paper on Possible Alternative Pressures on the Libyan Regime” addressed to Kissinger, four options were considered: enlist NATO allies to pressure the Libyan government to honor its commitment to military base leases (considered

impractical because European allies had more vital economic relations with Libya); economic pressures curtailing oil involvement (considered unfeasible because US oil companies would lose money and Libya had plenty of market for its oil); military display of force using the Sixth Fleet (unworkable because armed forces could not commit further than a show); and a fourth blacked-out

option likely detailing a covert counter coup, as the option is later referred to as some kind of political pressure.²²

The point to make here with regard to

the overall analysis is that because the US lacked sufficient leverage to change the behavior of the regime using the first three pressure points, the levers of covert political pressure and discrediting the regime via media and public announcements became key tools; in other words, the nature of power in the relationship dictated both reliance on covert measures and the use of media to influence domestic and international public opinion of Libya as well as the regime’s view of itself. So, gaps in knowledge about happenings in Libya, instrumental use of media, and activated cultural bias, all against a backdrop of tumultuous events, account for much of the volume, variance, and venom in the media over the years, as admittedly does the person of Qadhafi himself. For this orientation period, however, the memorandum authors recommended a wait-and-see policy.

The relationship soon began to sour. Despite strains regarding delivery of F-5 planes and Arab politics, analysts within US Department of State noted that, “Qadaffi and his supporters are

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prepared to make one last effort to preserve a basically U.S./Western Europe orientation of Libyan society and its oil-based economy.”²³ Tensions over the US relationship with Israel and whether force was necessary to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict constituted the major wedges, as illustrated by the following conversations between Qadhafi, Major Jallud and US Ambassador Palmer:

[Qadhafi] asked what is reason for this special US relationship with Israel...he could see no historical, geographical, religious or other rational basis for it. Thus, he must conclude, USG[US Government] doesn't like Arabs: 'Why does US hate Arabs?' he asked. He said that he learned in Cairo and elsewhere that other Arab leaders agree that the sole problem they have with USG is American commitment to Israel.²⁴

Relevant to the general question of when and how notions of civilizational divide arise, Islamophobia was cited one year later as a last-ditch explanation for US policy:

Qadhafi asked why does USG adhere to its commitment to Israel... [since] U.S. interests in Arab world far outweigh its interests in Israel. He said he could not understand Washington's special tie to Tel Aviv: could there be a Jewish-Christian pact directed against Islam?... After firmly rejecting any suggestion of Islamophobia, I[Ambassador Palmer] said USG is committed to a just peace in the ME[Middle East]...(Jallud at this juncture remarked to Qadhafi that I earlier had told him that ME problem, like Viet Nam and Korea, could be resolved peacefully through negotiations; Qadhafi smiled agreement with Jallud's grimace of incredulity at this idea.)²⁵

These conversations are quoted at length because they underline that the regime did not start out

anti-Western and the Islamophobia explanation was neither the first choice nor satisfactory, important to the civilizational divide strand, and that fundamental disagreement over the Arab-Israeli conflict more than any other interests drove tensions well into the future, including the explosive terrorism issue.

Though this paper does not seek to delve into the thorny topic of terrorism, comparing the 1978 and 2008 Libyan views of terrorism suggests that a common definition remains elusive, but that greater momentum to tackle terrorism as an international problem exists. In general, the chief differences center on: whether one views violence differently on 'wholesale' and 'retail' levels; what the contours, if any, of just use of force would constitute; how far chains of causality stretch; and how interrelated are events. At the first Arab-American People-to-People Dialogue Conference, which took place in Tripoli in 1978, Qadhafi commented that:

Foreign bases, nuclear weapons, starvation, economic warfare, naval fleets, hijacking of planes, the holding of hostages for ransom, and the killing of innocent people are all acts of terrorism. If we are serious in combating terrorism, we have to put all these deeds on one list and find the necessary solution for them. ...

[W]hen a Palestinian hijacks a plane to express his despair, the U.S. shakes the world by saying that this is terrorism and an end should be put to it. We are in agreement with the U.S., an end must be put to terrorism, but we should seek solutions to the underlying problems which have led to this kind of terrorism.²⁶

And another quote, again given at length because it cuts to the quick of current issues, speaks to what Noam Chomsky would term 'National Security States,' policies of short-term pragmatism contravening principles, and the cultural bias against Arabs:

History has recorded the insult to the Americans by their mobilization of all their resources in the service of evil, reaction, backwardness, dictatorship, fascism and oppression. ...It seems that in view of Americans, human rights are applied only to some people. ...Oh, people of America – I cannot address you as friends because we were not friends, and we are not yet friends – I say: Oh American guests, after this review and all these explanations you should be able to understand whether or not we have aggressive intentions. You can also understand whether we are backward, or whether we have ideas.²⁷

As concerns the present, although Qadhafi promptly condemned 9/11 and indeed was the first to report Bin Laden to Interpol in 1998, he still presents a different rationale: while terrorism

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constitutes a “horrible scourge” it is “a justifiable act for those who commit it... [which] is its danger;” and Bin Laden is problematic because of the “heresy” of his ideas such as the Caliphate.²⁸ Rapprochement analysis portraying Qadhafi as having seen the light or become rehabilitated imply that he came around to Western morality, but a more valid approach would be to identify a convergence in Islamic and Western morality and work toward a more universal view.

Moving back to the 1970s and on to a less emotive, convoluted issue, oil comprised another key contributor to spoiling relations. In 1970 Libya

became the first Middle Eastern or North African country to negotiate a raise in oil prices,²⁹ and in 1973, the year of the first oil embargo, Libyan oil was the second largest source of US oil imports. Media coverage of oil shocks illustrated greatly amplified cultural bias in light of a conflictual situation and non-systemic views of the global economy. For example, a histrionic 1973 *TIME* article entitled “The Arab World: Oil, Power, Violence” highlights the foregoing as well as notions of civilizational divide in citing the Crusades:

Suddenly the Arabs, 100 million strong, backward and neglected and abused for centuries, have begun to realize the proportions of the strategic weapon they hold in their hands. They have long complained of the money that Israel has received from the U.S. and Western Europe. Now they are receiving another sort of bonanza—a hundred times over. Their oil wealth is in the process of changing their history, bringing them a power they have not known since the time of the Crusades—a power that could be used for peaceful development or for violence and revenge.³⁰

And the following extracts speak to how Libya became a top enemy of the US, to the evolution of Qadhafi’s image, and to how Arab nationalism takes on an essential character as seen by the use of the word “instincts” to describe its motivation:

The recent thrust toward Arab control of Middle Eastern oil began in 1970, and the man who started it all was the new, young (then 28) and hotheaded ruler of Libya, Colonel Muammar Gaddafi...[who was] [s]purred by the instincts of Arab nationalism and pride...[and is] handsome, devout, ardent, even fanatical.³¹

Qadhafi had earlier complained to Ambassador Palmer about media coverage, though he too essentializes American motivation for outcry over oil:

unwarranted attacks and criticisms of LARG [Libyan Arab Republic Government] and LARG personalities, including Qadhafi himself, appear in US media. He cited recent *TIME* magazine article, several reports in *New York Times* – ‘We seek our rights’ re oil, Qadhafi commented, ‘We are not irresponsible.’ – and article in *National Review*. These indicate American writers motivated by hatred and blindness vis-à-vis LARG.³²

In sum, the way cultural bias appears in the media is conditioned by the degree of conflict in political relations, and citation of civilizational divide correlates with intractability of political conflict.

Now let us return to the question of why Americans are predisposed to accepting the cultural bias and intimations of civilizational divide toward Arabs in general and Libyans in particular. As earlier mentioned, factors such as turmoil in the Middle East and weak civil society presence of Arab-Americans contribute. Obviously, the bias is not monolithically held, as a Libyan government official noted to an American diplomat in 1970: “there are individual private Americans who understand and appreciate the Arab position... [yet they are] completely without influence in American society.”³³ For Europe, histories of the Crusades and perceptions of Muhammad as spreading religion via the sword held more sway than for the US, which did not directly share an acrimonious history with Muslims. In terms of policy, the US supported self-determination in the Middle East until previously discussed post-World-War-II strategic considerations made this unfeasible. Thus Islamic leaders threatened the stability of the international system rather than essentially proved troublesome, notwithstanding the cultural bias. Qadhafi, with his spreading of revolution and third world populism using Islamic symbols, caused American diplomats to worry about his

Islam has not been taught in relation to world history but rather with respect to the American political experience with Islam, namely through the Arab-Israeli conflict and Islamic leaders such as Khomeini, Qadhafi, and Assad

“proclamation of an Islamic state, his promotion of Islam as the religion of the ‘black man’ in Africa, and his spreading of Islamic ‘radicalism’ and ‘terrorism’ worldwide;” in fact, “Qadhafi’s Islamic campaign influenced US official perceptions of Islamic revivalism long before the Iranian Revolution.”³⁴ So, rival political pressures under the banner of Islam provoked: the combination of powerful acts associated with Islam, rather than Islam in itself or any history with Islam, colored perceptions.

Moreover, while political conditions incline Americans to accept this bias, the American educational treatment of Islam greatly exacerbates

matters, as in the 1970s “it was quite possible for a citizen of the United States to grow up, graduate from a major university, and pursue a career without knowing anything about Islam or the Muslim world.”³⁵ After the 1970s, more international education appeared in American schools, but, significantly,

“[m]ulticulturalists argued that the curriculum should include Islam and other world religions, not because world history does not make sense without them, but because Muslims and others now form significant groups within the American population.”³⁶ (And it is worth noting that even the imperfect project of multiculturalism faced opposition in the 1980s from those who wished a purely Western educational experience.) Following from this American-centric rationale, Islam has not been taught in relation to world history but rather with respect to the American political experience with Islam, namely through the Arab-Israeli conflict and Islamic leaders such as Khomeini, Qadhafi, and Assad. Not only does this affect how Islam is received, but also perpetuates a vicious cycle wherein biased media coverage of Arabs and Muslims is used in the classroom, and then students absorb these views and propagate them later. In addition, textbooks “portrayed Islam in light of the Arab nomadic society and the life of the Prophet of Islam while deliberately downplaying the Abrahamic legacy

in Islam” thereby “disconnecting Islam from the Judeo-Christian tradition;”³⁷ thus Islam is seen as an entity apart from Western civilization, which hinders student construction of the comprehensive, dynamic worldview needed to understand better international politics.

To pick up the policy thread, by the time President Reagan took office in 1981, the US and Libya had terminated diplomatic relations. The previous Carter administration had emphasized dealing with developing countries themselves rather than exclusively through the Cold War prism, and increased scrutiny over issues such as human rights and the environment. Consequently, emphasis shifted from Libya’s dealings with the USSR to Libya as a state-sponsor of terror and derailer of the peace process through its support of Palestinian rejectionist factions. Libyan terrorist activities had been noted from 1969 on, but Congress and the Executive had struggled in both the Nixon and Ford administrations over whether to designate Libya a terrorist state. Then as lately occurred with the rapprochement, the Executive leaned more toward interest-based politics whereas Congress, as representative of the people, was more responsive to public sentiment and interest groups. Therefore, given cultural bias, collective memory of contemporary events like oil shocks and terrorism, and paucity of knowledge of Libya apart from the demonized Qadhafi, the inertia of the political relationship rests at conflict.

Adding to this inertia, the Reagan administration sought to mold public opinion toward Libya via a disinformation campaign portraying, “Qaddafi the lunatic, Libya the Soviet proxy, Qaddafi the major source of international terrorism, and repressive Libya, all of which were also reflected increasingly in official statements from the U.S. government.”³⁸ Thus, President Reagan was able to conduct the first prime-time American military operation, to the tune of a seventy-six percent approval rating.³⁹ An article appearing in *TIME* shortly thereafter explaining the attacks entitled, “Gaddafi: Obsessed by a Ruthless, Messianic Vision,” connected his terrorism with Islam:

his messianic vision, like the turbans in which he wraps himself, does not camouflage his vicious methods and ruthless fanaticism. ...He has become the modern-day incarnation of the society of Assassins, which flourished from the 11th to 13th century in the Middle East...[he] regards himself not only as the last great hope of Pan-Islam but as the scourge of the West, which he fervently believes has humiliated the Arab world for centuries. It is a humiliation he intends to avenge.⁴⁰

However, exercising the speech freedoms previously cited as counterbalancing entirely instrumental bias, American journalists published questioning articles, such as Bob Woodward’s “Gadhafi Secret Target of Secret US Deception Plan” appearing in the *Washington Post*.⁴¹ In addition, Qadhafi had over the years targeted the American

people with open letters in newspapers and interviews, but as mentioned before regarding polish and pragmatism, these had little effect. After 1986, Libya withdrew from active

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antagonism into back-burner hostility, which simmered through the 1990s, in connection with Lockerbie, designation as a rogue state, and pursuit of weapons of mass destruction.

To briefly conclude this section and return to the focus on how cultural bias relates to political circumstances, it is interesting to note the shift in coverage of Qadhafi’s Islam in the press. For example, when Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice visited Libya in September 2008, the highest-

ranking US official to do so in 50 years, the focus changed to a more benign, exotic Islam: the Associated Press wrote that Rice made comments “following a traditional Muslim dinner – the evening meal that breaks the day’s fast during the holy month of Ramadan;”⁴² and according to Reuters, “Gadhafi, wearing a white robe and a green brooch in the shape of Africa, did not shake hands with Rice but put his right hand over his heart. By Muslim tradition, men should avoid contact with females during the fasting time.”⁴³ To some extent, Qadhafi has reprised his earliest role as a ‘devout’ Muslim, still grating in terms of meeting with Russian leaders, pursuing authenticity to the point of pitching a Bedouin tent on the Champs-Élysées, speaking out against American oil activities, and generally attempting to remold the international system. On the other hand much has changed, such as shifting from support for PLO rejectionist factions to advocating a one-state solution, sanctions and failed socialism, and “revolutionary realpolitik”⁴⁴ motivating renunciation of WMDs. This section has attempted to highlight the variable of changing perceptions in the metamorphosis of Qadhafi. In sum, it would seem that cultural bias takes a derogatory turn in times of political conflict and reverts to a more benign Other approach in times of cooperation.

CONCLUSION

In September 2006, the English National Opera together with Asian Dub Foundation released *Gadaffi: A Living Myth*, a spoken and rap opera set to raga, punk, dub and electronica played by the English National Orchestra and North African musicians. A review entitled “Muammar Mia, Here We Go at Last” offers an overall flavor: “Colonel Gaddafi swears vengeance against the West in a fiery aria set in the bombed-out ruins of Tripoli. Colonel Gaddafi

spars with Ronald Reagan in a searing duet at the UN General Assembly. Colonel Gaddafi sings a power ballad about women’s lib while his female bodyguards fan out around him Busby Berkley fishnets and feather boas.”⁴⁵ The opera’s conceptualizer, Steve Chandra Savale, also known as Chandrasonic, sought to move beyond, “all this ‘clash of civilizations’ rubbish” and put “a completely different spin on the whole thing.”⁴⁶ On the whole, the opera received lukewarm if not stingingly dreadful reviews, quite possibly due to the controversial subjects, but perhaps also owing to lyrics such as, “Only in the desert is there true union between me and myself,”⁴⁷ and “The power in the sand is the power in the land.”⁴⁸ Nevertheless, the opera represented a serious attempt, in the words of Scottish-born Muslim playwright Shah Khan, to “present a complex character and situation” and move beyond “simplistic” good versus evil ideas as “[m]usic by its very nature harmonises opposing themes”⁴⁹

Although the above opera represents the British vision of Qadhafi, and not the hypothetical next American movie of Qadhafi mentioned in the introduction, it is revealing in that it reached for a more absurdist than clash-of-civilizations narrative to explain Qadhafi. What this suggests, and indeed what the glance at US-Libyan relations over the past two hundred years highlights, is that the notion of civilization divide constitutes yet another attempt, albeit oversimplified, to understand dynamic, interrelated history.

The views and opinions expressed in articles are strictly the author’s own, and do not necessarily represent those of al Nakhlah, its Advisory and Editorial Boards, or the Program for Southwest Asia and Islamic Civilization (SWAIC) at The Fletcher School.

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