

PolicyWatch #1584

Qadhafi at the UN: How to Be Washington's Friend

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This week, in a striking symbol of improved U.S.-Libyan relations and Tripoli's reengagement with the international community, Libyan leader Muammar Qadhafi is set to address the UN General Assembly. Previously, Qadhafi refused to visit the UN headquarters because it was located within the borders of "an enemy of humanity." Although the dynamic has changed, in the aftermath of the release of Abdel Basset al-Megrahi, the convicted perpetrator of the Lockerbie bombing, few have high expectations for Qadhafi's UN visit. Nevertheless, the Libyan leader could capitalize on his visit to draw closer to the Obama administration, although it is impossible to know how Libyan domestic considerations or other factors will impact Qadhafi's behavior in New York. These may eventually dictate a more inflammatory path.

Opportunity to Enhance U.S. Ties

With the eyes of the world on Iran, the UN Security Council this week will be focused on nuclear proliferation. Libya abandoned its weapons of mass destruction (WMD) program in 2003, and U.S. ambassador to the UN Susan Rice has asked Tripoli to remain focused on this topic. If Qadhafi wants to bolster his relationship with Washington, he might elaborate on the benefits of nuclear disarmament in his UN address.

In recent years, however, Qadhafi interviews have painted disparate versions of his historic decision to forego Libya's WMD program. In December 2003, he said, "I believe [countries] should follow the steps of Libya, so that they prevent any tragedy from being inflicted upon their own people." But Qadhafi has also stated that "Libya has not been properly compensated, so other countries, like Iran and North Korea, will not follow."

Promotion of Libya's nuclear disarmament as a path for other countries to follow would not only be welcomed by the Obama administration, it would also dovetail with Qadhafi's stated justification for Libya's abandonment of its WMD program: that Libya no longer needed recourse to weapons, that "the nuclear bomb presents a danger to the country that has it," and that it is a "destructive policy for economy and life." Furthermore, Qadhafi portrays his decision to disarm as evidence of Libya's "exceptional" role as leader of the "world's peace movement."

Benefits of Abandonment

Despite Libyan claims to the contrary, the demise of its nuclear program has brought benefits to Libya. Part of the reason for reestablishing relations with Washington was Libya's need to modernize and upgrade its oil fields and hydrocarbon technology, with a strong preference for U.S. equipment. Since the lifting of sanctions, several U.S. firms have reestablished their presence, and although it is still too early to assess all the dividends, the negotiated contracts have already proved a windfall for Tripoli: the Oasis Group paid a \$1.8 billion reentry fee, including a \$530 million payment toward improvements made by Libya during the company's twenty-year absence, while Occidental Petroleum paid Libya a \$750 million bonus for a thirty-year contract, which includes a high production share for Libya.

These U.S. investments also have secondary benefits for the Libyan economy. Libyan law requires that international companies form joint ventures with local partners and hire and train Libyan nationals. In this context, Exxon Mobil agreed to pay \$25 million to fund training programs and scholarships for Libyans as well as \$3 million to improve local schools. This premium comes on top of the \$72 million signing bonus Exxon provided to Libya.

Engagement has also benefited Libya's -- and Qadhafi's -- international image. After the Washington-Tripoli rapprochement, Libya was elected president of the UN General Assembly and earned a seat on the UN Security Council, while Qadhafi was elected president of the African Union. Describing this development, Libyan ambassador to the UN observed: "It means we are back to normal ... this is very, very important for us." Libya's ascendance stands in stark contrast to 2003 and 2005, when the United States warned Libya it would oppose Libya's candidacy to the Security Council as a result of several outstanding issues (including Lockerbie compensation payouts). But Libya's prominence in international forums today is not only attributable to U.S. ties; despite U.S. opposition, Tripoli gained the chair on the UN Human Rights Commission in 2003.

What Qadhafi May Do

Recent indications -- the state-controlled Libyan media's scant coverage of al-Megrahi's arrival in Tripoli, Qadhafi's relative constraint during the recent African Traditional Leaders conference, and Libyan diplomat Ali Treki's toned-down speech at the UN -- suggest that Qadhafi may tame his typically polemical rhetoric, at least toward Washington. Rather than blaming the United States for the negative fallout of the al-Megrahi incident, Libya's official media has focused instead on British and European "hypocrisy." While this tack is in itself problematic, it does at least suggest some restraint.

Qadhafi will be conscious of how his visit will be perceived among his more hardline constituents in Libya, the Middle East, and Africa, and will likely take steps to maintain his carefully cultivated anti-imperialist image. Even before his arrival, Qadhafi has sought to stake out this ground. As a spokesman for Libya's foreign ministry stated, "Nobody can dictate to us what we should or should not say.... It is indecent to obstruct the continent's right to express itself." Qadhafi will likely square the circle -- protect his image without offending too many at the General Assembly -- by attacking Israel. Libya's ambassador to the UN has already indicated -- via his stated desire to highlight the recent UN report on alleged Israeli war crimes in Gaza -- that Tripoli will be focusing on Israel at the UN.

Based on his past performance, it may be difficult for Qadhafi to avoid controversy. If Qadhafi were to replay any of his recent controversial statements -- describing the UN Security Council as a terrorist organization, threatening to call for reparations from the West for slavery, defending Somali piracy, downplaying the genocide occurring in Darfur, and bringing up Obama's race as an issue -- the Libyan leader would get Washington's cold shoulder.

Conclusion

The last time Qadhafi shared a forum with President Barack Obama was at the G8 summit in Italy last July, and little occurred beyond a handshake. Whatever Qadhafi does this time, it will be closely scrutinized. Although it would not surprise many if Qadhafi were to make untoward remarks at the UN, in the wake of the al-Megrahi affair, Qadhafi might want to shuffle the deck. By taking this opportunity to focus on the positive outcomes of Libya's rapprochement with Washington, Qadhafi could further enhance his international stature and deliver the timely message that there is no inevitability about the fate of rogue states. Otherwise, the New York visit may be a lost opportunity.

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