

PolicyWatch #1573

## **Qadhafi's Time in the Limelight: Impact on U.S. Interests**

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Numerous celebrations in Libya this week will mark the fortieth anniversary of the September 1 revolution spearheaded by Muammar Qadhafi. For the Great Leader, these events are an opportunity to demonstrate the achievements of the Jamahiriyya and to further legitimize his rule. At the same time, the release and triumphant reception of terminally ill Abdel Basset al-Megrahi, convicted of murder for the Lockerbie air disaster, as well as the recent crisis in Swiss-Libyan relations, serve as a warning about Libya's leveraging of its hydrocarbon riches to achieve policy goals.

Important also to U.S.-Libyan relations is Qadhafi's upcoming visit to the United States, where he will address the United Nations General Assembly on September 23 -- which Libya is scheduled to chair -- and attend the UN Security Council meeting. This visit is widely expected to have awkward moments -- beginning with Qadhafi's plan to pitch a tent at the Libyan diplomatic compound in Englewood, New Jersey, home state to a number of families of Lockerbie victims. Beyond this, Qadhafi's visit may also have wider-ranging consequences.

### **Al-Megrahi's Return -- a Libyan Success?**

For the United States, al-Megrahi's release and reception were, as President Barack Obama noted, "highly objectionable." For Qadhafi, however, al-Megrahi's release represented a domestic success, demonstrating to Libyans opposed to renewed U.S. ties that although Libya has given up its nuclear weapons programs, it is no puppet of the West.

But this domestic victory was a foreign policy miscalculation, and the relative silence of the Libyan media following al-Megrahi's reception may indicate Libyan awareness of this blunder. Furthermore, al-Megrahi's role in the fortieth-anniversary celebrations is unclear and perhaps has not been fully decided on by the Libyans themselves. Nonetheless, the way this situation plays out may signal how Libya weighs domestic vs. foreign considerations.

Although the lifting of UN sanctions on Libya was predicated on Libya's acknowledgment of responsibility for Lockerbie, Qadhafi, since al-Megrahi's release, is once again proclaiming his innocence, claiming he was a "political hostage" of the West. This is not in itself a radical change in Libyan policy -- Qadhafi protested al-Megrahi's imprisonment in the past -- yet it demonstrates the regime's unreliability, even after negotiations have been completed.

### **Behind the Deal**

Although al-Megrahi was released on compassionate grounds by the Scottish authorities, rumors abound that business interests with the United Kingdom played a role. This was acknowledged by Qadhafi's son Saif al-Islam in a typically blunt remark that "In all commercial contracts for oil and gas with Britain, al-Megrahi was always on the negotiating table." Scotland and, indeed, Britain may well have been looking to Switzerland's 2008 arrest of another of Qadhafi's sons for a prediction of how the Great Leader would react

should al-Megrahi die in his Scottish prison.

Swiss authorities arrested Hannibal Qadhafi in July 2008 for the assault of two maids in his Geneva hotel. In retaliation, Libya arrested two Swiss nationals on spurious charges, cut flights between Switzerland and Libya, withdrew five billion euros from Swiss banks, and placed restrictions on Swiss companies. Business interests have been so damaged that Swiss president Hans-Rudolf Merz recently issued an apology as a way of mending relations. Unfortunately, the lesson to Qadhafi is that the thirst for Libyan business is such that Libya can get away with irresponsible behavior.

### **An Important Year**

The fortieth anniversary of the Jamahiriyya is simply one of a number of events that afford Libya a high profile this year. Libya has a seat on the UN Security Council, chairs the General Assembly, and presides over the African Union. Any of these events could set the stage for various diplomatic embarrassments.

Until the al-Megrahi imbroglio, Qadhafi was expecting a high-profile U.S. presence at his anniversary celebrations and subsequent high-level meetings in the United States itself. Now these honors may not materialize. How much offense Qadhafi takes will depend on whether he understands how politically toxic a topic he is in the United States.

Qadhafi has long displayed a need for international recognition. At this year's Arab Summit in Doha he proclaimed his status as "an international leader, the dean of the Arab rulers, the king of kings of Africa and the imam of Muslims."

### **Hosting Qadhafi**

Qadhafi's recent visits to Rome and Paris illustrate just how difficult a guest he can be. When meeting with Italian prime minister Silvio Berlusconi earlier this year, Qadhafi wore a photo of Omar al-Mukhtar -- a Libyan hero murdered by the Italians during their brutal colonization of Libya early last century. During an earlier visit to Paris, he lectured the French on their treatment of North Africans.

*Qadhafi on the podium.* Predicting exactly how Qadhafi will behave during his upcoming U.S. visit is difficult. Although domestic considerations may push him to play the antiimperialism card, his wish to maintain a relationship with the Obama administration could pull him in a different direction. Qadhafi is unlikely to regress on top U.S. priorities such as terrorism, as he does not want a return to isolation and has unequivocally stated "we do not want to have problems with the U.S." Yet, should he feel taken for granted, or perceived as a lackey either back home or in Africa, he may act in ways that will prove troubling to the United States.

With access to such diverse podiums as the United Nations, Qadhafi might well succumb to rhetoric. He has a marked tendency to shoot from the hip, as seen at the recent Doha Summit, where he ranted against Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah and refused to be silenced by the Qatari emir. In response to a question on Lockerbie from an American interlocutor last January, Qadhafi replied, "If you open up the Lockerbie file, there are files we can open, Palestine, Iraq ..." Defending Somali piracy and downplaying the genocide in Darfur are more examples of unsavory positions he has adopted in the recent past.

In none of these cases, though, does the Libyan bark have an actual bite. Not only does Libya wish to avoid U.S. censure, Qadhafi is also ideologically opposed to Hamas and has little influence in the Middle East since Libya turned its attention to Africa in recent years. Furthermore, Qadhafi's wish to be seen as a peacemaker in Africa means that Libya is playing a relatively responsible role in Darfur.

*Undermining the model.* After Libya's denuclearization, the Bush administration assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs, C. David Welch, characterized the country as "an important model as we push for

changes in policy by other countries." Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has similarly framed Libya as "a regime that eventually altered its behavior in exchange for the benefits of acceptance." Yet Qadhafi himself could undermine Obama administration hopes for Libya with statements such as "Libya has not been properly compensated, so other countries, like Iran and North Korea, will not follow."

*Worst-case scenario.* While Libyan troublemaking is highly unlikely to extend beyond rhetoric, should the U.S. visit go badly, Qadhafi does have levers he can pull. Although U.S. hydrocarbon expertise is highly valued by the Libyan government, other U.S. business sectors might not fare as well. And, as Qadhafi is already opposed to the U.S. presence in Africa, his patronage networks there could allow him to damage U.S. economic interests and even militate against the work of AFRICOM, the new U.S. military command there. The United States, for its part, has few carrots to offer Libya beyond international recognition and the weapons deals that the Libyans now seek.

## **Conclusion**

U.S.-Libyan relations are still very new, and the exact shape of the relationship is still uncertain. The recent debacle over al-Megrahi's release and reception in Libya highlights that the nature of the Libyan regime has not changed as a result of American engagement. Much remains as before -- Libya under Qadhafi is an opportunistic regime, one that uses its business interests as blackmail and behaves in unpredictable ways. Libya may no longer be an enemy, but it is a very unreliable friend.

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