

Colonel Gadhaffi's long journey and the collapse of Arab nationalism—Part 2

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This is the concluding part of a two-part article on the underlying causes of Libya's Muammar Gadhaffi's recent visit to Brussels. Part one was posted May 19.

As with the entire Arab bourgeoisie, the new Libyan government treacherously utilised the Palestinian question primarily to bolster its authority at home and across the Middle East. Radical sounding support for the Palestinian cause, and grand gestures towards Arab unity, became a means to divert criticisms and tensions within Libya. Ultimately Gadhaffi's policies resulted in disaster and the further isolation of the Palestinians.

Rather than being directed at the masses, Gadhaffi's calls for Arab unity were aimed solely at the Arab governments. By deploying oil money, cajoling and manoeuvring, Libya hoped to collect the disparate Arab-led regimes into a coalition against Israel.

The new government proclaimed a *jihad* and offered support for the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), including some of its terrorist operations such as the attack on the Israeli Olympic team in 1972. Gadhaffi also supported movements worldwide such as the Irish Republican Army, the West German Red Army Faction, and various black nationalist and native American groups in the United States. To the extent that these groups caused some irritation to imperialism, and were hostile to the working class, they provided Libya with a louder political voice in the Middle East, and a veneer of opposition to imperialism.

Following a purge of the state apparatus in 1973, Gadhaffi launched a drive for Libyan/Egyptian unity. He organised a motorcade of some 20,000 vehicles to Cairo. This was turned back at the Egyptian border. In response to what Nasser's successor and collaborator, Anwar Sadat, considered dangerous lunacy, Libya was excluded from Egyptian, Syrian and Saudi preparations for the 1973 attack on Israel.

Later, in response to Sadat's visit to Jerusalem in 1977, Libya formed the Steadfastness Front with Syria, Algeria, South Yemen and the PLO with the intention of opposing Sadat's developing peace initiatives with Israel. In 1979, Gadhaffi toured the Middle East, building support for the Steadfastness Front, and after a disagreement with the PLO turned to supporting the more radical Palestinian groups such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP).

But in 1982, when the PLO were besieged by the Israeli army in Beirut, Gadhaffi did nothing. Expressing the utter bankruptcy of his policy, his complete inability to equate rhetoric with reality, he even suggested that Arafat should commit suicide rather than face expulsion from the city.

Libyan oil money and arms were also deployed in Africa. In the early 1970s, Libya tried to oppose Israeli foreign policy efforts in Africa, by creating an anti-Zionist diplomatic front. The government offered cash to countries who would break relations with Israel, adopt Arabic as their language and Islam as the official religion. In 1975, Libya proposed a resolution to the United Nations, in which Zionism was equated with racism. Twenty-eight African states supported the Libyan position.

But repeated proposals to unite Libya with any of the neighbouring

African states came to nothing. Gadhaffi, the military strongman, was utterly incapable of appealing to the regional African and Arab masses. Libya's most sustained regional intervention was into neighbouring Chad, where Libyan forces seized the contested oil and uranium rich Aozou Strip, only to be eventually driven out by French-backed Chadian forces.

Ideologically, Gadhaffi's government turned to religion as a justification for its policies at home and abroad. The new government based its legal system on Islamic Sharia law, including, in theory, amputations for theft. Alcohol and much public entertainment were banned.

Gadhaffi developed his "Third Universal Theory" based on nationalism and religion and set out in his "Green Book." Arab nationalism had a "heavenly and universal message" and was inseparable from Islam, it argued. Islam was declared the single source of human values and civilisation. In 1978, rejection of Islam was made a basis for the removal of Libyan citizenship. Communism and atheism were naturally anathema.

For all his anticommunism, Gadhaffi, like Nasser before him, was propped up by the Stalinist bureaucracy. From the very first, the new regime sought to take advantage of the manoeuvring room offered by the conflict between the Soviet Union and the Western powers. On the day that Free Officers seized power, Libyan radio announced to the world that the Soviet fleet would intervene against any British attempt to reverse their coup. This was bluster, since no relations had been established at that point, and Libya soon claimed it had a policy of "positive neutrality" in the conflict between the Soviet Union and the US.

Within a few years, Libya was attracted to the Moscow Stalinists' promises of modern weaponry, particularly after the 1973 war. Soviet Prime Minister Kosygin visited Libya in 1975, and soon Libya had one of the highest per capita expenditures on arms in the world. Libya even applied to join the Warsaw Pact in 1978, and in 1979 it supported the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

For their part, the Stalinists made sure that Libya never had enough firepower or manpower to seriously upset the balance of power in the region. Rather, arms sales to Libya were viewed as merely a means of exerting pressure on the US for concessions. And Libya could offer the Soviet fleet a base in the Mediterranean.

The government refrained from entirely nationalising the largely US-owned oil industry. Rather Libya, then producing as much oil as Saudi Arabia, reduced production to maximise profits and began to use oil production and pricing as a political weapon against the West. British Petroleum's Libyan holdings were nationalised in protest against British actions elsewhere in the Middle East, while oil production was repeatedly cut or the oil price manipulated. Libya played a leading role in OPEC, the oil producing countries' cartel.

By the 1980s, Gadhaffi's policies began to come under increasing pressure. Several factors were at work. Firstly, the falling price of oil on the world market radically impacted on the state's finances. Particularly in the early 1980s, oil revenues were reduced by more than 50 percent due

to world overproduction.

Secondly, the country was attracting the hostile attentions of the new Reagan administration in the US, committed as it was to a “roll-back” of Soviet influence.

Despite Libyan efforts to improve relations with the US by loosening pressure on US oil companies still operating in Libya, in 1981 Libyan diplomats were expelled from Washington. Two Libyan fighters were also shot down in the Gulf of Sidra, off the Libyan coast, by aircraft from the giant US carrier Nimitz. The US characterised Libya as an enemy, while handing more aid to neighbouring Tunisia and Sudan. A US embargo on Libyan oil was imposed in 1982, and pressure was put on the European powers to do the same.

In 1985 the US banned all Libyan oil products and removed its remaining citizens from Libya, to the consternation of the US oil companies. In 1986 the US destroyed Libyan military craft and launched the infamous bombing raids in Benghazi and Tripoli. The attacks, using a terrorist attack on a Berlin discothèque as pretext, killed 60 people, including Gadhaffi’s daughter, while several European embassies were damaged.

Internally the regime, which had never enjoyed great support among ordinary Libyans, became progressively more dictatorial. Although strikes were banned from 1972, and political parties were treasonable from the beginning, over the 1970s a government that was awash with oil wealth spent a significant portion of it on real social improvements, particularly in housing and education. Life expectancy rose. A series of huge, often badly planned, irrigation projects were also prepared. The largest of these—the Great Manmade River, designed to exploit underground water resources—remains incomplete, while many others have been forgotten.

At the same time, over the 1980s the government increased domestic repression. Hundreds more political opponents of the government were jailed. Students were publicly hanged every year following 1978, while exiled opponents were assassinated. Public lashing was reinstated in 1981.

Large areas of the economy and welfare were dependent on foreign workers. In times of tension these foreign workers were routinely scapegoated by the government. In 1984-85, 60-70,000 of the 200,000 foreign workers in Libya were expelled.

A 1984 coup attempt launched by the exiled Libyan National Salvation Front, with some internal support, was the most effective of numerous failed attempts to remove Gadhaffi. In response, Gadhaffi purged the state apparatus and strengthened his personal dictatorship by creating new “revolutionary committees” of young radicals, whose authority rested on Gadhaffi’s personal patronage.

The US was encouraged in its provocations against Libya by the development of *glasnost* and *perestroika* in the Soviet Union under the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev and then Boris Yeltsin. The wholesale abandonment of even a semblance of opposition to US imperialism culminated in 1991 in the formal dissolution of the USSR, the reintroduction of capitalist property relations in the former territories of the Soviet Union and its reintegration into the imperialist world system.

US pressure increased throughout the 1980s. The US seized on the 1988 destruction of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, as a pretext for completing a diplomatic isolation of the Libyan government which, unlike most of the Arab regimes, opposed the US attack on Iraq in 1991. In 1992, UN sanctions banned the sale of oil-related equipment and arms to Libya.

Britain followed the US lead and broke off diplomatic relations in 1984 following the shooting of a policewoman in London outside the Libyan embassy.

In response, the Libyan government did everything it could to ingratiate itself with the US and dropped all pretence of opposition to imperialism.

Over the 1990s, Gadhaffi’s lifeline has been Europe, with whom relations were never as disrupted as those with the US. The European

powers had opposed the US bombing raid in 1986. Libya has long owned a large percentage of Italian car giant Fiat and oil exports were continually directed to most European countries.

In 1997, the coming to power of the Labour government of Tony Blair marked the beginning of efforts by Britain and the US to catch up with Spain, Italy and Germany in staking a renewed claim to Libyan oil wealth. Following protracted negotiations Gadhaffi handed over two Libyan officials in 1999 for the planned trial at Camp Zeist in the Netherlands for the Lockerbie bombing. UN sanctions were suspended, and political barriers to European investment were progressively lifted.

Libya has used its relations with Europe to pressure the US for greater concessions. In 2001, Libya warned US oil companies that their holdings in Libya would be handed over to European companies unless the US companies used their Libyan-based resources. Libya is desperate to attract US companies back in, fearful that Gadhaffi’s regime might otherwise may face the same treatment as that of Saddam Hussein—and also because the US-owned facilities are badly in need of maintenance and US spare parts.

Post September 11, 2001, Gadhaffi and his intelligence chief Musa Kusa saw their chance, and had offered full support to the US “war on terror” in words and deeds. During negotiations over compensation for the victims of Lockerbie, Kusa handed over thousands of intelligence documents on Islamic militants to US and British security agencies. Kusa also gave the British government full details of weaponry sold to the IRA in the 1970s. In early 2004, Gadhaffi, in ostentatiously handing over his partial WMD programmes, provided the US and UK with much needed propaganda coups which were used to legitimise the attack on Iraq. This also contributed to the diplomatic isolation of both Syria and the Palestinian leadership.

Internally, over the 1990s and into the twenty-first century, the regime has continued with its press censorship, and expulsions of foreign workers. Political parties remain banned. A prison riot of mainly Islamic prisoners in 1996 resulted in over 1,000 inmates being massacred. A growing and youthful population are increasingly unimpressed with a government which, while occasionally turning to the threadbare Nasserite rhetorical devices of old, is held together with tribal patronage, repression and carefully directed oil-related largesse. The new prime minister, Shukri Ghanem, has pledged to privatise over 300 companies, hoping to open up the state sector, on which many workers depend, to private profit.

Gadhaffi has come a long way. His current role as imperialist intelligence gatherer, border policeman and oil salesman, much like King Idris whom he replaced in 1969, stands in stark contrast to his former promises of Arab unity and support for the Palestinian people. He recently said as much himself: “The times of Arab nationalism and unity are gone forever ... these ideas which mobilised the masses are only a worthless currency.”

But more has collapsed than Gadhaffi’s radical image. Gadhaffi’s trajectory embodies the inability of any section of the Arab bourgeoisie to advance a viable anti-imperialist perspective with which to attract and unify the masses. That task falls to working class in the coming period.

Concluded



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