

# Colonel Gadhaffi's long journey and the collapse of Arab nationalism—Part 1

Steve James  
19 May 2004

*This is the first part of a two-part article on the underlying causes of Libya's Muammar's Gadhaffi's recent visit to Brussels.*

Muammar's Gadhaffi's trip to Brussels in April was the first time he had left Libya for 15 years. Gadhaffi arrived at the headquarters of the European Union with two transport planes, a Bedouin tent, a stretched Mercedes limousine and a security team consisting entirely of young women. The "Great Leader" was greeted by troops of dancers and an ecstatic Romano Prodi, head of the European Commission. Prodi hailed Gadhaffi's visit, the result of five years of preparation, as a "great day".

The visit is another episode in the one time pariah's rehabilitation by the leaders of world imperialism. In the last months, Gadhaffi has been visited by Spain's former prime minister, José María Aznar, Italy's Silvio Berlusconi, and British prime minister Tony Blair. US sanctions, inoperation for more than two decades have all but been removed. Talks with Prodi and the EU Commission focussed on Libyan integration into the Barcelona process—through which the European powers are seeking to dominate trade and energy around the Mediterranean. Gadhaffi also offered to help police the EU's southern border by barring immigration from Libya's coastline.

Underlying the cordiality between Libya and Europe is one of the largest oil bonanzas in the world in an area where European oil companies have stolen a march on their American rivals. Libyan oil is cheap, reserves may be up to three times the stated volume of 36 billion barrels, and are located close to Europe. Libya also has significant reserves of natural gas, which a host of European energy companies, from the UK to Norway and Greece, are rushing to exploit.

With US companies desperate to regain oil fields from which they have been excluded since 1986, even an invite for Gadhaffi to Washington is not impossible. The Libyan regime, long demonised by the US government, has offered support in the "war on terror", handed over such strategic weaponry as it possesses and has accepted responsibility and paid compensation for a number of terrorist attacks, most notably the Lockerbie bombing.

The former revolutionary army colonel's transformation into a border policeman for the EU embodies the dead end at which even the most radical wing of Arab nationalism has arrived.

His trajectory is a powerful vindication of the theory of permanent revolution, developed by Leon Trotsky, which explains that, in the oppressed nations, the national unity and development of democracy traditionally associated with the rise of the bourgeoisie can only be carried through by a politically independent working class acting on a socialist perspective.

In the Middle East, the only basis on which imperialist domination can be challenged is through the working class coming to the head of all the oppressed of the region. This demands the construction of workers' parties in every country, their unification on the perspective of the Socialist United States of the Middle East—the only means through which the region's artificial borders can be erased and the prodigious wealth

extracted daily from these lands be used to overcome the disastrous poverty afflicting much of the population.

Arab nationalism, as it emerged in the 20th century, explicitly sought to emulate the European experience of nation building in the 19th century and unify the Arab speaking peoples in one political entity. Arab intellectuals and political leaders saw the creation of a unified Arab capitalist state as the means to throw off the imperialist division of the entire Middle East and North African region and open a road for regional development which duplicated the road taken by the European powers.

But Arab nationalism arrived too late, and confronted a world already divided by European and US imperialism. Across the Middle East, in the scramble for oil and strategic advantage, the major powers had carved up the area in their own interests, established client regimes, and a host of relations with tribal and monarchical puppet regimes. To the extent that a national bourgeoisie had developed, it was weak, and owed it privileges to the continued imperialist exploitation and division of the region. To the extent that it was in conflict with the imperialist powers, this was due to the fact that the wealth being pumped out of the region was being appropriated by the major oil companies. The regional bourgeoisie sought a greater share of oil wealth. To do so, however, meant establishing its own right to preside over the exploitation of the Arab working class and peasantry.

This placed them in conflict with the very forces on which any struggle against imperialism must be based—a class whose potential social power the bourgeoisie correctly regarded as a greater threat to its privileges than were the imperialist powers.

The Arab bourgeoisie, therefore, was utterly incapable of mobilising and politically galvanising the masses for the sort of sustained mass struggle necessary to erase the national borders and brutal exploitation characterising imperialist rule of the region. Rather it viewed the possibility of such a struggle as its worst nightmare, something to be avoided at all costs.

Yet in the middle years of the 20th century, Arab nationalism was to become a powerful political factor in the region. This was in large part due to the Stalinist degeneration of the Soviet Union. The countless betrayals carried out by the Stalinists had served to discredit socialism in the eyes of many and those who looked to the communist parties throughout the Middle East, most centrally in Egypt, for leadership found themselves made political hostage to the regional bourgeoisie rather than mobilised on an independent perspective of struggle.

Under the "two-stage" theory, the Stalinised Communist Party in Egypt insisted that the class struggle for socialism had to be suppressed pending the victory of a supposed all-class democratic movement against imperialism led by the Egyptian bourgeoisie.

On this basis the Stalinists adapted to the seizure of power by right-wing army Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt in 1952. Nasser led the Egyptian Army against the pro-British monarchy of King Farouk, intending to better serve Egyptian capital in its dealings with imperialism.

Nasser put forward a Pan-Arab ideology, created the Palestine Liberation Organisation, nationalised the Suez Canal and diplomatically humiliated British and French interventions in the Suez crisis of 1956. Nasser, whose Free Officers Union and Revolutionary Command Council came to power via the suppression of all political activity and execution of striking workers, was nevertheless hailed across the region as an anti-imperialist leader. Some social concessions in education and housing were made to the working class, and large chunks of the economy were nationalised.

Along with the Ba'ath parties in Iraq and Syria, Nasser proposed to create a United Arab Republic by merging the three countries. Egypt and Syria began a merger process in 1958, but the union fell apart in 1961 following Syrian disenchantment with Egyptian capital's domination of its smaller, poorer ally. Egypt's disastrous defeat in the 1967 Six Day War with Israel, marked the effective death knell of Nasser's Pan-Arab aspirations.

Thereafter, the Arab governments trod diverging paths. The Egyptian, Syrian, and Iraqi governments placed more emphasis on building up their national economies while leaning on the Soviet Union for influence against the US. The monarchies of Jordan and Saudi Arabia built more direct relations with the West. This left the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) of Yasser Arafat leading a rearguard struggle against Israel that was by turns exploited for propaganda purposes by the Arab regimes or directly betrayed by them.

Libya lies over Egypt's long western border. As a unified state, Libya has only existed since the end of the Second World War. The huge territory, twice the size of France but with a population of only around 1.8 million at the time, was made out of Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, and the Fezzan. Independence was conceded to the merged regions of the former Italian colony because the major powers could not agree which one should control it.

Once thriving on trade coming across the Sahara desert, Libya's towns had decayed due to the disruption of trade following the rise of imperialism. As an Ottoman and then Italian colony, the country's coastal regions sustained some agriculture while the vast deserts were all but uninhabited and unproductive. During two world wars, such infrastructure as had been developed was destroyed and prior to the discovery of oil, in 1959, the new country's main export was scrap metal salvaged from abandoned army vehicles of the several major battles fought within its borders. Two major British and US military bases provided the bulk of state finance for the monarchy of King Idris, a long standing ally of British imperialism in the region. The country's urban, rural and nomadic populations were among the poorest in the world.

The first exports of oil, in 1961, generated new political and social aspirations and tensions in this impoverished land. By 1967 Libya was producing 6.8 percent of global oil production as extraction by up to 40 US and European companies developed at an unprecedented rate. Government revenue leapt from 20 million Libyan pounds in 1957 to 187 million ten years later. Over the 1960s, annual growth rates were running between 20 and 30 percent. The flood of oil created a layer of speculators, a new urban middle class, drew in tens of thousands of foreign workers, and exposed the Idris regime as hopelessly corrupt, unable to distribute the new wealth amongst the Libyan population or develop the national economy.

Throughout the "oil decade", Libya also saw repeated and increasingly turbulent student demonstrations against the Vietnam war, for the liberation of the Palestinian people and for the right to political organisation—no political parties were allowed—while workers struck at the expanding oil ports for union rights and increased living standards. This came to a head in 1967 during the Six Day War between Israel and Egypt. Much of the Libyan population erupted in fury at the Israeli attack, while dock workers refused to load oil tankers or allow petrol to be pumped along pipelines. Opposition to the presence of US and British bases also

grew into large protests after Nasser demanded they be closed. In the aftermath of Egypt's defeat in the Six Day War, Nasser claimed that the bases had been used to support Israel's war effort.

Thereafter many in the US and UK, including the UK Foreign Office, as well as amongst the narrow Libyan elite and in the oil companies, concluded that the Idris regime was finished. A new regime better able to control or divert the workers and student movement was urgently necessary. The monarchy itself viewed the small Libyan Army as the most immediate threat to its rule.

The decade also saw the beginnings of a political awakening whose form reflected the domination of the country's intellectual tendencies by Egypt. Teachers in Libyan schools were more likely to be Egyptian than Libyan. Lawyers and judges were trained in Egypt, if they were not largely Egyptian themselves. The emerging students movement supported the more left wing Arab Nationalist Movement. But amongst army officers Nasserism and Ba'athism, often picked up through training in Cairo or Baghdad training schools, were influential. Many officers also resented Idris' decisions to only spend oil wealth on weaponry that could not be used against his government.

Gadhaffi, a Colonel from an impoverished Bedouin background, was a fervent admirer of Nasser. He viewed the army as the only legitimate sphere of political activity. His coup, organised by 60-80 officers in the Free Officers Union, was launched days before a rival coup planned by more senior officers. Most of Gadhaffi's supporters were from one intake of the recently founded Libyan Military Academy, but a number of senior officers, including one with close contacts with the American embassy, supported the almost bloodless transfer of power to the military. Idris' regime collapsed on September 1, 1969, without a whimper, to Nasser's approval.

The new government of the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC), led by Gadhaffi, proclaimed itself to be a government of all Libyans, and trumpeted the lowly origins of most of its new leadership. The regime nationalised the banks, threw out the US and British bases, put Idris and his most corrupt followers and newspaper editors on trial, while leaving the oil companies largely untouched.

Like Nasser, Gadhaffi's and the RCC's attitude to the working class and to democratic rights were hostile from the beginning. The new government co-opted an oil workers' leader into its leadership, but immediately described all attempts to form political parties as "treason". Demands from a group of Benghazi intellectuals for trade union, student and women's rights were rejected out of hand. Such unions as were allowed were created and controlled by the Ministry of Labour. Strikes were soon banned. By 1973, Libya had, proportionally, the highest prison population in the world, most of them political.

The rhetorical emphasis on the regime's supposed closeness to "the people", combined with the actual political suppression of the working class, is the key to understanding the true bourgeois nature of Gadhaffi's government. Gadhaffi aimed to direct a considerable proportion of oil wealth to building up a pliable state and military apparatus, while ensuring the working class kept out of politics.

This also explains its foreign policy. Funded by dramatically growing oil wealth, Libya promised a radical policy in which Arab and African unity, opposition to imperialism, and the Palestinian cause were central. After Nasser's death, Gadhaffi tried to take over the Egyptian leader's role as the leading bourgeois pan-Arabist in the region.

According to Gadhaffi in 1970, "We will arrive at Palestine, brethren, when we have pulled down the walls which impede the fusion of the Arab people in battle. We will reach the Holy Land when we have removed the borders and partitions.... We shall liberate Palestine when the Arab land has become one solid front."



To contact the WSWWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**