FROM SOLDIERS TO POLICEMEN:
QADHAFI’S ARMY IN THE NEW CENTURY

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The main purpose of this article is to describe the repercussions on Libya’s Armed Forces Structure, from the late 1970s when Libya was considered a Military Regime until the present situation in which the Military System is reduced to a Law Enforcement apparatus, that result from the mutation occurred in Qadhafi’s foreign policy strategies and his progressive opening to the West.

Qadhafi came to power in 1969, when he led a coup that overthrew Libya’s pro-Western monarchy. Despite the inner revolutionary nature of the new Regime, it did not receive any opposition from the United States, because of the crucial role of Libya as a potential ally of the anti-communist block. The group of junior officers who seized power wanted to introduce a radical form of Arab and Islamic socialism. The Revolutionary Command Council (RCC), set up by Qadhafi and eleven other officers, assumed formal responsibility for drawing up general policies. Differences within the RCC appeared in 1975 because of the priority given by Qadhafi to armament purchases over other domestic social needs. Within a few years after the assumption of power by Qadhafi’s defence spending accelerated dramatically. It continued to rise nearly every year, though at a reduced rate after 1978. Arms imports generally represented more than half of total defence expenditures.

Politically, the military leadership that rose to power after 1969 has been described as both soldier-revolutionary and ardent pan-Arabist. By the early 1980s Qadhafi became the unquestioned supreme commander of the Regime, leading the armed forces: the People’s Militia, also known as the People’s Army (formerly the Popular Resistance Force).

Qadhafi’s main efforts were aimed to the modernization of Libya’s Armed Structure. This commitment was reflected in his acquiring technical military equipment and sophisticated weaponry, as well as in his emphasis on improving the development of technical skills and training.

The idea of a universal military service for all Libyan citizens from the age of fourteen, stated by 1984’s Statute 3, strictly symbolized Qadhafi’s major perspective of creating a military regime capable of guiding the “arabization” of the region with the purpose of forming a strong “Arab Front” opposing western imperialism. Statute 3 declared that all Libyans coming of age, whether male or female, were to receive regular military training, as long as they were
physically able, in order to contribute to the main idea of a People’s Militia. Military studies were to be among the basic subjects of the educational curriculum at all stages. To a considerable extent, the new law merely reinforced the already existing program to mobilize the entire population of physically fit students and workers into local militia units, centred on schools, communities, and workplaces. The number of individuals organized into paramilitary units has been estimated at 40,000, but should have increased with the application of the new law. The militia units reportedly were generously equipped with arms, transport, and uniforms.

The military structure defined by the above mentioned Statute provided for Libya to be divided into several defence regions, and the responsibility for defending each region was of its inhabitants. The Libyan Army was well outfitted with modern armaments, including rocket systems, armoured vehicles for its infantry and artillery, engineering equipment, up-to-date Soviet infantry weapons, sophisticated fire-control systems, flame throwers and chemical munitions, and antitank guided missiles. Libya’s more than 3,000 tanks gave it the tenth largest tank force in the world. Its range of tracked and wheeled armour, tank transporters, and air transport ensured it the necessary mobility to bring its forces to bear rapidly against any threat to its territorial integrity and enabled it to intervene in ventures far beyond its borders. The high technological level of its equipment demanded a corresponding level of technical competence in operation and maintenance.

Although the major mission of the so called People’s Militia, as formally stated by Qadhafi, was territorial defence, the West condemned Libya’s military activism, contesting Qadhafi’s commitment to “arabization” and interpreting Libya’s diplomatic and material support for what Tripoli called “liberation movements” as an aid and sponsor to international terrorism.

From a regional policy perspective, Qadhafi proposed bilateral and multilateral relations with his neighbours and several other countries, envisioning himself as carrying on the torch of Nasser’s ideology of Arabism as well as his personal vision of Islam and Africanism. Domestically, Qadhafi’s government was devoted to the search of a more equitable distribution of wealth. Guided by his need to contrast the influence of Ulema, Qadhafi’s final aim was to ensure, through a process of “arabization” and “anti-imperialism”, the birth of a new “Libyan State” based on socialism dictates and egalitarianism.

The continuous efforts of Qadhafi’s to recruit adepts from various national “liberation movements” were interpreted by the West as suspicious activities aimed to finance international terrorism and political subversion around the world. His insistent anti-Israel behaviour had seriously frozen the international relations between this North Africa State and all the other major actors of the world.
Nevertheless, what really caused Washington’s concerns was the reorganization of the military apparatus undertaken by the Libyan Regime. In the early 1980s the Army was re-organized into seven military districts and five Presidential Guards. In addition to 40,000 reservists organized in the People's Militia, the army totalled 45,000 men consisting of twenty-one mechanized infantry battalions, twenty-two artillery battalions, ten armoured battalions, fifteen Special Forces and eight air defence battalions. Air defence was organized into two antiaircraft battalions and six surface-to-air missile battalions. This restructuring of the Army was read by the West as further evidence of Qadhafi’s suspected activism to cause international instability and also as proof of his hidden intention to threaten Libya’s neighbouring countries. The “revolutionary” policy and the colourful personality of Colonel Qadhafi represented a dangerous element for both regional and international stability. A decade after his ascent to power Qadhafi and his regime were already enlisted in Carter's list of state sponsors of terrorism. And by the late 1970s, Washington had begun its struggle to weaken Libya’s alleged support to international terrorist organizations.

Libyan-U.S. relations have also been plagued by a number of direct confrontations between U.S. and Libyan Armed Forces. The first serious international and diplomatic incident happened in August 1981, when United States jets shot down two Libyan jet fighters during naval manoeuvres in the Gulf of Sidra. That same month, Libya signed an economic and political agreement with Ethiopia and South Yemen, the so-called Tripartite Agreement, aimed at countering Western, and primarily American, interests in the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean.

However, the first intentional US military attack on Libya was launched in 1986 as a consequence of a terrorist bombing that on April 5, 1986 killed three people and wounded 200 in the La Belle nightclub in Berlin. On April 15, some 100 U.S. aircraft attacked two military complexes, two air bases, and a port in Libya. Libyan sources said that 70 people were killed in the attack. Later on April 15, Libyan patrol boats fired two missiles against a U.S. Navy communications station based on the Italian island of Lampedusa, but the missiles fell short and the station suffered no damage.

Only two years later, in 1988, a further episode contributed to exacerbate the situation between Libya and the West. On December 21, 1988 a bomb exploded on Pan Am flight 103 en route from London to New York, killing all 244 passengers and 15 crew on board and another 11 people in the town of Lockerbie, Scotland. On November 14, 1991, the United States and Scotland indicted 2 Libyans described as intelligence officials for their roles in the bombing. The remains of Swiss timing devices, previously furnished to Libya, were the evidence behind the indictments. The two men accused were Abd al-Baset Ali al-Megrahi and Al-Amin Khalifah Fhimah, both described as Libyan intelligence officials. A further remarkable incident happened on September 19, 1989 when
a mid-air explosion killed 171 passengers and crew of the French airline UTA flight 772 over Niger in Africa.

As a consequence of Libya’s bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland in 1988 and French Air line UTA flight 772 in 1989, the United Nations imposed on Tripoli severe international sanctions and the United States declared air and arm embargos, blocking delivery to Libya of equipment judged to have potential military value. Among the sanctioned practices were transferring conventional weapons or chemicals that could be used in weapons manufacturing; providing direct or indirect foreign aid or support to international organizations that might benefit Libya; importing crude or refined Libyan oil and exporting U.S. oil production or refining equipment; engaging in trade, contracts, credits, loans, Export-Import Bank transactions, or third country transactions with Libya; and liquidating or transferring Libyan property in the United States. Some of the sanctions were modified over the years, for example, classes of U.S. aircraft were added to the banned export list.

The sanctions had a very deep effect on the above mentioned Libya’s Military Structure and severely undermined its ranks. The enormous damage of embargos can be understood if one considers that, for example, Libya’s whole navy potential came from western supplies and funding. The Navy, that has always been the stepchild of the Libyan armed forces, was integrally dependent on foreign sources and equipments, spare parts and training. Qadhafi’s maritime power consisted of Soviet-supplied submarines and fast-attack craft with missiles. Thanks to these foreign supplies Qadhafi acquired the potential for inflicting damage on other naval powers in the Mediterranean. The drastic consequence of the sanctions had also deeply affected Libya’s Air Force. Qadhafi had built up his air power mostly by receiving hundreds of American helicopters, later-model French close-air-support fighters, and up-to-date fighter interceptors from the Soviet Union.

Beyond a critical international situation that saw his Country and Regime at the centre of the greatest western disappointment, Qadhafi had to face an internal opposition caused by the consequences of his hostility with the West. Due to the harsh sanctions, Lybia had been plagued, during the 1980s, into a critic economical recession. Oil revenues drastically decreased from $22 billion in 1986 to $8 billion in 1996.

Although Qadhafi focused his diplomatic attention and resources on Africa to alleviate Libya’s economic and political isolation from the West and the Arab countries, sanctions evidently took their toll. The general discontent was jeopardizing the stability of Qadhafi’s administration; between 1992 and 1995 the total cost of internationals sanctions was estimated up to $24 billion. The embargo years had favoured the increase of inefficency to which was due a progressive pauperisation of Libya’s population.
The direct result of this impoverishment was a spread of malcontent that led, for the first time after the 1969 revolution, to the emergence of a dangerous Islamist guerrilla. In the early 1990s, the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group was founded by a group of Libyans back from battling Soviet troops in Afghanistan. The first aim of the movement was to replace Qadhafi’s regime with a government modelled on Islamic Law. In 1996 they tried to assassinate him. In response, the regime arrested hundreds of suspected insurgents, stepped up surveillance and repression and launched a major military campaign in those regions supporting the Islamist Group.

An active opposition was emerging also from the ranks of the military. Soon, Qadhafi realized that the strengthening and empowering of the military structure, which he had constantly promoted through his years in power, could become the most insidious menace against his regime. It was then that the need to preserve his power led Qadhafi to take the inexorable step toward the weakening of the military power structure. While disorganizing the Army into the “People’s Guard” he decided to strengthen the power of the so called Revolutionary Guard, the only ones loyal to his Regime. The Security Forces undertook a severe repression of the dissent and a strong eradication of the Islamist groups. Most of the Islamist activists, according to the intelligence network of the Regime, were Afghanistan war volunteers.

Most experts agreed that the extreme effort to safeguard his power and to rebuild his economically plagued Country forced Qadhafi to surrender to the western pressure. In order to eradicate the inner military and Islamist threats, while rescuing his regime from the harsh and heavy weight of the western embargos, Qadhafi had to embrace the western campaign against terrorism. He had to renounce his anti-imperialism commitment in order to defend his major concern that was the survival of his Regime.

The domestic repression was not enough to ensure the stability of Qadhafi’s Regime. The huge weight of the sanctions and the increasing pressure of the opposition led Qadhafi to choose the only possible alternative that would have partially recovered the precarious situation. The 1990’s rapprochement was the result of Qadhafi’s firm commitment to improve and recover his relations with the United States in order to end the previously imposed international sanctions. This explains why in 1998 Libya became the first country to issue an Interpol arrest warrant for bin Laden, charging that Al Qaeda had collaborated with domestic radicals. In addition, on April 5, 1999 Libya decided to surrender the two indicted agents charged with the bombing of Pan Am 103 and the French UTA flight 772. The same day, the United Nations suspended, but did not drop, the sanctions against Libya.

Qadhafi began reaching out to the U.S. during the mid-1990s, expelling or severing ties with radical groups. The Clinton Administration answered by start-
ing secret talks with Tripoli. Qadhafi, weighed down by Libya’s economical recession and civil malcontent, had, therefore, strong reasons to join the U.S. Administration’s war against Islamic extremists. On the other hand, the US Administration, aware of the ample resources the widespread Libyan intelligence network could offer, welcomed Qadhafi’s policy shift.

The attacks of September 11th offered Tripoli’s leader the possibility to prove the good nature of his intention to support the West in the international battle against terrorism. Libya’s regime tried to show the United States its willingness to negotiate its come-back in the international community. The day after September 11th, Qadhafi firmly condemning the terrorist violence and atrocities assured all his support to the United States, even recognizing its right to revenge and offering them the Libyan intelligence network. To the U.S. Administration, Qadhafi’s renunciation to his earlier anti-western policy appeared to be the first successful result of their efforts in Iraq.

In January 2004 Libya agreed to compensate victims of the UTA, Pan Am and la Belle bombings. Additionally, after years of secret negotiations between Tripoli and the White House, on December 27, 2003 Libya clearly stated its intention to denounce all its WMD programs, to eliminate unconventional weapons, to stop its activity to develop Scud C ballistic missiles and biological weapons, and to surrender its missile delivery systems. It announced its willingness to sign the additional inspection protocol with the IAEA and allowed US and UK inspectors to enter its WMD facilities. In other words, Libya was abandoning its main commitment to modernization; the no longer unquestioned leader of Tripoli had to swap the safety of his power with his anti-western vocation. He had to renounce his aspiration to transform Libya into the powerful and leading military regime of the African “arabization”. As a result, the UN Security Council formally lifted sanction Acts imposed by previous resolutions, and at the same time, the United States ended restrictions on travel to Libya and lifted all its embargos.

To conclude, after years of economic and political intimidations, pressures, and negotiations, Qadhafi’s Libya decided to follow a so called “policy of normalization” that would have led the country to the final liberation from the heavy weight of embargos. Qadhafi realized the need to promote a radical shift in his domestic and foreign policy. He became aware of the deep economical recession that was affecting his regime. No longer supported by his old western military suppliers, he understood the impossibility of continuing in his promise to realize and preserve a great military and revolutionary regime. Moreover, he understood that the army could represent a separate source of power capable of threatening his regime. The late 1990s represented the turning point in Libya’s policy shift. Libyan defence expenditures declined from US $1.5 billion in 1998 to US $1.3 billion in 1999. The
defence budget diminished from US $1.3 billion in 1998 to US $1.2 billion in 2000. Defence expenditures constitute 4.7% of annual GDP. What is evident is that the powerful Libyan military apparatus underwent a drastic decrease, in armaments and personnel. This progressively led to a complete transformation of the Military Forces into a Law Enforcement apparatus, which was primarily aimed to preserve Qadhafi and his opposed regime from every potential subversion of power.

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NOTES

2 The limited official data published by Libya offer a completely different picture from the estimates compiled by non-Libyan sources. In the administrative budget for 1984, the amount shown for the armed forces is LD340 million, which constituted 23.6 percent of the budget. This represented a substantial increase over the LD300 million shown for 1983, composing 19.7 percent of the administrative budget.
4 Ibid.
5 In early 1986, Western reporters were shown military training at a high school in Tripoli at which a minimum of two out of thirty-six class hours a week were devoted to military studies. In addition, one of three summer months was spent at a military camp. Graduates either entered the army directly or went on to college. Those entering college had to continue reserve training at their former high schools. The weekly lessons included hand-grenade throwing, signals and codes, and machine-gun maintenance.
9 In 1973 Qadhafi claimed the Gulf of Sidra to be within Libyan territorial waters by drawing a straight line between a point near Benghazi and the western headland of the gulf at Misratah. His claim was not generally accepted, although only the United States presented a direct challenge by declaring that its ships would continue to regard all areas beyond a distance of 12 nautical miles from the coast as international waters. When the United States Sixth Fleet began exercises in August 1981, Libyan fighter planes were assembled from elsewhere in the country to fly patrols near the American ships. On August 19, two Su-22 fighter-bombers were intercepted by two F-14 Tomcat fighters from the aircraft carrier Nimitz. While trying to escort the Libyans out of the exercise area, one of the American planes was the target of an air-to-air Atoll missile but was able to evade it. Both Libyan planes were then shot down with Sidewinder missiles launched by the Tomcats. The two Libyan pilots managed to eject and were rescued from the sea. The ease with which the American planes disposed of their attackers demonstrated that the earlier
generation Su-22 and its Atoll missile could not prevail against more sophisticated United States equipment.


Two of the three people killed were U.S. Army personnel, and 60 of the 200 wounded were U.S. citizens.

Clyde R. Mark, Libya, CRS Issue Brief for Congress, October 10, 2003 p. 7

Training was shifted to Greece and to Egypt and later to the Soviet Union. The initial ship orders, placed with British yards, were for patrol boats and corvettes. The largest surface ship in the Libyan navy, a frigate of about 1,500 tons with a crew of 130, was ordered just before the 1969 coup and delivered in 1973. Later, high-speed patrol boats and corvettes equipped with surface-to-surface missiles were purchased from France, Italy, and the Soviet Union. Between 1976 and 1983, six Soviet Foxtrot-class submarines were delivered. Each required a crew of seventy-five; in addition, twelve Soviet advisers were reportedly assigned to each vessel.

The air force’s primary installation was the huge Uqba ben Nafi Air Base (the former Wheelus Air Base) near Tripoli. It had excellent operational features and contained the service’s headquarters and a large share of its major training facilities. Both MiG fighters and Tu-22 bombers were located there. A large air base at a site near Benghazi shared with the civil airport also had some MiG squadrons. Most of the Mirages were located at Gamal Abdul Nasser Air Base.


Dr. Hanspeter Mattes, Libya’s problems with political reforms, Hamburg 2002. As cited by the author Libya has to face the opposition of the Warfalla tribe led by Colonel Muftah M. Gharum, Col. Mustafa Balquasim Mas’ud and Col. Sa’d Salim Faraj. In November, 1993 the revolt was put down by security forces and revolutionary guards loyal to the regime.

Ken Silverstein, “How Kadaﬁ Went from Foe to Allay, Common Cause against Islamic Radical Has woven U.S. Intelligence ties with Libya, Still Listed As A Terrorism sponsor”. Times, 4 September, 2005.

Ibid.

During these inspections it was revealed that Libya had a preliminary
clandestine Uranium enrichment program. All elements of Libya’s WMD have been removed.


However, the pattern of defence spending has been difficult to appraise with any exactitude since the mid-1970s. There are no certain, proved and detailed information since the government have imposed restrictions on the publication of military information. Detailed budgets, once available, have not been disclosed since the mid-1970s.