LIBYA: FROM ROGUE-STATE TO PARTNER

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Following his announcement in December 2003 that Libya would abandon its weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programmes, Colonel Qadhafi has been working hard to complete his country’s rehabilitation into the international community. Despite Qadhafi’s ongoing co-operation however a number of issues have served to slow this process down, including allegations of a Libyan assassination attempt against the former Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia. This has resulted in Libya’s continued inclusion in the US State Sponsors of Terrorism list. Nevertheless it appears that Libya is increasingly coming to be seen as a partner in the war against terror and is now considered as a trusted ally in this respect. However, like many of the regimes of the region Tripoli has been keen to emphasise the international dimensions of its terrorist problem as a means of better suppressing its own domestic dissent. Whilst this might bring it more friends in Washington and European capitals, it is unlikely to stem the support for an Islamist alternative that persists among large sections of the Libyan population.

ABANDONING WMD

Qadhafi’s decision to abandon Libya’s WMD programmes and to co-operate with the international community came as a surprise to many in view of the fact that Libya had developed a reputation for supporting ‘terrorist’ causes and for being antagonistic to the West in general. However, this move should be viewed as part of an ongoing attempt by the Libyan regime following the end of the Cold War to restore its international standing and to mend its relations with the West and with the US in particular. The main reason behind these efforts was the need for Libya to kick-start its economy that had been eroded by a combination of international sanctions, poor oil prices and the cumulative effects of three decades of economic mismanagement that had resulted in the regime being increasingly unable to meet the needs of its growing population.

From the end of the 1990s, the Libyans made a series of gestures to the West in an attempt to resolve their situation. In April 1999 Qadhafi handed the Lockerbie suspects over for trial in the Netherlands and following the trial co-operated in resolving the compensation issue. In November 2002, Libya signed up to the International Code of Conduct Against Ballistic Missile Proliferation at a meeting at the Hague, and Qadhafi was also quick to offer its support to the US in the aftermath of
the attacks of 9/11, providing intelligence information about suspected Libyan Islamist militants.

However, it was the Bush administration’s willingness to respond positively to these overtures following the invasion of Iraq in 2003 that really changed the international landscape for Libya. There have been suggestions that it was the war in Iraq that prompted Qadhafi to co-operate over WMD as he feared he was would be next on Bush’s target list. Whilst the Iraq war may have played a part in Qadhafi’s decision, it clearly was not the motivating factor. This remained the need to restore international credibility in order to bring investment and much-needed technical expertise back into the country.

BREAK WITH THE PAST?

Although Qadhafi has welcomed the lifting of sanctions and the new inflows of investment by US energy firms in particular, he remains angered by the fact that Libya has yet to be removed from the US state sponsors of terrorism list. The Libyans have found this process confusing and frustrating and have complained that the Bush administration keeps moving the goalposts. The Americans’ unwillingness to spell out exactly what the Libyan regime has to do to get off the list may be partly related to differences of opinion within the Bush administration. However, there have also been a number of incidents that have come to light over the past couple of years that have caused the US to stop and think about whether Qadhafi has really changed his ways.

In 2004 for example the Mauritanian regime accused Libya, and Colonel Qadhafi personally of supporting rebel factions accused of being behind a foiled plot to overthrow President Maaouya Ould Taya. The two regimes have tended to have a troubled relationship in view of the fact that the former Mauritanian government has traditionally kept up relations with Israel. However, Libya denied any involvement in the attempted coup and the two countries patched up their relations. These have been strengthened with the new regime that took over in Mauritania in August 2004.

On a more serious level, Qadhafi was accused in 2004 of being behind an alleged assassination attempt against Crown Prince Abdullah, now King of Saudi Arabia. The Saudi regime alleged that through a number of Libyans and through Abdelrahman al-Amoudi – a well known American Islamist who had strong connections with parts of the Libyan regime - Qadhafi had paid money to members of the Saudi opposition in order for them to carry out an assassination attack against the then Crown Prince. The Libyan regime denied these allegations, but did acknowledge that it had supported Saudi opposition elements in their struggle against the ruling family there. However, the death of King Fahd and Abdullah’s coming to the throne in August 2005 appears to have opened the
opportunity for a new start on this front and Libya and Saudi Arabia are gradually repairing their relations. Saudi Arabia released the Libyans who they had imprisoned in relation to the alleged attempt, including Mohamed Ismail, one of the close aides of Qadhafi’s son Saif al-Islam. More importantly for Libya however, whilst the US raised their concerns about the issue, overall it appears not to have done any long-term damage to their improving relations.

More recently the US has also stepped into the debate over the case of the Bulgarian and Palestinian medics who were sentenced to death after being convicted in 2004 of deliberately infecting over 400 children in a hospital with the HIV virus. After an appeal for help by the Bulgarian government, President Bush recently indicated that Libya would not be allowed off the terrorism list unless it released the medics. The Libyan regime however is in a dilemma. Whilst it needs to free the medics in order to complete it rehabilitation, Qadhafi is anxious not to look as though he is selling out to the West and more importantly there is very strong public feeling inside Libya that the medics are guilty and should be executed. It look as though this will eventually be resolved on a political rather than a judicial level as the regime is currently scrabbling to find a solution that will prove acceptable to both sides. However the Libyans are frustrated that an issue that is not generally considered to be related to terrorism now appears to be being linked to their being on the terrorism list.

PARTNER AGAINST TERROR

Ironically despite still being on the terrorism list, Libya is increasingly being considered as an important and trusted partner in the global war against terror. Libya has provided intelligence information including lists of names of suspected Libyan militants to the international community. There also appears to be a significant degree of co-operation with US intelligence agencies in relation to Libyan terror suspects. It has been alleged for example that the CIA has flown terror suspects to Libya, among other countries that practise torture, in order for them to be interrogated. Furthermore, Libyan Guantanamo detainee, Omar Deghayes alleges that he has been visited and abused there by Libyan security agents. In addition it is believed that there was some American involvement in the handing over of Abu Munder al-Saidi and Abdullah Sadeq - two leading figures in the designated terrorist organisation, the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group - who were arrested in the Far East and returned to Libya in 2004. More recently in October 2005 Libya signed a memorandum of understanding with the UK making provision for a number of Libyan Islamists who were arrested in Britain to be returned to Tripoli.

However, for the Libyans, this stance against Islamist militancy is not new. Indeed, Libya has considered itself to be at the forefront in the fight against
terrorism since the mid 1990s when militant Islamism emerged in North Africa and Qadhafi has repeatedly stressed that he publicly condemned Osama Bin Ladin as early as 1995. He has also taken an uncompromising stance against any form of politicised Islam inside Libya. Like many countries in the region, Libya experienced an Islamic revival in the 1980s and a number of militant Islamist groups emerged inside the country. The most well known and developed of these organisations was the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group that was formed in Afghanistan in 1990 by a group of Libyans veterans who had fought against the Soviets. When the regime discovered the group’s presence in the mid 1990s it took a brutal hard line approach, liquidating the LIFG and other militant groups operating inside the country. The regime killed and arrested hundreds of militants and their suspected sympathisers, forcing those who could to flee the country and to seek refuge in Europe. The regime also debilitated the more moderate Libyan Islamic Group - the Libyan branch of the international Muslim Brotherhood – arresting over 150 of its members in 1998 and convicting them of belonging to a banned organisation. Since then the regime has remained vigilant against any form of organised opposition, including that of an Islamist nature and as a result, despite rumours of small pockets of insurgents still fighting in the mountainous eastern regions, the regime has succeeded in wiping out any organised Islamist movement inside the country.

However, Qadhafi has continued to stress the threat that international terrorism poses to the country. Indeed, Libya must look to be an appealing target to groups such as Al-Qa’ida. Not only is the regime considered in such circles to be corrupt and secular, but it has now thrown in its lot very publicly with the West. The regime has repeatedly warned of the threat of terrorists “slipping into the country” and in September 2004 Public Security Secretary Nasser Al-Mabrouk announced that the Libyan authorities had arrested a number of suspects believed to have ‘cultural’ links to Al-Qa’ida and who were caught trying to enter the country from the south, although these reports were never publicly verified. The regime has also asserted that the members of the LIFG that are currently residing in the UK are linked to Al-Qa’ida. However, in reality the LIFG has always been careful to maintain its independence from Bin Ladin and has concentrated primarily on a nationalist agenda aimed at overthrowing Qadhafi.

The regime has cited this terrorist threat as the reason behind the efforts it has made to beef up its internal security apparatus since the start of its rehabilitation. In 2004 for example the police were given military powers in order to tackle the terrorist threat and there are currently rumours that despite state sector wages having been frozen since the early 1980s, the security forces have recently been awarded significant pay rises. Whilst Qadhafi may well be concerned about international terrorists targeting Tripoli, these measures are aimed
more at curbing domestic dissent and potential unrest as contrary to expectations the majority of the population is still not feeling any of the benefits of the new openness. In fact, those who have benefited from the new economic opportunities since the lifting of sanctions appear to be primarily the sons and daughters of Qadhafi and of high-ranking members of the regime who are currently amassing huge personal fortunes. Most Libyans continue to take on two or three jobs in order to survive and despite the increase in oil revenues are not seeing any tangible improvement in living conditions.

Indeed, like the rest of the Arab world, Libyan society is experiencing an increased Islamicisation and there appears to be growing support, albeit not in any organised form, for an Islamist alternative. Whilst it might suit the West to enable Qadhafi to use repression against the population at large in order to keep the lid on political Islamist activism, including that of a militant nature, arguably this is only serving to perpetuate the conditions that fuelled militancy in the first place.