

## Libyan Disarmament a Positive Step, but

# Threat of Proliferation Remains

By Stephen Zunes | January 15, 2004

In a world seemingly gone mad, it is ironic that one of most sane and reasonable actions to come out of the Middle East recently has emanated from the government of Muammar Qaddafi, the Libyan dictator long recognized as an international outlaw.

Libya's stunning announcement that it is giving up its nascent biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons programs and accepting international assistance and verification of its disarmament efforts is a small but important positive step in the struggle to curb the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs).

It would be a big mistake, however, to accept claims by the Bush administration and its supporters that it was the invasion of Iraq and other threatened uses of force against so-called "rogue states" which pursue WMD programs that led to Libya's decision to end its WMD programs.

While Saddam Hussein was less than cooperative with United Nations Special Commission on Iraq (UNSCOM) efforts in the 1990s, it appears that they were successful in ridding the country of its chemical and biological weapons and related facilities. The Iraqi regime was more cooperative during that period with the UN's International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), with the IAEA announcing in 1998 that Iraq's nuclear program had been completely dismantled. When IAEA inspectors returned in the fall of 2002 as part of UN Security Council resolution 1441, they reported that no signs that the program had been revived. Iraq also allowed the return of a revived and strengthened inspections regime for chemical and biological weapons systems (known as UNMOVIC) at that time, which also found no evidence of any proscribed weapons or weapons programs.

Despite this, the United States invaded Iraq and overthrew the government. As a result, Libya presumably knows that unilateral disarmament and allowing UN inspectors does not necessarily make you less safe from a possible U.S. invasion.

More likely, Libya simply recognized that they would not get anything worthwhile as a result of continuing with an expensive, dangerous, and complex process of weapons development and would instead continue to face international isolation and difficulty obtaining certain dual-use technologies which could enhance the country's economic development.

## A Triumph of Diplomacy

Indeed, the agreement is a sign of the triumph of American and British diplomacy, not military threats.

That this breakthrough involved some diplomatic initiatives from the U.S. government doesn't mean that the Bush administration has abandoned its unilateralist agenda. In a dispute which could potentially jeopardize Libya's bold initiative, the United States is challenging Libya's assumption that its disarmament process would be under the auspices of the IAEA and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW). The Bush administration insists that U.S. intelligence officials and experts from the U.S. Defense Department and U.S. Energy Department—along with some British authorities to give it a multilateral veneer—take charge of the disarmament process.

More serious is the position of successive administrations that the United States has the right to impose a kind of WMD apartheid on the Middle East, giving itself the right to say which countries can and cannot have nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons.

The United States has quietly supported Israel's extensive chemical and biological weapons programs, as well as Israel's nuclear program, which is believed to consist of over 300 warheads along with sophisticated medium-range missiles. This comes despite UN Security Council resolution 487, which calls on Israel to turn its nuclear facilities over to the trusteeship of the IAEA.

In the post 9/11 era, the U.S. has dropped its opposition to the nuclear programs of India and Pakistan, eliminating sanctions imposed by the Clinton Administration after both countries engaged in a series of underground nuclear tests in 1998 and ignoring UN Security Council resolution 1172, which calls on Pakistan and India to dismantle their nuclear programs and ballistic missiles.

To the United States, UN Security Council resolutions calling on the elimination of a given country's weapons of mass destruction should be enforced only when it comes



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to countries the U.S. government does not like, such as Iraq. By contrast, the United States has threatened to veto any efforts to enforce such resolutions against its allies.

Such a policy is doing little to enhance U.S. security interests. The evidence now points to Pakistan as the source of the key nuclear technology employed by Libya in its embryonic nuclear program, most of which ended up in Qaddafi's hands in the two years since the United States relaxed its restrictions on Pakistan's military government.

## The Costs of Domination

The unfortunate reality is that the United States is not interested in preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction per se but in preventing a challenge to its military domination in the post-Cold War world.

The first country to introduce weapons of mass destruction into the Middle East was the United States, which initially brought in nuclear weapons on its planes and ships as far back as the 1950s. More recently, the Bush administration has explicitly threatened to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states and is developing new nuclear weapons for battlefield use.

While demanding that countries that do not yet have nuclear weapons sign the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT)—which includes provisions that would prohibit them from doing so—the United States has refused to abide by other provisions of the NPT that call on already-existing nuclear powers to take serious steps towards complete disarmament.

Concern over the prospects of the horizontal proliferation of weapons of mass destruction also serves as a pretext for the ongoing U.S. military presence in the Middle East and for attacking countries that threaten to challenge this American dominance. Instead of seeing the potential acquisition of nuclear weapons by Third World countries as an inevitable reaction to the American failure to support global nuclear disarmament, the United States—by labeling it as part of the threat from international terrorism—can justify military interventionism.

Nuclear weapons are inherently weapons of terror, given their level of devastation and their non-discriminate nature. Indeed, the nuclear arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War was often referred to as “the balance of terror.” Many people outside the United States see the atomic bombings by U.S. forces of two Japanese cities in 1945 as among the greatest acts of terrorism in world history. American concerns, however, are not about the ability of the United States to threaten other countries with weapons of mass destruction but how others might threaten the United States. This can make it possible for U.S. administrations to portray acts of war against far-off countries as acts of self-defense.

Countries ranging from U.S. allies like Jordan and Egypt to adversaries like Syria and Iran have all endorsed calls for the establishment of a weapons of mass destruction-free zone for the entire Middle East, similar to those already existing in Latin America and the South Pacific. Such proposals have been categorically rejected by the United States, however. A UN Security Council resolution calling for the establishment of such a WMD-free zone in the region was introduced last month, but is expected to be vetoed by the United States. In effect, the United States insists that such weapons in the Middle East should be the exclusive domain of itself and Israel.

Other Middle Eastern governments may therefore decide not to risk emulating Libya's choice of unilateral disarmament. Indeed, such U.S. policies will most likely lead not to greater acquiescence to American will, but to a rush by other nations in the region to counter this perceived American-Israeli threat through the development of their own dangerous arsenals.

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