

## **Deconstructing the Libya Option for Syria**

**By Ronald Bruce St John | December 9, 2005**

The Bush administration continues to talk about applying the “Libya option” to Syria. In itself, this would be an excellent idea. The problem is the White House took the wrong lessons from Libya’s decision to renounce weapons of mass destruction and rejoin the international community. The Libya model may yet provide a path through the Syrian imbroglio but only if applied correctly.

### **Winding Road to Settlement**

Prior to the Libyan decision in December 2003 to renounce weapons of mass destruction, the Qaddafi regime had been trying for over a decade to come in from the cold. During the George H. W. Bush administration, Libya made several attempts to open dialogue with the United States. At this point, the Libyans were willing to exchange two suspects in the Pan Am Flight 103 bombing in return for opening negotiations to suspend sanctions and normalize relations. Even though the Libyans also expressed a willingness to discuss a verifiable cessation of terrorism and a confirmed abandonment of weapons of mass destruction, the State Department rejected bilateral talks.

Once Libya had remanded the two suspects in the Pan Am 103 case and United Nations sanctions were suspended, the Bill Clinton administration opened secret talks with Libya in mid-1999. At the initial meeting, which took place more than two years prior to 9/11, Libyan officials recognized a common threat from Islamist fundamentalism and agreed to cooperate in fighting al-Qaida. Responding to Washington’s expressed concern with Libya’s alleged chemical weapons program, the Libyans agreed to open their facilities to international inspection and to join the Chemical Weapons Convention. The Clinton administration declined to pursue the question of weapons of mass destruction at this time because its policy priority remained resolution of Pan Am 103 issues prior to additional engagement with Libya.

With the conclusion of the Lockerbie trial, American and British officials opened talks with Libya at the United Nations, detailing steps it must take to terminate UN sanctions. These talks produced a script, indicating what Libya must do to satisfy the families of the victims of Pan Am 103 and to accept responsibility for the acts of Libyan officials implicated in the bombing. This script later became the foundation for three-party talks to resolve the Lockerbie issue.

In the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the Qaddafi regime offered immediate support for the war on terrorism. And bilateral talks between American and Libyan officials continued in 2001-2002, even as the George W. Bush administration ratcheted up its rhetoric regarding Libya’s alleged unconventional weapons programs. In marked contrast, Libyan leader Qaddafi continued to assert the international legitimacy of Libya, arguing it was no longer a rogue state.

In March 2003, weeks before the invasion of Iraq, Libyan officials approached the British government, initiating talks with Great Britain and the United States aimed at dismantling Libya’s unconventional weapons programs. Nine months later, Libyan Foreign Minister Mohammed Abderrahman Chalgram announced Libya’s decision to renounce weapons of mass destruction, emphasizing his country had decided of its own “free will” to be completely free of internationally banned weapons. Libyan leader Qaddafi and other Libyan officials stressed this point in later statements.



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## Corralling Rogue States

One clear lesson to be taken from the Libyan model is the power of engagement as opposed to containment. Once Libya and the United States were engaged, progress came through a step-by-step process of negotiations in which both sides were clear on what was expected from them and what the next steps would be. With agreement on clear guidelines for each stage of the talks, a road map if you will, both sides shared a full understanding as to what needed to be achieved before advancing to the next stage.

In contrast, the use of force or the threat to use force generally proved counterproductive in the Libyan case. The repeated use of force against Libya, including the bombing of Benghazi and Tripoli in 1986, failed to produce the policy change desired by the United States. On the contrary, it brought Qaddafi welcomed international attention and enabled him to consolidate his domestic political position.

As negotiations proceeded in 2002-2003, John R. Bolton, then under secretary for arms control and international security, continued to make widely inaccurate, threatening charges against Libya. In part for this reason, the Libyans came to the British, not the Americans, in the spring of 2003 with their offer to renounce weapons of mass destruction. In the course of the negotiations leading to the December 2003 announcement, Bolton's behavior was so offensive that he was eventually banned from the talks.

A third lesson to be drawn from the Libya model is that sanctions, most especially bilateral sanctions, are not in themselves an effective means to change state behavior. In the case of Libya, "sanctions fatigue" was increasingly evident in the latter half of the 1990s as more and more states in Africa and the Middle East ignored the multilateral sanctions regime. In turn, European states increasingly challenged, where they did not ignore, the terms of the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act passed by the U.S. Congress in 1996. At home, Libyan leader Qaddafi took advantage of

the sanctions in place to squash internal opposition in tribal, military, and Islamist ranks.

Finally, regime change was never a component of the Libya option. As early as November 1999, Ambassador Ronald E. Neumann, deputy assistant secretary for Near East and South Asian affairs, made the point in a short, provocative comparison of Iraq and Libya. "Libya is not Iraq. We do not seek to maintain sanctions until there is a change of regime in Tripoli." While it rejected regime change in the Libya case, the Bush administration in the run up to the invasion of Iraq stone-walled Libyan attempts to comply with nonproliferation accords. The White House found it difficult to reward Libyan attempts to disarm when they didn't fit its rogue state model. Preoccupied with Iraq, a negotiated settlement with Libya would have undermined the administration's argument that removal of Iraq's alleged weapons of mass destruction necessitated war.

In the end, the Libyan decision to renounce weapons of mass destruction marked a success for patient, traditional arms control diplomacy. Initiated by the Qaddafi regime, the process was honed into an eventually successful diplomatic game plan by the Clinton administration. It then fell to the Bush administration to implement the policies originated by others which led to Libyan disarmament.

## Power of Distortion

For a complex negotiation, the details which led to Libya's renunciation of weapons of mass destruction were surprisingly clear; nevertheless, the Bush administration immediately sought to distort the process. White House officials portrayed the Libyan decision as a byproduct of the preemptive strike strategy in Iraq, and President Bush suggested in his State of the Union Address that Qaddafi's decision was a result, not of patient diplomatic efforts, but of the invasion of Iraq. Secretary of State Colin Powell in a March 2004 interview with James Kitfield of the *National Journal* joined the chorus, suggesting U.S. policy in both Afghanistan and Iraq influenced Qaddafi.

While the Bush administration's distortion of the "Libya option" is hardly surprising, it is disappointing

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to see how many journalists and other observers have failed to understand the process which led to the Libyan decision. In March 2004, for example, the American Enterprise Institute published a paper entitled “Beware the ‘Libyan Model’,” which focused on Qaddafi’s “internal repression and international adventurism,” largely ignoring the process which led it to renounce weapons of mass destruction. In mid-October 2005, *The Times* of London carried an article which suggested a “long list of painful concessions” demanded by the Bush administration constituted a “Qaddafi deal” to bring Syria in from the cold. Two days later, *The Australian* carried a similar article which described the concessions demanded by the White House as a “Qaddafi deal” to end the Assad regime’s isolation. While other examples could be cited, the point is that many analysts have joined the White House in ignoring the step-by-step approach which made the “Libya option” a success.

### The “Syria Option”

An effective application of the Libya option to Syria would include the following elements. First, the Libya model highlights the extent to which engagement and dialogue are central to effect desired policy changes. The Syrian government has often complained, and rightly so, that they have almost no channels of communication with the United States. Long absent from the post, the United States should send its ambassador back to Damascus. At the same time, American diplomats should reach out to Syrian dissidents, human rights groups, and other open-minded Syrians with the message the United States is standing with them as they move into the future.

At the same time, the United States should be careful to let the Syrian opposition run its own show. Syria’s often fractious opposition has taken advantage of the international pressure on the Assad regime to join forces and demand political reform. The “Damascus Declaration,” a statement issued by an array of small and disparate groups in mid-October 2005, called for radical change, including an end to emergency laws which the regime has used to curb political activism. The Damascus Declaration gained the support of the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood,

thought to have an important constituency in the country, as well as exile groups in Europe and the United States.

Less than a week after the issuance of the Damascus Declaration, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, addressing the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, bantered on about regime change, refusing to rule out possible military action against Syria. At the same time, anonymous sources in the Bush administration were suggesting the aim of the United States in Syria was a change in Syrian policy but not a change in the Syrian regime. As it did with Libya, the United States needs to eliminate the confusion, taking the idea of regime change in Syria completely off the table. Armed U.S. intervention in Syria is anathema to most opposition groups. Equally important from the standpoint of U.S. policy in the Middle East, the result of an American-sponsored overthrow of the Assad regime isn’t likely to be better in terms of regional stability and could well be worse. If Assad is toppled, the most likely replacement would be either a hardline Baathist regime or a fundamentalist Islamist government. Given the turmoil prevailing today in the Middle East, opening a new arena of instability in the region is, to say the least, a very bad idea.

A commitment to dialogue and policy change should then be followed by multilateral talks aimed at setting mutually agreed upon policy objectives for the Damascus government with explicit rewards for desired policy modification. While the United States has an important role to play in this process, the United Nations should lead the effort in Syria. The Bush administration should stick to the diplomatic path and avoid military threats which could rescue Syria from its current international isolation. Working through the United Nations, steps should be taken to deter Syria from further destabilization of Lebanon and to prevent insurgents from crossing into Iraq while fully backing the judicial process launched by the German prosecutor Detlev Mehlis.

Finally, the White House must recognize that economic sanctions, if the objective is to promote policy change, simply don’t work. Influential politicians

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often favor sanctions as a means to demonstrate resolve, but they have seldom produced policy change. Iraq, Libya, and Sudan offer three examples. And there is little reason to believe additional sanctions would be more effective in the case of Syria. On the contrary, the imposition of a comprehensive sanctions regime would play into the hands of Syrian hardliners who want no change. Broad-brush sanctions would also isolate the Syrian people from the West and alienate ordinary Syrians in need of reassurance. In short, the innocents in Syria, not the regime in power, would pay the price of economic sanctions.

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