

Decision on Libya Marks Shift in Bush Foreign Policy

By Ronald Bruce St John | May 27, 2006

The recent announcement by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice that the United States will open an embassy in Libya was welcome news all around. Long overdue, the restoration of full diplomatic relations is a win-win situation for both Libya and the United States, as well as for other states in and out of the Middle East. The U.S. decision also marks a significant shift in the foreign policy of the Bush administration, a change most observers have overlooked.

Actions Taken

The brief announcement by Secretary Rice on May 15, 2006, involved three separate but closely related actions. First, the United States will restore full diplomatic relations with Libya, including the opening of an embassy in Tripoli. Together, these steps reverse a downward spiral in American-Libyan relations which began well over three decades ago. Washington first signaled its concern with Libyan policies in early 1973 when it failed to appoint a successor to Ambassador Joseph Palmer who had returned to the United States in late 1972. Thereafter, bilateral relations were conducted at the level of *chargé d'affaires* until incumbent William L. Eagleton, Jr., a noted Arabist who later served as ambassador to Syria, shuttered the embassy in 1980, after it was attacked by a Libyan mob.

Secretary Rice also announced the United States was removing Libya from the list of designated state sponsors of terrorism. The Libyan government has been on the list, under the terms of the Export Administration Act of 1979, since its inception and is only the second state to be removed. Iraq was quietly taken off the list in 2004. The Secretary of State also indicated Libya would be omitted from the annual certification of countries not cooperating fully with the anti-terrorism efforts of the United States.

Appropriate Linkage

In taking these steps, the United States government recognized “Libya’s continued commitment to its renunciation of terrorism and the excellent cooperation Libya has provided to the United States and other members of the international community” since the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Despite some criticism of this approach, it was the correct linkage for the three actions announced by the Department of State. The bundle of commercial and diplomatic sanctions imposed by the United States on Libya after 1973 were tied, from the beginning, to charges the Libyan government was aiding and abetting terrorism.

American policy interests in other areas, like economic and political reform, energy security, and human rights, are long-standing topics of discussion with the Libyan government. That said, these issues were not involved in the official designation of Libya as a state sponsor of terrorism nor were they a factor in the eventual rupture of diplomatic relations. Moreover, they were not an integral part of the nine months of negotiations leading to the Libyan announcement in December 2003 that it was renouncing weapons of mass destruction and related delivery systems.



The addition of outside issues to the talks related to the hard-won agreements on weapons of mass destruction and the war on terrorism threatened to move the goal posts, damaging the credibility of the U.S. government. As an alternative, the United States can engage Libya in parallel talks that do not jeopardize U.S. efforts to ensure Libya fulfills its obligations regarding both weapons of mass destruction and the war on terrorism. In this sense, the State Department appeared to set the correct tone when it indicated in its formal statement in mid-May that “For Libya, today’s announcements open the door to a broader bilateral relationship with the United States that will allow us to better discuss other issues of importance.” As examples, Secretary Rice mentioned the protection of human rights, the promotion of freedom of speech and expression, and the expansion of economic and political reform in Libya.

Winners and Winners

Both Libya and the United States will gain immediately from the restoration of diplomatic relations. For one thing, the creation of a U.S. embassy in Tripoli and a Libyan embassy in Washington, DC will result in a more prompt and orderly process for obtaining visas. Today, Libyans must travel outside Libya, normally to Cairo or Tunis, to obtain a visa to visit the United States. Americans have also experienced considerable difficulty in obtaining visas to visit Libya. In addition to American businessmen and tourists traveling to Libya, an important beneficiary of an improved visa issuance process will be Libyan students wanting to study in the United States. Before the break in diplomatic relations, thousands of Libyans were studying in the United States. In contrast, based on my conversations with Libyan academics during a recent conference at Columbia University, the number of Libyan students studying here today can be

counted on two hands, largely because of visa issuance problems.

Over the past two years, the United States government has gradually lifted many of the sanctions previously impeding travel to and trade with Libya. However, a number of restrictions have remained in place, largely because of the U.S. determination, under the terms of the 1979 Export Administration Act, that Libya was a state sponsor of terrorism and was not cooperating fully with U.S. antiterrorism efforts. The removal of Libya from the terrorism list and its omission from the annual certification of countries not cooperating with antiterrorism efforts will enable the remaining sanctions to be lifted.

One unfortunate result of Libya’s retention on the terrorism list after its renunciation of weapons of mass destruction has been that the United States could not export the technology required by Libya to destroy its substantial inventory of chemical weapons. Of course, broader economic issues are also at stake as Libya remains a significant potential market for U.S. goods ranging from consumer products to capital equipment to a wide variety of services.

In addition, Libya’s proven oil reserves total 39 billion barrels; and with new exploration and production sharing agreements coming into play, its proven reserves are expected to increase. The under-exploration of Libyan oil and gas deposits in recent years is largely the result of the multinational sanctions regime imposed in the early 1990s and only lifted in September 2003. Libya now plans to double its current oil production by the middle of the next decade, returning to output levels not seen since 1970. While the United States has never been a major importer of Libyan oil and is not expected to be in the future, Libya’s oil and gas reserves are increasingly important to America’s European allies.

Additional Libyan output will contribute to global supplies to the mutual benefit of both sides of the Atlantic.

Rich Man, Wise Man

A rich man in Japan once asked a noted philosopher to write something related to the continued prosperity of his family, some wisdom that might be passed down from generation to generation. The wise man obtained a large piece of paper and quickly wrote in beautiful calligraphy: “Father dies, son dies, grandson dies.”

The rich man became very angry, thinking the wise man had made a joke of his simple but sincere request. Replying no joke was intended, the wise man explained.

“If your son dies before you die, you will grieve horribly. If your grandson passes away before your son, both you and your son will be broken-hearted. But if your family, generation after generation, passes away in the order I have named, it will be the natural course of life. This is real prosperity.”

In this context, there may be no peace possible for many of the families of the victims of Pan Am Flight 103. And it is understandable that some of them have criticized sharply the decisions recently announced by the Department of State. The same can be said for the American service personnel injured in the 1986 bombing of the La Belle discothèque in Berlin, some of whom have also criticized the U.S. decision. Nevertheless, as C. David Welch, the assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs, said on the day of the announcement, these decisions “were linked to our national security concerns with terrorism and weapons of mass destruction. In the case of the terrorism issue, this is embodied in American law, so the process we went through is very clear and straightforward.”

The removal of Libya from the list of state sponsors of terrorism did open the way for the Libyan government to make the third and final payment of the \$2.7 billion in compensation it agreed in 2003 to pay the families of the 270 people killed in the Lockerbie explosion. Under the terms of the agreement, a total of \$10 million was to be paid to each family in three separate payments. The final payment of \$2 million per family has yet to be made because it was contingent on Libya’s removal from the terrorism list. By all accounts, the Libyan government has been scrupulous in honoring its commitments regarding the war on terrorism and weapons of mass destruction. While the contractual time frame for this final payment to the families of the victims of Pan Am Flight 103 has long since expired, Libya would be wise also to honor its commitment here.

Libyan Model

One of the most surprising elements of the U.S. decision to restore full diplomatic relations with Libya was the suggestion in the official announcement that Libya “is an important model as nations around the world press for changes in behavior by the Iranian and North Korean regimes.” In his formal remarks at the post-announcement press conference, Ambassador Welch captured the essence of the Libyan model when he said, “Diplomacy in this case has produced results.” Expanding on the theme, he argued, “Today’s announcement demonstrated that when countries make a decision to adhere to international norms and behavior, they will reap concrete benefits. Libya serves as an important model as we push for changes in policy by other countries such as Iran and North Korea.”

Previously, the White house has argued that the Libyan decision to renounce terrorism and abandon weapons of mass destruction was a byproduct of the preemptive strike strategy in Iraq.

For example, President Bush, in his 2004 State of the Union address, suggested Libya's decision was a product, not of patient diplomatic efforts, but of the invasion of Iraq. Given the Bush administration's earlier insistence that the Iraqi invasion prompted Libya to come in from the cold, the official recognition today that traditional arms control diplomacy, the hallmark of the Libyan case, could be applied to other recalcitrant states marks an unexpected and welcome change in U.S. policy.

Conclusion

The decision on May 15, 2006, to restore full diplomatic relations with Libya, removing it from the list of state sponsors of terrorism and the annual certification of countries not cooperating fully in anti-terrorism efforts, was an important step in a prolonged effort, beginning in the early 1990s, to improve American-Libyan relations. Enhancing the credibility of the United States as a responsible bilateral and multilateral actor, it also signaled an important shift in American foreign policy. Over the last many months, the policy of the Bush administration toward Iran, North Korea, and Syria (oddly enough, not mentioned in the mid-May State Department announcement) has too

often been characterized by rhetoric instead of dialogue, isolation in lieu of engagement. A turn toward a more constructive approach, based on a Libyan model grounded in direct talks and security assurances, would be a positive and promising step.

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