

What If Libya's Qaddafi Hangs On?

Written by Jamsheed K. Choksy

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JAMSHEED K. CHOKSY, MAR 16 2011

Rather than unambiguously backing the cause of freedom in Libya, Western governments seem to be reconciling themselves to the possibility that the regime of Muammar Qaddafi might remain in power.

If this is the case, however, the world must prepare for the possible re-emergence of a global threat — Libya's weapons-of-mass-destruction (WMD) program. After "cleansing Libya" of "rats, cockroaches, and drug addicts" (as Qaddafi characterizes those defying him), Libya's leader will turn his attention to the foreign countries he believes fueled the rebellion against him.

Qaddafi is well aware of the global turmoil he can cause by abrogating the 2003 WMD agreement he reached with the West. Indeed, he has already threatened to pull out of all international agreements. Doing so would send already high oil prices soaring. "We know this game," Qaddafi's elites are fond of saying, citing Europe's dependence on oil they control. The current nuclear crisis in Japan merely strengthens their hand.

Of course, the leaders of countries like North Korea, Iran, Syria, and Venezuela are on the lookout for opportunities to overturn the current global system; sideline the United States, the European Union, and the United Nations; vitiate the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty; and eliminate any threats to their own authority. Helping Qaddafi recreate a major nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons program on Europe's doorstep would clearly help them further these ambitions.

Enemies Of My Enemies

But things are not all good among the world's troublemakers. After the administrations of U.S. President George W. Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair busted the A.Q. Khan nuclear-trafficking ring, Qaddafi not only rolled over but also incriminated North Korea and Iran. He'll have to make some effort to mend fences with these two countries.

Nonetheless, Pyongyang has had nothing to say about the uprising in Libya. And leaders in North Korea know that helping Qaddafi resume his WMD programs would deflect international attention from their own activities. Unable to threaten Europe from far-off Asia, North Korea would surely be tempted to resume providing missile technology to Tripoli, especially since doing so would indirectly funnel Europe's own oil money into Pyongyang's depleted coffers.

Reconciling with the mullahs in Tehran will be harder. Iran has come out in favor of an Islamist regime in Libya, so it is unlikely the Qaddafi family will be able to come to terms with Iran's theocrats. But the dynamics of proliferation do not demand hugs. Iran has said it is prepared to "export nuclear technology and products." There are plenty of intermediaries in the Middle East who are on good terms with both countries. Past differences didn't keep the nuclear programs of Iran and Libya from cooperating, as the International Atomic Energy Agency has demonstrated using uranium-particle data.

Although often in agreement with Tehran, Syria did not speak out against Qaddafi because populist Arab uprisings bode no good for its own authoritarian regime. President Bashar al-Assad can exploit that noninvolvement to facilitate cooperation between Iran and Libya. In addition to the Israeli-bombed site of Al-Kibar, where the Syrian atomic energy organization is suspected of having collaborated with its Iranian counterpart, Assad may well have at least

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one more nuclear plant. Syria has long had chemical and biological WMD programs as well. Damascus would benefit politically, ideologically, and financially by serving as a pipeline for Iranian technology heading to Tripoli.

Venezuela's Hugo Chavez has been championing his Arab mentor — from whom he received the Qaddafi International Prize for Human Rights in 2004! — during the present crisis. Caracas is linked to Tehran's uranium prospecting, weapons development, and nuclear proliferation. Flights into Caracas from Tehran and Pyongyang go unmonitored and unregulated. So Venezuela is an ideal conduit for indirect restocking of Qaddafi's WMD arsenal. Indeed when Chavez visited Qaddafi in October 2010, the two leaders declared they would “come out as steel tigers to face the [U.S.] empire.”

Exhausted militarily and politically by their drawn-out struggles to establish order in Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States and the European Union have largely chosen to sit out the intra-Libyan struggle. But will Washington, London, and Paris have the same luxury if Qaddafi turns against the outsiders he imagines are to blame?

U.S. President Ronald Reagan may very well have been on target in characterizing the Libyan tyrant as “this mad dog of the Middle East.” Given his consistent displays of mercurial, violent behavior, Qaddafi is perhaps a more likely deployer of WMDs than his counterparts in North Korea, Iran, Venezuela, or Syria. After all, he still has mustard gas on hand for use against domestic and international opponents. Reality frequently gives way to delusion among such leaders and their supporters.

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