

Qaddafi, Arab Unity and Islam

Stephen Oren

The January announcement of a Libyan-Tunisian union, short-lived to be sure, was but one in a series of seemingly odd actions by Libyan President Qaddafi. In the Yom Kippur War he refused to participate in the Syro-Egyptian attack—perhaps out of pique at not being consulted beforehand. Two weeks later he angrily denounced the cease-fire and has since refused to participate in inter-Arab conferences called to discuss the post-cessate-fire situation. The Israeli-Egyptian disengagement agreement, by which Egypt recovered the Suez Canal and a considerable part of Sinai, evoked only disapproval from Libya. Calling for ever greater oil embargoes against the West, Qaddafi's own adherence to the oil embargo is questionable. Qaddafi, known for his Islamic fundamentalism and fiery anti-Israel rhetoric, seemed for a time eager to join with Tunisia's Habib Bourguiba, a sophisticated modernist who has urged his fellow Arabs to accept the reality of Israel. Seeming contradictions abound. Yet Qaddafi's policies have a rationality of their own which may have as much to do with the Middle East's future as the impulses of those whom conventional wisdom calls saner.

The 1969 seizure of power from an established élite by a small group of army officers seemed to resemble events elsewhere in the Arab world. Qaddafi's mention of a vague "socialism," his admiration of Nasser and his anti-U.S. tirades all made the resemblance stronger. But Libya's revolution was different in two—possibly interrelated—ways. It was the first revolution in the oil states. These countries have not gone through a process of gradual if incomplete modernization like Egypt, Iraq or Syria. They were impelled into the twentieth century by the discovery of oil. The Libyan revolution had money to throw around. Indeed, one important reason that the Egyp-

tians in 1972 and Tunisia in 1974 were prepared to consider merging with Libya was that the Libyan economy is able to absorb many technicians, teachers and others who would otherwise be among the "educated unemployed" and a potential source of turmoil.

The second difference is that Qaddafi proposed to Islamicize Libya, not to socialize it. Military regimes elsewhere in the Arab world, while paying lip service to Islam, have limited the applicability of the Shari'a, the Islamic religious law, even in personal matters such as marital relationships. Qaddafi has applied the Shari'a even to criminal law. Conscious that the majority of Muslims are not Arabs and that some Arabs are not Muslims, the military leaders in Cairo, Damascus and Baghdad have stressed a linguistically based Arab nationalism. Qaddafi has identified Islamic zeal with Arab nationalism. His commitment to Islam is linked with concern about Muslim guerrillas in the Philippines and Pakistani defenses against Hindu India, as well as about the Arab-Israeli issue.

Qaddafi's Islam led him to look with disfavor upon the kings he deemed corrupt but who had appointed themselves guardians of Islam. Attacking King Hussein of Jordan for his willingness to live in de facto peace with Israel, Qaddafi called for Hussein's overthrow when that monarch clashed with the Palestinian guerrillas who wished to use Jordan as a base for attacks on Israel. He openly backed an attempted coup against Morocco's King Hassan in 1971. Its failure did not prevent Libyan radio from denouncing the King and calling for terrorist action against him. Morocco retorted by charging that Qaddafi was of Jewish descent.

Qaddafi is also intensely anti-Communist. The atheism implicit in Marxism-Leninism may be the basis of this. No doubt the Soviet role in aiding India against Pakistan in 1971 fueled this feeling. A central cause was Qaddafi's perception that the USSR had a stake in Israel's existence, since Arab fear of Israel

STEPHEN OREN teaches political science at Touro College in New York City.

was the main cause of Soviet-Arab ties. The USSR might proclaim its verbal support of the Arab cause, it might give—or sell—arms to the Arab states, but Qaddafi was sure the USSR intended neither to allow the Arabs to crush Israel nor to see the Arabs unite. Rather, the USSR proposed to play upon Arab fear and hatred of Israel, and upon Arab suspicions of each other, to turn the radical Arab states into dependents of the USSR.

For Qaddafi the road to Tel Aviv was not paved with Soviet weapons. He called for a regeneration of the Arab world, asking it to unite around a core of Islamic values, which would be its strength. The symbol of that strength was the Palestinian guerrillas—or at least those of them who were Islamic and not Marxist. And for them Libya, immune for geographic reasons from direct Israeli retaliation, served as a haven.

The modernizing Arab regimes have not been happy with Qaddafi. When he first proposed a Libyan-Tunisian union in 1971, President Bourguiba laughed it off, suggesting that Qaddafi had much to learn. In 1971 General Numeiri of the Sudan was certainly pleased that Qaddafi's anti-communism led him to help crush a Communist coup in the Sudan. But after that coup failed, Numeiri did not enter Qaddafi's proposed Libya-Egypt-Sudan merger. Instead, he stabilized the Sudan by ending the civil war between Muslim Arabs and animist-Christian blacks on generous terms which required, moreover, that Numeiri abandon his support of the Muslim Eritreans in their revolt against the Christian Emperor of Ethiopia. All this scarcely commended him to Qaddafi.

As for the Ba'athist rulers of Syria, they are descended from Muslim heretics (Alawites) and preach a semi-Marxist dogma hostile to Qaddafi. Only for tactical reasons would they join in a "union" of Egypt, Libya and Syria. By early 1973 Syrian-financed Palestinians were denouncing Qaddafi as a "fascist," while Libyan money supported mobs in Syria rioting against an "un-Islamic" constitution.

Indeed, the Arabs have shown wisdom in not including the public opinion poll among their borrowings from the West. Qaddafi would do consistently well in them. Islam is still a real force in the Arab world, and the average Arab is certainly not fond of the Russians. Qaddafi's desire for Arab unity, his willingness to use his country as a base for Palestinian guerrillas, and his ability to use Libyan oil revenues to support the anti-Israel cause (e.g., persuading Malta as well as many African states to break relations with Israel) are also appealing.

Sadat is master of an Egypt of over thirty million people, and has a large army. Yet he is unwilling to enter a union in which he would control the vast

foreign-exchange reserves of Libya with only two million people and no army to speak of. At least one reason might be that he is afraid of Qaddafi's popularity in Egypt. The leaders of Tunisia—in desperate need of Libyan jobs and foreign-exchange reserves for a population twice Libya's—quickly rejected a union, in part because they feared that Qaddafi's puritanism would have more appeal for the average Tunisian than the Europeanized francophile élite of Tunis.

By early 1973 others in the Arab world determined to resist Qaddafi and to gloss over old hatreds to create an anti-Qaddafi front. When the Israelis advanced on the Syrian front during the Yom Kippur War, they encountered Moroccan troops armed with U.S. equipment. King Hassan sent troops to Syria after the February, 1973, riots to help the "radical" Syrian regime against a common enemy whose capital was Tripoli, not Jerusalem. Saudi Arabia competed with Libya in distributing Islamic propaganda and anti-Israel subsidies in Africa. Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria and Egypt, after years of squabbling, began to resume diplomatic relations with each other. They were left no choice in view of "Palestinian" attacks on Saudi embassies in Khartoum (capital of the "heretical," from Qaddafi's point of view, Sudan) and Paris, as well as the Libyan attempt to force the Libyan-Egyptian union—by a bizarre but peaceful invasion of Egypt. Arab actions are determined far more by their own politics than by the wishes or policies of Washington, Moscow or Jerusalem. If Qaddafi was to be resisted, Egypt was the key. If Qaddafi could unite Cairo and Tripoli, he would be seen all over the Arab world as the wave of the future. Hence Sadat was something of an indispensable man in Arab politics.

The USSR must have been aware that Qaddafi's entrance into Cairo would mark the complete bankruptcy of its post-1955 Middle Eastern policy of supporting "progressive" military regimes. Moscow could contemplate gloomily the parallels—complete with cultural revolutions—between Qaddafi's Islamic populism and the "Marxism" peddled in Peking. Perhaps there are ties, perhaps not, but Tripoli and Peking have the same basic diagnosis of what ails the Arab world and what role the USSR plays in perpetuating that sickness.

We know that in 1970-71, when Soviet-Egyptian military collaboration was at its height, the USSR vetoed Egyptian plans to cross the Suez Canal. In 1973, with Soviet-Egyptian relations cooler because of Cairo's 1972 expulsion of Soviet military advisors, Moscow actively supported the Yom Kippur attack. An important reason may have been Soviet conviction that it must give Sadat a victory if he was to survive, that it must show the Arab world that cooperation with the USSR does pay off. The ability

of Libyan-backed guerrillas to end Austrian help to Soviet Jews going to Israel (a feat that reminded the Arabs of the continuing USSR role in building up Israel by permitting some thirty thousand Soviet Jews a year to migrate) may have been the last straw for Moscow.

In this context Qaddafi's policy becomes understandable. Why should he support an attack which, even if successful, would do nothing to end Israel's existence (as opposed to Israeli control of territories taken in 1967) and would simply increase the standing of Qaddafi's rivals? Why support an oil embargo if it was to be lifted upon Israel's return to pre-June, 1967, lines and is in practice to be abandoned upon the first sign of Israeli concession? Qaddafi saw both the attack and the cease-fire as a plot by which the Arabs, exulting in minor victory and the recovery of some territory lost in 1967, would ignore the root of the problem, Israel's existence, as well as the root of the solution, Arab unity and a return to Islamic values.

Libya's attitude limits the slim chances of Arab-Israeli accommodation in the Middle East. The Egyptian army's victory in the Yom Kippur War, equivocal as it was, has given Sadat a new legitimacy, which he is using to achieve disengagement and then concentrate on building Egypt economically. His program is designed to appeal to secular Egyptian patriotism rather than to Islamic Pan-Arabism. But Arab (and Egyptian) public opinion cannot forget forever that an accommodation involving Israeli withdrawal to the Mitla Pass and the reopening of the Suez Canal was basically offered by Israeli Defense Minister Dayan *before* the war. For that matter, Nasser could have had a much better deal right after the Six-Day War.

Syrian reluctance to attend the Geneva Peace Conference and to abide by the Geneva Convention in regard to Israeli POWs, among other things, is directly related to the domestic weakness of the Ba'athist regime in Damascus, a weakness that is at least partly Qaddafi's doing. Here again, the Syrians may feel that weakness is strength, that if renewed clashes with Israel come, the USSR must save it to

prevent more Arabs from looking to Tripoli. Soviet rearming of the Syrians since the October cease-fire supports this view.

Meanwhile, so long as the clashes go on, Qaddafi, far from the fighting front, must discover new ways to attract Middle Eastern attention. The attempt at union with Tunisia accomplished this end. Had the Islamic Arab Republic (the contrast with Nasser's "United Arab Republic" reveals Qaddafi's wider ambitions) been established, Qaddafi would have been the one Arab political leader to erase a colonial intra-Arab frontier instead of just prating about Arab unity. Moreover, by threatening to replace Egyptian technicians and workers in Libya with Tunisian ones, Qaddafi could impose a considerable strain on the Egyptian economy and thus perhaps reduce Sadat's popularity. The widespread popular support shown for union in southern Tunisia reflected in part this availability of Tunisian labor.

To be sure, Qaddafi has made gestures toward Arab unity. His praise of Sadat and Feisal in February is one example. But it is doubtful if Sadat, for one, is going to forget that in June Qaddafi was openly calling for revolution in Egypt, Tunisia and Algeria. Nor is it forgotten that Libyan subsidies have continued to go to antigovernment forces in the Sudan. Sadat and Feisal must both be grimly aware that Qaddafi's soft words will end the minute their popularity begins to decline. And any arrangement with Israel that is diplomatically possible will probably lead to such a decline.

In the volatile world of Arab politics it is difficult to predict the future. Much that happens on the surface has little meaning, much that has meaning does not show on the surface. There are rumors to the effect that some of Qaddafi's fellow Libyan military officers are a bit tired of Arab unity. But such rumors are not new. For the moment, Qaddafi is still very much around, a reminder that modernization has not destroyed the strength of Islamic belief in the Arab world—and a reminder that the Arab leaders' freedom of action is limited indeed.