

A lesson to Qaddafi: What is Washington's next step?

by Thierry Lalevée

The dust had not yet settled on what remained of the radar guidance system at Libya's Gulf of Sidra missile base March 24 when the most obvious question was asked: What would be Washington's next step?

Part of that step, as American officials have often commented, is to keep Muammar Qaddafi guessing and wondering. Many others are guessing and wondering, too. Moscow's Gorbachov is certainly one; others are Qaddafi's bedfellows in international terrorism, and European politicians who, like Italian Foreign Minister Giulio Andreotti or his German counterpart, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, almost choked of outrage on March 24.

The loneliness of Qaddafi

Washington received little support for having taught Qaddafi a badly needed lesson—at least, officially. With diplomatic ambiguity and hypocrisy, European governments, for example, waited up to 24 hours after the beginning of the confrontation to issue statements, then only to call on both parties for restraint. The British government graciously recognized the “right of the United States to hold military maneuvers in international waters,” while Israel's Peres commented on American television (April 1) that the United States had done the “right thing.”

Unofficially, things were otherwise. Italian Prime Minister Bettino Craxi was very pleased indeed. So was the new French government of Premier Jacques Chirac. Former French President Giscard d'Estaing praised the Americans on March 28 and recalled that his original plan to overthrow Qaddafi in September 1980 had unfortunately been foiled by President Carter. A day later, the Spanish government announced that it was fully siding with Washington and considered Qaddafi's ravings about revenge a “threat to the national sovereignty of Spain.”

Of utmost interest were the reactions of the Arab countries. The confrontation in the Gulf of Sidra erupted while Arab foreign ministers were meeting in Tunis to discuss the convening of an extraordinary Arab summit on Middle East peace. It has been said that Qaddafi, who had avoided provoking the U.S. Sixth Fleet a week earlier, timed his provocation to coincide with the gathering, to ensure maximum support for Libya.

Things didn't work out. It was not until March 25, late in the evening, that the Arab League finally circulated a formal protest and an even more formal text of “solidarity with the Libyan people.” The Libyan delegate, who had spent his day lobbying in favor of a general break of diplomatic relations with the United States, left the room purple with rage. A formal statement was the least the ministers could do, and they did the least. Even then, some governments were reluctant parties to it. It was not before March 26 that the Tunisian and Egyptian governments published separate statements, strangely similar in their generality and lack of clear support for Libya. Even Algeria, traditionally more prone to “Arab solidarity” sentiments, circulated a statement which described the crisis as a matter of “legal dispute” over the control of Sidra waters.

In sum, but for Syria, Iran, and their pet-terrorists of the PFLP and Abu Nidal, Qaddafi stood very much alone, the more so as Moscow merely issued a TASS release denouncing the “American aggression,” and trotted out foreign ministry spokesman Vladimir Lomeiko to announce “political and moral support to Libya.”

Washington's dilemma

Many in Europe and the Arab World regretted that American jetfighters had stopped after strikes on the Sidra military base, and were disappointed when the maneuvers were ab-

ruptly ended on March 27, five days ahead of schedule.

In subsequent days, it emerged that the Pentagon has had a contingency plan codenamed "Prairie Fire" since 1985, and this includes two sets of actions against Libya: first, a contingency plan aimed at overthrowing the Qaddafi regime; second, a series of actions to keep Libya under constant military pressure, with punctual retaliation for any provocations.

Such plans have been very openly opposed in the United States by Secretary of State George Shultz and his Kissingerian clique within the National Security Council and American foreign intelligence services, including National Security Adviser John Poindexter and the new deputy director of the CIA, Robert M. Gates. It was no coincidence that the events in the Gulf of Sidra occurred while George Shultz was away from Washington, touring Europe. They consider Qaddafi a useful asset. As soon as the March 24 confrontation erupted, they went into action to bring about an early end to the maneuvers.

As unnamed CIA officials revealed to *Time* magazine on March 31, Prairie Fire can only work with the cooperation of certain European countries, Egypt, and other North African countries. On March 30, the Egyptian government daily, *Al Ahram*, revealed that in March 1985, NSC director Robert MacFarlane had received a rebuke from Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak when he requested military action against Libya. Approached three times more by Washington, Cairo had each time refused. According to *Al Ahram*, Mubarak stated that Egypt would "never invade another Arab country."

The real reasons are otherwise. Confidence between Cairo and Washington has vanished. How can any Egyptian official take seriously an American offer to jointly destroy Qaddafi, while other American envoys tell Egyptian officials to cooperate with the International Monetary Fund and economically destroy themselves? How can there be any confidence, when Cairo only narrowly averted a major embarrassment by revealing in *Al Ahram* first what CIA officials were about to reveal to *Time* magazine. Did anyone in Washington think of the consequences for the Egyptians? This very stupid behavior only feeds the suspicions of many in Europe and the Arab world that American officials like Shultz actually want to build up Qaddafi's credibility.

Notably, *Time* magazine did not publish the names of other North African countries which were approached. Since an "Arab-African Union Treaty" exists between Libya and Morocco, everyone knows that the other unnamed countries are Algeria and Tunisia.

If Qaddafi could not be directly overthrown, Washington could only implement the second part of Prairie Fire: retaliation against Libyan provocations. In that, it succeeded and significantly rebuilt American credibility in the region.

The effect was certainly felt in Moscow, even though it had been forewarned twice: First, in July 1985, the Kremlin was told that the U.S. Navy had standing orders to retaliate,

and would do so. Then, on March 24, before bombardment began, Washington warned Moscow to withdraw its military advisers from the Libyan missile base. The warning was reportedly unnecessary. Moscow, which maintained four surveillance ships in the area, knew what was afoot. As soon as the U.S. vessels had crossed Qaddafi's "line of death," the Libyans had contacted the Soviets to ask for help. Moscow remained noncommittal and is reported to have explicitly warned the Libyans not to attack. This sudden caution stemmed from the fact that they knew that the SAM-5 missiles that they had given Qaddafi last December were not exactly the *Wunderwaffen* they might have claimed at the time, and stood no chance against American military technology. In fact, things turned out even worse than Moscow expected, as U.S. forces tested, for the first time in combat, new missiles such as the air-to-surface Harm and Harpoon. Libya lost more than 220 sailors, not counting casualties at the missile base on shore.

Qaddafi is only the first target

While this, of course was not reported by the Libyan media, Tunisian and Egyptian broadcasts were closely monitored by the Libyan people. Qaddafi mobilized the revolutionary committees, and on March 28, slaughtered a cow with the name Reagan painted on it. Foreign observers present in the Libyan capital, however, reported a sudden disinterest in such antics on the part of the population. His claim to have shot down three U.S. jetfighters provoked little enthusiasm. So Qaddafi went into flight forward. On March 30, he ordered the burning of all French and English books, just as last fall he had ordered the destruction of all "imperialist musical instruments." This may have been another mistake. On April 1, scores of university students were seen saving books from the fires; one department at Tripoli University sent an unprecedented official protest, stating that they needed foreign books.

Admittedly, the explosion aboard the TWA airliner on April 2, killing four Americans, bore Qaddafi's paw-marks, but his repeated threats since January of a wave of suicide commandos hitting the United States, came to nothing! Qaddafi does have suicide commandos at his disposal, but these can only be deployed in coordination with Syria, Iran, and Soviet intelligence. Libya provides financial support and training bases, but it doesn't own the terrorists. Moscow has the first and final word.

These developments prepare what should be Washington's next step. It is ensured of a support it has not previously enjoyed in the region. It should maintain the pressure on Libya, which will provoke a growing dissatisfaction within Libyan army ranks. But since Qaddafi is only one element of international terrorism, his overthrow is an example, not an aim in itself. What Washington must do is restore confidence in Cairo, Tunis, and elsewhere. Either drop support for the IMF, or U.S. military policy is of little import.