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## LIBYA

Can a terrorist tiger ever change its stripes? In 1969 Colonel Gadhafi took over Libya and made it one of the world's most notorious sponsors of terrorism. But in recent years he has wanted to come in from the cold and in 2004 Libya was removed from the US's list of rogue states sponsoring terrorism.

On September 1 1969 Mu'ammar Gadhafi and a group of young military overthrew the regime of the 79 year old King Idris, who was overseas. No one was killed. The king did not try to organize a counter-coup.

Gadhafi abolished the monarchy and established the Libyan Arab Republic. On September 14 he took over control of the banking system. These changes were welcomed by most Libyans, who did not like the king's corrupt and inefficient rule.

He closed down the British and American military bases, with the last of the foreign troops leaving by June 30 1970. The British and Americans got the bases after war, when the colony was freed from Italy control. The country received its independence in 1951, with the British and Americans retaining military bases. Among the British bases was the famous one at Tobruk. The bases were useful both to insure the UK's interest in the region and to help keep the king in power. Arab governments opposing Israel criticised King Idris for allowing the Americans and British to remain.

Therefore, Gadhafi's quick decision to expel the bases made him popular throughout the Arab world. He was one of the first Arab leaders in the Middle East to defy the traditional power brokers in the region: US and Britain. He is now the longest serving Arab leader.

Oil was discovered in Libya in April 1959. In July 1970 Libya nationalised the oil industry. With only about six million people, Libya is one of the richest Arab countries on a per capita basis.

In October 1970 Libya expelled the Italian settlers who had occupied parts of the country since Italy acquired the colony in 1911. Their land was shared among the Libyans.

Within two years, then, Gadhafi had reorganized the country's internal affairs and he was set for the next stage: to sponsor international terrorism. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Gadhafi was well known for his support of terrorism. Its support for terrorism, made the small country of Libya an unexpectedly powerful force in the world.

In April 1984 Britain suspected that Libyan embassy officials were involved in shooting dead policewoman Yvonne Fletcher patrolling outside the embassy. Libya was also suspected of supporting the Irish Republican Army. Britain severed its diplomatic relations with Libya.

Relations between the US and Libya continue to get worse. In May 1985 the US expelled all the employees of the Libyan People's Bureau (embassy) in Washington DC for suspicious activities.

In March and April 1986 the US carried out a number of military attacks on Libya to assert its right to fly and sail near the Libyan coast. On April 5 there was a bombing of the La Belle discotheque in West Berlin, in which two US servicemen and a Turkish woman were killed and 229 others wounded. The US retaliated with a bombing raid on April 15 in which 37 people were killed.

On December 21 1988 a Pan Am Boeing 747 was blown up over the Scottish village of Lockerbie. British and American intelligence officials believed that Libyan agents were responsible for planting the bomb. In April 1990 British investigators announced that they had found an electronic chip that linked two Libyan agents to the explosion. The United Nations imposed economic sanctions on Libya to force it to hand over the two agents for an international trial.

In March 1989 Libyan agents blew up the French UTA plane over Niger. 170 people were killed, including the wife of the US Ambassador to Chad.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s Libya financed terrorist groups. It also provided refuge to Palestinian terrorist Abu Nidal who was wanted in Israel and elsewhere for his terrorism.

The US government now says that Libya has not been involved in any foreign terrorism since 1994. Why the change?

The most obvious explanation is that all the Libyan expenditure on terrorism has nothing positive to show for it. It was been an expensive project – and a failed one. Not one military or political objective has been achieved by it. The US and UK have not given in to terrorism, Israel still survives and the IRA has not won.

He opposed the 1979 peace treaty between Egypt and Israel and yet it still remains in effect. In November 1979 he financed the terrorist group that briefly took over the Great Mosque in Mecca. The Saudi royal family regained control of the mosque and remain in control of their country.

Gadhafi has given up with the Arab leaders. He now prefers to think of himself as an African leader and has reduced his interest in Middle Eastern affairs. He now wears African clothes as often as Arab ones.

He does not like the rise of Islamic fundamentalism. He was one of the world's first leaders to warn about Osama bin Laden. In 1996 he was the target of an assassination attempt by the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group., sponsored by Osama bin Laden. He was the first leader to call for Osama bin Laden's arrest.

On September 11 he was one of the first leaders to express his condolences to President Bush for the terrorism in the US.

Meanwhile, the UN's economics sanctions have been hurting the country. Libya needs international markets, investment and expertise to get its oil industry flourishing again. Foreign oil companies are also anxious to get involved again in the Libyan oil industry.

Therefore Gadhafi has disowned his terrorist past. In 1999 he handed over the two Libyan agents wanted in connection with the Lockerbie bombing. They were tried under Scottish law in a special court based in The Netherlands. One was found guilty and the other not guilty. Libyan has paid compensation to the next of kin. Similarly Libya has paid US\$170 million to the next of kin of victims on the French UTA flight.

Palestinian terrorist Abu Nidal was expelled in 1997, after being sheltered by Libya for a decade. In 1999, Libya accepted "general responsibility" for the murder of police constable Fletcher and paid an undisclosed sum to her family.

In December 2003 he renounced Libya's attempts to acquire weapons of mass destruction. He invited in international inspectors to check that Libya was no longer developing such weapons.

On March 24 2004 British Prime Minister Tony Blair visited Libya. This was the first time that a British prime minister has been in the country since Churchill was there during the war. Blair's visit was a sign that Gadhafi had at last come in from the cold.

This is not a bad achievement for a man born in a poor desert tent. He was born in 1942 into a minor Libyan tribe called Gaddafi that roams the desert of eastern Libya. Most Libyans live in cities but their leader is a Bedouin who prefers to live a tent as often as living in a palace.

He was trained at the Libyan military academy and then went on to the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst. He did well in the military and in September 1969 made the most of his opportunity to take over the country. He lives simply and avoids the grandeur of other Arab leaders.

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