

U.S. Ambassador Cretz's Remarks at Princeton University
December 4, 2009

U.S. Libya Relations: Challenges on the Road to Normalization

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for this opportunity. It is truly a pleasure to be at Princeton University addressing the Woodrow Wilson School of Government.

In addition to the audience here with us today in Princeton, I also send out a heartfelt hello to students from the Political Science and English Departments at Al-Fateh University and the Academy of Graduate Studies in Tripoli, Libya, October 7th University in Misrata, Libya, and Garyounis University in Benghazi, Libya. Assalamu Aleikum.

As we approach the one-year anniversary of the re-establishment of full diplomatic relations -- including the first exchange of Ambassadors in 36 years -- I thought it would be useful to take stock of the relationship and make the case, once again, for why continued engagement with Libya is in our long-term national interest.

The events of the past few months have demonstrated that bilateral engagement will not be easy.

The August welcome of convicted Lockerbie bomber Abdul Basset el-Megrahi back to Libya was an event that has directly impacted the bilateral relationship. The image of the convicted killer of 189 Americans being accorded such a warm welcome struck a deep chord in the United States and occasioned anger and renewed grief on the part of the families of the victims. Such a greeting, followed by Megrahi's highly publicized meeting with Colonel Qadhafi, offended and shocked those who still grieve over the loss of American lives in the Pan Am 103 bombing, as well as those who honor their loss. The event was a clear reminder that while we have traveled far with Libya, we have far to go.

Libya needs to understand us at the same time they assert that we need to understand them. The speech of the Libyan leader at the UN General Assembly pointed to major differences we have with the Libyan Government across the board on several issues that concern our governments. We certainly do not share all of the views expressed at the General Assembly. His speech, coupled with the controversy surrounding the attempts to pitch a tent in New York and New Jersey,

created much negative sentiment among the American public. Colonel Qadhafi's debut visit to the United States and his first address to the UN General Assembly provided an opportunity to affirm Libya's proper place on the global stage. Many hoped that the Leader would have used this opportunity to present a more forward leaning vision of international cooperation. Regretfully, he did not.

Despite these recent setbacks, when we look at the record of the past several years, I would argue that engagement has been – and continues to be – in the long-term national interest of the United States. There are several critical areas in which we can engage with Libya and the Libyan people. These include interactions in the nonproliferation, counterterrorism, military, economic and commercial, political, and public diplomacy spheres. We should remember that up until the time that Colonel Qadhafi seized power in September 1969, there were close ties between the United States and Libya: over 5,000 Libyan students studied at American universities, and several of the leaders of Libya's current institutions and Libya's military were trained in the U.S.

While our engagement is measured and purposeful, we are laying a necessary foundation for cooperation with Libya that corresponds with the ideals of mutual interest and mutual respect that President Obama called for in Cairo in his landmark speech signaling new outreach to the Islamic world. We also believe that in working with the Libyans to fulfill their commitments to dismantle their weapons of mass destruction program, we advance the principles of a nuclear and WMD-free world advocated by the President during his chairing of the UN Security Council special session on non-proliferation in New York.

Quite simply, we have too much at stake in Libya not to continue pressing ahead on our engagement, in spite of the recent challenges to this fragile, new relationship.

Libya's Strategic Decision

In December 2008, I became the first American Ambassador to Libya in 36 years. This followed Colonel Qadhafi's historic unilateral decision in 2003 for Libya to abandon its weapons of mass destruction program and renounce terrorism and rejoin the Community of Nations. Since that time, the U.S. government has worked to make Libya a constructive partner on a range of bilateral and multilateral issues.

Libya's October 31, 2008 fulfillment of its agreement to compensate victims of past acts allowed us to turn a corner in the relationship and focus on the future. The current stage of our relationship and the distance we have traveled -- from isolation to engagement -- represent, in my view, a textbook case of the successful conduct of diplomacy carried out through several administrations which has clearly furthered the national interest of the United States.

The Core of the New Relationship

The core of our new relationship with Libya is based on shared interests in two key areas: nonproliferation and counterterrorism.

President Obama has made the quest for a world without nuclear weapons one of our top national priorities. As he stated in his address to the historic UN Security Council Summit on Nuclear Nonproliferation and Nuclear Disarmament, all nations must do their part to achieve this goal.

Until now, Libya has kept its commitment in this regard, and has worked seriously with its international partners, including the United States, to fully dismantle its weapons of mass destruction programs. Continued cooperation with the Libyan government is integral to our efforts to stop the spread of nuclear weapons, and to build international consensus for a world without nuclear weapons.

And as part of our nonproliferation efforts, we are working with Libyan scientists not only to help dismantle their WMD programs, but also to convert former WMD facilities into peaceful uses, such as pharmaceutical plants and nuclear medical centers. This type of cooperation -- and new, productive engagement for scientists -- is particularly important as an example for our prospective engagement with Iran and North Korea.

Similarly, the tragic events of September 11 and the rise of transnational terrorism have demonstrated that we will not be able to successfully combat violent extremism on our own. Since renouncing its support for terrorism, Libya has proven to be a reliable partner in the global efforts to end violent extremism.

Libya has fought the expansion of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in the region and has condemned kidnappings. It has taken a position against the paying of ransom to kidnappers.

Libya also has taken the lead in developing new approaches to counterterrorism, undertaking serious rehabilitation efforts with the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group members and arguably influenced the group's decision to break ties with al-Qaeda in the Maghreb. Its efforts in this regard, led by Saif al-Islam, are worthy of further attention and may serve as a model to apply to other extremist groups.

Our counterterrorism cooperation also provides new venues for public security training and reform, initiatives that could, over time, help address many of our longstanding human rights concerns. Libya has participated in Anti-Terrorism Assistance Programs and has expressed interest in receiving assistance to upgrade its detention and prison facilities, to include the training of prison guards, public security officials and judges.

A New Regional and Global Role

Through its strategic choices, Libya has moved from being a sanctioned, isolated regime which promoted terrorism and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, into a country fully engaged with the international community that provides leadership in several key forums.

Within the last twelve months, Colonel Qadhafi cemented his role as Chairman of the African Union; Tripoli resolved its years long dispute with Italy arising from Rome's occupation from 1911-1942; Libya celebrated the 10th Anniversary of the Sirte Declaration; Libya assumed a seat on the UN Security Council; Dr. Ali Treiki, a Libyan elder statesman, became President of UN General Assembly; and, finally, Libya marked 40 years since the September Revolution.

Libya's new role as a responsible actor on both the regional and global stage has opened new opportunities for cooperation and progress on long-standing, bitter conflicts. Libya is working with the U.S. and the international community to promote peace in Sudan, including complex negotiations on Darfur and the long-running Chad-Sudan dispute. It is working within the UN to help end piracy in Somalia and bring stability to the Horn of Africa. It is a partner with a real role in helping to solve many of our most important policy problems in Africa.

As the Chair of the African Union, Libya could also play an important role in helping to strengthen the AU as an institution and help develop African peacekeeping capabilities, key to long-term stability and prosperity in this often troubled continent. Through our relationship with Libya, we have an opportunity

to help shape these discussions and work with our African partners to develop a new framework for peace and prosperity in the region.

Political-Military Relations

Libya's strategic decision to end its weapons of mass destruction programs and support for terrorism also opened new opportunities for a bilateral military relationship.

Libya occupies a strategic position as a bridge in the heart of the Mediterranean. For millennia, it has served as a link between Africa and Europe and the Middle East. As such, it can play a helpful role as it does now in working with European nations to help stem the tide of illegal migration, or it can play a harmful role as it did in the Barbary Wars of the early 19th century.

We have a unique opportunity to help shape Libya's role in the 21st century, to further our shared interests in regional stability, and to establish a joint vision for mutually beneficial exchanges and training.

As a result of Libya's decades of isolation, its military lacks even a basic understanding of U.S. security goals or procedures. We quite literally do not even speak the same language as Libyan military officials. Very few Libyan military officials speak English, much less have the training necessary to sustain the multinational undertakings that are required today to preserve our national security, whether they are geared toward combating piracy in the Horn of Africa or defeating al Qaeda in the mountains of South Asia.

Admittedly, our relationship with Libya has not developed yet to the degree that Libya or the United States is considering these sorts of joint efforts. Yet we never will get to that point if we do not first begin building the basic military-to-military relationships – the common language and common understanding – that are the key to all of our strong partnerships.

In the last year, we have signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Libya regarding future cooperation between our militaries. We are in the process of finalizing an end-user agreement, the basic requirement of any of our bilateral security assistance relationships. We hope to launch a bilateral Political-Military dialogue that will form the basis for security engagement in the years to come.

The benefits to the American people of such cooperation would be enormous. Through our International Military Education and Training programs, we could begin English language training programs for military officials – an almost unimaginable achievement in a country where the teaching of English was illegal until fairly recently. We could increase the number of bilateral exchanges and visits, introducing Libyans to U.S. standards of military conduct, and increasing the prospects for long-term interoperability, key to our regional peacekeeping goals. These programs would help lay the groundwork for the establishment of a professional military respectful of civilian control over the armed forces, and mindful of human rights. These programs would also lead to lasting personal relationships and a deeper cultural connection between our two armed services. We also could help Libya upgrade its nonlethal military capabilities, an essential component to any future African Union peacekeeping capacity.

Quite simply, these are opportunities that we cannot afford to squander.

Economic and Commercial Opportunities

Libya's strategic decision also has opened many new opportunities in the economic and commercial sphere. Libya is a country of great wealth and rich natural resources -- particularly in the hydrocarbon sector -- with a relatively small population of just six million. It is a country that is just opening up now to international investment, technological advancement, and infrastructure development.

Since 2001, Libya has begun a number of economic reform initiatives as part of a campaign to adopt a market-oriented approach, develop human capacity, and diversify the economy in non-oil and gas sectors. It is important to note what a massive undertaking that has been – Libya effectively has been attempting to make up for forty years of systemic stagnation and re-constitute its bureaucratic and economic capability.

The results in terms of economic reform have been mixed. Informed observers and even some government officials agree that while many laws and regulations have been changed, implementation has been a problem. Transparency International ranked Libya in the bottom quarter of its overall list of surveyed countries last year – and there are significant concerns about both the rule of law and the sanctity of mutually-agreed contracts.

We have an opportunity to help Libya keep moving in the right direction and, in the process, promote U.S. business interests. We are working with the Libyan Government on new anti-money laundering and counter-terrorist finance programs which will further both our economic and our security interests.

U.S. companies are competing with European and Asian firms for a share of Libya's multi-billion dollar public infrastructure programs, aimed at making up for years of isolation and degradation. Sustained U.S. diplomatic engagement will be key to helping U.S. firms win these lucrative contracts. A strong U.S. business presence, in turn, will foster the values of transparency and free competition that will help promote lasting reform in Libya.

Political Reform

Libya's decision to rejoin the international community also created opportunities for broader political reform and opening within Libya.

Libya's unique political system of Jamahiriya – rule by the masses – is complex and often difficult for outsiders to understand. Yet for the last few years, it is clear that the Libyan Government has been exploring ways to reform this system. A surprise initiative by Libyan Leader Muammar Al-Qadhafi in March 2008 to dismantle most of the existing system of General People's Committees and privatize many government services was quietly deferred, and earlier plans for a new constitution similarly dissipated. Muammar Qadhafi's recent decision to appoint his son, Saif al-Islam, to a new position as General Coordinator for Libya has renewed speculation that a new, more serious political reform effort may be underway. It also has renewed speculation about the elder Qadhafi's succession plans.

Only time will tell whether these reform efforts will result in real, lasting change.

As President Obama said in Cairo, "No system of government can or should be imposed by one nation on another." That is the principle of mutual respect that governs our discussions with the Libyan Government on this very sensitive subject and on our long-term interests in Libya, which include maintaining our nonproliferation and counterterrorism cooperation, promoting regional stability, developing military ties, and promoting American economic interests.

We are in the initial stages of conducting a human rights dialogue with the Libyans. Our policy in this area is very much colored by the social, legal, and political characteristics of our society. Libya's response is likewise strongly influenced by these same factors. You can then well imagine that we would have significant differences in how we approach engagement on these issues. We hope to use the mechanism of a bilateral human rights dialogue to lay the foundation for a vigorous discussion of the issues that concern both of us.

We also hope to work with Libya to foster the development of a vibrant civil society. Throughout my career I have served in Pakistan, Israel, Syria, Egypt, China, and now Libya and have become convinced of the necessity and benefits of a robust civil society. Government cannot solve all the problems or address all the needs of its citizenry.

For that reason, I continue to explain to my Libyan counterparts that it is possible to create a space for civil society that is not threatening to the government or to the traditional customs or beliefs of the Libyan people. In a nutshell, civil society does not mean anti-government.

I firmly believe that civil society and government should complement each other and that the creation of non-governmental organizations is not a challenge to the regime.

This task will not be easy in Libya and progress will be evolutionary rather than revolutionary. But at least we are now communicating on the subject and searching for non-threatening proposals to highlight the benefits of creating a flourishing, NGO alternative.

People-to-People Ties

It's clear that we have many vital interests at stake in Libya. Nonproliferation, counterterrorism, regional stability, military assistance, and political and economic reform all translate into a very robust agenda. Yet in order to advance this agenda, we must also work on the fundamentals of the relationship, the people-to-people ties that have endured in the face of three decades of political differences.

I recently had the opportunity to celebrate Thanksgiving with more than 300 Libyan alumni of U.S. universities. Up until the 1980s, Libya sent thousands of foreign students to the United States, building a cadre of highly trained experts in

fields ranging from the science to the humanities. These Libyan alumni have played a key role in developing their country. Perhaps more importantly for our interests, they also have played a key role in keeping our people-to-people ties alive through decades of crises and sanctions. They understand both of our cultures and systems, and have served as bridge of understanding in the most difficult of circumstances.

My encounter with these former students, who share positive views of both our countries and helped to maintain a bridge between us for decades despite the lack of formal relations, underscored for me the need for us to redouble our efforts in the educational and cultural sphere. Deeper people-to-people ties will help overcome the differences that have accumulated over decades of distrust. They will make it that much easier for our two nations to take on our continuing differences in an atmosphere of mutual respect and understanding. Quite simply, we need to get to know each other once again after three decades of estrangement.

The United States has a robust plan to encourage greater people-to-people ties:

- We have reinstated the full range of Fulbright exchange programs, by which promising young academics from Libya are selected to study and teach at U.S. colleges and universities where they live and study among Americans. Since resumption of diplomatic relations, we have sent more than 40 Libyan students on Fulbright programs.
- In cooperation with the State Department's Bureau of Oceans, Environment, and Science, we recently sent twenty-four students and two Libyan teachers to attend a space camp at the Advanced Space Academy in Huntsville, Alabama. A professional Libyan film crew accompanied the students and teachers to capture the ten-day event. The Libyan students and teachers represent the first group from North Africa to attend U.S. Space Camp and only the second group from the Arab world since 1982. Bringing young Libyan students to the United States for a special science education program is just a small part of a larger U.S. effort to re-establish its commitment to offering educational opportunities to Libyan students and professionals.
- Over the next year, we anticipate sending more than one hundred and fifty Libyan students, academics, professionals, military and law enforcement officers, and government officials to the United States on training and exchange programs.

- Through our ACCESS Microscholarship Grant program, the Embassy has provided English language scholarships to dozens of underprivileged and economically challenged youth in Benghazi. We plan to expand this program to additional schools in Tripoli, Sebha, Misrata, and Zawiya.
- Robust educational coordination has also been revived. Incredibly, nearly 1,700 Libyans are currently studying in the States; up from nearly zero during the sanctions period. We intend to work with the Government of Libya to increase that number to 6,000.
- Finally, we have reestablished full Consular services in Tripoli. It is no longer necessary for Libyans to travel to a third country in order to get an American visa. We are now processing almost 50 visas per day at our facility in Tripoli. This allows Libyans to visit the United States and build critical people to people bonds and at the same time facilitates bilateral economic, cultural, and political development.

Our Greatest Challenge: Bridging the Gap

Libya's decision to relinquish its weapons of mass destruction and end its support for terrorism presented a rare, historic opportunity to help a formerly rogue nation change course. Our national security interests mandate that we must stay engaged.

The events of the last few months have illustrated that the challenges will continue to be great. We can never forgive nor forget the terrorism perpetrated against our citizens. As evidenced in Libyan Leader Muammar Al-Qadhafi's address to the UN General Assembly, there clearly are significant policy differences that must be addressed.

Yet the key to addressing these differences – and overcoming the significant challenges that lie ahead – is dialogue and cooperation and understanding each other's needs. It also may be our greatest challenge, as after more than three decades of suspicion and mistrust, it will take time and sustained effort for both sides to rebuild an atmosphere of mutual understanding. It is only through the establishment of lasting institutions and relationships between Americans and Libyans on all levels, that our bilateral relationship will be able to survive the vicissitudes of the political arena that could set it back.

Libya this year celebrated the 40th anniversary of the revolution that brought Muammar Qadhafi to power. As we work on developing the institutions and framework of our new bilateral relationship, it is important to focus not on the suffering and tragedy of these last years, but on the many opportunities that lie ahead. Seeing Libya exclusively through the narrow prism of its leadership is not, I believe, in the national interest of the United States.

For although we can never forget the suffering and tragedy that characterized the relationship for many years, we have the unique opportunity now to build the new relationships and institutions that will help ensure that the next 40 years are productive and beneficial to both of our countries.

Fortunately, in Libya today, there is a reservoir of goodwill toward Americans, toward our values, toward our educational institutions and toward our commercial products. It is a population that, in sum, wants close ties to our nation. I hope that we can continue to capitalize on this good will, and build the relationships and institutions that are at the heart of any successful diplomatic relationship. Greater engagement – particularly in the educational and cultural spheres – will be required to do so.

Thank you very much, and I would be happy to take your questions.