

# 1969-1972, Libya: America's New Ally, Colonel Qaddafi

By Stephen Shalom, professor, political science, William Paterson University; author, *Imperial Alibis: Rationalizing U.S. Intervention After the Cold War* (1993).

It was clear that the days of the Libyan monarchy were numbered. In 1969, King Idris was 79 years old and seemed increasingly removed from his royal responsibilities. Public support for the Idris dynasty had never matched that for Idris himself, and the King had no heir. Coup-plotters seemed to be everywhere and there were widespread reports that the King was considering abdicating or, on the other hand, launching a coup of his own.

On September 1, 1969, while the King was taking an extended vacation outside Libya, a group of young military officers – lead by Muammar Qaddafi – launched an almost bloodless coup. The new government promised to end corruption and extend the benefits of the oil wealth to all.

Back in 1967, the U.S. had apparently decided – or at least so informed King Idris – that while it would protect his regime from outside enemies, it would not intervene to defend his throne from domestic forces.

First, the internal base for an intervention simply wasn't there. As former Assistant Secretary of State David Newsom told one researcher, things might have been different "if the king had come back to Libya to fight for his throne, if he had found strong popular support there, and if the Defense Force had rallied to his defense instead of staying quietly in their barracks." (Idris had made a brief effort to interest Britain in intervening on his behalf, but public support for the new regime convinced him to accept guarantees for the safety of his family and retire to Cairo.)

Second, U.S. officials considered that while they would like to re-

tain Wheelus Air Base, it was of much less strategic value since the development of nuclear missiles had replaced bomber bases. In fact, Wheelus had really only served as a training facility in the sixties. Oil had become a much more crucial U.S. interest in Libya and, policymakers argued, this stake could best be protected by separating it from the issue of Wheelus. "We seek to retain our military facilities," noted a

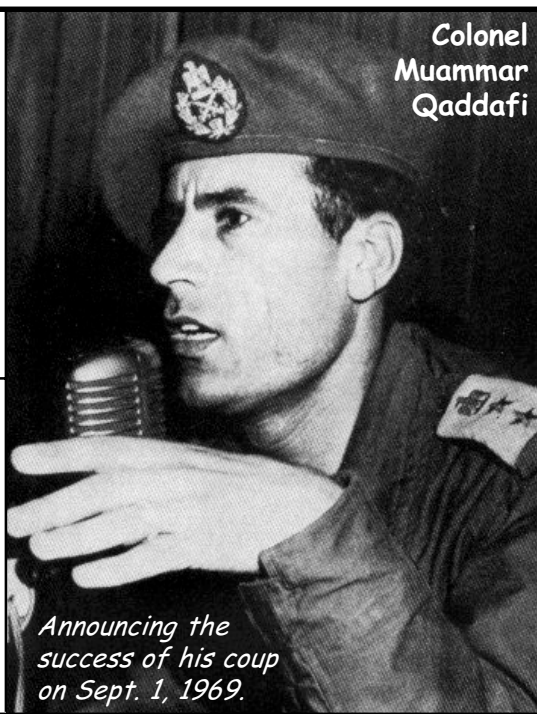
Moscow for supporting local Communist parties. In 1971, he intercepted a plane carrying the leaders of a left-wing coup attempt against Nimieri's pro-U.S. regime in Sudan and turned them over to Nimieri for execution. He denounced Soviet imperialism during the India-Pakistan war and sent warplanes to assist Pakistan (towards whom the U.S. was "tilting"). He reproached Nasser for his Soviet ties and



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**Colonel Muammar Qaddafi**

*Announcing the success of his coup on Sept. 1, 1969.*

high-level interagency paper, "but not at the expense of threatening our economic return." The Wheelus base agreement had two more years to run, and in December 1969, the U.S. agreed to vacate the facility by mid-1970.

The U.S. Ambassador in Libya sent word to Washington that while Qaddafi was a militant Arab nationalist, he would be a determined foe of international communism. Given the public mood in Libya – and growing radicalization in the Arab world generally – Qaddafi might well prove the best way to block a more anti-American Libyan regime. Presumably, it was for this reason that the U.S. was still providing training to a small number of Libyan military personnel in 1970 and tipped off Qaddafi about the first few plots organized against him.

During Qaddafi's early years in power he gave U.S. officials many reasons to be pleased. Qaddafi criticized

condemned the Iraqi-Soviet friendship treaty of 1972. He opposed Cuba's presence at the conference of non-aligned nations, charging that Cuba was no more neutral than Uzbekistan. And he aided pro-Western Oman in its war against the Dhofar guerrillas. According to one survey, "All official statements about U.S.-Libyan relations delivered before congressional committees and subcommittees from 1969 to 1972 emphasized Libya's antagonism toward the Soviets." "I guess we were kind of euphoric about him at first," commented former Secretary of State William Rogers.

**Source:** Excerpt, "The U.S. and Libya, Part 1: Before Qaddafi," *Z Magazine*, May 1990. <[www.zmag.org/zmag/articles/Shalomlyb1.html](http://www.zmag.org/zmag/articles/Shalomlyb1.html)>

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