

A Dialogue Even of the Deaf

NYT
E-13
1-2-77

TRIPOLI, Libya — Not long after Jimmy Carter won the election, Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi, President of the Libyan Arab Republic, cabled him offering "to foster relations of cooperation" with the new Administration.

Colonel Qaddafi, who is also chairman of Libya's Revolutionary Command Council, stressed Carter's "call for the observance of spiritual values." He hoped this would lead to an attitude "based on equal footing and mutual respect" helping "the cause of peace, security and justice."

Warmer relationships would certainly constitute a change; right now they are limited and cold. The last United States ambassador left here in 1972 after Wheelus Air Base had been closed and American oil companies were nationalized by Qaddafi's revolutionary regime. Since then our embassy staff has been restricted to 15 persons and is headed by a chargé d'affaires.

There has been clear hostility to the United States and sparse diplomatic access to the Government by its representatives. Although some 2,000 Americans virtually operate Libya's booming oil production, they are cut off from the local population which is quite xenophobic by tradition and deliberately isolated from foreigners.

However, recently Tripoli has taken an initiative to improve relations. It proposed opening a dialogue, ending numerical restriction of embassy staffs, and exchanging ambassadors. It even named a new envoy to America but he was not accepted by Washington which, on its part, made no move to reciprocate.

Moreover, although Libya wished to buy United States arms and an initial purchase of eight Lockheed C-130 transports was paid for, Washington

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By C. L. Sulzberger

blocked their export. The "dialogue" offer was cold-shouldered. We do hundreds of millions of dollars worth of commercial business here, buying one-fourth of Libya's oil and selling much agricultural machinery and civilian aircraft; but diplomatic business is stalled.

I discussed all this at length with Colonel Qaddafi in a Bedouin tent outside this city. Our conversation was interpreted by Dr. Tahar Sherif bin-Amir, Minister of State to the Presidency, but Qaddafi, who speaks considerable English, occasionally interrupted in that language and answered most questions without awaiting translation into Arabic.

The nub of what he said was this: "I believe in dialogue as a means of understanding. We are ready for a dialogue; the higher its level, the more effective the result. But this can be gradually approached. The ripe opportunity will be after President Carter takes over. I am relatively optimistic."

Nevertheless, burning issues still separate the two countries. Colonel Qaddafi resents Washington's assertion that he encourages terrorism abroad, from the Middle East to Northern Ireland and the Philippines. "We are the only country in the world with a stiff law against terrorism," he insists.

He acknowledges continued moral and political support for the I.R.A. in Ulster because that is "an integral part of Ireland and the Irish nation is different from the English nation. Why, even Scotland now wants its in-

dependence. But we give only moral and political—not material—backing as we do to other just causes."

The most troublesome point is Israel. Colonel Qaddafi strongly opposes American policy there. He says: "I don't consider the idea of a Geneva peace conference worthwhile. We must return to the original point in settling this problem. We must go back to the Palestinian population of Arabs and Oriental Jews in 1947-48 and accept their coexistence in any form they desire. Anything else, I consider aggression."

That obviously implies return of all Arab Palestinian refugees and their families, exodus of most of Israel's Jews, and destruction of their state. Such an extreme solution — which would certainly provoke war if attempted—is strongly opposed by the United States and many other countries, although Qaddafi denies this. Even several Arab lands now accept recognition of an independent and much larger Israel as part of a settlement.

There seems little room for compromise between the American and Libyan views on this—no more under Carter than under Ford. But this should not prevent the dialogue Qaddafi seeks.

On the contrary, were we to end our ambassadorial boycott and send a new envoy, ultimately beginning frank talks, it might be possible to disagree on Israel while finding common ground on certain other issues.

It is more important to have ambassadors in countries where we have problems than in lands where everything is roses. Dispatching an envoy to a capital with which we have poor diplomatic relations is not a sign of approval—but of interest and concern.