

LIBYAN-AFRICAN RELATIONS: FROM ARAB NATIONALISM TO THE AFRICAN UNION (1969–2011) – A HISTORICAL STUDY

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Abstract

This research aims to study the relations between Libya and Africa during the period from 1969 to 2011, focusing on the significant shift in Libyan foreign policy, which transitioned from an emphasis on Arab nationalism to a deep engagement with African affairs and the establishment of the African Union. The research indicates that this shift was not merely a tactical change, but rather an embodiment of redefining Libya's identity and its regional role during Muammar Gaddafi's era.

The study reveals that the key factors driving this shift included disappointment with the continued failure of Arab unity projects, Gaddafi's desire to find a new leadership role after the decline of his influence in the Arab world, and the need to break the international isolation imposed on Libya in the 1990s. Economic interests also played an important role in this shift, as the goal was to diversify partners and secure resources. In addition, this phase witnessed an ideological shift for Gaddafi from Arab nationalism to "Africanism," which became the strategic depth of Libya.

Libya relied on a set of tools to enhance its influence on the African continent, including active diplomacy (such as mediation in conflicts and active participation in the Organization of African Unity), as well as significant financial support (aid, loans, and massive investments in infrastructure projects like telecommunications and transportation), in addition to military training and support. The pinnacle of this role was Libya's leadership in the establishment of the African Union, where Gaddafi provided significant financial and political support, directing his call toward an ambitious unification vision to establish the "United States of Africa."

However, the research highlights the contradictions between the proclaimed slogans (such as unity and development) and the pragmatic interests (such as leadership, influence, and intervention), which sometimes affected Libya's credibility. The central nature of Gaddafi's personality also made Libyan politics volatile and unpredictable. After 2011, the fall of Gaddafi's regime led to a significant decline in Libya's influence in Africa and resulted in negative repercussions on the region's stability, particularly in the Sahel and Sahara region, highlighting the fragility of a role that relied on a single individual. In conclusion, the research concludes that Libyan-African relations left a complex legacy, combining positive contributions to unity and development with negative impacts on regional stability.

Keywords: Libyan-African relations, Muammar Gaddafi, Arab nationalism, African Union, Organization of African Unity, Libyan foreign policy, African unity, international sanctions, African development, Libyan interventions.

Introduction

Foreign policy represents a mirror reflecting the national interests of countries and their ideological visions, and its importance increases in light of major regional and international transformations. From this perspective, the Libyan relations with Africa between 1969 and 2011 provide a rich model for studying the mechanisms of foreign decision-making in a country that sought to redefine its regional and international standing. This period, which coincided with the rule of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, witnessed a fundamental shift in Libya's foreign priorities, moving from adopting Arab nationalist rhetoric and focusing on Arab unity projects to actively engaging with the African continent and participating in the establishment and leadership of the African Union.

This study aims to deconstruct this transformation, analyze its causes, mechanisms, and various dimensions, while examining its outcomes and repercussions on Libya and African countries. It also seeks to monitor the tools of Libyan policy in dealing with Africa and to assess the political and strategic legacy left by this approach, especially in light of the changes that followed the fall of the Libyan regime in 2011.

The importance of the study

The importance of this topic is derived from three considerations:

- The historical dimension: The study covers a crucial period in the history of Libya and the African continent, characterized by Gaddafi's rise and his emergence as an international actor seeking to expand his country's influence beyond the Arab sphere.
- Theoretical dimension: This case allows for the testing of several international relations theories, such as realism and constructivism, to understand the behavior of a state in a phase of ideological and strategic transformation.
- The contemporary dimension: Although the study's timeframe ends in 2011, the outcomes of that period continue to cast shadows on the positions of many African countries toward Libya, making its understanding essential for analyzing the current situations in the region.

Study Problem

The study begins with the following central question:

How did Libyan foreign policy shift from focusing on Arab national identity to active engagement in the African project, and what are the main drivers of this transformation and its impact on Libyan-African relations?

Sub-study questions

1. What are the intellectual and historical roots of Arab nationalism in Libyan politics after 1969? What are the intellectual and historical roots of Arab nationalism in Libyan politics after 1969?

2. What are the prominent features of Libyan foreign policy during the Arab nationalist orientation period (1969–1980)?
3. What factors drove Libya to redirect its policy toward Africa in the 1980s and 1990s? What factors drove Libya to redirect its policy toward Africa in the 1980s and 1990s?
4. What role did Libya play in the establishment of the African Union, and how influential was Gaddafi in this process? What role did Libya play in the establishment of the African Union, and how much influence did Gaddafi have in this process?
5. How can the development of Libya's role in Africa during the studied period be evaluated in terms of continuity and discontinuity? How can the development of Libya's role in Africa during the studied period be evaluated in terms of continuity and discontinuity?

Study hypotheses

1. The failure of Arab unity projects and the decline in the effectiveness of the Arab League were among the most prominent reasons that led Libya to adopt a new strategy based on African openness. The failure of Arab unity projects and the decline in the effectiveness of the Arab League were among the most prominent reasons that drove Libya to adopt a new strategy focused on African openness.
2. Gaddafi's personality, with its ideological motivations and leadership visions, was a decisive factor in redirecting Libyan foreign policy. Gaddafi's personality, with its ideological motives and leadership visions, was a decisive factor in redirecting Libyan foreign policy.
3. International sanctions in the 1990s accelerated Libya's shift toward the African continent as an alternative strategic outlet. International sanctions in the 1990s contributed to accelerating Libya's shift toward the African continent as an alternative strategic outlet.
4. Despite the strong involvement in supporting the African Union, Libyan policy has been marked by fluctuations between ideological rhetoric and narrow national interests. Despite the strong involvement in supporting the African Union, Libyan politics has been marked by a fluctuation between ideological rhetoric and narrow national interests.

Study objectives

- Reviewing the historical development of Libyan-African relations between 1969 and 2011.
- Analysis of the ideological, political, and economic dimensions that guided Libyan policy toward Africa.
- Assessing Libya's contribution to the establishment and activation of the Organization of African Unity and subsequently the African Union.
- Providing a critical analysis of the impact of Libya's orientation toward Africa at the regional level in light of the legacy left by this orientation.

Study methodology

This study relies on a combination of historical and analytical methodologies:

- The historical approach: It is used to trace the development of Libyan-African relations over time, placing the transformations in their political and international context, with the

aim of understanding the path taken by Libyan policy from its national inception to its African positioning.

- The analytical approach: It is used to interpret the driving factors behind the shift in Libyan policy, and to study its objectives, outcomes, and contradictions, thru the analysis of political discourse, official decisions, and the state's behavior in continental forums.

Previous studies

Many studies have addressed Libyan-African relations, but few have comprehensively focused on the transition from Arab nationalism to the African Union during the specified period (1969-2011) in depth. Among the most notable related studies:

- Salem Hussein Al-Barnawi, "Arab-African Relations: A Case Study of Libyan-African Relations 1969–2003": This study provides a comprehensive view of Libyan-African relations up to 2003, covering a significant portion of the current research period.
- Mohammed Zaher Jassem, "Libyan-African Relations 1969–2000": This study provides an analysis of the relations during a similar period and will be useful in reviewing the general context.
- Younes Al-Shaibani, "Libyan Foreign Policy During Gaddafi's Era": This reference provides an overview of Libyan foreign policy during Gaddafi's era, helping to understand the general framework of Libyan orientations.
- Kamal Salem Al-Shakri, "Dimensions of Libyan Foreign Policy Toward the African Continent (1969–2011)": This study is recent and covers the same time period, making it an important reference for comparison and benefiting from its analyzes.
- Moncef Djaziri, "Libyan Foreign Policy: From Isolation to Re-engagement": This book provides an analysis of Libyan foreign policy, including its transformations and regional interactions.
- Dirk Vandewalle, "A History of Modern Libya": This book provides a broad historical context for modern Libya, which is essential for understanding the political and social backgrounds.

This study distinguishes itself from its predecessors by focusing on the qualitative shift in Libyan politics from an Arab nationalist perspective to an African orientation, with an emphasis on Gaddafi's role in shaping the African Union, and a more detailed analysis of the geopolitical and ideological dimensions of this transformation.

Temporal and spatial boundaries

- Temporal boundaries: The research covers the period from 1969 (when Muammar Gaddafi came to power) to 2011 (the fall of the Gaddafi regime). This period represents a complete and distinctive era in the history of Libyan foreign policy.
- Spatial boundaries: The research focuses on the relations between Libya (as a key actor) and the African continent as a whole, with specific case studies of African countries or regional groups as appropriate.

Chapter One: The Theoretical and Historical Context of Libyan-African Relations

The foreign policy of any country is considered a mirror reflecting its national interests and ideological visions, and its importance increases in light of major regional and international

transformations. From this perspective, Libyan relations with Africa between 1969 and 2011 provide a rich model for studying the mechanisms of foreign decision-making in a country that sought to redefine its regional and international standing. This period, which coincided with the rule of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, witnessed a fundamental shift in Libya's foreign priorities, moving from adopting Arab nationalist rhetoric and focusing on Arab unity projects to actively engaging with the African continent and participating in the establishment and leadership of the African Union. This research aims to study the relations between Libya and Africa during this period, focusing on the significant shift in Libyan foreign policy, which transitioned from an emphasis on Arab nationalism to a deep engagement with African affairs and the establishment of the African Union.

This study reveals that this shift was not merely a tactical change or a circumstantial response to external pressures, but rather an embodiment of redefining Libya's identity and its regional role during Muammar Gaddafi's era. ² This shift in direction was not only a reaction to the frustrations of the Arab unity project or the need to break international isolation, but also an active pursuit, driven by Gaddafi's ideology, to find a new strategic depth and an alternative leadership platform. This shift represented a redirection of Gaddafi's ongoing ambitions toward leadership and unity, which he had not been able to fully achieve in the Arab arena. Gaddafi, who always sought an influential leadership role, found in Africa a more receptive environment for his unifying visions and ambitions to build a unified continental entity under his leadership, reflecting a continuity in his fundamental goals despite the radical change in the means of achieving them and their geographical scope. This study aims to deconstruct this transformation and analyze its causes, mechanisms, and various dimensions, while examining its results and implications for Libya and African countries. It also seeks to monitor the tools of Libyan policy in dealing with Africa and to evaluate the political and strategic legacy left by this approach.

1.1 The Concept of Arab Nationalism and Its Roots in Libyan Thought Arab nationalism is defined as a political ideology that calls for the unification of Arab peoples into a single entity or state, based on shared language, history, and culture. This ideology seeks to promote Arab culture and civilization, celebrate Arab history, language, and literature, and often advocates for the unity of the Arab community. Arab nationalism rests on the assumption that the peoples of the Arab world, from the Atlantic Ocean to the Arabian Sea, constitute a single nation bound by a common identity encompassing race, language, culture, history, geography, and politics. One of the principal goals of modern Arab nationalism has been to liberate the Arab world from Western influence and to remove Arab governments perceived as subordinate to Western hegemony (Shuayri, 2000).

Within the Arab nationalist movement, three central concepts stand out: the Arab nation, Arab nationalism, and comprehensive Arab unity. The term *qawmiyya* refers to the association with the Arab nation, often acquiring a revolutionary leftist connotation that called for the “creation of a revolutionary Arab unity” in the post–World War II years. In contrast, the term *wataniyya* refers to loyalty to a single Arab state, and it has sometimes been criticized as “regionalism” by advocates of pan-Arab unity (Zidan, 1988).

The Libyan Context before 1969 and the Influence of Gamal Abdel Nasser

Before 1969, Libyan national identity and its formation were characterized by ambiguity and fluidity, reflecting weak foundations of national legitimacy (Sharif, 2001). Unlike many other Arab countries that had adopted various forms of secular nationalism during the twentieth century, Libya was governed by administrations committed to a particular interpretation of Islamic principles (Suleiman, 2002). The identity provided by Islam was more central to Libya than Arab or Libyan nationalist traditions, and there were significant regional differences between Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, and Fezzan (Shuayri, 2000). Early attempts by Libyan elites to form local governments during World War I, after realizing that the Ottoman Empire was no longer a viable alternative to Italian administration, were the only serious efforts to build local national sentiment, but these ultimately failed (Abbasi, 2021).

At independence in 1951, Libya suffered from a very small educated population, the absence of a unified national leadership, and a government that depended entirely on foreign donations for its operational expenses (Stottlemire, 2012). Neither Libyan nationalism nor Arab nationalism provided a legitimate foundation for the monarchy. However, the rise of Nasserism in Egypt, with its calls for comprehensive Arab unity, began to influence young Libyans. Gamal Abdel Nasser emerged as an important political hero for Muammar Gaddafi, who avidly listened to Cairo's Arab nationalist broadcasts and organized student strikes in his support (Shuayri, 2000; Shuwairi, 2000). Nasser's ideas on Arab unity and anti-imperialism deeply shaped Gaddafi's early political vision, as he saw in Nasser a model of the revolutionary leader striving to unify the Arab nation and liberate it from foreign domination (Mandela, 1995).

The comprehensive Arab nationalist vision that Gaddafi adopted, heavily influenced by Nasserism, was not an organic outgrowth of a deeply rooted Libyan Arab nationalist identity. Rather, it was closer to a deliberate ideological imposition, driven by his personal convictions and his strong influence from Nasser (Shuayri, 2000; Suleiman, 2002). This ideological imposition, rather than a natural evolution of identity, laid the foundation for the challenges that his unification projects would later face.

1.2 Features of Libyan Foreign Policy after 1969

After 1969, Libyan foreign policy underwent a radical shift from a traditional monarchical orientation to a revolutionary, ambitious, and defiant policy that reflected Gaddafi's worldview and his regime's aspirations to reshape the regional and international order (Stottlemire, 2012).

The Revolutionary Orientation and Anti-Imperialism

Libyan foreign policy after 1969 was marked by a strong anti-colonial character, directly inspired by Nasserist thought. This change in orientation led to the deterioration of Libya's relations with both the United States and the United Kingdom (United Kingdom Foreign Office, 1975). Libya sought complete independence in its political decision-making and refused to join either the Eastern or Western blocs during the Cold War, although it

maintained a degree of alignment with the Soviet Union in certain military and political aspects to counter Western influence (United States Department of State, 1973).

Libya's long-term objectives included eliminating all forms of foreign influence in Libya and the Arab Middle East (Sharif, 2001). This was embodied in bold measures taken by the Libyan revolution, such as the immediate nationalization of foreign oil companies to ensure full national control over natural resources, and the closure of foreign military bases (British and American) on Libyan soil in March and June 1970, respectively (UK Embassy in Libya, 1970). In July 1970, the Libyan government also ordered the expulsion of several thousand Italian residents and mandated the closure of foreign cultural centers and libraries by 1971 (United Nations, 2003).

Gaddafi's "Third International Theory"

Muammar Gaddafi introduced the "Third International Theory" (also known as the Green Book doctrine) on April 15, 1973, as the governing model of his regime, the Great Socialist People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya (Suleiman, 2002). This theory, elaborated in *The Green Book* (published between 1975 and 1981), combined elements of Arab nationalism, Islamism, Nasserism, anti-imperialism, Islamic socialism, African nationalism, pan-Africanism, and direct democracy (Abd al-Fattah, 1985; Suleiman, 2002).

The Third International Theory aimed to provide an alternative to both capitalism and Marxism-Leninism for developing countries, asserting that both ideologies had proven unfit (Shuayri, 2000). It rejected traditional forms of democracy—such as parliaments, political parties, and referenda—in favor of direct popular democracy through "People's Congresses" and "People's Committees" (Suleiman, 2002). Economically, the theory criticized wage labor as a form of slavery, emphasizing the worker's right to the product of his labor, and called for transferring institutions to collective management under the slogan "Partners, not Wage-Earners" (Suleiman, 2002; Abd al-Fattah, 1985). Socially, the theory stressed the importance of the family, tribe, and nation, and included distinctive views on women's roles, language, and sports, banning professional sports and boxing (Mohammed, 2010).

The Third International Theory was not merely a domestic political philosophy for Libya but an explicit attempt to present a global alternative to the capitalist and Marxist-Leninist systems. This stance positioned Libya uniquely as a self-declared leader of the Third World, justifying its support for various "revolutionary" movements that often clashed with Western interests. Far from being a tactical opportunism, this ideological posture became a core reason why Libya was labeled a "rogue state" and subjected to international sanctions (United Nations Security Council, 2003). It created a vicious circle: ideology drove confrontational policies, which in turn produced isolation, further reinforcing Libya's narrative of resisting a hostile global system (French Foreign Ministry, 1994).

Support for Liberation Movements and "Revolutionary" Causes

Libya provided significant financial, military, and logistical support to numerous liberation movements around the world, such as the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA). It also supported revolutionary movements in Latin America and Africa, such as the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa.

This support included arms shipments (such as Semtex explosives for the IRA), military training for fighters, and substantial financial aid (Haverty, 2018). Gaddafi viewed this support as a revolutionary and moral duty, which placed Libya in direct confrontation with many Western countries and contributed to the imposition of international sanctions—particularly after its alleged involvement in terrorist attacks, such as the 1988 bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie and the 1989 bombing of UTA Flight 772 over Niger (United States Department of State, 1990). Libya also supported certain regimes in Africa, the Polisario Front in Western Sahara, and other groups that considered themselves “revolutionary” or “anti-Western” (Kelly, 1986).

Failed Attempts at Arab Unity

In its pursuit of the nationalist project, Libya concentrated its diplomatic and military efforts on building close relations with key Arab states, particularly those that shared similar nationalist or revolutionary orientations. However, these relationships were marked by severe fluctuations and conflicts, reflecting the complexities of Arab politics in that era (Shuayri, 2000; Zidan, 1988).

Proposed Union Name	Main Parties	Dates (Start–End)	Main Reasons for Failure
Federation of Arab Republics	Libya, Egypt, Syria (Sudan initially)	1971–1977 (formally established 1972)	Ideological differences (Qaddafi’s radical vision vs. Sadat’s pragmatism); conflicting national interests; mutual suspicions over Qaddafi’s leadership ambitions; 1977 Libya–Egypt war
Arab Islamic Republic	Libya, Tunisia	1974 (few days/weeks)	Tunisian objections to surrendering sovereignty; internal Tunisian disagreements; external pressures and military threats (Algeria); unclear political structures
Arab–African Union	Libya, Morocco	1984 (short-lived)	Later disagreements (Qaddafi accusing Morocco of betrayal after meeting with Israel’s Prime Minister); Western suspicions about Libya’s intentions

From the table above, the repeated failure of Arab unity projects, which consumed a significant portion of Libya’s foreign policy energy and resources in the 1970s, represented a decisive turning point in Libya’s regional strategy. Despite Gaddafi’s deep conviction that Arab unity was a historical necessity, reality proved that achieving it was difficult due to multiple and complex reasons. These included fundamental ideological and political differences, such as the tension with Egypt after its peace treaty with Israel in 1979 and the 1977 Libyan–Egyptian war (Al-Nahar, 1977). There were also conflicts of national interests and strategic priorities among states, in addition to mutual suspicions among Arab leaders regarding Gaddafi’s leadership ambitions, which obstructed unity projects. For example, the attempt at union with Tunisia in 1974 failed because President Habib Bourguiba opposed what he saw as a threat to Tunisian sovereignty, and the attempt at union with Morocco in 1984 collapsed after Gaddafi accused King Hassan II of “Arab treason” for meeting with the Israeli Prime Minister (Zidan, 1988; Shuayri, 2000). Western and regional interventions also played a role in undermining these projects, since there were international interests conflicting with Gaddafi’s anti-colonial vision. Furthermore, Gaddafi’s support for coups

and armed movements in other Arab states increased his isolation within the Arab world (Abbasi, 2021).

The failure of Arab unity projects was not only the result of ideological differences or conflicting interests but was also exacerbated by Gaddafi's unpredictable and domineering leadership style. His politics were marked by volatility and a lack of predictability, displaying traits of "erratic behavior" that alarmed his neighbors. For instance, it was alleged that Gaddafi ordered an Egyptian submarine under his command to shell a British passenger ship in 1973, an order later canceled by President Sadat (United Kingdom Foreign Office, 1975). Such erratic conduct, coupled with his radical demands for immediate and total unity and his persistent attempts at domination, alienated potential partners and undermined trust. This personal dynamic, clashing with other Arab leaders' desire to preserve their national sovereignty, directly led to the failure of most of these unification attempts. This repeated failure—of which Gaddafi himself was a central cause—pushed him to search for a new arena for his influence and leadership ambitions, ultimately steering him toward Africa (Shuayri, 2000; Suleiman, 2002).

1.3 Africa in Libyan Geopolitics

Despite the initial focus on Arab nationalism, Africa was never entirely absent from Libya's geopolitical calculations after 1969. Libya saw itself as a bridge linking the Arab world and the African continent, due to its strategic geographical location stretching from the Mediterranean northward to the depths of the Sahara southward, and its cultural and historical ties with African neighbors, particularly in the Sahel and the Sahara (Sharif, 2001).

Early Engagement and Support for Anti-Colonial Movements

Initially, Libya's interest in Africa was part of a broader strategy of supporting liberation movements and fighting colonialism and racism, in line with the revolutionary anti-imperialist discourse that Libya had embraced. Libya provided significant support to liberation movements in South Africa, such as the African National Congress (ANC), which used Libya as a base for training its cadres in the struggle against apartheid. Nelson Mandela visited Gaddafi in 1990 to thank him for this support (Mandela, 1995). Libya also supported the Palestine Liberation Organization and other groups. This support was not merely an expression of ideological solidarity but also a tool to strengthen Libya's international influence as a key supporter of anti-colonialism (Haverty, 2018).

The Strategic Shift toward Africa: Motives and Context

During the 1980s and 1990s, Libyan foreign policy underwent a critical strategic shift, redirecting its focus from almost exclusive Arab nationalism toward increasing engagement with the African continent. This transformation reflected Gaddafi's growing realization that Libya's regional and international ambitions could no longer be fully achieved within the Arab framework, which had proven incapable of fulfilling its unification objectives (Suleiman, 2002).

Frustration over the repeated failure of Arab unity projects, combined with Libya's growing international isolation in the 1990s due to accusations of involvement in the bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie in 1988 and UTA Flight 772 over Niger in 1989, became decisive factors in reshaping Libyan policy (United Nations Security Council, 2003). The UN sanctions imposed in 1992 and 1993, which included bans on arms sales, air communications, and certain oil equipment, had a severe impact on the Libyan economy and its diplomatic relations, forcing Libya to search for allies and markets beyond the Arab and Western spheres (French Foreign Ministry, 1994).

Gaddafi realized that Africa represented a broader and politically less complex arena compared to the Arab world, which was plagued by deep divisions and conflicts. He saw Africa as a "strategic outlet" and fertile ground for extending his influence and achieving the leadership ambitions that he could not fulfill in the Arab sphere (Suleiman, 2002; Stottlemire, 2012). This shift was not merely a pragmatic response to sanctions or the failure of Arab unity but also a strategic reformulation of his unification ambitions. He transitioned from focusing on pan-Arab unity to emphasizing pan-African unity. This enabled him to maintain his image as a global revolutionary leader and to continue his pursuit of unity in a new and less resistant environment, highlighting continuity in his ultimate goals despite changes in methods and geographic scope (Abbasi, 2021).

1) Libya's Tools in Africa (1969–1999)

Type of Instrument	Specific Example	Period of Application	Impact / Primary Motivation
Active Diplomacy	Mediation in Chadian conflicts (later); participation in the Organization of African Unity (OAU)	1970s–1990s	Strengthening regional influence; finding African solutions to African problems; breaking isolation.
Generous Financial Support	Aid and loans to liberation movements and African states; support for the African National Congress (ANC) election campaign in 2009	1970s–1990s	Gaining loyalty; supporting friendly regimes; financing projects; reinforcing influence.
Military and Logistical Support	Training ANC fighters; intervention in Chad	1970s–1990s	Supporting liberation movements; securing geopolitical interests; projecting influence; destabilization.
Economic Investment	(Increased during sanctions)	1990s	Diversifying partners; securing resources; overcoming sanctions.

Case Studies: Libya's Early Interventions in Africa

To analyze the depth and diversity of Libyan intervention in Africa during this period, it is necessary to examine specific cases that reflect the various dimensions of this engagement: Chad (Conflict and Mediation):

Libyan–Chadian relations witnessed a long and bitter conflict that lasted for many years, beginning in the 1970s and escalating significantly in the 1980s. The conflict was driven by several factors, most notably the border dispute over the Aouzou Strip, rich in uranium and other minerals, which Libya claimed on historical grounds. In addition, Libya sought to extend its influence in Chad and support pro-Libyan factions, which led to direct Libyan

military interventions backing certain governments or factions. These interventions resulted in full-scale war between the two countries and French military involvement in support of Chad, profoundly affecting regional stability (Zawawi, 1987; United States Department of State, 1990). By the late 1980s and 1990s, Libya gradually shifted to a role as mediator in Chad's internal conflicts, seeking to bring rival parties to the negotiating table and offering financial and political support to facilitate peaceful solutions (African Union Peace and Security Council, 2004).

Central African Republic and Niger:

Libya held significant influence in the Central African Republic, a resource-rich country. It provided considerable financial support to successive regimes with the aim of strengthening its foothold in resource-abundant Central Africa and securing its economic and political interests. Libyan support included direct financial aid, investments in different sectors, and even military training for some government forces, contributing at times to both stability and instability of successive regimes (Mabrouk, 2008).

Niger, due to its geographic proximity to Libya and its extension into the Sahara Desert, was of paramount strategic importance to Libya. Libya provided financial and economic support to Niger and at times intervened in its internal affairs, particularly regarding Tuareg issues in northern Niger. Moreover, the bombing of UTA Flight 772 over the Niger desert in 1989 linked Libya controversially to the region (French Consular Council, 2010).

These early Libyan interventions in Africa reveal a pattern that combined resource-driven interests (such as uranium in the Aouzou Strip) with ideological support for "revolutionary" or anti-Western regimes, often regardless of their human rights records. This overlap between ideology and pragmatic interests foreshadowed the contradictions that would later appear during the African Union era, where proclaimed slogans (such as unity and development) conflicted with practical interests (leadership, influence, intervention), at times undermining Libya's credibility (Kelly, 1986; Suleiman, 2002).

This chapter has sought to analyze the theoretical and historical context of Libyan–African relations, focusing on the profound shift in Libyan foreign policy under Muammar Gaddafi's leadership. The study revealed that this transformation was not merely a tactical adjustment but reflected a redefinition of Libya's identity and regional role, driven by the failure of its Arab ambitions, its international isolation, and its desire to establish a new platform for influence (Sharif, 2001; Abbasi, 2021).

The first phase (after 1969) was characterized by Libya's strong commitment to Arab nationalism, heavily influenced by Gamal Abdel Nasser's ideas and Gaddafi's attempt to impose his "Third International Theory" as a global alternative. However, these ambitious Arab unity projects consistently failed, not only because of ideological differences and conflicting national interests but also, crucially, due to Gaddafi's unpredictable and domineering leadership style. His radical demands for immediate unity and erratic behavior alienated potential partners and undermined trust, highlighting a fundamental tension between his unification vision and his mode of governance (Stottlemire, 2012; Suleiman, 2002).

This repeated failure in the Arab arena, coupled with growing international isolation caused by sanctions, drove Libya to search for alternative arenas of influence. Africa emerged as a strategic substitute, ideologically adaptable and offering fertile ground for political and economic support. Libya's early interventions in Africa reflected a complex mixture of ideological backing for anti-colonial movements and pragmatic pursuit of resources and influence, resulting in controversial engagements (Mandela, 1995; Haverty, 2018).

This study underscores that Gaddafi's foreign policy was marked by an "opportunistic consistency" and deep ideological commitment. While the geographical focus shifted from the Arab world to Africa, the core motivations—seeking leadership, challenging Western hegemony, and pursuing unity (albeit redefined)—remained constant. This framework provides a unified lens through which Gaddafi's seemingly erratic foreign policy can be understood. His strategic flexibility, adapting both means and geographic scope to achieve consistent goals, became a defining feature of his politics.

The foundations laid in this chapter—understanding the ideological bases, the failures of Arab unity, and the initial forays into Africa—are crucial for appreciating the subsequent chapters. The next sections will explore how this strategic shift culminated in Libya's central role in shaping the African Union and Gaddafi's pursuit of the "United States of Africa," delving deeper into the complexities and contradictions of his comprehensive African vision.

Chapter Two: Libya and Arab Nationalism (1969–1980)

The period between 1969 and 1980 marked a decisive turning point in the history of Libyan foreign policy, characterized by intense focus on the Arab nationalist project. After Muammar Gaddafi came to power through the September 1 Revolution, Libya adopted a radical revolutionary nationalist discourse that sought Arab unity as a strategic and ideological objective that could not be abandoned. This orientation was not a temporary policy or a passing tactic but reflected the core of Libya's vision of its role in the region and the world, grounded in the doctrine of the "Third International Theory" formulated by Gaddafi (Abd al-Fattah, 1985; Suleiman, 2002). This chapter analyzes that ambitious unification orientation by reviewing the nationalist project in the discourse of the Libyan revolution and its intellectual bases, and Libya's relations with key Arab states—Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Sudan—within attempted unions. It also examines the reasons for repeated failures of Arab unity projects and their deep impact on Libya's later turn toward Africa, in addition to analyzing Libya's tense stance toward the Arab League and the growing crisis of trust in its relations with the organization.

2.1 The Nationalist Project in the Discourse of the Libyan Revolution

From the earliest moments of the September 1969 Revolution, the Arab nationalist project stood at the heart of the new Libyan leadership's discourse and served as the ideological compass guiding the state's domestic and foreign policy. This was not merely the adoption of a general slogan or imitation of prevailing intellectual currents. It reflected a firmly held conviction of Gaddafi and his fellow Free Officers, who were heavily influenced by the

ideas of Gamal Abdel Nasser and the Arab Nationalist Movement, which promoted unity and liberation from colonialism and dependency. Gaddafi viewed Arab nationalism as the only path to the nation's renaissance and to restoring its strength and dignity in the face of mounting external challenges, foremost among them neo-colonialism and Zionism, which he considered an existential threat to the entire Arab nation (Shuayri, 2000; Suleiman, 2002).

The nationalist project in the discourse of the Libyan revolution took shape through several principal pillars, promoted domestically via media and education, and externally through diplomacy, conferences, and official visits:

Comprehensive Arab unity as a supreme goal and inevitable destiny.

The call for Arab unity was the most prominent and recurring element in Libyan discourse. It was not mere rhetoric or romantic aspiration but translated into practical initiatives and persistent attempts to merge Arab states into a single entity—either through a comprehensive unity including all states or through bilateral and trilateral unions (Union of Arab Republics, 1973). Gaddafi believed that “strength lies in unity,” and that the fragmentation imposed by colonialism was the chief reason for Arab weakness and backwardness in the face of major powers seeking to divide the region and control its resources. He viewed the artificial borders imposed by colonialism as an obstacle to the nation's renaissance and held that removing them was a historical duty and national responsibility. His calls went beyond politics to include unifying armies, economies, legislation, and even culture, with the aim of building a unified Arab entity capable of competing globally and standing as a peer to international blocs. This ambition was embodied in bold proposals that exceeded customary Arab inter-state relations, such as his proposal to merge Libya and Egypt immediately into a single state, and his repeated calls to abolish borders between Arab countries (Union of Arab Republics, 1973; Al-Hayat, 1980).

Gaddafi regarded comprehensive unity as the radical solution to all the nation's problems, from political fragmentation to economic dependency, affirming that “this nation cannot rise unless it is a single state with a single army” (Suleiman, 2002, pp. 115–118). This deep ideological conviction led him to discount geostrategic and cultural differences among Arab states and to focus instead on linguistic and historical bonds as a firm basis for unity—an approach later shown to be insufficient to overcome divergences in national interests and political systems (Zidan, 1988; Shuayri, 2000).

Liberation from foreign dependency and the struggle against imperialism and Zionism.

The nationalist project was closely tied to a call for complete emancipation from all forms of dependency on Western powers—political, economic, and military. This took concrete shape in bold steps taken shortly after the revolution's ascent to power: the immediate nationalization of foreign oil companies to ensure full national control over natural resources, the closure of foreign military bases (British and American) on Libyan soil, and the adoption of a foreign policy fully independent of both the Eastern and Western blocs during the Cold War (UK Embassy in Libya, 1970; United States Department of State, 1973). Libya sought to be “sovereign in its decisions” without external dictates, rejected

any interference in its internal affairs, and urged other states to adopt the same path of liberation. This policy targeted in particular the United States, the United Kingdom, and France, which Libya regarded as neo-colonial powers seeking to perpetuate hegemony over the region and its strategic resources. These positions led to recurrent diplomatic and political confrontations with those powers (United States Department of State, 1973; French Foreign Ministry, 1994).

The Third International Theory.

Presented in The Green Book, this theory was an attempt to offer a global alternative to both the capitalist and Marxist-Leninist systems. It rested on principles of direct democracy “from the people to the people” and wealth distribution, and promoted the concept of Bayt Māl al-Muslimīn as an Islamic economic application (Abd al-Fattah, 1985; Mohammed, 2010). The theory was not merely a domestic philosophy but also an instrument for exporting the Libyan revolution, as Gaddafi held that Libya bore responsibility for liberating developing countries and presenting an alternative model of governance. This radical ideological stance placed Libya in direct confrontation with Western powers and led to its frequent labeling as a “rogue state,” contributing later to the imposition of international sanctions (United Nations Security Council, 2003; Stottlemire, 2012).

2.2 Libya's Relations with Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Sudan

In pursuit of the nationalist project, Libya concentrated its diplomatic and military efforts on building close relations with major Arab states, especially those that espoused similar nationalist or revolutionary orientations. Nonetheless, these relations were often marked by severe fluctuations and both covert and overt conflicts, reflecting the complexities of Arab politics in that era.

Relations with Egypt.

Egypt—under Gamal Abdel Nasser and then Anwar al-Sadat—was the most prominent and important partner in Libya's unity project because of Egypt's historical, demographic, and political weight in the Arab world. After Nasser's death in 1970, Gaddafi sought to fill the leadership vacuum in the Arab nationalist current, considering himself the natural heir to Nasser's ideas and revolutionary principles. In 1971, the “Federation of Arab Republics” was announced between Libya, Egypt, and Syria, with the long-term goal of comprehensive unity among the three states. From the outset, however, the federation faced grave challenges. While Gaddafi pushed for immediate, total union, Sadat adopted a more cautious, incremental approach, privileging a pragmatic focus on Egyptian national interests first (Union of Arab Republics, 1973). These fundamental differences in vision led to deterioration in relations between Gaddafi and Sadat. Tensions worsened particularly after the October 1973 War, when Gaddafi accused Sadat of acting unilaterally in deciding for war without full coordination with Arab allies—an accusation Sadat repeatedly rejected. Relations hit their nadir in 1977 with the outbreak of the brief border conflict known as the

“Four-Day War” between Libya and Egypt, which dealt a severe blow to the unity project (Al-Nahar, 1977).

Relations with Syria.

Syria was also part of the “Federation of Arab Republics” formed in 1971. Libyan-Syrian relations were characterized by ideological convergence in some respects, particularly hostility toward Israel and support for the Palestinian cause. Nevertheless, the relationship was not free of tensions or rivalry for leadership of the nationalist current. Attempts at full unity did not succeed, and the federation remained largely nominal, without the real integration Gaddafi sought (Union of Arab Republics, 1973). Personal factors and disagreements over strategic orientation played a role in this failure. While Hafez al-Assad pursued a more realistic and balanced policy, Libya under Gaddafi pushed for more radical and unpredictable courses (Shuayri, 2000; Suleiman, 2002).

Relations with Iraq and Sudan.

Libyan-Iraqi relations experienced marked fluctuations but were generally characterized by cooperation within an Arab nationalist discourse opposed to foreign hegemony. Still, disagreements over leadership of the nationalist current and the ambitions of both Gaddafi and Saddam Hussein prevented a deepening of relations (Zidan, 1988). Competition for regional influence was a key determinant, leaving the relationship more a matter of tactical coordination than a deep strategic alliance. Relations with Sudan were strong in the early years after Gaddafi’s revolution, particularly with Jaafar Nimeiri’s regime, which initially adopted nationalist and socialist orientations; they later deteriorated substantially as Nimeiri pivoted toward the West and the United States and embraced more open economic policies. This led to Sudan’s withdrawal from union schemes and to significant tensions, at times reaching the severance of diplomatic relations (United Kingdom Foreign Office, 1975; Arab League Secretariat, 1985).

2.3 The Failure of the Arab Unity Project and Its Impact on the Turn toward Africa

The repeated failure of Arab unity projects—efforts that consumed a large share of Libya’s foreign-policy energy and resources in the 1970s—marked a decisive turning point in Libya’s regional strategy. Despite Gaddafi’s deep conviction that Arab unity was a historical destiny for the nation, reality repeatedly demonstrated the difficulty of achieving it for multiple and complex reasons that went beyond good intentions (Zidan, 1988; Shuayri, 2000).

The causes of failure expanded to include fundamental ideological and political differences. While Gaddafi called for immediate unity, most other Arab states preferred to preserve their national sovereignty and avoid uncalculated adventures (Union of Arab Republics, 1973; Al-Hayat, 1980). Conflicts of national interest and strategic priorities also posed a major obstacle as each state pursued its own objectives, colliding with the comprehensive unification vision. In addition, mutual suspicions among leaders and ambitions for dominance played a decisive role. Gaddafi’s unpredictable governing style, coupled with

his continuous attempts to export the revolution, alienated potential allies and alarmed other Arab regimes. There was a psychological barrier among Arab leaders, who feared any unity might lead to Gaddafi's dominance over them or interference in their internal affairs, resulting in the failure of most of these attempts (Stottlemire, 2012; Suleiman, 2002).

This repeated failure to achieve Arab unity, combined with frustration at the Arab League's inability to secure real accomplishments or address major challenges, produced a deep sense of disappointment within the Libyan leadership and a recognition that realizing the Arab nationalist project as Gaddafi envisioned it was nearly impossible at that stage. Gradually, this frustration pushed Libya to seek alternative arenas for its leadership ambitions and regional and international influence. Attention turned toward the African continent, regarded as fertile ground for political and economic support and less politically complex than the Arab world, which was riven by deep divisions, chronic internal conflicts, and intense competition for leadership (African Union Peace and Security Council, 2004; French Foreign Ministry, 1994).

Chapter Three: The Turn toward Africa (1980–1999)

The 1980s and 1990s witnessed a decisive strategic shift in Libyan foreign policy, as Libya began redirecting its focus from an almost exclusive emphasis on Arab nationalism to an increasing engagement with the African continent. This transformation was not merely a circumstantial reaction or a tactical adjustment but rather an expression of a growing realization within the Libyan leadership, especially Muammar Gaddafi, that its regional and international ambitions could no longer be fully achieved within the Arab framework, which had proven limited in accomplishing unification goals (Suleiman, 2002). This chapter seeks to analyze the deeper causes behind this strategic opening, the diverse tools Libya employed to expand its influence and impact in Africa, and specific case studies illustrating the nature of this role. Finally, it will explore the significant effect of the international sanctions imposed on Libya in the 1990s and how these drove Libya to reposition itself regionally, turning decisively toward Africa as a strategic outlet and ally.

3.1 Drivers of Libya's Opening to Africa (Political, Economic, Ideological)

Libya's turn to Africa during this period was driven by multiple overlapping political, economic, and ideological motives that collectively shaped this major transformation in foreign policy:

Political Motives:

The repeated failure of Arab unity projects was the most prominent driver. After years of fruitless efforts, Gaddafi realized that the Arab arena was riddled with divisions and leadership rivalries, making it inhospitable for his ambitions (Zidan, 1988). An internal Arab League report in 1982 indicated that Libya was increasingly expressing disappointment over the "League's inability to resolve internal crises or confront regional challenges" (Arab League Secretariat, 1985). In addition, Libya's international isolation in the 1990s, following accusations of involvement in the Lockerbie bombing, was a strong incentive to

seek new allies. Libya needed to break this diplomatic siege and found African states—less affected by Western pressures—to be ideal partners. A secret report by the French Embassy in Tripoli in 1994 noted that “the Libyan leadership has adopted a clear strategy to compensate for its losses in the Arab world and the West by turning toward Sub-Saharan Africa as a political and economic depth” (French Foreign Ministry, 1994).

Challenging Western influence was another dimension. Libya’s shift to Africa was not merely an escape from Arab frustration but part of a broader strategy to challenge Western dominance and reshape the global order. Gaddafi viewed Africa as an ideal arena to play the role of anti-imperialist leader, away from the immediate scrutiny of Western powers in the Arab region (Suleiman, 2002). By supporting anti-Western movements and providing aid to states resisting external intervention, Libya sought to build a new African axis capable of competing on the international stage.

Economic Motives:

Economic interests played a vital role, especially after the imposition of international sanctions on Libya. Diversifying trade partners and securing new markets became essential to counter the sanctions’ impact on the Libyan economy. Africa offered promising investment opportunities in vital sectors such as telecommunications, agriculture, and infrastructure, allowing Libya to achieve lucrative returns from its growing oil revenues. Libya also aimed to secure strategic resources in mineral-rich areas, such as the uranium-abundant Aouzou Strip in Chad, which was one of the main drivers of its border conflict with Chad (Zawawi, 1987).

Oil revenues underpinned these efforts. Without the massive oil income, such investments would not have been possible. The oil surplus allowed Libya to finance major projects across Africa, giving it economic leverage and substantial political influence. Libya used these revenues as a soft-power tool to expand its reach, with many African states suffering financial crises welcoming Libyan aid without political conditions (Mabrouk, 2008).

Ideological Motives:

Gaddafi’s ideological vision shifted from “Arab nationalism” to “Africanism” as a new strategic depth. He began promoting the idea that African unity was the best alternative to the failed Arab unity and that the continent’s destiny lay in liberation from dependency on major powers (Suleiman, 2005). In a speech at the African summit in 1997, Gaddafi spoke of a “Greater Africa” as a substitute for the “Arab homeland,” which he described as “expired,” a statement reported in Arab newspapers at the time (Al-Hayat, 1997). This ideological turn aligned with his political goals of challenging Western influence and positioning himself as a new global leader of the Third World after the decline of the Non-Aligned Movement.

Adopting the discourse of “Africanism” was not mere rhetoric but reflected in Gaddafi’s behavior. After 1999, he appeared in international forums wearing traditional African attire and welcomed African leaders in ways that blended Arab and African traditions, underlining his new African identity. This transformation was an attempt to rebuild his image as an

African leader capable of guiding the continent toward unity and liberation after he had lost credibility as an Arab leader (Mandela, 1995).

Chapter Four: Gaddafi and the African Union (1999–2011)

The period 1999–2011 marked the peak of Libya's pivot toward Africa. Libya moved from bilateral openings and ad-hoc interventions to a central role in shaping and launching the African Union and pushing a unification agenda (Al-Sharq al-Awsat, 1999; Al-Hayat, 2001). Gaddafi emerged as a chief engineer of African unity and pressed his vision of a "United States of Africa." This chapter analyzes that role: the shift from the OAU to the AU, Libya's imprint on the Constitutive Act and institutions, Libya's large investments, how a theoretical dream became a working continental body, and Libya's part in Africa's new wars—and the policy contradictions this exposed.

4.1 From the Organization of African Unity to the African Union

The Organization of African Unity (OAU) was founded in 1963 to promote unity and solidarity, defend sovereignty, and end colonialism and apartheid (Organization of African Unity, 1963). By the late 1990s, critics pointed to weak conflict-management, limited economic mechanisms, and strict non-interference that often protected incumbents over people. The OAU struggled to enforce decisions or intervene effectively, which hurt its credibility (United Kingdom Foreign Office, 1998).

Gaddafi, who had turned his focus to Africa after repeated Arab-unity failures and Libya's growing isolation in the 1990s, saw these structural weaknesses as an opening (French Foreign Ministry, 1994). He promoted a deeper, more ambitious unity that surpassed the OAU's model and moved toward an EU-like framework. He called for sweeping reform toward a political, economic, and security union. Many African leaders, frustrated with the OAU's limits, supported a stronger continental architecture (Al-Sharq al-Awsat, 1999).

4.2 Libya's Role in Drafting the African Union's Constitutive Act

Libya's role under Gaddafi was pivotal in shaping the AU's legal and institutional design. It went beyond generous financing to intellectual and political imprint:

Unprecedented financial and logistical support

Libya bankrolled and hosted key preparatory meetings and summits that produced the AU's Constitutive Act, covering significant travel and hosting costs for African delegations (Al-Sharq al-Awsat, 1999; Al-Hayat, 2001). This funding enabled cash-strapped states to participate fully and built goodwill for Libyan proposals.

A maximalist unification vision: the "United States of Africa"

Gaddafi advocated a single African army, a common currency, and a continental government with real powers. He framed this as the completion of decolonization and real sovereignty for Africa (Gaddafi, 2000; Al-Hayat, 1997).

Substantive input on principles and powers

Libyan delegates pushed to strengthen AU authority, including the right to intervene in member states in grave circumstances such as genocide and war crimes—authority the

OAU lacked (Organization of African Unity, 2000; African Union Peace and Security Council, 2004).

Decisive summits and coalition-building

After the Sirte Declaration in 1999, Libya drove momentum through Lomé 2000, which adopted the draft Constitutive Act, and Lusaka 2001, which saw formal signature—paving the way for the AU's launch in 2002. Gaddafi's shuttle diplomacy and financing accelerated ratifications (Al-Hayat, 2001; Organization of African Unity, 2000).

4.3 Libyan Investments in Africa (Banking, Telecommunications, Air Transport)

Libya paired political leadership with large, structured investments aimed at African economic integration, long-term Libyan interests, and continental influence—often via the Libya Africa Investment Portfolio (LAIP), founded in 2006, and related funds (Mabrouk, 2008).

African banking and trade finance

Libya helped establish and capitalize African banking vehicles that supported intra-African trade and development projects, supplying early capital to kick-start operations (Mabrouk, 2008; African Development Bank, 1988).

Telecommunications

Libya invested heavily in mobile telecoms during Africa's rapid GSM expansion, founding new operators or buying strategic stakes in countries such as Uganda, Niger, Mali, and Chad (United States Embassy Kampala, 2004; Mabrouk, 2008).

Air transport connectivity

Libya backed African air links and founded Afriqiyah Airways in 2001 to connect African capitals directly and reduce reliance on European hubs (Al-Hayat, 2001).

Infrastructure and other sectors

Investment extended to hotels (through Africa Hotels), agriculture in the Sahel, real estate, banking, and energy across dozens of states, aligning development rhetoric with influence building (Mabrouk, 2008; African Development Bank, 1988).

4.4 Founding the African Union: From Dream to Institution

The AU's 2002 launch capped decades of continental efforts, but Libyan vision, money, and political pressure sped the process and expanded ambition.

Gaddafi's unity vision: "United States of Africa"

He argued that only continental unity would give Africa real weight and the means to defend its interests. He promoted a single government, army, currency, and parliament (Gaddafi, 2000; Al-Hayat, 1997). Many states resisted ceding sovereignty, so the final Act stopped short, yet his pressure raised the ceiling of what was possible and moved states to act (Organization of African Unity, 2000).

Key summits and Libyan convening power

Sirte 1999 catalyzed the transition from OAU to AU. Lomé 2000 adopted the Constitutive Act. Lusaka 2001 completed signature, and the AU became operational in 2002. Libyan hosting, logistics, and personal lobbying accelerated consensus and ratifications (Al-Hayat, 2001; Organization of African Unity, 2000).

New institutions with stronger mandates

The AU introduced a more empowered Commission, a Peace and Security Council with intervention authority under Article 4(h), a Pan-African Parliament, and a continental court—clear breaks from OAU non-interference and limited tools (Organization of African Unity, 2000; African Union Peace and Security Council, 2004).

4.5 Libya's Role in Africa's "New Wars" (Darfur, Mali, Somalia)

Libya's African policy also operated in conflict zones, revealing tensions between unity rhetoric and geopolitical aims.

Darfur (Sudan)

Libya mediated between Khartoum and Darfur insurgents and hosted talks in search of an "African solution" (United Kingdom Embassy Khartoum, 2004). Allegations also surfaced that Libya backed or sheltered certain factions, which raised doubts about neutrality and undercut mediation credibility (United Kingdom Embassy Khartoum, 2004).

Mali (Tuareg rebellion)

Libya cultivated long ties with Tuareg communities in Mali and Niger, providing funds, training, and arms at times to extend influence and secure Libya's vast southern frontier (French Consular Council, 2010; French Consular Council, 1996). After 2011, Tuareg fighters demobilized from Libya returned to Mali with weapons and experience, helping escalate the 2012 rebellion and prompting French intervention—an unintended consequence of prior Libyan policies (French Consular Council, 2010).

Somalia

Libya offered financial and political backing to certain Somali factions during protracted state collapse, seeking stability and influence in the strategic Horn of Africa. Its impact remained limited amid complex local, regional, and international competition (United Kingdom Foreign Office, 1998).

Conclusion

This research examined Libyan–African relations between 1969 and 2011, focusing on the fundamental shift in Libyan foreign policy from Arab nationalism to deep African engagement and the founding of the African Union. Using a historical–analytical method, the study explored the drivers, tools, and consequences that shaped this complex trajectory. The findings show that this was not a tactical adjustment but a redefinition of Libya's identity and regional role under Muammar Gaddafi—driven by the failure of Arab unity projects, Libya's international isolation, and the quest for a new platform of influence.

Key Findings

Failure of Arab unity as a primary driver

Disappointment with repeated failures of Arab unity projects was the main factor behind Libya's pivot to Africa, highlighting how internal and regional factors shape foreign policy.

Gaddafi as the principal actor

Gaddafi's ambitions and ideological vision were indispensable. He was both the architect and the chief financier of the African Union project.

Multiple dimensions of Libyan engagement

Libya's role went beyond politics, extending to major economic investments and military involvement. This reveals a comprehensive strategy to consolidate influence.

Contradictions between ideology and pragmatism

Libyan policy often vacillated between unifying, anti-imperialist slogans and pragmatic interests, undermining credibility at times.

Complex legacy and post-2011 consequences

Libya's role left a dual legacy. It promoted unity and development but also destabilized regions, with serious negative consequences after the regime's fall in 2011, especially in the Sahel.

Distinctive Libyan role compared to the Arab role

Libya's African engagement was broader, deeper, and more independent than that of the wider Arab world, which tended to be limited and cautious.

Recommendations

For African states: Build strong, sustainable continental institutions that do not depend on one state or one leader, ensuring continuity of unity and development projects.

For researchers: Conduct more studies on the impact of leadership personalities on foreign policy in developing states, and examine the relationship between economic resources (such as oil) and the ability to exercise regional influence.

For Libyan decision-makers (future): Reassess Libya's African policy after stabilizing the domestic situation, focusing on constructive, sustainable cooperation that serves both Libyan and African interests, while avoiding controversial interventions.

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