

MaltaToday

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Libya's bridge to Europe

Have Malta's close diplomatic ties with the Great People's Libyan Arab Socialist Jamahiriya cooled since reaching their peak in the turbulent 1980s? RAPHAEL VASSALLO takes a look at the key moments that define the two countries' close collaboration over the past 40 years.

1964 – 1965 Libya, since 1952 an independent Constitutional monarchy under King Idris I, establishes diplomatic relations with Malta soon after Independence on 21 September, and is among the first countries to open an embassy here. Malta reciprocates by opening its own embassy in Tripoli the following year.

1969 On 1 September, King Idris is deposed in a bloodless military coup d'état led by 27-year-old army captain Muammar Gaddafi. The revolutionary army abolishes the monarchy and proclaims the Great People's Libyan Arab Socialist Jamahiriya, adhering to principles later set down by Gaddafi in The Green Book. A Revolutionary Command Council is formed to rule the country, with Gaddafi as lifelong chairman.

1971 61-year-old Malta Labour Party leader Dom Mintoff becomes Prime Minister of Malta, and in his first year in power engages in talks with Gaddafi in Tripoli, while also embarking on negotiations with Britain regarding use of Malta's military facilities.

Even before the 1971 election, Mintoff's overtures to Gaddafi's Socialist Republic are viewed with open suspicion by Labour's political opponents. The

United Kingdom and United States perceive the relationship as a realignment of Malta's foreign policy away from NATO influence.

1972-79 NATO closes its Malta headquarters.

Libya loans Mintoff's government Lm3 million interest-free, payable upon departure of the British navy, on condition that Malta's military facilities would never again be used to fly supply missions to Israel (as Gaddafi claimed they had been used during the 1956 Suez Canal crisis and the June 1967 War).

1973-76 The start of a conscious policy of cultural rapprochement between the two countries, affectionately termed 'blood brothers' by Mintoff. Work commences on the mosque in Corradino, administered by a Libyan foundation, the 'World Islamic Society'. Libyan Cultural Institutes open in Sliema and Valletta, while hundreds of Maltese workers find jobs in Libya.

1975 Malta enters an agreement to buy refined crude oil from Libya at preferential prices.

1979 Gaddafi pledges "total support" for Malta, as the British naval base closes at the expiry of the 1972 deadline. Speculation is rife in the British media as to a possible military alignment of Malta with Libya, but this never materialises.

The United States meanwhile designates Libya as a "state sponsor of terrorism", after its embassy in Tripoli is burnt down by an angry mob.

1980 The first signs of tension between Libya and Malta, as Saipem 2 – an Italian-owned oil rig commissioned by Texaco to drill on behalf of the Maltese government – is approached by Libyan gunboats and a submarine and forced to halt operations on the Medina bank, 68 nautical miles southeast of Malta. Both countries claim territorial jurisdiction over that area of the Continental Shelf, and in 1982 the matter is referred to the

International Court at the Hague.

1982-1984 In spite of the ongoing maritime border dispute, relations between the two countries reach new heights as Malta undertakes numerous controversial initiatives to foster cultural and economic ties.

Ordinary level matriculation Arabic is introduced as a compulsory entry requirement for university.

A Treaty of Friendship and Co-operation is signed between the two countries, including a security protocol by which Libyan forces agree to train and arm their Maltese counterparts.

Visa requirements are waived for Libyan nationals entering Malta.

Voice of the Mediterranean, an international radio station jointly financed by Libya and Malta, commences operations. The initiative would last until 2004, when it was finally liquidated after six years of inaction.

1985 Tension escalates between Libya and the West – most notably with Italy, Britain and the United States – resulting in an intensification of American naval operations in the Mediterranean.

The International Court delivers its ruling in the Case of the Continental Shelf Malta/Libya; but this is limited to delineating only a tiny section of the contested territory, and as such the issue remains largely unresolved to this day.

1986 In January Gaddafi proclaims a “line of death” across the Gulf of Sirte, warning that if American ships or planes crossed that line they would be destroyed. In March, aircraft from the Sixth Fleet's three aircraft carriers make regular forays into the Sirte gulf.

On April 5, a bomb detonates in a Berlin discotheque, killing one Turkish woman and two American servicemen, and wounding over 200 others.

Intercepted telex messages suggest the terrorist attack was sponsored by Libya.

Nine days later, a combined British and American airforce strike drops more than 60 tonnes of laser-guided bombs on five targets in Tripoli and Benghazi: including Gaddafi's maximum security Tripoli bunker. The raid lasts 11 minutes in all. Among the casualties is Gaddafi's 18-month-old adopted daughter, Hana.

Gaddafi himself escapes unscathed, in part thanks to early warning by the Maltese government which forwarded intelligence of the incoming planes to the Libyan authorities. To this day, former PM Karmenu Mifsud Bonnici is credited with saving the Libyan leader's life.

1987 Eddie Fenech Adami becomes Prime Minister as the Nationalist Party wins the May election. Arabic is downgraded to optional subject, and the Libyan cultural centres cease operations over the next 10 years. However, the joint Malta-Libya commission continues to meet regularly, and officially the relationship continues to expand with added Maltese investment in Libya, and vice versa.

1988 Pan Am flight 103 explodes in midair above the Scottish town of Lockerbie, killing 270 people. Subsequent investigations suggest that the bomb had been loaded onto the plane, wrapped in clothes bought from a Sliema boutique, by Libyan suspects at the Malta airport in Luqa.

Libya's refusal to hand over the two suspects results in United Nations sanctions which would last 13 years. During this time a ferry link with Malta would prove to be Libya's only official lifeline to the rest of the world.

The testimony of Maltese shop owner Tony Gauci proved instrumental in the conviction of Abdel Al Megrahi, a Libyan Arab Airways security advisor, in 2001. However, doubts have since been raised over the prosecution's case.

1995 Malta Libya relations experience a dramatic downturn when Fathi Shqaqi, leader of the Palestinian terrorist organisation Jihad Islamika, is shot dead outside the Diplomat Hotel in Sliema, allegedly by Mossad agents. The

killing sparks furious protests outside the Maltese embassy in Tripoli, and the ferry service between Malta and Libya – at the time the only link between Libya and the rest of the world – is suspended for several months.

1999 Gaddafi proposes a “United States of Africa” at the African Summit held in Libya. At the same time the Libyan government implements a “open door policy” resulting in tens of thousands of Sub-Saharan African migrants entering the country in search of employment.

2000-2009 Commencement of organised mass emigration of irregular migrants leaving Africa for Europe. An estimated 70-80% of those attempting the central Mediterranean route are suspected to leave from Libya, exacerbating diplomatic tensions with southern EU states, particularly Italy and Malta.

2003 Following Gaddafi’s pledge to pay compensation to the families of the Lockerbie victims, the United Nations finally lift sanctions against Libya. Germany becomes the first European nation to resume international flights to Tripoli.

Corinthia Palace Hotels opens the five-star Corinthia Bab Africa hotel in Tripoli’s Bab Al Bahr district.

Prime Minister Eddie Fenech Adami signs an agreement on the promotion, safeguarding and protection of investment between the two countries. First mention of a possible joint oil exploration between Malta and Libya, but no agreement reached.

2004 Libya agrees to renounce its covert weapons programme and destroy its arsenal of WMD, resulting in the immediate lifting of US sanctions. The EU will follow suit one month later, effectively ending a ban on European investment in Libya.

2005 In May Libya unilaterally declares a “Fisheries Protection Zone” covering Malta's traditional fishing grounds. Publicised as a fisheries

conservation zone for the protection of marine life, the designated area is nonetheless widely perceived as a unilateral attempt to deny access to foreign fishermen, and is contested by Malta as well as Italy. Protracted talks commence but no breakthrough is reached. The issue remains technically unresolved to this day.

2007 French President Nicolas Sarkozy enters into an agreement to provide Libya with nuclear technology to power a desalination plant: a move which angers local environmentalists. Malta's Green Party requests safeguards against potential contamination of the sea, after two separate incidents at France's Tricastine nuclear facility trigger safety concerns. However, the subject is not broached during subsequent meetings between Malta and Libya.

2008 Negotiations commence over a possible joint oil exploration agreement, with Foreign Minister Tonio Borg suggesting a breakthrough might be "imminent".

Dom Mintoff, 92, is awarded the Gaddafi Awards for Human Rights. The award is collected on his behalf by Karmenu Mifsud Bonnici at the Corinthia San Gorg in St Julian's.

In December, Malta signs a double taxation agreement with Libya, but no developments on joint oil exploration

2009 Convicted Lockerbie bomber Abdel Megrahi is set to appeal against the 1992 conviction, after fresh evidence casts further doubt upon Tony Gauci's testimony. The trial, due to begin shortly, is expected to reopen the case of Libya's alleged involvement in the Lockerbie bombing, with possibly far-reaching consequences for the Jamahiriya's international standing.



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