



## LIBYA AND BP: POLITICAL ENTANGLEMENTS OF OIL EXPLORATION

***BP is pursuing a deepwater drilling program off the coast of Libya, which is increasingly subject to concerns from other countries in the region on environmental grounds. The continuing Macondo disaster in the Gulf of Mexico has raised the spotlight on BP's activities in European waters. The U.S. Congress is also asking more questions about any potential connection surrounding the release of a Libyan agent convicted of involvement in the Lockerbie bombing on the eve of the BP deal being signed.***

Petroleum giant BP has evidently succeeded at temporarily capping the leaking under-sea well in the Gulf of Mexico. Following this weekend's minor hurricane, which compelled ships engaged in the cleanup effort to withdraw from the storm's path, the firm is proceeding with relief wells intended to seal the leak permanently. In the meantime BP is pushing ahead with plans to drill in the Mediterranean Sea, in the Gulf of Sidra. Its leadership concluded a deal with the Libyan government in 2007, agreeing to pay \$900 million for the right to drill in oil and gas fields off the Libyan coast. The Gulf of Sidra well will be in 1,700 meters of water, over 200 meters deeper than the Deepwater Horizon spill, which defied efforts at containment and cleanup for weeks, giving rise to an ecological disaster along the U.S. Gulf Coast.

The Libyan endeavor has produced two effects. First, it sounded the alarm among European environmentalists and officials. For instance, Antonio D'Alli, chairman of the Italian Senate's environment commission, declared himself "very worried" about the project. D'Alli observed that the sea "has no boundaries and when accidents happen, in national or international waters, effects are felt in the whole Mediterranean." This is much the same analysis as that offered by American sea captain Alfred Thayer Mahan a century ago, albeit in a different context. Mahan de-

scribed the world's oceans and seas as an indivisible expanse. Coastal states controlled the narrow band of sea just off their shores, but the rest was an international "commons" beyond the jurisdiction of any government. Mahan also likened the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea to the Mediterranean Sea, describing them as inland seas commanding tremendous commercial value. He would surely agree with D'Alli that the neglect or malfeasance on the part of one state (or its nationals) in the maritime commons could be incalculable for all coastal nations in expanses like the Mediterranean, the Gulf, and the Caribbean.

Second, the Libyan deal has embroiled BP in transatlantic politics reaching back to the 1980s -- exposing the firm to new slings and arrows lobbed by U.S. officials. The Gulf of Sidra was the theater for multiple military encounters between U.S. and Libyan forces during the Reagan administration, culminating in 1986 with U.S. air strikes on sites around the capital city of Tripoli. Libyan reprisals included the 1988 terrorist bombing of an airliner over Lockerbie, Scotland. After years of denials, the Libyan government admitted to complicity in the Lockerbie incident and paid reparations. In August 2009, however, the Scottish government released convicted perpetrator Abdelbaset Ali Al Megrahi on "health grounds." Why does this involve BP? Because the company admitted to lobbying the British government for a

prisoner transfer agreement with Tripoli for fear that a delay would harm its commercial interests in the Gulf of Sidra. BP officials vehemently denies involvement in the specific Scottish decision to release Megrahi.

Lockerbie clearly remains a sore subject with U.S. officials. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton vowed to investigate the allegations of improper BP influence, while U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee chairman John Kerry branded the release of Megrahi “a travesty” and insisted that “the details that have emerged in recent days in the press have raised new concerns.” For his part, British prime minister David Cameron denied any link between the release and the oil exploration deal -- despite the timing. (The prisoner release preceded the drilling agreement by only six weeks, lending credence to theories about a quid pro quo.) Former UK justice secretary and foreign secretary Jack Straw, however, told the *Telegraph* (London) that oil and trade were an “essential part” of government decision-making on a prisoner transfer.

The ability of the U.S. government to unearth details about negotiations between an oil firm and a foreign government -- and about decision-making within a friendly government like the Scottish or UK government -- is doubtful. In all likelihood the furor over the release of Megrahi will subside before long. Indeed, the matter may have never come up but for the Gulf of Mexico oil spill, which has kept BP in the crosshairs for U.S. lawmakers and American public opinion.

Environmental worries, by contrast, could have lasting effects. Governments around the world are considering the impact of an uncontrolled underwater well on the marine ecosystem. They could forbid or severely restrict deep-water oil drilling. If so, President Barack Obama’s effort to impose a moratorium on offshore drill-

ing pending an investigation of the Deepwater Horizon disaster and its aftermath could represent a portent for the future.

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