

When Hannibal met Heidi

By Gal Luft

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Last week was a good one for Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi. He not only succeeded in bringing home to a hero's welcome a terrorist who killed 270 innocent people over Lockerbie, Scotland, he also brought the world's least belligerent nation to its knees.

It is a tale of national capitulation to thuggery and strong arm diplomacy. On July 15, 2008, Swiss authorities arrested Gaddafi's son Hannibal and his wife at a Geneva hotel for beating their two domestic employees. Hannibal has a rich criminal record in several European countries, including reckless driving, illegal possession of a firearm and alcohol abuse. In 2005, he was sentenced in France for causing bodily harm to his pregnant girlfriend, whom he later married. Beating one's employees may be acceptable in Libya but for the law-abiding Swiss, Hannibal's actions were intolerable. Daddy Muammar was furious, demanding that Swiss authorities drop the charges and apologize. The Swiss eventually dropped the charges and allowed Hannibal to leave the country but refused to apologize. Thus began the "Hannibal's war," as diplomats call it, an economic and diplomatic jihad against Switzerland. First, Gaddafi cut his oil supply to Switzerland (Libya supplies some 20 percent of Switzerland's oil) and called upon all other OPEC nations to do the same. Then, Libya pulled billions of dollars in deposits from Swiss banks, severed air links with Switzerland and forced several Swiss companies operating in Libya to terminate their businesses. In addition, Gaddafi arrested two Swiss businessmen and kept them as hostages. Most recently, the Libyan prime minister refused to meet the new Swiss charge d'affaires in Tripoli.

"Honor must be saved," Gaddafi explained, while Hannibal punctuated at a reception in Tripoli for Arab diplomats: "If I had an atomic bomb I would wipe Switzerland off the map."

It worked. The Swiss couldn't take the pressure and hoisted the white flag. Last week, Swiss President Hans-Rudolf Merz, the same man who in April allowed Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to be the only head of state to speak at the Durban Review Conference on racism in Geneva, traveled to Tripoli where he asked the Libyans for forgiveness and issued a public apology for the "unjust arrest of Libyan diplomats by Geneva police." In describing the arrest as unjust, Merz has not only tarnished his country's honor but also gave a kick in the face to the Geneva police, whose only "wrongdoing" was law enforcement.

What part of the Swiss DNA causes this Alpine nation to be so easily coerced is something for anthropologists to explore but for the (hopefully) more resilient us, there are some important lessons to learn from the affair.

First, never underestimate the power of honor in Muslim culture. Time and again Arab leaders -- Gamal Abdel Nasser, Yasser Arafat, Saddam Hussein, Hassan Nassrallah to name a few -- have demonstrated their willingness to go to extreme measures to defend their people's honor. The defiant response of Afghanistan's ruling Taliban to President George W. Bush's "hand over terrorists or share in their fate" ultimatum after Sept. 11, 2001, condemned the regime to destruction, but honor was saved. This fixation with honor is worth remembering for the next faceoff between a Western nation and a Muslim regime. Second, 36 years after the Arab oil embargo, the oil weapon is still alive. Many Western analysts claim OPEC countries were the main casualties of the embargo and are therefore not likely to repeat their mistake. This claim ignores that astounding record of Arab regimes acting against their own self-interest and the repeated implicit as well as explicit threats of using the oil weapon by petroleum exporters from Saddam to Ahmadinejad.

Third, Merz's trip to Tripoli comes with the backdrop of London's mute response to the premature release of the Lockerbie terrorist Abdel Baset al-Megrahi. Both Swiss and British authorities have promised that it was compassion that brought their recent decisions. But we should know better. Gaddafi's 2004 decision to abandon his weapons-of-mass-destruction program has opened the gate to endless business opportunities in Libya's energy sector.

Last year Libya exported some \$46 billion worth of oil. Its light sweet oil is the most desired of all crudes as it is easily refined. With its own reserves in the North Sea dwindling and eager to reduce its dependence on Russia's oil and gas, Europe is becoming increasingly addicted to Libya's energy. And addicts are willing to do much more for their pushers than commit what the FBI's head called a "mockery of justice."

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