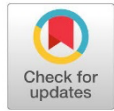


Research Article

Open Access



## Soviet Diplomacy in Libya: Strategic Motives and Challenges during the Cold War, 1955-56.

Attia Suleiman Attia Abu Malouma

**\*Corresponding author:**

[Zzzxom33@gmail.com](mailto:Zzzxom33@gmail.com)

Independent Academic  
Researcher, Libya

**Abstract:** This research examines a critical juncture in the history of Libyan-Soviet relations during the mid-1950s, a period when the Libyan Kingdom navigated the pressures of the Cold War. In 1955, countering British efforts to include Libya in the Baghdad Pact, Prime Minister Mustafa Ben Halim pursued an independent foreign policy by strengthening ties with the Soviet Union. His objectives were twofold: asserting sovereign decision-making and securing Soviet support for Libya's admission to the United Nations. The establishment of diplomatic relations with Moscow provoked the United States and Britain, leading to significant pressure to politically isolate Ben Halim. The study highlights how Libya leveraged regional dynamics, particularly coordination with Nasser's Egypt, to bolster its standing. It also details Western counter-measures, such as reinforced military presence, to curb Soviet expansion. Ultimately, the research reveals that Libya's foreign policy was not merely reactive, but an active, independent process designed to safeguard national interests within a polarized international environment.

**Keywords:** Libya, Cold War, Soviet Union, Baghdad Pact, Mustafa Ben Halim.

**الدبلوماسية السوفيتية في ليبيا: الدوافع الإستراتيجية والتحديات إبان الحرب الباردة، 1956-1955**

**المستخلص:** تستقصي هذه الدراسة منعطفاً حاسماً في العلاقات الليبية السوفيتية منتصف الخمسينيات، حيث واجهت المملكة ضغوط "حلف بغداد" الغربية. وبرزت عبقرية رئيس الوزراء "مصطفى بن حليم" في هندسة تقارب براغماتي مع موسكو، لانتزاع سيادة القرار وتأمين عضوية ليبيا الأممية. أثار هذا التوجه حفيظة المحور الأنجلو-أمريكي، الذي ردّ بمحاولات عزل بن حليم وتعزيز الوجود العسكري. وتبرز الدراسة كيف وظفت ليبيا التنسيق مع مصر الناصرية لتدعيم موقفها، مؤكدةً أن سياستها الخارجية لم تكن مجرد رد فعل، بل استراتيجية استقلالية واعية حمت المصالح الوطنية وسط استقطاب دولي حاد.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** ليبيا، الحرب الباردة، الاتحاد السوفيتي، حلف بغداد، مصطفى بن حليم.

الباحث الاول\*:  
عطية سليمان عطية باحث أكاديمي  
مستقل.

**Received:**  
2026-01-30

**Accepted:**  
2026-03-16

**Publish online:**  
2026-04-30



## Introduction

During the mid-twentieth century, international relations underwent radical shifts fueled by the escalating conflict between the Eastern and Western blocs during the Cold War. In this context, the Middle East emerged as a vital arena for strategic competition between the superpowers. While the United States and its allies sought to contain Soviet expansionism, the Soviet Union worked to bolster its influence by supporting national liberation movements and anti-Western regimes. Amidst this complex environment, Libya emerged as a newly independent state (1951), striving to define its political and diplomatic trajectory away from absolute dependency on either bloc.

This study analyzes the strategic shift in Libyan foreign policy in early 1955, when the Libyan government, headed by Mustafa Ben Halim, adopted a more independent policy by establishing diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. This move was made despite intense Western pressure, particularly from Britain and the United States, who viewed the rapprochement as a threat to their interests in the region. Furthermore, the study examines the motives behind this engagement—which coincided with Libya's bid to join the United Nations—and its repercussions on relations with Western allies, especially in light of the rising tide of Arab nationalism led by Gamal Abdel Nasser.

### **The central problem of this study is framed as follows:**

"How was Libyan foreign policy, during the premiership of Mustafa Ben Halim, able to maneuver between the pressures of Western powers and the aspirations of the Soviet Union, while maintaining the independence of national decision-making and leveraging international competition to achieve its objectives, foremost of which was joining the United Nations?"

### **From this central problem, several questions arise to guide the research:**

- What were the international and regional backgrounds that prompted Libya to establish diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union in 1955?
- What were the positions of the United States and Britain regarding this rapprochement, and what means did they employ to pressure the Libyan government?
- To what extent was Libya able to balance its relations with the West and its opening toward the Soviets without losing its political autonomy?

This study relies on sources and references that reveal the nature of the Anglo-American stance toward the Libyan-Soviet rapprochement and how the Libyan regime navigated these pressures, through both official discourse and political maneuvering. It also addresses the impact of this shift on regional and international politics, including Western reactions that ranged from diplomatic protests to attempts at isolation, and Libya's insistence on its right to pursue an independent foreign policy.

This paper aims to highlight the complexities of Libyan politics during this era—a stage that represented an attempt to balance external pressures with national interests. It reveals the dynamism of Libyan decision-making during a period characterized by political fragility and global geopolitical competition. To investigate this subject, the **historical method** is employed, involving the collection of scientific material from primary and secondary sources, verifying their authenticity, and then examining, comparing, and analyzing the data.

## I. Libya in Soviet Strategy: Foreign Trends and Western Reactions (1945–1952)

In the framework of international political analysis, Winston Churchill famously asserted that the relations between nations are governed by interests rather than permanent alliances. A study of history reveals that geopolitical systems shift in accordance with changes in the balance of power and interests. This was clearly evidenced following World War II, when the Western-Soviet alliance collapsed as soon as the common threat was eliminated, giving rise to a new conflict rooted in ideological and strategic divergences. Thus, historical facts confirm that foreign policy is built upon calculated interests rather than fixed principles.

In the aftermath of World War II, the "Libyan Question" represented one of the most complex and sensitive international files in the contemporary geopolitical context, due to its multi-leveled strategic dimensions. Libya, with its unique geostatistical position at the crossroads of continents, constitutes a geopolitical center of gravity. Control over its vital triangle (**Cyrenaica – Tripolitania – Fezzan**) grants regional and international influence extending from the Mediterranean basin into the African heartland. The significance of this influence is not limited to mere spatial hegemony; rather, it serves as a pivotal factor in shaping geopolitical balances and redefining the dynamics of international interactions. This rendered Libya a central arena for superpower competition within the context of their strategic conflicts and cooperation<sup>1</sup>.

On this basis, the Libyan Question became a focal point of international rivalry, particularly with the emergence of the Soviet Union as a formidable competitor to the Western bloc. This resulted in a strategic shift in the structure of the international system and a redistribution of spheres of influence in the post-World War II era:<sup>2</sup> These contradictions became apparent early on during the **Potsdam Conference** (July 1945), where disagreements among the Great Powers surfaced despite an outward agreement on the principles of maintaining global peace. It was during these proceedings that **Joseph Stalin** raised the issue of trusteeship over former Italian colonies, including Libya<sup>3</sup>.

However, the British response came firmly from Sir Winston Churchill, who expressed the British position with clear pragmatism, stating: "I can say with all force—and under exceptional circumstances—that it was British forces that occupied these colonies." This statement highlighted the principle of "effective occupation" as a basis for legitimacy in the post-war era—a principle that manifested as one of the primary axes of colonial competition among the Great Powers<sup>4</sup>.

Confronted with this Soviet retort, which utilized the same line of reasoning, Churchill asserted that Britain sought no new territorial gains despite its heavy losses in the war; he then pointedly asked Stalin about the specific demands of the Soviet Union.<sup>5</sup> Stalin responded that he wished to know whether the meeting would discuss the fate of the Italian colonies and to which state their trusteeship would be granted. He added that if the matter were deemed premature, it could be postponed until a mutual understanding was reached.<sup>6</sup> As soon as the Soviet leader finished speaking, his Foreign Minister, Molotov, submitted a memorandum containing a proposal to place Libya under the individual trusteeship of the Soviet Union. However, this proposal was met with a categorical rejection from both the British government and the United States of America.<sup>7</sup>

In that critical historical context, relations between the key parties were marked by escalating tensions, as positions diverged between British hesitation to confront Soviet demands and Soviet firmness aimed at reaching a radical solution for the issue of the former Italian colonies within the conference's framework. Recognizing the necessity of achieving a consensus, the American President took the initiative, acting as an effective mediator between these opposing powers. These efforts

culminated in a tripartite agreement, which tasked the Foreign Ministers of the Big Four (following France's inclusion) with drafting the detailed provisions of the peace treaty with Italy, including recommendations concerning its former colonies.

The Council of Foreign Ministers held in London in September 1945 revealed fundamental disagreements among the victorious Allies regarding the fate of the former Italian colonies, particularly Libya. These disagreements were the result of clashing strategic interests and divergent political visions that had intensified since the Potsdam Conference. While Britain, France, and the United States sought to consolidate their influence in Libyan territories, the Soviet Union demanded a share in their administration as part of post-war reparations<sup>8</sup>.

Amidst these developments, the debate over Libya's political status intensified, as the Western position fluctuated between adopting an idealistic discourse calling for the right to self-determination and geopolitical fears of expanding Soviet influence in the Mediterranean region<sup>9</sup>. Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov exploited this Western hesitation by submitting an explicit claim for the administration of Tripolitania<sup>10</sup>, justifying it by his country's ability to establish cooperative relations with colonized peoples<sup>11</sup> and denying any expansionist intentions that would threaten British interests in the region. However, his proposal was met with a categorical rejection from the Western powers, leading to a paralysis of negotiations and a complete deadlock<sup>12</sup>. Following the failure of these negotiations, the conference decided on February, 1946, to postpone the decision on the fate of the Italian colonies, including Libya, and referred the matter to the second session of the Council of Foreign Ministers scheduled to be held in Paris, where hopes remained for reaching a consensual solution satisfying the disputing parties<sup>13</sup>.

In a charged political atmosphere, the Council of Foreign Ministers in Paris witnessed a shift in the Soviet Union's position toward Libya<sup>14</sup>. The Soviets abandoned the idea of individual trusteeship over Tripolitania and proposed a collective trusteeship instead. In April 1946, Molotov submitted a proposal to place Libya under a joint trusteeship between an Allied power and Italy, accompanied by an advisory council composed of representatives from the Great Powers and local members. He further suggested sharing the trusteeship of Cyrenaica between the United States or Britain and Italy, while Tripolitania would fall under a joint Italian-Soviet trusteeship<sup>15</sup>.

The Soviet proposal emerged as an ambiguous challenge for British policymakers. This initiative, appearing in a highly sensitive political context, became a source of profound concern for the British government. It was widely interpreted within British political circles as a calculated attempt to destabilize Western cohesion and sow divisions within the alliance, especially following France's overt endorsement of the proposal. This potential scenario placed Britain in an exceedingly complex position, as it found itself compelled to balance the strategic ambiguity surrounding Soviet intentions with the urgent necessity of responding to this political maneuver<sup>16</sup>. In an effort to alleviate the mounting pressures, the British Foreign Secretary sought to overcome this impasse by introducing a counter-initiative emphasizing the necessity of unifying Libya and granting it immediate independence, hoping this would provide a solution to the risks of becoming entangled in a multifaceted diplomatic crisis<sup>17</sup>.

However, subsequent developments took a different turn. On May 10, 1946, the Soviet Foreign Minister announced that his country had abandoned the proposal for joint trusteeship over Libya, affirming instead his support for the imposition of an Italian trusteeship over the country<sup>18</sup>. This move revealed the pragmatism of Soviet policy and its ability to reshape strategic balances to serve

its interests, particularly as it aligned with the French position, thereby intensifying the challenges faced by British diplomacy<sup>19</sup>

A turning point in the settlement of the Libyan question came with the signing of the Peace Treaty with Italy on February 10, 1947. Under Article 23, Italy renounced its African colonies, though their administration remained temporary. Their fate was to be decided later by the Great Powers, and the treaty was enacted following its ratification in September 1947<sup>20</sup>.

In September 1948, discussions regarding the Libyan issue witnessed a clear divergence in visions and objectives among the concerned parties. This period was characterized by escalating latent tensions between the superpowers, as the proposed initiatives conflicted and contradicted one another in substance<sup>21</sup>. Given the inability to reach a consensus, the conference participants were left with a single option: referring the file to the United Nations General Assembly for a decisive resolution. This approach crystallized during the Council of Foreign Ministers held in Paris on September 15, 1948, at a time when political horizons were narrowing, replaced by a state of ambiguity and uncertainty regarding the future<sup>22</sup>

When the Libyan question was first discussed within the halls of the UN General Assembly in April 1949, the international platform transformed into an arena for strategic competition between the Great Powers, as the concerned parties vied to present political initiatives reflecting their geopolitical interests and ideological affiliations. In a historic turning point, the UN General Assembly issued a fateful resolution on November 21, 1949, stipulating that Libya be granted full sovereignty no later than January 1, 1952<sup>23</sup>.

Thus, it can be said that the series of international conferences following World War II represented a decisive stage in the geopolitical struggle between international powers. The Soviet Union emerged as a primary actor seeking to bolster its influence by gaining control over Tripolitania, thereby pursuing its ambitions to access "warm waters." Conversely, Western nations—led by Britain and the United States—realized the risks associated with the expansion of Soviet influence in Libya, particularly if a trusteeship over Tripoli were imposed. Consequently, these nations sought to maintain the balance of power in their favor, transforming Libya into a strategic military base within their regional interests. However, this raises questions regarding the extent to which Moscow truly abandoned its geopolitical ambitions in the region, as well as the nature of its strategy toward Libya in the post-independence era. These questions remain an open subject for debate, necessitating further analysis in light of subsequent political and military developments

## II. Diplomatic Relations Between Libya and the Soviet Union.

At the beginning of 1955, relations between Libya and Western nations underwent a strategic shift. Western leaders realized that relying solely on economic and military aid was no longer sufficient to counter the growing Soviet expansion in the region. In response, the United States and Britain adopted an active foreign policy manifested in concrete measures, most notably the establishment of the **Baghdad Pact** (1953–1955)\*. This alliance, which included Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, and the United Kingdom, aimed to create a regional coalition serving as a strategic buffer against Soviet expansion in the Middle East, thereby curbing its escalating influence in the area<sup>24</sup>

Given that the Kingdom of Libya was aligned with the Western axis during that era, it faced intense political pressure from Britain following the announcement of the Baghdad Pact<sup>25</sup>. The United Kingdom resorted to all available means to push Libya toward adopting its strategic project aimed at isolating the Soviet Union and curbing its influence in the Middle East. However, shifts in Liby-

an foreign policy did not align with British expectations. British attempts to bring Libya into the Baghdad Pact coincided with a comprehensive reassessment of Libya's policy toward the Soviet Union. Following Mustafa Ben Halim's appointment as Prime Minister, he moved swiftly to establish diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union, seeking Soviet support for Libya's bid to join the United Nations<sup>26</sup>. This move also aimed to assert the Kingdom's foreign policy independence<sup>27</sup>, which had been subject to sharp criticism from some Arab nations, including Egypt<sup>28</sup> which accused Libya of solely aligning with the West without considering other options. Consequently, the Libyan government resisted British pressure, demonstrating its independence and adherence to a foreign policy consistent with its national interests and aspirations<sup>29</sup>

Based on the above, it can be stated that the period following Libya's independence represents a highly complex stage in its political history. This era witnessed a dynamic interaction between the influence of the Great Powers—represented by the Western bloc led by Britain—and the national aspirations of the nascent state. Through the Baghdad Pact, Britain sought to consolidate its regional influence as part of a strategy to counter Soviet expansion in the Middle East. However, this vision clashed with unforeseen shifts in Libyan foreign policy, particularly after Mustafa Ben Halim assumed the premiership, as Libya began to adopt a more independent course that defied international expectations. The historical significance of this phase lies in Libya's ability to maneuver between external pressures and national interests, as evidenced by the Ben Halim government's pursuit of diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. This move was not merely a spontaneous reaction to British pressure, but rather an expression of political pragmatism aimed at enhancing Libya's international standing, especially in the context of its bid for United Nations membership.

Furthermore, it should be noted that the independence of Libyan policy was not limited to liberation from Western hegemony; it also included a refusal to automatically join regional alliances. Libyan-Egyptian relations were characterized by tension due to differing political visions, confirming that Libyan foreign policy was driven by independent national calculations rather than a mere response to regional or international pressures. Thus, this period can be interpreted as a qualitative shift in Libyan foreign policy, wherein the modern state succeeded in asserting itself as an independent actor capable of making strategic decisions that reflected its self-interest, despite the challenges of the international context at the time. This analysis highlights the interactive and dynamic nature of Libyan foreign policy, which transcended the logic of dependency toward the logic of national interest and sovereign decision-making.

In general, this change in the Kingdom of Libya's foreign policy coincided with a similar shift in Soviet policy toward the Middle East. Shortly after the death of Joseph Stalin and Nikita Khrushchev's rise to power, the Soviet vision for the region changed radically<sup>30</sup>. The ideological dimension no longer occupied the prominent position it held during the Stalin era; instead, the new policy adopted a more liberal and flexible approach, distanced from the constraints of Communist dogma<sup>31</sup>, with the aim of strengthening ties with various Middle Eastern regimes<sup>32</sup>. Within this framework, Soviet Foreign Ministry documents refer to secret contacts established between Cairo and Moscow during the implementation of the Czech arms deal with Egypt<sup>33</sup>. These contacts aimed to enlist Egypt's support for Soviet efforts to bolster relations with Arab countries. Among these efforts was the decision by the Office for Support of Field Operations at the Soviet Foreign Ministry to establish diplomatic relations with the Kingdom of Libya as part of a comprehensive strategy to enhance the Soviet presence in the region<sup>34</sup>.

In this context, it should be emphasized that Gamal Abdel Nasser was not merely a passive disciple imitating Communist practices; rather, he possessed a superior ability to mobilize and energize

masses that were newly awakened to political consciousness. However, this does not define him as a Communist in the strict ideological sense, as his political thought contained specific points of intersection with Communist principles.

Nasserist nationalism and Communism stood on common ground characterized by the adoption of socialist ideas, opposition to Western capitalist hegemony, and support for national liberation movements worldwide. This degree of ideological convergence led the Soviet leadership to view the Nasserist project—which stood like a skyscraper on the shifting sands of the Arab desert—as a strategic opportunity to undermine Western influence in the region and disrupt Western attempts to encircle the Soviet Union.

The features of this reasoning become clear in Mustafa Ben Halim's visit to Egypt, which served as the initial step in the diplomatic relations between Libya and the Soviet Union. During the visit, Ben Halim held several meetings with President Nasser in Cairo and Alexandria regarding the policies of Egypt and the Kingdom of Libya toward Western nations, particularly concerning the creation of a form of competition between the East and the West\* .

Furthermore, they coordinated a secret plan to exchange diplomatic representation between the Kingdom of Libya and the Soviet Union. After considerable effort, the Libyan government, led by Ben Halim in early 1955 and through its ambassador in Cairo at the time, Khalil al-Qallal, succeeded in conducting highly confidential talks with the Soviet Chargé d'Affaires in Cairo, which ultimately resulted in the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries<sup>35</sup> .

Thus, in September 1955, the Libyan government officially announced the establishment of diplomatic relations with the Soviet state<sup>36</sup> . This paved the way for Libya's admission in December of the same year as part of the group of 16 new countries that joined the United Nations <sup>37</sup>Amidst this development, the first Soviet ambassador arrived in Tripoli in January 1956<sup>38</sup> The question remains: what was the position of the Anglo-American alliance regarding the Kingdom of Libya's announcement of diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union?

### **III. The Anglo-American Position on Diplomatic Relations Between Libya and the Soviet Union**

Following the Libyan government's announcement of diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union, reactions in Washington and London converged swiftly and clearly, trending more toward anger and denunciation than calm diplomatic engagement <sup>39</sup>

In a telegram sent by Acting Secretary of State Herbert Hoover Jr. to Secretary of Defense Wilson, he expressed profound concern, asserting that the Soviet Union was expanding its influence across the Near East and North Africa. He noted that Libya's exchange of diplomatic missions with the USSR was a troubling step, particularly given the potential Egyptian influence on Libyan decision-making. He emphasized the necessity of establishing barriers to thwart Soviet expansionist tactics and warned of the dangers of Libya negotiating with the Russians at the expense of Western interests in the region<sup>40</sup> .

As for the United Kingdom, its position mirrored that of the United States. The diplomatic exchange provoked a negative reaction among the veteran colonial class entrenched in the Foreign Office in London and the British Embassy in Tripoli. They portrayed Libya's new policy as complete submission to Nasser's influence, an orbit within the Egyptian sphere, and an acceptance of the spread of Nasserist nationalism and anti-British Communism throughout Libya. They dissemi-

nated this narrative within sensitive circles of the Royal Diwan, the Libyan provinces, and in their communications with King Idris al-Senussi.

In a letter from Sir Alec Kirkbride, the British Ambassador to Libya, to the Foreign Office, he stated: "As for my assessment, Mustafa Ben Halim may indeed harbor emotional leanings toward Egypt due to his background and childhood. Furthermore, it has been rumored that he is accumulating significant funds in Egypt obtained in Cyrenaica through unknown means; I have also seen reports suggesting the Egyptians have deposited funds into his account in an Egyptian bank... His actions reflect a keenness to reconcile his leanings toward Egypt with the policy of King Idris, who cannot be considered to have Egyptian leanings"<sup>41</sup>. Kirkbride added: "I do not believe Ben Halim harbors any special affection for us or for any other Western power"<sup>42</sup>.

A notable aspect of the innovative horizons Ben Halim established in Libyan foreign policy was their tight link to Nasserist nationalism, which was steadily advancing across the Arab world. Libya, like other Arab nations, was naturally susceptible to Nasserist influence—whether through religion, language, or shared Arab national identity. Moreover, the Arab world, influenced by Nasserist policy, could only fulfill its responsibilities toward Libya if certain conditions were met, chief among them the withdrawal of the Kingdom of Libya from the Western orbit. Crucially, regardless of Ben Halim's political orientation or his balancing act between East and West, his central objective appeared to be aligning with the nationalist current that had permeated the fabric of Libyan society across all social and political strata.

Amidst this high state of tension and denunciation within Western circles, the American and British ambassadors moved to express absolute resentment. They conveyed their indignation toward the policies of Prime Minister Mustafa Ben Halim. The American Ambassador went as far as delivering an urgent message from the U.S. administration expressing deep regret over the establishment of relations with the Soviets, voicing astonishment that such a fateful decision was made without prior consultation with Washington. The British Ambassador's stance was equally firm, insisting on the importance of the Treaty of Friendship and Alliance and reminding Ben Halim of the consultation clauses intended to ensure regional stability and security<sup>43</sup>.

The U.S. Embassy, on the other hand, addressed Libya's initiative to exchange diplomatic representation with the Soviet Union with comprehensive detail, outlining its motives and repercussions on Libyan-American relations. The embassy clarified that this step was not intended to strengthen economic ties or seek friendship with the Communists, but was rather aimed at "refuting allegations that Libya was subject to Western influence"<sup>44</sup>. Additionally, the embassy provided an analysis of the impact of Soviet policy in West and North Africa, pointing to the possibility of Libya turning into a conduit for directing and supporting Communist insurgents in Tunisia and neighboring regions. The embassy did not fail to mention the French government's concern regarding Libya's support for anti-French "terrorists." It concluded by emphasizing its inability to fully assess Soviet intervention in Libya, declaring the necessity for the government to review the situation and take appropriate measures to counter Soviet movements, especially as they exploited the chaos in the region<sup>45</sup>.

In light of the above, U.S. Embassy reports reveal a complex web of diplomatic interactions characterized by deep Western anxiety—led by the United States and France—toward any potential Libyan pivot toward the Soviet Union. The embassy treated this file with profound insight, noting that Libya's pursuit of ties with Moscow was less about economic gain or ideological alignment and more of a political reaction to persistent accusations of Western hegemony. This was not a superfi-

cial analysis but a deep dive into the international scene; the embassy closely monitored Soviet expansion in North and West Africa, keeping a vigilant eye on the possibility of Libya being utilized as a transit point for supporting armed Communist movements in Tunisia and beyond. Simultaneously, France voiced its alarm, fearing Libya would become a launchpad for those it described as "rebels" challenging its regional influence. The embassy's conclusion reflected a deep-seated suspicion regarding the extent of Soviet influence in Libya, calling for preemptive steps and a meticulous review before the circle of chaos expanded in favor of Soviet maneuvers. This vision embodied the Western obsession with Libya transforming into a new arena for ideological conflict and geopolitical competition between East and West at a time when the world was on the brink of widespread turmoil.

Based on this perspective, the American command at Wheelus Air Base intensified security measures around the base for fear of potential Soviet espionage. Strict surveillance was imposed on Libyan employees working there<sup>46</sup>. In addition to these measures, the United States considered expanding its strategic influence in Libya by building military bases in Cyrenaica, adjacent to the Egyptian border. These, combined with British bases, were intended to form a barrier preventing the seepage of Soviet influence and Nasserist nationalism. Following this idea, the American Ambassador, John Tappin, met with King Idris in Tobruk on April 15, 1956, in the presence of Prime Minister Mustafa Ben Halim. During this meeting, Tappin informed the King of the U.S. intention to establish a new base in Cyrenaica. For his part, the King emphasized the importance of this base as a means to facilitate the distribution of labor and goods between Cyrenaica and Tripolitania. Tappin's report on the meeting noted the King's happiness with this announcement; the King confirmed he had previously proposed this to the Americans, believing that any potential threat to Libya would come from the East, especially given the Soviet presence in Egypt<sup>47</sup>.

The matter did not end there; at the beginning of 1956, the British Ambassador began consultations with Ambassador John Tappin and commanders of British and American forces. These consultations resulted in a joint agreement to submit a strongly worded protest to Prime Minister Ben Halim, sternly warning him against resorting to any cooperation or aid from the Soviet Union or granting it any facilities on Libyan soil. It was also agreed that Ambassador Tappin would meet King Idris to explain the dangerous implications of Ben Halim's conduct and how his silence allowed Soviet influence to deepen in Libya, in hopes of convincing the King of the necessity of dismissing Ben Halim from the premiership<sup>48</sup>.

In conclusion, this section reveals that the Anglo-American stance on Libyan-Soviet relations was not merely a fleeting rejection but a reaction reflecting deep strategic fears. Both the United States and Britain viewed Libya's rapprochement with the Soviet Union as a direct threat to their interests in the Middle East and North Africa, especially amidst the rise of Arab nationalism and Soviet expansion during the Cold War. Diplomatic documents show that Western concerns transcended politics into the security dimension, as the two powers feared Libya would turn into a platform for Soviet influence or a support base for movements hostile to Western interests. This prompted American and British diplomats and military officials to take swift actions to contain the situation, ranging from political pressure via formal protests to bolstering their military presence. The question that imposes itself here is: What was the position of the King and the Libyan government regarding all of this?

#### **IV. Libyan Policy Regarding the Anglo-American Stance on Libyan-Soviet Rapprochement**

As previously mentioned, by the mid-1950s, Libya found itself at a decisive crossroads between the pressures of the Western bloc, represented by Britain, and its aspirations toward independent

political decision-making. While Britain sought to pull Libya into the Baghdad Pact to counter Soviet influence, Libya—under the leadership of Mustafa Ben Halim—exhibited remarkable pragmatism by strengthening ties with the Soviet Union as a means to bolster its international standing and secure its admission to the United Nations.

This shift was not merely a reaction to pressure but an expression of a dynamic foreign policy seeking to reconcile national interests with the balance between Great Powers. Libya realized at this stage the importance of adopting a more independent approach that ensured it did not fully align with either bloc. This was reflected in diplomatic strategies aimed at building a network of international relations that allowed it to secure national interests amidst rapid global changes.

Regionally, this shift coincided with the rise of Nasserist nationalism led by Gamal Abdel Nasser, which cast a shadow over the Middle East and North Africa. This period also witnessed a change in Soviet strategy, as the Middle East became a primary target for attracting allies and expanding influence, providing Libya with an opportunity to diversify its political and economic options.

Internally, the ruling authorities faced a dual challenge: maintaining a balance between competing international powers and enhancing internal stability, which required achieving a consensus among various political and social forces. The question remains: how did the ruling authorities interact with this shift? Were they able to manage this delicate balance successfully without allowing external pressures to compromise national sovereignty?

On January 21, 1956, Prime Minister Ben Halim announced before the House of Representatives the establishment of diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. This announcement came within the framework of a new direction in Libyan foreign policy, as the country sought to diversify its international partnerships. The announcement was met with widespread welcome and overwhelming acceptance from the majority of members, who saw this step as an opportunity to open new horizons for cooperation with a global superpower. The hall shook with warm applause, reflecting a rare consensus on the importance of this historic step<sup>49</sup>.

It appears that the members viewed the future of Libyan-Soviet relations with optimism, seeing this partnership as a strategic opportunity to support the country's economic and social development. These expectations reflected a long-term vision to reduce dependence on Western powers. From the parliament's perspective, this relationship was a pivotal step toward multi-dimensional cooperation, including vital sectors such as agriculture, industry, and education, with a focus on utilizing Soviet expertise to modernize infrastructure and enhance military capabilities.

Thus, it can be said that this orientation was not merely a tactical choice but came in the context of Libya's aspirations to strengthen its political and economic independence. This step represented an ambitious and bold effort reflecting the will of the leadership and the people to build a more balanced future, free from external hegemony.

On February 11, 1956, Dar al-Salam Palace in Tobruk served as the stage for a pivotal strategic meeting between King Idris and the American Ambassador, John Tappin. Amidst an atmosphere reflecting global complexities, the Ambassador expressed deep concern over the "cunning methods" employed by the Soviet Union to achieve its interests, warning that these moves posed a direct threat to the shared interests of the United States and the Kingdom of Libya. In response, King Idris demonstrated a conscious awareness of the Soviet danger, affirming his keenness to keep the Kingdom beyond their influence. He wisely explained that the Kingdom had not initiated relations, but

rather it was the Soviets who pursued them, cleverly questioning whether this pursuit was driven by the hidden incitement of other parties. In an attempt to plant seeds of doubt, the Ambassador criticized certain members of the Libyan government, suggesting they might lack full awareness of the dangers of tempting Soviet offers. However, King Idris faced these remarks with firm clarity, stating confidently: "We know our friends through their past actions; we do not know the Russians yet. Therefore, it is wise to seek aid from those who have proven worthy of our trust, rather than risking cooperation with those whose intentions are shrouded in mystery" <sup>50</sup>.

In an attempt to soothe angry Western reactions, Ben Halim wrote to the United States on April 20, 1956, clearly defining the Libyan position. The government affirmed its unwillingness to take any measures that would endanger Western interests in Libya. Ben Halim reassured the U.S. government regarding the Soviet diplomatic mission, stating its role would be limited to routine diplomatic activities and that Libya would not accept any Soviet interference. Furthermore, he noted that "all these measures will also apply to countries orbiting within the Soviet Union's sphere" <sup>51</sup>.

It appears from this letter that Ben Halim found himself caught between a rock and a hard place; although he was the direct driver of the crisis, he did not wish to provoke Western powers, yet he could not ignore the resentment of Arab and local forces toward a pro-Western policy. Thus, he attempted to mitigate Western anxiety through this correspondence.

Ultimately, Libya succeeded through carefully measured diplomatic steps in navigating the fine line between deepening international cooperation and safeguarding core interests. The establishment of relations with the USSR was a manifestation of a conscious strategy to diversify partners and enhance sovereignty. While the government adopted a pragmatic approach in responding to parliamentary aspirations toward the East, King Idris remained the guardian of the strategic balance, recalling the importance of historical ties with the West. This stage was a true test of the Libyan state's ability to sail through the storms of the Cold War without losing its national compass

## Conclusion

This research concludes that Libya's geopolitical position in the post-World War II period and leading up to the mid-1950s was a direct reflection of the strategic struggle between the Great Powers, as the country transformed into an arena for competition between the Western and Soviet blocs. Through the Potsdam Conference and subsequent Councils of Foreign Ministers, the Soviet Union sought to impose trusteeship over Libyan territories, exploiting the political vacuum left by the collapse of Italian colonialism. Conversely, Britain and the United States worked to keep Libya within their sphere of influence, whether through de facto control or international diplomacy, which eventually culminated in the United Nations resolution granting Libya independence in 1951.

However, Libyan independence did not end international competition over the country; rather, it entered a new phase characterized by efforts from each superpower to win the loyalty of the nascent state. While Britain attempted to include Libya in the Baghdad Pact (1955) as a buffer against Soviet expansion, the Libyan government, under the leadership of Mustafa Ben Halim, moved toward establishing diplomatic relations with Moscow in 1955. This step provoked the ire of Western allies but revealed the Libyan government's pragmatism in leveraging international rivalry to serve its national interests, particularly its quest for admission to the United Nations.

Although Libya succeeded in maintaining a balanced distance between the two blocs, this equilibrium was not without challenges. King Idris's position, which remained cautious not to provoke the

West, clashed with the aspirations of certain domestic political circles that viewed rapprochement with the Soviets as an opportunity to break the Western monopoly. Furthermore, Western reactions—manifested in diplomatic protests and the fortification of military presence at American and British bases—underscored the sensitivity of Libya's location within global strategies.

In conclusion, this study reveals that Libya, despite its limited capabilities as an emerging state, managed to evolve from a mere battlefield into an actor practicing a form of "Realpolitik," benefiting from the contradictions of the Cold War. Yet, this relative success did not erase the long-term consequences of this conflict, which later manifested in the shaping of Libyan policy in the following decades. The question regarding the persistence of this rivalry in Libya's international relations—especially following the discovery of oil and its transformation into a regional player—remains a subject requiring further research in the context of subsequent developments.

## Endnotes:

- <sup>1</sup> Ali Abdullatif Ahmida, *Beyond Orientalism: Critical Reviews of Maghribi Social and Cultural History*, Lebanon, Center for Arab Unity Studies, 2007, p. 124.
- <sup>2</sup> Al-Mukhtar Al-Tahir Al-Kervah, *A Study in the History of International Relations: Libya in the Foreign Policy of Russia - The Soviet Union 1911–1951*, Libya, Seventh of April University Press, 2007, p. 126.
- <sup>3</sup> James F. Byrnes, *Speaking Frankly*, New York and London: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1947, p. 76.
- <sup>4</sup> Harry S. Truman, *Year of Decisions: Memoirs*, Vol. 1, New York: New Word City LLC, 2014, p. 413.; Al-Mukhtar Al-Tahir Al-Kervah, *Op. Cit.*, p. 128.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128.
- <sup>6</sup> Roi Yaacovi, *From Encroachment to Involvement: A Documentary Study of Soviet Policy in the Middle East, 1945-1973*, Israel: The Shiloah Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, Tel Aviv University, 1974, p. 9.
- <sup>7</sup> DDI, *Documenti Diplomatici Italiani*, Serie X (1943-1948), Roma: Libreria dello Stato, Vol. 4, 1994, p. 850.
- <sup>8</sup> Al-Mukhtar Al-Tahir Al-Kervah, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 129–130.
- <sup>9</sup> Wm. Roger Louis, *The British Empire in the Middle East: Arab Nationalism, the United States, and Postwar Imperialism*, New York: Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1998, p. 265.
- <sup>10</sup> Gianluigi Rossi, *L'Africa Italiana Verso l'Indipendenza 1941–1949*, Milano: Giuffrè, 1980, p. 117.
- <sup>11</sup> Joseph Wechberg, "Letter From Libya," *The New Yorker*, November 2, 1951.
- <sup>12</sup> Carol Anderson, "Rethinking Radicalism: African Americans and the Liberation Struggles in Somalia, Libya, and Eritrea, 1945-1949," *The Journal of The Historical Society*, UK, Vol. XI, No. 4, December 2011, p. 395.
- <sup>13</sup> H.L. Matthews, "The House of Representatives Conference," *The New York Times*, January 25th, 1946.
- <sup>14</sup> John Kent, *British Imperial Strategy and the Origins of the Cold War, 1944-1949*, Leicester, UK: Leicester University Press, 1993, p. 102.
- <sup>15</sup> French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Reports of the Council of Foreign Ministers - Soviet Proposal on Collective Trusteeship at the Fourth Session*, April 29, 1946, Vols 1-4, France: National Printing Office, 1946, p. 16.
- <sup>16</sup> Wm. Roger Louis, *Op. Cit.*, p. 278.
- <sup>17</sup> "Transformation of the USSR in Tripoli – Bevin Suggests Liberating Libya Now," *The New York Times*, April 30th, 1946.
- <sup>18</sup> *Note sur les anciennes colonies italiennes*, 1949, MAE, Série Nations Unies et Organisations Internationales 1944–1959, Sous-Série Secrétariat des Conférences, Dossier n° 124.: Nevill Barbour, *Southwest Africa*, New York, n.p., 1962, p. 354. : Sergei Mazov, "The USSR and the Former Italian Colonies, 1945–1950," *Cold War History*, London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, Vol. 3, No. 3, 2003, p. 62.
- <sup>19</sup> Al-Mukhtar Al-Tahir Al-Kervah, *Op. Cit.*, p. 137.: Muhammad Fuad Shukri, *The Birth of the Modern State of Libya: Documents of its Liberation and Independence*, Vol. 1, Cairo: Dar al-Thaqafa al-Diniyya, 2015, p. 245.: Helen Chapin Metz, *Libya: A Historical and Cultural Overview*, Washington D.C.: Library of Congress, 1987, p. 30.

- <sup>20</sup> Muhammad al-Hadi Abu Ajila, *The Struggle of the Libyan People for Independence 1939–1963*, Vol. 1, Libya: Dar wa Maktabat al-Sha'b, 2012, pp. 252–253.; Scott L. Bills, *The Libyan Arena: The United States, Britain, and the Council of Foreign Ministers, 1945-1948*, Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1995, p. 151.
- <sup>21</sup> Al-Mukhtar Al-Tahir Al-Kervah, *Op. Cit.*, p. 142.
- <sup>22</sup> Emanuele Ertola, "Terra Promessa: Migration and Settler Colonialism in Libya, 1911–1970," *Settler Colonial Studies*, University of California, San Diego, 26 March 2016, p. 19.
- <sup>23</sup> Emanuele Ertola, Terra Promessa: Migration and Settler Colonialism in Libya, 1911-1970, *Settler Colonial Studies*, University of California, San Diego, 26 March 2016, P19.
- \* President Nuri al-Said and Turkish Prime Minister Adnan Menderes issued a joint statement in Baghdad regarding the conclusion of a mutual defense agreement. On February 24, Turkey and Iraq signed the agreement known thereafter as the Baghdad Pact. For more details on the Baghdad Pact, see: John C. Campbell, *Defense of the Middle East: Problems of American Policy*, Revised Edition, New York: Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1960, p. 282.
- <sup>24</sup> F. Romantsev, *The Development of Policy in the Arab East in 1958–1960 According to the Ruling Circles of the USA and Great Britain*, Moscow: Scientific Editorial Board of the Journal "History," April 2018, p. 104.
- <sup>25</sup> Within the context of Britain's comprehensive strategy in the Middle East, Libya's importance increased following the 1954 Anglo-Egyptian Agreement, which resolved the dispute over British forces in Suez. Consequently, Libya became the primary alternative base to support the Baghdad Pact. See: Ali Abdussalam Abdulla Ali, *Libya and Britain: A Study of the History of British-Libyan Relations 1969-1979*, PhD Thesis, Nottingham Trent University, 2014, p. 13.; Stephen Blackwell, "Saving the King: Anglo-American Strategy and British Counter-Subversion Operations in Libya 1953-1959", *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 1, 2003, p. 3.; V.I. Bartenev, "British Policy Toward Libya (1951-1969)", (*Moscow University Bulletin*, No. 4, 2015, p. 124.
- <sup>26</sup> The necessity of joining the UN required Libya to show diplomatic flexibility, especially toward the USSR. While PM Mahmoud al-Muntasir submitted an official application on Independence Day in 1951, the USSR initially blocked it, favoring a "package deal" for thirteen other states. See: Idris Muhammad Hussein Abu Bakr, *The Role of Idris al-Senussi in the National Movement and the Founding of the Libyan Kingdom (1911-1969)*, PhD Thesis, Ain Shams University, Cairo, 2016, p. 291.; Geoffrey Kemp, "Strategy and Arms Levels, 1945-1967", *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science*, Vol. 29, No. 3, 1969, p. 22.
- <sup>27</sup> Walid Shuaib, "Libyan-Soviet Relations 1955-1963", *Journal of Historical and Social Studies*, University of Nouakchott, Mauritania, No. 24, 2019, pp. 3-4.
- <sup>28</sup> Egypt viewed pro-Western pacts as colonial tools. To appease President Nasser and avoid domestic unrest among nationalist youth, Ben Halim made promises regarding Libya's autonomy from Western orbits. See: Sabih Abdullah Ghulam, *American Hegemony in the Arab Region 1945-2003*, PhD Thesis, St. Clements University, 2011, p. 39.; Aned George Samaan, *The Policy of Containment and the Middle East, 1946-1958*, PhD Thesis, Portland State University, 1972, p. 117.; Charles O. Cecil, "The Determinants of Libyan Foreign Policy", *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 10, No. 1, 1956.; Saskia van Genugten, *Libya in Western Foreign Policies, 1911-2011*, London: Macmillan Publishers, 2016, p. 66.
- <sup>29</sup> Majdi Rashad Abdel-Ghani El-Sayed, *US Policy Toward Libya from the End of WWII to the Eisenhower Doctrine 1945-1957*, PhD Thesis, Cairo University, 2001, pp. 99-100.
- <sup>30</sup> Ali Abdussalam Abdulla Salhab, "Soviet Trends Toward the Arab Region (Egypt – Iraq – Syria – Libya) from 1953 to the late 1970s", *Sabha University Journal for Humanities*, Vol. 16, No. 1, 2017, p. 1.
- <sup>31</sup> Tareq Y. Ismael, *International Relations of the Contemporary Middle East: A Study in World Politics*; Talal Nizameddin, *Russia and the Middle East: Towards a New Foreign Policy*, p. 9.
- <sup>32</sup> Jumah F. Dakheel, *The Impact of the Collapse of the Soviet Union on Libya's Foreign Policy during the Period From 1991 to 2003*, PhD Thesis, Nottingham Trent University, UK, 2014, p. 115.
- <sup>33</sup> On September 27, 1955, Gamal Abdel Nasser announced the Czech arms deal, the first transfer of Soviet weapons to the Middle East after the war. This deal provoked a violent reaction among Western powers. However, the formation of the Baghdad Pact gave Russia the opportunity to penetrate the region dramatically. See: James Phillips, "Libya's Booming Connection with Moscow", *Heritage Foundation Middle East Report*, June 1984, p. 5.; Jacob Coleman Hurewitz (ed.), "Soviet-American Rivalry in the Middle East", *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science*, Vol. 29, March 1969, p. 9.; George W. Breslauer et al., *Soviet Strategy in the Middle East*, London: Routledge, 2016, p. 4.

<sup>34</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Soviet Union, Alexander N. Yakovlev Fund, *The Middle East Conflict 1947–1967*. Memorandum from G.T. Zaitsev, Head of the Near and Middle East Department, to Deputy Foreign Minister V.A. Zorin, Moscow, Document No. 186, July 19, 1955, p. 38.

\* It is worth noting that after Arab nationalism spread among the Libyan people, the Libyan state became particularly susceptible to the influence of Egyptian policy. See: E. Shuckburgh, *Descent to Suez: Foreign Office Diaries 1951–1956*, London: Norton, 1986, p. 269; H. Trevelyan, *The Middle East in Revolution*, London: Macmillan, 1970, p. 58; Douglas Little, "To the Shores of Tripoli: America, Qaddafi, and the Libyan Revolution 1969–1989", *The International History Review*, Routledge, 2012, p. 72.

<sup>35</sup> Walid Shuaib, *Op. Cit*, p. 4.

<sup>36</sup> Ronald Bruce St John, "The Soviet Penetration of Libya", *The World Today*, Royal Institute of International Affairs, Vol. 38, No. 4, April 1982, p. 132.

<sup>37</sup> E.A.V. de Candole, *The Life and Times of King Idris of Libya*, Manchester: Mohamed Ben Ghalbon, 1990, p. 123.

<sup>38</sup> Richard John Worrall, "The Strategic Limitations of a Middle East Client State by the Mid-1950s: Britain, Libya and the Suez Crisis", *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Routledge, 2014, p. 322.

<sup>39</sup> Walid Shuaib, *Op. Cit*, p. 14.

<sup>40</sup> U.S. Department of State, "Letter From the Acting Secretary of State to Secretary of Defense Wilson", *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1955–1957, Africa*, Vol. XVIII, Washington, D.C., November 12, 1955, No. 184.

<sup>41</sup> In a telegram from the U.S. Embassy to the State Department, the Ambassador mentioned that Ben Halim conspired with the Egyptians to establish relations with the Soviets while concealing it from Western representatives in Libya. See: U.S. Department of State, "Telegram From the Embassy in Libya to the Department of State", *FRUS, 1955–1957, Africa*, Tripoli, February 7, 1956, No. 154, Vol. XVIII.

<sup>42</sup> Dhahir Sakr Muhammad al-Hasnawi, *Libyan-American Relations 1945–1960: A Strategic Vision*, Syria: Dar al-Sharq for Printing and Publishing, 1st ed., 2012, pp. 191–192.

<sup>43</sup> Walid Shuaib, *Op. Cit*, p. 14.

<sup>44</sup> Dhahir Sakr Muhammad al-Hasnawi, *Libyan-American Relations 1945–1960: A Strategic Vision*, p. 193.

<sup>45</sup> U.S. Department of State, "Dispatch From the Embassy in Libya to the Department of State", *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1955–1957, Africa*, Tripoli, November 30, 1955, Vol. XVIII, Washington, D.C.

<sup>46</sup> Majdi Rashad Abdel-Ghani El-Sayed, *Op. Cit*, p. 103.

<sup>47</sup> Dhahir Sakr Muhammad al-Hasnawi, *Libyan-American Relations 1945–1960: A Strategic Vision*, p. 199.

<sup>48</sup> Walid Shuaib, *Op. Cit*, p. 16.

<sup>49</sup> Mohammed Yousef al-Magariaf, *Libya: Between the Past and the Present – The Birth of the Independence State*, Oxford, UK: Center for Libyan Studies, 2017, p. 357.

<sup>50</sup> Mustafa Ben Halim, *Folded Pages from Libya's Political History*, Cairo: Al-Ahram Agency for Distribution and Publishing, 1992, p. 207; Mohammed Yousef al-Magariaf, *Op. Cit*, p. 481.

<sup>51</sup> U.S. Department of State, "Letter From Prime Minister Ben Halim to Ambassador Tappin of Libya", *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1955–1957, Africa*, Tripoli, April 20, 1956, No. 344\A\16, Vol. XVIII, Washington, D.C.

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