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Gadhafi, Troubled by Series of Setbacks, Acts to Repair the Damage

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CAIRO, March 18—Libyan leader Col. Muammar Gadhafi, stung by a military defeat in Chad and diplomatic setbacks throughout the Arab world, is seeking to improve relations with former enemies in a bid to end Libya's growing isolation.

Analysts and diplomats familiar with the 44-year-old leader's mercurial temperament are convinced his moves are motivated primarily by concern about deepening domestic problems.

This winter Gadhafi reshuffled his government and allowed the execution of several fundamentalist opponents on state television, an act apparently intended to warn Libya's 3.5 million citizens about the risks of political dissent.

Moreover, major fence-mending this month with Libya's moderate pro-western neighbor Tunisia and with Yasser Arafat, the long-estranged chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization, reflect Gadhafi's perceived fear of threats from those quarters, according to informed sources.

Libya's reconciliation with the PLO—and active sponsorship of efforts to end Arafat's differences with Syrian-supported Palestinian dissidents—apparently caused further strains in Gadhafi's rapidly cooling alliance with Damascus.

Major reverses in his unpopular desert war in Chad were underlined by an embarrassing defection to Egypt of Air Force officers aboard a C130 aircraft earlier this month and by Libya's persistently delayed counteroffensive to retake the northern oasis of Fada, captured Jan. 2 by Chad government troops.

Nor are relations with his Moscow superpower ally considered close, despite his trumpeting of Kremlin support in the event of fresh U.S. military attacks. Gadhafi was so irritated by the poor performance of Soviet-supplied air defense systems during the U.S. air raid on two Libyan cities 11 months ago that he pointedly refused to receive Moscow's new ambassador for six months, according to diplomats.

On paper, neither the badly divided PLO nor Tunisia, a small

state weakened by the vagaries of aging President Habib Bourguiba, constitutes an obvious danger.

But highly placed Palestinian sources insist that Gadhafi's decision to improve relations with the PLO is largely motivated by his mistaken conviction that Arafat is in league with largely ineffective Libyan opposition groups in exile.

Similarly, Gadhafi is said to fear that Tunisia's intelligence service—considered among the most reliable on Libyan affairs by many professionals—could initiate trouble for him.

The transfer to Chad of many Libyan troops previously stationed on the Tunisian border diminished his ability to intimidate his neighbor and facilitated Tunisian intelligence operations against Libya.

Last week, for the first time since Tunisia broke off diplomatic relations in August 1985, Gadhafi sent a senior official, Khouildi Hamadi, to Tunis to make amends to Bourguiba.

As a gesture of good faith, Libya reimbursed \$6.5 million of its \$9 million debt to the national airline, Tunis Air, and promised redress for summarily deporting 32,000 Tunisian workers from Libya in 1985. Their unpaid wages represent the bulk of the \$150 million debt owed Tunisia.

The ostensible cause of tension with Syrian President Hafez Assad is Gadhafi's support for arch enemy Arafat in the long siege of Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon being conducted by Syria's surrogates, the Shiite Amal militia.

At the same time Gadhafi has sought to improve his credibility with Syria and other Arabs by criticizing both Iran and its Lebanese allies, the Shiite extremist militia Hezbollah.

Gadhafi took Iran to task for acquiring arms from Israel and the United States. Surprisingly—in light of charges that Libya has supplied Tehran with Soviet-built Scud B missiles used against Baghdad since 1985—Gadhafi said that attacking urban civilians with these and other weapons was “not a revolutionary act,” although he still sided with

Iran's revolution and did “not defend” Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

And despite Arafat's tactical alliance with Hezbollah—and that militia's rivalry with the pro-Syrian Amal—Gadhafi recently told visiting Lebanese journalists, “We support Hezbollah if it calls for martyrdom on Palestinian soil, but if Lebanon is the target, then this is terrorism.”

But Gadhafi's efforts to appear more moderate experienced a hitch when the Libyan media attacked Saudi Arabia's King Fahd, judging him remiss for decorating Adm. William J. Crowe Jr., chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, and for visiting Morocco.

Morocco and its king, Hassan II, were criticized for having received then-prime minister Simon Peres of Israel last July. That visit effectively ended the two-year treaty of union between radical Libya and conservative Morocco, an alliance which in its time helped end an earlier era of Libyan diplomatic isolation.