

Opening Remarks by Jon B. Alterman
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It's a pleasure to be back at Columbia, and a pleasure to participate in such an important conference.

What I want to talk about today is fear. One can be fearful of the known, and one can be fearful of the unknown. One can be fearful with good reason, or bad. Fear can protect, but it can also cripple.

There is a great deal of fear of Libya in the United States, and I suspect a great deal of fear about the United States in Libya. A quarter century of separation, combined with vitriolic statements and more concrete acts of hostility, has eroded whatever goodwill had been built in previous decades. We suspect each other's intentions, we question each other's capabilities, and we challenge each other's actions.

I should add that this is not completely unjustified. Many in the United States look at Libya's actions over the last quarter century and see a series of judgments that range from the from the unwise to the criminal. They see a country in which power is tightly controlled by people who are both unelected and unaccountable, and a government that rides roughshod not only over its critics, but also its ordinary citizens. What they see is not merely a tyranny, but one that is hostile to American interests and American allies in the Middle East.

Many Libyans no doubt harbor similar feelings about the United States. International sanctions and bombing campaigns have scarred Libyans and cut them off from the prosperity that many see around them. It is more than two years after Libya opened up the files on its nuclear development program, and even longer since it satisfied U.S. conditions on settling the Pan Am 103 case. Still, Libya is waiting to reap many of the benefits it had expected to win by striking a devastating blow against global proliferation networks and owning up to its past actions.

Dialogue will not erase the mistrust that has grown over a quarter century of hostility. Indeed, dialogue is likely to highlight areas of disagreement that are currently obscured. But dialogue can help ensure that we have disagreements about things that are real rather than imaginary, it can help eliminate unwarranted fear, and it can help us identify small areas of cooperation that can grow over time.

There are some who argue that this dialogue should not even take place—that it lends legitimacy to those who do not deserve it. I have to say I do not agree. We are neither making deals nor coronating leaders today. Instead, we are seeking to understand if the basis for further dialogue exists.

The government of Libya has taken some dramatic steps in recent years to try to right its relationship with the rest of the world. I don't pretend to know what that relationship will look like in ten years, nor what Libya will look like after a decade in which it is increasingly open to the intellectual ferment that is growing in the Arab world. I believe the time is right to explore these questions with people who have a stake in their outcome.

The government-to-government dialogue between Libya and the United States has yielded impressive fruit. The time has come to see if that dialogue can be broadened and deepened, to make U.S.-Libyan bilateral contact more like the kinds of contacts Americans maintain with countries all over the world. I am hopeful that this dialogue will be successful, and that it will help allay unfounded fears in the U.S.-Libyan relationship. Actually addressing the considerable differences that divide our two countries will take more time, and more action, on both sides. Today's conference is an important step to help set the agenda for that process. I am delighted to participate on behalf of CSIS, and I very much look forward to our two days of deliberations.