On his state visit to Libya, French President Nicolas Sarkozy signed a memorandum of understanding on nuclear energy cooperation with long-time Libyan leader Moammar Gaddafi. The July 25 memorandum clears the way for French access to Libyan uranium and outlines an agreement on the eventual construction of a nuclear desalination plant to provide drinking water to the littoral desert country.

Press reports indicate that Areva, a French company, would be building the reactor for the facility. Although the desalination plant is not an immediate project, the memorandum might give an advantage to Areva in the bidding competition for 1,600 metric tons of yellowcake in Libyan possession. Several foreign nuclear energy entities have expressed interest in acquiring it. Although obligated to dispose of it after ending a clandestine nuclear weapons program, Libya’s plans for the yellowcake are not known.

Areva’s reactor would power the energy-intensive process of making salt water potable. According to the World Nuclear Association, an industry group, 30 million cubic meters of seawater are desalinated every day worldwide. About one-half of this amount is processed in the Middle East, mostly in hydrocarbon-powered plants.

The type of reactor to be used in the facility has yet to be decided. Sarkozy disputed a recent announcement that Libya was purchasing a European Pressurized Water Reactor from Areva.

Libya’s acquisition of the Milan anti-tank missile system and communication equipment was also announced during Sarkozy’s visit. French opposition leaders, among them Socialist leader François Hollande, have called for a parliamentary probe, suspecting that this sale was improperly linked to the release of six medics from Libyan captivity. The missile supplier maintains that the deal had been under discussion for 18 months.

Preparations for the French-Libyan nuclear cooperation agreement started in 2005. Its conclusion marks another milestone in Libya’s normalization of relations with the West. As recently as 2003, the North African country was working to develop a nuclear weapons capability.

The United Kingdom and the United States choreographed Libya’s return to the international mainstream, but France has most actively taken commercial advantage of the end of sanctions. Both the United Kingdom and Russia have pledged to cooperate with Libya on medical applications of nuclear technology.

Later this year, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice is expected to visit Libya to further cooperation between Washington and Tripoli. According to Department of State spokesperson Sean McCormack, Rice wishes to “mark the fact that this is a very changed relationship” since she first joined the Bush administration as national security adviser.