



## Libya: More Balance Needed

By Stephen Zunes, University of San Francisco

In 1969, Colonel Muammar Qaddafi led a military coup in Libya against King Idris, an unpopular pro-Western leader. A left-leaning Arab nationalist and a harsh critic of Israel and the West, Qaddafi nationalized Libya's foreign-controlled oil industry and ordered the closure of Wheelus Air Base, one of the largest U.S. military facilities in the world. Although Qaddafi's anti-communism allowed for some initial cautious optimism from the U.S., diplomatic relations were downgraded in 1973 and were formally broken eight years later.

Under Qaddafi's rule, Libya has made impressive gains in health care, education, housing, women's rights, and basic social services. His brand of Islamic socialism, combined with the country's relatively small population and large oil reserves, has made Libya one of the more prosperous and egalitarian societies in the developing world, even though rhetoric has outpaced performance. A decentralized political system has allowed for democracy and popular participation in some political activities.

Political repression, however, is widespread. Serving both monarchs and military rulers, Libyan law prohibits the formation of political parties and criticism of the political system. There are no independent human rights organizations or nongovernmental organizations of any kind, and the government strictly controls the press. There are hundreds of political prisoners, and torture in detention is common. Outspoken opponents of the government have been murdered, both at home and abroad.

More distressing to the U.S. has been Qaddafi's support for extremist movements abroad, including terrorist groups, some of which may have been responsible for the deaths of American citizens. He has also been an outspoken advocate of radical third world and Arab causes.

During the early 1980s, there was a series of military clashes between the U.S. and Libya, with Libya attacking U.S. navy ships, and U.S. forces destroying Libyan military ships and aircraft and bombing coastal military installations. In April 1986, following a terrorist bombing in Berlin that killed an American G.I., the U.S.

bombed Tripoli and Benghazi, Libya's two largest cities, killing more than sixty civilians. The Reagan administration supported a wide range of covert activities targeting Libya, including disinformation campaigns, propaganda, sabotage, and encouragement of opposition groups. The U.S. also provided logistical support for French military operations against Libyan forces in the disputed Ouzou Strip region of northern Chad, and Washington encouraged Egyptian hostility toward Libya, resulting in a series of clashes along their common border.

In 1982, the U.S. initiated a series of sanctions against Libya, including an embargo on Libyan oil and a new requirement for export licenses for most American goods. Comprehensive sanctions were imposed in 1986, including a freeze of Libyan assets and a ban on all trade and financial dealings with Libya. These sanctions also forbid Americans, including journalists and academics, from traveling to Libya without permission from the U.S. government.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Washington issued a series of reports, widely circulated in the media, designed to discredit and demonize the Libyan government. These included charges of a Libyan hit squad targeting American officials, reports of coup attempts against Qaddafi, and allegations of a large underground chemical weapons factory. Subsequent investigations found all of these reports to be false.

When an investigation of the 1988 PanAm airliner bombing over Lockerbie, Scotland, fingered two Libyan intelligence agents, the U.S. and Great Britain demanded their extradition to stand trial. In 1992, as the International Court of Justice was addressing the extradition question, the U.S. successfully pressured the UN Security Council to impose sanctions against Libya to force the government to hand over the suspects. These international sanctions prohibited the export of aviation, military, or petroleum equipment to Libya, banned commercial flights to or from Libya, limited Libyan diplomatic representation abroad, and placed restrictions on certain Libyan financial activities.

In 1999, all parties agreed to have the Libyans tried in the Netherlands before three Scottish judges. UN sanctions against Libya were suspended in 1999 when the two Libyan suspects were extradited for trial, though the U.S. has maintained its own unilateral sanctions. The judges made their ruling in January 2001, convicting one suspect and acquitting the other. It is still unclear whether the bombing was a rogue operation or ordered by higher-ups, including possibly Qaddafi, himself, in retaliation for the 1986 bombing raids.

### Key Points

- The U.S. has maintained a hostile relationship toward the Libyan regime of Muammar Qaddafi for over two decades, including a series of military confrontations in the 1980s.
- Qaddafi's repression at home, anti-Western foreign policy, and support for extremist movements—including terrorist groups—have fueled the anti-Libyan sentiment of successive U.S. administrations.
- U.S. sanctions against Libya have continued, despite the suspension of UN sanctions following the extradition and trial of Libyan suspects in the Lockerbie PanAm bombing.

# Problems with Current U.S. Policy

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U.S. hostility toward Libya appears to have been largely reactive and not based on any well-conceived strategy. Demonizing the eccentric Qaddafi, with his penchant for harsh and provocative rhetoric, has been useful in bolstering the domestic standing of successive U.S. presidents and feeding the sense of self-righteousness Americans feel for the U.S. role in the world. But it has netted little tangible benefit for U.S. policy interests. For example, Qaddafi's 1986 claim that the entire Gulf of Sidra was within Libyan territorial waters had no legal justification. Yet the U.S. insistence on militarily challenging the claim seemed more designed as an excuse to attack the country than to enforce international law, particularly since Libya was not enforcing its claims.

More tragically, what apparently provoked the Libyan terrorists who destroyed the Pan Am airliner in 1988 were the U.S. bombing raids against Libyan cities two years earlier. The U.S. justified the air strikes on the grounds that they would prevent future Libyan-sponsored terrorism—an ironic justification, given the subsequent event. Moreover, international law only recognizes the legitimacy of the use of force for self-defense, not for retaliation. The numerous civilian casualties from the air strikes and the serious damage caused to the French embassy and other diplomatic facilities provoked outrage throughout the world and bolstered Qaddafi's standing both at home and abroad. Indeed, Washington's support for terrorist groups like the Nicaraguan contras, U.S. failure to extradite CIA-connected terrorists currently indicted in two Latin American countries, and America's role in a deadly 1985 car bombing in a Beirut suburb have hampered U.S. credibility as a crusader against the Libyan regime's alleged links to terrorism.

Although the UN sanctions against Libya never inflicted the serious humanitarian consequences that have plagued Iraq, they did retard Libya's economic development and isolated the country internationally, discouraging liberalizing influences. The ongoing unilateral U.S. sanctions have had a similar effect. Even Qaddafi's Libyan opponents have opposed the sanctions on the grounds that this tactic has played into the hands of the Libyan dictator.

What made the Libyans particularly reluctant to accede to initial demands to extradite the bombing suspects was the realization that the U.S. would oppose the lifting of UN sanctions even if they complied, since Washington's target was not really the indicted men but rather the Qaddafi regime. Indeed, even though UN sanctions have been suspended against Libya, the U.S. has blocked efforts to have them completely lifted.

A particularly problematic manifestation of U.S. sanctions has been the 1996 D'Amato Act, the motivation for which may go beyond simply curbing terrorism to exerting U.S. pressure on weaker countries. The law says that the president can "determine" that a person, company, or government is in violation of the act, and the aggrieved party has no recourse to challenge the president's determination in court or anywhere else. With such wide latitude of interpretation, a president can impose sanctions or other punitive measures based more

on political considerations than on any objective criteria, thus honing the mechanisms by which the U.S. can force foreign countries to cooperate with its strategic and economic agendas.

The bill provides for an array of sanctions, including banning the sale of products of culpable firms in the United States. As with similar extraterritorial efforts regarding Cuba, even America's strongest allies have raised vehement objections to the law, which apparently violates World Trade Organization rules. Ironically, this is the same sort of secondary boycott that the U.S. has vehemently opposed when applied by Middle Eastern states to U.S. companies doing business in Israel. If the U.S. secondary boycott is maintained, other countries are likely to take over lost American business. Thus, it will not be the targeted regime that will be hurt by U.S. policy—it will be American businesses and American credibility.

The crimes committed over the years by Qaddafi's Libya, though frequently exaggerated and not always unique, are still very real. Similarly, double-standards are commonplace both in U.S. diplomatic history and in the foreign policies of every great power. Yet in many respects, just as Qaddafi has gained political mileage in portraying himself as a victim of a vengeful and hypocritical U.S., there are those in the U.S. who also benefit from maintaining a hostile relationship with this leader whom Americans love to hate. Hostility toward "rogue states" like Libya helps justify continued high military budgets, encourages unilateral military initiatives, and feeds the self-righteous and sanctimonious U.S. perception of its role in the world.

It is becoming increasingly apparent that Libya's most serious offense in the eyes of U.S. policymakers does not concern human rights abuses, terrorism, nuclear ambitions, subversion, or conquest but rather the impudence to challenge American hegemony in the Middle East. Regimes like Libya and other so-called "rogue states" are preventing the U.S. from exercising its political dominance over this crucial region. By overthrowing or subjugating these regimes, American policymakers believe they will gain unprecedented leverage in shaping the future direction of the Middle East.

This brings us to the final irony. Their role as an impediment to hegemonic American ambitions lends these regimes the credibility and legitimacy they would not otherwise receive, since most Middle Eastern people resent foreign domination.

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## Key Problems

- Military attacks against Libya have led to civilian deaths, have violated international law, and have strengthened Qaddafi's standing in Libya and the international community.
  - Washington's opposition to political repression and support of terrorism by the Libyan government is compromised by U.S. support of other autocratic regimes and acquiescence to terrorist activities by American allies.
  - The sanctions against Libya have been largely ineffective in altering Tripoli's behavior but have been harmful to American businesses and other interests.
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# Toward a New Foreign Policy

Washington needs to encourage Libya to play a more responsible role both toward its own citizens and as a member of the international community. Current policy needs an overhaul, however, if such policy ambitions are to be successful.

Many of Qaddafi's stated objectives—encouraging sustainable broad-based economic development, promoting Palestinian rights, and defending the Arab world's cultural, religious, and national rights from

Western domination—have some legitimacy and evoke solidarity throughout the Middle East. A U.S. decision to address the legitimate concerns and adopt more responsible policies in the Middle East would rob demagogues like Qaddafi of their popular base and obstruct their dangerous policies. Such an approach would prove more successful at controlling Qaddafi than air strikes and punitive sanctions, which only appear to strengthen his power and influence.

Washington should go on record with the promise that it will not attack Libya unless there is clear evidence that Libya has attacked first. Proactively, the U.S. should

promote arms control across North Africa as a means of bringing greater peace and stability to the region. Normal diplomatic relations should be restored and sanctions should be substantially liberalized to allow for normal business activity as well as academic and tourist exchanges. A whole generation of Americans has grown up with the news media and popular culture depicting Libyans as terrorists. Normal interchanges between the two countries would greatly enhance better understanding between the two peoples and minimize the risk of violence against either.

Military sanctions should remain in place. Similarly, the U.S. should maintain restrictions against commercial or other activities that could directly strengthen the regime's repressive apparatus or foster terrorism.

Recent conflict between the U.S. and Libya has harmed the credibility of U.S. efforts to promote a more open and pluralistic society in Libya. Encouraging a greater role for international nongovernmental organizations—

untainted by a direct U.S. presence—could help this process. Libya's impressive advances in some aspects of economic development, including innovations in appropriate technology, deserve examination as possible models for development elsewhere.

Lingering concerns about potential Libyan involvement in terrorism should be addressed through international organizations and law enforcement, not through unilateral actions. Washington must renounce its support for any irregular forces or governments involved in terrorism in order to become a more effective leader in the war against terrorism. Moreover, the U.S. should acknowledge that its previous attacks against civilian targets in Libya were themselves a form of terrorism.

Similarly, Washington's concerns about Qaddafi's ongoing human rights violations would be enhanced if the U.S. ended its silence about human rights violations by such U.S. allies as Egypt, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Morocco. There is nothing wrong with constraining—using economic sanctions, if necessary—regimes that export terrorism and violate human rights. However, until the U.S. is willing to end its flagrant double-standards, such efforts—even where justified—will get little international support.

Finally, if the U.S. is really interested in democratic change in Libya, it should recognize that Qaddafi is not the only important political actor in that country. Washington must analyze Libya's social structure and regional differences. There are technocrats, ideologues, military and religious leaders, and other competing interest groups outside Qaddafi's complete control. Together they constitute a complex internal political dynamic in Libya.

Libya should not be used as a symbol, a whipping boy, an excuse for higher military spending, or a vehicle for proving a president's machismo. U.S. policy should be guided more by area specialists and less by military leaders and national security managers who are unfamiliar with Libya, its politics, history, and culture. The demonization of Qaddafi and Libya should be replaced by a more balanced approach that recognizes the regime's accomplishments as well as its many serious problems.

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## Key Recommendations

- The U.S. should significantly ease sanctions against Libya as a means of encouraging a more pluralistic society and responsible foreign policy.
- The U.S. should promote arms control throughout North Africa and should pledge not to attack Libya unless there is clear evidence that Libya has attacked first.
- Diplomatic relations should be restored and most economic sanctions lifted; military sanctions should be retained, and any trade that could strengthen the regime's repressive apparatus or export of violence should be stifled.

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# Sources for More Information

## Organizations

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<http://www.globalpolicy.org/security/sanction/libya/indxirlb.htm>

### Libyan American Friendship Association

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Email: [aaljaran@lafa.org](mailto:aaljaran@lafa.org)  
Website: <http://www.lafa.org/>

### Libyan Democrats Society

Email: [LDS@i12.com](mailto:LDS@i12.com)  
Website: <http://www.libyaontheweb.com/lds.html>

### The Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP)

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Washington, DC 20005  
Voice: (202) 223-3677  
Fax: (202) 223-3604  
Email: [ctoensing@merip.org](mailto:ctoensing@merip.org)  
Website: <http://www.merip.org/>

### Permanent Representative of the Great Socialist People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya to the United Nations

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New York, NY 10017  
Voice: (212) 752-5775  
Fax: (212) 593-4787  
Email: [info@libya-un.org](mailto:info@libya-un.org)  
Website: [http://www.libya-un.org/index\\_n.html](http://www.libya-un.org/index_n.html)

### Sijill: International Condemnation of the Gadaffi Regime

Email: [sijill@activist.com](mailto:sijill@activist.com)  
Website: <http://members.tripod.com/~sijill/>

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