

Qaddafi, Lockerbie, and Prospects for Libya

by [Ray Takeyh \(/experts/ray-takeyh\)](#), [Gideon Rose \(/experts/gideon-rose\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Ray Takeyh \(/experts/ray-takeyh\)](#)

Ray Takeyh is a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations.



[Gideon Rose \(/experts/gideon-rose\)](#)

Gideon Rose is the editor of Foreign Affairs and author of "How Wars End: Why We Always Fight the Last Battle."



Brief Analysis

Libya's economic decomposition has led to the rise of an Islamic opposition. The Islamists are increasingly allying with the Libyan armed forces, forming a pragmatic union that is likely to define Libya's political future in the post-Qaddafi period.

Background. In the pre-Qaddafi period, Islam played a central role in Libya's political evolution. The Sanusi movement spearheaded resistance to Italy's 1911 conquest of Libya. It also helped Libya gain independence in 1951, thus further enhancing Islam's role as Libya's political ideology. After Libya's independence, King Idris constantly relied on Islam for legitimacy, but he failed to foster strong national political institutions.

During the revolution of 1969 and Colonel Muammar Qaddafi's first four years in office, he drew on Libya's traditions. He realized that for his revolution to be legitimized, he needed a conservative base, namely Islam and its guardians, the ulama. During this period, the clerical establishment and Qaddafi's Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) were very closely aligned, and it appeared that Qaddafi was trying to construct a traditional Islamic state. Beginning in 1973, however, Qaddafi attempted to create a new ideological foundation for Libyan society by professing populism, egalitarianism, socialism, and a revolutionized Islam, while dismissing the traditional sectors. Executions and torture started in this period. As the clerical establishment strongly criticized Qaddafi's ideological transformations, Qaddafi tried to erode the clerics' power by attacking them as reactionaries. The problem for Qaddafi was, and remains, that traditional Islam has a more durable foundation than the manipulated version of the revolutionary leader.

Qaddafi's economic policies were disastrous. The effects of his initiatives have been general inefficiency and mismanagement, which led to a massive waste of precious resources. For a long time, Qaddafi was able to deflect criticism by distributing petrodollars and creating a generous welfare state. Yet, given the decline in oil prices since the late 1980s, that policy is becoming less and less credible. In the late 1980s, Qaddafi decided to embark on his own liberalization program. The attempt to liberalize the economy, however, was obstructed by both political and institutional factors, such as Qaddafi's eradication of the institutions of civil society, the mismanagement by popular

committees, and the unreliable nature of the legal system.

The Lockerbie Trial and Libya's Future. There is an internal debate in Libya regarding the turning over of the suspects in the 1988 bombing of PanAm flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland. The Revolutionary Committees say Libya should hold tight and not compromise with the international regime. In contrast, other elements of the Libyan elite -- including Qaddafi's brother-in-law, Abdullah al-Sanusi, who was implicated in the subsequent bombing of UTA flight 772 and who is regarded one of the masterminds of the Lockerbie bombing -- are essentially pressing for some sort of compromise. The latter group does not necessarily advocate turning over the suspects, but rather a prolonged process of negotiations which, they hope, will erode the viability of the sanctions regime. Such a process would be better for Qaddafi, who is closer to the pragmatic faction, than would the actual outcome of negotiations. Qaddafi would not want his sponsorship of international terrorism to be revealed publicly in the course of a fair trial, which is why he most likely will not turn over the suspects. If any individuals were found guilty of crimes of international terrorism, that would enhance an American call for an embargo of Libyan oil, which is what Qaddafi fears most.

As regards Libya's future, there is a discernible change in the mood of the population, from passivity to resistance. If Qaddafi were replaced, the most likely source of the change would be the armed forces. Islam will play a pivotal role in any succession crisis in Libya. Anyone who will inherit the state after Qaddafi's death will require the legitimacy that only Islam can provide. At least a dozen coup attempts, most recently in November 1996, attest to the unreliability of the Libyan army. In a 1993 coup attempt led by the army, Qaddafi had to call in the air force to suppress the ground forces. The Libyan armed forces have felt an increasing alienation in recent years for a number of reasons: Qaddafi has cut the military budget, which has primarily affected the ground forces; Qaddafi has tried to reduce the size of the armed forces by militarizing the purification committees and popular militias as a counterbalance to the armed forces; finally, he is attempting to reduce the human base of his army by relying more on chemical and possibly nuclear weapons for an assertive foreign policy.

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The choice of a U.S. policy toward Libya is not one of absolute good, but one of balancing the pros and cons of several alternatives. America's troubles with Libya began in the 1970s after Qaddafi decided to devote a significant portion of his country's oil revenues to sponsoring revolution abroad, suppressing his enemies, and supporting terrorism. The question posed to the United States ever since has been what to do with a country that engages in occasional criminal behavior directed at U.S. national interests and at regional stability, yet which is not a vital threat to national interests and which remains an attractive commercial partner for both U.S. firms and those of America's allies. Extreme responses such as appeasement or overall invasion of Libya have quickly been dismissed, and the U.S. government instead has decided to adopt a policy of limited sanctions and modest containment.

Sanctions. The sanctions against Libya have come in three phases. The first phase began in the 1970s and ended in 1991. During that period, the United States embarked on a relatively lonely campaign to wage economic war against Libya and isolate it. The United States imposed a unilateral economic embargo and tried to persuade other countries to do the same. However, it was not successful with its campaign.

The second phase of the sanctions began when evidence emerged linking Libya to the Lockerbie and UTA bombings. Had the revelations appeared soon after the bombings, there is little doubt that there would have been a major military response. As it happened, Libya's involvement was divulged only years after the Lockerbie bombings, by which time the immediate passions about the attacks had cooled off -- except for those of the victims' families. Consequently, the United States, Great Britain, and France opted for a diplomatic solution. The dilemma was that many European countries wanted to maintain their economic relations with Libya. The compromise solution was relatively minor sanctions, including an air travel ban and a ban on arms sales.

The third phase started in 1996 when Congress passed the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA), an attempt to coerce allied countries into joining U.S. policies by threatening to enact a variety of secondary sanctions. ILSA was basically about Iran, but it came to include Libya as well. Yet there was no real change in the Libyan situation which would have required a stepped-up pressure. Ironically, when a deal was cut in May 1998 to return to the pre-ILSA status quo with regard to Iran, no explicit mention was made of Libya. Nevertheless, it is highly possible that, should there be any future crisis in the Libyan investment area, the U.S. government would probably cut some kind of deal to avoid a trans-Atlantic trade war over Libya.

Lockerbie. In August 1998, the U.S. and British governments announced their agreement to allow the suspects in the Lockerbie bombing to be tried in The Hague, although in accordance with Scottish law and by Scottish judges. As Qaddafi had previously agreed to this arrangement, there is a chance that some kind of trial might actually take place in the near future.

A major reason for the recent developments in the Lockerbie case is the doubts about whether the pre-ILSA status quo can be sustained much longer. There has been a general sanctions fatigue, particularly among members of the Arab League and the nonaligned movement. Signals of an erosion of the sanctions regime merged with other signals that seemed to be emanating from Libya, indicating that Qaddafi might have decided to return to international respectability by letting the suspects try their chances in court. As to the U.S. and British policy, it is very unlikely that the two governments will increase pressure on Libya, as there are too many forces that object to such a move. The likeliest outcome is that the current policy will be maintained, which is the one solution that places Libya at about the right level in terms of the overall threat it poses to U.S. interests.

◆ This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Assaf Moghadam.

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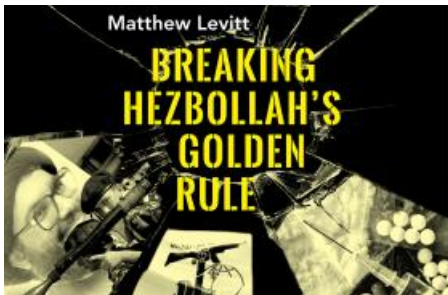
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