



# Libya: Military Moves Challenge U.S.-Backed Transition Plan

April 4, 2019

On April 4, 2019, [Khalifa Haftar](#), the commander of the Libyan National Army (LNA) movement that has controlled eastern Libya with [foreign support](#) since 2014, [ordered](#) forces loyal to him to begin a unilateral military operation to secure the capital, Tripoli. Tripoli is the seat of the Government of National Accord (GNA), an interim body recognized by the United States and [United Nations Security Council](#) as Libya's legitimate governing entity. The LNA stated its deployment to northwestern Libya is meant "to purge it of the remainder of the terrorist groups present in their last hideouts" (CRS translation from [Arabic](#)). In response to LNA movements, GNA Prime Minister-designate Fayeza al Serraj [mobilized](#) pro-GNA forces. Fighting has been reported in some areas near Tripoli.

United Nations (U.N.) Secretary General António Guterres was in Tripoli as these events occurred, [visiting](#) in a show of solidarity for a planned U.N.-sponsored conference among Libyans scheduled to begin on April 14. The [conference](#), endorsed by the U.N. Security Council and facilitated by Guterres' Special Representative and United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) head [Ghassan Salamé](#), is being convened to produce consensus among Libyan factions on principles to guide the completion of the country's extended post-2011 [transition](#). Specifically, the conference seeks Libyans' endorsement of new interim power sharing and national security arrangements and an agreed schedule for legislative and presidential elections in 2019. Conflict and discord over these issues have disrupted Libya's post-Qadhafi [transition](#) since 2011, producing rival governments and empowering local militias.

U.N. and other international efforts to reach consensus among Libyans during 2018 faltered as armed groups competed over strategic territory. LNA military moves in 2018 resulted in the country's major oil producing areas and infrastructure in the [center](#) and [southwest](#) coming under the effective control of LNA-aligned fighters. The United States and other international actors [issued statements](#) insisting that the LNA not wrest control of oil resources and revenue from the National Oil Corporation and GNA. Nevertheless, the de facto changes in the balance of power on the ground appear to have strengthened the LNA's hand in negotiations. The developments also generated a renewed sense of international urgency to conclude the transition before wider conflict erupts.

Congressional Research Service

<https://crsreports.congress.gov>

IN11091

Figure 1. Map of Libya



**Source:** CRS using ESRI, U.S. government, and United Nations data.

**Notes:** This map does not necessarily reflect the policies of the United States Government with regard to geographic names or boundaries. Names and boundary representation are not necessarily authoritative.

International statements issued in the wake of recent Libyan mobilizations reflect common perspectives and concerns. On April 4:

- The governments of the United States, France, Italy, the United Arab Emirates, and the United Kingdom [jointly stated](#) their deep concern about fighting near Gharyan, where LNA forces announced they had been welcomed just 60 miles south of the capital (CRS translation from [Arabic](#)) (**Figure 1**). The U.S. government and its fellow signatories urged all parties “to immediately de-escalate tensions.” The governments jointly affirmed that “our governments oppose any military action in Libya and will hold accountable any Libyan faction that precipitates further civil conflict.” The United States had previously joined other members of the U.N. Security Council on March 26 in [expressing support](#) for the national conference.

- U.N. Secretary-General Guterres [called for](#) “calm and restraint,” expressing his concern about military movements and “the risk of confrontation.” Guterres flew to eastern Libya for consultations on April 5, and, on departure, signaled with “[a heavy heart](#)” his hope for peace.
- Russia’s Libya Envoy Lev Dengov told Interfax that, “Russia is continuing to support a peace process in Libya,” and described calls for mobilization “as provocative and counterproductive.”

The LNA’s moves and counter-mobilizations by the GNA and other western Libyan forces directly challenge the stated preferences of the Security Council and the U.S. government. The developments pose complex questions for U.S. policymakers and Members of Congress. These include:

- **How might military confrontation in western Libya or dramatic changes in governing arrangements affect U.S. counterterrorism operations?** According to the [U.S. intelligence community](#), the capabilities of the Libya-based Islamic State affiliate “have been degraded, but it is still capable of conducting attacks on local and Western targets in Libya and possibly elsewhere in the region.” IS supporters carried out attacks across Libya in 2018. U.S. forces have partnered with some forces nominally aligned with the GNA. Periodic U.S. airstrikes continue to target suspected IS or AQ personnel. Widespread instability or conflict could presumably give IS supporters and other extremists new opportunities.
- **What tools do the Administration and Congress have to deter further unilateral actions by Libyan parties that may undermine U.S.-supported, U.N.-facilitated transition plans or respond if such actions occur?** A [U.N. arms embargo and asset freeze](#) is in place, and [U.S. executive orders](#) provide for sanctions against those undermining Libya’s transition. The Administration could seek to convince the U.N. Security Council to impose sanctions or restrict oil transactions to influence the decisions of Libyan actors. Congress could move to require the imposition of U.S. sanctions currently provided for by executive order. Congress has conditionally funded limited U.S. transition support and security assistance programs for Libya since 2011 and is considering the Trump Administration’s request for assistance funds for FY2020.
- **How might military confrontation in western Libya affect Libya’s neighbors and Europe?** Instability in western Libya has displaced Libyans and threatened the security of Tunisia and Algeria since 2011. Western Libya also hosts a foreign [migrant population](#) that could be vulnerable in the event of conflict. European cooperation with western Libya-based actors on security and migration could be disrupted by renewed fighting. National elections are scheduled for October and November 2019 in Tunisia, and Algeria is now undergoing a sensitive political transition. [U.S. AFRICOM identifies](#) containing instability in Libya as one of its six main lines of effort and works to support diplomatic efforts to reconstitute the Libyan state.

**How is the United States postured to respond to related contingencies?** U.S. diplomatic personnel continue to operate from the [Libya External Office \(LEO\)](#) in Tunis, Tunisia, led by Charge d’Affaires-Ad Interim Peter Bodde (the former U.S. Ambassador to Libya). State Department and USAID personnel operate from LEO Tunis in support of U.S.-funded foreign and humanitarian assistance programs in Libya. Bodde and U.S. AFRICOM Commander [General Thomas Waldhauser visited](#) Tripoli in March 2019 in a show of support for the GNA government. AFRICOM and the U.S. military have established liaison relationships with local security actors in several parts of Libya.

## Author Information

Christopher M. Blanchard  
Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs

- 

---

## Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.

-