



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

Christopher M. Blanchard

Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs

Updated April 8, 2019

On April 4, 2019, [Khalifa Haftar](#), the commander of the Libyan National Army (LNA) coalition that has controlled eastern Libya with [foreign](#) military and financial [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 \(U.N.\) Security Council](#) as Libya's legitimate governing entity. In response to LNA movements, GNA Prime Minister-designate Fayez al Serraj [mobilized](#) pro-GNA forces. Fighting is ongoing near Tripoli, with reports of airstrikes and mobilization by several militia forces. On April 7, Secretary of State Michael Pompeo [stated](#) that the U.S. government opposes Haftar's offensive and urged its "immediate halt." Secretary Pompeo said "forces should return to status quo ante positions," and said, "all involved parties have a responsibility to urgently deescalate the situation."

U.N. Secretary General António Guterres was in Tripoli as the offensive began, [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 U.N. 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](#) two [statements](#) insisting that the LNA not wrest control of oil resources and revenue from the National Oil Corporation and GNA.

Congressional Research Service

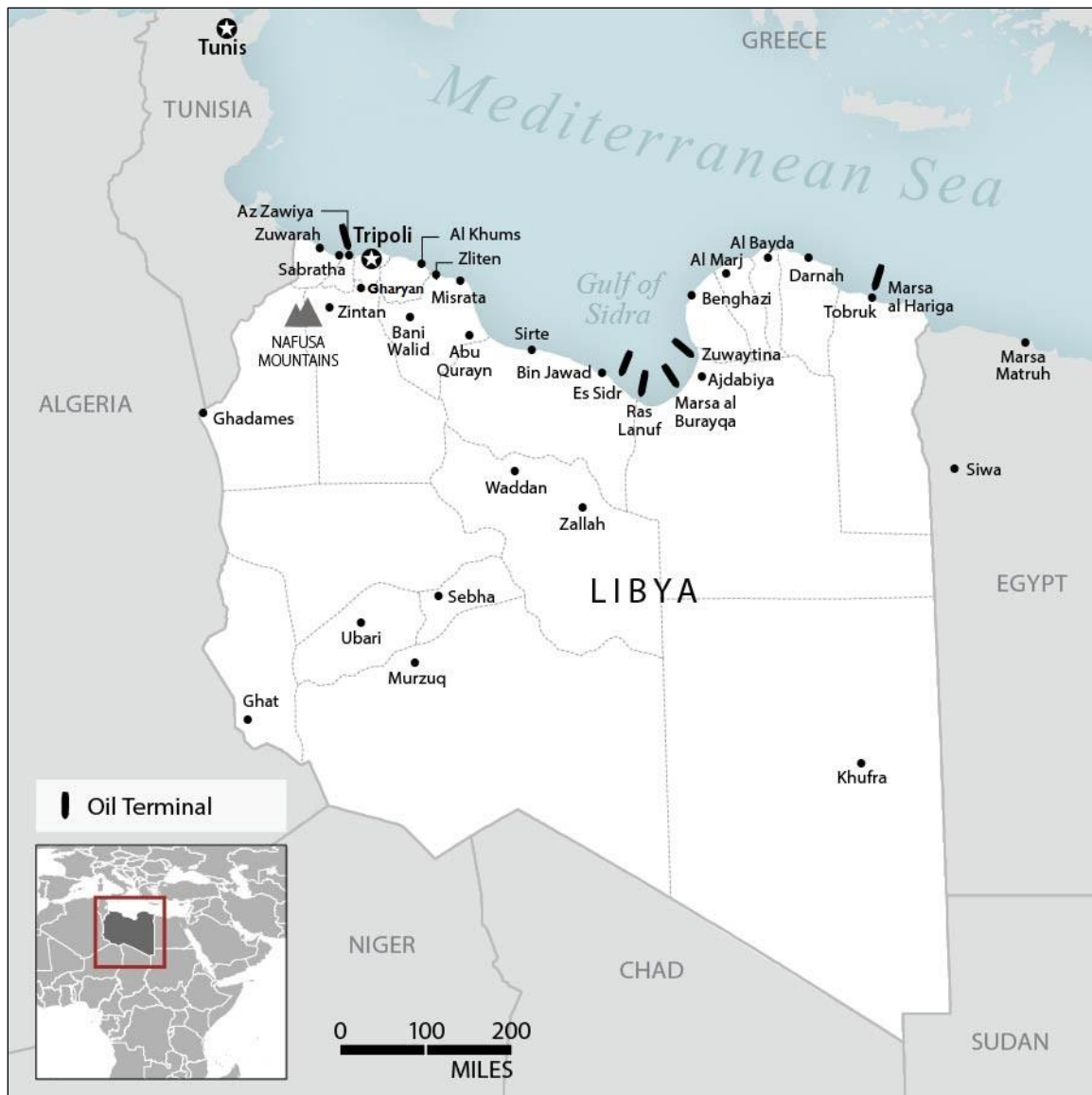
7-....

www.crs.gov

IN11091

Nevertheless, the de facto changes in the balance of power on the ground appeared to have strengthened the LNA's hand in negotiations, while generating the renewed sense of international urgency to conclude the transition according to the U.N. plan before wider conflict could erupt. The outbreak of fighting reflects a lack of mutual trust among some key Libyan parties. If fighting continues, decisions by outside actors about whether to coordinate de-escalatory action or provide unilateral support for proxies could prove decisive. Past rounds of prolonged combat in densely populated coastal western Libya have been destructive and have killed and displaced Libyan civilians.

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 U.S. Government with regard to geographic names or boundaries. Names and boundary representation are not necessarily authoritative.

International statements issued since the recent Libyan mobilizations began reflect common perspectives and concerns, emphasizing the risk of escalation and demanding that forces disengage.

- 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, (**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 G-7 countries issued a similar [statement](#) on April 5. Both statements avoided singling out Haftar and the LNA.
- U.N. Secretary-General Guterres [called for](#) “calm and restraint,” and then flew to eastern Libya for consultations. On departure, he stated with “a heavy heart” his hope for peace. Meeting later that day, the Security Council [agreed](#) on a verbal press statement calling on “LNA forces to halt all military movements” and calling “on all forces to de-escalate and halt military activity.”
- Russia’s Libya Envoy Lev Dengov told Interfax on April 5 that, “Russia is continuing to support a peace process in Libya,” and described calls for mobilization “as provocative and counterproductive.” In Egypt on April 6, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov [said](#), “we are opposed to attempts to apportion blame unilaterally.” On April 7, diplomats reported that Russia had [blocked](#) a U.N. Security Council statement that would have singled out Haftar and the LNA in demanding a halt to their operations.

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. International powers appear to share a desire to avoid continued violence but also appear to differ on how to defuse the situation and to hold actors accountable. Most statements issued to date have called on all Libyans to deescalate the situation, with some specifically mentioning Haftar and the LNA. The developments in Libya and the evolving postures of other governments pose complex questions for U.S. policymakers and Members of Congress, including:

- **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, and [relocated](#) some forces from Libya in response to the fighting. Periodic U.S. airstrikes 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. However, apparent differences of opinion and preferred approaches among Russia, the United States, and France may complicate or prevent joint action. 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. National elections are scheduled for October and November 2019 in Tunisia, and Algeria is now undergoing a sensitive political transition. Humanitarian officials are [warning](#) that fighting “could potentially result in significant population displacement.” Western Libya also hosts a [vulnerable](#) foreign [migrant population](#). European security and migration cooperation with western Libya-based actors could be disrupted by continued fighting.
- **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. [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. 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, though, as noted above, AFRICOM has [relocated](#) some U.S. military personnel from Libya temporarily.

EveryCRSReport.com

The Congressional Research Service (CRS) is a federal legislative branch agency, housed inside the Library of Congress, charged with providing the United States Congress non-partisan advice on issues that may come before Congress.

EveryCRSReport.com republishes CRS reports that are available to all Congressional staff. The reports are not classified, and Members of Congress routinely make individual reports available to the public.

Prior to our republication, we redacted phone numbers and email addresses of analysts who produced the reports. We also added this page to the report. We have not intentionally made any other changes to any report published on EveryCRSReport.com.

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 permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.

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' institutional role.

EveryCRSReport.com is not a government website and is not affiliated with CRS. We do not claim copyright on any CRS report we have republished.