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Libya and U.S. Policy

Conflict and COVID-19 Threaten Libya

Major conflict erupted in Libya in April 2019, when the “Libyan National Army”/“Libyan Arab Armed Forces” (LNA/LAAF) movement—a coalition of armed groups led by Khalifa Haftar—launched a bid to seize the capital, Tripoli, from militias and the internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA).

Fighters in western Libya rallied with Turkish military support to blunt the LNA’s advance, and Haftar’s forces withdrew from northwestern Libya in June 2020. The LNA and its local partners control much of Libya’s territory and key oil production and export infrastructure (Figure 1). The GNA and anti-LNA groups control Tripoli and the western coast and seek to assert control over the entire country. Southern Libya is marginalized and faces threats from criminals, rival ethnic militias, and terrorists. The U.S. government has supported a ceasefire, while rival coalitions (Figure 2) have prepared to fight and restarted negotiations.

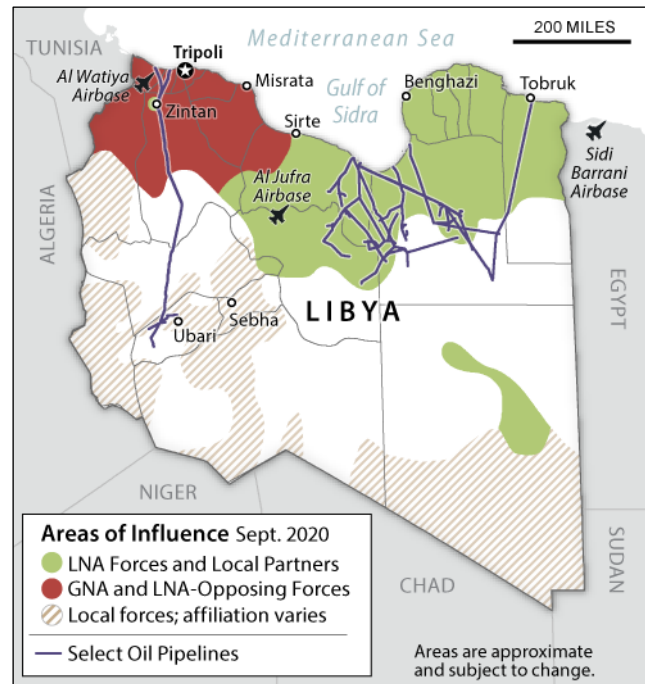
Conflict dynamics shifted in 2019 and early 2020 as Russian-national Wagner Group contractors intervened on behalf of the LNA, Turkey and the GNA concluded maritime and security cooperation agreements, Turkey deployed fighters and arms on behalf of the GNA, and outsiders shipped weapons to both sides. According to U.S. officials, Russia, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates arm the LNA and aid its operations. Turkey provides overt military support to anti-LNA forces. Both sides have recruited and deployed Syrian militias. Egypt has prepared to intervene militarily if GNA and Turkish forces advance further east; GNA and Turkish forces have sought to control all of Libya and demanded that LNA forces withdraw beyond the “oil crescent” east of Sirte.

Nongovernment conflict observers estimate that fighting between LNA forces, GNA supporters, and anti-LNA militias has killed more than 2,400 fighters, along with more than 430 civilians since April 2019. More than 425,000 Libyans are internally displaced, and mines left by retreating LNA forces have complicated the return of displaced civilians in western Libya. More than 650,000 foreign migrants (largely from sub-Saharan Africa) also are in Libya and remain especially vulnerable.

In 2020, multilateral diplomatic initiatives have sought to achieve and sustain a ceasefire as a precursor to renewed political reconciliation efforts. Meeting in Berlin, Germany in January, the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council and other key foreign actors jointly committed to new arrangements aimed at permanently ending the conflict. GNA and LNA figures attended, but did not commit to a ceasefire. The Security Council endorsed the Berlin arrangements in Resolution 2510. The U.N. Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) then supported security, political, and economic discussions, but pandemic concerns and renewed fighting undermined progress.

Figure 1. Libya: Areas of Influence

As of September 2020



Source: Prepared by CRS using media and social media reporting.


Years of division and conflict have weakened the health care system’s ability to mitigate risks from the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19). Acting UNSMIL head Stephanie Williams has called “fragmented governance” a “serious obstacle to the COVID-19 response,” and said in August that humanitarian access remains restricted.

U.S. and U.N. officials have condemned “persistent” post-Berlin weapons shipments to Libya as violations of the U.N. arms embargo and called for a humanitarian ceasefire to allow the country to combat the spread of COVID-19. In August and September 2020, some GNA officials and their rivals in the House of Representatives (HOR) and interim government each proposed different arrangements for a ceasefire and, conditionally, to allow oil exports to resume. Both sides were positioned to resume fighting if necessary.

A Long-Troubled Transition

Libya’s political transition has been disrupted by armed nonstate groups and threatened by the indecision and infighting of interim leaders for years. After an armed uprising ended the 40-plus-year rule of Muammar al Qadhafi in 2011, interim authorities proved unable to form a stable government, address security issues, reshape the country’s finances, or create a viable framework for post-conflict reconciliation. Insecurity spread as local armed groups competed for influence and resources.

Figure 2. Libya: Principal Coalitions

	<p>Government of National Accord (GNA) The U.N. Security Council and U.S. government have recognized the GNA as Libya's legitimate interim governing authority pursuant to the December 2015 Libyan Political Agreement (LPA). The GNA's eastern-Libya-based rivals have withheld recognition, and militias in western Libya have undermined GNA authority. However, some of these militias have fought alongside GNA forces against the Libyan National Army/Libyan Arab Armed Forces Movement (LNA/LAAF). Turkey provides the GNA with overt military aid. U.S. forces cooperate with the GNA for counterterrorism purposes. GNA Prime Minister-designate Fayez al Sarraj reportedly intends to resign if transition negotiations bear fruit.</p> <p>Leader: Prime Minister-designate Fayez al Sarraj</p> <p>Foreign Supporters: Turkey, Italy, Qatar</p>		<p>Libyan National Army/Libyan Arab Armed Forces Movement (LNA/LAAF) The LNA/LAAF is a coalition of militias, military personnel, and tribal fighters that has asserted control over eastern Libya since 2014. Launched as a movement to combat Islamist forces in Benghazi, the LNA attempted to seize Tripoli in a campaign from April 2019 to June 2020, with foreign military support. LNA leader Khalifa Haftar is a Qadhafi-era military defector and former U.S. intelligence partner. In April 2020, Haftar claimed a popular mandate for LNA rule, dismissing the LPA, but later backtracked and ordered his forces to retreat from northwestern Libya.</p> <p>Leader: Field Marshal Khalifa Belqasim Haftar</p> <p>Foreign Supporters: United Arab Emirates, Russia, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, France, Jordan</p>
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Source: Prepared by CRS.

Qadhafi's rule compounded stabilization and transition challenges by depriving Libyans of experience in self-government, preventing the development of civil society, and leaving state institutions weak. Armed militia groups, local leaders, and coalitions of national figures with competing foreign patrons have remained the most powerful arbiters of public affairs.

The U.N. Security Council praised Libya's administration of elections for legislative bodies and a constitutional drafting assembly in 2012 and 2014, but declining rates of participation, threats to candidates and voters, and zero-sum political competition have marred the country's democratic exercises. Insecurity deepened amid terrorist attacks on U.S. and other international targets in 2012, and coalitions of rival armed groups clashed in 2014, driven by overlapping ideological, personal, financial, and transnational rivalries. In the conflict's aftermath, the country's transitional institutions fragmented, and the LNA movement began a long fight against Islamist groups and critics in and around Benghazi.

In December 2015, some Libyan leaders endorsed a U.N.-brokered political agreement to create a Government of National Accord to oversee the completion of the transition. GNA Prime Minister-designate Fayez al Sarraj and members of a GNA Presidency Council tried to implement the 2015 Libyan Political Agreement (LPA) but faced resistance from defiant militias, scorn from a rival interim government and HOR leaders in the east, and hostility from Khalifa Haftar's LNA/LAAF movement. This hostility erupted into conflict in 2019.

On the surface, the conflict in Libya pits two primary factions and their various foreign and local backers against each other in what appears to be a straightforward contest for control over the capital and the organs of state power. However, beneath the surface, complicated local interests, foreign agendas, personal grudges, identity-based concerns, profit motives, and ideological rivalries shape political and security developments. Leading coalitions suffer from internal divisions and political legitimacy deficits stemming from the extended, fractious nature of the transition. Poor living conditions are fueling protests against the GNA and eastern leaders. Victory or surrender by either side could spur new fighting within their ranks. Outside powers have exploited these factors, frustrating mediation efforts.

Though some talks have resumed, Libyan factions and their foreign supporters appear to retain deep differences in their preferred models for governance for the country, military command arrangements, resource sharing, the role of Islam in public life, and Libya's international partnerships.

U.S. Policy and Outlook

For years, U.S. diplomats and officials have emphasized the importance of a political solution, but have not convinced or compelled Libyans and their various patrons to disengage from confrontation. U.S. diplomats in July 2020 stated U.S. "opposition to all foreign interference" and described "the imperative of an immediate ceasefire," while engaging with all sides in an "active neutrality" approach. Officials identify counterterrorism as the top U.S. priority in Libya, and balance Libya-related concerns with other U.S. goals in relation to foreign actors. U.S. officials in August and September welcomed ceasefire proposals from Libyans and back U.N.-led dialogue to achieve a ceasefire, define a roadmap for the withdrawal of all foreign forces, and promote the transparent management of oil revenues.

The U.N. Security Council has authorized financial and travel sanctions on those responsible for threatening "the peace, stability or security of Libya," obstructing or undermining "the successful completion of its political transition," or supporting others who do so. A U.N. arms embargo is in place, but many actors, including some U.S. partners, violate its provisions. In parallel to these U.N. measures, U.S. executive orders provide for U.S. sanctions on those threatening peace in Libya. U.S. officials engage Libyans and monitor U.S. aid programs via the Libya External Office (LEO) at the U.S. Embassy in Tunisia.

Congress has conditionally appropriated funding for transition support, stabilization, security assistance, and humanitarian programs for Libya since 2011. In July 2020, the House Foreign Affairs Committee endorsed the Libya Stabilization Act (H.R. 4644, see also S. 2934), which would authorize future U.S. assistance, provide a legislative basis for U.S. sanctions, and define mechanisms for additional oversight of U.S. policy.

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