



Libya and U.S. Policy

Eleven years after a 2011 uprising that toppled long-time authoritarian leader Muammar al Qadhafi, Libya has yet to make a transition to stable governing arrangements. Elections and diplomacy have produced a series of interim governments (**Figure 1**), but militias, local leaders, and subnational coalitions backed by competing foreign patrons have remained the most powerful arbiters of public affairs. The postponement of planned elections in 2021, Libyans' continuing lack of consensus over constitutional and legal arrangements, the potential fragility of a United Nations (U.N.)-backed ceasefire, and the reemergence of institutional rivalry threaten Libya's stability and pose challenges for U.S. decision-makers.

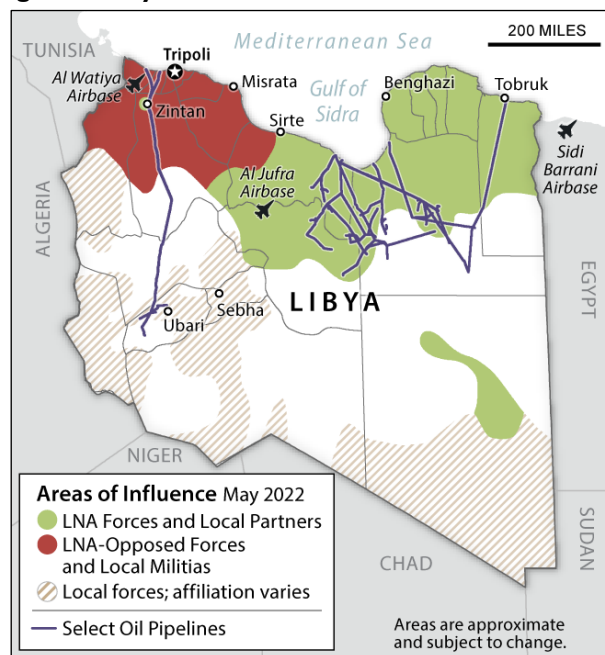
Successive U.S. Administrations have sought to prevent Libya from serving as a permissive environment for transnational terrorist groups and have taken different approaches to conflict and competition among Libyans. The Biden Administration supports the holding of new elections in Libya and has used U.S. influence to bolster U.N.-led mediation efforts to that end. Congress has appropriated funds to enable U.S. diplomacy and aid programs, and some Members have called for more assertive U.S. engagement.

War, Ceasefire, and a Deferred Election

Conflict re-erupted in Libya in April 2019, when a coalition of armed groups led by Qadhafi-era military defector Khalifa Haftar known as the Libyan National Army (LNA, alt. "Libyan Arab Armed Forces," LAAF), attempted to seize the capital, Tripoli, from the internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA). Russia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt, and leaders of Libya's House of Representatives (HOR, an interim parliament last elected in 2014) backed the LNA. With Turkish military support, the GNA and anti-LNA western Libyan militias forced the LNA to withdraw. Libya has remained divided since, with foreign forces still present, and opposing coalitions separated by a line of control west of Sirte (**Figure 1**). During 2020, multilateral diplomatic initiatives helped achieve a ceasefire, and the U.N. has deployed civilian monitors at Libyans' request.

In 2021, members of a U.N.-appointed Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF) and the HOR approved an interim executive authority and Government of National Unity (GNU) to replace the GNA, with a mandate to serve until elections or through June 2022. In 2021, the U.N. Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) facilitated discussions among LPDF members, the HOR, and the High Council of State (HCS, an advisory representative body) in an attempt to establish a constitutional and legal basis for parliamentary and presidential elections planned for December 24, 2021. However, disputes over candidacy criteria and constitutional and legal issues persisted, leading to an indefinite postponement of the elections. U.N. and U.S. officials have sought to preserve momentum toward prompt elections, amid contending Libyan proposals and initiatives.

Figure 1. Libya: Areas of Influence and Timeline



- 2011** Uprising topples Muammar al Qadhafi.
- 2012** Parliamentary elections. Transitional cabinet seated.
- 2014** Elections for constitutional drafting body and parliament. Disputed results fuel conflict. U.S. diplomats depart.
- 2015** International mediation yields agreement to form Government of National Accord (GNA).
- 2016** House of Representatives (HOR) withholds GNA endorsement. Islamic State forces defeated in Sirte with U.S. military support.
- 2018** Libyan National Army (LNA) controls eastern Libya.
- 2019** LNA offensive against Tripoli; Turkey intervenes.
- 2020** U.N. supports ceasefire negotiations, selects Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF) members. LPDF agrees to roadmap, plans December 2021 elections.
- 2021** LPDF selects Interim Executive Authority members. HOR approves interim Government of National Unity (GNU). U.N. Security Council endorses ceasefire monitoring and election date, but election postponed.
- 2022** HOR selects replacement interim government. GNU leaders object and retain control of the capital. U.N.-led talks seek consensus on constitutional basis for election. Protests and militia clashes suggest growing tensions.

Source: Prepared by CRS using ArcGIS and media reporting.

Competing Governments Reemerge

In the wake of the election postponement, consultation and political competition among Libyans has intensified. Haftar, the LNA, and competing western Libyan militias remain powerful security actors with diverse political aims and influence. HOR Speaker Aqilah Saleh, who had stepped back from his role in 2021 to seek election as president, moved to dismiss GNU Prime Minister Abdul Hamid

Dabaiba and the GNU cabinet. Dabaiba, who also had presented himself as a presidential candidate in spite of a previous pledge not to do so, has asserted a continuing mandate and refused to yield to anything but a nationally elected government. In February 2022, the HOR endorsed former GNA Interior Minister Fathi Bashaga as Prime Minister-designate, and, in March, endorsed Bashaga's proposed cabinet. U.S. officials encourage dialogue among Libyans and have stated that elections are required to resolve disputes over legitimacy.

Since May, Bashaga's attempts to enter and assert authority in Tripoli, resistance from Dabaiba and local militias, and struggles for control of the Libyan National Oil Corporation (NOC) have resulted in some armed confrontations. Libya's fiscal and economic dependence on the oil and gas sector make the NOC, the Central Bank, and budgetary and fiscal processes objects of intense competition, as rivals seek access to oil export revenues to pay salaries, provide subsidies, and otherwise generate political and security support. In July, Dabaiba moved to replace long time NOC Chairman Mustafa Sanalla with Farhat Bengdara. Allies of Haftar and the LNA subsequently suspended their protest blockade of national oil facilities, which had severely reduced national oil exports since April.

Libya has the largest proven crude oil reserves in Africa, but conflict, political rivalry, and neglected infrastructure impede the energy sector's operations and limit its potential. Oil revenues accrue to a National Oil Corporation account for transfer to the Central Bank to support government spending.

The political path forward is uncertain. Through June, U.N. Special Adviser to the Secretary-General Stephanie Williams led talks that produced some agreement on a constitutional basis for elections, but key differences remain unresolved, and U.N. consultations over William's replacement are ongoing. HOR Speaker Saleh, his partners among the LNA leadership, and their foreign backers have proposed a longer election timeline and seek to appoint additional figures under the HOR-designated government. Military officers of the Joint Military Commission ("5+5") that negotiated the October 2020 ceasefire met in Tripoli in July 2022 to resume military reunification talks. Violence and militia mobilization in western Libya in July led U.N. and U.S. officials to reiterate calls for calm, dialogue, and an end to unilateral steps involving state institutions.

U.S. Policy and Selected Issues

During and prior to the 2019-2020 clashes, rival executive authorities based in western and eastern Libya competed for power and international recognition. International mediators intended the formation of the GNU and the holding of new elections to provide a basis for the reunification of Libyan institutions and an end to serial interim arrangements. U.S. officials supported U.N. leadership of these initiatives, emphasized the importance of maintaining the ceasefire and the neutrality of institutions such as the NOC, and sought to avoid accusations of illegitimate interference by not insisting on specific outcomes. U.S. officials have maintained these approaches in 2022, while balancing Libya-related concerns with other U.S. goals in relation to Russia, Egypt, Turkey, France, Italy, and the UAE.

U.S. Special Envoy for Libya Ambassador Richard Norland has led U.S. diplomatic engagement since 2019. U.S. officials operate from a Libya External Office at the U.S. Embassy in Tunisia. Press reports suggest U.S. officials are assessing requirements to reestablish a permanent U.S. diplomatic presence in Libya. Congress may consult with the Administration pursuant to security requirements.

Terrorism and Foreign Military Forces

U.N. and U.S. reporting describe transnational terrorist threats in Libya as reduced and contained. Other U.S. priorities in Libya include preventing the resumption of destabilizing conflict, encouraging political accommodation and economic development, and fostering the departure from Libya of foreign military forces and mercenaries. The U.S. military supports U.S. diplomatic initiatives and has monitored and reported on the activities of Russian mercenaries and military equipment in Libya. Press reports suggest that some Russian mercenaries may have left Libya to support operations in Ukraine, although Libya reportedly remains a logistical hub for their operations in sub-Saharan Africa. Turkish military advisers train and assist western Libyan forces in accord with a 2019 Turkey-GNA security agreement. The LNA and its opponents reportedly have used fighters from Syria, Chad, and Sudan.

Sanctions and U.N. Bodies

The U.N. Security Council has authorized financial and travel sanctions on entities threatening peace in Libya, undermining the political transition, or supporting others who do so. U.S. executive orders provide for comparable U.S. sanctions. In April, the Security Council extended UNSMIL's mandate through July 2022. The position of Special Representative of the Secretary-General is vacant.

Humanitarian Needs, Migrants, and Food Security

The U.N. estimates more than 800,000 people in Libya (out of 7 million) will require some form of humanitarian aid in 2022. U.N. agencies have identified more than 635,000 foreign migrants, more than 168,000 internally displaced persons, and more than 43,800 refugees in Libya. Migrants remain especially vulnerable to extortion and other abuses.

Libya imports most of its food, and the U.S. government reports that Russia and Ukraine provide more than half of Libya's wheat and grain supply. Rising food and fuel prices have created hardship for Libyan citizens, while oil facility blockades have resulted in forgone oil export revenues.

Issues in the 117th Congress

Congress has conditionally appropriated funding for transition support, stabilization, security assistance, and humanitarian programs for Libya since 2011. In the 117th Congress, the House-passed version of the National Defense Authorization Act of 2023 (H.R. 7900) includes a revised version of the previously House-passed Libya Stabilization Act (H.R. 1228; S. 379) that would authorize future U.S. assistance, enact U.S. sanctions in statute, and establish new reporting requirements. The Biden Administration seeks \$44.5 million in FY2023 funding for Libya programs.

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