

Updated September 9, 2024

## Libya and U.S. Policy

Over a decade after a 2011 uprising and U.S.-backed military intervention that toppled longtime 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, 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 since 2021, Libyans' continuing lack of consensus over electoral and constitutional arrangements, the potential fragility of a United Nations (UN)-backed ceasefire, and the reemergence of institutional rivalry are prolonging Libya's instability and pose challenges for U.S. decisionmakers.

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 Libya's internal conflict and interventions by other countries. The Biden Administration has called for the holding of new elections and used U.S. influence to bolster UN-led mediation efforts to that end. The increased presence and influence in Libya of Russian officials and security actors since 2020 paired with the effects of ongoing conflict and political instability to Libya's south appear to be motivating the Biden Administration to prioritize efforts to unify Libyan institutions, despite lingering international and Libyan concerns about the behavior, legitimacy, and intentions of key actors. An enduring Russian military presence in Libya would create complications for U.S. and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) military planners. Russia has also reportedly used Libya as a logistical hub for operations in the Sahel and Central African Republic.

The 118<sup>th</sup> Congress has appropriated funds for U.S. diplomacy and aid programs, including pursuant to the Global Fragility Act (GFA, Title V of Division J, P.L. 116-94). Congress also provided funds in 2024 to reestablish a U.S. full-time diplomatic presence in Libya, which could enable more robust U.S. engagement.

### War, Ceasefire, and a Deferred Election

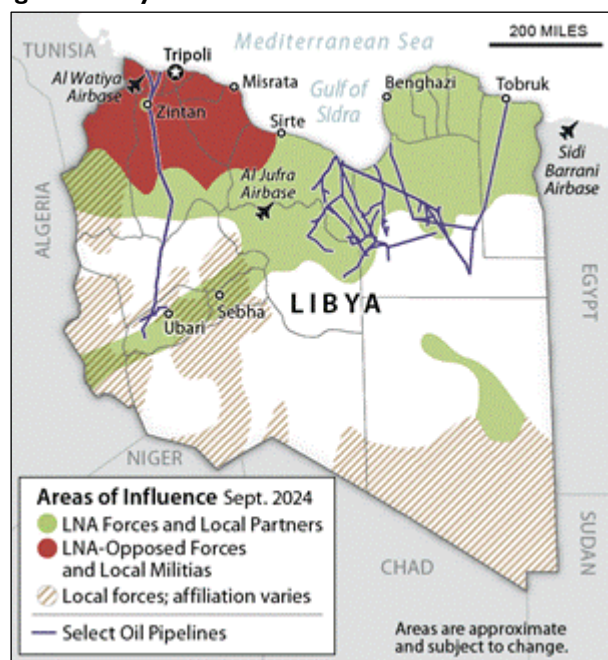
Libya's 2012 election produced governing arrangements that devolved into conflict in 2014, effectively dividing the country along ideological, geographic, and institutional lines. Conflict re-erupted in April 2019, when a coalition of eastern Libya-based armed groups led by Qadhafi-era military defector Khalifa Haftar known as the Libyan National Army (LNA, alt. "Libyan Arab Armed Forces," LAAF), attempted to seize the capital, Tripoli, from the then-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 (**Error! Reference source not found.**). Multilateral diplomacy in 2020 helped achieve a ceasefire, which the UN monitors.

In 2021, members of a UN-appointed Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF) and the HOR approved an interim Presidential Council (PC) and Government of National Unity (GNU) to replace the GNA, with a mandate to serve until elections or through June 2022. The LPDF and HOR endorsed Abdul Hamid Dabaiba as GNU Prime Minister, along with a three-member Presidential Council. The UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) facilitated discussions among the GNU, the HOR, and the High Council of State (HCS, an advisory representative body), but was unable to establish a constitutional and legal basis for parliamentary and presidential elections then-planned for December 2021.

The elections were postponed indefinitely and have yet to be rescheduled amid ongoing disputes over electoral laws and the possibility of a new interim government. Since that time, eastern Libya-based actors have revived efforts to have a rival government, led by Osama Hamad, recognized as legitimate. Competition among Libyans has intensified for control over the National Oil Corporation (NOC) and Central Bank, which govern the oil operations, revenues, and public sector payments on which most Libyans rely.

**Figure 1. Libya: Areas of Influence**



Source: Prepared by CRS using ArcGIS and media reporting.

## A “Scramble for Libya” and U.S. Policy

In April 2024, Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General (SRSG) for Libya Abdoulaye Bathily of Senegal resigned, citing the unwillingness of the GNU, HOR, HCS, LNA, and Hamad government to compromise. Bathily lamented the onset of “a new scramble for Libya” that he said had made the country “the playground for fierce rivalry among regional and international actors motivated by geopolitical, political and economic interests.”

Unilateral measures pursued by Libyan factions since Bathily’s resignation have increased risks of renewed conflict. In July and August 2024, western Libyan forces and LNA forces mobilized in areas of the west, posing risks to ceasefire arrangements. Tensions between the long-serving governor of Libya’s Central Bank and GNU Prime Minister Dabaiba over spending and budgets intensified, as GNU and PC leaders moved to replace the bank’s governor and board, and GNU-aligned forces seized the bank’s headquarters. Eastern factions halted oil operations in areas under their control, reducing Libya’s output. Libya holds the largest proven oil reserves in Africa. Libya’s ~1 million barrel per day output influences global markets and provides nearly all of the state’s revenue. The United States called for a negotiated settlement to the impasse, and warned that “unilateral attempts to replace its governor risk endangering Libya’s standing in global financial markets.”

U.S. officials have reengaged actors on all sides of Libya’s internal divides in a stated effort to limit the destabilizing effects of recent events. This has included outreach to LNA leaders and forces in eastern Libya whose past attempts to assert control over Libya through military force, ongoing cooperation with Russia, and human rights violations have otherwise prompted U.S. concerns and calls from some in Congress for the imposition of sanctions. U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) commander Gen. Michael Langley visited Libya in late August and met with LNA, GNU, and PC leaders to discuss ways “to support the unification of security institutions” and deepen U.S.-Libya security ties.

The Biden Administration has backed UN mediation in Libya with the stated goals of providing for the reunification of Libyan institutions and an end to serial interim governing arrangements. U.S. officials have encouraged dialogue among Libyans and stated that elections are required to resolve disputes over legitimacy. U.S. diplomats have emphasized the importance of maintaining the post-2020 ceasefire and of impartial administration of the NOC and Central Bank. In engaging other third parties such as Egypt, Turkey (Türkiye), the UAE, France, and Italy, U.S. officials continue to balance Libya-specific concerns with other U.S. goals. U.S. influence relative to these third parties may be limited.

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 (LEO) at the U.S. Embassy in Tunisia. In March 2024, the Biden Administration notified Congress of its intent to resume embassy operations in Libya by mid-2025, and requested additional funds to establish a planned Diplomatic Travel and Support Operations Facility in Tripoli.

## Terrorism and Foreign Military Forces

UN and U.S. reports describe transnational terrorist threats in Libya as much reduced since peaking circa 2015-2016. Successive U.S. Administrations have sought to foster the departure from Libya of foreign military forces and mercenaries. AFRICOM has expressed concern about Russian personnel and military equipment in Libya, reportedly present since 2018. Press accounts suggest that some Russian personnel may have left Libya since 2022 to support operations in Ukraine, although Libya reportedly remains a logistical hub for operations in sub-Saharan Africa. In 2024, U.S. officials have drawn international attention to reports of ongoing shipments of Russian weaponry to LNA-controlled eastern Libya, which they describe as “destabilizing” for Libya and the region. Turkish military advisers train and assist western Libyan forces, and Turkey has extended its military presence to 2026. The LNA and its opponents reportedly have recruited fighters from Syria, Chad, and Sudan.

## UN Bodies and UN and U.S. Sanctions

The UN Security Council has authorized UNSMIL through October 2024. Deputy SRSG for Political Affairs Stephanie Koury, a U.S.-national, is UNSMIL’s interim officer in charge. The 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 July 2023, the House did not pass H.J.Res. 70, which would have rescinded the national emergency related to Libya cited in Executive Orders 13566 and 13726 that provide for U.S. sanctions.

## Humanitarian Needs and Migration

Humanitarian need in Libya has grown in times of conflict and economic disruption. Humanitarian aid over the past year has focused on the more than 250,000 Libyans affected by September 2023 catastrophic flooding in the east. The UN flood response flash appeal of \$34 million for Libya in 2024 has been fully funded. Libya also remains a transit point for irregular migration to Europe, and migrants remain vulnerable to extortion, detention, sexual violence, and other abuses. UN agencies have identified more than 761,000 foreign migrants, more than 125,000 internally displaced persons, and more than 65,000 refugees and asylum seekers in Libya, including new arrivals in 2024 from Sudan. The State Department reported in 2023 and 2024 that “endemic corruption and militias’ influence over government ministries contributed to the GNU’s inability to effectively address human trafficking.”

## Issues in the 118<sup>th</sup> Congress

Congress has conditionally appropriated funding for transition support, stabilization, security assistance, and humanitarian programs for Libya since 2011. The Biden Administration seeks \$19.25 million in FY2025 funding for aid in Libya, and has begun implementing programs outlined in its March 2023 10-year GFA plan for Libya. The Biden Administration’s FY2024 and FY2025 budget requests have included increases in Worldwide Security Protection (WSP) and Overseas Program (OP) funding to support the resumption of diplomatic operations in Libya. Congress may review plans for renewed operations in Libya in light of lessons learned from the 2012 Benghazi attacks, the 2014 U.S. withdrawal, and subsequent LEO operations.

---

**Christopher M. Blanchard**, Specialist in Middle Eastern  
Affairs

**IF11556**

---

## 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.