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Libya and U.S. Policy

Ten years after the start of a 2011 uprising 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 (**Figure 1**), but militias, local leaders, and coalitions of national figures backed by competing foreign patrons have remained the most powerful arbiters of public affairs.

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 movement (LNA, in Arabic: “Libyan Arab Armed Forces,” LAAF) leveraged support from Russia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Egypt to attempt to seize the capital, Tripoli, from an interim Government of National Accord (GNA) and local militias. With Turkish military support, the GNA and western Libyan militias forced the LNA to withdraw. Libya has remained divided since, with foreign forces remaining present and the main opposing coalitions separated by a line of control west of Sirte (**Figure 1**).

During 2020, multilateral diplomatic initiatives helped achieve a ceasefire, and in April 2021, the United Nations (U.N.) Security Council endorsed plans to deploy civilian ceasefire monitoring personnel at Libyans’ request.

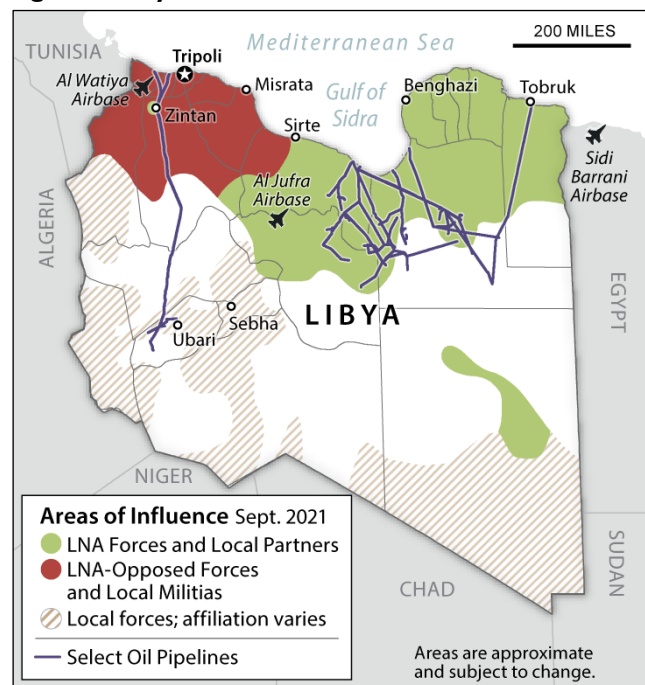
Delegates to a U.N.-convened Libyan Political Dialogue Forum and members of Libya’s House of Representatives (HOR, interim parliament last elected in 2014) approved an interim executive authority and interim Government of National Unity (GNU) to replace the GNA in March 2021. The U.N. Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) is facilitating discussions among LPDF members, the HOR, and the High Council of State (HCS, an advisory representative body) to establish a constitutional basis and law for parliamentary and presidential elections planned for December 24, 2021. U.S. officials continue to call for an end to foreign interference in Libya and for holding the elections as scheduled.

U.N. Endorses Ceasefire Monitoring

In October 2020, U.N.-backed talks among members of a Joint Military Commission (JMC, or “5+5” because of its equal make-up of GNA/LNA delegates) established a temporary ceasefire. The agreement called for the departure of mercenaries and foreign fighters along with the suspension of foreign training and the departure of trainers. The ceasefire has held through August 2021, although foreign forces have not departed. In April 2021, the U.N. Security Council endorsed Resolution 2570, approving the “scalable and incremental deployment” of ceasefire monitors and strongly urging member states “to respect and support the full implementation of the ceasefire agreement, including through the withdrawal of all foreign forces and mercenaries from Libya without delay.” Preparations for the monitoring mission are ongoing.

In July 2021, UNSMIL head Jan Kubiš observed that, “the situation in Libya is becoming more difficult, confrontational and tense. Institutional, political and individual interests stand in the way of agreeing on the necessary legal framework for holding the elections on 24 December, as agreed in the LPDF road map, endorsed by the Security Council.” He further warned that, “The unity of the Joint Military Commission and the implementation of the agreement could unravel if the political process remains stalled,” and said, “The continued presence of foreign forces, mercenaries and foreign fighters also threatens the ceasefire.” In August 2021, he said, “time is running out.”

Figure 1. Libya: Areas of Influence



- 2011** Uprising topples Muammar al Qadhafi.
- 2012** Parliamentary elections. Transitional cabinet seated.
- 2014** Constitutional referendum and parliamentary elections. Disputed results fuel conflict. U.S. diplomats depart.
- 2015** International mediation yields agreement to form Government of National Accord (GNA).
- 2016** Parliament withholds endorsement of GNA. Islamic State forces defeated in Sirte with U.S. military support.
- 2018** Libyan National Army consolidates control in east Libya.
- 2019** Libyan National Army launches offensive against Tripoli.
- 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 cabinet. U.N. Security Council endorses ceasefire monitoring and date for December 2021 election.

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

U.S. officials reported in January 2021 that forces affiliated with the Wagner Group of Russia were constructing sophisticated defensive fortifications in LNA-controlled central Libya. Turkish military advisers continue to train and assist western Libyan forces in accord with a 2019 Turkey-GNA security agreement. Both sides have recruited and deployed Syrian militias. Fighters from neighboring Chad left Libya in April 2021 and launched operations that resulted in the death of Chad's long-time president, Idriss Déby. The U.S. Embassy in Libya asserted that the Chadian fighters' offensive "again highlights the urgent need for a unified, stable Libya with control over its borders."

Civilian Protection and Human Rights

Through December 2020, fighting between LNA forces, GNA supporters, and anti-LNA militias had killed more than 500 civilians and displaced more than 200,000 people according to U.N. estimates. The U.N. estimated that as many as 1.2 million people in Libya (out of 7 million) would require some form of humanitarian assistance in 2021. Access constraints have decreased since early 2020. U.N. agencies have identified nearly 600,000 foreign migrants, more than 212,000 internally displaced persons, and more than 42,000 refugees in Libya. Migrants remain especially vulnerable to extortion and other abuses.

Interim Government of National Unity

In 2020, U.N. officials selected and convened a 75-member Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF) to restart the country's disrupted political transition. Based on an agreed roadmap, in February 2021, members of the LPDF nominated an interim three-person Presidential Council and interim Prime Minister to replace the GNA and lead the country until elections in December 2021. Mohamed Menfi of the eastern city of Tobruk serves as chairman of the Presidential Council, with southerner Musa Al Koni and westerner Abdullah Al Lafi as his deputies. On March 10, the HOR approved the cabinet proposed by interim Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dabaiba, an engineer and former Qadhafi-era official from the western city of Misrata.

Oil Sector Recovers, Finances Strained

Libya has the largest proven crude oil reserves in Africa, but conflict, political rivalry, and neglected infrastructure impede the energy sector's operations. As of July 2021, Libya produced roughly 1.1 million barrels of oil per day, down from 1.4 million barrels per day in 2011. Oil revenues accrue to a National Oil Corporation account in accordance with an U.N.-brokered agreement. Since 2011, public debt has deepened and currency reserves have declined. Millions of Libyan households depend on public sector employment and subsidies, which dominate state spending. Ongoing disputes over the leadership of state financial institutions, oil sector spending, and budget priorities underscore the continued influence of political rivalries on state finances.

Conflict Hampers COVID-19 Response

Years of division and conflict have weakened the Libyan health care system's ability to mitigate risks from Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19). In May 2021, UNSMIL reported that "the COVID-19 pandemic continued to overwhelm the health system in Libya." Libyan officials have reported nearly 306,000 COVID-19 cases and more than 4,180 COVID-19 deaths. Testing and public health monitoring capacity remain limited.

U.S. Policy and Outlook

For years, U.S. diplomats and officials have emphasized political solutions to Libya's conflicts, but have not convinced or compelled Libyans and their various patrons to disengage from confrontation. U.S. officials support UNSMIL-led negotiation processes and welcomed the establishment of the interim executive authority and GNU. U.S. Special Envoy for Libya and Ambassador to Libya Richard Norland emphasizes U.S. support for holding elections in December 2021 and for the withdrawal of foreign forces from Libya as required by the October 2020 ceasefire agreement. In May 2021, a State Department spokesperson said "this includes the need for the departure of Russian mercenary and proxy forces, Turkish forces and all foreign military forces, mercenaries, proxies and foreign fighters, including those from Syria, Chad and Sudan, and the need to end any support for foreign military intervention, including from the UAE." U.S. officials continue to balance Libya-related concerns with other U.S. goals in relation to foreign actors.

U.S. officials engage Libyans and monitor U.S. aid programs via the Libya External Office (LEO) at the U.S. Embassy in Tunisia. Press reports suggest that the Administration is assessing the security and logistical requirements necessary to return U.S. diplomats to Libya on a full time basis. 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.

U.S. and U.N. officials cite persistent terrorist threats. U.S. forces have conducted targeted strikes against terrorist targets in Libya citing the 2001 AUMF as well as constitutional authorities. In July 2021, UNSMIL reported that the "lack of a centralized and coordinated approach" among Libyans is allowing space to a "renewed terrorist threat by Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb and the Islamic State/Da'esh, particularly in the south."

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. In parallel to these U.N. measures, U.S. executive orders provide for U.S. sanctions on those threatening peace in Libya.

Congress has conditionally appropriated funding for transition support, stabilization, security assistance, and humanitarian programs for Libya since 2011. In the 117th Congress, H.R. 1228 and S. 379 would authorize future U.S. assistance, provide a legislative basis for U.S. sanctions, and establish new reporting requirements. Congress allocated not less than \$30 million in FY2021 aid for "stabilization assistance for Libya, including support for a United Nations-facilitated political process and border security" under P.L. 116-260. The Biden Administration seeks \$43 million in FY2022 funding for Libya programs. The House Appropriations Committee recommended funds for Libya above FY2021 levels for FY2022 (H.R. 4373).

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