

Libya: Conflict Disrupts U.S.-Backed Transition Plan

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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 the pro-LNA offensive, pro-GNA and other anti-Haftar elements in western Libya have [mobilized](#). Fighting is ongoing south of Tripoli, but the conflict has devolved into a tactically fluid stalemate in which neither side has a clear military advantage. According to U.N. Special Representative and U.N. Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) head [Ghassan Salamé](#), "reliance on external support is a conflict driver" in spite of a U.N. arms embargo, and "armed drones, armored vehicles and pick-up trucks fitted with heavy armaments, machine guns, recoilless rifles and mortar and rocket launchers have been recently transferred to Libya with the complicity, and indeed outright support, of foreign governments."

Libyan parties to the conflict have [rejected](#) outsiders' calls for an unconditional ceasefire. Some western Libyan parties (including GNA leaders Prime Minister-designate Fayeze al Serraj and Deputy Prime Minister-designate Ahmed Maitiq) [reject](#) future political engagement with Haftar and insist that the LNA withdraw to status quo ante positions. Armed anti-Haftar groups reportedly further [reject](#) the premise that Haftar could have a future national security leadership role, an idea which underpinned pre-April U.N. reconciliation plans. Haftar and the LNA [refuse](#) to withdraw and reject calls to replace Haftar as the leader of eastern Libya-based military forces.

On June 16, GNA Prime Minister-designate Serraj [proposed](#) a new political negotiation arrangement and the holding of parliamentary and presidential elections by the end of 2019, echoing elements of the pre-April U.N. plan. Officials of the LNA-backed eastern Libyan government [rejected](#) the proposal, vowing that LNA operations will not cease until the LNA militarily controls Tripoli. Key Libyan [figures](#) are making [their](#) respective [cases](#) internationally, apparently [seeking](#) to shift the external balance of opinion in a way that might decisively affect the internal balance of power. No major new international initiatives to reach a settlement have been revealed, although key European and Arab leaders continue to mutually consult, and [U.S.](#), U.N., and other foreign officials welcomed a [brief](#), fragile truce during Eid al Adha observations in early August. International powers appear to share a desire to avoid the worst effects of continued fighting but also appear to differ on how to defuse the situation and whether or how to hold actors accountable.

The U.S. government initially [called](#) for the LNA to immediately cease its operations against Tripoli. However, President Trump then personally [engaged](#) Haftar and acknowledged Haftar's counterterrorism and energy security efforts. The U.S. government since has reiterated its support for an inclusive political settlement and [an end to escalation](#), while [positioning](#) the United States as a neutral arbiter willing to engage with all sides.

As of mid-July, U.N. officials [reported](#) that there have been a minimum of 400 civilian casualties, including 106 civilian deaths. The World Health Organization then [placed](#) the overall casualty count since April 4, including combatants and civilians, at 1093 deaths and 5,752 wounded. U.N. officials since have condemned "[indiscriminate](#)" airstrikes resulting in additional civilian deaths and injuries. More than [105,000](#) people have been internally displaced by the fighting, with aid agencies [estimating](#) that more than 100,000 civilians are in immediate front-line areas, with an additional 400,000 within 1 KM of the front lines.

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, posing complex questions for U.S. policymakers and Members of Congress, including:

- **How might developments in western Libya affect U.S. counterterrorism operations?** The [U.S. intelligence community](#) reports that the capabilities of the Libya-based Islamic State affiliate "have been degraded, but it is still capable of conducting attacks in Libya and possibly elsewhere in the region." IS supporters carried out attacks across Libya in 2018, and have struck [repeatedly](#) since April 4. U.S. forces have partnered with some forces now nominally aligned with the GNA for counterterrorism purposes, but [relocated](#) U.S. military personnel 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. Conflict also may empower and embolden militias now fighting Haftar. In August, a car bombing [killed](#) three UNSMIL personnel in Benghazi.
- **What tools do the Administration and Congress have to respond?** 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 now subject to presidential discretion. Congress has conditionally funded limited U.S. transition support and security assistance for Libya since 2011, and is considering FY2020 aid requests.
- **How might fighting 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 September and October 2019 in Tunisia, and Algeria is now undergoing a sensitive political transition. Humanitarian officials report that displacement is occurring and posing new challenges for Libya's [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. personnel continue to operate from the [Libya External Office \(LEO\)](#) in Tunis, Tunisia, in support of diplomatic efforts and U.S.-funded foreign and humanitarian assistance programs in Libya. The Senate [confirmed](#) U.S. Ambassador to Libya [Richard Norland](#) in August 2019. [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. 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.