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Libya and U.S. Policy

Conflict and COVID-19 Threaten Libya

Libya has been wracked by major conflict since 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 local militias and the internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA).

Fighters in western Libya rallied to blunt the LNA’s advance, and inconclusive fighting has continued despite multilateral demands for a ceasefire. As of May 2020, LNA forces and local partners control much of Libya’s territory and key oil production and export infrastructure directly or through militia allies. GNA supporters and anti-LNA groups retain control of the capital and have seized several areas west of Tripoli since April 2020 with Turkish military support. Southern Libya remains marginalized and faces threats from criminals, rival ethnic militias, and terrorists.

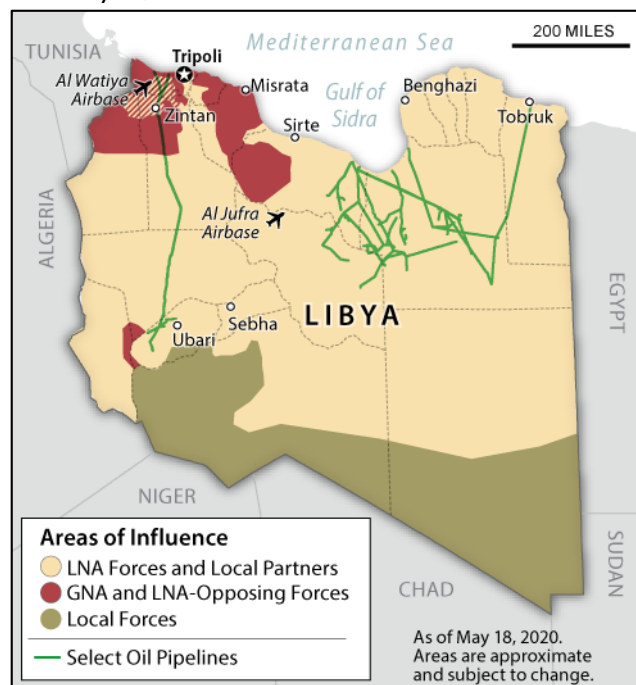
Conflict dynamics have shifted since April 2019 following the introduction of Russian-national Wagner Group contractors into LNA forces, the conclusion of Turkey-GNA maritime and security cooperation agreements, Turkish deployments on behalf of the GNA, and expanded weapons shipments to both sides. According to U.S. officials, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates arm the LNA, and Russia aids LNA operations. Turkey overtly provides military support to GNA forces. Both sides have recruited Syrian militias to aid their respective war efforts. State Department officials condemned “toxic foreign interference” in March 2020, and have called for “a sovereign Libya free of foreign intervention.”

Fighting between LNA forces, supporters of the GNA, and anti-LNA militias in western Libya is estimated to have killed more than 2,200 fighters, along with hundreds of civilians. In the capital region, the conflict has displaced more than 200,000 people, and U.N. officials report that nearly 345,000 people are in frontline areas. 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 between Libyan combatants as a precursor to restarting political reconciliation efforts. Russia and Turkey engineered a temporary truce in January, but did not achieve a ceasefire. Meeting in Berlin, Germany later in January, the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council along with other key foreign actors jointly committed to supporting a series of new arrangements with a goal of durably ending the conflict. GNA and LNA figures attended, but did not formally commit to a ceasefire. The Security Council endorsed the Berlin commitments in Resolution 2510. The U.N. Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) then supported intra-Libyan security, political, and economic discussions, but COVID-19 concerns and resumed fighting have largely undermined progress.

Figure 1. Libya: Areas of Influence

As of May 18, 2020



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

Years of division and conflict have weakened the Libyan health care system’s ability to mitigate COVID-19-related risks. In April, Acting UNSMIL head Stephanie Williams said ongoing fighting was “reckless” and “inhumane,” saying it was “stretching the capacity of local authorities and the health infrastructure that is already decimated.”

U.S. and U.N. officials have condemned 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, which, to date, appears to be limited. Notwithstanding a temporary LNA ceasefire declaration for Islamic religious observances during Ramadan, fighting continues, humanitarian access is restricted, and parties to the conflict have shut down national oil production, threatening state finances.

A Long-Troubled Transition

Libya’s political transition has been disrupted by armed non-state 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 pressing security issues, reshape the country’s public finances, or create a viable framework for post-conflict reconciliation. Insecurity spread as local armed groups competed for influence and

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 now fight alongside GNA forces against the Libyan National Army/Libyan Arab Armed Forces Movement (LNA/LAAF) and its backers. U.S. forces cooperate with the GNA for counterterrorism purposes. In November 2019, U.S. and GNA officials launched a joint security dialogue.</p> <p>Leader: Prime Minister-designate Fayeze 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 eastern Libyan militias and military personnel that has asserted control over much of eastern, central and southern Libya since 2014. Launched as a movement to combat Islamist forces in Benghazi, the LNA has attacked rivals across the country while resisting efforts to place its forces under civilian authority. It relies on foreign military support and tribal groups in areas under its control. LNA leader Khalifa Haftar is a Qadhafi-era military defector and former U.S. intelligence partner. In April 2020, he claimed a popular mandate for LNA rule, dismissing the LPA.</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.

resources. 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 Fayeze al Sarraj and members of a GNA Presidency Council tried to implement the 2015 Libyan Political Agreement but faced resistance from defiant militias, scorn from a rival interim government and leaders of Libya's House of Representatives 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 Libyan coalitions suffer from internal divisions and political legitimacy deficits stemming from the extended, fractious nature of the transition period. Victory or surrender by either side could spur new fighting within their ranks. Outside powers have exploited these factors, frustrating mediation efforts.

Diplomats have identified priorities for supporting a ceasefire and defining a path toward the unification of state institutions and the holding of national elections. However, key Libyan parties appear to have deep differences in their preferred models for governance for the country, military command, 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 for the country's stability, but U.S. actions have yet to convince or compel Libyans and their various patrons to disengage from confrontation. U.S. diplomats have stated repeatedly in 2020 that the United States does not support the LNA offensive and calls for "an immediate end to the conflict" and a return to dialogue. Officials identify counterterrorism as the top U.S. priority in Libya, and balance Libya-related concerns with other objectives in engaging various foreign actors.

The U.N. Security Council has authorized financial and travel sanctions on individuals and entities 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, as noted above, several international actors, including some U.S. partners, continue to violate its provisions. In parallel to the U.N. embargo and sanctions, U.S. executive orders provide for U.S. sanctions on those threatening peace in Libya. U.S. diplomats 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, and may consider proposals to authorize further assistance and to conduct additional oversight (H.R. 4644 and S. 2934). As long as political consensus among Libyans remains elusive, security conditions may create challenges for the return of U.S. diplomats to Libya and erect barriers to peace and the fuller development of U.S.-Libyan relations.

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