



Libya and U.S. Policy

Over a decade after 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 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 electoral and constitutional arrangements, the potential fragility of a United Nations (U.N.)-backed ceasefire, and the reemergence of institutional rivalry are prolonging Libya's instability and pose challenges for U.S. decisionmakers.

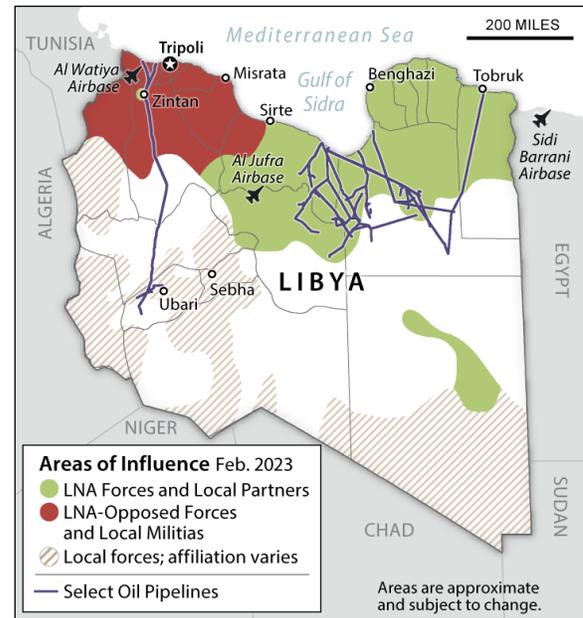
Successive U.S. Administrations have sought to prevent Libya from serving as a permissive environment for transnational terrorist groups and have taken different approaches to conflict and competition among Libyans. The Biden Administration supports the holding of new elections in Libya and has used 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 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 (**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. The LPDF and HOR endorsed Abdul Hamid Dabaiba as GNU Prime Minister, along with a three-member Presidential Council. The U.N. 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 24, 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.

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 retain control of the capital after militia clashes.
- 2023** U.N. urges Libyans to organize elections. Violence flares in Tripoli and Benghazi. Extreme flooding strikes eastern Libya, killing more than 4,000 in Derna and displacing more than 40,000 people, with 8,000 reported missing.

Source: Prepared by CRS using ArcGIS and media reporting.

U.N.: Governance Gaps Harm Libyans

Since his selection in September 2022, Special Representative of the U.N. Secretary-General for Libya Abdoulaye Bathily of Senegal has consulted with Libyans and third parties and has attempted to build consensus on organizing and holding legislative and presidential elections on an agreed constitutional basis. Bathily has said that

“most institutions lost their legitimacy years ago.” After massive floods swept through eastern Libya in September 2023, killing thousands in the city of Derna, Bathily said “The Derna disaster has revealed severe governance deficits... Had those governance issues been resolved at the national level, they would have mitigated the impact of the tragedy.” Bathily opposes aspects of electoral laws and governance proposals agreed to in 2023 by a “6+6 Committee” of HOR and HSC members. UNSMIL is organizing high-level national consultations on alternatives.

HOR Speaker Aqilah Saleh and Prime Minister Dabaiba both sought election as President in 2021, and Saleh continues to call for Dabaiba’s dismissal and the replacement of the GNU cabinet. In May 2023, the HOR appointed Osama Hamad to lead its appointed government. Dabaiba has asserted a continuing mandate and refused to yield to anything but a nationally elected government.

Haftar, the LNA, and competing western Libyan militias remain powerful security actors with diverse political aims and influence. Militia fighting killed dozens in Tripoli in August 2023, and in October 2023 fighting followed the LNA’s arrest of a former GNA defense minister. Officers of the Joint Military Commission (“5+5”) that negotiated the 2020 ceasefire continue to meet under U.N. auspices.

Libya’s fiscal and economic dependence on the oil and gas sector make the Libyan National Oil Corporation (NOC), the Central Bank, and the state budget 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 2023, Libya’s Presidential Council established a High Financial Oversight Committee made up of representatives from competing factions to oversee public revenue and spending.

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 nominally accrue to a National Oil Corporation account for transfer to the Central Bank to support government spending. In practice, leaders of the NOC and the Central Bank at times appear to manage funds for political purposes.

U.S. Policy and Selected Issues

The Biden Administration has backed U.N. mediation in Libya with the goals of providing for the reunification of Libyan institutions and an end to serial interim governing arrangements. Like their U.N. counterparts, U.S. officials encourage dialogue among Libyans and have stated that elections are required to resolve disputes over legitimacy. U.S. diplomats have emphasized the importance of maintaining the ceasefire and of impartial administration of institutions such as the NOC and Central Bank. In engaging other third parties U.S. officials continue to balance Libya-specific concerns with other U.S. goals relative 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. The executive branch continues to

assess requirements to reestablish a lasting U.S. diplomatic presence in Libya. Congress may consult with the Administration on related plans, security needs, and costs.

Terrorism and Foreign Military Forces

U.N. and U.S. reporting describe transnational terrorist threats in Libya as reduced and contained. Successive U.S. Administrations have sought to foster the departure from Libya of foreign military forces and mercenaries. The U.S. military has monitored and reported on the activities of Russian mercenaries and military equipment in Libya. Press accounts 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. Forces in eastern Libya shot down a U.S. unmanned aerial vehicle there in August 2022. Turkish military advisers train and assist western Libyan forces, and Turkey recently approved the extension of its military presence to 2026. The LNA and its opponents reportedly have used fighters from Syria, Chad, and Sudan.

U.N. Bodies and U.N. and U.S. Sanctions

The U.N. Security Council has extended UNSMIL’s mandate through October 2024. The 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

The U.N. estimates more than 500,000 people in Libya (out of 7 million) require some form of humanitarian aid, including the more than 250,000 affected by September 2023 flooding. U.N. agencies have identified nearly 700,000 foreign migrants, more than 50,000 internally displaced persons, and more than 54,000 refugees and asylum seekers in Libya. Migrants remain vulnerable to extortion, indefinite detention, sexual violence, and other abuses. The State Department reported in 2023 that “Endemic corruption and militias’ influence over government ministries contributed to the GNU’s inability to effectively address human trafficking.”

Issues in the 118th Congress

Congress has conditionally appropriated funding for transition support, stabilization, security assistance, and humanitarian programs for Libya since 2011. The Biden Administration seeks \$15.95 million in FY2024 funding for aid in Libya, and in March 2023 sent Congress a 10-year plan for aid in Libya pursuant to the Global Fragility Act (Title V of Division J, P.L. 116-94), under which the Administration named Libya as a priority country in 2022. The Senate Appropriations Committee report accompanying S. 2438 to provide for FY2024 foreign operations appropriations directs that the Administration may not use Prevention and Stabilization Fund (PSF) monies for GFA programs in Libya.

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