

U.S. Diplomatic Heft Required in Libya

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

The U.S. has historically deferred to international diplomacy to stabilize Libya, but the situation now requires diplomatic weight that the U.S. alone can muster.

The ongoing violence in Libya has destabilized a fragile region, gives cover to Islamist terrorist organizations, and provides Russia an opportunity to build influence.

The U.S. should engage aggressively in diplomacy, influence combatants toward an agreement, and discourage destabilizing foreign interventions.

The nearly decades-long violence in Libya is destabilizing a fragile region, gives cover to Islamist terrorist organizations, and provides Russia an opportunity to build influence in a strategic region. Yet since the outbreak of the civil war in Libya in 2011, the U.S.—the country best able to influence the combatants and coordinate foreign powers’ Libyan activities—has deferred to others’ leadership. Washington should urgently lead a diplomatic effort that involves pressuring the warring sides to hold good-faith negotiations, supporting competent municipal governments, and trying to coordinate the activities of countries involved in Libya.

Bad, and Getting Worse

Libya has been in tumult since a 2011 “Arab Spring” uprising led to a rebel movement backed by the North

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Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) toppling long-time dictator Muammar Qadhafi.¹ Two competing governments, each backed by a collection of militias, are now battling for supremacy. The internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) is based in the capital in the west, Tripoli, while the self-styled Libyan National Army (LNA) hails from the eastern part of the country.

The competition between the two sides escalated in April when the LNA, under the leadership of General Khalifa Haftar, attacked Tripoli. The offensive ground to a stalemate where it remains, though in January the LNA captured the important coastal city of Sirte.

Both warring factions have severe shortcomings. The GNA is weak with little popular support. Its forces are a fractious coalition of militias—some of which are Islamist—over which the GNA exercises nominal control. Its primary foe, General Haftar, leader of the LNA, appears intent on conquering Libya and ruling as a military strongman. It is unlikely that he can subdue such a divided country filled with armed groups. Even if he could, the rule that prevails in some of the areas that he controls is authoritarian, brutal, and Islamist-tinged,² a likely harbinger of the type of rule he would impose were he to conquer Libya.

The international community has unsuccessfully tried to coax the two sides into a sustainable settlement for years—the most recent cease fire, agreed in Berlin, collapsed within days.³ Less than a week earlier, Haftar left a peace summit convened in Russia and supported by Turkey without signing the agreement.⁴

Foreign Interference

From the start of the 2011 uprising, outside powers have played an important role in the Libyan conflict. Egypt, France, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) currently support Haftar. The UAE in particular is funneling weapons, advisors, and materiel to the general; while mercenaries from Chad and Sudan, as well as Russia's Wagner Group, a private paramilitary organization, are a significant part of Haftar's forces.⁵ Russia has made overtures to both sides, but aligns with Haftar.

The pro-Haftar faction generally believes that he is the best hope for suppressing the terrorist and other Islamist groups prevalent in Libya. Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE are also involved in a tit-for-tat struggle with Qatar and Turkey, whom they accuse of supporting Islamist movements throughout the Middle East and beyond. Ankara's support of the Arab Spring protests in Egypt that temporarily brought a Muslim Brotherhood president to power particularly irritated Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE.

Italy, Qatar, and Turkey are the GNA's primary external supporters. Qatar, currently under a UAE- and Saudi Arabia-led embargo, likely sees Libya as a chance to frustrate its rivals' designs, which at least partially motivates its support of the GNA.

Turkey provides weapons to the GNA, including armed drones that, facing off with the LNA's Chinese-made and UAE-supplied armed drones, has made Libya one of the world's most active drone warfare theaters. In January, Ankara began deploying thousands of troops to Libya—some of whom are reportedly Syrians affiliated with Islamist terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda and ISIS—to fight for the GNA.⁶

Ankara is drawn to Libya because more than a million people of Turkish descent live there.⁷ Turkey also wants to recoup some of the losses that its companies suffered in the upheaval surrounding Qadhafi's fall, as well as to position them to benefit from Libya's eventual reconstruction.⁸ Collaborating with the GNA has geostrategic value as well—in November 2019, Turkey and the GNA agreed on forming a maritime exclusive economic zone connecting the two countries across the Mediterranean Sea. The zone would give Ankara the ability to block the development of rich gas fields in the eastern Mediterranean, which would have to be exported by pipeline through the maritime region that Turkey now claims.⁹

The Indispensable Role of the U.S.

Libyan instability harms U.S. national interests in a variety of ways:

- The lack of effective government control in Libya makes it impossible for any power to suppress the terrorist groups operating in the country. Libya's instability has supercharged terrorism in Africa's Sahel region as weapons and fighters moved south from Libya.
- The conflict stresses the region, especially Libya's immediate neighbors Tunisia and Egypt, both American allies, and Qadhafi's ouster allowed irregular migration through Libya to surge.
- Libya is not a major oil producer, but if its production increased, it could help cushion international oil markets from Middle East turmoil.
- The ability of the Gulf countries to pursue their rivalry unchecked in Libya may encourage them to intensify their destabilizing competition in other parts of Africa.¹⁰

- Finally, geopolitical competitors, most notably Russia, inserted themselves into the conflict. Moscow's ability to convene the leadership of both warring factions is evidence of the influence it now wields, even though its mediation attempt failed.

The U.S. has deferred to others to lead the effort to stabilize Libya. Yet Russia's abortive peace summit is a dual reminder of why the U.S. should assert itself. U.S. passivity handed Moscow an opportunity to build influence in a country on Europe's doorstep, while Russian President Vladimir Putin's failure to deliver a peace deal demonstrates how a problem as difficult as Libya requires the kind of diplomatic weight the U.S. alone can muster.

U.S. leadership on Libya does not require troops or money. It requires American attention and diplomatic influence, which should include the following:

- **Pressuring the warring sides to hold good-faith negotiations.**
The frequent failure of negotiations demonstrates the factions' disinterest in a political settlement—Haftar's attack on Tripoli in particular shows his preference for settling the conflict through force. The U.S. should make clear that only a negotiated agreement will bring stability to the country and elicit full American support.
- **Coordinating the activities of countries with interests in Libya.**
The U.S. should use its influence to motivate and unify the many states with interests in Libya to work together toward a stable and terror-free Libya. The U.S. should persuade those countries to join the U.S. in convincing the Libyan factions that a political agreement is the only solution, and to work with the U.S. to fight terrorism in the country. The U.S. should also pressure the countries that are violating the U.N. arms embargo and propping up the competing factions inside Libya to stop doing so.
- **Supporting competent municipal governments.** Given Libya's national-level dysfunction, the U.S. should support those municipal governments that are functioning and have a measure of credibility among Libyans. Competent municipal governments could help to reduce the violence and provide the foundation for a workable national government model.

Time to Lead

The best chance the U.S. has to ameliorate the Libya crisis is to aggressively engage on the diplomatic front. The United States is the country best able to influence the combatants toward an agreement, and to persuade foreign powers to stop their counterproductive activities inside Libya. Failing to do so will heighten the odds that Libya becomes a bigger and more complex problem for the United States for years to come.

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Endnotes

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9. A number of countries have dismissed the Libyan-Turkish agreement as a violation of international law. Luke Baker, Tuvan Gumrukcu, and Michele Kambas, "Turkey-Libya Maritime Deal Rattles East Mediterranean," Reuters, December 25, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-libya-eastmed-tensions-explain/turkey-libya-maritime-deal-rattles-east-mediterranean-idUSKBN1Y0JK> (accessed March 24, 2020).
10. For more on how the rivalry is affecting East Africa, see Joshua Meservey, "The Saudi-Qatari Dispute: Why the U.S. Must Prevent Spillover into East Africa," Heritage Foundation *Background* No. 3268, November 29, 2017, <https://www.heritage.org/africa/report/the-saudi-qatari-dispute-why-the-us-must-prevent-spillover-east-africa>.