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. Both LNA and anti-LNA forces reportedly have received some military supply shipments since May, raising questions with regard to enforcement of the U.N. arms embargo.

Libyan parties to the conflict have rejected outsiders’ calls for an unconditional ceasefire. Some western Libyan parties (including GNA leaders Prime Minister-designate Fayez 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. officials and U.N. Special Representative and U.N. Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) head Ghassan Salamé remain engaged with all sides. 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 June 25, U.N. officials reported that there have been a minimum of 178 civilian casualties, including 41 civilian deaths. The World Health Organization places the overall casualty count since April 4, including combatants, at 739 deaths and 4,407 wounded. More than 93,000 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. Reports suggest that fuel shortages, bank lines, service interruptions, and crime in and around Tripoli are increasing.

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. 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.

- **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 October and November 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 is considering the nomination of U.S. Ambassador-designate Richard Norland. 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.
Author Information

Christopher M. Blanchard
Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs

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