

ISSUES

- Since Moammar Gadhafi was overthrown in 2011, Libya has been unable to achieve political stability. By 2014, Libya faced a mini-civil war between a Tripoli-based government backed by Turkey and Qatar and a Tobruk-based government in the east backed by Egypt, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia. A December 2015 UN-brokered political agreement for a Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA) was supposed to provide a transition to a new constitution and elections. Instead, it led to a continued east-west split, efforts by Libyan General Khalifa Hifter to impose one-person military rule throughout the country, and resumption of a renewed and continuing proxy war.
- The current civil war was initiated by Libyan strongman Khalifa Hifter on April 4, 2019, when he decided, with the military support of Egypt, Russia, and the UAE, to besiege Tripoli in an effort to conquer Libya's capital and its western region by force. This effort prompted the introduction of Turkish-backed military forces and mercenaries on the side of the internationally recognized GNA, which resulted in the defeat of Hifter's forces 14 months later, and their withdrawal south to Jufra and east to Sirte. In addition to its civil war, Libya still faces the risk of a broader proxy war, due to the continued presence in Libya of the foreign military forces supporting each side.
- Since January, Hifter's forces have generally prevented the export of Libya's oil. Libya's economy is entirely dependent on its oil revenues, which are sufficient in principle to take care of the basic needs of all 6.5 million Libyans. Creating an equitable sharing of those revenues remains a central element of any further political deal that would allow Libya to move forward.
- The unresolved conflict has led to a humanitarian crisis, amid the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people by the war. It also continues to impede progress in addressing the use of Libya to smuggle migrants into Europe. Finally, it is creating renewed opportunities for terrorists, including for ISIS to reconquer Libyan territory it lost to joint U.S.-Libyan counter-terrorism efforts in 2016.

US INTERESTS

- Prevent Libya from becoming a terrorist safe haven. Renewed terrorist control of territory would threaten the stability and safety of Libya, the Maghreb as a whole, the Sahel, and Europe.
- Prevent Libya from fragmenting into multiple states. The risk of eastern secession is real. Efforts to divide the country risk creating long-term political, security, economic, and humanitarian catastrophes.

- Maintain Libyan oil production. As a producer of up to 1.6 million bpd, Libya plays an important role in international oil markets, and a collapse in its production could have a negative impact on global oil prices, in addition to putting Libyans at risk.
- Counter smuggling and criminality. The spread of criminal activity risks destabilizing Libya, its African neighbors, and its European ones, especially from migrant smuggling.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Take action to stop the civil war. The U.S. should do more to press all foreign sponsors of the warring sides to pull back from the proxy war through taking tailored measures against countries that ignore U.S. warnings and continue to violate the UN arms embargo. These could include publicizing violations at the UN Security Council and deferring discretionary security cooperation. It should also sanction Libyans who commit acts of terrorism, such as attacks on civilian targets and airports, and other serious human rights violations.
- Support the UN in its efforts to secure a further political agreement. A political agreement could provide the basis for political, economic, and security arrangements that would enable Libya to become stable. Meaningful support should include the U.S. acting as a convener, rather than merely as a participant, to drive the UN process forward.