

CRS Insights

Responding to Libya's Political and Security Crises: Policy Choices for the United States
Christopher M. Blanchard, Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs (cblanchard@crs.loc.gov, 7-0428)
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Deepening conflict and political tension in Libya are threatening civilians and may drag the country off the path of transition and toward civil war. (Read the CRS background report [here](#).) [Intense clashes near Tripoli](#) between militias have closed the capital's international airport and further strained relations among political factions. On July 26, the State Department [suspended operations at the U.S. Embassy](#) (located near the Tripoli airport) and evacuated personnel [under U.S. military escort](#). [Fighting also continues around Benghazi](#) between armed Islamist groups and forces allied with an anti-Islamist former military commander, Khalifa Haftar.

The fragmentation of political and military power in Libya since the end of the 2011 anti-Qadhafi conflict and the absence of capable state institutions compound the difficulty of restoring order. In late July 2014, Libya's acting cabinet issued a vague call for international assistance, but some Libyan legislators responded by rejecting the prospect of any foreign military intervention. On July 23, acting Interim Prime Minister Abdullah al Thinni [clarified](#) his government's call for international support and pleaded with combatants to pull back "before our country reaches a point of no-return and becomes involved in an unjustifiable, full-blown war."

Some observers have warned that fighting among militias and mutual suspicions among political factions could derail the work of the [recently-elected](#) Council of Representatives (COR) and delay that legislative body's selection of a new cabinet. Meanwhile, Members of Congress and Administration officials may consider new options for encouraging Libyans to end the fighting and agree to security and political arrangements to bring the transition period to a close.

U.S. Assistance and Diplomacy

The United States and other leading members of the international community are debating options for reversing Libya's deteriorating security conditions and reenergizing Libyan efforts to build national consensus. Although U.S. Embassy personnel have been evacuated, the State Department reports that its officials will remain engaged in conflict resolution and transition support efforts. U.S. officials [have called on](#) Libyans to "immediately cease hostilities and begin negotiations to resolve their grievances," and "to respect the will of the people, including the authority of the recently-elected COR, and to reject the use of violence to affect political processes." [David Satterfield](#) continues to serve as a U.S. envoy to Libyan leaders and concerned international parties.

The 113th Congress has approved and funded Administration proposals to provide [limited security assistance](#) to Libya's nascent border security and counterterrorism forces. However, the implementation and scope of some programs have been delayed or altered for security and administrative reasons. In June 2014, U.S. officials [told Congress](#) that they would seek the yet-to-be-formed new Libyan cabinet's endorsement for a planned larger-scale military training program. The evacuation of U.S. personnel from Libya may hamper the preparation and implementation of U.S. security assistance programs for the immediate future. Conditioning the delivery of future U.S. assistance on ceasefire or dialogue commitments might underscore U.S. priorities but also might fail to influence those Libyans opposed to the acceptance of U.S. assistance. It might also undermine U.S. relationships with emerging leaders who desire U.S. support. [Executive Order 13566](#) and the national emergency declared in 2011 regarding Libya [remain in force](#) and, if adapted, may offer options for placing financial or other sanctions on individuals disrupting peace and security.

An Internationally Supported Security and Transition Plan?

Some observers have called for internationally supported security or dialogue agreements for Libya and

have looked to Yemen's post-2011 transition arrangements as potential models to consider [adapting](#) to Libya's current crises. In Yemen, a regionally negotiated and internationally backed transition plan helped break a cycle of conflict that prevailed in 2011 and 2012, when fighting among Yemeni military units, attacks on protestors, and a series of assassinations risked igniting civil war between supporters and opponents of then-President Ali Abdullah Saleh. The United Nations (U.N.) Secretary General named a Special Adviser and envoy for Yemen, and the U.N. Security Council adopted resolutions (Resolution [2014](#), Resolution [2051](#), and Resolution [2140](#)) demanding an end to political violence; calling on leaders to agree to and implement a Gulf Cooperation Council-sponsored transition plan; and authorizing financial and travel sanctions on individuals found to be "obstructing or undermining" the transition and committing violent acts or human rights abuses. U.S. [Executive Order 13611](#) also threatens individuals who undermine peace and security in Yemen with U.S. financial sanctions. Some observers considered Yemen's National Dialogue Conference a success, although it concluded without resolving some major issues. Several transition steps remain incomplete amid ongoing—but lower-level—violence.

It remains to be seen whether such a framework [could be applied](#) to the current situation in Libya. Yemen's transition plan has sought to transfer power between leaders while reforming some ministries and powerful national security forces. In comparison, Libya suffers from a national-level leadership vacuum, hollow national bureaucracies, and weak national security forces. Foreign engagement in Yemen in part reflects the concerns of powerful third parties such as Saudi Arabia and the United States about transnational terrorism. Libya's neighbors, particularly Algeria and Egypt, have expressed increasing concern about threats emanating from Libya, but have not formally offered to lead mediation among Libyan factions alongside other countries' envoys. Libya's state oil wealth and the funds available to militias also may limit outsiders' leverage.

U.N. Security Council Resolutions [1970](#) and [1973](#) defined the international response to Libya's 2011 conflict, but the Security Council has rescinded the public asset freeze, no-fly zone, and civilian protection mandate provisions of those resolutions. Some of Resolution 1970's sanctions and arms embargo provisions [remain operative](#), along with [International Criminal Court jurisdiction](#) for certain crimes. Resolution [2144](#) strengthened and expanded the mandate of the U.N. Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL, established by Resolution [2009](#)), and [Tarek Mitri](#) serves as the Special Representative of the Secretary-General and Head of UNSMIL. Like their U.S. counterparts, U.N. personnel were recently [evacuated](#). It is conceivable that Security Council members could consider sanctions or embargo provisions to support their [demands for an end to violence](#). However, a new U.N. mandate for military intervention or peace enforcement in Libya does not appear to be forthcoming.