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PolicyWatch 3371

Beyond the Ceasefire in Libya

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Aug 25, 2020

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Brief Analysis

Publicly committing to a ceasefire is a positive development, but many details still need to be resolved with active U.S. support, especially security arrangements in central Libya and the speedy resumption of oil exports.

On August 21, the political leaders of the two main factions in Libya's civil war—Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj of the Government of National Accord (GNA) and Speaker Aguila Saleh of the eastern-based House of Representatives—issued separate statements declaring a ceasefire and a freeze in military positions around Sirte and al-Jufrah. The move followed extensive diplomatic efforts by Germany, the United States, and the UN.

Many of the deal's terms will require further negotiation, but so far they entail establishing a demilitarized zone in central Libya and lifting the oil blockade that has cost the country \$8 billion to date. Saleh also called for reformatting the Presidential Council and moving it from Tripoli to Sirte, while Sarraj called for holding national elections next March.

The announcements grew out of the stalemate that set in after GNA-aligned forces [pushed to the outskirts of Sirte in June](#). Since then, Egypt and Turkey have escalated their threats of direct military action, spurring intensified Western diplomacy to stave off a regional war.

Of particular significance is Saleh replacing eastern military commander Khalifa Haftar in the negotiations. The latter's sponsors in the United Arab Emirates and Egypt lost confidence in him after his fourteen-month offensive against Tripoli collapsed this May. In response to the new ceasefire, Haftar's spokesman in the so-called Libyan National Army (LNA) dismissed Sarraj's statement, vowed to remain in Sirte, and completely ignored Saleh's parallel statement, indicating deep divisions in east Libya and raising questions about who has authority over the LNA's fighting forces. Saleh has not been a reliable diplomatic interlocutor in the past and remains under U.S. sanctions for obstructing the 2015 Libyan Political Agreement. Thus, while Haftar is politically marginalized for now, he or other eastern commanders could still undermine the ceasefire.

WHAT WILL DEMILITARIZATION ENTAIL?

The concept of demilitarizing central Libya sounds simpler than it will be in practice. Many details still need to be negotiated by the 5+5 Joint Military Commission, the body established in January at the Berlin conference and comprising five military representatives from each side. For starters, the parties need to determine the specific points to which forces must withdraw, how they will distinguish between military and non-military forces in Libya's militia-ridden environment, and what internal security arrangements will be made for Sirte and al-Jufrah (Sarraj's statement suggested police from each side would deploy there).

Even more problematic are the security arrangements around adjacent oil facilities, including wells, pipelines, and the export terminals that Haftar has blockaded since January. After retreating from Tripoli in May, Haftar-aligned forces from the Wagner Group, [a Russian private military contractor](#), relocated to al-Jufrah and assumed positions in the Sirte oil crescent and further south in the Sharara oil field. While Sarraj and Saleh's statements mentioned Libyan sovereignty and the departure of foreign mercenaries in general terms, officials from the country's National Oil Corporation explicitly linked these issues to oil security as a prerequisite to resuming exports.

Once the Libyans establish specific terms for the DMZ, the international community will have to play a significant role in monitoring and enforcing them. That means active participation by the reluctant United States and the traditionally divided EU. In particular, the U.S. military will need to expand the imagery that AFRICOM releases on Russian activity in Libya, while the Europeans will need to create a mechanism for monitoring potential violations. In addition, the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) requires additional resources to oversee an observation mission as agreed by the 5+5 Commission this spring, and its mandate needs to be amended accordingly when renewed in September. The international community and the UN Security Council remain divided over Libya policy, so negotiations should begin now over how they will treat potential violations of the DMZ. Moscow must be part of this conversation, even though it continues to deny its military interests in Libya and its links to the Wagner Group's operations there.

ECONOMIC COMPROMISE

Beyond security arrangements, the ceasefire's second main goal is to lift the oil blockade. Haftar initially closed oil terminals in the east as part of his strategy to freeze funds from the GNA and respond to accusations of corruption against the Libyan Central Bank and its governor, Sadek al-Kabir. Indeed, part of the motivation for Haftar's long offensive to take Tripoli was to wrest control over the Central Bank.

To allay Haftar's position over perceived corruption, officials from UNSMIL and the United States have worked for months on arrangements to audit the Central Bank and unify Libya's parallel financial institutions, which have been divided since 2014 (though all the recognized national institutions remain in Tripoli). Notably, Sarraj and Saleh agreed to hold oil revenue in the Libyan Foreign Bank—and outside the Central Bank—until a political deal is reached. Thus, if political negotiations drag on indefinitely, it would starve the country of funds desperately needed for recovering from the war, addressing the COVID-19 emergency, fixing rampant power shortages, and meeting

other humanitarian needs.

BROADENING THE U.S. ROLE

After over a year of relatively minimal efforts to halt Haftar's offensive, Washington increased its diplomatic involvement in July. Various foreign leaders called President Trump directly to request his support for competing stances on Libya, apparently spurring the White House to announce a policy of "active neutrality" and "360-degree diplomatic engagement with Libyan and external stakeholders across the conflict," according to an August 4 statement by National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien. Subsequent U.S. discussions with Libyan leaders and regional players—including Ambassador Richard Norland's visits to Cairo and Ankara—helped produce the ceasefire.

Yet the United States cannot let the momentum fade, since a number of known challenges could easily reverse whatever progress is made in the coming days and weeks. For one, Sarraj and Saleh remain politically weak at home. On August 23—two days after the promising ceasefire announcement—protestors took to the streets of Tripoli to criticize the prime minister and the GNA over poor service delivery. Accordingly, the United States should encourage the 5+5 Commission to proceed quickly on setting terms for the DMZ. It should also advise UNSMIL about how best to protect the zone and local oil installations.

Another significant risk is that the temporary security arrangement could easily turn into a long-term frozen conflict if the accompanying political negotiations stall, with the DMZ imposing artificial borders that push Libya closer to partition. Dividing the country into its historical regions is a dangerous proposition that ignores the many local and intercommunal factors driving the war. Additionally, a frozen conflict would encourage Haftar's backers in Egypt, Russia, and the UAE to push for permanent spheres of influence and normalize their positions outside the DMZ, thereby preventing the GNA or a successor government from gaining full control over the country. A long-term DMZ could also hurt the GNA's primary military backer, Turkey—for instance, their [November 2019 agreement](#) delineating territorial waters and exclusive economic zones in the Mediterranean would become increasingly tenuous if the coastal areas covered by the deal remain outside Tripoli's control.

Perhaps most important, Washington cannot focus solely on central Libya while ignoring the ongoing buildup of military hardware and personnel in the east (by Russia and the UAE) and west (by Turkey). Moscow's footprint in central Libya is only an extension of its larger military and logistical presence in the east, including personnel stationed at the UAE-constructed al-Khadim Air Base. U.S. officials should continue exposing Russian activities in Libya, calling them out directly from Washington, not just from AFRICOM headquarters in Germany. They should also press U.S. allies Ankara and Abu Dhabi to mutually agree on halting arms transfers to the rival sides during the ceasefire talks, especially given the limited effectiveness of the EU's maritime embargo enforcement mechanism, Operation Irini.

Libya's recent history of failed ceasefires and diminished confidence in peacemaking gives Washington extra incentive to seize this opportunity and reestablish itself as a trusted mediator. That requires persistent diplomatic effort by the White House and State Department, along with targeted support from elements of the Treasury and Defense Departments to maximize the effectiveness of sanctions and expose violations of the arms embargo. It is also past time for Washington to agree to a new UN special representative for Libya, a post that has been unfilled since Ghassan Salame resigned in March.

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