

# Shifting Tides in Libya Require More Active U.S. Involvement

by [Ben Fishman \(/experts/ben-fishman\)](/experts/ben-fishman)

Jun 10, 2020

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/tghywr-alzrwf-fy-lybya-yttlb-anhrataan-amrykyaan-akthr-falyt\)](/ar/policy-analysis/tghywr-alzrwf-fy-lybya-yttlb-anhrataan-amrykyaan-akthr-falyt)

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Ben Fishman \(/experts/ben-fishman\)](/experts/ben-fishman)

Ben Fishman is the Steven D. Levy Senior Fellow in the Linda and Tony Rubin Program on Arab Politics at The Washington Institute, where he focuses on North Africa.



Brief Analysis

---

**Directly engaging all parties is essential if Washington hopes to advance a national dialogue and prevent a Turkish-Russian accommodation that establishes their presence in Libya indefinitely.**

On June 8, President Trump held a phone call with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to discuss the situation in Libya, where the civil war has taken a sharp turn but remains far from over. The fourteen-month offensive led by Gen. Khalifa Haftar's so-called Libyan National Army was finally turned back in recent days—forces aligned with the UN-recognized Government of National Accord not only retook all of Tripoli, but also overran LNA strongholds in Bani Walid and Tarhuna with much less resistance than expected. These advances were at least temporarily halted in Sirte, after the GNA extended its positions beyond the air superiority zone it had previously established with Turkey's help (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/what-turned-the-battle-for-tripoli>).

Yet the LNA is far from defeated. One of its chief patrons, Russia, still maintains a significant presence in the south, including at least fourteen advanced fighter aircraft in al-Jufrah and, in all likelihood, hundreds of troops from the Wagner private military company (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/russian-private-military-companies-continuity-and-evolution-of-the-model>). Whether Haftar will be able to mount a defensive stand in Sirte or al-Jufrah depends on the extent to which Russia and another key backer, the United Arab Emirates, continue providing him with military support—even as a third patron, Egypt, attempts to put its stamp on Libya diplomacy.

## HAFTAR IN RETREAT

On June 6, President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi summoned Haftar to Cairo alongside sometime-rival Aguila Saleh, the

head of the eastern-based House of Representatives that nominally remains part of the institutions recognized by the 2015 Libyan Political Agreement. There, Sisi announced the “Cairo Declaration,” calling for a ceasefire and a complicated political transition plan. The multipart plan expands on Saleh’s April proposal to hold elections for the Presidential Council (the ruling body overseeing the GNA) based on Libya’s historical regions—east, west, and south. When Saleh’s initiative first surfaced, Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov praised it and the UN said it was worth discussing, earning him a place at the podium this week beside Sisi and Haftar.

For Haftar, the Cairo Declaration is a political defeat that compounds his military losses. Just a few short weeks ago, he was publicly denouncing the agreement that created the GNA five years prior. Now, however, Sisi has forced him to acknowledge the GNA and support the very national dialogue that his months-long campaign against Tripoli preempted. Some Egyptian media report that Haftar is being kept in Cairo until an alternative eastern leader can replace him. His staying power may now depend on how the UAE views him after his latest defeats in the field.

Whatever the case, GNA prime minister Fayez al-Sarraj rejected the Egyptian ceasefire, while Interior Minister Fathi Bashagha indicated that GNA forces will halt their offensive after they take Sirte, its nearby oil facilities, and al-Jufrah, only then negotiating with the LNA. Such statements reflect the GNA coalition’s tricky balance between internal pressures to continue advancing and international pressure to stop the fighting.

## THE FOREIGN ACTORS

**T**urkey has established itself as the primary military actor in Libya after helping the GNA defeat the combined forces of the LNA, hundreds of Russian Wagner military contractors, and Emirati drones and air defense systems. How much further Ankara will invest militarily in Tripoli depends on the next stages of the war. There is some risk of being drawn into a costly conflict should Russia choose to defend its positions.

More likely, however, Erdogan and President Vladimir Putin will look to repeat their [history of tactical accommodation \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/coronavirus-has-opposite-effects-on-turkish-policy-in-syria-and-libya\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/coronavirus-has-opposite-effects-on-turkish-policy-in-syria-and-libya) as seen in both Syria and Libya, most recently the unimpeded retreat of Wagner forces from Tripoli. As for the prospects of a more strategic Turkish-Russian arrangement similar to Syria’s Astana process, any such effort would face resistance from both Libyans (given their anti-colonial impulses) and Western powers (who have their own interests in limiting Turkish and Russian influence in North Africa).

At this point, the most interesting actor is Sisi. He long believed that the LNA served as Egypt’s western buffer against Libyan militants and successive governments in Tripoli, which Haftar and the UAE falsely characterize as Islamist and jihadist. Ironically, though, Sisi’s support for Haftar has brought a real Islamist power and a modernized NATO military—Erdogan’s Turkey—to Egypt’s border. Haftar’s humiliating appearance in Cairo suggests that Sisi has finally lost confidence in him to protect the frontier. The key question is who Sisi believes can replace the general, and to what extent this individual (or group) would be willing to genuinely compromise with the GNA. The content of the Cairo Declaration suggests that Sisi can at least tolerate new elections in Libya, though he may choose not to recognize an outcome he deems unfavorable.

## A MORE DYNAMIC U.S. ROLE

**I**n recent weeks, the Trump administration has undertaken more senior-level diplomatic activity on Libya than it did in the previous thirteen months. In late May, before the GNA’s advances, President Trump discussed Libya with Erdogan and French president Emmanuel Macron, and all of them agreed on the need to “deescalate.” Secretary of State Mike Pompeo then called Prime Minister Sarraj for the first time in well over a year and tweeted, “A ceasefire leading to a political resolution is the only option for the Libyan people.” Catching up to events on June 7, the National Security Council press office recognized the Egyptian “peace initiative” as an effort that could lead “all parties to a ceasefire, withdrawal of foreign troops from Libya, and a return to UN-led political negotiations.”

President Trump's second Libya call with Erdogan came the next day.

The next step is for Washington to expand its engagement in three crucial ways: encouraging—not just watching—the diversification of political voices in the east, exposing violations of the UN arms embargo, and talking with Turkey and Russia to help manage their withdrawal from Libya.

**Engaging with eastern leaders.** Haftar has been militarily and politically damaged, and Saleh is unlikely to reach similar levels of power (besides competing with other figures in the east, he is still under U.S. sanctions for his previous role in disrupting Libya's stabilization). Yet this does not mean Washington should just keep "watching with interest as political voices in the East of Libya find expression," as the U.S. embassy tweeted on June 6. Instead, American and allied officials should regularly engage local political, business, and civil society leaders in the east, much like they recently touted Ambassador Richard Norland's conversation with a mayor in the west. Such efforts would encourage eastern participation in a national dialogue and make clear that the United States does not endorse any particular figure.

**Exposing arms embargo violations.** Washington should shine a much brighter light on foreign military interference in Libya, following the example that U.S. Africa Command has set by releasing satellite imagery of Russian fighter jet deployments. This includes highlighting the important work of the UN Panel of Experts [in detailing all sanctions violations \(https://undocs.org/en/S/2019/914\)](https://undocs.org/en/S/2019/914). Even if the divided Security Council will not do anything in response, the United States should still help the panel expose additional violations and impose unilateral sanctions on offending entities (e.g., private military contractors, arms dealers, shipping companies). Focusing on other avenues of arms transfers would also augment the poorly resourced EU maritime mission in the area, Operation Irini. Additionally, Washington should back up its vote for Security Council Resolution 2510 and its rhetorical support for a ceasefire by specifying how it will facilitate a UN-coordinated mechanism toward that end.

**Preventing a Russia-Turkey deal.** Moscow and Ankara stand to benefit by jointly formalizing their positions in Libya. Turkey would gain Russian support against European opposition to both its presence in Tripoli and its [controversial maritime arrangement \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/turkey-pivots-to-tripoli-implications-for-libyas-civil-war-and-u.s.-policy\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/turkey-pivots-to-tripoli-implications-for-libyas-civil-war-and-u.s.-policy) with Libya; Russia would solidify its position in the eastern half of the country, advance its local economic interests, and, most worrisome, expand its military basing in the region. Such an understanding will not happen organically, however, so U.S. officials have an opportunity to prevent it.

Thus far, Washington has shunned the idea of holding a dialogue with Moscow on Libya, despite Lavrov proposing one to Secretary Pompeo during his December visit to Washington. It is time to reverse that policy. U.S. officials should start talking with Russia and Turkey to identify mutually acceptable terms for ending the war, withdrawing their advanced military assets, and urging their Libyan partners to return to the UN-led national dialogue. Germany should be brought into these talks as a voice for European interests. Absent such direct U.S. involvement, Russia and Turkey will become more deeply ingrained in a way that runs counter to American interests and puts Libya on the road to partition and continued strife. Ultimately, a unified, stable, and legitimate government is the best ally to reject foreign militaries on Libyan soil. Ending the war and supporting such a government is the best path toward that goal.

*Ben Fishman is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute and former director for North Africa at the National Security Council.* ❖

---

## RECOMMENDED

---



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

### [President Trump's Gulf Trip: A Whirlwind Three Days in the Region](#)

May 16, 2025



Robert Satloff

[\(/policy-analysis/president-trumps-gulf-trip-whirlwind-three-days-region\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [Seizing the Moment of Opportunity in Syria: Guidelines for U.S. Action](#)

May 21, 2025, starting at 11:00 a.m. EDT (1500 GMT)



Matthew Levitt,  
Devorah Margolin,  
Souhira Medini,  
David Schenker

[\(/policy-analysis/seizing-moment-opportunity-syria-guidelines-us-action\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

### [President Trump's Gulf Trip: Investment, AI, and Semiconductors in the UAE on Day Three](#)

May 15, 2025



Elizabeth Dent

[\(/policy-analysis/president-trumps-gulf-trip-investment-ai-and-semiconductors-uae-day-three\)](#)

TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

[Democracy & Reform \(/policy-analysis/democracy-reform\)](/policy-analysis/democracy-reform)

## REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[North Africa \(/policy-analysis/north-africa\)](/policy-analysis/north-africa)

[Turkey \(/policy-analysis/turkey\)](/policy-analysis/turkey)