

Reframing Libya for a Reluctant Administration

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

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Brief Analysis

By treating the conflict as a matter of Mediterranean security, President Biden's team can better assist the new Libyan government and demonstrate its commitment to revitalizing alliances.

On February 25, Prime Minister-designate Abdulhamid al-Dabaiba presented his new national unity government to Libya's House of Representatives, which now has twenty-one days to approve it. Although he has not yet named his ministers, he promised they would be qualified technocrats who are representative of Libya's three regions and diverse society. The deadline is based on the transition roadmap drawn up by the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF), the body that narrowly appointed Dabaiba and chose Muhammad al-Menfi to lead the three-person Presidential Council. If the House of Representatives fails to convene a quorum or approve the government, ratification reverts to the LPDF.

In any case, the new government is only slated to administer the country until elections are held in December, so its mandate and priorities will be inherently limited. It will therefore require significant international support to stay on task, maintain [the fragile ceasefire \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/beyond-ceasefire-libya\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/beyond-ceasefire-libya), and ensure minimal interference by outside actors. The Biden administration should play a key role in that effort, despite its inclination to avoid messy conflicts in the Middle East.

Reframing Libya

Libya remains a secondary U.S. priority in a region where the Biden team says it will devote less attention going forward, despite its early focus on Iran and Yemen. Yet the country can still be an exemplary arena for demonstrating that "America is back," if President Biden and Secretary of State Antony Blinken sufficiently leverage diplomacy and reengage allies who have often found themselves on competing sides of the conflict.

The first question the administration must address is how much Libya matters. To elevate the country on a crowded

global agenda, one must reframe its conflict from yet another Middle Eastern struggle to an immediate, multilateral Mediterranean security challenge. U.S. partners involved in the conflict have already sparred via proxies (Turkey and the United Arab Emirates) or threatened direct action against each other over Libyan turf (Egypt and Turkey). When one adds Russia's **[dangerous mercenary presence \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/role-russian-private-military-contractors-africa\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/role-russian-private-military-contractors-africa)**, a humanitarian and migrant crisis, and a **[historically disjointed European approach \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/enough-theory-european-strategic-autonomy-needs-practice-middle-east\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/enough-theory-european-strategic-autonomy-needs-practice-middle-east)**, the current situation can be seen for what it is: a potential boiling point on NATO's southern flank.

In that sense, Libya is a key test case for President Biden's pledge to restore the transatlantic alliance and revitalize American diplomacy, as he emphasized during his initial foreign policy speeches. Yet according to the readouts of Secretary Blinken's conversations with European foreign ministers, Libya has only come up once (with Italy), while President Biden has not raised the issue at all during his calls with heads of state.

This dynamic must change. If the United States and Europe are going to develop a common approach to Libya as an example of what a revitalized transatlantic alliance can accomplish, then their leaders must agree to unify the messages they send to Libyan actors and outside players such as Russia, the UAE, and Egypt.

The core of this unified message should be encouraging Libya's new government to develop a focused agenda based on providing better services, enhancing security, and preparing for the agreed elections on December 24. To ensure that local officials maintain this focus, an empowered diplomatic group representing each country should meet monthly with both the Libyans and newly appointed UN envoy Jan Kubis to assess progress, identify hurdles, and propose solutions. Whether this group is derived from the January 2020 Berlin conference or another mechanism, regular engagement is essential to ensure proper follow-up and prevent Libyan officials from backsliding on their election schedule. The United States must play an active role in these meetings to ensure they are taken seriously.

Senior officials in Washington also need to convey their expectations regarding all of the actors primarily responsible for exacerbating the civil war. First, the administration should urge the UAE, Egypt, and Turkey to support the new Libyan government, freeze their **[military aid to either side of the conflict \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/erdogan-will-play-biden-stick-putin\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/erdogan-will-play-biden-stick-putin)**, and encourage their proxies to abide by the ceasefire. President Biden has not yet called his Emirati, Egyptian, or Turkish counterparts, so this message is best delivered by National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, since the foreign ministries of these countries do not have primary influence over Libya policy.

The Russian presence is a thornier issue given Moscow's veto power on the Security Council and its refusal to even admit its deployment. U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) **[definitively exposed \(https://www.africom.mil/pressrelease/33034/russia-and-the-wagner-group-continue-to-be-in\)](https://www.africom.mil/pressrelease/33034/russia-and-the-wagner-group-continue-to-be-in)** the presence of Kremlin-backed Wagner Group forces in central Libya last summer, and the deployment of advanced Russian fighter aircraft there poses a threat to NATO, not just to Libya. As such, the United States should continue highlighting Russian activity in Libya and encourage NATO to consider Moscow's local deployments as a danger to the alliance.

Specific Areas for U.S. Assistance

Aside from more concerted diplomatic action, the Biden administration should provide assistance in three key areas: continuing the process of financial unification and service delivery development; contributing to the UN-backed ceasefire monitoring mission; and providing technical assistance for planned elections.

- **Financial unity and public services.** Since last year's Berlin conference, the United States has co-chaired the committee that supports efforts to reconcile the main financial institution of the Tripoli-based Government of National

Accord (GNA) with the eastern-based rival bank established by the still-existing Tobruk government. (Both governments will dissolve when the new unity government takes office). In December, the Central Bank of Libya agreed to absorb the significant debt accrued by its eastern counterpart and devalue the dinar in order to better regulate the currency, draw it away from the black market, and ultimately improve liquidity. In addition to continuing this work, Washington should help the new government identify areas where quick technical support would be most useful, such as electricity provision or healthcare treatment amid the COVID-19 pandemic. In the longer term, the United States should coordinate with Brussels on how best to coordinate assistance planned by the European Commission.

- **Ceasefire monitoring.** As part of the October ceasefire agreement, the Joint Military Commission—representing officers from the GNA and the eastern-based Libyan National Army—agreed to deploy a Libyan-led monitoring mechanism with limited international civilian observers. The UN Security Council tasked the secretary-general with presenting options for the mission, and a UN advance team is supposed to deploy to the area to develop proposals. Washington should offer to assist the mission with transportation, including evacuation contingencies if necessary. Most important, it should provide imagery of the ceasefire region, deployments, and violations in the same manner that AFRICOM reported on the Wagner Group last summer. This includes exposing arms embargo violations by the UAE and Turkey if they do not heed warnings to cease such activities; threatening sanctions under existing authorities; and considering how AFRICOM can contribute to Europe’s embargo enforcement mechanism, Operation Irini.
- **Election support.** As part of its democracy assistance to Libya, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has a \$10 million program to support the High National Election Commission and certain NGOs, as it did during the country’s previous elections. Yet while these technical advisors are indispensable, they are insufficient to ensure that elections proceed on time. For this voting cycle, Washington should undertake a diplomatic coordination role as it did in 2012. Together with the highly effective UN Electoral Assistance Division, it should regularly convene all relevant stakeholders to ensure that election-related tasks are underway, from ballot production to security planning.

By establishing these diplomatic, security, and technical priorities, the Biden administration can play a more influential role in advancing Libyan stability, leveraging European alliances, and protecting Mediterranean security.

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

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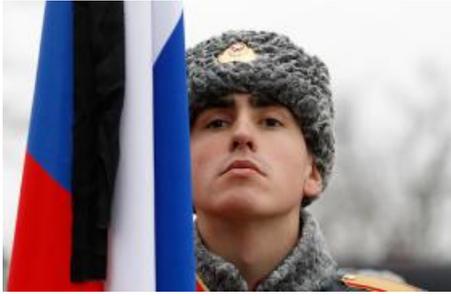
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