

Challenges Facing the Libyan Government

by [Andrew Engel \(/experts/andrew-engel-0\)](#)

Dec 19, 2011

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Andrew Engel \(/experts/andrew-engel-0\)](#)

Andrew Engel, a former research assistant at The Washington Institute, recently received his master's degree in security studies at Georgetown University and currently works as an Africa analyst.



Brief Analysis

In light of its experience in Iraq and Afghanistan, Washington should be able to do more to facilitate the transition in Libya.

Escalating militia clashes and protests are challenging the legitimacy of Libya's interim government at a crucial period of transition from the chaos of the post-Muammar Qadhafi phase to that of statebuilding. Yet the National Transition Council (NTC) can successfully execute the last seven months of its statebuilding mandate before elections are held, as long as the government gets access to Libya's frozen assets, some of which were released last week. Foreign expertise, particularly U.S. experience, should also help.

Libya's Interim Government

Libya's interim prime minister, Abdul Rahim al-Keib, has charted a bold course. Choosing neophyte candidates over those with experience, he has formed a government of technocrats drawn from across Libya, a country where east-west tension runs deep. He also resisted the urge to nominate to his cabinet powerful Islamists from the Tripoli Military Council (TMC) or the Tripoli Revolutionists Council (TRC), even though these entities had pressed hard for portfolios, particularly in the Defense and Interior ministries.

For Keib, delaying the announcement of the new government paid off: The arrest of Saif al-Islam al-Qadhafi on November 19 by fighters of the Zintan Military Council enabled the prime minister to nominate the group's leader, Usama al-Juwaili -- hitherto not considered a candidate -- for minister of defense. In addition, Misratah security chief Fawzi Abdulal was named minister of interior in recognition of his city's role in the revolution. Both the TMC and TRC have grudgingly accepted these nominations.

Others, however, feeling excluded, have protested. The first to do so were Libya's Amazigh (Berbers) -- in particular, the Benghazi-based Awagi and Maghariba tribes -- and outgoing NTC officials such as former oil and finance minister Ali al-Tarhuni, who decried the government as "an unelected elite." On Monday, December 12, protestors gathered in Benghazi to voice their objections to the government, demanding for the first time the resignation of NTC president Mustafa Abdul Jalil, among others, and a cleansing of all former Qadhafi-era officials, to be replaced by "the people." Protests have reportedly spread to Misratah and Darnah.

Libya's Militias

Both Libyans and the international community will watch events in Tripoli to gauge whether Libya can demobilize its militias. In response to increasing tensions, Tripoli's eleven military councils have set up checkpoints to prevent the flow of weapons into the capital. The Tripoli Local Council (TLC) gave nonlocal militias until December 20 (December 31, by some accounts) to disband. Yet the deadline is likely to be unmet. Certain military commanders from Misratah and Zintan -- cities that field some of the most powerful militias operating in Tripoli -- have agreed to comply, in principle, while TRC head Abdullah Ahmed Naker said, "We accept the decision to disarm the militias, but we would like to know how the weapons will be handed over."

The growing frequency of clashes between militias underlines the importance of achieving visible progress in the demobilization effort. On December 10, at a Tripoli International Airport checkpoint, Zintani fighters opened fire on a convoy carrying Khalifah Haftar, acting chief of staff for the Libyan National Army; Haftar alleged on December 17 that his son, a national army volunteer, is being held captive by rebels at the airport. Alarming, on December 12, fighters from Zintan, including Naker, engaged in "anti-Qadhafi operations" against the al-Mashashia tribe in Wamis, in what was most likely a reprisal attack emerging from tribal tensions.

Islamists Prefer Stability -- for Now

Libya's Islamists, possibly under the influence of Islamist victories in Morocco, Tunisia, and Egypt, may see that working with the emerging state is more advantageous than working against it. TMC head Abdul Hakim Belhaj has said he would set up a political party and that his fighters would transfer their fealty to the NTC, although he has not specified when this would happen. He has also discussed amalgamating his forces into the state's apparatus and "preparing for the future political project," albeit, again, without providing details. Naker, in addition, may seek near-term accommodation with the NTC.

Meanwhile, in Benghazi on November 17, the Muslim Brotherhood convened its first public conference in Libya, selecting a new shura council and secretary-general, Bashir al-Kabti, who lived for thirty-three years in the United States. Kabti called for "establishing a modern, contemporary state, a state of institutions and laws." The Brotherhood will not establish a local political party but is encouraging all its members "to participate with other patriots in forming a nationalistic party with an Islamic character," ensuring representation across political parties. Kabti stressed that founding a state "comes before founding a party. Political participation will come at a later stage."

On November 28, under the auspices of the Ministry of Islamic Affairs -- the only cabinet-level agency led by an Islamist -- some 250 religious figures met in Tripoli for the first time since Qadhafi's fall. The clerics expressed their fears that tribal and regional tensions could affect security and encouraged the new government to collect weapons and form a national army -- while also demanding a constitution based on Islamic law. Salim Jabar, an imam from Benghazi, said, "We need to focus on reconciliation and on building a new state for Libya."

Broader Security Concerns

Remnants of the old regime, described by former NTC prime minister Mahmoud Jibril on November 17 as being "very capable of fomenting every kind of instability," threatened to exploit the sectarian clashes that shook al-Maya the previous weekend. Despite numerous threats leveled by Qadhafi loyalists, the arrest of Saif al-Islam delivered a massive blow to hangers-on from the old regime. On November 29, investigators from Zintan said that Saif has been very forthcoming in providing vital information on remaining Qadhafi loyalists as well as Libya's missing assets.

As for loose weapons, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, leader of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, stated publicly, "Our acquisition of Libyan armaments" was "an absolutely natural thing." More recently, on December 6, senior al-Qaeda

fighter Abu Yahya al-Libi urged Libyans to hold on to their weapons.

Libya's Next Steps

In response to increasing domestic pressure, the interim government has proposed the "decentralization of government work." In such an arrangement, Benghazi will become Libya's economic capital, hosting the ministries of Economy and Oil; Misratah will receive the Ministry of Finance; Darnah will get the Ministry of Culture; and fifty local councils will be granted their own budgets. To address concerns related to militias, NTC president Jalil has promised a "security structure for the army and an established police and border guards in no more than a hundred days." For his part, Interior Minister Fawzi Abdulal is planning to put 25,000 rebels on payroll and to form an integrated force. Training and job opportunities will be provided for those who wish to return to civilian life.

Defusing popular discontent and unifying military command are two critical steps through which the government must fulfill its statebuilding mandate. Longer-term issues include reconciliation, reconstruction, and political capacity building before elections.

To take these first steps, Libya needs immediate funds and accompanying expertise. Because oil production is currently at one-third of prerevolution levels and may not return to former levels until the interim government's mandate ends in mid-2012, the only recourse for funds is from Libya's frozen assets. Although Libya is still under UN Security Council Chapter XII sanctions that have frozen an estimated \$150 billion, the UN's release on December 16 of more than \$40 billion and the subsequent U.S. release of \$30 billion will test the new government's competence in governing and building patronage networks. Because Libya's disparate actors recognize that only the government has access to Libya's purse strings, its elevated holdings should result in increased legitimacy, at least in the short term.

The interim government is set to release a budget by the end of the month, a good starting point for establishing sound financial management, accountability, and the vetting Libya's ambitious economic program of decentralization. The country's remaining frozen assets can be used to reward good governance. The extent to which Libya's assets are still allocated overseas remains unclear and will require close cooperation among the United States, Europe, and regional states,

Lastly, while it is important that the U.S. government support the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), which just extended its mandate for another three months, steps other than releasing assets need to be taken more quickly. For example, the U.S. government could increase its diplomatic presence in Tripoli, assist in a comprehensive anti-corruption strategy to manage Libya's newly recovered assets, or communicate lessons learned from the integration of Iraqi militias into the new Iraqi Security Forces and from the reconstruction efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan to the interim government. Such steps are meant not just for Libya's sake but also to provide competition with other countries operating unilaterally outside the UN framework.

Andrew Engel, a former research assistant at The Washington Institute, is a Beirut-based analyst who recently traveled across Libya. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

[\(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule\)](#)

TOPICS

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

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

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

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

