



GA (General Assembly) Addressing the political instability and conflicts present in Libya



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Overview

Since the start of the Arab Spring uprising of 2011 which led to the overthrow and death of leader Muammar Gaddafi, Libya has been in a prolonged crisis filled with political instability and conflict. What initially began as a wish for a transition to democracy has spiraled into more than a decade of civil war, political instability, and humanitarian crisis

Libya remains divided between two rival administrations: the Government of National Unity (GNU) based in Tripoli in the west, which is led by Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibeh, and the Government of National Stability in the east, backed by the House of Representatives in Tobruk and controlled by Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA). Neither side has the military strength to decisively defeat the other. However, both have enough resources and outside support to block any political agreement that could change the balance.

This standstill has created what analysts describe as “managed fragmentation” where division is stable enough to prevent a full scale conflict, but unstable enough for prolonged violence and political uncertainty. Armed militias control key infrastructure such as airports, oil facilities, and shipping routes, halting economic growth for the nation. Despite Libya possessing Africa’s largest oil reserves, its oil industry faces repeated collapse due to blockades and conflicts over revenue distribution

Attempts at reunification have failed multiple times. National elections scheduled for December 2021 fell short due to disputes over candidate eligibility and electoral laws, further worsening political divisions. While local municipal elections have been more successful, with voting taking place in various municipalities in 2024 and 2025, the second phase of municipal elections aimed to restore the legitimacy of local governance, has been repeatedly delayed

As of now, the humanitarian situation in Libya remains in crisis. While the number of people requiring aid has decreased from 1.3 million in 2016 to approximately 300,000 in 2023, significant issues persist including human rights abuse in detention facilities, deaths in custody, migrant trafficking, and periodic outbreaks of organized violence. In September 2023, flooding caused by Storm Daniel killed thousands in the city of Derma, exposing weaknesses in Libya's infrastructure and disaster management.

The crisis has been further exacerbated through foreign intervention. Nations such as Egypt, the UAE, Russia (through the Wagner Group, a state funded private military company), and France support



the LNA, while Turkey, Qatar, and Italy have backed the western government. These external actors pursue their own interests such as access to oil, military bases, maritime zones, and influence over trade routes, greatly hindering international support for a single course of action.

Furthermore, economic mismanagement and corruption have worsened political issues. The Central Bank of Libya remains contested between rival authorities, leading to disputes over currency valuation, government spending, and oil revenue distribution. State capture by elite networks has led to extensive corruption. In 2024, Libya's actual fiscal deficit is expected to exceed \$10.4 billion, which is more than 22% of GDP. The circulation of counterfeit currency and issues within institutions have added to the instability of the economy.

As of early 2025, Libya remains at high risk of renewed large-scale violence. Recent military mobilizations, including the LNA's movements toward southwestern Libya in August 2024 and GNU forces moving westward, have raised fears of a 'Third Civil War.' The killing of a prominent militia commander in May 2025 triggered violent clashes in Tripoli, demonstrating the fragility of even temporary stability. The international community, particularly the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), continues mediation efforts, but sustainable peace remains difficult without addressing the fundamental drivers of conflict: competition for power and economic resources, militia entrenchment in state structures, and foreign interference.

Definitions of important terms

Government of National Unity (GNU)

The UN-backed government in Tripoli, led by Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibeh. Formed in March 2021 through the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum as an interim administration, its mandate expired in 2021 and elections have been repeatedly postponed. The GNU relies on militia coalitions for security and controls Libya's oil revenues through the Tripoli-based Central Bank.

Libyan National Army (LNA)

The eastern Libyan military force commanded by Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, officially recognized by the Tobruk-based House of Representatives in 2015. Despite presenting itself as a conventional army, it functions as a coalition of tribal forces, militias, Salafist units, and foreign fighters. The LNA controls eastern Libya and regional oil facilities, with military backing from Egypt, the UAE, and Russia via the Wagner Group.



Government of National Stability (GNS)

A rival government formed in eastern Libya in March 2022, led by Prime Minister Osama Hammad and backed by the House of Representatives. Nominally civilian, it is effectively controlled by Haftar and the LNA. The UN recognizes only the GNU as Libya's legitimate government.

House of Representatives (HoR)

Libya's elected parliament, based in Tobruk and elected in 2014. The only nationally elected legislative body still functioning in Libya, it has aligned with Haftar's LNA. In August 2024, it voted to end the GNU's mandate — a decision Tripoli rejected as illegitimate.

High Council of State

A Tripoli-based advisory body created under the 2015 Libyan Political Agreement, composed of former General National Congress members. It consults on legislation and governance, and generally supports the GNU against eastern rival institutions.

Central Bank of Libya (CBL)

Controls Libya's oil revenues and state finances, with parallel operations in Tripoli and Benghazi that fuel disputes over currency management and resource distribution. Control of the CBL is a central source of conflict. In April 2025, it devalued the currency by 13.3%, its first devaluation since 2021.

Libyan Political Agreement (LPA)

A UN-brokered deal signed in December 2015 in Morocco, establishing the Government of National Accord as a unity government. It created power-sharing arrangements but faced persistent implementation failures. Technically expired in 2017, it remains a reference point for subsequent peace efforts.

United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL)

A UN political and peacekeeping mission established in 2011 to support Libya's democratic transition. Its mandate covers mediation, human rights monitoring, humanitarian coordination, and institutional reunification. The current Special Representative is Hanna Serwaa Tetteh of Ghana, appointed February 2025.

Wagner Group



A Russian private military company providing military support to Haftar's LNA since 2018, contributing fighters, equipment, and air support. In exchange, Russia has gained access to Libyan ports and airbases. Wagner assets near Benghazi were targeted in drone strikes in June 2023; no group claimed responsibility.

Timeline of key events

February 2011 – Uprising Against Gaddafi Begins

Inspired by the Arab Spring, mass protests erupted in Benghazi before spreading nationwide against Muammar Gaddafi's 42-year rule, quickly turning into armed rebellion. NATO intervened in March under UN Resolution 1973 to protect civilians. Gaddafi was captured and killed in October 2011, but hundreds of militias refused to disarm.

June 2014 – Libya Splits into Rival Governments

Following disputed elections with extremely low turnout, two governments emerged: the internationally recognised House of Representatives in Tobruk (aligned with Haftar) and the rival General National Congress in Tripoli. Each claims legitimacy and commands its own militia coalition, marking the formal beginning of Libya's prolonged political and military division.

December 2015 – Libyan Political Agreement Signed

Under UN mediation, Libyan factions signed the Libyan Political Agreement in Skhirat, Morocco, creating the Government of National Accord under Prime Minister Fayeze al-Sarraj. The House of Representatives refused to fully endorse it, undermining implementation from the outset, though the GNA became the internationally recognised government.

April 2019 – LNA Launches Assault on Tripoli

Khalifa Haftar launched a major offensive — Operation Flood of Dignity — backed by Egypt, UAE, France, and Russia, to capture Tripoli and unify Libya under LNA control. Forces advanced to the capital's outskirts but stalled in prolonged urban fighting, causing significant civilian casualties before ultimately failing.

January 2020 – Turkey Intervenes; Berlin Conference Held



Turkey deployed troops and advanced drone technology to Tripoli at the GNA's request, shifting the battlefield in its favour. The Berlin Conference brought together key international stakeholders who commit — without follow-through — to support a ceasefire and halt weapons supplies to both sides.

October 2020 – Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement

A permanent ceasefire brokered in Geneva ends large-scale hostilities, with the 5+5 Joint Military Commission established to oversee implementation. The agreement called for withdrawal of all foreign forces and mercenaries — a provision not meaningfully enforced, with Turkish troops, Wagner Group forces, and UAE-supplied weapons all remaining.

March 2021 – GNU Formed; Elections Planned

The UN-facilitated Libyan Political Dialogue Forum selected Abdul Hamid Dbeibeh as Prime Minister of the new Government of National Unity, mandated to govern as an interim body until elections planned for December 2021 — subsequently cancelled due to disputes over electoral laws and candidate eligibility.

March 2022 – Eastern Government Declared

The House of Representatives appointed Osama Hammad to lead a rival Government of National Stability in eastern Libya, formally rejecting Dbeibeh's authority and worsening the east-west divide. The UN continues to recognise only the GNU.

September 2023 – Storm Daniel — Derna Floods

Catastrophic flooding caused by Storm Daniel overwhelmed two ageing dams near Derna, killing thousands. The disaster exposed decades of infrastructure neglect and the failure of early-warning systems — a direct consequence of institutional breakdown and absent governance in eastern Libya.

November 2024 – First Phase of Municipal Elections

Municipal elections took place in 58 municipalities with a reported 74% voter turnout — the first simultaneous voting across eastern and western Libya since 2014. A planned second phase was subsequently delayed, and the House of Representatives ordered the suspension of voting in eastern cities including Benghazi.



December 2024 – UNSMIL Launches New Political Process

UNSMIL announced a Libyan-led multi-track political process centred on an Advisory Committee of independent Libyan experts tasked with developing a roadmap to elections, spanning political, security, economic, and reconciliation tracks. Its effectiveness remains to be seen.

May 2025 – Militia Violence Erupts in Tripoli

The killing of militia commander Abdelghani al-Kikli triggered violent clashes between armed factions across the capital.

Position of key nations

Turkey:

Turkey is the most significant military backer of the western Libyan government, having intervened in 2020 with troops, drones, and air defence systems that halted Haftar's assault on Tripoli. Turkey's interests are strategic and economic: a maritime boundary agreement with the GNU grants it access to contested eastern Mediterranean waters rich in natural gas, in direct competition with Greece, Cyprus, and Egypt. Ankara maintains a military presence at Tripoli's Mitiga Airport and other sites, has resisted calls to withdraw its forces, and continues to supply weapons in violation of the UN arms embargo.

Egypt:

Egypt shares Libya's longest land border and views Libyan instability as a direct national security threat. Cairo strongly backs Haftar's LNA, motivated by fear of political Islam — particularly the Muslim Brotherhood — and opposition to Turkish regional influence. Egypt has conducted airstrikes in support of LNA forces, supplied weapons and military advisers, and threatened direct intervention if GNU-aligned forces advanced on Sirte. It participates in UN-led mediation while remaining one of the arms embargo's most prominent violators.



Italy:

As Libya's former colonial power and its closest European neighbour across the Mediterranean, Italy maintains significant strategic and economic interests in Libyan stability. Rome officially supports the UN-recognised GNU and advocates for a negotiated political settlement, prioritising migration control and energy security — Libya supplies natural gas to Italy through undersea pipelines. However, Italy's influence has diminished as Turkey, Egypt, the UAE, and others have become more militarily involved. Unlike these actors, Italy does not supply weapons to either side and instead positions itself as a neutral mediator, though its ability to shape outcomes has been limited by its reluctance to deploy military force and its dependence on other EU members for a unified Libya policy.

United Arab Emirates:

The UAE has been a key financier and military supplier to Haftar's LNA since 2014, sharing Egypt's hostility toward political Islam and concern about Turkish regional ambitions. UN Panel of Experts reports document repeated UAE violations of the arms embargo, including the supply of weapons, aircraft, and armoured vehicles. Despite being among the most significant enablers of Haftar's military operations, the UAE participates in international diplomatic forums and formally endorses UN-led peace processes, creating a significant gap between its stated and actual positions.

United States:

The US played a leading role in the 2011 NATO intervention that ousted Gaddafi but subsequently reduced its direct engagement as Libya fragmented. Washington officially supports the UN-recognised GNU and a negotiated political settlement, while opposing the entrenchment of Russian influence — particularly Wagner Group access to Mediterranean bases. The US has conducted periodic counterterrorism strikes in Libya, targeting ISIS and al-Qaeda-linked groups. Under the Trump administration, broader disengagement from multilateral processes has raised questions about Washington's commitment to active diplomacy, leaving a strategic vacuum that Russia, Turkey, and the UAE have moved to fill.



Suggested solutions

The most effective peace effort in recent years has been UNSMIL's December 2024 multi-track political process, which incorporated an Advisory Committee of independent Libyan experts. For this process to carry political legitimacy, it requires unanimous international support alongside meaningful pressure on the external backers of rival factions to allow compromise. Establishing a credible electoral roadmap with agreed timelines would give ordinary Libyan citizens a tangible stake in the outcome.

A persistent weakness of past efforts has been their focus on political power-sharing, leaving the underlying economic disputes, particularly regarding oil revenues and control of the Central Bank, largely unresolved. These economic incentives remain among the principal drivers of continued conflict. Both Chatham House and UNSMIL have proposed a dedicated economic track within peace negotiations, centred on oil revenue management, reunification of the Central Bank, and equal distribution of resources across regions. Addressing the financial incentives that sustain conflict could meaningfully reduce the motivation of factions and their militia allies to obstruct a settlement.

The UN arms embargo, in place since 2011, has been repeatedly violated by multiple states. While EU Operation IRINI monitors maritime arms flows, the land and air routes used primarily by Egypt, the UAE, and Turkey remain largely unmonitored. Strengthening oversight mechanisms, making findings publicly available, and imposing sanctions on identified violators would deter non-compliance. So long as weapons continue to flow freely into Libya, the risk of military escalation remains constant.

Libya's long-term stability ultimately depends on replacing the entrenched militia system with professional security forces operating under civilian oversight. The 5+5 Joint Military Commission, established under the 2020 ceasefire agreement, already provides a framework for security dialogue between eastern and western military forces. Providing this body with technical assistance, funding for disarmament and reintegration programmes, and political backing for a unified command structure would gradually reduce militia influence. Possible early stages include agreeing on common command structures and shared vetting standards.

The November 2024 municipal elections offered an encouraging sign of reunification, with 74% voter turnout recorded across both eastern and western Libya, demonstrating that free and fair elections are attainable. Completing the delayed phases of the municipal election process



and strengthening the High National Elections Commission would build public confidence in democratic institutions and generate momentum toward national elections. Successes at the local governance level also provide practical, replicable models for reconciliation across political divides.

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