

US Relations with Libya:

What to Expect from the Biden Administration?

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(Ibrahim Yakut - Anadolu Agency)

This policy outlook aims to analyse US strategy in Libya post 2011 and also examines what President Biden's new diplomatic approach will be in the country. Washington's various interests in Libya are examined and used to assess US policy in Libya and its effect on the Libyan conflict.

In 2011, the United States and its NATO allies supported an international military effort to topple the regime of Muammar Gaddafi. Since then, Washington has had limited engagement in Libya, and its policy has been mainly motivated by counterterrorism efforts and commercial interests.

Introduction

The United States helped bring together the NATO-led operation that brought Muammar Gaddafi's four decades of totalitarian rule to an end in 2011. However, since then, the U.S. has limited its engagement in Libya, seeing the oil-rich country chiefly through a counterterrorism lens and urging European nations to take the lead.

The United States, along with the other Western powers, have openly supported the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) and a United Nations-sponsored reconciliation process. However, they have also done little in the way of concrete action to support Libya's internationally recognised authority.

Washington maintained a relatively passive stance towards Libya under President Donald Trump, whose administration saw the Libyan conflict as a European problem of little strategic significance for American interests. This has arguably given other external players, including the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Russia, more room to manoeuvre, resulting in increased numbers of Russian mercenaries in the country and increased flows of weapons in contravention of UN embargoes. Indeed, the continuing insecurity and presence of mercenaries have been detrimental to, inter alia, Libya's sovereignty and its control over its oil industry.

A nationwide ceasefire was declared in August 2020. On 23 October 2020, military delegations from Libya's two warring parties [announced](#) a formal ceasefire agreement, which has triggered a renewed peace process. Recently, delegates from opposite sides at a UN-sponsored forum [voted](#) for an interim prime minister and a three-member presidential council with the aim of holding national elections on 24 December 2021.

The possibility of increased US support for diplomacy and a UN-led multilateral process under the Biden administration could serve to strengthen this dynamic.

What drives US policy in Libya?

Washington's Libya strategy has traditionally been driven by counterterrorism measures and economic interests. Libya has unique characteristics, including a population of only 6.5 million, abundant natural resources, the largest [proven oil](#) reserves in Africa, and one of the world's wealthiest economies by the proportion of oil reserves to population size. Besides, the country has an enviable location at the heart of the Mediterranean, the Maghreb, and on the doorstep to sub-Saharan Africa. As a result, the country has been a theatre for international struggle and competition.

Mohammed Ali Abdallah, Senior Advisor to the Libyan Government of National Accord for US Affairs, told TRT World Research Centre that "the primary interests for the US administration in Libya are linked to regional stability around the Mediterranean and ensuring that the Russian / Chinese influence in sub-Saharan Africa does not jeopardize US interests and its allies' interests. There are also interests related to energy and maintaining leverage when it comes to oil and natural gas markets. However, the primary objective at this point in Libya and the region is maintaining cooperation with regard to counterterrorism and building on the efforts of the past few years".

Security Concerns

The toppling of the Gaddafi regime created a number of domestic, regional, and international challenges. In the post-Gaddafi era, Libya has struggled with an ongoing civil war, including paralysis from rival institutions, regional turmoil, massive civilian displacement, and an environment conducive to terrorism and extremism.

"Counter-terrorism and Daesh, above all else, has driven US policy in Libya since the fall of the Gaddafi regime. This means that Washington has viewed peacebuilding, political stability, and economic recovery in Libya entirely through the lens of counter-terrorism rather than what those processes might mean intrinsically for Libya beyond the question of transnational extremism". Dr Jacob Mundy, Associate Professor of Peace and Conflict Studies and Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies at Colgate University, told TRT World Research Centre.

The power vacuum that occurred in the wake of Gaddafi's enabled terrorist groups to gain a foothold in Libya. One of these groups, known as Ansar al-Sharia, carried out the 2012 attack on the US consulate in Benghazi that [killed](#) four Americans, including the Ambassador to Libya.

Washington has been deeply concerned by the lack of state-control in Libya and the rise of terrorism and smuggling cartels, fearing that these phenomena could destabilise neighbouring countries. For instance, in 2013, [Algeria](#) was the scene of a major terror attack that [targeted](#) the Tigantourine gas facility near Ain Amenas in the desert region. During the raid, the attackers took captive about 150 Algerians and dozens of foreigners.

In 2015, Daesh gained significant ground in Libya with the capture of the coastal town of Sirte. Daesh [emerged](#) in Libya in early October 2014, when extremist factions in the eastern city of Derna joined their cause. Reportedly, [Derna](#) has been a centre of extremist factions in Libya for more than three decades. After 2011, Derna continued to serve as a centre for militant Salafis with links to terrorist groups including al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)

and Ansar al-Sharia in Libya (ASL). After the formation of Daesh in 2014, many local fighters [pledged](#) allegiance to their cause.

[Reportedly](#), by the end of 2013, Libyans were among the top five nationalities heading to Syria.

Many of the Libyan militants who joined Daesh were veterans of the group's activities in Iraq and Syria and brought with them significant battlefield experience. Having [gained experience](#) on the battleground, many returned, filling a security vacuum exacerbated by lawlessness. They were helped along the way by having easy access to weapons from the Gaddafi era and porous borders, allowing them to set up their own groups or join others.

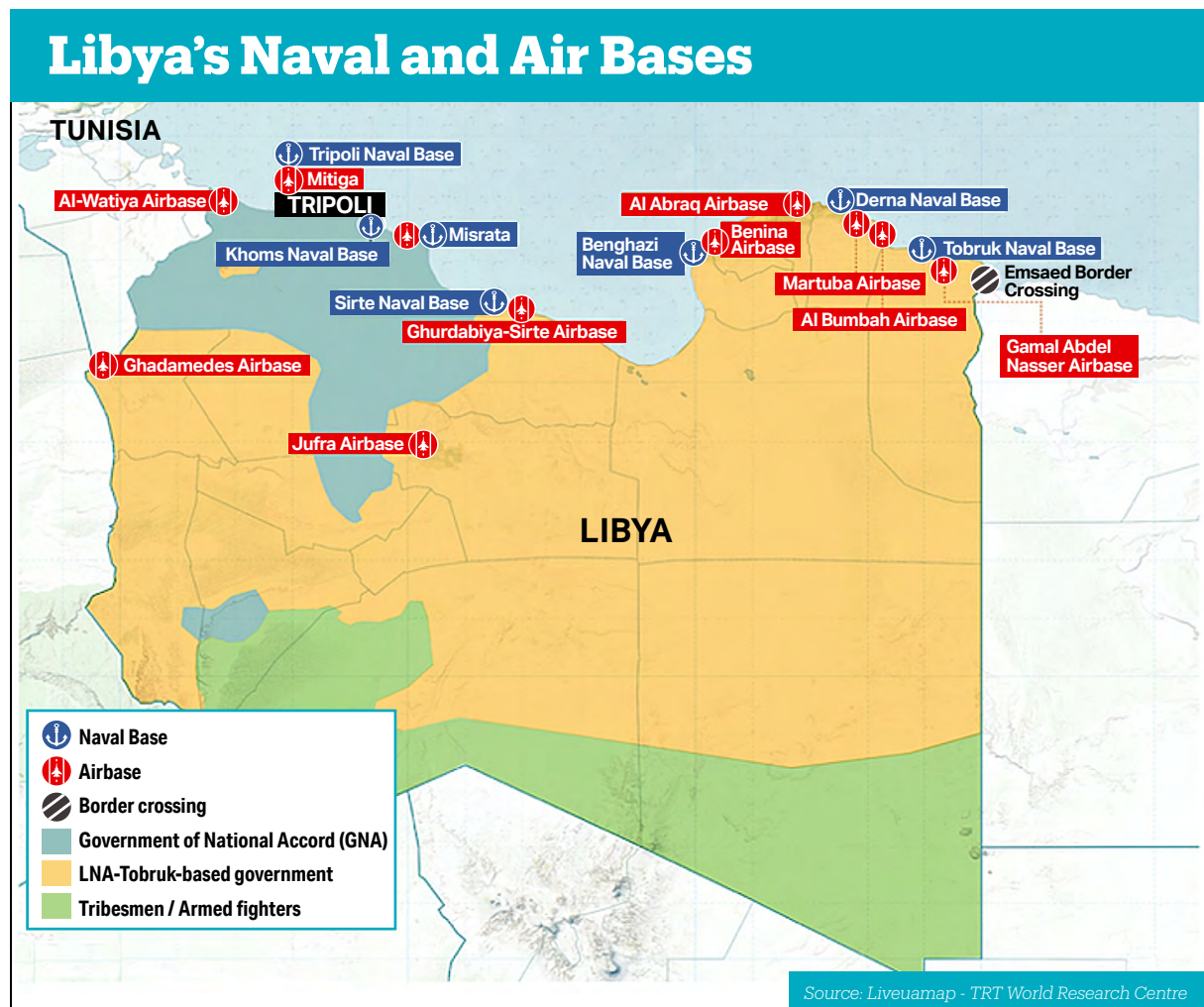
Eighteen months later, on December 5, 2016, Daesh was [defeated](#) in Sirte following a six-month military campaign led by brigades from the western city of Misrata, loyal to the GNA with support from US airstrikes. However, Daesh has yet to be [eliminated](#) from Libya.

"In the last few years, the fight against terrorism has been the main priority of US policymakers in Libya. The rise of the Daesh in Sirte and its territorial expansion has sounded alarm bells in Washington and pushed different US ad-

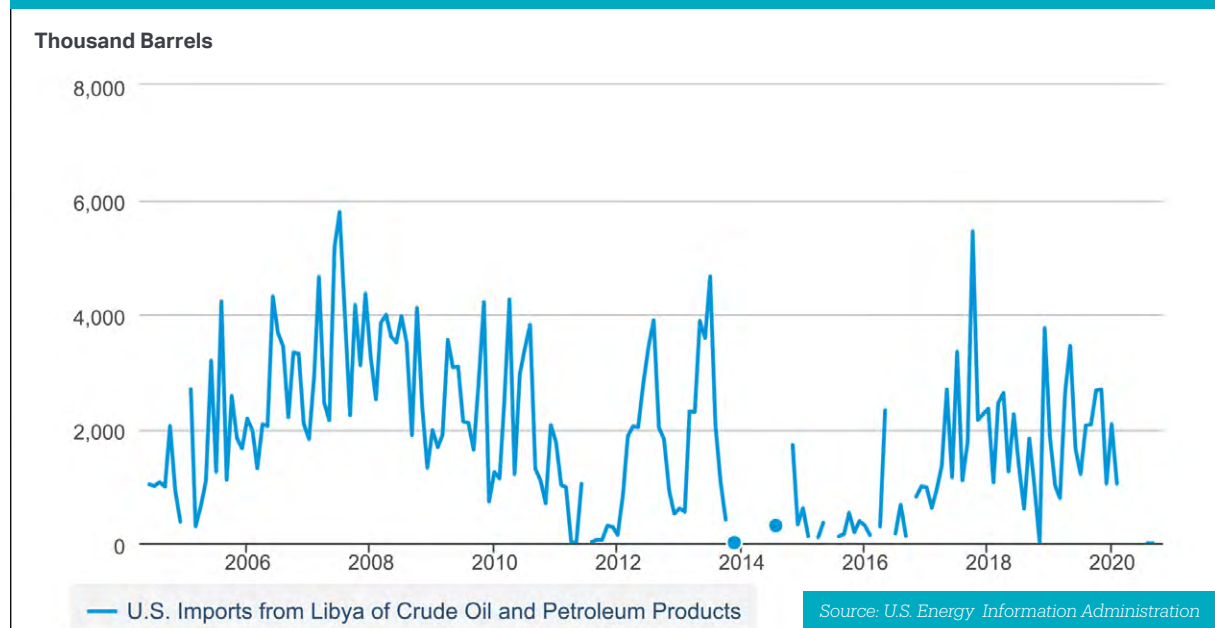
ministrations to renew their attention to the security situation in Libya. Indeed, US support to Libyan forces fighting against Daesh in Sirte (Operation Bunyan Marsous) was signed off by the Obama administration, while several airstrikes and drone strikes against Daesh remnants and senior leaders of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) have been authorised by former President Donald Trump". Umberto Profazio, Associate Fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), told TRT World Research Centre.

Geostrategic interests

Libya has strategic value in large part due to its location on the Eastern Mediterranean, hosting several military bases (Al Watiya, Mitiga, Sirte and Benina airbases, as well as the Tripoli, Misrata, Derna, Tobruk naval bases) linking air and sea routes. In 1954, Libya [signed](#) an agreement with the United States, which allowed it to establish the Wheelus Air Base near Tripoli. It is now known as the Mitiga civil and military airport, which between 1943 and 1969 operated as the US' largest military base abroad. In 1957, former US President Richard Nixon stated that "Libya occupies a [key strategic position](#) with respect to North Africa and the southern flank of NATO".



U.S. Imports Libya of Crude Oil and Petroleum From Libya



Libya has [unique advantages](#) as an oil producer, and its reserves remain significant. With over 48 billion barrels or just under 3 per cent of the world's total reserves, the deposit is Africa's largest. The US purchases [less than three per cent](#) of Libya's oil exports, so direct oil procurement is not the primary concern. However, the price of oil is impacted by the civil war in Libya, thus Washington has wanted to prevent Libyan politics from disrupting the global oil market. As the world's biggest oil consumer, the US is especially vulnerable to price volatility.

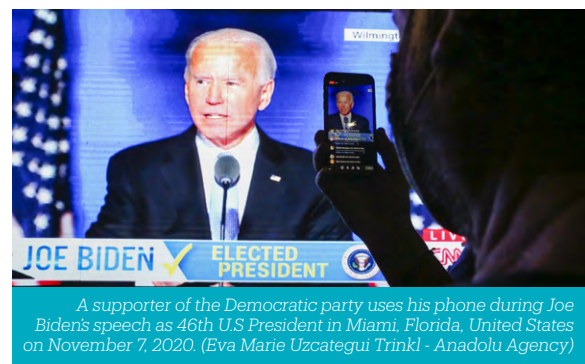
Despite low imports, there is significant economic potential for the US in Libya. Libya has several potentially competitive advantages, in addition to its possession of the largest oil reserves in Africa. Additionally, the country's strategic location close to Europe has been a tremendous advantage for Libyan oil vis-à-vis Middle Eastern oil producers and has meant cheaper transportation costs. As a result, Libya has the ability to become a new regional hub and financial centre in the region with the potential to attract significant levels of international investment should the political situation stabilise.

If rival Libyan parties reach a political solution to end the ongoing conflict, countries will be competing with each other to take advantage of the opportunities in Libya. Libya offers potentially new and lucrative opportunities through defence contracts and other economic prospects including in infrastructure development. Therefore, the post-conflict environment stands to provide significant commercial opportunities for foreign investors, particularly with regards to the reconstruction of key infrastructure including roads, railways, housing, telecommunication, airports and seaports and so on.

According to the [US Department of State](#), "many U.S. firms, especially in the energy sector, have long-standing investments in Libya. Two-way trade in goods between the United States and Libya totalled more than \$1.1 billion in 2019. The United States also has signed a trade and investment framework agreement with the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa, of which Libya is a member".

Will the US have a larger role under the Biden Administration?

The US formally backs the UN-backed GNA, however, under former President Trump, it has mostly stayed out of the conflict. However, despite the official stance, Trump [stunned](#) allies in April 2019 when he praised Haftar in a phone call. John Bolton, Trump's former national security advisor, indicated approval of Haftar's attack on Tripoli by [telling](#) Haftar in a phone call "If you are going to attack, do it quickly".



The encouragement from Trump and Bolton [undermined](#) the warnings that Haftar has received from the state department. For instance, a few days before Trump's praise for Haftar, former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [stated](#) that "we have made clear that we oppose the military offensive by Khalifa Haftar's forces and urge the immediate halt to these military operations against the Libyan capital." Peter Bodde, former U.S. ambassador to Libya, had also [warned](#) Haftar against advancing on Tripoli.

Conflicting messages under the Trump administration are reflective of the lack of a coherent Libya strategy on the part of US policymakers. David D. Kirkpatrick, International Correspondent at the New York Times, [commented](#) that: "Washington's inconsistent position on Libya officially supporting the peace process even as the White House has signalled that President Trump favours Haftar has played a major role in prolonging the chaos".

U.S. officials have since [sought](#) to define their stance to support a political solution rather than choosing any particular party, which may have caused Washington to lose its credibility in the eyes of the Libyan people.

According to Professor Jacob Mundy's opinion, "Even during the Obama administration, there was a preference to leave the issue of Libya to others, especially the Europeans who wanted to intervene in the first place. This is obviously an effect of the US experience in Iraq from 2003 and the Obama efforts to return to a more multilateral policy. It was only late in the Obama administration when they realized that the power vacuum in Libya was being exploited by all kinds of outside interests. Trump did nothing to address this, and it got much worse. For the sake of international peace and security, one would think Biden would take a more proactive approach, perhaps even restore the position of a US envoy".

Mohammed Ali Abdallah told TRT World Research Centre that, "I am not expecting a drastic shift in strategy when it comes to the utilisation of the US allies when it comes to

Libya. However, I think the Biden administration will have much less patience for the countries that had become the proxy assets utilised by Russia. For example, the UAE, Egypt, France, and Saudi Arabia had a direct role in funding & [offering] logistical support for Russian mercenaries and arms provided to Haftar in the past few years. This will not be something that will be ignored by the Biden administration. However, the U.S. approach will not shift to a more direct involvement beyond what we have seen from them. This could change depending on the developments on the ground, and what happens with regards to the Russian presence on the southern shores of the Mediterranean".

For Profazio, "Nevertheless, with the third phase of the civil war in 2019-2020, the geopolitics of the renewed great power competition in the Mediterranean Sea has gradually stepped in when talking about Libya in Washington. The presence of mercenaries from the Wagner Group, the transfer of Russian fighter jets and more in general the role of Russia in the Libyan conflict finds a more suitable contextualisation in the changing balance of power in the Mediterranean Basin, which required the US to reconsider its passive stance, push for a ceasefire and relaunch the peace process".

Will the Biden Administration act to confront Russia's plans in Libya?

Over the past few years, Russia has taken advantage of the absence of unified Western engagement to extend its influence in the region. Moscow has used Libya's civil war to increase its influence on Europe's southern flank and its access to Libya's hydrocarbon resources, as well as to establish a permanent foothold in Libya while it expands military basing access across the [eastern Mediterranean](#).



Libya's Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj met with US Africa Command (AFRICOM) head Gen. Stephen Townsend and the US ambassador to Libya Richard Norland at Zuwarah Airport, west of the capital Tripoli on 22.06.2020 (GNA Media Office - Anadolu Agency)

NATO's prolonged absence after its 2011 intervention in the country has enabled Russia to establish a permanent foothold in Libya, expanding its military presence primarily where [Russian mercenaries](#) are already present, such as in Jufra and Sirte. As discussed, Libya's strategic location offers several options for both naval and air bases such as the Derna, Benghazi and Tobruk naval bases, as well as the Sirte, Martuba and Benina airbases which are currently under the control of Haftar's LNA. These bases could host Russian forces to support and even deepen its activities not only in Libya but also in the whole of Africa. Besides, the Russian presence in Libya could potentially represent a security threat to NATO for instance, the al-Watiya airbase, Misrata's port, and the Sirte airbase are all located a mere 600-700 kilometres south of the Italian Sigonella airbase in [Sicily, which hosts several US activities](#) related to south-eastern Europe and the Mediterranean.

AFRICOM commander, US Army General Stephen Townsend, [stated](#) back in June that "if Russia obtains bases in Libya and introduces long-range weapons systems, it would pose a security risk to NATO, limiting the alliance's access to its southern flank".

According to Mohammed Ali Abdallah, "I have no doubt that the Biden administration will be more firm in confronting Russia's negative role in Libya. This will be seen both in the direct sanctions of Russian entities & individuals involved, as well as in the empowerment of the Libyan government to minimize the role of the Libyan factions backed by Russia. I don't think this will lead to any direct confrontation between the U.S. and Russia, but it will definitely have an impact on Russia's willingness to risk its long-term strategic goals in exchange for its continuation for backing the outlaw Haftar's militia that has already proven itself ineffective".

Moscow has sought to strengthen its influence in Libya through its backing of Haftar's war against the UN-backed GNA. Russia's [engagement](#) with Haftar can be traced back to 2015 when Moscow became involved in the Libyan civil war. Russia contributed to Haftar's efforts primarily through the Wagner Group, a private military company linked to the Kremlin. According to a UN [report](#), hundreds of mercenaries from the Wagner Group have been operating in Libya since September 2019.

Russia also appears to have dug in further, [shoring up](#) its combat forces in the country, especially at the critical Jufra-Sirte line which is a gateway to Libya's oil crescent region.

US Africa Command's General Townsend has also [said that](#) "Russia is clearly trying to tip the scales in its favour in Libya. He continued to say that "I saw them doing in Syria, they are expanding their military footprint in Africa using government-supported mercenary groups like Wagner."

As part of last October's ceasefire agreement, foreign fighters and mercenaries were supposed to leave the country within three months. However, instead of withdrawing, Moscow is [reportedly](#) reinforcing its position on the [Sirte-Jufra axis](#) with the delivery of materiel and fighters.

For Mundy, "It's difficult to say whether or not Russia has an end game in mind in Libya but given the anti-Putin rhetoric of the Biden administration, we can probably expect some moderation in the US position, which had seemed to implicitly back Haftar ahead of his failed siege on Tripoli. The problem is that the agenda for the Biden administration is overflowing, especially with domestic challenges that make it seem as if the American polity is in a terminal death spiral. As long as the trendlines in Libya keep moving in a positive direction under the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF), I imagine that the US will reconcile itself with Russia's role in Libya just as Washington has in Syria".

According to Umberto Profazio, "Recent calls made by the US to Russia, Turkey and the UAE to cease foreign intervention and remove their forces from Libya are particularly indicative of the changing mood in Washington and represent a rebuke for strict allies that has been unusual in recent years. Considering the specificity of the Russian case and the different stance adopted by the Biden administration towards the UAE (much expected and also highlighted by the suspension of the US arms sales announced last week), the inclusion of Turkey is also noteworthy. Training agreements between the GNA and Ankara and the presence of Turkish troops and foreign fighters are hindering the peace process, representing one of the main sticking points not only between Ankara and Washington but also between Turkey and EU Member-States".

Potential U.S. -EU cooperation

The Libyan conflict chiefly represents a cause of considerable concern for Libyans and neighbouring countries, despite the political process presently showing signs of some positive development. Recently, Libyan delegates [elected](#) an interim authority responsible for organising elections, and there have been prior attempts to hold a constitutional referendum. Under the Trump administration, Washington played a relatively passive role in the UN-backed process. However, if the Biden administration took a more active role, it could go a long way in helping to push some regional and European countries away from backing Haftar and towards more vigorously supporting the political process. Should the new administration increase its support for the current UN-led peace process, there would be the added benefit of strengthening US - EU cooperation.

For instance, Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte [talked](#) to Biden in late 2020 and voiced Rome's stance in support of more US attention to Libya in the post-Trump period. Most European states, apart from France, see Russia's position in Libya as a matter of great concern. France has pursued a strategy to improve its relationship with Russia and French President Macron has [reached out](#) to Putin over key issues like Ukraine and Libya. For instance, last year, Macron [stated](#) that "he is confident of progress in key areas with Russia, notably the crisis in Libya". In 2018, Macron reported called on the European Union to increase military collaboration and stop relying on Washington for defence while reaching out to Moscow to develop a "strategic partnership."

Most EU member states and NATO have backed the GNA, while Paris has supported Haftar's offensive on the capital which has led to the failure of EU attempts to promote a political solution for the ongoing conflict. France's stand towards the two main parties within Libya has been one of continuous oscillation. While paying lip service to the UN-backed GNA, French President Macron has closely co-operated with Haftar. For a long time, the [French approach](#) towards the Libyan conflict was to give war a chance to see whether Haftar could achieve a military solution to the conflict. As a consequence, the EU has not been able to take a strong stand on Libya or produce significant strategies for de-escalation given Paris's contradictory position to the majority of other EU member states.

In this regard, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu has [stated](#) that "On one side, NATO sees Russia as a threat but on the other side, NATO ally France is working to increase Russia's presence in Libya".

The EU is concerned that the increasingly strong Russian presence in the country could make it harder for them to influence outcomes on their own doorstep. Furthermore, there are also concerns that the Kremlin may have influence vis-à-vis migration flows from Libya, especially in the eastern part of the country, which the Kremlin could use to put pressure and blackmail the EU.

For Abdallah, "We have already seen that the US Foreign Policy team is engaging more positively with the EU & other allies when it comes to Libya. This will be a significant shift from the previous administration, but what impact that will have on the political situation inside Libya is yet to be seen. Some of the challenges that face this scenario is holding some of the allies accountable for what was done in the past few years, regarding human rights violations, violations of UN arms embargo, and most notably the financing of mercenaries that are fighting on the side of the illegitimate militias led by Khalifa Haftar. If the US chooses to ignore the past, and only focus on engaging in Libya via these allies, this will present a difficult situation on the ground as these allies are seen as a fundamental part of the problem and cannot be trusted to be part of any solution. At the same time, it is impractical to think that these

allies can be ignored completely and the balance between accountability for what has happened, and pragmatic positive engagement in establishing stability is the key role the US will have to play".

Following the toppling of the Gaddafi regime, European countries have been divided on the Libyan issue and have been consistently inconsistent with their policies towards the country. In particular, there has been a great division between France and Italy. The clash between the two countries has contributed to the failure of EU efforts to develop a holistic political solution for the ongoing conflict.

Previous conferences that took place in Palermo, Paris and Abu Dhabi were supposed to strengthen international support and mechanisms, as well as to create a roadmap for relaunching the UN-sponsored stabilisation programme for Libya. However, these meetings effectively aimed at legitimising Haftar and his LNA at the expense of the internationally recognised government. As a result, these conferences have failed to bring any tangible progress in bringing stability to the country. If it wishes to have success in Libya, the EU should acknowledge the lessons of past failures by shaping a more unified approach and co-operate with Washington to pursue a political solution in Libya. A unified and coordinated EU effort with support from Washington would go a long way in ensuring that local and regional players comply with the current agreement.

As stated by Mundy, "Working within the existing European framework for Libya, the one launched by Germany last year, is probably the best place for Biden to start, though there's a lot of repair work that has to be done to mend fences between the US and Europe. It's not as if Washington can march into the Libyan peace process and act as if the last 4 years did not take place. There will have to be a lot of humility, especially when it comes to US-German relations".

Do Ankara and Washington share similar interests in Libya?

Faced with Haftar's assault on Tripoli in April 2019, the GNA requested help from Turkey. Ankara has given tangible assistance to the internationally recognised government. By providing needed military support to Haftar's opponents, including armed drones and air defence systems, it altered the balance on the ground. This intervention [saved](#) the GNA and expelled the LNA from Tripoli, though it drove the latter towards central Libya and key energy and military installations. As a result, Moscow [reportedly](#) responded by setting up powerful new military hardware on the Sirte-Jufra axis, signalling its readiness to escalate. At that point, negotiations halted the fighting, and a cease-fire arrangement was concluded that allowed both parties to avoid a dangerous escalation.



Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan (R) and U.S. Vice President Joe Biden (L) attend a press conference after a meeting at the Beylerbeyi Palace on November 22, 2014 in Istanbul, Turkey. (Kayhan Özer - Anadolu Agency)

Despite minor flareups, the truce has largely remained intact. The opposing groups, notably Haftar's LNA, have little enthusiasm to give up their advantages, and it remains to be seen whether the different armed groups, both in western and eastern Libya, will adhere to the ceasefire.

Washington's approach towards Libya under the Biden administration is likely to be revised and adjusted to take an active role against Moscow's growing military involvement in the country. In this regard, the US could offer more support for the political efforts headed by the U.N. Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) to achieve a final political solution to end the conflict in the country.

According to Mohammed Ali Abdallah, "The level of collaboration between the United States and Turkey will never be made public nor will it be something used in diplomatic circles. However, anyone who knows the facts on the ground knows that without high-level collaboration and cooperation between the US and Turkey, Libya's situation would be much worse, and we would be looking at the return of military dictatorship to Libya. This level of collaboration will continue, and I think will develop in the near term to wider diplomatic & economic cooperation. These types of partnerships will only help achieve the stability we need in Libya and can become a fundamental shift for the region if it is expanded to include collaboration with Libya's neighbouring countries".

Mundy argues that "I imagine there is some broad agreement between the two on the need to end the civil war, demilitarise the society as much as possible, and install a permanent constitutionally-based government through democratic elections. Washington will obviously be concerned as to whether or not Turkey's allies in Libya will continue to turn a blind eye to certain destabilising actors (as was the case in previous years), as well as Turkey's allies' commitment to respecting democratic norms in the long run. But I don't think anyone in Washington is convinced that Haftar or Haftarism is the answer anymore".

What are Washington's future intentions under the Biden Administration?

Russia's engagement in Libya has enabled Moscow to effectively counter Western influence in the region and emphasise that it is seeking to play a decisive role in the country's future, particularly as NATO and EU support has mainly been rhetorical.

Frederic Wehrey, a senior fellow in the Middle East Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, [wrote](#) that "Russia's ongoing military entrenchment in Libya, on NATO's Mediterranean flank...has been abetted by the Emirati intervention, greenlit by Trump last year, and by de facto battlefield collaboration between the Emirates and Russian mercenaries from the Kremlin-linked Wagner Group."

The Biden administration could try to assert US influence in the oil-rich country more actively. Biden and those in his team have promised to pressure Moscow in various ways, which means Libya might be an increasing point of conflict between the White House and the Kremlin.

According to Umberto Profazio, "One of the main goals of the Biden administration should be to prevent a frozen-conflict scenario in Libya, in which faltering and delegitimised institutions are confronted by militias, terrorist groups, mercenaries and foreign Non-State Armed Groups (NSAGs). This scenario would favour Moscow's hybrid approach posing significant challenges to the EU and NATO. Supporting State-building efforts coordinated by UNSMIL should be a priority for the US and the EU, reverting the fragmentation trend in Libya".

For Mundy, “Perhaps at low levels and discretely, one can imagine Biden returning to Obama’s policy of supporting UN-led peace-making while using military force judiciously against terrorism only. One of course has to first let the incoming UN representative get settled in, and we have to see if the LPDF can be sustained, particularly in the face of well-armed spoilers. Though Stephanie Williams is a UN officer, not a US one, the State Department would probably like to see her stay as close as possible to the frontline of very complex negotiations”.

For his part, Abdallah contends that “I think that the appointment of a new UN Secretary-General Special Envoy to Libya will expand on this involvement. It is not a secret that any UN-led political solution will only go as far as the United States & other UNSC member states support it. With a prominent US role in the LPDF, we have a chance of arriving at the first step towards an end to the political division and a step towards long-term stability”.

Peace Talks and Potential Challenges

The country has struggled to build national institutions and a consensus over the post-Gaddafi transition. Libya’s complex political and security situation has presented significant challenges to the achievement of a comprehensive political settlement between rival factions within the country. Recently, the UN-assembled Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF) produced an executive authority tasked with setting up a temporary government and leading the country to elections scheduled for 24 December 2021. The new interim government, known as the Government of National Unity (GNU), could face several challenges.

For instance, the Tobruk-based House of Representatives (HoR) must [approve](#) the newly selected executive authority within three weeks, and if the HoR fails to do so, the decision would go to members of the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum ([LPDF](#)).

In this regards, it is important to bear in mind that the Libyan parliament has been divided since 2015 and has not held an official session for years. Furthermore, the parliament was further [divided](#) in 2019 as a group of lawmakers broke away, making any agreement by a full quorum all but impossible. Thus, it seems likely that the decision would go to the LPDF as required by the political roadmap should the HoR fail to do so within three weeks, which [does not bode](#) well for a smooth transition.

[Many experts](#) believe that this new interim government conjures images of the same period in 2016 when the unity government formed by UN-mediated negotiations, the GNA, was unable to overcome the institutional divides that had emerged in 2014. The parallel eastern-based authority

aligned with Haftar will likely refuse to recognise this interim government. Aguila Saleh [has preconditions to recognise the GNU](#), including that the new authority be based in Sirte and work under the protection of Haftar’s LNA and under the supervision of the Libyan 5+5 Joint Military Commission, which are not likely to be met. Given this, these demands could undermine progress made since the [Berlin Peace Conference](#) and bring Libya back to where it started: two rival governments and parliaments.

According to Mohammed Ali Abdallah, “The goal of a long-lasting political situation in Libya will take a very long time, much longer than just one presidential term in Washington. However, the Biden administration has an opportunity to be a big part of a success story that started in 2011 & unfortunately was hijacked by many spoilers. The next few years will not only shape the future of Libya’s stability but for the entire region’s stability”.

For his part, Mundy told TRT World Research Centre that “I think the prospects are good, but the US will probably have a small role to play. The biggest factor is the sheer exhaustion of most Libyans with this never-ending conflict and transition and the constant foreign meddling in their country. A military solution to this civil war has been proven impossible time and time again, so national dialogue is the only way out”.



Conclusion

After years of deadlock, recent months have brought what the UN calls [tangible](#) progress. As the country heads towards planned December elections – a significant step – huge obstacles remain.

As part of the ceasefire agreement, foreign fighters and mercenaries were supposed to leave the country within three months. That deadline has now passed, but [reportedly](#) they are still on the ground. Some countries continue to pay lip service to the political talks while ignoring the details of the agreement. For instance, the Kremlin has been [seemingly](#) strengthening its position on the Sirte-Ju-fra line with the delivery of materiel and mercenaries to the country shortly after the new interim government was designated.

The current UN-backed reconciliation process has developed momentum to bring the Libyan people closer to unity and stability – as long as the international community prevents spoilers, either domestic or foreign, from shifting Libya's hard-earned peacebuilding achievements to renew the conflict.

Therefore, to organise free and fair elections, international players must coordinate their approach to protect the U.N.'s efforts, engaging with Libyans across the country in a manner that increases the country's stability and security. Without the help of key external states who back different Libyan actors, no political process will be effective in bringing about long-term stability.

Under the Trump presidency, the US was not able to implement a coherent political strategy to provide more practical support for the UN-backed political process. However, Washington's Libya policy might experience significant changes with the Biden's administration commitment to multilateralism. This, however, remains to be seen. Indeed, given the new president has a number of domestic issues to tackle, Libya may not be a priority for Washington. The US and its NATO partners should take a more coordinated and unified response to Libya's challenges in order to pave the way for the formation of a unified government capable of continuing the transition to a stable and democratic Libya. Otherwise, some regional and international players namely the UAE and Russia with their local partners might spoil the ongoing peace process. As sustainable political settlement seems to not be in the interest of these actors because it could undermine their influence and may even threaten their military presence in the country.



(Cem Ozdel - Anadolu Agency)