

Another False Dawn in Libya?

Elections have once again been postponed as the aftermath of America's disastrous war there looks bleaker still.

By [Ted Galen Carpenter](#) • [November 13, 2018](#)

Just a few months ago, it appeared that Libya's long nightmare of chaos that the U.S.-led "humanitarian" intervention unleashed in 2011 might finally be coming to an end. A ceasefire among the contending political factions and armed militias was at least partially effective, diminishing the level of violence. The massive exodus of refugees, many on small, overcrowded boats trying to cross the Mediterranean to Europe, had slowed as well. Elections were scheduled for early December to choose a new government that would then exercise jurisdiction over the entire country.

Once again, though, optimism is fading. Elections will not take place now until early spring—if they are held at all. Even as UN mediators were getting leaders of the main factions to sign a new election agreement, armed skirmishes [between rival militias](#) erupted in the capital, Tripoli. UN envoy Ghassan Salame [concluded glumly](#) that conflict-wracked Libya is caught in a destructive cycle "fueled by personal ambition and the nation's stolen wealth." The only way forward, Salame insisted, had to begin with a national conference of all parties in early 2019. That approach seemed more a forlorn hope—a diplomatic Hail Mary—than a realistic strategy.

Given the multiple players vying for dominance, it is no surprise that Libya's strife continues to go on. Even before the latest outbreak of fighting, Mohamed Eljarh, a Libyan scholar with the Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East, made [the sobering observation](#) that progress toward democracy and good governance "will require a level of stability and

security hard to imagine in Libya today.”

There had been a few encouraging developments in 2017 and 2018 though. French President Emmanuel Macron [facilitated](#) the signing of a ceasefire agreement among the feuding Libyan factions at a meeting outside Paris in July 2017. A [subsequent Macron mediation effort](#) led to an accord between Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, perhaps the most powerful factional leader, and his rivals in late May 2018 to conduct nationwide elections [on December 10](#).

A great deal of uncertainty developed [almost immediately](#) as to whether the December target date would hold. That skepticism was well founded, and it was not the first time that hopes were dashed. The July 2017 ceasefire agreement contained a provision promising elections in early 2018 and clearly that did not happen. Skeptics also argue that any agreement to hold elections in the near future [puts the cart before the horse](#). They doubt whether a free and fair election can be held at all without first achieving a marked improvement in Libya’s overall stability.

Trying to facilitate voting in the current fractured and volatile environment, they contend, is a blueprint for voter intimidation, as well as ballot box stuffing and other forms of fraud. The losers almost certainly would reject the outcome of such an election—and perhaps any election in which they did not prevail. The likely aftermath would be a resumption of full-scale fighting. At that point, Libya might be the worst off that it’s been since the 2011 NATO-assisted revolution to overthrow dictator Moammar Gaddafi.

Even if such a meltdown could be avoided, Libya is still a long way from becoming a functional democracy. Neither Haftar nor his opponents have ever shown much commitment to democratic norms.

Haftar is an especially sketchy character. He is a former CIA asset who once lived just a few miles from the agency’s headquarters in Langley,

Virginia. Indeed, the United States had backed him with financial and logistical support in a failed 1988 coup attempt against Gaddafi. Despite his previous CIA ties, though, U.S. officials during the Obama administration no longer seemed to regard Haftar as a worthwhile asset. In fact, they viewed him as an [impediment](#) to Washington's overall Libya policy.

Although he was reliably [anti-Islamist](#) and commanded a significant contingent of armed fighters, U.S. policymakers saw his actions as dangerously divisive and motivated primarily by a drive for personal glory. Instead of backing Haftar and his troops, the Obama administration linked U.S. fortunes, for better or worse, to the so-called Government of National Accord—one of the other factions vying to control Libya. There is little evidence that the Trump administration has adopted a different approach.

Haftar insists that his goal is to push Libya's democratic process forward and neutralize extremist elements. He did call early on for elections to be held in 2018, and eventually attained the agreement to that effect.

[Opponents](#), though, note both his autocratic bearing and the often brutal conduct of the military forces he controls. They fear that Haftar's real goal is to establish a personal dictatorship.

One point should be clear by now: if the situation in Libya is to improve on a lasting basis, it will be the product of more prudent actions that the various Libyan factions adopt themselves. Democracy and stability, if they come to Libya at all, must be a self-help project. The chaos that the Western powers helped sow with their ill-considered meddling demonstrates that even well-meaning outsiders cannot implant the necessary values and institutions for either stability or democracy. And optimism about the new election agreement may prove as misplaced as previous hopes for progress.

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