

The Takeaway

Policy Briefs from the Mosbacher Institute for
Trade, Economics, and Public Policy

Lobbying Battles in the Libyan War

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In many contemporary armed conflicts, belligerent parties fight not only on the battlefield, but also on the diplomatic front in the world's capitals. In Washington and other US cities, warring groups often hire high-profile public relations professionals in order to gain access to US policymakers and influence policy. This brief uses the ongoing conflict in Libya to illustrate the foreign war lobby in the United States and examine why fighting groups hire American lobbyists, far from the war front.

While war rages in Libya, the country's main belligerent parties have been waging a different kind of battle against one another in the United States. Here, they have hired American law firms and PR professionals to help them lobby the US government. How and why do foreign governments and their armed opponents engage in lobbying in the United States?



WHAT'S THE TAKEAWAY?

The Libyan war lobby is just one example of how foreign governments and their armed opponents both actively lobby the US government.

Millions of dollars are spent each year on US law firms and PR companies by foreign governments and rebel groups.

There is little systematic data on the extent of conflict lobbying.

The Libyan case illustrates that foreign lobbying is significant and deserves more attention from academics and policymakers.

THE LIBYAN WAR

The current war in Libya has origins in the popular uprisings that erupted in early 2011 as part of the widespread demonstrations against entrenched autocrats across the Middle East and North Africa. When Libyans protested en masse against Col. Muammar Gaddafi and his regime that spring, NATO forces took the opportunity to intervene with airpower and ensure his removal, bringing to an end over four decades of his dictatorial rule.

But the overthrow of Gaddafi created a power vacuum in Libya, an outcome NATO powers chose to ignore. Predictably, a number of militant groups began to fight for territorial control. Amidst the ensuing chaos the UN supported a political agreement in 2015 that designated the Government of National Accord (GNA) as Libya's interim government. However, the GNA barely functioned as a government and was not national in any sense, and the accord that brought it into being quickly shattered.

The self-styled Libyan National Army (LNA), led by Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, soon emerged as the most powerful armed contender to the GNA. The war took on a new sense of urgency in April 2019 when Haftar's forces launched a campaign to seize the capital, Tripoli, bombarding civilian targets in the process.¹

As is typical of contemporary conflicts, numerous external states have asserted a role in this war, backing one side or the other with shipments of weapons, fighters, and funds. Haftar's LNA has received support from Russia, France, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan, while Turkey sent

troops from the Syrian opposition to fight on the side of the GNA's internationally recognized government.²

THE FOREIGN WAR LOBBIES

Far from Libya, the warring parties have been fighting not an armed contest, but a political one in Washington. The United States has so far played a muted role in the Libyan war, nominally aligning itself with the GNA. Nevertheless, with control of Tripoli itself up for grabs and Arab and European states' heavy backing of the rebel LNA, both sides see the potential payoffs of developing strong ties with American officials and lawmakers in preparation for any eventuality.

Lobbying by Libya's internationally recognized government is par for the course in US politics; many dozens of foreign governments spend millions of dollars a year hiring American law firms and PR companies to lobby the executive and legislative branches.³ In lobbying—inserting themselves into the US policy-making process—foreign governments are taking advantage of democratic freedoms enshrined in the First Amendment. Lobbying allows foreign actors greater influence in policy debates and helps them build relations with individual lawmakers and government offices. Ultimately, it is a way for foreign governments to attempt to steer US policies in their favor.

Foreign rebel groups also lobby in the United States while engaged in armed campaigns against their home governments. Like their government counterparts, they hire American PR companies—specialists in the influence game who typically have close connections with (or formerly held offices in) the US gov-

ernment—to represent their interests in Congress, in the White House, and with other policy audiences.

Whether they represent foreign states or rebels, lobbyists must regularly disclose their work to the US Justice Department as mandated by the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) and other US lobbying laws. Conflict lobbying data, however, are inadequately collected, difficult to analyze, and sometimes nonexistent, particularly for rebel groups.

DIPLOMACY AND COUNTER-DIPLOMACY IN THE LIBYAN CONFLICT

As part of the Libyan war, the GNA has worked with at least two American PR companies over the past year to lobby Congress and the Trump administration, with contracts totaling \$3.5 million for the year.⁴ The GNA's statements, issued by their American PR agents, advance arguments one might expect from an internationally-recognized government seeking to fend off armed challengers:

“The GNA is the legitimate government and the only body authorized in Libya to consolidate military alliances necessary to defend the state, its institutions, and its citizens.... The goal of the GNA is to defeat the aggression [by Haftar's forces], eliminate the coup project, return Libya to a peaceful democratic constitutional path, and restore security and stability.”⁵

They also dangle the Libyan war as an opportunity for the Trump administration to make its mark in the foreign policy sphere:

“Only the Trump administration has clean hands in Libya...since European and Gulf powers are feeding the con-

flict through their continued support for renegade warlord Khalifa Haftar. President Trump can call out the hypocrisy of these outsiders and apply real pressure.... Previous US administrations and foreign powers have exploited and failed Libya, and now it's clear that only Donald Trump can get the process back on track.”⁶

In a classic lobbying tactic, they also stress the dire consequences—here with geopolitical intonations—of American failure to back the GNA:

“Is the administration concerned that if Haftar succeeds, Russia will gain access to two more deep water ports in Libya facing Europe, besides the one they now have in Syria?”⁷

Haftar and the LNA, for their part, have engaged in counter-diplomacy by hiring their own lobbyists in the United States in 2019.⁸ While the GNA currently has the clear upper hand in the battle for international diplomatic recognition, the empirical reality is that the LNA now controls most of Libya, including the country's largest oil field.⁹ Given this, the rebels have adopted a different marketing tactic from that used by the GNA, stressing their credentials in exploiting Libya's vast oil reserves. Their chosen PR firm, based in Houston, is known for its experience in the international energy market, and its staff have disclosed meetings with high-level American officials in charge of energy policy over the past year.¹⁰ The LNA's lobbying efforts are likely motivated in part by the possibility that international recognition can shift in the future, depending on war dynamics on the ground, particularly the outcome of the ongoing battle for Tripoli.

IMPLICATIONS

The Libya case illustrates the extent to which international diplomacy can be part and parcel of civil conflicts. When states and rebels fight not just for territorial control and battlefield victories but also for international recognition and future business investments, the diplomatic front can sometimes overtake local war dynamics in its impact on the ultimate war outcome. Lobbying contests also demonstrate the internationalized nature of contemporary conflicts. Local actors may be the main fighters, but they are backed by regional and international powers in complex configurations of proxy warfare that reflect various states' geopolitical and regional interests of the day.

The war lobby certainly raises ethical questions about the confluence of foreign wars, PR companies' profit motives, and US foreign policy decisions.¹¹ Regardless, given that violent conflicts often have far-reaching repercussions on international politics, and in light of the increasing importance of image-marketing in the social media age, the war lobby can be expected to remain a major feature of violent conflicts to come.

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Notes:

¹ Wintour, P. & Stephen, C. (2019, April 7). Battle for Tripoli escalates as fighting nears Libyan capital. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/apr/07/libya-us-forces-evacuated-haftar-seeks-military-control>

² McKernan, B. & Akoush, H. (2020, January 15) Exclusive: 2,000 Syrian fighters deployed to Libya to support government. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/15/exclusive-2000-syrian-troops-deployed-to-libya-to-support-regime>.

³ Shinkman, P.D. (2018, August 17). Countries and influence: Enter through the lobby. *US News & World Report*. <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/articles/2018-08-17/biggest-spenders-of-foreign-lobbying-in-the-us-comes-from-americas-closest-allies>

⁴ *Al-Monitor*, Libya. <https://lobbying.al-monitor.com/pulse/libya#tab1>

⁵ US Department of Justice, FARA file, <https://efile.fara.gov/docs/6170-Informational-Materials-20200103-247.pdf>

⁶ US Department of Justice, FARA file, <https://efile.fara.gov/docs/6728-Informational-Materials-20200128-7.pdf>

⁷ US Department of Justice, FARA file, <https://efile.fara.gov/docs/6170-Informational-Materials-20200211-277.pdf>

⁸ Huang, R. (2016) Rebel diplomacy in civil war. *International Security*, 40 (4): 89-126.

⁹ Eastern Libyan forces take over El Sharara oilfield. (2019, February 6). *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-oilfield/eastern-libyan-forces-take-over-el-sharara-oilfield-idUSKCN1PV25G>

¹⁰ Schaffer, A. (2020, January 13). Libyan rebels lobbied US energy officials, GOP lawmakers amid oil dispute. *Al-Monitor*. <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/01/khalifa-hifter-libyan-national-army-lobby-energy-republicans.html>

¹¹ Huang, R. (2020, February 6) Armed rebel groups lobby in DC, just like governments. How does that influence US policy? *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/02/06/armed-rebel-groups-lobby-dc-just-like-governments-how-does-that-influence-us-policy/>

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