

REUNITING THE GNA-LED LIBYA EAGERNESS VS. CHALLENGES

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- What are the driving factors behind the conflict in Libya?
 - What is Turkey's strategic objective in Libya?
 - What are the future scenarios for Libya?

A FRAME FOR THE CONFLICT

Libya has been struggling for peace and stability for almost a decade following the 2011 revolution. Many dynamics have challenged the stability in Libya such as the heritage of the Qaddafi term, the vulnerable social and political structures, the non-existence of an institutionalized state mechanism, and the incursions of foreign actors. As soon as there is some hope of setting up a compromise towards starting a political process, challenges - lately by Haftar's attack - impede the promising undertakings. Haftar's quest to be a Qaddafi-like authoritarian leader in Libya has coincided with three dynamics – excluding the internal Libyan ones. The first and most significant issue in question is the Eastern Mediterranean-related developments that bring a wide number of actors into the crises. The second external factor is the revisionism of the partnership between the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia which aims to reverse democracy-building efforts in the Middle East. Finally, Russia's historic desire to reach the hot seas, and most certainly the Mediterranean Sea, is another input. All three dynamics challenge both Libya's legitimate Government of National Accord (GNA) and the interests of Turkey.

The shared concerns of Libya and Turkey have been solidified by two agreements to respond to the aforementioned revisionism. The first one is the delimitation of the exclusive economic zone in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea according to international law and the sovereign rights of states. The second is the cooperation agreement in the security field under the previously inked memoranda. In this frame, Turkey started a security assistance mission in Libya in the form of training, organizing, and mentoring the GNA's military formations to defeat Haftar's militias. Contrary to Turkey's efforts, Haftar's militias are heavily equipped, organized, and concretely backed by Russia, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, France, Greece, Egypt, and Jordan, and indirectly by Israel and the EU. The national interests of these states in Libya are grounded in the efforts to remove Libya's legitimate GNA and replace it with the Sisi-like authoritarian Haftar regime. Hence a complicated struggle in Libya's theater has started between legitimacy and illegitimacy.

Haftar's assault on Tripoli and the other GNA-held areas with the support of the aforementioned states is a challenge to the legitimate government of Libya. However, the main motivation is to realize

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these countries' interests in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea. In this sense Haftar enjoyed the support in the form of Sudanese and Russian mercenaries paid by the UAE and has obtained military equipment from all involved countries. Egypt and the Aqabah Airport in Jordan have become the hub of foreign assistance while France and the UAE have sent aircraft either to Egypt or to the skies of the city of Misrata. Furthermore, they have offered de facto legitimization to Haftar by official visits and announced phone calls. What is more, Libya's conflict, as a perfect case of a coup d'état, has become a regional revisionism project for the countries that expect the realization of wider interests not only in Libya but in the wider geography. In this frame, the military success of the Turkey-backed GNA troops forced the intruding states to augment Haftar more and more. Hence the intensified efforts of these state actors gave the necessary impetus for Haftar to topple the legitimate GNA and exclude Turkey from the plans of the energy equation in Libya and the Eastern Mediterranean.

Haftar's April 4 attack with the aforementioned support initially reached the neighborhood of Tripoli and squeezed two-thirds of the Libyan public to the coastal area in the northwest of Libya. The scattered nature of the Libyan militia groups that are not well organized and have a more regional structure, without a hierarchy, facilitated Haftar's advance. Meanwhile, Madhali Salafi groups, under the influence of Saudi Wahhabism and with the Saudi Arabia's support, aligned with Haftar and eased his expansion. Such an attempt, for instance, eased Haftar's efforts to capture the southern neighborhood of Tripoli and the city of Sirte. The armored vehicles – sent by Jordan, Egypt, and the UAE - provided a shield for the advancing Haftar militia while Chinese-made UAVs cleared the corridors with precise ammunition. With the strength of having military initiative on the ground, Haftar felt that he is about to capture the heart of Libya, namely Tripoli, that would, in turn, persuade the majority of the tribes and regions, mainly the southern flank of Libya, to accept his authority. In this mood, Haftar left

the Moscow Summit and the Berlin Conference proud that he will have a victory within days that will make the international attempts outdated. The Turkish involvement in the Libyan crisis by a smart mentoring strategy challenged Haftar and his backers since Turkey was able to surface the potential of the Libyan military councils that had succeeded in the 2011 revolution.

The military support by the aforementioned countries to Haftar included armored personnel carriers, armed unmanned aerial vehicle systems, Pantsir (SA-22) air defense system, ammunition of all types, and life-support goods. Meanwhile French Air Forces conducted air reconnaissance tasks and violated Libyan aerospace. The UAE, on the other hand, sent five jet fighters to Egypt in case Turkey intervened in the ongoing fight on the ground following Turkey's drill in the Mediterranean Sea. Finally, Russia sent eight jet fighters after the destruction of eight Pantsir air defense systems and a vehicle-mounted electronic jammer that could challenge the overall dynamics and escalate the conflict beyond intrastate turmoil. To sustain the military support to Haftar, despite the UN embargo, the UAE sent a IL-76 type cargo plane almost every day to Benghazi, Egypt, or Jordan loaded with military equipment and crowded with mercenaries. As a result, there was a great influx of foreign military aid to Haftar.

Operation IRINA, which has been activated by the EU to observe the embargo on Libya since April 1, 2020, did not intervene in these flights while the vessels departing from Turkish ports towards Libyan ones were strictly controlled. Egyptian ports and territory were out of the authority of Operation IRINA that is facilitating the free passage of mercenary and military goods to Haftar's forces. The question of whether Operation IRINA was designed to deny military assistance to Haftar emerged as Malta expressed regret in participating in the operation due to concerns about how the operation is being employed. The embargo decision appears not to be fair since it has been exploited by the UAE, Egypt, Russia, and France to facilitate a Sisi-like government in Libya opening the way to realizing the EAST-MED energy project.

TURKEY'S STRATEGY IN LIBYA

Turkey's strategy is designed, first, to ensure the GNA is in charge of Libya's security as it ought to be rather than for the GNA to be forced to compromise with Haftar's and his backers' dictated terms. Such an aim does not cover an overall state-building effort that will address the restructuring and reforming of the Libyan state's architecture. In other words, Turkey is more security-oriented in Libya. The second leg of the strategy is to respond to what the other parties are committed to achieving by providing Haftar support for bringing down the GNA/for ousting the GNA. The final dimension of the Turkish approach is to watch the efforts of the third parties that are not directly involved in the Libyan issue. The countries that have preferred an "observe and act" strategy may start undertakings in favor of the party that wins - regardless of who it is. In this case, Turkey needs to review all probable courses of both the involved and observing actors and be prepared to employ a flexible and integrated policy in Libya by uniting military strategy and political undertakings.

Turkish policy has initially leaned on promoting diplomatic interaction to find a solution to the crisis despite the fact that Haftar had declared Turkey an adversary. In this context, Turkey did not react to Haftar's aggressive statements, but delineated the legitimacy and accountability of the GNA pending the UN decisions. Turkey was not involved in any military assistance or joint operation against Haftar, even after he started the so-called Operation Volcano Anger which claimed to be countering terrorism in Libya but, in reality, was attempting to topple the GNA. Military assistance came on January 5, 2020, almost nine months after Haftar's coup d'état attempt. The Turkish parliament approved the military assistance after a brutal attack by Haftar's militias on the Military Academy in Tripoli with a toll of 30 martyred cadets. President Erdoğan announced Turkey's objective as "not to fight" but "to support the legitimate government and avoid a humanitarian tragedy" in Libya.

The assistance was designated in the form of mentorship under the leadership of a lieutenant general ap-

pointed by the President Erdoğan. The task was not combat-oriented but to assist the local military formations that are linked to the GNA. After a planning and preparation phase to repel the Haftar militia, GNA forces started a military campaign to be continued as long as Haftar denied the calls for a ceasefire by the GNA leadership. As the military operations intensified with UAVs to repel Haftar's and his allies' aerial campaigns, GNA forces proved their capacity in repelling the threats. The GNA forces shot down three of Haftar's SU-24s and a number of Chinese-made UAVs that indicated the termination of Haftar's dominance and GNA's assault phase.

Other than military developments, Turkey was also vigilant for the political developments in order to reach a compromise. In this frame, Turkey facilitated the Moscow Summit with Russia pushing both the GNA and Haftar to agree on a solution that will be cost-effective. The risk of this undertaking was to legitimize Haftar as a de facto actor in Libya while the advantage was to reach a political compromise and ease the conflict. Unfortunately, Haftar left Moscow without a consensus on a ceasefire although the Tripoli government had signed a memorandum. Hence the calculated risk was realized for Turkey and the GNA. Similarly, the Berlin Conference was held within weeks by a wider participation of the states and conflicting parties in Libya. However, it was concluded by a declaration; unlike in Moscow, Haftar did not ink. Turkey completely abides by the memorandum of the Berlin Conference. But the attitudes of the countries which provide support to Haftar provoked Turkey to mentor and organize the GNA troops in order to counterbalance Haftar. As a result of political and military commitment, the GNA gained superiority on the ground and swept the Haftar forces out of the northwest of Libya at the initial stage of the campaign to counter Haftar's coup d'état that was backed by the profiting countries.

A question, which can be directed as a criticism, is whether Turkey violated and circumvented the UN arms embargo on Libya. The UN embargo covers military shipments and sales to Libya. Turkey's mem-

orandum with Libya covers security assistance that exists doctrinally in NATO's regulations and in UN practice. Contrary to the arguments against Turkey's involvement in Libya, Haftar claims to assume the authority of the country on behalf of the Libyan people. This position is a coup d'état in the full sense of the word. Any military support to Haftar means assisting a coup d'état in Libya rather than cementing the legitimate authority.

FUTURE SCENARIOS FOR LIBYA

The projections on Libya's conflict depend on military and political dynamics that appear to develop in ambiguity. In this sense, the initial defining elements are foreign logistical support, organizational capacity, and the sustainability of the military capacity to display the future projections. If these features are compared for both parties of the conflict, the GNA and Haftar seem weak and dependent on foreign military assistance. Consequently, predicting the military course depends on the level of foreign incursion.

Turkey's support for the GNA has been based on limited logistical support, enhanced organizational assistance, and consolidating the endurance of the established security apparatus by mentoring. On the other hand, Haftar has enjoyed an enormous level of military logistical support by the backing countries which has included aerial force, ammunition, sophisticated types of equipment, and military assets. The continuity of this support favors Haftar since the economic burden is shared and organized by the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, France, and Russia. On the other hand, the GNA enjoys the logistical support of Turkey that is only framed by self-defense and internal security. Hence the strategy of the intruding states has disproportionately favored Haftar although the latest military balance indicates the correctness of the Turkish strategy.

The other feature, organizational capacity, leans on the subcategories of personnel recruitment, the loyalty of the local militias, command, and control linkage to direct the military operations on the ground. Haftar does not have a unique military structure but

an accumulation of military formations that can easily shift their loyalty. Sudanese and Russian mercenaries appear to be the backbone of Haftar's military power: they are loyal as long as they are paid by the UAE. The GNA, conversely, is structured around the military councils of the cities and regions inherited from the 2011 revolution. In other words, the GNA represents the revolution, which makes it credible when compared to Haftar's absence in the revolution. The Turkish contribution to the GNA consolidated this organizational strength allowing the furthering of their combined combat capability. Finally, the endurance of the security architecture can be correlated to the previous capacities and favors the GNA since its logistics and organizational structure are within the optimum levels - as opposed to Haftar's polarized capacities.

As a result of these three characteristics, the GNA surpassed the culmination point to defeat Haftar's overall attack. The GNA succeeded in uniting the northwest of Libya while pushing back Haftar's militia towards the eastern flank of the country. The southern portion of Libya traditionally observes the authority in Tripoli and a silence persists there. Key terrain in defining the course of this loyalty will be, first, the Al Jufra Airbase and, second, the oil crescent between Sirte and Benghazi. Whoever holds control of these two locations will enjoy the long-term success of their military campaign across Libya. Russia's current move to position aircraft in Tobruk and Jufra can be assessed within this logic.

Political developments are twofold. The first is an internal political compromise or confrontation. Internal political developments are short of reaching an agreement between the two parties since Haftar rejected the Libya Political Agreement. The author assesses that only the defeat of either party will start a political process because a united Libya can only be achieved by a single authority in the country. Failing to secure a victory, Haftar may start a divisive strategy, defining Benghazi as the emerging capital of a parallel state. The second type of political development may be initiated by the international community. The Berlin

Conference is perceived as the basis of the international commitment and it appears as a failure after Haftar continued to attack Tripoli. Furthermore competing countries will not prefer a reconciliation unless their national interests in the East Mediterranean Sea are met; several of them may align themselves with the status quo after the conflict. The critical issue, I believe, is the attitude of the USA.

The USA preferred to observe the conflict and position itself for maximum gaining. As the GNA moves forward, the USA shifted its policy towards the GNA while leaving an open door for Haftar. The same strategy is also valid for Italy. If these two countries cooperate with Turkey, Libya's conflict will be concluded on the ground in favor of the side of legitimacy. Russia, France, or Egypt may retreat in such a case or they might encourage Haftar to build a government in the east of Libya. But the GNA will be more determined to reach the border of Egypt and permanently clear away Haftar. Hence politics in Libya is a variable that depends on military achievements.

CONCLUSION

The strife in Libya downgraded the quality of citizens' daily life as a result of the lack of services following an environment of conflict. Haftar's revisionism devastated a potentially rich and prosperous country and destined it to suffer. The agendas of the

intruding countries polarized the country and complicated the crisis. Unfortunately, the current picture indicates only a military option will terminate the conflict in Libya.

The desired end state for Libya ought to be a state-building effort by the international community to create a model for the Middle East. However, the struggle for maximizing profit in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea depletes such hopes. The foreign incursion of the UAE, France, Egypt, Jordan, and Russia escalated the instability and conflict by encouraging a warlord to challenge the legitimate government. The intruding states, which are providing support to Haftar, are not interested in Libya but in the regional issues. Hence there seems no international willingness to solve the crisis.

If the solution is destined to be military, the promising advance by the GNA promoted a new hope in Libyans that the GNA will be able to defeat Haftar despite the competing countries pumping military assets and mercenaries to the latter. This strategy diminishes the prospects for a prosperous and safe Libya as can be observed after the Russian aircraft deployment to Jufra Airbase after the fall of Al Watiyye Base. Hence the military achievements that can be solidified by the capture of Jufra and the oil crescent will mark the decisive point in Libya's conflict. The political solution will come after a military victory.



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