

# A VORTEX OF CONFLICT THE EVOLVING DYNAMICS OF TURKEY'S INVOLVEMENT IN LIBYA

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# A VORTEX OF CONFLICT

## THE EVOLVING DYNAMICS OF TURKEY'S INVOLVEMENT IN LIBYA

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## SUMMARY

The analysis discusses the evolving dynamics of Turkey's military involvement in Libya, laying out Turkey's motivations for supporting the UN-recognized government in Tripoli, and examining how Turkey's recent military achievements on the ground may leverage its hand diplomatically to secure a political settlement that protects its interests in Libya and in the Eastern Mediterranean.

On November 27, 2019, Turkey signed a maritime delineation and defense cooperation agreement with the UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) based in Tripoli, and subsequently, in January 2020, deployed troops to Libya with parliamentary approval, becoming the first foreign actor to intervene openly in the Libyan conflict upon the formal invitation of the internationally recognized government. The primary reason for Turkey's military involvement in Libya is protecting its geostrategic interests in the Eastern Mediterranean. By backing the Libyan government, the only Turkish-friendly government from a maritime perspective in the region, Ankara aims to break through an "anti-Turkey front" led by France, Greece, and the Greek Administration of Southern Cyprus that seeks to box Turkey in a small corner of the Mediterranean, and thus exclude it from the newly discovered natural gas bonanza in the region. To a lesser degree, Turkey's involvement in Libya is also motivated by its commitment to counter dictatorial regimes (bankrolled by the United Arab Emirates) and support majority

rule in Middle Eastern countries, and finally, by its goal to recoup billions of dollars in unfinished construction contracts signed by Turkish construction companies under the Gaddafi regime.

In a period of six months (January-June 2020), Turkish intervention in support of the GNA has stunningly turned the tide in Libya's civil war by rolling back renegade warlord Khalifa Haftar's Tripoli offensive and by capturing key coastal towns in western Libya and the two main launch pads for Haftar's offensive, the al-Watiya Air Base and Tarhuna. Key to this transformation has been Haftar forces' loss of aerial superiority due to the deployment of Turkish Bayraktar TB2 drones in the skies over Tripoli and, to a lesser extent, the deployment of a significant number of Turkish-backed fighters in the GNA ranks.

Notwithstanding the most recent deployment of Russian air power in support of Haftar to counterbalance Turkish aerial dominance, Turkey's military achievements on the ground thus far leverage its hand diplomatically to secure a political settlement that protects its geostrategic interests in Libya and in the Eastern Mediterranean. The analysis concludes by pointing out that Turkey should ensure that the GNA retains the key role in any future political and security arrangement in Libya, and that the maritime delimitation deal Ankara signed with Tripoli remains intact. To achieve this end goal, Turkey for the moment should continue to support the advancement of the GNA forces and should try to pull the EU and the US to its side.

## INTRODUCTION

On November 27, 2019, Turkey signed a maritime delineation and defense cooperation agreement with the UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) based in Tripoli, dealing a heavy blow to Greece, the Greek Administration of Southern Cyprus (GASC), and Israel's common project of constructing an underwater gas pipeline to transport the newly discovered Eastern Mediterranean gas to Europe via Greece (hence bypassing Turkey). The agreed-upon exclusive economic zone (EEZ) and continental shelf (CS) delineations cut off the prospective route of the EastMed gas pipeline and thus effectively dash any hopes for its construction. Notwithstanding Athens and Nicosia's strong objections (backed by the EU) that the agreed-upon delineations infringe upon the Greek and Greek Cypriot CSs/EEZs (Fig. 1), Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan stated clearly from the very beginning that "South Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, and Israel cannot establish any

natural gas pipeline in this region without Turkey's consent."<sup>1</sup>

Ankara then pressed ahead with the defense cooperation agreement and on January 2, 2020, Turkey's Grand National Assembly (TBMM) approved the bill authorizing the government to deploy troops to Libya for a one-year period to roll back the Tripoli offensive of the eastern-based putschist warlord Khalifa Haftar against the Libyan government (GNA).<sup>2</sup> With the January 2020 bill, Turkey became the first foreign actor to intervene openly in the Libyan conflict upon the formal invitation of the Libyan government led by Fayez al-Sarraj. However, Turkey's military involvement in Libya is not new. Ankara has been covertly propping up anti-Haftar forces in the oil-rich North African country since the second half of 2014, particularly during the 2014-2017 war for Benghazi.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, for over a decade, Turkey has sought to sign a maritime delineation deal with Libya to push back against Greece's maximalist claims in the Eastern Mediterranean that assign an EEZ and CS to Greek islands also. While the 2011 Arab Uprisings and the overthrow of Muammar al-Qaddafi in Libya temporarily interrupted such Turkish plans, since October 2018, Ankara has insisted on concluding a maritime deal with the Libyan government. Yet, it was only after the Russian and United Arab Emirates (UAE)-backed Haftar forces besieged the capital Tripoli in November 2019 that the GNA felt seriously threatened and

1. "Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: Libya'yla Anlaşmada Türkiye Uluslararası Haklarını Kullandı", *Anadolu Agency*, December 9, 2019. <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/libya/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-libyayla-anlasmada-turkiye-uluslarasi-haklini-kullandi/1668679> (Access date: May 28, 2020).

2. Veysel Kurt, "Tezkere Sonrası Libya'da Denklem", *Sabah*, January 4, 2020. <https://www.sabah.com.tr/perspektif/yazarlar/veyselkurt/2020/01/04/tezkere-sonrası-libyada-denklem> (Access date: May 28, 2020).

3. Michael Young, "Into the Libya Vortex", *Carnegie Middle East Center*, January 14, 2020. [https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/80776?fbclid=IwAR1pu5bRrRNhfTwfl\\_ffSxBkaHn3Mhll5c3pN17z1EuQBfEOR4pe8NEUWs](https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/80776?fbclid=IwAR1pu5bRrRNhfTwfl_ffSxBkaHn3Mhll5c3pN17z1EuQBfEOR4pe8NEUWs) (Access date: May 28, 2020).

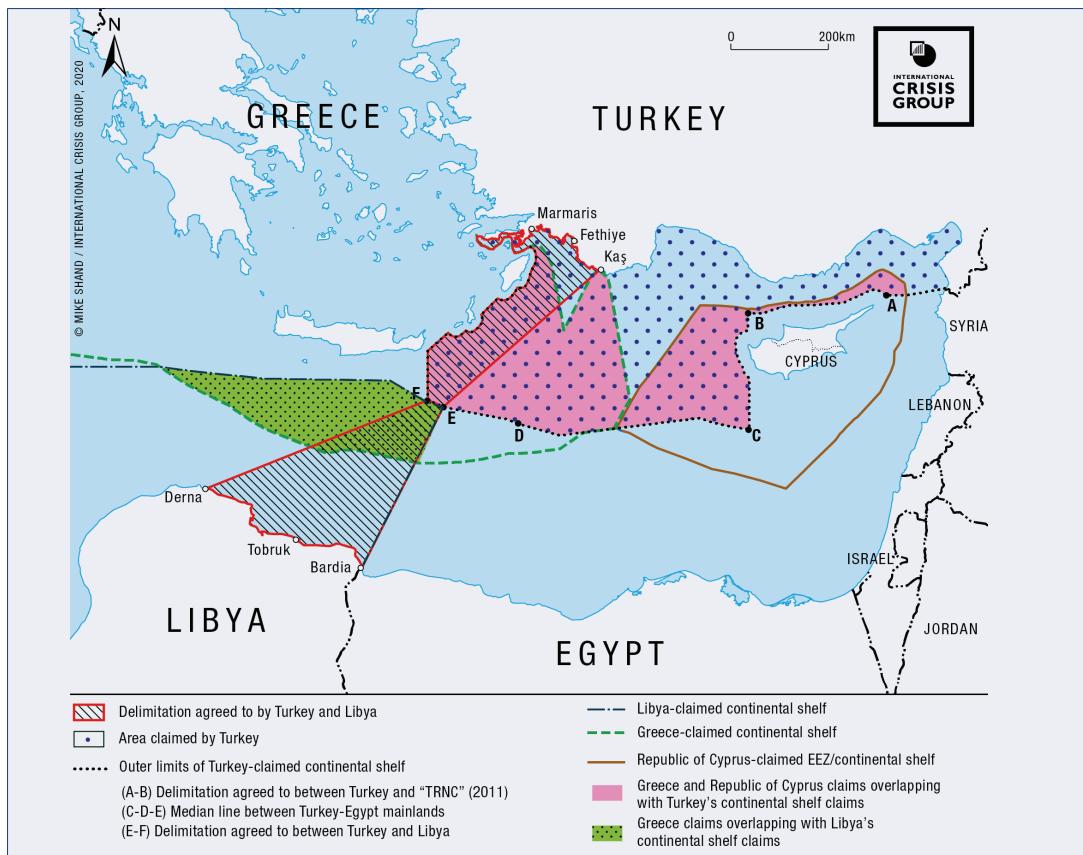


Figure 1: Maritime delineations agreed upon by Turkey and the GNA and the overlapping GASC, Greek, Libyan, and Turkish CS claims in the Eastern Mediterranean. Source: International Crisis Group, “Turkey Wades into Libya’s Troubled Waters”, *Europe Report No. 257*, (April 30, 2020), p. 27.

hence asked for Turkish military support. In return, Tripoli signed a maritime deal and defense cooperation agreement with Ankara on November 27, 2019.<sup>4</sup>

Turkey showed its key importance in the developments in Libya by first sponsoring (together with Russia) two diplomatic initiatives to bring forth a political solution to the Libyan crisis, the Moscow Meeting on January 13, 2020, and the Berlin Conference on January 19, 2020. In both cases, however, Haftar acted as a spoiler by refusing to sign a cease-fire agreement. One day before the Berlin Conference, Khalifa Haftar even ordered his allied tribesmen to shut down

Libya's oil fields and export terminals in the “oil crescent,” Libya's eastern coastal area from where around 60 percent of its crude oil is extracted and exported.<sup>5</sup> (Fig. 2) Clearly, the move was intended to pressure the Libyan government into submission by cutting its primary source of revenue and only source of foreign currency. Since then, though, Turkey has significantly upped its military supplies (including combat drones, rockets, and armored vehicles) to the Libyan government. To date, Turkey's gambit has paid off handsomely in terms of rolling back Haftar's Tripoli offensive.

4. International Crisis Group, “Turkey Wades into Libya’s Troubled Waters”, *Europe Report No. 257*, (April 30, 2020), pp. 1-4.

5. Mücahit Aydemir, “Afrika’nın En Fazla Petrol Rezervine Sahip Libya Bu Zenginliğini Kullanmaktan Mahrum”, *Anadolu Agency*, May 31, 2020. <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/afrika-nin-en-fazla-petrol-rezervine-sahip-libya-bu-zenginligini-kullanmaktan-mahrum/1859553> (Access date: May 31, 2020).

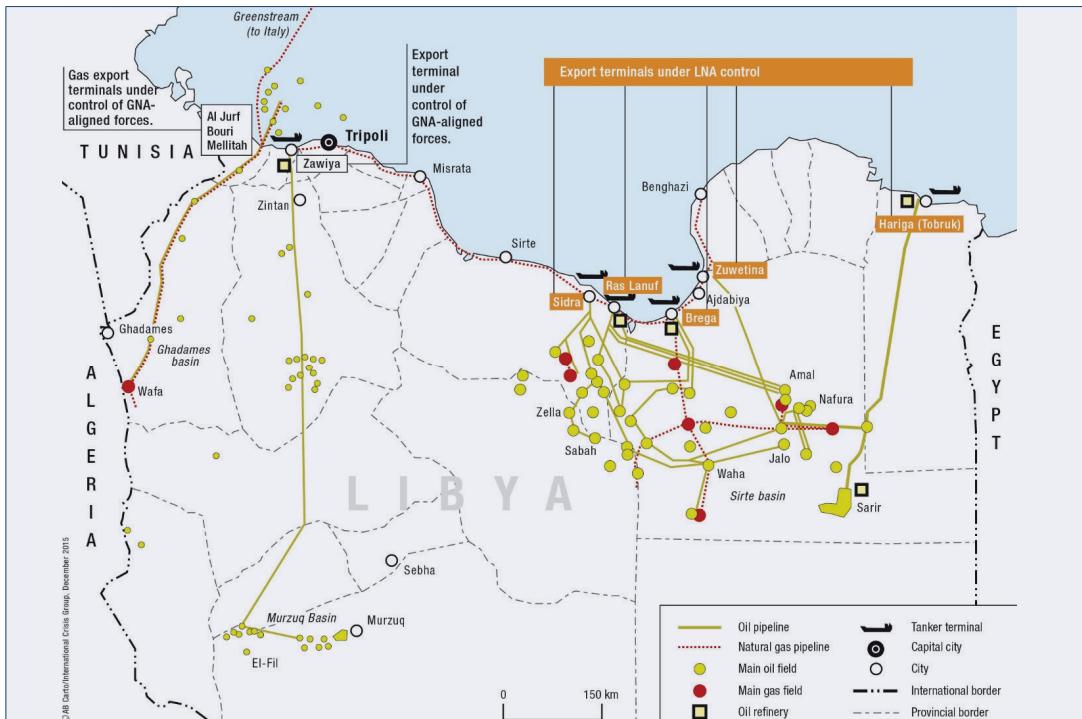


Figure 2: Map of Libya's gas fields, oil fields, and export terminals under GNA and Libyan National Army (LNA) control. Source: International Crisis Group, "After the Showdown in Libya's Oil Crescent", *Middle East and North Africa Report No. 189*, [August 9, 2018], p. 24.

## WHY IS TURKEY IN LIBYA?

The primary reason for Turkey's involvement in Libya is protecting its geostrategic interests in the Eastern Mediterranean. Since the 2010 discovery of substantial offshore natural gas deposits in the region, Turkey has faced a concerted effort by three EU member states (Greece, GASC, and France) to box it in a small corner of the Mediterranean and thus exclude Ankara from the newly discovered gas bonanza. This "anti-Turkey front" has also been joined by three Middle Eastern states (Egypt, Israel, and the United Arab Emirates),<sup>6</sup> and the two main outputs of their joint efforts until now have been the establishment on January 14, 2019, in Cairo, of

the East Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF), and the East Mediterranean (EastMed) pipeline agreement signed in Athens on January 2, 2020, between Greece, GASC, and Israel.<sup>7</sup> Turkey's intervention in Libya in support of the Libyan government then represents Ankara's attempt to break through this "anti-Turkey front," since from a maritime perspective the Libyan government is the only Turkish-friendly government in the region. Not surprisingly, on the other side, all members of the "anti-Turkey front" provide political and military support to the putschist warlord Khalifa Haftar.

Most recently, the conflict lines in the Eastern Mediterranean were highlighted in a joint declaration adopted by the ministers of foreign affairs of Egypt, France, Greece, GASC, and the United Arab Emirates on May 11, 2020, which

6. Aslı Aydintاشbaş, Julien Barnes-Dacey, Cinzia Bianco, Hugh Lovatt, and Tarek Megerisi, "Deep Sea Rivals: Europe, Turkey, and New Eastern Mediterranean Conflict Lines", *European Council on Foreign Relations*, May 2020. [https://www.ecfr.eu/specials/eastern\\_med#menuare](https://www.ecfr.eu/specials/eastern_med#menuare) (Access date: May 29, 2020).

7. İdlir Lika, "Greek Security Policy in the Eastern Mediterranean", *SETA Analysis*, No. 60, (February 2020), pp. 11-14.

“urged Turkey to respect fully the sovereignty and the sovereign rights of all States in their maritime zones in the Eastern Mediterranean” and “strongly condemned Turkey’s military interference in Libya, and urged Turkey to fully respect the UN arms embargo, and to stop the influx of foreign fighters from Syria to Libya.”<sup>8</sup> While Ankara quickly responded to this declaration by accusing its signatories of forming an “axis of malice” (*ser ittifaki*) and of “hypocrisy,”<sup>9</sup> what is conspicuous is that Israel is not among the signatories of this declaration. This might be a sign that Turkey’s successful diplomacy and military achievements in the region might have led Israel to backtrack on its partnership with Greece and the GASC. Indeed, recently, the Israeli chargé d’affaires in Ankara, Roey Gilad, openly declared that shared interests in containing Hezbollah in Syria and in securing gas supplies in the Eastern Mediterranean can be the basis for re-establishing full diplomatic relations and cooperation between Ankara and Tel Aviv.<sup>10</sup> Ankara’s aim Ankara in a rapprochement with Israel is breaking through the “anti-Turkey front” in the Eastern Mediterranean (as it did with the agreements with the GNA), and using Israel to improve its relations with the U.S. Congress.

In brief, the primary reason for Turkey’s involvement in Libya is protecting its geostrategic interests in the Eastern Mediterranean. While

Turkey’s geostrategic interests in the long term are mostly economic in nature, Ankara aims also to project political power in the region. As noted in a recent article in the *Guardian*, “The push for control over any oil and gas in the Mediterranean basin is not really an economic project at all [in the short term]: gas supply is not a pressing need or financial imperative for Turkey yet. This is really about the projection of political power.”<sup>11</sup> From another point of view, Hasan Basri Yalçın rightly points out that with the decline of U.S. primacy globally and especially with the increasing unwillingness of the United States to become involved in the developments in the Middle East, Turkey should project an autonomous foreign policy to protect its national interests.<sup>12</sup> Turkey’s involvement in Libya is an example of Ankara’s quest for autonomy in its foreign policy.

To a lesser degree, there are also two other motivations for Turkey’s involvement in Libya. One is countering the influence of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), a flimsy union of seven statelets in the Gulf, that for decades has used and is still using its oil wealth against the democratic aspirations of the people of the Middle East and to wreak chaos in the region. Now in Libya, Abu Dhabi is again the main backer of the putschist warlord Haftar, who has not refrained from indiscriminately shelling residential areas and killing hundreds of civilians in the capital Tripoli. By intervening in Libya in support of the UN-recognized government, Turkey showed once more that it is actually the only major

8. “Joint Declaration Adopted by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Cyprus, Egypt, France, Greece, and the United Arab Emirates (11.05.2020)”, Hellenic Republic Ministry of Foreign Affairs. <https://www.mfa.gr/en/current-affairs/statements-speeches/joint-declaration-adopted-by-the-ministers-of-foreign-affairs-of-cyprus-egypt-france-greece-and-the-united-arab-emirates-11052020.html> (Access date: May 30, 2020).

9. “11 May 2020, Statement of the Spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Hami Aksoy, in Response to a Question Regarding the Joint Declaration Adopted by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Egypt, Greece, GCA, France, and the United Arab Emirates”, Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs. [http://www.mfa.gov.tr/sc\\_33\\_gkryortakbildiri-hk-sc.en.mfa](http://www.mfa.gov.tr/sc_33_gkryortakbildiri-hk-sc.en.mfa) (Access date: May 30, 2020).

10. “Is There a Thaw in Israel–Turkey Ties?”, *TRT World*, May 15, 2020. <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/is-there-a-thaw-in-israel-turkey-ties-36349> (Access date: May 30, 2020).

11. Bethan McKernan, “Idlib to Tripoli: Turkey Moves to Dominate Eastern Mediterranean”, *The Guardian*, May 26, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/26/from-idlib-to-tripoli-turkeys-grab-for-influence-in-libya> (Access date: May 30, 2020).

12. Hasan Basri Yalçın, “Rusya’nın Libya’ya Uçak Sevkiyatı”, *Sabah*, May 30, 2020. <https://www.sabah.com.tr/yazarlar/hasan-basri-yalcin/2020/05/30/rusyanin-libyaya-ucak-sevkiyati> (Access date: June 11, 2020). See also Hasan Basri Yalçın, “Egemenlik Kurgusu”, *Sabah*, June 11, 2020. <https://www.sabah.com.tr/yazarlar/hasan-basri-yalcin/2020/06/11/egemenlik-kurgusu> (Access date: June 11, 2020).

global power that counters dictatorial regimes and supports majority rule in the Middle East.

Lastly, the third motivation for Turkey's involvement in Libya, arguably the lesser among the three, is "to recoup billions of dollars in unfinished construction contracts signed under Gaddafi, and get in first when it comes to the reconstruction needed after this bout of fighting."<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the International Crisis Group estimates that around 100 construction contracts awarded to Turkish companies during the Qaddafi era were left incomplete after the overthrow of Qaddafi in 2011, thus incurring Turkish construction companies an estimated loss of \$19 billion. As such, Turkey is reportedly seeking to formalize a memorandum of understanding with the Libyan government to recoup the business losses.<sup>14</sup>

## TURNING THE TIDE IN LIBYA

In a period of six months (January-June 2020), Turkish intervention in support of the Libyan government has stunningly turned the tide in Libya's civil war by rolling back almost all of Haftar's forces' important gains since the launching of the Tripoli offensive on April 4, 2020. In such a short span of time, the Turkish-backed GNA forces have moved from a defensive to an offensive posture.<sup>15</sup> The key to this transformation has been the loss of aerial superiority of Haftar's forces due to the deployment of Turkish drones in the skies over Tripoli. Despite the fact that Haftar's forces rely on UAE-supplied Chi-

nese Wing Loong II combat drones which, from a technical point of view, have tactical advantage over the Turkish Bayraktar TB2 drones operated for the GNA (Table 1), in actual operations, the Turkish drones have outperformed their Chinese counterparts and have thus entirely flipped the balance of military forces on the ground.

The second factor that has tilted the balance of military power on the ground in Libya, although less determining than the air superiority afforded by the Turkish drones, is the deployment of a significant number of Turkish-backed fighters in the GNA ranks.<sup>16</sup> It is Haftar actually who first used such tactics in the Libyan civil war, given that he has relied on Russian Wagner mercenaries and UAE-financed Sudanese and Chadian fighters since the beginning of the Tripoli offensive in April 2019. Recently, Haftar has also recruited a significant contingent of Assad regime-allied fighters sent from Russian bases in Syria.

As shown in Table 2, even after the deployment of Turkish-backed fighters in support of the GNA, the estimated total number of foreign fighters fighting for Haftar in the LNA (7,900) still outnumbers the corresponding number in GNA ranks (5,060-6,560). In other words, Turkey has only managed to bridge the gap between the contingent of the LNA's and GNA's foreign fighters, which to date has helped to turn the tide in Libya.

Accordingly, as a result of the deployment of Turkish drones and a greater number of fighters on the ground, Haftar forces first lost the important coastal cities of Surman and Sabratha on April 14, 2020. On April 18, GNA forces advanced toward Tarhuna (one of the two crucial supply centers for Haftar in western Libya), besieging it, but stopped short of entering the town, which would take a few more weeks for full cap-

13. McKernan, "Idlib to Tripoli: Turkey Moves to Dominate Eastern Mediterranean".

14. International Crisis Group, "Turkey Wades into Libya's Troubled Waters", pp. 12-13.

15. Declan Walsh, "In Stunning Reversal, Turkey Emerges as Libya Kingmaker", *The New York Times*, May 21, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/21/world/middleeast/libya-turkey-russia-hifter.html> (Access date: May 30, 2020).

16. Talha Köse, "Libya at a Critical Juncture", *Daily Sabah*, May 29, 2020. <https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/columns/libya-at-a-critical-juncture> (Access date: May 30, 2020).

**TABLE 1: COMPARISON OF UNMANNED COMBAT AERIAL VEHICLES (UCAVS) USED IN LIBYA**

Type	Manufacturer	Supplier	Deployed in Support of	Range	Altitude	Endurance	Payload
Bayraktar TB2	Baykar Makina, Turkey	Turkey	Government of National Accord (GNA)	Less than 200 km	6,860 m	Less than 24 hours	55 kg
Wing Loong II	Aviation Industry Corporation of China	United Arab Emirates	Libyan National Army (LNA)	200 km using line of sight or greater than 2,000 km using satellite data link	Greater than 9,000 m	Greater than 20 hours	480 kg

Source: "Letter Dated 29 November 2019 from the Panel of Experts on Libya Established Pursuant to Resolution 1973 (2011) Addressed to the President of the United Nations Security Council", S/2019/914, December 9, 2019, p.32. [https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S\\_2019\\_914.pdf](https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S_2019_914.pdf) [Access date: May 30, 2020].

**TABLE 2: ESTIMATES OF FOREIGN FIGHTERS RECRUITED IN LIBYA (AS OF LATE MARCH 2020)**

Foreign Fighters	Estimated Number	Deployed in Support of
Chadian	1,100	LNA (700 fighters) & GNA (400 fighters)
Assad regime-allied fighters	2,000	LNA
Turkish-backed fighters	4,500-6,000	GNA
Russian Wagner mercenaries	3,000	LNA
Sudanese	2,360	LNA (2,200 fighters) & GNA (160 fighters)

Source: Table compiled by the author using data from the International Crisis Group, "Turkey Wades into Libya's Troubled Waters", *Europe Report* No. 257, (April 30, 2020), pp. 3, 20-21.

ture. After the loss of several coastal towns west of Tripoli, it was Haftar's fear of seeing his power base and camp fragment that motivated his decision on April 27, 2020, to renege on the 2015 UN-brokered Libyan Political Agreement and to declare that he had been granted a popular mandate to rule. Yet, this move, which was effectively a coup, has thus far backfired. It not only alienated Aguila Saleh, the speaker of the internationally recognized Libyan legislature, the Tobruk-based House of Representatives (HoR), but has somehow irritated Haftar's foreign patrons also, particularly France and Russia that openly declared they did not condone his unilateral declaration.<sup>17</sup>

Most importantly, the putschist warlord ended up losing more ground on the battlefield. After pummeling Haftar's supply lines with Turk-

ish drones for several weeks, on May 18, 2020, GNA forces succeeded in capturing al-Watiya, the strategic air base close to Libya's border with Tunisia, and arguably the most important military installation in North Africa.<sup>18</sup> (Fig. 3) Actually, there was no fighting on the ground for al-Watiya. Gradually, Haftar's forces were forced to withdraw because they lost the ability to operate over the skies due to the Turkish drones. The same scenario was repeated two weeks later when GNA forces first seized Tripoli's international airport (June 3, 2020) and then finally, on June 5, 2020, entered the city of Tarhuna, Haftar's main launch pad for its Tripoli offensive.<sup>19</sup> Now, having lost Tarhuna and with no air base in western

18. Burhanettin Duran, "A Political Transition in Libya?", *Daily Sabah*, May 27, 2020. <https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/columns/a-political-transition-in-libya> (Access date: May 31, 2020).

19. "Libyan Government Forces Seize Haftar Stronghold Tarhuna", *Al Jazeera*, June 5, 2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/06/libyan-government-entered-haftar-stronghold-tarhuna-200605083043845.html> (Access date: June 11, 2020).

17. Burhanettin Duran, "Libya on the Verge of Division?", *Daily Sabah*, May 4, 2020. <https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/columns/libya-on-the-verge-of-division> (Access date: May 30, 2020).

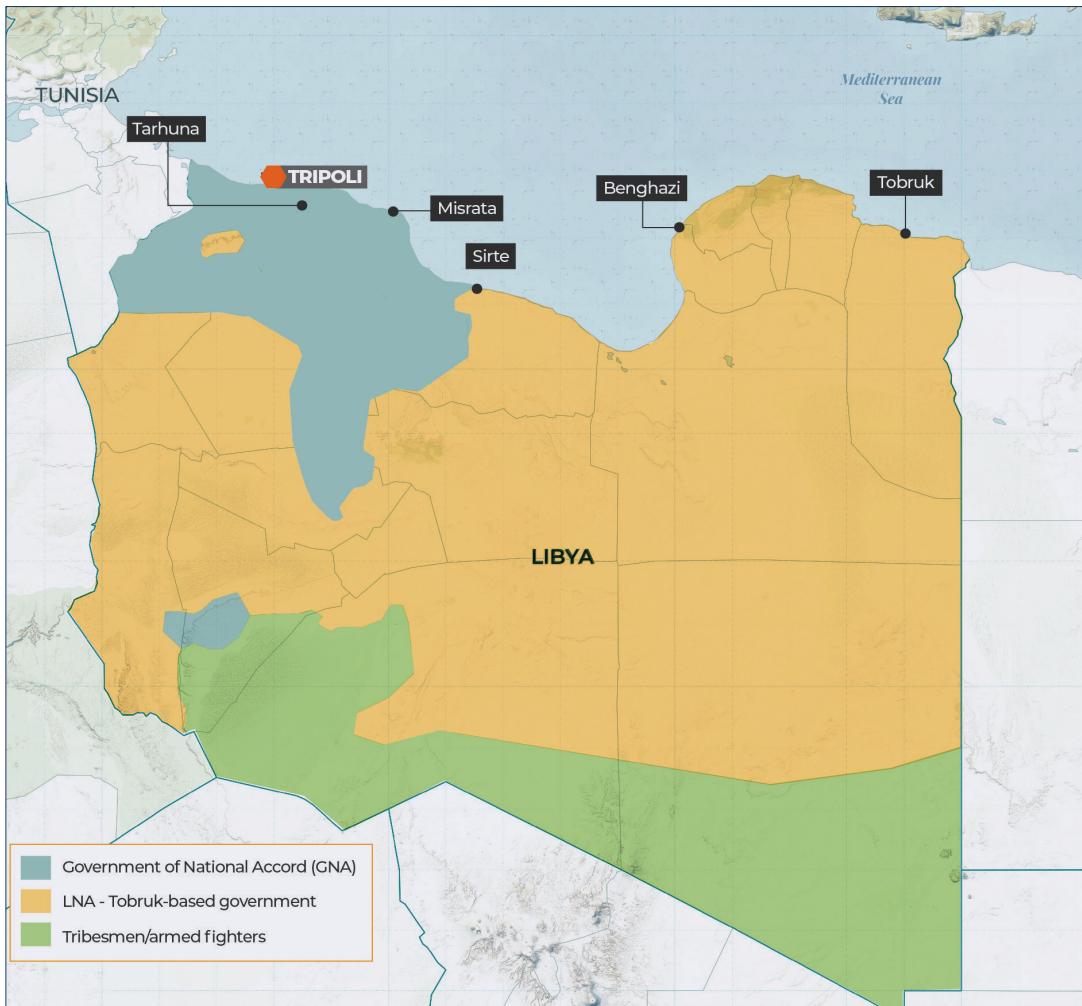


Figure 3: Areas in western Libya captured by the Turkish-backed GNA forces from Haftar's militias [January-May 2020]. Source: Alia Chughtai and Ramy Allahoum, "Libya: Mapping Areas of Military Control", *Al Jazeera*, June 9, 2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/2020/06/libya-mapping-areas-military-control-200604114507211.html> (Access date: June 11, 2020).

Libya, Haftar's ability to take Tripoli has basically been eliminated. At the time of writing this report, the GNA forces, having rejected an Egyptian-led call for cease-fire, are at the doorstep of the city of Sirte and also have their eyes on the Jufra district that hosts a strategic airbase and most importantly is the center of the country's "oil crescent."<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, the capture of al-Watiya had a special symbolic significance. Images of trium-

phant GNA-affiliated soldiers parading a captured Pantsir air defense system, Russian-manufactured and UAE-supplied, made headlines around the world. It was both a humiliation for Haftar's powerful foreign patrons (i.e. Russia and the UAE) and once more showcased Turkish military prowess. Indeed, after the Operation Spring Shield in Idlib in February-March 2020, Libya became the second theater where Turkish combat drones have disabled/destroyed Russian-made air defense systems, each worth about \$15 million.

20. Muhittin Ataman, "Turkey's Decisive Policy and Libya's Future", *Daily Sabah*, June 10, 2020. <https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/columns/turkeys-decisive-policy-and-libyas-future> (Access date: June 11, 2020).



Figure 4: GNA forces parading a Russian-made air defense system truck in Tripoli after its capture in al-Watiya Air Base. Source: Declan Walsh, "In Stunning Reversal, Turkey Emerges as Libya Kingmaker", *The New York Times*, May 21, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/21/world/middleeast/libya-turkey-russia-hifter.html> [Access date: May 30, 2020].

## IS THERE A WAY OUT OF THE MORASS?

The fiasco of Haftar's Tripoli offensive showed that there cannot be a military solution to the Libyan conflict. No one actor can assert control over the whole country. International stakeholders (EU, Russia, Turkey, U.S., UN) should instead use Haftar's Tripoli fiasco and the impending capture of Sirte by Turkish-backed GNA forces to intensify their diplomatic efforts to find a political solution to the Libyan crisis. What is needed is a process that reconfigures the current legitimate political institutions (the GNA and the HoR), tackles the security issue by removing the militias from both sides, and puts in place badly needed economic reforms as well. This three-track process is crucial in order to bring stability and order back to Libya. It should be emphasized that the major flaw of the

2015 UN-brokered Libyan Political Agreement (i.e. the Skhirat Agreement) was that it did not include security and economic tracks. Skhirat was only a political agreement: it only created an internationally recognized rump executive (i.e. the GNA) and officially endorsed the parliament that had been popularly elected in 2014 (i.e. HoR).<sup>21</sup> Apart from that, Skhirat left key security questions unaddressed by leaving out militia representatives from both sides of the conflict and by not including economic stakeholders. Skhirat even left the tribes out of the talks, which was a major mistake since the tribes are an important social and political constituency in Libya.<sup>22</sup> In brief, any new internationally mediated political

21. International Crisis Group, "The Libyan Political Agreement: Time for a Reset", *Middle East and North Africa Report No: 170*, (November 4, 2016), pp. 1-2.

22. Alison Pargeter, "Haftar, Tribal Power, and the Battle for Libya", *War on the Rocks*, May 15, 2020. <https://warontherocks.com/2020/05/haftar-tribal-power-and-the-battle-for-libya/> [Access date: May 31, 2020].

agreement must address all three tracks, namely political, security, and economical.

Actually, the Berlin Conference of January 19, 2020, had already acknowledged this necessity by proposing a three-track negotiation package: political, financial, and military. Until now, however, different rounds of Geneva-based negotiations on all three tracks have either collapsed or proved to be inconsequential, mainly due to the intransigent behavior of the renegade warlord Haftar.<sup>23</sup> This suggests that a prerequisite for finding a lasting political solution to the Libyan crisis is “to send the incompetent renegade Haftar and his sons into a comfortable exile.”<sup>24</sup> Indeed, as a GNA colonel recently told *Al Jazeera*,

We will not negotiate with Haftar. The killing of civilians, displacement of hundreds of thousands, and the destruction of homes and infrastructure is his responsibility. After we win this battle, we must sit at the table and come up with a political solution. But eastern Libya must bring forth other individuals that we can negotiate with.<sup>25</sup>

Russia's deployment of 14 fighter jets to eastern Libya one week after the GNA's capture of al-Watiya, although still officially denied by Moscow, is clearly a move to counterbalance the aerial superiority of Turkish-backed GNA forces and increase Moscow's bargaining power.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, the recent Russian move also sends the message that Russia wants the Libyan crisis to evolve gradually toward a Syria-like scenario

where Ankara would have no other choice but to seek cooperation with Moscow to settle the conflict in Libya.<sup>27</sup> In such a scenario though, the EU and NATO should stand by Turkey's side and should not repeat their strategic blunder in Idlib. On the one hand, NATO should realize that “if Russia obtains bases in Libya and introduces long-range weapons systems, it would pose a significant security risk to the southern flank of NATO.”<sup>28</sup> As far as the EU is concerned, as Tarek Megerisi aptly puts it,

European states – particularly Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom – should press France and Greece to escape Haftar's sinking ship ... Europe's window of opportunity in Libya is closing. It needs to move fast if it is to forcefully protect its interests and its role as a barrier against Russian encroachment into the country, while preventing the development of another Syria-style conflict in its neighbourhood.<sup>29</sup>

However, France is actually the main obstacle to a unified, common EU and NATO approach toward the Libyan crisis as it staunchly opposes Turkey's involvement there and continues its support for the putschist Haftar. Recently, Paris significantly upped its aggressive rhetoric toward Ankara by calling its military support of the Libyan government a “dangerous game” and threatening fresh EU sanctions.<sup>30</sup> Equally important, on June 20, 2020, France (together with the UAE) is thought to have pushed Egypt to warn that its forces would intervene in Libya if

23. International Crisis Group, “Turkey Wades into Libya's Troubled Waters”, pp. 15–16.

24. Talha Köse, “Libya at a Critical Juncture”.

25. Malik Traina and Ramy Allahoum, “Is Libya's Khalifa Haftar on the Way Out”, *Al Jazeera*, May 24, 2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/05/libya-khalifa-haftar-200523142442684.html> (Access date: May 31, 2020).

26. Declan Walsh and Eric Schmitt, “U.S. Accuses Russia of Sending Warplanes to Libya”, *The New York Times*, May 26, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/26/world/middleeast/russia-warplanes-libya.html> (Access date: May 31, 2020).

27. Fehim Taştekin, “What Does Libya's ‘Syrianization’ Scenario Mean for Key Actors?”, *Al-Monitor*, May 29, 2020. <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/05/turkey-russia-libya-may-lead-to-faceoff-similar-to-syria.html> (Access date: May 31, 2020).

28. Talha Köse, “Libya at a Critical Juncture”.

29. Tarek Megerisi, “It's Turkey's Libya Now”, *European Council on Foreign Relations*, May 20, 2020. [https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_its\\_turkeys\\_libya\\_now](https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_its_turkeys_libya_now) (Access date: June 11, 2020).

30. “Dışişleri Bakanı Çavuşoğlu: Tehlikeli Oyunu Haddini Asarak Oynayan Macrondur”, *Anadolu Agency*, June 24, 2020. <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/politika/disisleri-bakanı-cavusoglu-tehlikeli-oyunu-haddini-asarak-oynayan-macrondur/1888955> (Access date: July 7, 2020).



Figure 5: Turkey's President Erdogan and Libya's Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj during a press conference after their meeting in the Presidential Palace in Ankara on June 4, 2020. Source: Burhanettin Duran, "Sarraj's Turkey Visit and a New Era in Libya", *Daily Sabah*, June 4, 2020. [https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/columns/sarrajs-turkey-visit-and-a-new-era-in-libya?gallery\\_image=undefined#big](https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/columns/sarrajs-turkey-visit-and-a-new-era-in-libya?gallery_image=undefined#big) [Access date: June 11, 2020].

the Turkish-backed GNA crossed the Sirte-Jufra frontline. This clearly represents only a deterrent move since even Egyptian military experts argue that Egypt will not engage in a major war in Libya just to fulfill the strategic agenda of the UAE and/or France.<sup>31</sup>

Finally, regardless of the form of the final political settlement in Libya, Ankara should have two main priorities, which are actually interrelated. First, to ensure that the GNA retains the key role in any future political and security arrangement in Libya, and second, to be assured that the maritime delimitation deal it signed with the GNA remains intact.<sup>32</sup> It would be of course highly desirable if Turkey can establish

a long-term military presence at al-Watiya Air Base and a naval presence in Misrata, since the most certain way Turkey can secure its geopolitical interests in the Eastern Mediterranean in the long term is by having a long-term military and naval presence in western Libya. Last but not least, as already mentioned above, the solution process in Libya must also include an economic track (in addition to the political and military/security tracks), and Turkey must make sure it takes a leading role in the post-conflict economic reconstruction of Libya. Indeed, as both President Erdogan and Libya's Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj agreed upon during their recent meeting in Ankara on June 4, 2020, the post-conflict cooperation between Turkey and Libya shall not be limited to energy, but shall be "multidimensional," including Turkish investments in various areas of civilian infrastructure. Such a commitment was reconfirmed during the of-

<sup>31</sup>Yezid Sayigh, "Is Cairo Going to War?", *Carnegie Middle East Center*, June 22, 2020. <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/82130?fbclid=IwAR2yIYb-EtowexNCeq-R04zeDKLuHmg5bUkG25Hw2nZE28LvjA8569WZxXw> (Access date: July 7, 2020).

<sup>32</sup> International Crisis Group, "Turkey Wades into Libya's Troubled Waters", p. 25.

ficial visit of a high-level Turkish delegation to Tripoli two weeks later, on June 17, 2020.<sup>33</sup>

## CONCLUSION

On May 27, 2020, on the 60th anniversary of the brutal military coup that executed then Turkish Prime Minister Adnan Menderes and two of his ministers, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan officially opened the “Democracy and Freedoms Island” (the new name of Yassiada Island in Istanbul where the shameful tribunals took place 60 years ago) as a platform to condemn the legacy in Turkish history of illegitimate usurpations of power by the military.<sup>34</sup>

Breaking the tutelage of the military, judiciary, and bureaucracy (i.e. the three *unelected* components of any political system) over elected officials in Turkey is undoubtedly one of the major achievements of President Erdoğan.

Another major achievement of the Turkish president is transforming Turkey into a formidable military power. The Libya intervention of the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) is Turkey's fifth

successful transborder military operation since August 2016, the other four being Operation Euphrates Shield (August 2016-March 2017), Operation Olive Branch (January 2018), Operation Peace Spring (October-November 2019), and Operation Spring Shield (February-March 2020) in northern Syria. The TSK's stunning military successes on the ground have leveraged Turkey's hand at the negotiating table concerning Syria. Now, in Libya, Turkey has once more showcased its military capabilities by rolling back the advance of the renegade warlord Khalifa Haftar and by assisting the Libyan government in capturing the strategically important al-Watiya Air Base and Tarhuna.

Thus, Turkey is again in a position to use the military achievements on the ground to influence a political settlement in Libya that protects its geostrategic interests. Accordingly, Ankara should ensure that the GNA retains the key role in any future political and security arrangement, and that the maritime delimitation deal it signed with the GNA remains intact. To achieve this end goal, Turkey for the moment should continue to support the advancement of the GNA forces and should try to pull the EU and the U.S. to its side.<sup>35</sup>

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33. “Türk Heyeti Libya'da Serrac ile Görüştü”, *Anadolu Agency*, June 17, 2020. <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/turk-heyeti-libyada-serrac-ile-gorus-tu/1880338> (Access date: July 7, 2020).

34. Nagehan Alçı, “End of Shame: The Meaning of ‘Democracy and Freedom Island’”, *Daily Sabah*, May 30, 2020. <https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/columns/end-of-shame-the-meaning-of-democracy-and-freedom-island> (Access date: May 31, 2020).

35. Veysel Kurt, “Rusya'nın Libya Hamlesi ve Riskleri”, *Sabah*, May 30, 2020. <https://www.sabah.com.tr/yazarlar/perspektif/veyselkurt/2020/05/30/rusyanin-libya-hamlesi-ve-riskleri> (Access date: May 31, 2020).

# A VORTEX OF CONFLICT

## THE EVOLVING DYNAMICS OF

## TURKEY'S INVOLVEMENT IN LIBYA

IDLIR LIKA

### SETA | ANALYSIS

The analysis discusses the evolving dynamics of Turkey's military involvement in Libya, laying out Turkey's motivations for supporting the UN-recognized government in Tripoli, and examining how Turkey's recent military achievements on the ground may leverage its hand diplomatically to secure a political settlement that protects its interests in Libya and in the Eastern Mediterranean.

On November 27, 2019, Turkey signed a maritime delineation and defense cooperation agreement with the UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) based in Tripoli, and subsequently, in January 2020, deployed troops to Libya with parliamentary approval, becoming the first foreign actor to intervene openly in the Libyan conflict upon the formal invitation of the internationally recognized government. The primary reason for Turkey's military involvement in Libya is protecting its geostrategic interests in the Eastern Mediterranean. By backing the Libyan government, the only Turkish-friendly government from a maritime perspective in the region, Ankara aims to break through an "anti-Turkey front" led by France, Greece, and the Greek Administration of Southern Cyprus that seeks to box Turkey in a small corner of the Mediterranean, and thus exclude it from the newly discovered natural gas bonanza in the region. To a lesser degree, Turkey's involvement in Libya is also motivated by its commitment to counter dictatorial regimes (bankrolled by the United Arab Emirates) and support majority rule in Middle Eastern countries, and finally, by its goal to recoup billions of dollars in unfinished construction contracts signed by Turkish construction companies under the Gaddafi regime.

In a period of six months (January-June 2020), Turkish intervention in support of the GNA has stunningly turned the tide in Libya's civil war by rolling back renegade warlord Khalifa Haftar's Tripoli offensive and by capturing key coastal towns in western Libya and the two main launch pads for Haftar's offensive, the al-Watiya Air Base and Tarhuna. Key to this transformation has been Haftar forces' loss of aerial superiority due to the deployment of Turkish Bayraktar TB2 drones in the skies over Tripoli and, to a lesser extent, the deployment of a significant number of Turkish-backed fighters in the GNA ranks.

Notwithstanding the most recent deployment of Russian air power in support of Haftar to counterbalance Turkish aerial dominance, Turkey's military achievements on the ground thus far leverage its hand diplomatically to secure a political settlement that protects its geostrategic interests in Libya and in the Eastern Mediterranean. The analysis concludes by pointing out that Turkey should ensure that the GNA retains the key role in any future political and security arrangement in Libya, and that the maritime delimitation deal Ankara signed with Tripoli remains intact. To achieve this end goal, Turkey for the moment should continue to support the advancement of the GNA forces and should try to pull the EU and the US to its side.