

# Turning the Tide in Libya: Rival Administrations in a New Round of Conflict

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After more than a year of efforts, the Libyan National Army's (LNA) military campaign to capture Tripoli has collapsed. Turkey's military intervention in favour of the Government of National Accord (GNA) has been crucial in preventing the fall of Tripoli, turning the tide against the LNA and helping the GNA advance to the east. Turkey's involvement has also stirred new diplomatic initiatives, enhanced the geopolitical antagonism between Ankara and external supporters of the LNA such as Russia and Egypt, and ushered Libya into a new phase of conflict between the GNA and LNA. Amid possibilities of conflict escalation and challenges to bridging Cairo's proposed peace initiative and the UN-led peace talks, a win-win formula in Libya will be difficult to negotiate.

## Brief Points:

- Turkey's intervention in favour of the GNA had a decisive role in the collapse of the LNA's year-long campaign to capture Tripoli.
- Despite the LNA's failure, involvement by external actors will most likely perpetuate the LNA-GNA conflict.
- Turkey's intervention has shifted the conflict's balances of power and enhanced the antagonisms among external powers over Libya.
- Divergences emerged over the peace process framework as Turkey rejected Egypt's ceasefire proposal and Washington expressed its support to the UN-led peace talks, indirectly rejecting the Cairo framework.

## Introduction

Libya was swept into chaos and instability in February 2011 when an uprising, within the context of the so-called Arab Spring, toppled and later killed the long-time leader and strongman Muammar Gaddafi. Today, Libya is split between two rival administrations: one in the east, led by the Libyan National Army (LNA), and one in the west, led by the Government of National Accord (GNA), each backed by opposing external actors struggling for power (see Figure 1). Over the last year, General Khalifa Haftar, an ex-Gaddafist officer, has sought to regain control over the western part of the oil-rich country; however, his recent attempt to seize the capital Tripoli and gain full control of the country met with failure.

Haftar's abortive attempt in 2019, which led to the collapse of the Western Libya Campaign, has created the conditions for a new phase in the Libya conflict. The LNA's unsuccessful attack on Tripoli proved veteran officer Haftar's inability to proceed with what he had announced would be a quick military victory. This was despite the strong military and financial support he had received from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Egypt, as well as non-state actors such as the Russian-linked "Wagner", a private military company (PMC).

### The Tactical Level:

#### The Collapse of LNA's Tripoli Campaign

According to the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), nearly 3,000 people have died after little over a year of fighting, mostly on the Tripolitania front,<sup>1</sup> and more than 16,000 Libyans have been displaced during the recent battles at the Tripoli front and around Tarhuna.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the conflict in Libya has transformed into a peculiar version of a proxy war between Turkey on behalf of the GNA, and the UAE, Egypt, Russia and France on behalf of the LNA.

Turkey's military intervention in Libya in December 2019 explains the GNA's dynamic comeback and today's realities

on the ground. By 26 December, it was clear that Turkey had intervened in Libya in full military terms: i.e. supporting the GNA with sophisticated weapons like Turkish-made drones (TB-2 'Bayraktar' and ANKA-S); advanced radar and jamming systems; military vehicles and artillery; military intelligence; naval support; and ground forces. Moreover, Turkish-backed Syrian rebels belonging to the Sultan Murad Division and Sham Legion were reported fighting for the GNA in the 'Al-Takbali' camp in the Salah al-Din area of southern Tripoli, arriving through the Mitiga and Misrata international airports and travelling from Syria via Turkey. The first fighter of Syrian origin was reported dead (and the exact location of his killing was geolocated on social media) by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) on 27 December. This was a Syrian Turkmen from Idlib, a member of the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army (TFSA) faction of the Sultan Murad Division.<sup>3</sup>

### The Strategic Level: External Involvement

Among the other sources of external involvement in Libya, Russia is considered one of the main players, although the extent of its military engagement and commitment is sometimes exaggerated. Vladimir Putin's Russia is reluctant to engage in a full-scale war in Libya. To identify the country's motives, one must look at its historical engagement, especially in Gaddafi's Libya during the 2008–2010 period, which reveals substantive economic interests and Moscow's need to sustain and secure them.<sup>4</sup>

Another important external factor is the Turkey-Russia coordination/cooperation in Libya, which has its own limitations. Nevertheless, this relationship has also been tested in Syria. It could be argued that in the course of the Libya conflict, one of two things may happen: there may be either a common understanding between Ankara and Moscow, such as that reached on Syria, or there could be more competition over Libya that will lead to further regional destabilization in the coming months. If the experience of the Syria conflict is any indication, the first scenario is more likely. On the other hand, if the GNA advances with the aim of fully capturing Sirte and Tobruk, substantial pressure will be put on Egypt's president, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, to intervene more actively (even militarily); this scenario, though not certain, entails the risk of a full-scale proxy war with Turkey. How the GNA will act over the next weeks and months will be key and remains to be seen, but the outcome will also depend on Turkey's support and resolve.

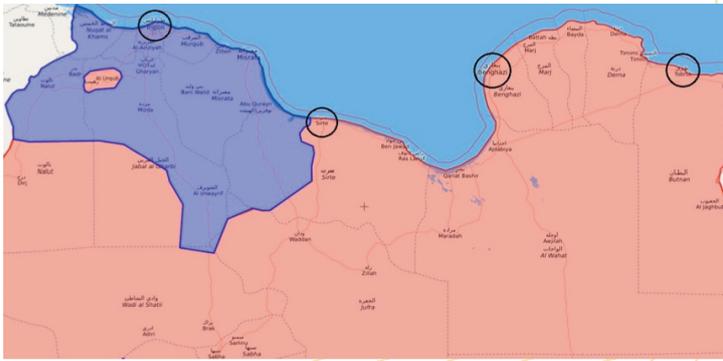


Figure 1: LNA-controlled territories (red) and GNA-controlled territories (blue). Key cities circled in black. Source: Libya.livemap.com

Indeed, Turkey has played a critical role in turning the tide against the LNA since the end of 2019. Many have drawn parallels between Turkey's intervention in Libya in favour of the GNA and Russia's intervention in Syria in favour of the Bashar al-Assad regime. Both military campaigns shifted the power balances of the conflict and had a decisive impact on the diplomatic-political process. However, despite some similarities, there are noteworthy differences between the interventions in Libya and Syria. Most importantly, Russia conducted a full-scale tactical intervention in the Syria conflict using its own naval, air and even ground forces in coordination with the Syrian Arab Army (SAA), Hezbollah and other Shiite militias. Turkey's intervention in Libya, however – as in Turkey's Syria interventions – primarily used proxy forces in coordination with Turkish military consultants and the consultancy company SADAT Defense. SADAT, however, also functions as a paramilitary group that carries out clandestine operations for the Turkish government.<sup>5</sup>

It is worth noting that such a military campaign is unprecedented in contemporary Turkish history, particularly in terms of distance. The interventions in Syria (and Iraq) were significant in their own right, but they were cross-border ground operations. Likewise, during the 1974 invasion of Cyprus, the Turkish navy had to cover only 40–50 miles of distance, whereas Tripoli lies almost 850 miles away from Izmir. This in itself is a significant operational achievement for Turkey and demonstrates the growing power – and power projection – capacities of the Turkish military.

Turkey's geopolitical vision for the broader region, and especially its maritime policy, has been made known through the publicization of the so-called 'Blue Homeland' (*Mavi Vatan*) doctrine – a maritime area encompassing the Black Sea, the Aegean Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean. As the man who conceived it, Cem Gurdeniz, noted: 'Blue Homeland

has become Turkey's maritime doctrine and it shows Turkey is becoming a maritime power.'<sup>6</sup> The benefits that Ankara reaps from its involvement in Libya are related to this doctrine and manifest in at least four ways: the maritime deal (Memorandum of Understanding)<sup>7</sup> that it reached with the GNA for an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ);<sup>8</sup> the expansion of its sphere of influence over the GNA and western Libya more generally; the potential economic benefits through construction contracts, business investments and hydrocarbon collaboration and/or exploitation; and the prospect of acquiring a strategic foothold through military bases, such as the al-Watiya military air base (see Figure 2),<sup>9</sup> which would also be used within a 'forward basing' framework for increasing Turkey's capability to project power deeper into Africa.



Figure 2: Locations of Libya's capital, Tripoli and Al-Watiya military base. Source: Al Jazeera.

Turkey's Libya intervention has also proven the country's military-operational credibility to certain international actors and reaffirms Ankara's role as a worthy partner of NATO and the United States (US) – especially at a time when the latter is being careful not to get dragged deeper into conflicts abroad. This was made evident when, reportedly, Turkey and the US reached 'some agreements' over Libya.<sup>10</sup> Just as in the case of Syria, the US is capitalizing on the fact that Ankara finds itself on the opposite camp to Russia in Libya – despite the fact that they have so far managed to bridge their differences. Thus, Washington hopes that providing support to Turkey will improve their bilateral relations, draw Turkey away from Russia, and contribute – through the Turkish involvement – to limiting Russian influence in Libya (and Syria). As US Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs David Schenker said, the US is 'particularly concerned about the continued influx of Russian military equipment, weapons, and Russian Wagner mercenaries, whose presence led to the significant Turkish intervention.'<sup>11</sup>

## Diplomatic Initiatives and the Political Process

The collapse of the LNA's Tripoli campaign, and Egypt's subsequent diplomatic initiative, led to a series of diplomatic processes in the presence of General Haftar in Cairo on 7 June, where he proposed the negotiation of a ceasefire agreement. At the same time, the GNA leadership met in Ankara and Moscow for consultations, despite their initial rejection of the ceasefire proposal. This process is very reminiscent of the diplomatic failure of previous efforts (the 12 January ceasefire and the Berlin rounds of talks), raising questions about the prospects for its success, the further destabilization of Libya, and the continuation of clashes.

Although Washington hailed the GNA and LNA ceasefire talks and found the Egyptian initiative 'helpful', it made clear that, for the US, 'the UN process, the UN-led process, and the Berlin process are really the frameworks and most productive frameworks for everybody to engage in negotiations and to make progress on ceasefire and negotiation, consolidation of that'.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, it seems that the US is making diplomatic efforts with key regional players, such as the UAE, to push for a ceasefire and political negotiations.<sup>13</sup>

What is interesting to observe in the Libya case is the extent to which Ankara and Moscow will have enough options to reach a win-win formula. Moscow has held many economic interests in the country since the Gaddafi years. On its part, Ankara is pursuing an ambitious policy in the Eastern Mediterranean, which includes hydrocarbons exploration while also looking for a gateway to further its geopolitical objectives in Africa. Politically speaking, the two main options for the Libya dialogue are clear: reshaping the Geneva dialogue under the auspices of the UN; or adopting a more 'guarantor' approach, akin to the Astana format of the Syrian talks, whereby Turkey and Russia would act as the main regulators of stability. To be sure, the scenario of a serious escalation between Russia and Turkey cannot be excluded. What remains to be seen is Haftar's political role in the future, especially whether he will be sidelined (and perhaps even replaced) by the actors involved – including his UAE backers.

### Notes

- 1 United Nations Support Mission In Libya (2020) 'One Year of Destructive War in Libya, UNSMIL Renews Calls For Immediate Cessation Of Hostilities And Unity To Combat Covid-19', 4 April. Available at: <https://unsmil.unmissions.org/one-year-destructive-war-libya-unsmil-renews-calls-immediate-cessation-hostilities-and-unity-combat>.
- 2 France24 (2020) 'UN says more than 16,000 displaced in latest Libya fighting', 7 June 2020. Available at: <https://www.france24.com/en/20200607-more-than-16-000-displaced-in-latest-libya-fighting-un>.
- 3 Al-Masdar News (2020) 'First Syrian militant killed in Libya as hundreds more deploy', 9 January. Available at: <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/first-syrian-militant-killed-in-libya-as-hundreds-more-deploy/>.
- 4 For example, Putin, in a 2008 visit to Libya, agreed to cancel \$4.5 billion of Libyan debt. Among 10 deals signed between Russia and Libya on arms, oil and joint ventures, the biggest contract was worth 2.2 billion euro (\$3.48 billion) given to Russian state railways, with a payment tied to the debt deal. Alexei Kudrin, then Russian Finance Minister, stated that the debt would be cancelled once payments for the railway deal and other contracts arrived in Russian companies' bank accounts. Analysts point out that the debt was built up during the Cold War, much of it as a result of Soviet arms supplies to Gaddafi's Libya. One could say that the toppling of Gaddafi cost the Russian economy 2.2 billion euros. Russian involvement in Libya aims to regain such economic profits. See Mark N. Katz (2008) 'The Russian-Libyan Rapprochement: What Has Moscow Gained', *Middle East Policy*, 15(3): 122–128.
- 5 Suat Cubukcu (2018) 'The Rise of Paramilitary Groups in Turkey', *Small Wars Journal*, 3 March. Available at: <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/rise-paramilitary-groups-turkey>.
- 6 Hürriyet Daily News (2019) 'Blue Homeland "shows Turkey has become a maritime power"', 4 March. Available at: <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/blue-homeland-shows-turkey-has-become-a-maritime-power-141624>.
- 7 Available at: <https://geopoliticalcyprus.org/2019/12/05/the-turkey-libya-mou-document/>.
- 8 See also Zenonas Tziarras & Sigvart Nordhov Fredriksen (2020) 'The Libya Conflict and its Security Implications for the Broader Region', *Re-imagining the Eastern Mediterranean Series: PCC Report*, 4. Nicosia: PRIO Cyprus Centre.
- 9 In mid-June 2020, it was reported that Turkey was planning to set up two military bases in Libya: one in al-Watiya airbase, and one naval base in Misrata. See Abdulkader Assad (2020) 'Turkey plans to set up two military bases in Libya', *The Libyan Observer*, 13 June. Available at: <https://www.libyaobserver.ly/news/turkey-plans-set-two-military-bases-libya>.
- 10 Ayla Jean Yackley (2020) 'Turkey sees success in Libya shaping relations with US', *Al Monitor* 9 June. Available at: <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/06/turkey-libya-war-us-relations.html#ixzz6P58oEphT>.
- 11 U.S. Department of State (2020) 'Briefing with Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs David Schenker On the U.S.-Iraq Dialogue and Developments in Libya', 11 June. Available at: <https://www.state.gov/briefing-with-assistant-secretary-for-near-eastern-affairs-david-schenker-on-the-u-s-iraq-dialogue-and-developments-in-libya/>.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Al Monitor (2020) 'Intel: Pompeo discusses Libya truce with Abu Dhabi's crown prince', 5 June. Available at: <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/06/pompeo-uae-libya-mohammedbinzayed-hifter-sarraj-ceasefire.html#ixzz6P8aFnNmI>.

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### THE PROJECT

This project aims to explore the Eastern Mediterranean as a distinct geopolitical space in the context of global and regional transitions. It conceptualizes the Eastern Mediterranean's new geopolitical identity both historically and theoretically and looks at its security and politico-economic prospects. At the same time, it tracks the main challenges that regional states face, and attempts to re-imagine the patterns of conflict and cooperation by examining the potential of regionalism and inter-state cooperation in various sectors. Moreover, the project keeps monitoring conflict and peace-building dynamics (e.g. in Syria and Libya) as well as region-building/regionalism processes in the Eastern Mediterranean and the role of state and non-state actors.

### PRIO

The Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) is a non-profit peace research institute (established in 1959) whose overarching purpose is to conduct research on the conditions for peaceful relations between states, groups and people. The institute is independent, international and interdisciplinary, and explores issues related to all facets of peace and conflict.