

The escalation of the war in Libya

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Since the fall of the Dictator Muammar Gaddafi and the chaos that followed his death in 2011, Libya is divided between an internationally backed government- the Government of National Accord (GNA), led by Fayez al-Sarraj, based in Tripoli and a rival authority, the Tobruk government, formed by the House of Representatives elected in 2014 and dominated by general Khalifa Haftar, commander of the Libyan National Army (LNA), in the east and south of the country.

Libya is increasingly becoming a battlefield for a geopolitical contest among regional and international powers. Both sides accuse each other of using foreign mercenaries and receiving military support from foreign powers. Haftar has the backing of the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Russia and accuses Turkey and Qatar of supporting the GNA.

General Haftar launched a surprise attack in early April 2019, to take the Libyan capital, Tripoli, in an attempt to remove the Government of National Accord (GNA), however, Haftar's battle to take Tripoli has been blocked by Turkish support for the pro-GNA militias and his attack has failed to achieve its objectives thus far.¹

General Haftar has ordered his forces in November 2019, to advance onto the capital Tripoli in a "decisive battle" to take the city. Haftar's new order to take over Tripoli came amid heightened tensions with Turkey after the head of the GNA Al-Serraj signed on November 27, 2019, two memorandum of understanding (MoUs) with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on security and maritime boundaries in the Mediterranean.

Greece, Egypt and Cyprus have denounced the deal as being contrary to international law, and Greece expelled the Libyan GNA ambassador over the issue.

Following Haftar's announcement fighting intensified between Haftar's forces and militias affiliated with the GNA. The Libyan National Army (LNA) claimed on December 19, 2019, that Libya's capital, Tripoli, has been fully besieged. Meanwhile, the official press office of GNA announced that forces loyal to Haftar had launched series of BM-21 Grad rockets into civilian areas of Tripoli.²

Fayez al-Sarraj, met with faction leaders in the presence of military officials, on December 19, 2019, to discuss their request of a Turkish intervention in Tripoli. Media affiliated to the Libyan Government of National Accord said they have agreed to activate the military memorandum of understanding with Turkey.³ The GNA gave no further details about the terms of the agreement or the assistance Ankara could provide to pro-GNA forces facing an offensive by the LNA.⁴

Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said on December 10, 2019, that Ankara was ready to send troops to Libya to support the GNA after the deal agreed on November 27, 2019, in Istanbul with GNA head Fayez al-Sarraj. "If Libya makes such a request from us, we can send our personnel there, especially after striking the military security agreement," he said.⁵

The LNA has warned that it would target any Turkish forces entering Libya. The threat came after Libya's Government of National Accord (GNA), approved the implementation of a military deal with Turkey, paving the way for a bigger role for Ankara in the conflict-hit country.⁶

Regarding Berlin's plan to hold an international conference on Libya and international calls for a political solution to the country's crisis, Haftar said: "We believe that the elimination of militias is the only solution."⁷

The Government of National Accord (GNA)

The Tripoli government was set up by the United Nations in 2015 and is officially supported by the United States and other Western powers. But in practical terms, Turkey is its only patron.

Libyan Foreign Minister Mohamed Taher Siala warned of the possibility that General Khalifa Haftar could enter Tripoli, especially after the recent Russian intervention in Libya. Siala explained during a press interview that

the ongoing escalation in Libya is due to Russian mercenaries' support to Khalifa Haftar in bombing Tripoli by various means, noting that this matter will lead to civilian casualties and the displacement of thousands of migrants to European shores.⁸

The sponsors of the GNA

The Government of National Accord (GNA) relies on a consortium of armed militias and enjoys the support of Turkey and Qatar. The GNA also need to deal with over a dozen tribal militias, as well as the Islamic State in southern Libya and another army, called the Petroleum Facilities Guard, which operates independently is backed by Turkey and Qatar.⁹

Turkey

Turkey's interest in Libya goes back to its Ottoman past as the country was part of the empire until 1912 when Italy then conquered the north African country. Following the Revolution of February 2011, Turkey recognized the National Transitional Council as the “sole representative of Libyan people” and Turkey has been the first country to appoint an Ambassador to Tripoli on September 2, 2011, after the full control of Tripoli by the National Transitional Council.

The Libyan gas and oil are one of the most important reasons for Turkey's interest in the Libyan issue. Bilateral trade between Turkey and Libya – estimated at two-to-three billion dollars a year.¹⁰

Turkey is competing with the Italians and the French over presence and influence in Libya. Ankara has expressed its readiness to oversee a force to protect Libya's oil exporting ports and one of the largest Turkish oil companies has been competing to renovate destroyed oil refineries and infrastructure in Libyan harbors. Supporters of Erdogan in Libya accuse Italy, France and the US and other countries of defaming Turkish policies in Libya.

Turkey is a main ally of the Government of National Accord (GNA), and its armed militias and Turkey is wary of the growing political and military strength of Haftar.

Turkey provided drones to the GNA and sent on May 18, 2019, a large shipment of military equipment to pro government of National Accord (GNA) - militias controlling Tripoli and fighting the Libyan National Army (LNA). The Turkish military assistance came amid the GNA's efforts to stop the Libyan National Army (LNA) attack on the capital, Tripoli.

The shipment included around 40 armored vehicles of Turkish origin, including BMC Kirpi armored vehicles, anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles, high-powered sniper rifles, and ammunition.¹¹

Turkey's president has met with Prime Minister Fayez Sarraj, the head of Libya's "recognized" government, following heightened tensions between Turkey and forces loyal to General Khalifa Haftar, head of the Libyan National Army (LNA). In a statement from his office on July 5, 2019, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan reiterated his support for Prime Minister Fayez Sarraj's forces and Erdogan called on Haftar's forces to cease their attacks.¹²

A statement from Sarraj's office said he discussed with Erdogan the developments in Libya and regional affairs, as well as opportunities for cooperation between their countries. He also voiced his appreciation for Turkey's opposition to the offensive against Tripoli and its keenness on ensuring the success of the political settlement.¹³

Turkey signed with Libya's internationally recognized government (the GNA), on November 27, 2019, a memorandum of understanding demarking the maritime boundaries between the two nations.¹⁴

The area spanning from southwest Turkey to northeast Libya and it could extend Turkey's continental shelf by around a third, allowing it to lay claim to recently-discovered oil and gas reserves in the eastern Mediterranean.¹⁵

A map published by Turkey shows the Turkish and Libyan Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) meeting midway across the Mediterranean, over an area also claimed by Greece.¹⁶ It cuts across a zone currently claimed by Greece and Cyprus, where plans for a future gas pipeline are in the works to link eastern Mediterranean gas fields with European markets.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan had declared in December 2019 that Ankara was prepared to send troops to Libya to support the GNA should Sarraj request it. But Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said on December 14, 2019, the GNA had not made a request to Ankara for sending troops to support it against the forces of the Libya National Army that are advancing on Tripoli.¹⁷

Turkish President Erdogan held talks with Libyan Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj in Istanbul on December 15, 2019, as fighting in Libya intensified and regional tensions boil. The closed-door meeting, which was not on Erdogan's official agenda, took place in Istanbul's Ottoman-era Dolmabahce Palace, the Turkish presidency said without giving details.¹⁸

Qatar

GNA chief Fayez al-Sarraj was in Doha on December 15, 2019, where he met with Emir of Qatar Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad. The Emir of Qatar had expressed Doha's readiness to provide Libya's Government of National Accord with any support needed in the economic and security fields. Discussions between Sarraj and Sheikh Tamim also tackled the upcoming international conference on Libya set for Berlin. They agreed on the need to invite concerned countries to the event without exception.¹⁹

The Libyan National Army (LNA)

Libyan general, Khalifa Haftar, commander of the Libyan National Army (LNA) has reportedly ordered his forces in December 2019, to advance onto the capital Tripoli in a "decisive battle" to take the city.²⁰ Haftar said gunmen in the city would be provided with safety in exchange for laying down their arms.

The Libyan National Army (LNA) continued its push to take the Libyan capital Tripoli on December 15, 2019. The LNA units bombed positions in al-Naqlia camp south of the capital, and other positions in its vicinity, saying that these positions are used by forces of the GNA to "store vehicles and fuel." The LNA also claimed that its forces took over Al-Tawghaar town to the south of Tripoli. Haftar's forces also launched three airstrikes on the militias' positions on the airport road.²¹

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan had earlier this month declared that Ankara was prepared to send troops to Libya to support the GNA should Sarraj request it. The chief of staff of the LNA, Farag Al Mahdawi, warned that his forces will sink any Turkish ships approaching the Libyan coast.²² Haftar's air force has already bombed the coastal city of Misrata as a warning for Ankara not to ship in troops or further supplies.²³

The conflict between LNA and Turkey

Under the pretext of combating "terrorists", who he accuses of backing the GNA, Haftar led an offensive on Tripoli in April 2019, however, it led to a stalemate with the LNA failing to achieve its objectives.²⁴

On June 28, 2019, General Ahmad Al-Mesmari, LNA spokesperson accused Turkey of backing the internationally recognized, Government of National Accord (GNA), in Libya's conflict and General Khalifa Haftar, head of the LNA has ordered his forces to attack Turkish ships and interests in the country.²⁵ Meanwhile, Haftar declared a "general mobilization" as tensions between Ankara and the eastern administration mounted.

In an official response to Haftar's threats, Turkey's defense minister, Hulusi Akar, said that Turkey will retaliate against any assault from Khalifa Haftar's forces in Libya. He said Turkey's efforts in Libya sought to "contribute to peace and stability in the region".²⁶

Forces loyal to Khalifa Haftar said on June 30, 2019, they have arrested six Turks over Turkey's support for "militias" in Libya but the Turkish nationals were freed after Turkey threatened action.²⁷

In a related development, the air force of the Libyan National Army (LNA) destroyed on June 30, 2019, a Turkish drone at Tripoli's Mitiga military air base. The LNA announced that it had destroyed the main control room for Turkish drones that are operated from the military section of Tripoli's Mitiga airport. The LNA also claimed on July 7, 2019, that they have destroyed four Turkish drones.²⁸

The sponsors of the LNA

The UAE, along with Saudi Arabia and Egypt, support Haftar who they see as a bulwark against Islamist militants in North Africa. Another main supporter is Russia.

Egypt

President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi said on December 15, 2019 in televised comments that the Government of National Accord (GNA) "has been taken hostage by armed and terrorist militias there."²⁹

Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi said that the civil war and the chaos in Libya after the death of long-time dictator Moammar Gadhafi have harmed Egypt, and that hundreds of thousands of Egyptian youth working in Libya have returned to Egypt due to the conflict in the neighboring country. *El Sisi added that "Libya is a transit point for illegal immigration; our national security is tied to Libya. We could have intervened, but we respected the situation in Libya."*³⁰

President El-Sisi said that, "We will not allow anyone to believe that they can control Libya and Sudan," adding that "interference in Libya by foreign

countries has delayed a solution [there] for years." El-Sisi's remarks came after Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said his country is ready to send troops to Libya if asked by the country's Government of National Accord (GNA). The Libyan GNA criticized the remarks made by President El-Sisi, saying they disregard Libya's sovereignty.³¹

Egypt had officially condemned the signing of the MoUs, saying they violate the Skhirat Agreement, which does not give the prime minister the authority to sign international agreements. Egypt's Parliamentary Speaker Ali Abdel-Aal stated during a meeting with Libyan parliament speaker Aguila Saleh that Egypt considers the Libyan parliament the "only legitimate representative of the Libyan people."

The GNA Libyan Embassy in Cairo - crisis ³²

In a separate statement on December 15, 2019, the embassy denied that members of its diplomatic mission had defected from the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA). It said a statement about the matter, which was reported by Egypt's official news agency MENA, was forged by a group that is not affiliated with the embassy in any way.

The Libyan embassy in Cairo has suspended its work in Egypt until further notice starting Sunday 15 December over "security reasons." The embassy announced its closure in a statement published on its official Facebook page on December 14, 2019.

Egypt's official news agency (MENA) had reported that the Libyan diplomatic mission in Egypt announced in a statement on December 14, 2019 that it had defected from the GNA headed by Fayeze Al-Sarraj, and that the mission's members no longer recognize the GNA after it recently signed "illegitimate agreements" with Turkey, adding that it stands by the Libyan National Army (LNA), which is led by Libyan commander Khalifa Haftar and the elected parliament.

UAE

A 2017 U.N. report said the UAE has provided the Libyan National Army (LNA) with military and logistical support. The U.N. report said Haftar's forces had received aircrafts and military vehicles from the UAE, which also built up an air base at Al Khadim, allowing the LNA, to gain air superiority by 2016.³³

At least six U.S.-made turboprop planes appear in satellite images of an airbase in eastern Libya, deployed in support of the forces of rogue Libyan general Haftar.

According to a secret UN report, the missiles fired from unmanned aircraft on the southern suburb of Tripoli on 19 and 20 April 2019, are Blue Arrow air-to-ground missiles, that only three countries, China, Kazakhstan, and the United Arab Emirates own. This is because these missiles could only be launched by drone produced by China's Wing Loong.³⁴

The experts investigating the possible use of variables from the Wing Loong unmanned aircraft by the Libyan National Army led by Marshal Khalifa Haftar, or by a third party supporting the Libyan National Army," the report pointed out.³⁵

UAE hosted in February 2019 talks between Prime Minister Fayed Seraj and Haftar, where the two agreed on the need for national elections but in April 2019 the LNA launched a surprise attack on Tripoli fighting has intensified again.

The UAE, a prominent Haftar backer, is also suspected of using attack aircrafts on behalf of his forces.³⁶ In August 2014, the UAE and Egypt carried out an air strike in Libya against a Muslim Brotherhood-linked Islamist militia that reportedly enjoyed support from Qatar. The United States criticized the strike as detracting from Libyan stability.³⁷

The planes at the base appear to be Archangels, a specialized turboprop plane made by a company called Iomax USA. The American Archangel planes are an advanced iteration of an old concept that dates to the Vietnam War: crop-dusters that can be equipped with advanced surveillance gear and weapons. The plane's slower speed and low flying altitude makes them ideal for patrolling borders and fighting insurgents at relatively close range. Iomax has sold 48 of the planes to the U.A.E.³⁸

In July 2018, press reports claimed that UAE-based entities had signed agreements with Haftar-aligned oil authorities in eastern Libya to export Libyan oil in violation of U.N. Security Council resolutions.³⁹

Russia

Russia is exerting itself as the new superpower and Moscow views its role in Libya as a means to increase its influence in the region. After several years of behind-the-scenes financial and tactical support for general Haftar, Russia is now pushing far more directly to shape the outcome of Libya's

civil war. It has introduced mercenaries, advanced Sukhoi jets, coordinated missile strikes, and precision-guided artillery, as well as the snipers.⁴⁰

Russia is doing now in Libya a kind of hybrid warfare approach, to employ a variety of means, many of them deniable, to try to advance their interests. U.S. and Libyan officials say that hundreds of Russian mercenaries are fighting alongside the LNA forces. The GNA said earlier this month that it had documented between 600 and 800 Russian mercenaries involved in fighting in Libya.⁴¹ The Kremlin has denied knowledge of Russian mercenaries in Libya.⁴²

Russian President Vladimir Putin said on December 19, 2019, he wants to see an end to the conflict in Libya, stating that he will discuss the issue with a Turkish delegation in Russia. Moscow and Ankara have backed different sides in the conflict.⁴³

The Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA), believes that two Russians arrested on spying allegations in 2019 were employed by the Wagner Group. The Russian nationals were arrested on suspicion of attempting to influence planned municipal elections and gather information on the GNA's military operations against the LNA. The men had provided "confessions" and remained in detention while the GNA attorney general investigates their activities. Russian government was putting pressure on the GNA's leadership to free the two men. The alleged intelligence operation coincides with mounting concern about Russian involvement in a battle for control of Tripoli.⁴⁴

Russia has been accused by UN and the GNA of shipping hundreds of mercenaries to the country to fight alongside Haftar. UN Special Envoy to Libya, Ghassan Salamé, said that "Russian support" for the forces of General Khalifa Haftar has intensified his attack on Tripoli, warning that this may cause a "bloodbath" in the Libyan capital.⁴⁵

The U.N.

UN Special Envoy to Libya, Ghassan Salamé, explained that the Russian military forces, who are called "mercenaries or young contractors", have contributed to changing the strategic balance, pointing out that "since the Russians joined Haftar's forces, the attack on Tripoli has regained its power." He added that it is necessary to open immediately a dialogue and to stop the fighting. Salamé did not rule out that the sudden entry of Haftar's forces to Tripoli would hinder efforts of the preparation for the Berlin International Conference on Libya.⁴⁶

The Berlin International Conference on Libya - Germany has been preparing for a conference on Libya that brings together the influential international parties in the Libyan file to discuss a political solution that would end the conflict in the country away from military solutions. The conference is expected to be held on the second half of December 2019 or early next year.⁴⁷

The Egyptian president said in December 2019 that a comprehensive political solution would be achieved in the coming months that would put an end to a “terrorist hotbed that pushes militants and weapons to (Libya’s) neighboring countries including Egypt.”⁴⁸

Summary

Libya is increasingly becoming a battlefield for a geopolitical contest among regional and international powers. Turkey is a key ally of the GNA and Russia is the main supporter of Haftar and the LNA.

The Russian forces, who are called “mercenaries”, have contributed to changing the strategic balance between the GNA militias and the LNA.

Turkey's parliament has ratified the military cooperation pact between Turkey and Government of National Accord (GNA), of Libya, paving the way for possible armed intervention in Libya.

The new security agreement will open the door for exchange of personnel, materials, equipment, consultancy and experience between Turkey and Libya. It also provides Turkish support for a so-called quick reaction force for police and military in Libya, as well as enhanced cooperation in intelligence and the defense industry. Erdogan said that the security cooperation agreement, granted Turkey the right to intervene militarily in Libya.⁴⁹

While Turkey has supplied Sarraj's forces with arms and drones, it has not yet become involved with its own forces in the battle between the Tripoli government and warlord Khalifa Haftar. Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu Asked whether Tripoli had made a request for Turkey to send troops to Libya, Cavusoglu said "not yet" but said "sending troops is the easiest way" to stop Haftar's assault.⁵⁰

The Libyan Government of National Accord decision to activate the military memorandum of understanding with Turkey can lead to direct

intervention of Turkish forces in the war in Libya and to escalation of the war.

Notes

¹ Libya: Haftar orders troops to advance on Tripoli in 'final battle', MEMO, December 13, 2019.

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³ Libya requests direct Turkish intervention, Arab news, December 19, 2019.

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⁶ Haftar forces to target Turkish troops entering Libyan territory, Arab news, December 20, 2019.

⁷ LNA Says Tripoli Fully Besieged, Asharq Al Awsat, December 19, 2019.

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¹⁹ Qatar Pledges Security, Economic Support to Libya's GNA, Asharq Al Awsat, December 15, 2019.

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- ²⁰ Libya: Haftar orders troops to advance on Tripoli in ‘final battle’, MEMO, December 13, 2019.
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- ²² Libya: Haftar orders troops to advance on Tripoli in ‘final battle’, MEMO, December 13, 2019.
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- ²⁴ Libya: Haftar orders troops to advance on Tripoli in ‘final battle’, MEMO, December 13, 2019.
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- ²⁶ Turkey ready to retaliate after 'hostile' Haftar threatens attack, the new Arab, June 30, 2019.
- ²⁷ Libyan National Army spokesman denies arrest of any Turkish citizen, Al Arabiya, July 2, 2019.
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- ³¹ Egypt is keen on seeing unity and stability in Libya: Sisi tells Merkel in phone call, Ahram online, December 19, 2019.
- ³² Libyan Embassy in Cairo suspends work over 'security reasons', Ahram online, December 15, 2019.
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⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Libya GNA warns from Haftar's possible entry to Tripoli with Russian support, MEMO, December 13, 2019.

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⁵⁰ Ibid.