

Between Ankara and Tripoli

Shaul Shay

(Senior research fellow at the International Institute for Counter-terrorism (ICT) at the Interdisciplinary Centre Herzliya and former deputy head of Israel's National Security Council)

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Libya has been in crisis since the fall of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011. The conflict, which began as a part of the Arab Spring in 2011, transformed into a civil war where foreign governments provided weapons, money, and even fighters to opposing sides on the ground.¹

Since 2011, Libya was 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. Major fighting between LNA and GNA forces paused with a U.N.-mediated political agreement in Geneva in 2021.

The Libyan parliament has been divided since 2015 and has not held an official session for years. But after long and complex negotiations, on March 10, 2021, the Libyan House of Representatives confirmed the newly-appointed Government of Libyan National Unity (GNU) and on this day, 132 lawmakers approved the government of Prime Minister Abdulhamid al-Dbeibah.

On March 15, 2021, Libya's Government of National Unity (GNU) was sworn. The GNU's main purpose was to prepare for simultaneous presidential and parliamentary elections on December 24, 2021. However, all attempts to promote agreed elections have failed and *since 2021 there is no democratically elected government in Libya*. The GNU remained in power but because the GNU is a transitional government, it has a relatively limited mandate and legitimacy.

During the last decade, Turkey managed to take advantage of the political crisis and the civil war in Libya in order to establish a strategic and economic grip on the divided country.

Turkey decided to support the Government of National Accord (GNA), led by Fayeze al-Sarraj, based in Tripoli during the civil war in the years 2019 – 2020 and since the 2020 cease fire agreement, to support Libya's Government of National Unity (GNU).

Turkey took advantage of the weakness of the GNA and the GNU governments in order to sign a series of agreements on the issues of: demarking the maritime borders (2019), the use of Libya's natural resources in the oil and gas sectors (2022), and security and military cooperation agreements (2019, 2024) which enabled the survival of these governments in the conflicts with their local enemies and in return gave Turkey territorial and economic gains and a strategically important military outpost in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said on February 13, 2024, that Libya's Government of National Unity (GNU) "is the only legitimate government that the world and Turkey deal with," expressing his "readiness to support any dialogue that leads to the stability of Libya, and the holding of elections without new transitional stages".²

In March 1, 2024, Turkey and Libya's Government of National Unity (GNU) signed a military Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) that aims to bolster Libya's defense capabilities but grants the Turkish forces wide privileges in Libya. Turkey will lead efforts to restructure and train Libya's armed forces and security units, responding to a direct request from the Libyan government led by Abdulhamid al-Dbeibah.³

Because the GNU is transitional government, it has a relatively limited mandate and Dbeibah and his government were slammed for signing the “shameful” agreement with 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 but Turkey's current involvement in the Libyan conflict can also be seen in the broader context of Turkey's geopolitical interests in the eastern Mediterranean and beyond.

The current military MoU is a continuation of a series of agreements between the countries that began in 2019 and which gives Turkey significant control over Libya's gas and oil resources and a strategic military base in the country.

Since August 2024, the situation in Libya has deteriorated quite rapidly in terms of political, economic and security stability. Unilateral acts by Libyan political, military and security actors and power struggles in Libya have increased tension and further entrenched institutional and political divisions.

The military MoU

The head of Libya's Government of National Unity (GNU) Abdulhamid al-Dbeibah signed on March 1, 2024, in the Turkish city of Antalya, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Türkiye that grants the Turkish forces wide privileges in the country.⁴

Following the signing of the memorandum, Dbeibah stressed that developing cooperation between the General Staff and the Turkish Ministry of Defense is a priority and of great importance, in addition to implementing advanced training programs to build the capacity of the Libyan army.⁵

On August 17, 2024, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan submitted the memorandum of understanding (MoU) to the Turkish Parliament. The MoU is effective for three years, with an automatic one-year extension unless either party opts to terminate it. This ensures Turkey's continued military presence in Libya, a key strategic priority for Ankara, especially given Libya's valuable oil and gas resources.⁶

The MoU includes several significant provisions:⁷

- Article 7 gives Turkish forces unrestricted access to Libyan airspace, territorial waters, and land, exempting them from local seizures or charges.
- Article 12 grants Turkish forces the right to carry personal and military weapons and wear their uniforms while on duty, reflecting significant autonomy in their operations.
- The MoU allows Turkish forces to establish and manage their communication systems, and set up postal offices, bank branches, and recreational facilities within their areas, as detailed in Article 9 and Article 16.
- Turkish military personnel in Libya will have broad legal immunity under Article 11, meaning any crimes committed during official duties will be governed solely by Turkish law. This effectively shields them from Libyan legal jurisdiction, reinforcing Turkey's control over its forces abroad.
- Libya has committed to providing extensive logistical support, covering essential services like electricity, water, and internet at no cost. Furthermore, the MoU includes financial exemptions, such as tax and duty-free imports and exports related to Turkish military activities in Libya, as per Article 14.

The Turkish military involvement in the civil war in Libya

The conflict in Libya was further complicated by foreign involvement and foreign fighters have become a permanent part of the Libyan landscape. Following the revolution of February 2011 toppling of Muammar Gaddafi, 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.

Turkey was also the main ally of the Government of National Accord (GNA), and its armed militias. Türkiye supported the GNA forces with troops and allied Syrian mercenaries, while Russia backs general Haftar head of the Libyan National Army

(LNA) in the east and south of Libya, first through the Wagner Group and now with a direct military presence.⁸

Turkey 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.⁹

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.¹⁰

The 2019 Security and Military Cooperation Memorandum

In November 2019 Turkey and the Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA) signed a military memorandum of understanding MoU. The security and military cooperation agreement allowed Turkey to send military advisers to help co-ordinate the GNA's war efforts and train local forces. Since the military agreement was ratified with Libya, Turkey began sharing its military resources and experience with the GNA by training Libyan forces.

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. On January 2, 2020, Turkey's Parliament approved a government proposal to deploy troops to Libya to support the internationally recognized government in Tripoli.

Faced assault on Tripoli, the GNA requested help from the United States, Britain, Italy, Algeria and Turkey to help them defend their positions. Only Turkey responded with tangible assistance including armed drones and air defense systems, which have shifted the balance on the ground.¹¹

The arrival of Turkish drones shortly afterwards was seen as crucial in the victory of Tripoli-based forces against those of eastern military chief Khalifa Haftar (LNA), backed at the time by Egypt, Russia and the United Arab Emirates.

The 2019 demarking the maritime boundaries between the two nations

In same month another MoU between the Government of the Republic of Turkey and Libya's Government of National Accord (GNA) was signed on maritime boundaries in the Mediterranean Sea. The MoU allows the two countries to carry out joint exploration operations in the eastern Mediterranean.

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 oil and gas reserves in the eastern Mediterranean.¹²

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.¹³ 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.

The MoU also reportedly ignores objections by countries such as Cyprus, Egypt and Greece, and sparked controversy and anger among countries across the eastern Mediterranean region and added to the tension caused by Turkey's drilling activities in the Eastern Mediterranean.¹⁴

The maritime hydrocarbons MoU

One of the main drivers of Ankara's support for the Government of National Accord (GNA) in Libya, were the Libyan oil and gas resources. Turkey is one of the world's top energy consumers. For the past two decades, Ankara's energy needs have been on the rise, and they are projected to continue on an upward trajectory.¹⁵

Libya ranks as the largest oil economy by proven oil reserves in Africa and one of the world's wealthiest economies by the proportion of oil reserves to population size. However, years of conflict and instability have transformed oil-rich Libya into a revenue-poor country.¹⁶

On October 3, 2022, the GNU signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Turkey during a visit conducted by a high-level delegation from Ankara that

included the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Defense, Energy and Trade, the National Security Advisor, the Head of the Presidential Communications Department, and the Chief of the General Staff.¹⁷

The MoU allowing oil and gas exploration in Libya's Mediterranean waters, three years after a maritime border deal between the countries. The deal was rejected by a rival administration in the war-torn country's east.¹⁸

On January 10, 2023, the Third Circuit (Administrative Judicial Circuit) of the Tripoli Court of Appeal ruled to halt the implementation of memorandums of understanding between the GNU and Turkey in the field of hydrocarbon energy.¹⁹

Libya's Government of National Unity (GNU) told Turkey "Not to take seriously" the court ruling that suspended the energy exploration deal that the Tripoli government signed with Turkey. Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said that Ankara had been in touch with Abdulhamid Dbeibah, head of the Tripoli-based GNU.²⁰

On February 19, 2024, Tripoli Court of Appeal ruled to invalidate the October 2022 memorandum of understanding between Libya (signed by the current Tripoli based government) and Turkey on cooperation in the hydrocarbon energy sector.²¹

The escalation in Libya (2024)

Since the beginning of August 2024, the situation in Libya has deteriorated rapidly in terms of political, economic and security stability, including fighting between armed groups on the outskirts of Tripoli and attempts of rival authorities based in the capital Tripoli took over the central bank and replaced its governor, Seddik al-Kabir.²²

Tensions have recently been increased also after forces led by Saddam Haftar, the youngest son of general Haftar, were moving towards southwestern Libya, a region under the Tripoli government's control. Saddam Haftar said it was only aiming to "secure the country's southern borders and enhance stability" in areas it already controls.²³

The eastern parliament in the city of Tobruk said on August 17, 2024 that the government in Tripoli was "illegitimate" and General Haftar and his sons who hold key posts in the eastern administration have similarly questioned the legitimacy of the UN-recognized government.²⁴

On August 26, 2024, Libya's eastern-based administration which controls most of the country's oil fields, said it was shutting down "all oil fields" under its control and "suspending all production and exports until further notice".²⁵

The unilateral acts by Libyan political, military and security actors and power struggles in Libya have increased tension and further entrenched institutional and political divisions. Reemerging bloodshed raised fears of a broader escalation, threatening to deal a fatal blow to the UN-brokered political transition and push the war-torn country deeper into turmoil.²⁶

Summary

Libya has been in crisis since the toppling of Muammar Gaddafi more than a decade ago. As part of the agreement signed under the auspices of the United Nations, Libya's Government of National Unity (GNU) was supposed to hold elections for the presidency and the House of Representatives as early as 2021, however, all attempts to promote agreed elections have failed.

The GNU is a weak transitional government, with relatively limited mandate and legitimacy and as a result, the cease fire is fragile, political polarization is high, and the involvement of external actors remains a significant issue.

Dbeibah and his government were slammed for signing a "shameful" deal with Turkey, but Dbeibah's dependence on Turkish support suggests that the Turkish-Libyan agreements will remain in place and Ankara will continue to support the GNU.

Turkey has been one of the actors actively seeking to influence developments in Libya in order to promote its geopolitical interests in Libya and beyond. Ankara's geostrategic interests, in the long run, are mainly economic in nature. Therefore,

Turkey has tried to restore stability and support the establishment of a friendly central government (GNU).

In addition to that, the Turkish government has aimed to maintain and expand its influence in Libya. Ankara trying to prevent Libya from being controlled by other foreign actors: Russia, UAE, Egypt, Italy and France, which may harm to Turkey's interests. Turkey's position in Libya can thus be seen as a part of a more general strategy to position Turkey as a regional and global player.

Turkey's military involvement in Libya has been controversial. The UN Security Council's 2024 report accused Turkey of violating sanctions by providing military equipment and training to various factions in Libya. Despite these criticisms, President Erdogan has emphasized the strategic importance of Turkey's presence in Libya, both for national security and energy resource exploration.

Since August 2024, the situation in Libya has deteriorated rapidly in terms of political, economic and security stability. Reemerging bloodshed raised fears of a broader escalation, threatening to deal a fatal blow to the UN-brokered political transition.

If dialogue and political mediation fail, there is a fear that the civil war will resume and Turkey, because of the agreements it signed with the GNU, will find itself involved in a war in which other countries that support General Haftar will also be involved, and there is a danger that the conflict will turn from local to international.

Notes:

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