



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

Situation Assessment | 15 January 2020

Turkey's Growing Role in Libya:

Motives, Background and Responses

Unit for Political Studies

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Series: **Situation Assessment**

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Unit for Political Studies

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On 2 January 2020, the Turkish Parliament approved a draft resolution to send troops to Libya in support of the internationally recognized Government of National Accord in Tripoli, permitting the Turkish government to initially determine the scope of its deployment. The bill garnered the support of 325 deputies, with opposition from 184.⁽¹⁾ The move comes in response to the request of the Libyan government, which is under increasing pressure in the field from the forces of retired General Khalifa Haftar, who launched a military operation last April to take control of Tripoli, with Egyptian-Emirati, and later Russian, support.

The Increasing Turkish Role in Libya

Prior to the outbreak of the February 2011 revolution, Turkey's interests in Libya were focused on strengthening its economic interests. Turkey secured a large sum of construction contracts in Libya in 2010, and Turkish investors pumped billions of dollars into the sector, with Turkish business companies signing about 304 commercial contracts in Libya.⁽²⁾ Given its economic interests in Libya, Turkey first opposed the NATO military intervention against Colonel Gaddafi's regime, but soon changed its position and supported the Libyan revolution.

Following this, Turkish policy passed through several stages:

The first stage: continued until 2014, during which Turkey tried to restore its economic relationship with Libya by supporting stability and the establishment of a central government. The chaos that followed the fall of the Gaddafi regime and the country's descent into civil war seriously damaged Turkish interests. Turkey has approximately \$15 billion in unpaid contractual obligations in Libya. However, the state's disintegration, the problem of militias and factions, and the increase in external interference in Libya, especially after the military coup in Egypt in the summer of 2013 and Libya's transformation into a regional conflict arena, came to a head with General Khalifa Haftar's military operation launched from eastern Libya in early 2014, prompting Turkey to support the opposed military factions. Turkey hosted several media institutions and political figures opposed to the Haftar project on its territory.

The second stage: Turkey supported the Libyan political agreement signed in "Skhirat", under UN auspices, in December 2015, and Government of National Accord. However, Haftar's allies intensified their support against the government, to the point of declaring war on Tripoli. On the other hand, the government was unable to end the factional issue, prompting additional Western countries to gamble on Haftar to achieve building an army and state in Libya. The Turkish military role supporting the internationally recognized government in Tripoli grew, especially after Haftar's attack on the capital in April 2019. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan informed the Prime Minister of the

1 Peter Beaumont, "Turkish MPs Pass Bill to Send Troops to Support Libyan Government," *The Guardian*, 2/1/2019. Accessed on 3/1/2019, at: <https://bit.ly/36mMA86>.

2 Ferhat Polat, "The Trajectory of Turkey-Libya Relations," *TRT world*, 30/8/2019. Accessed on 30/8/2019, at: <https://bit.ly/2Q5tA8q>.



Government of National Accord, Fayez al-Sarraj, that Ankara is ready to provide all kinds of assistance to him, in order to counteract what he called “the conspiracy against the Libyan people.”⁽³⁾

Accordingly, Turkish military support began to take a public character, limited in early battles, as military vehicles were sent to the Government of National Accord.⁽⁴⁾ On 19 June, Erdogan announced that his country was providing weapons to the national government under a military cooperation agreement, and not specifying the nature of this agreement and cooperation at the time. He added that Ankara’s military support allowed Tripoli to “restore balance” in Libya, in the face of the Haftar forces backed by the UAE and Egypt.⁽⁵⁾ This command planted Turkey into direct confrontation with Haftar and his allies in the region, where the spokesperson for Haftar’s forces, Major General Ahmed Al-Mesmari, described Turkish military support to the government as a “Turkish invasion.” He stressed the need to confront Turkey, by targeting Turkish boats and ships within the territorial waters, as well as soldiers on the ground.⁽⁶⁾ On the other hand, Turkish Defence Minister Hulusi Akar threatened Haftar’s forces in the event of any hostile act or attack on Turkish interests.⁽⁷⁾

Third stage: On November 27, 2019, the Turkish government and the Government of National Accord signed a memorandum of understanding on sovereignty over marine areas in the Mediterranean Sea, as the eastern Mediterranean region is subject to disputes over the demarcation of maritime borders following geological surveys that confirmed the existence of enormous stockpiles of technically recoverable oil and gas.⁽⁸⁾ This demonstrates that the Turkish goal goes beyond the situation in Libya to the Mediterranean as a whole.

Turkey and Libya also signed a memorandum on security cooperation, which included military and anti-terrorism training, assistance on irregular migration, logistics, maps and military planning, and transfer of expertise.⁽⁹⁾ As soon as the government in Tripoli submitted a formal request for Turkish military air, sea, and land support, President Erdogan confirmed that his country would send troops to Libya, at Tripoli’s request, following the approval of the Turkish Parliament.

Regional and International Responses to the Turkish Intervention

Turkish diplomacy has been active in Libya’s neighbouring countries, in the aim of clarifying the nature and features of the Turkish role in Libya. The Foreign Minister, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, visited Algeria

3 “Turkey and Qatar Condemn the Attack on Tripoli, and Erdogan Will Act to Prevent the Conspiracy”, *Al-Jazeera Net*, 4/29/2019. Accessed 29/29/2019, at: <https://bit.ly/2EYUsRp>.

4 “Turkey Hands Over Dozens of Armored Vehicles to the Libyan National Army, Despite the UN Embargo,” *Arabic Defense*, 18/5/2019. Accessed 12/30/2019, at: <https://bit.ly/2MFBGmd>.

5 “The Release of Six Turks Detained by Haftar Forces in Libya (Source: the Turkish Foreign Ministry)”, *France 24*, 7/1/2019. Accessed 12/30/2019, at: <https://bit.ly/2F1qD2H>.

6 “Haftar Orders His Forces to Hit ‘All Turkish Strategic Targets’ in Libya,” *France 24*, 29/26/2019. Accessed 12/30/2012, at: <https://bit.ly/2MEaOD9>.

7 “Turkish Defense Minister Threatens Haftar with a ‘Very Harsh Response’: If Turkish Interests in Libya are Attacked by Haftar’s Forces,” *TR*, 6/30/2019. Accessed 30/30/2019, at: <https://bit.ly/37F1jvp>.

8 “The Libya-Turkey Memorandum of Understanding: Local and Regional Repercussions” ACRPS, Situation Assessment., 17/12/2019. Accessed 7/1/2019, at: <https://bit.ly/2Fud6ka>.

9 “After the Maritime Agreement ... Turkey Announces a New Step in Military Cooperation with Libya,” *Al-Jazeera Net*, 12/15/2019. Accessed 29/29/2019, at: <https://bit.ly/39GTUO4>.

on 9 October, where he met his Algerian counterpart, and they agreed to call for a political solution to the Libyan crisis.⁽¹⁰⁾ However, Algeria has since reaffirmed its special role in Libya, after growing talk of sending in Turkish military forces. The Algerian National Security Council held a meeting on 27 December 2019, in which it decided to take “precautionary” security measures to protect the common border with Libya and revitalize Algeria’s role in relation to Libya and Mali.⁽¹¹⁾

The Turkish president made a short visit to Tunisia, where the conflict in Libya occupied its airspace, and announced the establishment of cooperation between the two countries to provide political support to the legitimate government in Libya, which was interpreted by some Tunisian parties as approval of the Turkish military intervention,⁽¹²⁾ prompting the Tunisian president to issue a statement denying that it entered into any alliance.⁽¹³⁾ Cairo, Haftar’s ally along with Abu Dhabi in the region, has spurned the Turkish intervention. President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi described the Tripoli government as a “prisoner of armed militias,” claiming that Egypt has refrained from intervening despite being capable.⁽¹⁴⁾

Internationally, the US position remained unclear about the ongoing conflict in Libya, due to the absence of a clear strategy. More recently, US interest in Libya was limited to combating the Islamic State and ensuring the continued flow of oil to world markets. A statement was issued by the White House after a phone call between Presidents Donald Trump and Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in which they affirmed the rejection of foreign interference in Libya and the need for the Libyan parties to take steps towards resolving the conflict internally.⁽¹⁵⁾

The European Union has expressed reservations about the agreement signed between Turkey and the Libyan government and requested greater clarification about it, as well as the Turkish military intervention. But it does not have any real ability to influence the course of the Libyan crisis, as a result of the French-Italian competition that has limited EU institutions’ capacity to adopt a common European approach to issue. The role of these institutions has been limited to providing relatively limited financial and technical support to the government, and to dealing with the crisis as a security threat from the perspective of irregular migration. Fears of slipping into a wider conflict led the leaders of the European Union to establish a European mission, headed by Josep Borrell, EU Foreign Minister, to visit Libya, in preparation for the Berlin conference on Libya to be held in January 2020.

The Russian position came through the State Duma, which expressed concern about the Memorandum of Understanding between Ankara and Tripoli. Leonid Slutsky, head of the Duma’s International Affairs Committee, said that sending Turkey military forces to Libya may further deepen the recent

10 “Algeria’s Foreign Minister: Turkey Supports Our Position on the Crisis in Libya,” *Andalou Agency*, 9/10/2019. Accessed 29/12/2019, at: <https://bit.ly/357yDtl>.

11 “Algeria Takes Security Measures to ‘Protect’ its Borders with Libya,” *France 24*, 27/12/2019. Accessed 12/30/2019, at: <https://bit.ly/2Q61dqT>.

12 Abdul Rahman Amini, “Erdogan’s visit provokes reactions that fear that Tunisia will turn into a platform to interfere in Libya,” *Alwasat*, 12/26/2019. Accessed 12/30/2019, at: <https://bit.ly/35wwfwl>.

13 “Libya: Tunisia Denies Entering into an Alliance...,” *France 24*, 12/26/2019. Accessed 12/30/2019, at: <https://bit.ly/2SzFpWh>.

14 “el-Sisi: We Refrained from Direct Interference in Libya and the Government of National Accord Held Captive by the Armed Militias,” *Russia Today*, 15/12/2019. Accessed 12/30/2019, at: <https://bit.ly/2u3iloG>.

15 “The White House: Trump and Al-Sisi Agree on the Need to End the Libyan Conflict,” *Asharq al-Awsat*, 27/12/2019. Accessed 12/30/2019, at: <https://bit.ly/2ZURNsq>.



crisis. He considered that the decision of the Turkish parliament is “worrisome”, stressing that Russia is pushing towards resolving the Libyan crisis through political and diplomatic methods.⁽¹⁶⁾

Conclusion

The Turkish decision to support the legitimate ruling Government of National Accord may contribute to uniting the war effort of the military components fighting alongside it to repel Haftar’s attack on the capital, and move to the task of maintaining security and stability in western Libya, if this is realized by the Turks. The government will not be recognised internationally unless it succeeds in establishing a national army and goes beyond the factional situation that European and neighbouring Arab countries cannot deal with as a country. Turkey’s military intervention, if Haftar and his allies despair of taking control of the capital, could lead to a return to the negotiating table and an agreement on a political solution to the crisis. However, there are still caveats that external interventions, of all kinds, will prolong the conflict and turn it into a regional and international agency war that threatens the future of the country and its territorial integrity.

16 "Russia: Turkey's Approval to Send Troops to Libya 'Worrisome,'" *Andalou Agency*, 1/3/2020. Accessed 4/1/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/35IXlq8>.