

# What Turned the Battle for Tripoli?

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Brief Analysis

**A boost in Turkish drones and air defense systems enabled forces in Tripoli to establish local air superiority and ease pressure on the capital, leaving each side's foreign patrons with tough choices about whether to escalate further or take steps to halt the fighting.**

In early April, one year after Gen. Khalifa Haftar's self-styled Libyan National Army (LNA) began its ongoing offensive against Tripoli, forces aligned with the internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) captured six towns west of the capital and advanced on al-Watayah Air Base, a key LNA supply node. Since then, fighting has remained intense in southern Tripoli and around Tarhuna, a town that provided the LNA with much of its local support and forces over the past year.

The ground advances partly resulted from tactical victories by local GNA militias against inferior Sudanese mercenaries fighting for the LNA, amid reported reductions in the [Russian Wagner Group private military contractors \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/russian-private-military-companies-continuity-and-evolution-of-the-model\)](#) who devastated GNA forces in September-October. Yet a dramatic shift in the air war was most responsible for enabling their biggest victories since the beginning of this year, with Turkish support helping them retake much of the capital's periphery.

How Haftar and his backers in the United Arab Emirates and other countries respond to their setbacks will

determine the next phase of Libya's civil war. The general's defeats seemingly led him to call for a ceasefire on April 29 after rejecting previous calls (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/as-civil-war-rages-diplomacy-fails-with-libyas-haftar>) in March and at the beginning of Ramadan; in parallel, he made a public declaration of nationwide military rule on April 27. Meanwhile, Tripoli's continued vulnerability to shelling—which has caused dozens of civilian casualties and devastated crucial infrastructure such as hospitals—indicates that local fighting could persist for some time, especially if the LNA rearms.

## THE LNA'S INITIAL AIR DOMINANCE

**W**hen the war's current phase erupted in April 2019, the GNA relied on man-portable air defense systems (MANPADS) and small artillery to contest control of the sky, and both sides used their small fleets of Soviet-era fighters to limited effect. The next month, however, the LNA took the upper hand by expanding its use of UAE-operated systems after Haftar's initial attempts to capture Tripoli stalled. It then maintained this general air superiority until November.

The main UAE combat drone deployed in Libya is the Chinese-designed Wing Loong II, which is similar in size and capability to the U.S. MQ-9 and provides a clear intelligence and strike advantage to the LNA (a phenomenon also seen when UAE forces used them in Yemen). The Wing Loongs were especially effective at targeting the small drone fleet that Turkey provided to the GNA after Haftar began his campaign last April. The UAE drones attacked the fleet's ground stations and airfields, preventing it from providing the same capabilities to the GNA.

The LNA also used manned aircraft to occasionally devastating effect. International investigations of mass-casualty bombings against civilian areas around Tripoli in July and November concluded that fighter jets were responsible for the incidents—most likely Mirage 2000-9 aircraft operating out of the UAE-constructed al-Khadim Air Base east of Benghazi.

To reinforce this air superiority, the UAE also bolstered the LNA's surface-to-air missile capabilities with multiple Pantsir-S1s. These SAM systems helped Haftar's forces protect high-value targets from the GNA drone fleet and some manned aircraft (though not without reportedly suffering some losses).

## TURKEY SPURS A DECISIVE SHIFT

**A**fter reaching defense agreements with Turkey (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/coronavirus-has-opposite-effects-on-turkish-policy-in-syria-and-libya>) last November, the GNA quickly sought to shift the tide in the air campaign. The slowdown in fighting (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/making-the-most-of-the-berlin-conference-on-libya>) around January's Berlin conference gave the two military partners a window to establish an air defense bubble around the capital, deploying multiple SAM systems in and around Mitiga Air Base. The combination of medium-range U.S.-made MIM-23 Hawk missile systems, Hisar short-range SAMs, and Korkut anti-aircraft guns created a layered defense over critical infrastructure and reduced the threat to GNA drone ground stations and launch operations. This protection, combined with an increase in Turkish operators and equipment, allowed Libyan government forces to increase the number and effectiveness of their drone operations.

The GNA primarily uses the Turkish Bayraktar TB2 drone, which is smaller and shorter in range than its LNA rivals but still provides significant intelligence and precision strike capabilities. It is primarily used for two missions: (1) expanding GNA battlespace awareness through reconnaissance and interdiction against LNA supply lines, and (2) performing targeted strikes. Turkey used the Bayraktar with similar effectiveness in Syria, where the drone thrived in a more traditional combined-arms environment of supporting artillery and fixed-wing strikes.

Ankara has also protected Mitiga Air Base with the Koral, a jamming system with advertised capabilities against Pantsir missile radars and the datalink frequencies of Wing Loong drones. This dual jamming capability could

account for the increased survivability of the GNA drone force and recent disruptions to LNA drone operations.

## CONTINUED ESCALATION OR CEASEFIRE?

**A**lthough Turkey has made a decisive impact on the battle for Tripoli, it would need to greatly expand its military contributions if it wants to support a potential GNA offensive beyond northwest Libya. Similarly, if the UAE decides to counter Turkey's presence in the country and reverse the GNA's gains, it would need to take costly actions that end whatever plausible deniability still surrounds its unacknowledged military role in Libya. These dynamics suggest that a middle ground is available for both sides to return to negotiations.

Turkey's calculus will be shaped by the bubble it helped to establish around Tripoli, which can only be expanded so far based on technical and equipment limitations. The Bayraktar drone has a general range of only 150 miles and requires a direct line of sight signal, so any operations east of Sirte would require Ankara and the GNA to either forward-deploy control stations or build relay towers—both of which would be vulnerable to LNA counterattack. Moreover, their SAM and jamming capabilities in Tripoli are effective due to their layered nature; expanding such dense coverage beyond the capital area would necessitate deploying additional SAM systems at increased cost and risk.

The GNA has also benefited from operating with relatively short supply lines—an advantage that would disappear in a wider offensive requiring advanced logistical operations to provide fuel, weapons, parts, and manning. Turkey is already supporting massive operations in northwest Syria and may be stretched too thin to do the same in northwest Libya. A more realistic goal would be to push LNA forces outside shelling range of Tripoli and accept an internationally verifiable ceasefire at that point.

The UAE would likewise face numerous risks in any campaign to regain the initiative in the air. Emirati forces are capable of executing suppression of enemy air defense (SEAD) missions, but doing so in Libya would likely mean sending their F-16E/F fighters, which have not been engaged there so far. Such a deployment could trigger retaliatory strikes by Turkish air force units, which conducted exercises in mid-April demonstrating their ability to project power across the East Mediterranean with F-16s and refueling capabilities. It would also increase the risk of civilian casualties, exposing the Emiratis to political backlash in Congress for using U.S.-made systems to such ends. Exploiting a potential ceasefire to rearm Haftar would likewise open the UAE up to further exposure; according to flight trackers, over 150 heavy cargo deliveries have been made to east Libya by air since January alone, and a continuation or increase in such traffic once the fighting stops would be glaringly obvious.

Given their limited options for low-cost escalation, Ankara and Abu Dhabi may be receptive to a renewed press for a durable ceasefire line that protects civilians in and around Tripoli. Whether or not the Berlin process or GNA-LNA military dialogue can be revived, the perpetually divided UN Security Council needs to show greater unity for a ceasefire to have a chance. This includes agreeing on a new special representative and adopting a resolution that gives the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) renewed authority and resources to monitor a negotiated line. In parallel, the United States should encourage all parties—especially the UAE and Turkey—to accept whatever line is formalized and contribute intelligence resources to monitor and verify that each side and their foreign backers are complying.

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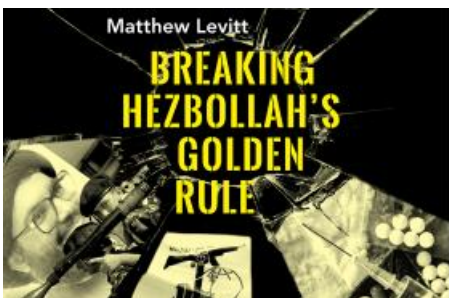
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