

# Turkey Pivots to Tripoli: Implications for Libya's Civil War and U.S. Policy

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Brief Analysis

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**Facing pressure from General Haftar and his foreign military backers, the Tripoli government has welcomed the helping hand extended by Ankara, whose own lack of regional options has drawn it into the middle of another conflict.**

**O**n December 10, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced that he was willing to deploy troops in Libya if the UN-backed Government of National Accord in Tripoli requested it. He reiterated the offer during a December 15 meeting with GNA prime minister Fayez al-Sarraj in Ankara—a visit that arose after Gen. Khalifa Haftar, who heads the self-styled Libyan National Army (LNA) and seeks to replace the GNA, renewed his push to take Tripoli by force.

Meanwhile, Turkey signed two controversial agreements with Tripoli over the past month: a memorandum of understanding on providing the GNA with arms, training, and military personnel, formally ratified by Tripoli earlier today; and a November 28 maritime agreement delineating exclusive economic zones in the Mediterranean waters separating the two countries. The latter move drew protests from Greece and Egypt and was condemned “unequivocally” by the European Council.

These and other developments indicate Libya's emerging status as a focal point of Ankara's foreign policy, which

seemingly regards the country as an arena for Turkish proxy competition with rivals old (Greece) and new (Egypt and the United Arab Emirates). At the same time, Libya's GNA has become increasingly dependent on Ankara for military reasons—namely, a lack of other allies willing to provide arms capable of countering the LNA's Emirati-supplied drones, and the arrival of Russian mercenaries who have added new technology and precision to Haftar's war against Tripoli.

Unless Washington invests more diplomatic energy and fully backs the German-led initiative to implement a ceasefire and return to peace negotiations, the proxy war in Libya will only escalate. In that scenario, Turkey and Russia—not the United States or its European partners—could become the arbiters of Libya's future.

## **TURKEY'S ONLY FRIEND IN THE REGION**

**A**nkara's Libya policy stems from its isolation in the East Mediterranean, which has gradually worsened since the rupture of Turkish-Israeli ties in 2010 and Erdogan's regional policy miscalculations during the Arab Spring uprisings. On the latter front, his support for Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood in 2011-2012 cost him dearly after that government was ousted by mass protests and replaced with a military administration. And when he refused to recognize the subsequent government of President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi, he alienated powerful members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)—particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE, who supported Sisi and were deeply concerned about the role of the Brotherhood and other political Islamist movements in regional politics. (Qatar was the lone Gulf exception, actively working with Turkey to support Islamist political parties in the Middle East and form de facto alliances against Egypt, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia on various fronts.)

Meanwhile, Turkey's support for rebel groups in the Syria war put it at odds with Damascus and Iran, as well as Tehran's regional allies inside Lebanon and the Iraqi government. In short, Ankara's loss of regional partners was nearly total by the time Libya's civil war erupted in 2014, setting the stage for Turkey's turn to Tripoli.

At the time, Erdogan threw his support behind the Tripoli/Misratah-based "Dawn Coalition," which opposed Haftar's "Dignity Coalition." For their part, Egypt and the UAE were worried about the ascent of political Islam in Libya and eager to undermine Erdogan, so they quickly backed Haftar and his avowed "anti-Islamist, anti-terrorist" agenda. Among other assistance, they carried out airstrikes on his behalf.

Today, Cairo and Abu Dhabi have vastly increased their support to Haftar's latest offensives, including through Emirati drone-strike technology and operators. Turkey has sought to counter these moves by providing the GNA with drones of its own (though fewer than the UAE has given Haftar) as well as additional weapons and armored personnel carriers. As noted by a recent UN report, all of these multiparty weapons transfers have been conducted in blatant disregard of the Security Council's arms embargo in Libya.

## **COUNTERING THE EAST MED BLOC**

**T**urkey has recently found itself pitted against an emerging coalition of old and new adversaries across the East Mediterranean, mainly Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, and Israel. Given its cool-to-hostile relations with these states, Ankara is alarmed by the rate at which they have come together in strategic cooperation, including joint diplomatic, energy, and military initiatives.

Soon after coming to power, for example, Sisi opened talks with Greece to delineate their maritime economic areas. He then held a three-way summit in November 2014 to promote a deal for supplying natural gas to Egypt from undersea fields off the coast of Cyprus. Cairo also hosted the inaugural meeting of the East Mediterranean Gas Forum earlier this year, notably excluding Turkey.

On the military front, Egypt has been conducting joint air exercises with Greece since 2015. The first of these, "Medusa," was held on the Greek island of Rhodes just twelve miles from Turkey's coast. Cypriot forces began

participating in Medusa drills in 2018; separately, they carried out three rounds of joint exercises in Israel earlier this year.

Ankara's new maritime agreement with Tripoli was forged in part to counter such cooperation. The November 28 accord established a virtual maritime axis between Dalaman on Turkey's southwest coast and Darnah on Libya's northeast coast (far from the GNA's practical area of control). In Erdogan's view, drawing this line will allow him to cut into the emerging Cypriot-Egyptian-Greek-Israeli maritime bloc, while simultaneously pushing back against Egypt and the UAE's pressure on the GNA.

## POTENTIAL REPERCUSSIONS INSIDE LIBYA

**A**lthough Europe and the United States have warned the GNA that forming closer relations with Turkey would endanger its support in the West, authorities in Tripoli felt they had no alternative after eight months of renewed fighting. GNA military losses have increased due to Emirati drone strikes and Russian snipers, while conditions in the capital have worsened as tens of thousands of internally displaced persons seek refuge in Tripoli. (GNA supporters in Tripoli and Misratah constitute the majority of Libya's population, but Haftar and his eastern-based allies control substantially more territory.)

With Haftar showing no interest in political compromise and the international community doing little to pressure his foreign backers, the new Turkish-Libyan defense memorandum could help deter further escalation—particularly since Egypt does not want a military confrontation with Turkey. Further escalation in Libya could open the door to Ankara and Russia supplanting the West and the UN in the battle to determine Libya's future. Although Erdogan and Vladimir Putin currently back opposing sides in the civil war, their operational track record in Syria speaks volumes about their potential for reaching an understanding in Libya. The two leaders spoke about the Libya situation by phone on December 17, and Putin is scheduled to visit Turkey in January for a meeting focused specifically on that issue.

## CONCLUSION

**T**o date, the Trump administration has taken a back seat during Haftar's offensive. On November 13, it hosted two senior GNA officials in Washington and issued a joint statement opposing the LNA's military campaign. Yet when a U.S. delegation headed by Deputy National Security Advisor Victoria Coates met with Haftar in the region eleven days later, it issued no such public warning. Two weeks after that, Haftar declared that "Zero Hour has come" for Tripoli, and the LNA reinvigorated its offensive.

U.S. indecision regarding the battle for Tripoli has allowed the Russians to gain influence on the southern flank of NATO. It has also created another unnecessary friction point with Turkey, as well as between Ankara and other U.S. allies in the East Mediterranean. Washington now has a narrow window to prevent further violence in Libya and limit Moscow's influence there. To do so, it must fully back the German-led effort to convince all relevant outside parties—including Turkey and its regional rivals—to commit to a ceasefire and halt arms transfers. U.S. officials should also threaten to use existing sanctions authorities against violators of a ceasefire once it is signed.

Without U.S. participation, the Berlin initiative will falter as facts on the ground create more violence and stoke tensions between U.S. allies in the region. The best way to curb Moscow's interference is not by coopting Haftar, but rather by pushing his other backers, mainly the UAE and Egypt. These countries seek positive relations with Washington, and this desire should be used as leverage to extract their support for the Berlin process and a much-needed ceasefire.

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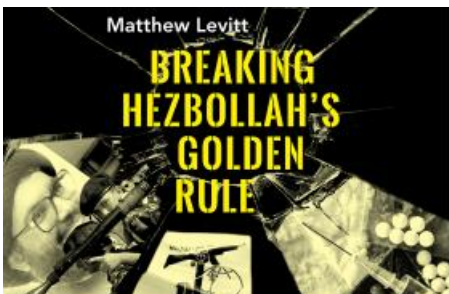
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