

Ceasefire or Escalation in Libya?

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After the fall of Sirte, Erdogan and Putin's desired ceasefire can only be achieved with Washington's support.

Over the past week, regional and European actors have increased their diplomatic activity around Libya in response to intensifying violence in the nine-month-old civil war. On January 8, less than a week after the Turkish parliament approved sending forces to support the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA), President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Russian leader Vladimir Putin met in Istanbul and called for a Libya ceasefire to begin on January 12. Whether or not Moscow and Ankara manage to pause the violence temporarily, their growing influence in Libya represents an epic failure of Western attempts to resolve the conflict diplomatically.

The longer-term effort to jumpstart Libya's political transition requires a wider international effort at peace and reconciliation—something Russia and Turkey can support but not lead. Putin and Erdogan seemed to acknowledge that fact at their summit, endorsing a long-planned multilateral conference in Berlin aimed at recommitting all relevant actors to support an end to hostilities and respect the UN Security Council's mandatory but widely ignored arms embargo. Even assuming Putin is serious and withdraws Russian mercenaries from the frontlines, a full, lasting ceasefire cannot transpire until the other actors who support Gen. Khalifa Haftar's so-called Libyan National Army (LNA) agree to withdraw their equipment and personnel for a fixed period while negotiations are launched—especially the United Arab Emirates, which provides the LNA with critical air superiority. At the same time, Turkey would have to take commensurate de-escalatory steps of its own.

The United States is the only actor that holds enough weight with all the foreign parties to bring about an authentic ceasefire. Despite being consumed with crises in Iran and Iraq, Washington should expend the diplomatic effort required to pursue durable stability in Libya before the country slips further toward endemic chaos.

CONSEQUENCES OF TURKEY'S INTERVENTION

Feeling pressure from the insertion of Russian private military contractors on Haftar's side in September, the GNA turned to Turkey, [its most reliable regional ally](#), for assistance in November. Previously, Ankara had provided GNA-aligned forces with armored vehicles and Bayraktar drones early in the civil war, but slowed their supply and operations over the summer. In late November, however, Turkey signed two controversial agreements with the GNA: a memorandum of understanding wherein Turkey agreed to provide military equipment, personnel, and training upon request, and a maritime agreement that delineated an exclusive economic zone extending both countries' territorial waters in the Mediterranean Sea, to the visceral outrage of Cyprus, Egypt, and Greece.

In December, the GNA requested direct military help on the basis of the defense memorandum, and Ankara made good on its pledge by approving troop deployments on January 2. The scope and mission of the Turkish intervention remain unclear—Erdogan stated on January 6 that his forces would play a coordinating and training role, emphasizing that they would not see combat. Meanwhile, Turkey has deployed militias from Syria to fight alongside the GNA, adding even more foreign fighters to the mix (Ankara denied sending them, but U.S. Embassy Tripoli, which currently operates from Tunis, confirmed their presence).

In addition to provoking significant political blowback from the European Union states that oppose Ankara's involvement, the drawn-out, high-profile nature of GNA-Turkish engagement has contributed to the recent military escalation. Haftar-aligned forces have increased their bombing attacks over the past few months, raising the death toll among civilians. They have also targeted the airports in Misratah and Tripoli, including a precision missile attack against a graduating unit of air cadets in formation that killed more than thirty. Most recently, they captured Sirte earlier this month after various Salafist brigades and pro-Qadhafi remnants changed their allegiance.

Sirte's fall is particularly galling because in 2016, the United States spent six months helping pro-GNA forces from Misratah evict the Islamic State from the city. Moreover, Sirte provides strategic depth for Misratah, so these same forces will now have to defend their hometown from the east, decreasing their ability to reinforce the GNA in Tripoli to the west.

MAKING A CEASEFIRE VIABLE

In the midst of all this military activity, the diplomatic tempo has increased. After visiting the new presidents of neighboring Tunisia and Algeria in recent weeks, GNA prime minister Fayez al-Sarraj traveled to Brussels on January 8, where EU High Representative Josep Borrell pledged “to guarantee the full implementation of practical measures to ensure a sustainable ceasefire and accompany the political process.” Borrell then issued a joint statement with the foreign ministers of Britain, France, Germany, and Italy calling for a ceasefire and a return to negotiations through a future conference in Berlin. The statement also condemned “unilateral agreements,” singling out the GNA-Turkish deal (though failing to mention the various informal arrangements that govern foreign support for Haftar).

Although the main European players now appear more united on Libya than in the past, achieving longer-term stability will entail persuading or pressuring all of Haftar’s external backers to stop supporting his offensive against Tripoli. Convincing Haftar alone would be challenging given his previous unwillingness to accept any form of political compromise with the GNA. But the difficulty is compounded when his primary supporters—the UAE and Egypt—remain just as obdurate as him. Indeed, Abu Dhabi and Cairo are wholly convinced that the internationally recognized GNA is beholden to “Islamist militias,” conveniently ignoring the significant Salafist elements among Haftar’s LNA. Erdogan’s support for the GNA only reinforces this view, since Emirati and Egyptian officials oppose the Turkish leader’s policies regionally and view him as a patron to their domestic Islamist rivals.

Accordingly, the UAE should be Washington’s starting point. Until Abu Dhabi pulls back its drones, operators, and other crucial military support, the prospects for Libya’s stability will remain dim. Besides the fact that they provide the greatest advantage to Haftar’s forces, focusing on the Emiratis also makes sense because the other foreign players currently have reasons to de-escalate on their own. Putin may now decide to [pull back Russia’s Wagner mercenaries](#), if only as a temporary measure to fulfill his deal with Erdogan and limit the prospects of Turkish-Russian clashes. Ankara has not yet fully committed its forces and could therefore limit their contributions, especially if it believes Tripoli is no longer under immediate threat (in Turkey’s view, the city’s fall would endanger [its strategic interests in the East Mediterranean](#) and broader Middle East). As for Egypt, it is unlikely to provide more support for Haftar in the Tripoli theater because its primary interest is to ensure the security of its border with Libya.

Only Washington can make the case to the UAE that adventurism in far-off North Africa is ill advised at a time of extraordinary crisis in the Persian Gulf, where Abu Dhabi should be focusing its resources on collective regional security. A U.S. diplomatic role would also give the Emiratis some assurance that their views will be taken seriously during negotiations.

At the same time, U.S. officials must be willing to call the UAE out for contributing to the escalation—something they have notably refused to do in past statements citing other belligerents. Likewise, Washington should help Abu Dhabi shift away from its zero-sum mentality about so-called Islamists in general, and Libya is a good place to start.

To reinforce these bilateral efforts, the administration should work with Russia to pass a UN Security Council resolution supporting a ceasefire. The Trump administration opposed this important measure last April and May, but it now has another opportunity to press for it given Putin’s own call for a ceasefire.

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