The Turkish Intervention in Libya

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Abstrakt

Denna FOI-rapport är en studie av Turkiets intervention i Libyen, vilken inleddes i slutet av 2019. Den redovisar bakgrunden till Libyenkonflikten och Turkiets politik, samt beskriver och analyserar Ankaras inblandning i kriget sedan 2011. I centrum för analysen står Turkiets syften och intressen, liksom de medel och handlingssätt som nyttjats. Rapporten föreslår därutöver vissa slutsatser om interventionens effekter i Libyen och på Turkiets framtida politik. Rapporten finner att Turkiets intervention förefaller ha motiverats av framför allt geopolitiska/ideologiska och i andra hand ekonomiska faktorer, samt att den förlitat sig på en innovativ blandning av konventionella och okonventionella medel, inklusive syriska legosoldater stödda av turkiska drönare. Interventionen har allmänt sett varit en framgång för Turkiet, som har konsoliderat sitt inflytande som en av de huvudsakliga externa aktörerna i Libyen, slagit ett slag mot sina utländska rivaler, säkrat ett fördelaktigt havsrättsligt avtal med Tripoli och skapat möjligheter till framtida ekonomiska förtjänster. Situationen i Libyen förblir emellertid riskabel och instabil, och kostnaderna för Turkiet kan komma att växa över tid.

Nyckelord: Egypten, Förenade arabemiraten, havsrätt, inbördeskrig, konflikt, intervention, legosoldater, Libyen, libyska inbördeskriget, Medelhavet, miliser, militärintervention, Nordafrika, Qatar, Ryssland, Syrien, Turkiet, UNCLOS

Abstract

This FOI report is a case study of Turkey's intervention in Libya, launched in late 2019 and early 2020. In addition to offering a general background on the Libyan conflict and Turkish policy, it describes and analyses Ankara's involvement in the war since 2011. The core of the analysis is an investigation of Turkey's aims and interests as well as the means and actions it has deployed. The report also suggests certain conclusions about the effects on Libya and on Turkish foreign policy. The report finds that Turkey's intervention is likely to have been motivated by factors that were primarily geopolitical/ideological and secondarily economic in nature, and that it utilised an innovative combination of conventional and unconventional means, including the deployment of Syrian mercenaries backed by Turkish drones. By and large, the intervention has been a success for Turkey, allowing it to cement its influence as a primary external actor in Libya, deal a blow to foreign competitors, secure a favourable maritime agreement with Tripoli, and set the scene for a potential future economic payoff. The situation in Libya remains risky and unstable, however, and the costs to Turkey may grow over time.

Keywords: Civil War, Conflict, Egypt, Intervention, Law of the Sea, Libya, Libyan Civil War, Mediterranean Sea, Mercenaries, Militias, Military Intervention, North Africa, Qatar, Russia, Syria, Turkey, UNCLOS, United Arab Emirates

Executive Summary

In late 2019 and early 2020, Turkey intervened militarily in Libya, to support an embattled UN-recognised government in Tripoli against the forces of Khalifa Heftar, based in the country's eastern regions. The Turkish intervention successfully turned the war around. By mid-2020 the frontlines had stabilised, and as the country's UN-led peace process resumed, a new unity government was formed in Tripoli. Within this government, too, Turkey came to exercise a powerful influence.

This FOI report looks at the role played by Turkey in Libya since the start of its civil war in 2011, the interests that led the Turkish government to intervene, and the methods used to pursue those interests. It contextualises the Turkish role in Libya by describing the background to the Libyan conflict and Turkey's evolving foreign policy. In a final chapter, it looks at the results of the Turkish intervention and its likely consequences for Turkey's foreign policy behaviour going forward.

Libya has been without a functioning central state since the foreign-backed toppling of Moammar al-Gaddafi's regime in 2011. Militias, Islamist groups, and tribal fighters have filled the space vacated by Gaddafi's dictatorship, creating a turbulent, fragmented environment in which foreign actors meddle incessantly. Since approximately 2014–16, the country has been roughly divided between two major constellations of militias and political actors. One has been centred in Tripoli and other western cities, enjoyed UN recognition, and relied on the support of Turkey, Qatar, and several Western nations. The other, led by Heftar, has been based in eastern cities like Benghazi and Tobruk, backed by the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Russia, and France. Over time, Turkey came to be the dominant supporter of the west-Libyan camp, escalating its involvement incrementally to match its opponents. When its Libyan partners were at risk of defeat in 2019, Turkey decided to gamble on an overt intervention, which has successfully preserved and even expanded Turkish influence.

The Libya intervention would be difficult to imagine, had not Turkey's own foreign policy changed so dramatically over the past decade. Deeply embroiled in the Middle East's post-Arab Spring feuding, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has opted for tough hard-power tactics and bullish nationalism. Through fighting in Syria and deal-making with Russia, Erdoğan has sought to fend off Middle Eastern threats and rivals, expand Turkey's influence, and raise the status of his government to that of a serious regional power. After suffering a coup attempt in 2016, Erdoğan purged his government and doubled down on his transformation of Turkish politics, both domestic and foreign.

The aims and interests driving Turkey's engagement with Libya, and eventually leading it to intervene militarily, are manifold. No single explanation suffices, but a combination of geopolitical, political-ideological, and economic interests have collectively served to draw Turkey into Libya. These include Erdoğan's quest for

prestige and regional power; Turkey's involvement in a complex set of Middle Eastern proxy wars; the power games played by Erdoğan and Vladimir Putin, the president of Russia; Turkey's hopes of building leverage over the EU; and the special role that Libya can play in underwriting Turkey's claim on vast swathes of the eastern Mediterranean Sea. Erdoğan's own political ideas and the Islamist and nationalist tastes of his political base have also played a role, though domestic factors seem to matter less than geopolitics. With time, however, Turkey has become more focused on potential economic gains. Gaddafi's fall interrupted Turkish business in Libya to the tune of $19 billion; Turkish companies now seek to recover that money, and hope that oil-rich Libya will retain their services in a post-conflict reconstruction phase.

In support of these interests, Turkey has used an array of different means. The military campaign relied on an unconventional recipe first developed during Turkey's post-2016 interventions in Syria: a combination of Turkish special forces and advisors, Syrian proxy fighters brought in with the assistance of a government-linked mercenary company, and Turkish military drones. In the winter of 2019–20, this unusual mix of assets and capabilities was deployed overseas in Libya. Turkey also sent significant quantities of arms and equipment to its local partners, helped them set up training camps, and took charge of planning. Last but not least, it deployed aerial and naval assets to assist with radar surveillance, reconnaissance flights, and modern air defence systems – big-ticket military items that would normally be far beyond the reach of militia fighters.

In addition to the military side of the intervention, Turkey has provided its Libyan partners with diplomatic and political support. In cooperation with its Qatari ally, it has launched a media campaign unfolding across several formats and languages, including in Turkish, English, and Arabic. What Turkey has not offered its Libyan allies, however, is serious economic support. This seeming omission likely reflects Turkey's stressed financial situation, as well as Libya's ability to self-fund and even pay for assistance, but it also hints at Ankara's long-term ambition to make the Libyan war carry its own costs.

In sum, the report finds that Turkey's intervention was swift, innovative, and effective, up to a point. Pitted against Heftar's powerful backers, including Russia, the Turkish military faces hard limits on what it can do offensively, and Ankara's political influence is not enough to carry the conflict to a negotiated resolution. While Turkey has so far benefitted from the status quo, and is now likely to dig down further and seek permanent military bases, the conflict itself may drag on indefinitely. Worryingly, from a Turkish military perspective, Erdoğan has failed to formulate a clear endgame. As time passes, Turkey may well face mission creep and blurred objectives; and in a crisis, its armed forces could find that they are exposed, hard to supply, and stretched thin by straddling a few too many conflicts. Another source of worry is what the Libyan deployment tells us about the Erdoğan government's growing appetite for unilateral action and risk. Having succeeded in

Libya, Turkey may well be tempted to try its new trick in other crises, whether that be in Cyprus, Iraq, or Bosnia.

Abbreviations

AKP	*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*: Justice and Development Party
EEZ	Exclusive Economic Zone
EU	European Union
FSA	Free Syrian Army
GNA	Government of National Accord (2015–21)
GNS	Government of National Salvation (2014–15)
GNU	Government of National Unity (2021–)
HoR	House of Representatives
LAAF	Libyan Arab Armed Forces (Heftar)
MHP	*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*: National Action Party
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
PKK	*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê:* Kurdistan Workers' Party
SNA	Syrian National Army
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UN	United Nations
UNSCR	UN Security Council resolution
UNSMIL	United Nations Support Mission in Libya
USA	United States of America

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1 Introduction

In late 2019, Turkey surprised the world by dispatching military forces to Libya, a country mired in civil war since the NATO-led toppling of its long-time dictator Moammar al-Gaddafi in 2011. The intervention, which took the side of a UN-recognised but brittle government in Tripoli, was a bold gamble by Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and a watershed moment in the Libyan conflict. By intervening, Turkey managed to protect the Tripoli government and its militia allies from defeat at the hands of a rival, east-Libyan coalition, while also cementing its influence across western Libya. In summer 2020, Turkish-Russian talks facilitated a new stalemate on terms more favourable to Turkey and its client forces than before the intervention, and paved the way for a resumption of UN-led peace talks. Even so, a solution to the conflict is nowhere in sight.

This FOI report is a case study of Turkey's geopolitical manoeuvring and the methods it has used to intervene in Libya. It follows, and has benefitted from, earlier FOI research on Libya, Turkey, Mediterranean security, and external powers in Africa.[1]

The topic is highly relevant to our understanding of eastern Mediterranean and Middle Eastern/North African security dynamics; to our understanding of the conflict in Libya and its likely future evolution; and to our understanding of the evolving foreign policy trajectory of Turkey, a country of critical importance to Europe, the Middle East, Russia, and the NATO alliance.

The report seeks to accomplish the following:

Primarily, it will describe and analyse *why* and *how* Turkey has intervened in the Libyan civil war, by investigating (a) Turkey's aims and interests in Libya and (b) the means and actions deployed by the Turkish government in pursuit of those aims and interests.

Secondarily, it will seek to draw some tentative conclusions about the intervention's effect on Libya and on Turkish foreign policy going forward.

In addition, it will provide a general background on Libya, the Libyan war, and various aspects of Turkish foreign policy, for context and to benefit readers without previous experience of these topics, as well as to facilitate future FOI research.

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[1] Including, but not limited to: Lindvall & Forssman 2012; Eriksson 2015; Eriksson & Bohman 2018; Gasinska (ed.) 2019; Hammargren 2019; Lund 2020; Lund 2021.

Serveta (FOI) for editing and designing the report; John Rydqvist (FOI) for reviewing a draft version; and Elin Hellquist (head of FOI's African Studies Programme) for assisting and overseeing the production of the report.

1.1 Scope and sources

The report studies Turkish policy towards Libya from the start of the 2011 conflict. It is primarily focused on the 2019–20 period, when Turkey escalated its intervention. Events after 31 December 2021 have not been considered.

The investigation has relied exclusively on openly published sources, including official documents, print and online media, books, academic papers, and policy/think tank reports, primarily in English and Arabic but to a lesser extent also in French, Russian, and Swedish. Although the author has benefitted from informal conversations with experts on Turkey, the Middle East, and Libya, no interview material has been utilised in this report.

Reporting on the Libyan conflict is greatly influenced and distorted by contested political narratives, propaganda, and disinformation. The author has sought to address this problem by utilising, as far as possible, UN reporting and other credible official sources, and by cross-checking claims against sources of a rival political tendency.

The above-described approach has presented some difficulties. The most obvious problem is the absence of original Turkish-language source material, for the simple reason that the author does not speak Turkish. English-language Turkish media compensates to a degree, particularly in outlining official views. However, the author wishes to acknowledge that the lack of Turkish language sources has been a significantly limiting factor, preventing access to general news coverage, investigative journalism, and official documents from Turkey itself.

1.2 Disposition

This report consists of five chapters:

Chapter 1 consists of this introductory section, with notes on methodology, sourcing, and so on.

Chapter 2 contains background on the Libyan conflict and the role of external actors. It begins with a very brief survey of Libya's modern history and the Gaddafi era (2.1), continues with a description of events during the post-2011 period up until 2019 (2.2), and closes by describing the intensified foreign intervention in 2019–20, especially by Turkey and Russia, and the period that followed (2.3).

Chapter 3 describes Turkey's foreign policy under President Erdoğan, with special sections on Turkey's relationship with certain Middle Eastern actors (3.1) and with Russia (3.2).

Chapter 4 looks at Turkey's involvement in Libya since 2011, first by providing a general overview (4.1), then by analysing Turkish aims and interests (4.2), and finally by describing the means and actions used to achieve them (4.3).

Chapter 5 summarises findings and offers a brief forward-looking analysis.

To assist the reader, a chronological timeline of major events in Libya has been included in the final section of the report.

2 The Libyan war and the role of external actors

In early 2011, an uprising erupted in Libya against its long-ruling authoritarian leader Moammar al-Gaddafi, inspired by protests in neighbouring Tunisia and Egypt. Despite its great oil and gas wealth, Libya was poorly equipped to handle the disruptive effects of such a sudden popular mobilisation. The crisis immediately degenerated into a country-wide civil war, which triggered a foreign intervention. Gaddafi's fall and death, later that year, effectively ended the Libyan central state and left a power vacuum. Since then, Libya has been without any effective national leadership capable of demobilising wartime militias, contain local and tribal feuding, or protect against external interference.

The continued infighting, along with foreign meddling, produced an east-west split between rival cabinets and blocs of militias in 2014. The authorities and factions in western Libyan cities like Tripoli and Misrata were backed primarily by Turkey, Qatar, and Western nations, while the authorities in Benghazi, Tobruk, and other parts of eastern Libya enjoyed support from the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Russia, and France. (For an overview of the wider region, see Map 1; for a map of Libya, see Map 2.)

The conflict facilitated the growth of radical Islamist factions, which gained initial popularity by tackling crime, corruption, and predatory militias. A surge of Islamic State influence was crushed with the assistance of foreign special forces and air strikes in 2016–17.

The increased involvement of Russia and Turkey on opposite sides of the conflict after 2018 escalated the fighting and cemented foreign influence over Libya's factions. Following a dramatic mutual escalation in 2019, which culminated in Turkey's military intervention, a new balance emerged that facilitated a ceasefire and a resumption of the UN-led peace process. Despite the relative peace and calm that has reigned since mid-2020, however, Libya remains divided, dysfunctional, and unstable. Virtually no progress had been achieved on the political track by the end of 2021, and the elections that had been planned to reunify Libyan state institutions failed to materialise. There is a significant risk of relapse into partial or full-scale armed conflict in 2022.

Map 1. Libya, Turkey, and the wider region. Source: Per Wikström (FOI).

2.1 Historical background and the Gaddafi era (1951–2011)

A former Italian colony, Libya was scarred by brutal colonial practices, underdeveloped, and extremely poor at independence in 1951. The discovery of oil later that decade paved the way for rapid development from the 1960s and 1970s onward, creating a typical rentier economy in which the state doled out support and patronage to control the population.

Libya's first ruler, King Idriss, was deposed in 1969 by a military junta headed by Moammar al-Gaddafi. In power, Gaddafi proved to be an eccentric and volatile leader, and he ruled in a highly authoritarian fashion. His foreign policy included overt and covert sponsorship of a variety of militant groups, which prompted US retaliatory bombings of Libya in 1986 and made the UN impose sanctions from 1992 to 2003. After curtailing its foreign policy and making a series of concessions, Gaddafi's regime was partially rehabilitated in the early '00s.[2] By the end of the decade, however, years of economic mismanagement, corruption, and

[2] On Libya's pre-2011 history, see St John 2008.

dictatorship had left Libya in a depleted state and created simmering popular frustration with Gaddafi's four-decade rule.

Protests erupted in eastern Libya in mid-February 2011, as part of the Arab Spring uprisings. They were met by a violent crackdown, but quickly gained the support of defecting military personnel. As Libya lapsed into civil war, the UN Security Council imposed an arms embargo and passed resolution 1973, which, among other things, authorised member states to "take all necessary measures" to protect Libyan civilians "excluding a foreign occupation force".[3]

In mid-March 2011, several NATO members and Arab and other states began to conduct air strikes in Libya, with the United States, France, and the United Kingdom in lead roles. (Sweden conducted aerial reconnaissance and provided other nonlethal support.) NATO assumed operational leadership of the intervention in April.[4]

The intervention did not include ground troops, and instead sought to empower Libyan armed actors. International efforts to fund, arm, and train local rebels were hampered, however, by the incoherent nature of Libya's insurgency and by rivalries among its foreign backers. A longstanding and toxic dispute between Qatar and Turkey, on the one hand, and the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, on the other, would prove especially damaging.

In August 2011, rebels overran the Libyan capital, Tripoli. Gaddafi was captured and killed on 20 October near Sirte, as the last pockets of loyalist resistance crumbled. NATO wrapped up its operations soon after, on 31 October.[5]

2.2 Instability and conflict (2011–19)

The fall of Gaddafi's regime sent shockwaves through the region. Libya's large stockpiles of Cold War-era Soviet arms proliferated to a variety of guerrilla and insurgent groups, contributing significantly to the collapse of Mali in early 2012 and empowering a jihadist insurgency across the Sahel.[6] Even so, external interest in Libya faded quickly after the end of major hostilities. Post-war preparations consisted of little more than a UN mission, the United Nations Support Mission for Libya (UNSMIL), which had been created in September 2011 to "support the country's new transitional authorities in their post-conflict efforts".[7]

[3] UN S/2011/1973.
[4] Lindvall & Forssman 2012.
[5] NATO 2011.
[6] Munshi 2021. In 2021, rebels operating out of Libya killed the president of Chad. See Bobin 2021.
[7] UNSMIL was originally established through the Security Council's resolution 2009 (2011). Its mandate was later renewed and amended to support intra-Libyan political/military mediation through resolutions 2022 (2011), 2040 (2012), 2095 (2013), 2144 (2014), 2238 (2015), 2323 (2016), 2376 (2017), 2434 (2018), 2486 (2019), 2542 (2020), and 2595 (2021).

In practice, all post-Gaddafi authorities were hopelessly weak and ineffective. Their centrepiece was the National Transitional Council, an opposition body hastily assembled at the start of the uprising. Though buoyed by international recognition and, at least initially, considerable domestic legitimacy, it exercised no real power over the hundreds of militia factions that had sprouted during the conflict. With UNSMIL support, the council managed to prepare elections that produced a new government in summer 2012. But the new government was equally incapable of governing the country or assuming control of security.

The regional situation contributed to Libya's problems. Post-Arab Spring regional tensions had continued to build, pitting an Islamist-friendly, pro-revolutionary bloc around Qatar and Turkey against the status quo-oriented governments in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (see 3.1). In 2013, a coup d'état saw Libya's largest neighbour, Egypt, flip from the Qatari-Turkish camp to the Saudi-Emirati one, through the ouster of a Muslim Brotherhood government at the hands of then-defence minister Abdelfattah al-Sisi.[8] The coup reverberated across the region, empowering anti-Islamist opponents of the Turkey-Qatar axis, while feeding Islamist fears of a foreign-backed, secular power grab in Libya, too. It contributed greatly to Libya's descent into renewed civil war.[9]

Libya's 'second civil war' and east-west polarisation

The constant interference by rival Middle Eastern powers sharpened the polarisation of Libyan politics. In 2014, the country's brittle political institutions splintered to create two opposing systems, each with its own geographic base and aligned with a different set of foreign-backed powerbrokers.

- One group of politicians and militias was based mainly in western Libya, including in Tripoli and Misrata. In 2014, a Government of National Salvation (GNS) was created in Tripoli. The Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist factions played a prominent role within this camp, and its leaders sought to claim the revolutionary legacy of the 2011 uprising. Collectively, these groups enjoyed strong support from Qatar and Turkey and, for a time, Sudan.[10]
- Another set of politicians and militias was centred in eastern Libya, including in Benghazi and Tobruk, although it also incorporated forces from the Zintan area in western Libya. The most prominent figures in this bloc were Khalifa Heftar, a military officer who styled himself commander of the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF), and Aguila Saleh, speaker of the Tobruk-based House of Representatives, elected in June 2014. Although this group, too, had its roots in the 2011 uprising, it included ex-regime

[8] Lynch 2016, pp. 157ff.
[9] *Ibid*., pp. 183–5; Wehrey 2018, pp. 165–6.
[10] Sudan's policy on Libya shifted in the following years. Gallopin 2020.

elements. Moreover, it was clearly aligned with the "counter-revolutionary" bloc in regional politics: the United Arab Emirates, Sisi's Egypt, and, to a lesser extent, Saudi Arabia and Jordan. Russia and France would eventually also embrace the east-Libyan camp.

In early 2014, Heftar launched what he termed an anti-terrorist operation in eastern Libya, attacking Islamist groups accused of having ties to militant jihadists and/or to Turkey and Qatar. In so doing, he consolidated local power and attracted foreign support for what would soon reveal itself as a bid for national power.[11]

Egypt's President Sisi, whose 2013 coup had served as a source of inspiration for Heftar and his backers, viewed the presence of Muslim Brotherhood-aligned groups with Turkish and Qatari backing on Egypt's western border as a national security threat. From 2014 onward, Egypt worked with its close partner the United Arab Emirates to support Heftar's ambitions.[12] The reasons for Abu Dhabi's hard-line stance were of a more indirect nature: a fear of domino effects and ideological contagion across the region.[13] In these regional feuds, Heftar's alignment was clear and explicit. In June 2014, for example, he ordered all Turkish and Qatari citizens to leave eastern Libya, accusing the two states of sponsoring "terrorism".[14]

The spiral of violence set in motion in 2014 was of a different order of magnitude compared to the diffuse, small-scale, militia-driven ferment of the 2012–13 period. The post-2014 period saw higher levels of violence, larger and more clearly delineated militia constellations, a more distinct institutional and territorial split, and considerably more intense foreign interventions than at any point since 2011. Some observers consequently depict 2014 as the starting point of Libya's "second civil war", distinct from the anti-Gaddafi conflict in 2011 as well as from the lower-level unrest of the intervening years.[15]

Despite Emirati and Egyptian air strikes, the Heftar-led LAAF campaign to seize Tripoli from the GNS and its militia allies failed to reach its goals.[16] As neither side was able to overpower the other, and with foreign interest in Libya rekindled by the crisis and by the rise of the Islamic State (see below), the focus shifted back to diplomacy.

In December 2015, UNSMIL-backed negotiations in Skhirat, Morocco, produced an agreement on reunifying the political system. A so-called Government of National Accord (GNA) was seated in Tripoli the following spring, led by Prime

[11] Wehrey 2020, p. 17.
[12] Lynch 2016, pp. 183–8.
[13] Wehrey 2018, pp. 192–5; Harchaoui 2021a.
[14] *Al-Arab* 2014.
[15] E.g. Eriksson 2015; Eriksson & Bohman 2018.
[16] Wehrey 2018, pp. 192–3.

Minister Fayez al-Serraj. As a product of the UN process, the GNA won broad international legitimacy, including from the United States and the EU.[17]

Real unity would nonetheless prove elusive. After some manoeuvring, the GNA successfully replaced the GNS, but its influence remained limited even inside the capital. Serraj's position rested on alliances with local militias, but he exercised no genuine control over the major armed groups and continued to struggle against unrest and opposition. Most importantly, the GNA failed to extend its writ over Heftar's LAAF and other groups in eastern Libya, and could not get its cabinet legitimised by the House of Representatives, which, as an elected institution, also enjoyed some international legitimacy. The majority of the House, which had fled to Tobruk, chose instead to support Heftar.

In practice, then, the 2015 Skhirat agreement produced only a reconfiguration of Libya's divided political landscape.[18]

The Islamic State challenge

In 2014–15, Sirte and other parts of central Libya fell under the influence of the Islamic State, a transnational jihadist group also known as IS, ISIS, ISIL, or Daesh. The group's Libyan wing incorporated both local extremists and hardened fighters returning from the war in Syria.[19]

Partly in response to the new threat but also to attract foreign support and forestall rival advances, both of the major Libyan blocs went to war against the group. By 2016, they had received foreign support in the form of air strikes and US and European special forces on the ground. In a sign of what was to come, British special forces deployed with the loosely GNA-aligned Misrata militias, while US troops worked out of both Tripoli and Misrata and to a lesser extent LAAF-held Benghazi, but French forces based themselves in LAAF territory.[20]

The combined effect was too much to handle for the jihadists, and, by the end of that year, the Islamic State's Libya wing had been decimated.[21] The group has subsequently "continued to decline", especially after the killing of its leader in 2020.[22]

[17] US Department of State 2016.
[18] Fitzgerald & Toaldo 2016.
[19] Wehrey & Alrababa'h 2015.
[20] Elumami 2016; Barluet 2016; Ryan 2016; Loyd & Philp 2016; Tomašević & Torbati 2016.
[21] Zelin 2019.
[22] UN S/2021/98, p. 5.

Multi-sided foreign intervention

As the jihadist menace receded, so did Western interest in Libya. Yet the country's domestic conflict remained unresolved, and it was now deeply entwined with regional-level feuds.

Although Qatar's role in Libya had receded somewhat, it remained an important partner of the west-Libyan camp. Turkey, too, temporarily scaled back its involvement with the conflict after the 2015–16 creation of the GNA.[23] However, Ankara retained influence through well-established contacts in the Muslim Brotherhood-/Islamist milieu and in Misrata (see 4.2.2), and its involvement soon intensified again. With time, Turkey came to be seen as the west-Libyan camp's primary external patron.

Meanwhile, the United Arab Emirates doubled down on its support for Heftar, emerging as his primary sponsor. Egypt also continued to favour Heftar, but cultivated even stronger ties to his Tobruk-based ally, House of Representatives Speaker Aguila Saleh. Drawing on this support, the LAAF was able to pick off pockets of dissidence and expand territorially. By summer 2017, Heftar had crushed Islamist and pro-GNA resistance in Benghazi and other eastern areas.

The United States maintained some involvement with Libya in this period, supporting peace efforts and counterterrorist campaigns. Its influence was hampered, however, by the unpredictable twists and turns in US policy during the Donald J. Trump administration, from January 2017 to January 2021. Although the US State Department remained committed to the UN process and recognised the GNA, Trump at times indicated support for Heftar, possibly influenced by Emirati contacts.

Heftar also began to attract increasing support from Russia, which was generally favourable to Emirati and Egyptian influence and to their policy in Libya.[24] In early 2017, Russia publicised its alignment with Heftar by inviting him aboard the aircraft carrier *Admiral Kuznetsov* as it returned from Syria, to discuss "pressing issues in the fight against international terrorist groups" with Russian defence minister Sergei Shoigu, over video link.[25]

Beginning in the second half of 2018, Heftar's forces started to receive hands-on support from the Wagner Group, a Russian private military contractor with strong ties to Moscow's military and intelligence establishment. UN investigators have concluded that Wagner Group staff began to operate in Libya in October 2018, initially to service and repair Russian-manufactured armoured vehicles.[26] In November of that year, Heftar was invited to Moscow to meet Shoigu in person.

[23] Wehrey 2020, p. 20.
[24] *Ibid.*, pp. 21–2.
[25] *Reuters* 2017.
[26] UN S/2021/229, p. 32.

He also met the Kremlin-linked businessman Yevgeny Prigozhin, who is said to own or control the Wagner Group. A few months later, Prigozhin visited Benghazi.[27] Over time, the Wagner Group would expand its activities to include assistance with equipping and training the LAAF, acting in combat support roles, handling air defence, and providing intelligence.[28]

The Wagner Group's services were widely believed to have been financed by the United Arab Emirates, but the company was nonetheless seen as an instrument of Russian foreign policy.[29] At the same time, Moscow maintained contact with the GNA and lobbied for the interests of surviving members of the Gaddafi family, including the dictator's son Seifelislam al-Gaddafi. Official Russian policy was to work with all relevant actors in Libya.[30]

European influence on Libya remained limited in the second part of the 2010s, in large part due to the EU's unwillingness and inability to provide ground-level, hands-on support for Libya's major armed groups, but also because influential European nations pulled in different directions. EU policy as a whole was pro-GNA, but nations closely involved with the dossier pursued their own interests with limited regard for the Brussels consensus. Most notably, France aligned with its regional partner, the United Arab Emirates, to promote Heftar's interests, even while paying lip service to the EU line.[31]

2.3 Intensified intervention (2019–21)

Starting in 2019, rival Russian and Turkish interventions prompted successive waves of escalation in Libya. Although the ground-level conflict ultimately resumed a version of its former shape, with a semi-stable main frontline drawn roughly down the country's middle, the events of 2019–20 stimulated political recalibrations and jolted the peace process back into action. Most importantly, the international context changed by drawing Libya into a Russian-Turkish "great game" that plays out across several theatres – Libya, Syria, and the South Caucasus.

Foreign-backed LAAF escalation in 2019

Capitalising on foreign support and weak local opposition, Heftar's forces gradually expanded their reach after consolidating power in eastern Libya, including by seizing several towns in the sparsely populated desert interior.

[27] *Ibid.*, p. 428.
[28] Jones *et al.* 2021, pp. 42–5.
[29] Wehrey 2020, p. 28; Rondeaux *et al.* 2021.
[30] Ghanemi 2018; Wehrey 2020, p. 29.
[31] Bobin *et al.* 2019.

In early April 2019, Heftar launched an attack into the heartland of the GNA, aiming to conquer Tripoli and finish the conflict. The initial offensive appears to have been assisted mainly by the United Arab Emirates, although Egypt, France, and Russia remained supportive of Heftar.[32] Among other things, Abu Dhabi boosted LAAF capabilities by providing advanced weaponry, including *Pantsir* S1, a modern Russian-manufactured air defence system, the older American-made MIM-23 *Hawk* system, and *Wing Loong* II, a modern Chinese-produced drone.[33]

After a string of early successes, the offensive bogged down and settled into a war of attrition, in which Heftar "struggled to maintain long supply lines through territory that he controlled only nominally".[34] The stopping of the offensive was in part due to Turkey's swift and aggressive response. Fearing a GNA collapse, Ankara had ramped up its covert involvement and dispatched military advisors and new weaponry, including domestically-produced armoured vehicles and *Bayraktar* TB2 drones. (See 4.3.1.)

After a period of unproductive, stalemated fighting, Heftar regained the initiative in autumn 2019, aided by the attrition of Turkey's drone force and a new injection of foreign support.[35] It was at this point that Wagner Group mercenaries deployed in a direct combat role for the first time.[36] UN investigators estimated that some 800 to 1200 Wagner Group operatives had been sent to Libya to engage in "specialized military tasks such as acting as artillery forward observation officers and forward air controllers, providing electronic counter-measures expertise and deploying as sniper teams."[37]

This second wave of Russian military support appears to have produced an immediate effect, allowing the LAAF to put severe pressure on the pro-GNA forces and threaten the Libyan capital.

Turkey intervenes, 2019–20

On 26 November 2019, a GNA delegation led by Prime Minister Fayez al-Serraj, Foreign Minister Mohammed al-Taher Siyyala, and Interior Minister Fathi Bashagha arrived in Istanbul to sign two memoranda of understanding with the Turkish government. The first memorandum was about the delimitation of maritime boundaries in the Mediterranean (see 4.2.1) while the second concerned military cooperation.[38]

[32] For example, France vetoed EU action against Heftar. Baczynska & Guarascio 2019.
[33] UN S/2019/914, pp. 28–9, 270–2, 293–5.
[34] Megerisi 2020, p. 6.
[35] Wehrey 2020, p. 28.
[36] UN S/2021/229, pp. 436–41.
[37] *Ibid.*, p. 32.
[38] Turkish Presidency 2020, p. 33–8.

Quietly assured of Ankara's approval, Serraj then asked several foreign governments to intervene militarily in defence of the GNA, including Turkey, the United States, the United Kingdom, Algeria, and Italy.[39] As expected, only Turkey responded to the call, having already prepared the ground through the new military cooperation memorandum. A troop build-up began in December, and the parliament in Ankara approved an official deployment on 2 January 2020.

In the space of a few months, thousands of Turkish-commanded Syrian mercenaries arrived in Libya alongside an infusion of advisors, trainers, special forces, and military equipment, including armoured personnel carriers, artillery, unmanned aircraft, and surface-to-air systems, complemented by the arrival of warships to secure maritime supply lines and provide sea-based air defences. As the GNA went back on the offensive, Turkish personnel operating *Bayraktar* TB2 drones unleashed a wave of precision air strikes.[40] (For details on the Turkish intervention, see 4.3.1.)

Faced with this firepower, Heftar's position crumbled. Over the following months, LAAF fighters withdrew from the Tripoli frontline to Sirte, which they had recently seized from the Misratan militias that ousted the Islamic State in 2016. The Wagner contractors also redeployed to avoid being caught up in the fighting; after their retreat, they began to mine and fortify a new, central-Libyan defensive line through Sirte and Jufra.[41]

Russian-Egyptian escalatory signalling, 2020

Concerned that a GNA breakthrough in central Libya could fundamentally alter the balance in the conflict, both Russia and Egypt changed their posture to prepare for serious counter-escalation, while warning Turkey to withhold support for any offensive against the Sirte-Jufra line.

Starting in January 2020, several sources began reporting that demobilised anti-Assad rebels were being recruited as mercenary fighters in Syria by the Wagner Group.[42] Russia also dramatically increased the pace of military cargo flights to Libya. Arriving via the Russian Hmeymim Air Base in Syria, military transport aircraft, including *Ilyushin* Il-76 and *Tupolev* Tu-154, increased their pace of travel to LAAF-controlled sites in eastern Libya during summer 2020. According to UN data, the traffic shot up from an average of 26 monthly flights in January, February, and March 2020 to a peak of 93 flights in August.[43]

[39] ICG 2020, p. 4.
[40] UN S/2019/914, pp. 296–9.
[41] Al-Hawari 2021, pp. 25.
[42] UN S/2021/229, pp. 269–73, 441–4.
[43] *Ibid.*, pp. 219–24.

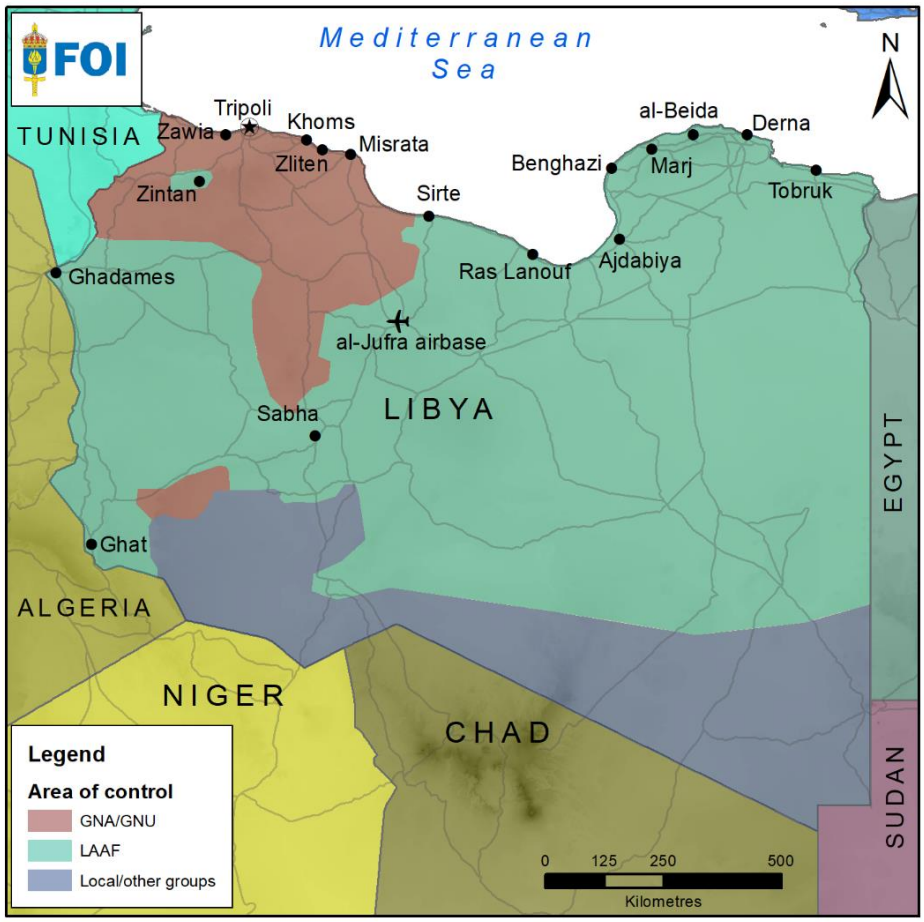
In May, a number of unmarked *Sukhoi* Su-24 and *Mikoyan* MiG-29 jets arrived from Hmeymim to Jufra.[44] A UN analysis determined that some of the MiG-29 airframes appeared to be Syrian in origin, possibly representing a switch whereby Syria had been compensated with newer-production MiG-29s from Russia for its own air force.[45]

In June, Sisi added his weight to the escalatory signalling, by warning that "Sirte and Jufra are a red line" and having the rubber-stamp parliament in Cairo pre-authorise an Egyptian military intervention.[46]

Faced with the threat of a Russian- and Egyptian-backed LAAF counter-offensive, the Turkey-led GNA campaign ground to a halt, thereby freezing the conflict along approximately the lines seen on Map 2. As the war settled into a sort of de facto truce from June 2020 onward, with minimal fighting, attention shifted back to the political and diplomatic sphere.

[44] Iddon 2021; Nichols 2020; US Africa Command 2020a; US Africa Command 2020b; UN S/2021/229, pp. 149–50.
[45] UN S/2021/229, p. 149.
[46] *Al-Masry Al-Youm* 2020; Hendawi 2020.

Map 2. Approximate situation in Libya in 2021. Source: Per Wikström (FOI) and liveuamap.com.



Restarting the peace process

On 23 October 2020, an UNSMIL-brokered ceasefire came into effect.[47] The following month, the UN brought together representatives of the warring parties in Tunisia, in the framework of the so-called Libyan Political Dialogue Forum. The outcome was an agreement for the creation of yet another unity cabinet, tasked with leading Libya to nationwide elections on 24 December 2021.

Somewhat to everyone's surprise, the continued negotiations did in fact produce a new cabinet, labelled the Government of National Unity (GNU). Its central figure was Prime Minister Abdelhamid al-Dbeibah, a well-connected Misratan business-man with ties to the former Gaddafi government, the Misratan militias, Turkey,

[47] UNSMIL 2020a.

Qatar, and to an extent also Russia.[48] Alarmingly, however, the GNU leadership did not include a similarly strong representative of eastern Libya or the LAAF's core constituencies. In the words of French expert Jalel Harchaoui, the GNU's eastern-born president, Mohammed Younes al-Menfi, was "known for little other than his failure to cheer [Heftar]'s various offensives since 2014" and had "no political or social anchoring" among the power brokers in his native region.[49]

Even so, the mere fact that the GNU could be established was a rare success after years of ineffectual diplomacy. By showing that political talks could produce results, it helped sustain the ceasefire, as negotiations continued to hash out a common constitutional and electoral system in time for the 24 December 2021 election.

Regional thaw, Libyan impasse

Another auspicious sign in late 2020 was an emerging trend of de-escalation in the regional struggle that had pitted Turkey and Qatar against the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia.[50] The reasons for this shift were complex, but included decreased tensions around the now-stalemated wars in Syria and Libya; the election of Joseph R. Biden as president of the United States; and a widespread sense of exhaustion among the regional actors themselves.

In January 2021, a summit of the Gulf Arab states saw the Saudi-Emirati camp end the economic blockade it had instituted against Qatar in 2017. The decision was widely welcomed, including by Turkey, and raised expectations of regional de-escalation after the tense post-Arab Spring years.[51] In the following months, Turkey embarked on a quest to break its regional semi-isolation and unfreeze relations with Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Israel. While the Turkish campaign did not solve any major points of disagreement or end the tension, it was well received and produced a series of mutual goodwill gestures, including a renewal of high-level contacts.

As recently as June 2020, Egypt and Turkey had been close to coming to blows over the Sirte-Jufra line. Partly as a result of the resolution of that crisis, the two nations were now back on speaking terms, which in turn helped sustain a positive dynamic in Libya. In summer 2021, Cairo welcomed a Turkish decision to restrict the operations of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and its anti-Sisi media apparatus in Istanbul. Responding to the news, Egypt's foreign minister Sameh Shukri hailed the prospect of a future normalisation of relations with Turkey, which, he predicted, would "be a basis for proceedings in Libya."[52]

[48] Harchaoui 2021b.
[49] *Ibid.*
[50] Atwood 2021.
[51] *Aljazeera* 2021a.
[52] *Al-Ahram* 2021.

The prospect of constructive regional cooperation could not, however, paper over the complications of Libya's domestic scene, where the disagreements remained as intractable as ever.

The GNU was an unwieldy creature of compromise with little on-the-ground power. It did not control the armed groups that ran the west-Libyan military scene and much of the economy, had no way to impose itself on Heftar's power base in the east, and was hostage to Dbeibah's entrenched business and personal interests.[53]

Foreign influence over the process was another obstacle, notwithstanding the pious diplomatic rhetoric about a Libyan-led, Libyan-owned peace process. The 23 October 2020 ceasefire had stipulated that foreign forces and mercenaries would vacate Libya within three months, but the deadline passed without any sign of compliance from either Russia or Turkey. There was little real pressure on either country to leave, apart from European and American diplomatic scolding. Their Libyan partners and proxies were in fact keen to keep their foreign patrons involved.

Stephanie Williams, then the acting special representative of the UN secretary-general, said in December 2020 that Libya now hosted ten military bases wholly or partially occupied by foreign forces, and that a total of 20,000 foreign fighters and mercenaries operated on Libyan soil.[54] The figure included Syrian fighters enlisted on both sides, as well as Turkish soldiers, Russian military contractors, Sudanese mercenaries and armed groups, and rebel groups from Chad.[55]

The electoral process breaks down

In autumn 2021, with three months left before the election date on 24 December, the process showed clear signs of derailing. An electoral law adopted by Aguila Saleh's House of Representatives in Tobruk was condemned by his rivals in western Libya, and a Tripoli-based upper chamber of parliament, the Higher Council of State, voted to delay the elections. On 22 September, the House of Representatives withdrew confidence from Dbeibah's government.[56]

By December, nearly one hundred candidates had registered for the presidential election, with Khalifa Heftar, Abdelhamid al-Dbeibah, Seifelislam al-Gaddafi, and Fathi Bashagha among the top names. But there was still no generally accepted political framework, leading candidates were embroiled in unresolved legal challenges, and militias interfered with court rulings and electoral preparations.

[53] Harchaoui 2021b; Lacher 2021.
[54] UNSMIL 2020.
[55] Mezran & Al-Ghwell 2021.
[56] Boumamesh 2021.

The Libyan electoral commission finally called off the process one day ahead of the scheduled vote.[57]

As Libya headed into 2022, the ceasefire remained intact, but the political process was in disarray and there was growing uncertainty about the role of the GNU and other key bodies.

[57] *Aljazeera English* 2021.

3 Turkey's foreign policy under Erdoğan

Turkish foreign policy has undergone major changes during the reign of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who has led Turkey for nearly two decades. The shift in Turkey's foreign policy behaviour has been most pronounced since 2011, and especially since 2016, i.e. coinciding with the Libyan conflict and the run-up to the Turkish intervention. To contextualise Turkey's Libya policy, the current chapter will briefly survey Turkish foreign policy under Erdoğan.

The early AKP foreign policy

Erdoğan has dominated Turkey since the 2002 election victory of his political party, the Justice and Development Party (AKP). He became prime minister in 2003 and was in 2014 elected as president of the republic.

Lauded as a reformer and a liberaliser in his early years as prime minister, Erdoğan pursued an energetic but non-confrontational foreign policy that focused on soft power and the expansion of Turkeys' commercial interests. In contrast to the more narrowly pro-Western orientation of previous Turkish governments, the AKP also wanted to nurture cooperation with Islamic, Middle Eastern, African, and Asian nations. This reorientation produced some friction. In particular, Erdoğan's vocal support for the Palestinian independence struggle harmed Turkey's previously strong ties with Israel. His refusal to assist the US invasion of Iraq also caused some strain, although scepticism of the war was widely shared within NATO and Europe. Generally, however, Erdoğan maintained good ties with the United States and kept pushing for Turkish membership in the EU.

An oft-cited motto for the early AKP policy was the phrase "zero problems with neighbours", coined by Erdoğan's long-serving foreign minister, and later prime minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu. It signified an aspiration for a trouble-free regional environment, in which Turkey would be able to maximise its regional influence as a partner to all, while expanding economically.

Changes in Erdoğan's second decade

In his second decade in power, Erdoğan began to harden elements of the AKP outlook, while adopting a more ambitious, unilateral, and militarised approach to foreign policy. This process played out in parallel to growing turbulence in Turkish domestic politics, to which Erdoğan responded with authoritarian means.

Many of the factors behind this policy shift were internal, including Erdoğan's personal politics, the conservative-religious preferences of his base, and a post-2015 alliance between the AKP and the ultranationalist National Action Party (MHP). Over time, Erdoğan had also reconfigured Turkey's political culture and

institutional balance, giving him a free hand in national security matters while removing most of the institutional constraints and counterweights that had previously tempered his behaviour.[58]

External and structural factors were no less important, however. Turkey had entered the 2010s in a position of unprecedented military and economic strength, in large part thanks to the rapid economic growth during Erdoğan's first years in power. In effect, the country was primed for power projection in a neighbourhood whose previously impenetrable police states suddenly cracked under the shock of the 2011 Arab Spring. The resulting power vacuums created tempting new opportunities, which incentivised a more forward-leaning Turkish policy, while also spawning new regional threats, which encouraged hard-line action.

Internal and external turmoil

The Syrian war, especially, came to fracture US-Turkish ties. In 2011, Turkey threw its weight behind the opposition to President Bashar al-Assad. Over time, however, Ankara grew exasperated at the failures of the rebellion in the face of Assad's tenacity, and at the US refusal to intervene militarily to topple the Damascus regime. In 2014–15, Washington began to partner with Syrian Kurdish factions linked to Turkey's domestic Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) insurgency, to combat the Islamic State; in Turkish eyes, the United States was now aiding enemies of the state. When Russia intervened to shore up Assad's hold on power in September 2015, Turkey's discontent turned to desperation. After several tense months, Erdoğan swung his policy around, quietly abandoned the goal of Assad's removal, and initiated a close, pragmatic collaboration with Russia to isolate the US-backed, PKK-linked Kurdish factions and secure Turkish interests (see 3.2).[59]

Soon after, on 15 July 2016, Turkey suffered a violent coup attempt allegedly orchestrated by a US-based Turkish exile and Islamic leader, Fethullah Gülen. This traumatic event accelerated Turkey's transformation both domestically and in terms of foreign policy, by fuelling the president's fears of subversion and his distrust of the United States while simultaneously allowing him to purge rivals and dismantle institutional constraints. In the aftermath of the coup attempt, Erdoğan cracked down on critics, changed the constitution, and deepened his alliance with the nationalists of the MHP. The president also shook up Turkey's foreign policy establishment, removing many senior cadres.

The Turkish military has since intervened in Syria (2016), Libya (2019–20), and the South Caucasus (2020), while maintaining or scaling up previous interventions in Cyprus and Iraq. In 2019–20, Turkish warships were deployed in a threatening fashion to challenge Greek and Cypriot Mediterranean boundary claims.

[58] Koru 2021.
[59] Lund 2018, pp. 21–2.

Meanwhile, relations with Turkey's traditional Western allies have plummeted. In 2017, Turkey took the controversial step of purchasing S-400 air defence systems from Russia, disregarding US and NATO protests. The S-400 issue eventually triggered Turkey's expulsion from the US-led F-35 Joint Strike Fighter programme and the imposition of US sanctions on the Turkish defence industry in 2019.[60] The EU-Turkey relationship has suffered from Turkey's instrumentalisation of migration flows since 2015, from the maritime conflicts, and from Erdoğan's abrasive, anti-Western rhetoric more generally.[61] In 2019, the EU created a sanctions framework to deter Turkey from challenging Greek and Cypriot maritime claims (see 4.2.1), although it has been used very sparingly.[62]

For the president and his party, the near-constant feuding with Western nations is to some degree a political tactic, intended to rile up the government's nationalist and Islamist voter base. But it also seems to represent genuinely held beliefs, including a deeply suspicious view of Western governments, a sense that Turkey has suffered historic injustices, and a fear of foreign plots to weaken or divide the Turkish nation. In addition, Erdoğan seems to thrive on confrontation and view himself as the leader of a national resurgence. He has disparagingly described the old, pre-AKP Turkey as having "looked in one direction only, it was pro-status quo, afraid of change, lacked confidence, its fighting spirit was blunted, it was closed into itself."[63]

3.1 Turkey, Qatar, and their rivals

A major feature of Turkey's new foreign policy has been the country's involvement in Middle Eastern and North African political feuds and proxy wars after the 2011 Arab Spring.

In addition to the conflict between Iran and its allies, on the one hand, and a US-backed, Saudi-led bloc of states, on the other, the latter camp is divided against itself. For years, major US-allied nations such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and (after 2013) Egypt have faced off against Qatar and Turkey. The former bloc had opposed the uprisings of the Arab Spring and preferred an authoritarian model for stability, while the latter camp tried to ride the revolutionary wave and support dissident groups like the Muslim Brotherhood.[64]

In addition to waging constant campaigns in rival media outlets, and sponsoring dissidents and subversive groups, the two camps fund and support client forces across the Middle East-North Africa region and even outside of it, on the Horn of Africa. The conflicts and civil wars that followed the uprisings in 2011 led to an

[60] Hamilton & Mikulska 2021, pp. 43–6.
[61] Siccardi 2021, pp. 201; Lund 2020.
[62] Lund 2020, pp. 6–7.
[63] Koru 2018, p. 18.
[64] Lynch 2016; Atwood 2021.

intensification and partial militarisation of the rivalry, especially through proxy wars. The Syrian opposition broke apart repeatedly due to interference by these rival camps, which also contributed to the splintering of Libya's militia landscape, as seen in Chapter 2.

Throughout these events, Turkey has consistently stood by its Qatari ally and vice versa, and the two countries have collaborated closely across multiple theatres.

Initially, after 2011, the Qatari-Turkish axis was ascendant. New rulers or insurgent coalitions in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, and Libya were favourable to their politics and had often benefitted from their largesse. But in 2013, the tide turned. The fall of Egypt's new Muslim Brotherhood-led government to a Saudi- and Emirati-backed coup was a stunning reversal. Many Egyptian Muslim Brothers and other dissidents fled to Turkey, making Istanbul the region's main centre of anti-Sisi agitation.[65] In 2017, the Saudi-led Gulf Cooperation Council placed Qatar under an economic and political boycott, in response to which Turkey dispatched troops and economic support to shore up its ally.[66]

As has been noted above (see 2.3), the conflict cooled somewhat in 2020–21, partly due to a general exhaustion. The Qatar boycott ended, and high-level meetings resumed between nations that had not been on speaking terms for years.[67] Nevertheless, major disagreements remained unsolved, and rival state-sponsored media on both sides continued to produce hostile propaganda against the other camp.

3.2 Turkey-Russia relations

The post-2016 Russian-Turkish relationship has been characterised in many ways, including as an "uneasy alliance", a "fragile relationship", "cooperative competition", "competitive cooperation", a "brutal entente", "adversarial collaboration", a "marriage of convenience", and as a "dynamic, complex, and high stakes" relationship.[68] All descriptions tend to accept, however, that the way in which Turkey and Russia now operate with and against each other is new and unprecedented.

A NATO member since 1952, Turkey was firmly in the Western camp during the Cold War, wary of Soviet designs on the Bosporus and Dardanelles straits, which connect the Mediterranean and the Black Sea.[69] After the collapse of the Soviet Union, in 1991, relations thawed and bilateral trade increased.[70] This pragmatic approach endured in the 2000s, under Putin and Erdoğan.

[65] Ayyash 2020.
[66] *Aljazeera English* 2017.
[67] Atwood 2021.
[68] Daniel 2021; Siccardi 2021, p. 17; Hamilton & Mikulska 2021, p. 3.
[69] Lund 2021, pp. 3–4.
[70] Köstem 2021, p. 6; Hamilton & Mikulska 2021, p. 11.

While Turkey was uneasy about Russia's growing ambition and rearmament after the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, it generally "preferred to engage rather than pick fights".[71] Turkey also rejected suggestions that it should be more lenient in its implemention of the 1936 Montreux Convention, which regulates naval traffic through the straits, to facilitate NATO's naval presence in the Black Sea.[72]

In the mid-2010s, ties between Ankara and Moscow were thrown off track by the Syrian conflict, especially after Russia's 2015 military intervention.

On 24 November 2015, the Turkish Air Force shot down a Russian jet that had allegedly violated Turkish airspace. Putin responded forcefully, condemning what he said was "a stab in the back by terrorist accomplices" and imposing economic sanctions on Turkey.[73] Although Russian exports suffered, Turkey took the brunt of the fallout: according to one estimate, the country lost some $5.8 billion in tourism revenue in 2016.[74] In late June 2016, Erdoğan issued a carefully phrased apology over the death of the Russian pilot, which Putin quickly accepted.[75]

Relations then rebounded dramatically, as the two nations began to engage each other over conflict management issues in Syria. Contacts eventually became routine, and Turkey and Russia now regularly hold high-level meetings about the three conflicts where both have intervened, namely Syria (since 2016), Libya (since 2019), and the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict (since 2020).[76]

Turkey and Russia also support opposite sides in Georgia and Ukraine, with Ankara backing the governments in Tbilisi and Kyiv, while Russia supports anti-government and separatist forces. (In addition, Russia illegally annexed the Crimean Peninsula in 2014 and launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.) Turkey is less directly involved in these conflicts, however, and they have, so far, not been central to the post-2016 turn in the Erdoğan-Putin relationship.[77] For its part, Russia has avoided involvement in Turkey's maritime disputes in the eastern Mediterranean.[78] Other issues on which both nations hold firm and opposing views include the perennially difficult political situation in Bosnia. Turkey views itself as a protector of sorts for the Bosniaks, while Russia takes a similar attitude to the Serbs.[79] Should Bosnia's inner tensions relapse into violence, it could draw Russian and Turkish attention.

[71] Bechev 2021, p. 3.
[72] Lund 2021, p. 3.
[73] Hamilton & Mikulska 2021, p. 37.
[74] Pritchett 2021.
[75] Rainsford 2016.
[76] On the South Caucasus conflict, see Hedenskog *et al.* 2020.
[77] Bechev 2021, p. 4; Hamilton & Mikulska 2021, pp. 33–4; Köstem 2021, p. 6.
[78] Lund 2020.
[79] Smith 2018.

Despite their deep disagreements and occasional clashes, both Putin and Erdoğan seem to respect the other as a partner and competitor, and both are eager to maintain good working relations. "The relationship moves quickly between cooperation and confrontation, often in the span of only months", note Robert E. Hamilton and Anna Mikulska, and it relies on a shared willingness to "compartmentalise" irresolvable problems.[80]

Since 2016, the two presidents speak and meet frequently, and so do their ministers of foreign affairs, defence, and other senior officials.[81] Between 2016 and 2018, Erdoğan met face to face with Putin nearly twice as often as he met the US president; and, according to public records, he spoke to the US president 19 times over the phone in that period but had 44 phone conversations with Putin.[82] Similarly, in 2020, Kremlin records listed 18 Putin-Erdoğan calls, compared to only four between Putin and Chinese president Xi Jinping.[83]

In the view of Pavel Baev, the constant discussions about Syria have laid the foundation for a "unique intensity of interactions [that] has ensured that the two autocrats have a good measure of each other's character and aspirations".[84] On the leadership level, the relationship appears to ride on a common or at least compatible outlook on international affairs. Both Erdoğan and Putin take a dim view of liberal norms, resent the idea of a unipolar US-led global order, are authoritarians at home, and have a transactional, realist approach to state interests abroad. This meeting of minds appears to be a key factor in Putin and Erdoğan's ability to do business despite their differences: there is little love and no trust, but a lot of understanding. In the words of Selim Koru, Turkey's "new realists" have come to perceive Russia as neither friend nor foe but as a model for what they want Turkey to be, i.e. "a self-reliant, hard-nosed country that stands up to the West."[85]

The new Turkish-Russian relationship is far from painless, but it has been productive. Turkey's ties to its traditional US and European allies, on the other hand, seem to be trapped in a downward spiral, which, of course, encourages Russia and Turkey to collaborate further. Ankara uses its Russian connection to balance against the United States and the EU, whereas, for Russia, the now-constant friction between Turkey and its Western allies is a gift that keeps on giving – from S-400 sales and dominance over Syria, to intra-NATO friction.[86] In a much-noted incident in 2020, Turkey blocked NATO defence planning for Poland and the Baltic region over several months, in an unsuccessful attempt to force its allies to

[80] Hamilton & Mikulska 2021, p. 3.
[81] Koru 2018, pp. 14–16.
[82] *Ibid.*, p. 15.
[83] Baev 2020, p. 12.
[84] *Ibid.*
[85] Koru 2018, p. 18.
[86] Bechev 2021, p. 2; Baev 2021, p. 11.

terrorist-list the main US-backed militia in Syria, citing its PKK links.[87] But in spite of Erdoğan's angry denunciations of his treaty allies, a Turkish exit from NATO is highly implausible. Turkey depends on having NATO as a final security guarantee against Russia, and it also needs to prevent the alliance from aligning fully with Greece.

Although conflict diplomacy has dominated the Turkey-Russia relationship since 2016, the two countries also compete and collaborate economically. According to 2018 data, Russia is Turkey's single largest trading partner, accounting for approximately 10 per cent of the total volume. It is also a major importer of Russian natural gas, and both countries have collaborated to build Black Sea pipelines. These joint interests have often facilitated Turkish-Russian re-engagement after crises, but the future of the economic relationship is less clear.[88] Baev argues that Turkey's ongoing diversification away from Russian energy may diminish "business-related constraints" in the relationship's "fast-evolving diplomatic intrigues and security contestations," potentially triggering more volatility and conflict.[89] Conversely, Hamilton and Mikulska argue that the "shift from a traditionally dominant Russia to a more balanced relationship of mutual dependence […] could enhance stability in other policy areas."[90]

[87] *Daily Sabah*/AFP 2020; Erlanger 2020.
[88] Hamilton & Mikulska 2021, pp. 53, 57.
[89] Baev 2020, pp. 9–10.
[90] Hamilton & Mikulska 2021, p. 3.

4 Turkey's role in Libya

The following chapter will investigate Turkey's involvement in Libya since 2011, with an emphasis on the intervention launched in 2019. It begins with a summarised outline of events and policies since 2011, in Section 4.1. Section 4.2 will then discuss Turkey's aims and interests in Libya. Section 4.3 will look at the means used by Turkey to intervene and actions undertaken in the course of that intervention.

4.1 Turkey's involvement in Libya, 2011–21

Turkey was not a major player in the 2011 overthrow of Moammar al-Gaddafi. It was, in fact, initially opposed to the idea of regime change in Libya. Ankara had established a promising trade relationship with Libya in the years prior to the uprising, and when the conflict began, it initially cautioned against an international intervention and sought to promote a compromise based on political reforms.[91]

Once the UN Security Council had issued resolution 1973 and Gaddafi's downfall began to seem likely, or even inevitable, Erdoğan nimbly shifted his position and endorsed the idea, while stressing that military action should be carried out under the leadership of NATO, of which Turkey is an important member.[92] Even then, Turkey mainly offered financial and humanitarian support for the anti-Gaddafi rebels, but in July 2011 Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu visited Benghazi and officially recognised the National Transitional Council as Libya's legitimate government.[93]

After the fall of Gaddafi's government and the end of the NATO mission, Turkey maintained some involvement with Libyan affairs. Notably, Ankara established a "friendly but largely passive" relationship with the Libyan branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, including its political wing, the Justice and Construction Party.[94] Such partnerships were entirely in line with Erdoğan's foreign policy profile, AKP ideology, and Turkey's close alignment with Qatar, the Brotherhood's main international sponsor.

In 2013, Turkey was one of four NATO countries, alongside the United States, the United Kingdom, and Italy, that joined together to establish the nucleus of a new Libyan security force. Known as the General Purpose Force, it was designed to operate in support of Libya's prime minister at the time, Ali Zeidan, in order to help free his fledgling government of its dependence on militias and form the basis

[91] Kekilli & Öztürk 2020, pp. 54–5.
[92] Head 2011.
[93] Hacaoğlu 2011.
[94] Wehrey 2020, p. 15.

of a new national army.[95] The plan was a fiasco for all involved, and the Turkish section of the training programme appears to have been badly mismanaged. Reportedly "eager to win follow-on contracts for the equipment of the Libyan army", Ankara rushed its implementation by inadequately vetting recruits, which led to "astronomical" rates of failure and expulsion.[96] Half of a 800-strong contingent of Libyan police officers trained in Turkey reportedly dropped out, though some graduated.[97] When rising insecurity forced the United States to close its diplomatic and military missions in Tripoli in summer 2014, the General Purpose Force programme was shut down, having achieved none of its goals.[98]

Around that time, however, Turkey began to increase its own direct involvement in Libya. The country had begun to fracture into two opposing camps, closely linked to the hardening regional tug of war (see 2.2 and 3.1). Qatar and Turkey worked hand in glove to aid the Tripoli-based GNS government and allied militias, moving Qatari-financed support into Libya by way of Turkey's logistics and support network; for a time, Sudan was also part of the scheme.[99] In October 2014, Erdoğan appointed a special envoy for the Libyan crisis, and Turkish Airlines resumed flights to Misrata, helping to break the city's isolation.[100]

For reasons linked to Qatari domestic politics and developments elsewhere in the region, Doha's influence in Libya began to recede somewhat after 2014, although both Qatar and Turkey continued to back the Brotherhood, various Misratan militias, and other Libyan groups. Toward the end of the decade, Turkey had emerged as the leading supporter of the GNS's successor, the GNA, and its Misratan, Islamist, and other allies. Late 2018 and 2019 saw a noticeable rise in Turkey's involvement with Libya, including high-level visits from both sides. For example, after Turkish defence minister Hulusi Akar visited Tripoli in November 2018, the GNA prime minister Fayez al-Serraj led a delegation to see Erdoğan in Istanbul, and Fathi Bashagha, the Misratan interior minister, who had close links to Turkey, met repeatedly with Turkish officials.[101]

When Heftar's forces moved on Tripoli in April 2019, Erdoğan immediately voiced support for the GNA against what he termed a "conspiracy".[102] Bashagha was speedily received in Ankara to discuss "security and military" cooperation.[103] Turkey then drastically stepped up its support, including by delivering more and more advanced military equipment.

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[95] Al-Shadeedi *et al.* 2020, pp. 25–7.
[96] Wehrey 2018, pp. 154–7.
[97] Al-Shadeedi *et al.* 2020, p. 26.
[98] Ryan 2015.
[99] Wehrey 2018, p. 193.
[100] Hogg 2014.
[101] *Aljazeera Mubasher* 2021; Özer & Abdullah 2011.
[102] *Aljazeera* 2021c.
[103] Alharathy 2019.

When Heftar's offensive resumed later that year, with added Russian support, Turkey began to fear the collapse of the GNA. In response, it opted to formalise its intervention, facilitating a more ambitious military response. Serraj was invited to Istanbul on 26–28 November 2019, where he signed, among other things, an agreement known as the Memorandum of Understanding on Security and Military Cooperation, which was ratified by the Turkish parliament on 21 December 2019.[104] Based on the memorandum and a formal GNA request, the parliament voted on 2 January 2020 to authorise a Turkish military deployment in Libya for one year.[105]

As noted in Section 2.3, the intervention quickly reversed the balance of the war, but Turkey and the pro-GNA militias stopped pushing eastward in June 2020, respecting red lines laid down by Russia and Egypt. A ceasefire was formalised on 23 October 2020.

Through the rest of 2020 and 2021, Turkey remained engaged in Libya, including with military personnel and by using diplomatic and other means. In June 2020, *Yeni Şafak,* a pro-AKP Istanbul daily, reported that Turkey and the GNA were in talks about establishing two Turkish military bases. According to the newspaper, the discussions focused on the al-Watiya Air Base, close to the Tunisian border, and port facilities in Misrata.[106] To date, however, no announcements have been made.

As its parliamentary mandate neared expiration in December 2020, the Turkish deployment was extended by a further 18 months.[107]

4.2 Aims and interests

There is no identifiable single cause for the Turkish decision to intervene in Libya. As seen above and in Chapter 2, the Erdoğan government's policy has evolved gradually and reactively since 2011, which means that it may be futile to seek a consistent strategic rationale. Even so, Ankara has pursued a number of inter-related interests in Libya, and its Libya policy also reflects Turkey's broader foreign policy aims.

These aims and interests may be grouped into:

- Geopolitical, regional, and maritime issues, including a desire for regional power and status; a quest for leverage over Arab rivals, Russia, and the EU; Turkish ambitions in Africa; and Libyan cooperation on maritime boundary delimitation;

[104] Atalay 2019.
[105] *Daily Sabah* 2020a.
[106] *Yeni Şafak* 2020.
[107] Nuri Erdoğan 2020.

- Ideological and political issues, including Erdoğan's foreign policy views and the influence of domestic Islamist and nationalist constituencies;
- Economic issues, including strategic acquisitions, the salvaging of pre-2011 Turkish investments in Libya, and hopes of gaining high-value reconstruction contracts.

4.2.1 Geopolitical, regional, and maritime issues

As noted in Chapter 3, Erdoğan strives to establish Turkey as an independent Muslim power with region-wide influence, while also pursuing traditional Turkish state interests. In recent years, he has taken to using increasingly militarised and confrontational tactics. The Libyan intervention aligns well with these ideas, and, as a major recent foreign policy initiative, it has helped define Erdoğan's vision for Turkey.

Overall, Libya fits into at least five spheres of Turkish geopolitical activism:

- Turkey's involvement with Middle Eastern rivalries.
- Turkey's dynamic post-2016 relationship with Russia.
- Turkey's efforts to expand commercially and politically into Africa.
- Turkey's quest for leverage over the EU.
- Turkey's maritime feuding with Greece, Cyprus, and the EU.

Turkey's involvement with Middle Eastern rivalries

Libya has emerged as a key arena in the regional "cold war" that has rocked the Middle East and North Africa over the past decade.

As noted in chapters 2 and 3, a key feature of Middle Eastern and North African politics in recent years has been the struggle between Turkey and Qatar, on the one hand, and, on the other, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and (after 2013) Egypt. The former bloc identifies with the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings and supports anti-status quo forces, with an emphasis on Islamists like the Muslim Brotherhood. The latter bloc has adopted the opposite posture, casting the Arab Spring as a period of chaos and conspiracy. It tends to support incumbent autocrats, and is hostile to popular uprisings in general and to the Muslim Brotherhood in particular.[108]

In Libya, these two camps were reflected in the GNA-LAAF power struggle. The intervention in Libya thus served both to reinforce Turkey's strategic alliance with Qatar and the Muslim Brotherhood, and to push back against their Emirati and Egyptian rivals.

[108] On these conflicts, see Lynch 2016.

Conversely, Emirati and Egyptian involvement in Libya appears to have aimed to prevent the country from turning into a base for Islamist politics and Turkish-Qatari power projection. In fact, Turkey's intervention appears to have facilitated a 2020 coming-together of otherwise unrelated anti-Turkish actors, when Greece, Cyprus, Israel, and France joined with the United Arab Emirates and Egypt to denounce Turkey's behaviour in the eastern Mediterranean.[109]

Turkey's dynamic post-2016 relationship with Russia

As has been explained in Chapter 3, Turkey's relationship with Russia saw dramatic ups and downs over the past decade. Since 2016, it has settled into a new and evolving pattern of close collaboration mixed with intense proxy competition.

Turkey's behaviour in Libya has at times shadowed Russia's own. In terms of timing, for example, Turkey's late-2019 decision to deploy military forces in Libya was an immediate response to the Wagner-led escalation on the LAAF side.

While the Russia relationship is hardly the only issue on Erdoğan's mind, Libya seems to have represented an opportunity to build new leverage over Moscow by engaging it in a conflict where Turkey enjoyed certain advantages, including trusted clients among the militias and an invitation from a UN-recognised government. In the longer term, Erdoğan may have aimed for a Syria-style brokered process, in which Ankara and Moscow can serve as primary kingmakers, or at least accepted it as a tolerable outcome.

Turkey's efforts to expand commercially and politically into Africa

Turkey is engaged in a determined campaign to expand its economic and political interests in Africa, and Libya seems to be viewed as a piece of that puzzle.

After declaring a "Year of Africa" in 2005, Erdoğan has visited multiple African countries each year. The Turkish Foreign Ministry has built a dense diplomatic network across the continent, and the number of Turkish embassies in Africa has grown from 12 to 43 between 2009 and 2022.[110] Since 2008, three Turkey-Africa summits have been held to promote business and cooperation. The last one took place in Istanbul in December 2021, bringing together 16 heads of state and 102 ministers from 39 countries.[111] Turkish-African trade has grown from $5 billion to $25 billion in two decades, and Erdoğan has said that he wants to double it to $50 billion in the coming years.[112]

[109] Lund 2020, p. 7.
[110] Schipani & Pitel 2021; Marcou 2022.
[111] *African Business* 2021.
[112] Schipani & Pitel 2021; Marcou 2022.

Turkey has also made goodwill investments in cultural diplomacy and humanitarian aid, infrastructure projects, and development support.[113] Recently, for example, Erdoğan promised to supply African nations with 15 million doses of Turkovac, a domestically manufactured Covid-19 vaccine.[114] When engaging African audiences, the Turkish president uses a "neo-thirdworldist" rhetoric that positions Turkey as a "custodian of Islamic culture" that stands shoulder to shoulder with Africans, as they struggle to overcome colonial legacies and injustices inherent in the international system.[115] In 2020, French president Emmanuel Macron accused Turkey (and Russia) of "playing on post-colonial resentments" and of funding anti-French propaganda in African nations.[116]

Turkish-African military cooperation has begun to increase in recent years, albeit from a low level. Turkey's defence industry has exported its products to countries including Somalia, Togo, Chad, Ethiopia, Morocco, Niger, and Tunisia, and of course Libya. The latter five nations have received drones, Turkey's most successful military export in recent years, for which the wars in Syria, Libya, and the South Caucasus have served as a marketing campaigns.[117]

Turkey's strongest foothold on the continent is on the Horn of Africa. In Somalia, Turkey operates a 400 hectare military base that provides training for Somali soldiers, opened in 2017.[118] Turkish companies have invested strategically in Somali infrastructure, and now run both the port and the airport in Mogadishu.[119] In all, Turkey has spent more than $1 billion on humanitarian and development aid in Somalia since 2011, including by building schools and hospitals. These efforts appear to have been very well received locally, bolstering Erdoğan's personal popularity[120] Next-door Ethiopia has been a major recipient of Turkish investments, accounting for some $2.5 billion of the $6 billion invested by Turkish companies in Sub-Saharan Africa.[121] It remains to be seen how Turkey's influence may be affected by the current Ethiopian-Tigrayan civil war.

Libya's role in Turkey's Africa strategy is somewhat unclear, but the Erdoğan government appears to view it in part as a logistical springboard. Turkish companies have invested significant sums in strategic Libyan infrastructure, and there are plans for a large air, sea, and rail logistics centre in Misrata to create a "gateway" for Turkish export through North Africa and the Sahara.[122]

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[113] Schipani & Pitel 2021.
[114] Marcou 2022.
[115] Armstrong 2021; Marcou 2022.
[116] Roger & Ben Yahmed 2020.
[117] *AFP* 2021.
[118] Bergenwall 2019, pp. 39–40.
[119] *Ibid.*; Khalif 2020.
[120] Schipani & Pitel 2021.
[121] *Ibid.*
[122] Betül Bal 2021.

A strengthened Turkish role in Libya would likely have the greatest impact on the Sahel region. Turkey's influence in that area has increased steadily over the past decade. Embassies have been opened in Bamako (2010), Ouagadougou (2012), and Niamey (2012). A Turkish-Nigerien defence cooperation agreement was signed in 2020, followed by several arms contracts. The area has also seen the usual Turkish mix of aid, investments, and symbolic cultural projects, such as restoring historical mosques. But the Sahel region also demonstrates the limits of Turkey's capacity: in 2014–19, the Turkish state aid agency, TİKA, reported spending about $60 million on development cooperation in the central Sahel region, while the EU and its member states spent more than $8 billion.[123]

Turkey's quest for leverage over the EU

Increased Turkish influence in Libya could potentially translate into leverage over the EU. The importance of the union to Turkey can, of course, hardly be overstated.

Several European governments are actively involved with the Libyan conflict or with the UN peace process. European nations also worry about the war's impact on weak states in the Sahel, where they are militarily engaged against jihadist insurgents. Beyond the conflict, Libya is of importance to some EU members as an exporter of oil and gas. Like their Turkish counterparts, European companies may also hope to gain high-value reconstruction contracts and public tenders from the Libyan government (see 4.2.3).

Last but not least, Libya matters greatly to the EU's migration policy, as one of the Mediterranean region's main transit routes for African and other irregular migrants. Taking advantage of the chaos, smugglers organise dangerous, illegal boat trips from Libyan shores toward Italy, Greece, and Malta. The EU places a high emphasis on countering this traffic. In 2016, as part of an Italian-led initiative, the union began to fund and equip the GNA/GNU coast guard, effectively militias hired to stop (or to stop participating in) the smuggling. The system has been severely criticised for legitimising human rights abuse, but the number of migrants arriving from Libya has fallen substantially since 2017.[124] Libya nevertheless represented the top Mediterranean migration route to the EU in 2021.[125]

In 2015, amid growing migrant and refugee pressures, Turkey tacitly began to permit people-smuggling from its territory toward the EU. The resulting wave of hundreds of thousands of migrants walking up through Europe toward Germany, Sweden, and other northern nations triggered a destabilising internal crisis in the union. To secure Erdoğan's renewed cooperation on border and asylum issues, the EU was forced to offer a €6 billion economic assistance package to Turkey in 2016, sweetened by a series of other concessions. Since then, many European

[123] Armstrong 2021.
[124] Wehrey 2018, pp. 223–7; *The Economist* 2022.
[125] European Council (n.d.).

nations have been wary of provoking Turkey, fearing that it will once again open the border. Turkey clearly relishes its newfound power, and it briefly loosened border restrictions again in late 2019, apparently as a pressure tactic in talks about a new 2016-type deal.[126]

In so far as Turkey can influence the GNU and local Libyan militias, including those enlisted in the coast guard system, it would reinforce Ankara's already advantageous bargaining position on migration issues.

Turkey's maritime feuding with Greece, Cyprus, and the EU

One of the more complicated aspects of Turkey's interest in Libya is the role the country can play in promoting Turkish maritime claims. Simply by virtue of sitting on the opposite shore of the Mediterranean, Libya has the power to underwrite or undermine Turkey's controversial claims of ownership to what could be very valuable sea and seabed resources.

For decades, Turkey has insisted on an interpretation of maritime law that is at variance with the UN Convention on the Law of the Seas (UNCLOS), which Turkey refuses to sign.[127] UNCLOS is not universally recognised, but widely accepted, including by the European Union and all its members. The much shorter list of nations that have not signed or ratified UNCLOS includes the United States, Israel, Syria, and Libya, although, in practice, most non-signatories have tended to accept much of what the convention states. Turkey stands out for its persistent, active objection to core features of UNCLOS.

One of Turkey's criticisms of UNCLOS concerns the method for calculating *exclusive economic zones* (EEZ), maritime areas in which states may extract resources such as fish, oil, or natural gas. In contrast to UNCLOS and the prevailing view globally, Turkey holds that islands can be disregarded when calculating *continental shelves*, a related and overlapping concept that confers ownership of seabed and subsoil resources. As seen in Map 3, this idiosyncratic Turkish view has the effect of depriving Cyprus and Greece of most of their expansive economic claims in the eastern Mediterranean, primarily to the advantage of Turkey itself, but also benefitting other littoral states in the Levant and North Africa.

Concretely, Ankara's method of calculation would allow the Turkish and Libyan continental shelves to connect at the half-way point across the Mediterranean. The internationally accepted UNCLOS method would lead to the opposite conclusion, namely that Turkey and Libya do not share a maritime boundary at all. Instead, the relevant area would belong to a vast Greek EEZ emanating from Crete, Karpathos, and Rhodes, with Libyan and Turkish EEZ:s relegated to smaller sea regions south and north of this area.

[126] Terry 2021.
[127] Lund 2020, pp. 1–3.

Turkey's conflict with Greece is by no means the only boundary dispute in the eastern Mediterranean. In fact, most of the area's maritime boundaries are undetermined, with active disputes around Cyprus (including between the Republic of Cyprus and the unrecognised breakout republic in Turkish-occupied northern Cyprus) and between Israel and Lebanon. While this was always a problem on some level, the issue has recently come to the fore due to significant natural gas discoveries in the waters of Egypt, Israel, and Cyprus since 2009–10. The gas findings have had a significant impact on regional politics, as governments seek ways to cooperate over energy extraction and export while claiming rights to potentially gas-rich waters.[128] Turkey, which, like Egypt, aims to become the eastern Mediterranean's primary gas hub, has been cut out of the regional energy cooperation schemes launched by Greece, Cyprus, Israel, and Egypt – all bitter rivals of Turkey. These states and others joined together in 2019–20 to create the East Mediterranean Gas Forum, of which Turkey is not a member.[129]

In response, Turkey has doubled down on its own claims by leveraging its naval superiority. In 2019 and 2020, Turkish drill ships were repeatedly escorted by the Turkish Navy into zones claimed by Cyprus and Greece as part of their EEZs. The drill missions appeared to have been designed to be deliberately provocative, and likely had less to do with hydrocarbon exploration than with demonstrating Turkey's claims and its ability to act with impunity in disputed areas.[130] In conjunction with this maritime sabre-rattling, Erdoğan sought to make the sea boundary claims a popular cause at home. Since 2019, state officials have begun to use the slogans of the Blue Homeland doctrine, or *Mavi Vatan*, a concept for Turkish maritime power formulated by ultra-nationalist naval officers.[131]

The culmination of the maritime nationalist drive arrived when Turkey signed a memorandum on Mediterranean boundary delimitation with the GNA in 2019. The idea was not new. Turkey had proposed a maritime delimitation deal to Gaddafi already in 2010, but the negotiations were interrupted by the Libyan uprising.[132] In early 2019, however, Ankara began to put pressure on the GNA to reach a deal. GNA Prime Minister Fayez al-Serraj finally complied in November, apparently as a quid pro quo for the military intervention that would rescue his government from Heftar's Russian-backed offensive.[133]

[128] Eissler & Arasıl 2014.
[129] Lund 2020, p. 5. The EMGF co-founders also included Italy, Jordan, and Palestine. France joined in 2021.
[130] *Ibid.*, pp. 6–7.
[131] Gingeras 2020.
[132] ICG 2020, p. 9.
[133] *Ibid.*, pp. 8–10.

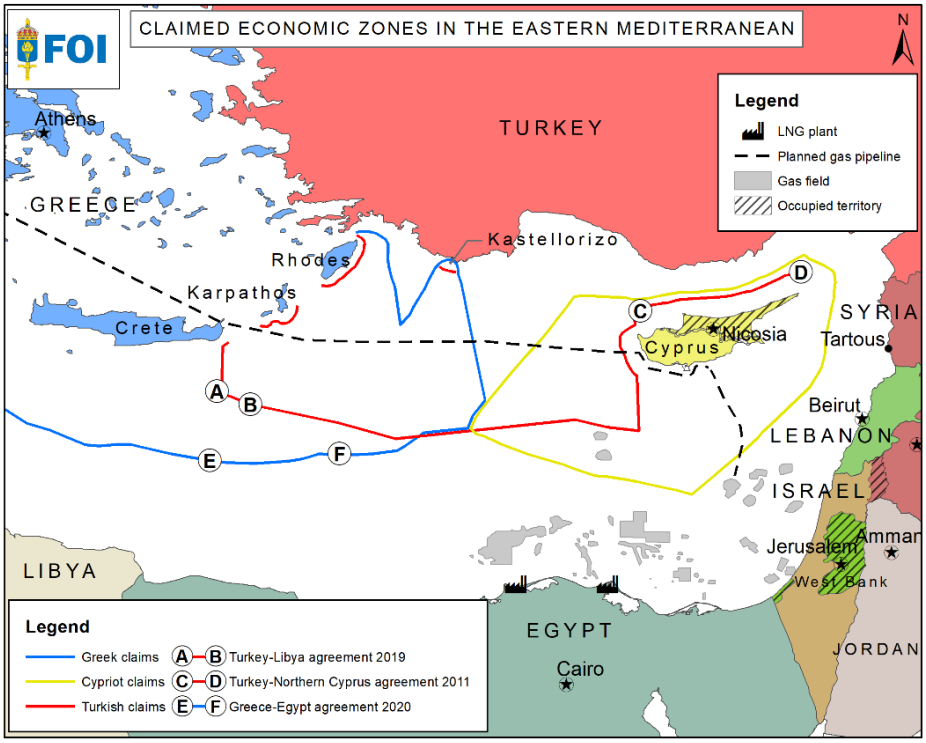
The maritime deal was a public relations success for Erdoğan, "heralded across Turkey's political spectrum as a triumph in the name of the country's blue homeland".[134] It was also a direct challenge to Greece, Cyprus, and the EU. By delimiting a small stretch of the ostensible Turkish-Libyan continental shelf boundary just south-east of Crete (section A–B on Map 3), the deal awarded areas to the south and north of this line to Libya and Turkey, respectively.[135] While these regions contain no known gas deposits, the very existence of the agreement serves to dispute the totality of Greek and Cypriot EEZ claims.[136]

Turkey likely also hoped to use the agreement to lure Egypt and Palestine into similar deals, even though both governments have ratified UNCLOS, by pointing to the extra territory that would accrue to them if they were to adopt Turkey's method. To Erdoğan's great irritation, however, Egypt instead chose to sign a counter-agreement with Greece in August 2020, endorsing the boundaries advanced by Athens.[137]

Protecting the delimitation agreement is now a key Turkish priority in Libya, and it has already survived its first challenge. When the GNA was replaced by the GNU in 2021, Serraj's successor Abdelhamid al-Dbeibah was immediately invited to Ankara. Standing alongside Erdoğan, Dbeibah publicly recommitted to the boundary deal, which, he said, is "based on correct foundations and serves the interests of our country".[138] In the event of an LAAF victory in Libya, however, the agreement would likely be repudiated. It has been denounced in no uncertain terms by Saleh, the Tobruk parliamentary speaker.[139]

[134] *The Economist* 2020; Gingeras 2020.
[135] Turkish Presidency 2020.
[136] UN 2019.
[137] *Reuters* 2020b.
[138] *Aljazeera* 2021b.
[139] *Al-Hadath* 2019.

Map 3. Claimed economic zones in the eastern Mediterranean. Source: Per Wikström (FOI).



4.2.2 Ideological and political issues

There is, of course, a domestic element to Turkish decision-making on Libya. Erdoğan's AKP party was founded as an Islamist organisation, but has recalibrated its ideology to also incorporate ethno-nationalist themes and personal loyalty to the president, who is portrayed as a strong, brilliant leader who fearlessly challenges world powers. As noted in Chapter 3, Erdoğan's own foreign policy preferences appeared to turn increasingly nationalistic and militaristic in the 2010s, and the AKP has followed suit. When diminishing voter support forced the AKP to form a coalition with the far-right MHP in 2015, Turkey's nationalist drift accelerated.

The Libyan intervention seems to fit well with the preferences of Erdoğan's political base, exemplifying his aggressive pursuit of Turkish interests and his ability to meet and match a great power like Russia. All forms of foreign-policy activism have the added advantage of distracting nationalist-minded voters from the country's mounting economic troubles. The GNA/GNU camp's Islamist tint adds another attractive element for the AKP.

The ideological preferences and regional-power aspirations of Erdoğan and his circle likely influenced the decision to intervene. But Erdoğan did not order the intervention in Libya because it was a popular cause. It was not. The Turkish public tends to be sceptical of foreign military entanglements, and domestic concerns routinely trump foreign policy. When the Turkish parliament voted on the Libya deployment in January 2020, a poll indicated that 34 per cent of Turks were supportive while 58 per cent opposed the intervention.[140] Nor was there any sign of an uptick in Erdoğan's personal popularity as a result of the Libyan deployment, or after the ceasefire announcement in October 2020.[141]

The lack of public enthusiasm for Erdoğan's intervention has not, however, translated into meaningful opposition. This may be because the intervention has so far been both cheap and successful (see 4.3.1 and 4.3.3). It may also be because Erdoğan disproportionately relies on Islamist and nationalist constituencies that are more likely to favour the intervention. In addition, the maritime delimitation deal that accompanied the intervention was very popular, even among anti-AKP groups (see 4.2.1).

Invoking ethnic ties

To appeal to popular nationalist sentiment and build support for the intervention, the government has sought to highlight Libya's place in Turkey's imperial Ottoman past. Libya was under Ottoman dominance for nearly four hundred years, from 1551 to 1912, which, in the words of pro-Erdoğan commentators, should instil "a deep sense of responsibility".[142]

The president and his allies have also played up some Libyans' Turkic heritage for political effect, by invoking the Karaghila. Known in Turkish as *Köroğlu*, these are the long-since naturalised and Arabic-speaking descendants of 16th Century Ottoman Janissaries. *Karaghila* populations can be found in many coastal Libyan cities, including Tripoli and Khoms, but especially in Misrata.

"In Libya, there are Köroğlu Turks remaining from the Ottomans, whose number exceeds one million", Erdoğan told an AKP gathering in 2020. Warning that Heftar's forces were trying to ethnically cleanse these fellow Turks, Erdoğan insisted that his government was duty-bound to "protect the grandchildren of our ancestors."[143] Pro-government Turkish media has reinforced this narrative, including by highlighting alleged anti-Turkic persecution by Heftar's forces.[144]

Such narratives exaggerate the role and distinctiveness of the Karaghila, but the ethnic marker does exist and has grown more relevant during the war. During the

[140] *The Economist* 2020.
[141] Siccardi 2021, p. 11.
[142] Kekilli & Özturk 2021, p. 61.
[143] ICG 2020, p. 3.
[144] Betül Bal 2020.

infighting in Tripoli in 2014, where Misrata-based militias played a leading role, and often acted abusively, some locals took to condemning Misratans as *sharakisa*, or Circassians, in reference to the Caucasian origins of some Ottoman settlers.[145] And just as some Misratan political entrepreneurs have sought to curry favour with Turkey by invoking a common Ottoman heritage, some LAAF supporters will manifest an exclusionary Arab identity to garner regional support. For example, pro-LAAF media commentators have depicted Karaghila-origin Libyans as a Turkish fifth column in service of Erdoğan's "neo-Ottoman" expansionism.[146] Such attitudes have also translated into persecution on the ground: after 2014, nativist pro-Heftar forces in eastern Libya reportedly expelled non-local families, particularly Misratans, and vilified them as Turkish or Circassian "implants".[147] The long-term impact on Libya's social cohesion remains to be seen.

4.2.3 Economic issues

Turkey sees major economic potential in its relationship with Libya. Turkish-Libyan economic ties were booming in the pre-2011 period, when Libya's release from UN sanctions and Gaddafi's haphazard attempts to reform the economy created opportunities for Turkish construction firms. The 2011 uprising interrupted the Turkish projects in Libya, however, and, as unrest spread, some 100 Turkish companies employing 25,000 workers were reportedly forced to evacuate the country. Around $19 billion worth of construction contracts were left unfinished and unpaid.[148] Turkish companies also reported having paid some $2 billion toward equipment and other arrangements for interrupted projects, arguing that these sums should be refunded by the Libyan state.[149]

Since 2011, Ankara has worked to help Turkish businessmen reactivate old contracts, collect Gaddafi-era debt, and position themselves for an expected economic windfall in the form of post-war reconstruction. Some estimates place Libya's reconstruction needs at close to €111 billion.[150] Given that Libya's hydrocarbon wealth will allow it to initiate post-war rebuilding without recourse to UN aid or outside funding, extraordinarily profitable contracts could be made available to foreign companies once conditions stabilise. Turkish companies are well placed to capitalise on these opportunities.[151] And, as already noted (see 4.2.1), Libya is seen as a stepping-stone toward greater Turkish economic involvement in Africa.

Turkey's interest in Libya as a profit-generating venture appears to have increased with the deterioration of its domestic economy, which began around 2013 and

[145] Wehrey 2018, p. 196.
[146] Two examples from pro-UAE media: Taeima 2019; Shaaban & Rabie 2020.
[147] Wehrey 2018, pp. 198–201.
[148] Yüksel 2021, pp. 2–3.
[149] ICG 2020, p. 12.
[150] Vernhes 2021.
[151] *Ibid.*

accelerated after 2018.[152] The government has also come under pressure from the Turkish business lobby, seen as close to the AKP, to solve the problem of the pre-2011 Libyan contracts.

Ankara's influence on these economic issues appears to have grown in step with Turkey's military involvement, and Libyan concessions often seem to coincide with new Turkish assistance to the GNA/GNU. In April 2019, when the GNA needed Turkey to save it from Heftar's surprise attack, a joint Turkish-Libyan working group was set up to address the issue of compensation for pre-2011 Turkish investors.[153] Similarly, a week after the parliament's 2 January 2020 vote to intervene, the Turkish-Libyan Business Council reported that the issue was about to be solved imminently.[154] Ankara and the GNA finally reached a deal on 13 August 2020; days later, Turkey and Qatar agreed to train GNA forces.[155] However, Turkish business representatives continued to complain of sluggish implementation on the Libyan side.[156]

Turkey has continued to focus on investment opportunities under the GNA's successor, GNU. At a meeting with Erdoğan in April 2021, GNU Prime Minister Dbeibah signed additional agreements, noting that Turkish companies could look forward to "an important role in Libya's reconstruction".[157] Tellingly, when Dbeibah returned to Turkey in August 2021, Erdoğan was not flanked by military or intelligence officials, but by Turkey's Central Bank governor, the trade minister, and the minister of treasury and finance.[158] By late 2021, Turkish companies operated in several strategic economic sectors in Libya: cement factories, power generation and distribution, airports, trade/transport infrastructure, etc. Notably, Albayrak Group, a politically powerful construction and logistics conglomerate with close links to the AKP government, was becoming very active in Libya.[159]

On the other side of the ledger, Turkey's intervention in Libya carries a cost to the Turkish taxpayer. To date, however, it appears entirely bearable. The number of Turkish soldiers in Libya remains small, probably in the hundreds, and many expenses are covered by oil-rich Libya itself. Qatar reportedly provides additional support.[160]

[152] Spicer 2021; Tziarras & Harchaoui 2021.
[153] ICG 2020, p. 13.
[154] Çağlayan 2020.
[155] Şahin 2020; Özer 2020.
[156] *Daily Sabah* 2021.
[157] *Aljazeera* 2021b.
[158] *A-News* 2021.
[159] Vernhes 2021.
[160] ICG 2020, p. 13.

4.3 Means and actions

Turkey has pursued its interests in Libya using diverse methods, tailored to the requirements of the day. While much of Turkey's involvement in Libya has been informal or clandestine, Ankara has also had opportunities to formalise its involvement and extend support in full view. Notably, UN recognition of the GNA and GNU governments in Tripoli has facilitated overt Turkish assistance and helped Ankara make the case that its intervention is lawful, although military support for Libyan groups remains banned by the UN arms embargo.

The following section describes Turkey's activities in Libya across three fields:

- Military activities since 2019, including warfighting, arms provision, and training programmes;
- Political-informational activities, including diplomatic and media support;
- Economic-humanitarian activities, including commercial investments, economic development support, and humanitarian aid.

4.3.1 Military activities since 2019

Although Turkey had funnelled weapons and other types of support to Libya before 2019, that year saw Ankara step up its involvement through two successive rounds of escalation: in April 2019, and in December 2019.

When Heftar's forces attacked in April 2019, the the GNA approached Turkey with a request for arms and equipment.[161] The Turkish government swiftly began to deliver "combat drones, rockets and armoured vehicles", as well as "Turkish technicians to operate this equipment and train Libyan fighters in its use."[162] Steps were taken to conceal the traffic, but many deliveries could nonetheless be traced by the media and by UN investigators, in part because Turkey's Libyan partner militias had a habit of flaunting their new equipment on social media. In July 2019, GNA leaders acknowledged that they were receiving weapons from Turkey.[163]

On 18 May 2019, for example, the Moldovan-flagged ship MV *Amazon*, which was sailing from Turkey, offloaded "a large consignment" of BMC *Kirpi* mine-resistant, ambush-protected armoured personnel carriers in the Port of Tripoli.[164] The vehicles were delivered to two anti-Heftar commanders, one of them a Misratan militant sanctioned by the UN.[165] Although the *Amazon* had sought to conceal its movements, the shipment was widely publicised in Libya .[166] The GNA

[161] UN S/2019/914, p. 20.
[162] ICG 2020, p. 17.
[163] UN S/2019/914, p. 20.
[164] *Ibid*., p. 21.
[165] *Ibid*., pp. 21–2; UN Security Council n/d.
[166] Magdy 2019.

later confirmed to UN rapporteurs that the *Kirpis* had been procured from Turkey.[167]

Between May and August 2019, Turkey also delivered an unknown number of domestically produced *Bayraktar* TB2 armed drones to assist the GNA-linked forces.[168] A team of Turkish nationals was reportedly flown into Libya at approximately the same time, led by a major-general, and was assessed by UN investigators to be "deployed to operate and maintain the *Bayraktar* TB2."[169]

Introduced in Turkish service in 2014, the *Bayraktar* is a large unmanned aircraft with a 12 metre wingspan. It is reported as having a maximum range of 150 km and can loiter over the battlefield up to 27 hours, carrying up to 75 kg of precision-guided weapons.[170] Produced by a company with ties to the presidential family, the *Bayraktar* has been an export success and is heavily promoted by the Turkish government as a defence industry showpiece, often with reference to its strong performance in Syria.

Starting in May 2019, Turkey also began to deploy small numbers of Arabic-speaking Turkmen fighters recruited in Syria to serve as interpreters and support staff for the Turkish advisers. At that stage, the Syrians were not involved in frontline combat.[171]

Formal intervention

In winter 2019, with GNA defences once again faltering after the loss of several *Bayraktar* drones and an influx of Russian Wagner mercenaries, Turkey took a significant step up the escalation ladder by announcing a formal military deployment. Agreed with the GNA in November 2019, elements of the intervention appeared to be under way even before the decision was formally approved by the Turkish parliament on 2 January 2020.

According to the Turkish security expert Metin Gürcan, the Turkish military was instructed in December 2019 to organise the rapid dispatch to Libya of "two or three naval underwater assault and defence teams and a company from the Turkish Marine Brigade", comprising around 100 soldiers. The mission was to be "limited to providing training and consultancy services to the GNA without any combat mission".[172] In all likelihood, Turkey wanted to improve the monitoring and protection of ports and shipping, as it prepared to move additional forces and equipment into Libya.

[167] UN S/2019/914, p. 22.
[168] *Ibid.*, pp. 34–5, 296–9.
[169] *Ibid.*, p. 298.
[170] Muczyński 2021.
[171] ICG 2020, p. 22.
[172] Gürcan 2019.

Following this initial deployment, the Turkish intervention unfolded to reach full scale over a few months. According to the International Crisis Group, at least four cargo ships that were thought to provide a "sizeable qualitative and quantitative increase in military equipment" arrived in Tripoli and Misrata between January and March 2020.[173] In all, Turkey sent "hundreds of advisors and officers, self-propelled artillery, tanks, trucks, counter-battery radars, surveillance and armed drones, and naval frigates with helicopters."

Importantly, Turkish officers also took an active role in leading the battles waged by their Libyan and Syrian clients. Turkey's commanders were reportedly based offshore on a frigate, where they controlled aerial targeting with little input from GNA leaders.[174]

Air defence systems and drones

One of Turkey's major contributions to the pro-GNA campaign was its introduction of advanced systems capable of neutralising the LAAF's air superiority.

Starting in January 2020, Turkey deployed domestically-produced *Korkut* 35 mm self-propelled anti-aircraft guns, short range missiles, and upgraded medium-range MIM-23 *Hawk* air defence systems at the Mitiga (Tripoli) and Misrata airports.[175] Although the *Hawk* is an old system, dating to the 1950s, the upgraded version deployed by Turkey proved effective against the Emirati-provided, Chinese-made *Wing Loong* drones used by Heftar's forces. By April, Turkey had reportedly deployed a surveillance plane and staged demonstrative military exercises with F-16 fighter jets in Libyan air space.[176]

Simultaneously, Turkey moved two frigates to Libya's western coast. The *G* or *Gabya* class frigate is a modernised Turkish version of the US *Oliver Hazard Perry* class guided missile frigate, equipped with medium-range air defence systems.

Together, the land-based systems and frigates created an overlapping air-defence umbrella covering the coastal region all the way from the Tunisian border through Tripoli to Sirte, effectively negating the LAAF's dominance in the air.[177] A third frigate of the same type was reportedly deployed to Libya in June.[178]

In April 2020, the LAAF spokesperson, Major-General Ahmed al-Mismari, claimed that one of the Turkish frigates had fired a missile toward Ajailat, near Sabratha in north-western Libya, terming it a "dangerous development" though

[173] ICG 2020, pp. 17.
[174] Wehrey 2020, pp. 34–5.
[175] UN S/2021/229, pp. 16, 21, 142–3. According to some reports, Turkey has also dispatched another domestically produced surface-to-air missile system, the HİSAR-A. Fishman & Hiney 2020.
[176] ICG 2020, pp. 17–18.
[177] UN S/2021/229, p. 16 (figure 1).
[178] *Al-Arabiya* 2020.

there had been no casualties. In fact, photographic evidence released in support of these claims showed the remains of a RIM-66E-05 surface-to-air missile, likely aimed at a hostile aircraft.[179]

Although Turkey had deployed *Bayraktar* TB2 drones to Libya even before the formalisation of its intervention in January 2020, it now ramped up their use against the LAAF in what UN Special Representative Ghassan Salamé termed "the largest drone war in the world".[180] Select drone camera footage was released on-line as propaganda, to demonstrate the *Bayraktar* system's efficiency.

In one notable instance, *Bayraktar* drones helped Libyan and Syrian fighters drive Heftar's forces from the al-Watiya Air Base, where they captured a "relatively intact" Emirati-origin *Pantsir* S1; after being hauled away by a Libyan militia, it was placed under Turkish control.[181] In June 2020, the *Pantsir* was spirited out of Libya on a US cargo plane to Ramstein Air Base in Germany for further study.[182]

The combination of measures and resources deployed by Turkey – planning and coordination, an air defence umbrella, Syrian mercenaries, and high-intensity drone warfare – proved effective. Within a few months of the Turkish parliament's vote, the LAAF had been forced to retreat.

Although the mix of capabilities used in Libya was unique, the intervention copied certain methods that had first been tried out in north-western Syria, where Turkey engages in a proxy conflict with Russian-backed Syrian government forces. The same tools would later be used in yet another theatre, when Turkey deployed specialists, Syrian mercenaries, and drones to fight alongside Azerbaijan in autumn 2020.[183]

Syrian mercenaries

Turkey did not deploy a conventional ground force to Libya, apart from special forces and various niche capabilities. Instead, the intervention relied on Libyan militias and on Syrian fighters, who began to be deployed under Turkish command and supervision already in December 2019.

In January 2020, Libyan officials estimated that Turkey had sent about 2,000 Syrians; two months later, US and UN officials placed their number at 4,500.[184] In mid-2020, the US Africa Command cited an estimate of 5,000.[185] The number appears to have remained reasonably steady since then. UN investigators stated in 2021 that some 5,000 Syrian mercenaries are, at any given moment, operating in

[179] *Al-Marsad* 2020.
[180] Gatopoulos 2020.
[181] UN S/2021/229, p. 27–8.
[182] Al-Atrush 2021.
[183] Hedenskog *et al.* 2020.
[184] ICG 2020, p. 20.
[185] Pentagon 2020a, p. 35.

Libya in support of Turkey's policies.[186] Pro-Heftar sources have offered slightly higher numbers.[187]

The Syrians were recruited from Turkish proxy militias in northern Syria, where Ankara sponsors and controls a network of Arab and Turkmen rebel groups known collectively as the Syrian National Army (SNA). The SNA was established by Turkey in 2017 as part of its efforts to control and reorganise the local rebel movement, after having intervened in northern Syria in summer 2016.[188]

The SNA is an evolved version of the older, less structured militia constellation known as the Free Syrian Army (FSA), a political umbrella or brand that emerged in 2011 as part of the uprising against President Bashar al-Assad. The FSA name continues to be used in parallel by most SNA groups, and the SNA is ostensibly subordinate to the Syrian opposition's Turkey-based exile government. In practice, however, the SNA operates under Turkish command.

SNA factions that have been reported – accurately or not – to supply fighters or other personnel for Turkey's Libyan intervention include:[189]

- The Sultan Murad Division
- The Sultan Suleiman Shah Division (known as al-Amshat)
- The Moutassem Division
- Failaq al-Sham
- Ahrar al-Sharqiyeh
- The Hamza Division (known as al-Hamzat)
- Suqour al-Sham

The first three factions, which are all seen as very close to Turkey, are rumoured to have been particularly active in recruiting for the Libyan deployment.

Many rebel groups that are now in the SNA previously received financial and/or military support from other nations than Turkey, such as the United States, France, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Qatar, or Saudi Arabia.[190] For example, the Hamza and Moutassem factions were in 2016–17 funded by the US government as part of a Pentagon programme to train FSA fighters to combat the Islamic State in Syria.[191] But the SNA also includes groups that were rejected by the United States and its European allies, though not by Turkey or Qatar. For example, Ahrar al-Sharqiyeh was involved in a tense standoff with US forces in Syria in 2016, and

[186] UN S/2021/229, p. 33.
[187] ICG 2020, p. 20.
[188] Lund 2018, pp. 29-30, 53-4.
[189] Soylu & Aswad 2019; Abdessattar Ibrahim & Hammo 2020.
[190] Lund 2017.
[191] Pentagon 2018, pp. 62-3.

the group was later sanctioned by the US government on charges of murdering Syrian Kurdish civilians, looting civilian property, and having extremist ties.[192]

However, although the SNA clearly contains problematic factions, the persistent attempts by pro-Heftar/anti-Erdoğan groups to portray the Turkey-backed Syrians in Libya as members of al-Qaeda or the Islamic State should be considered propaganda. Side-switching has been common throughout the Syrian civil war and some individual fighters may well have been part of a jihadist faction in the past, but doctrinaire Salafi-jihadists are largely absent from the SNA coalition on both leadership and group levels. Syria's jihadists have typically disparaged the SNA as an "infidel" mercenary force, accusing it of fighting for money. Many SNA factions do, however, subscribe to less extreme versions of Sunni Islamist ideology. For example, Failaq al-Sham was established by members and allies of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood.[193]

The role of SADAT

The mechanics of the Turkish-led mercenary operation remain murky, but according to open source reporting, US military officials, and UN investigators, it was organised by a Turkish private military company, SADAT International Defence Consultancy.[194] According to the US military's Africa Command, "several dozen military trainers" from SADAT deployed to Libya in 2020 "to train both GNA-aligned militias and Syrian fighters" and remained responsible for "supervision and payment" of the Syrians.[195]

SADAT was founded by Adnan Tanrıverdi, a retired Turkish brigadier-general known to espouse Islamist and Turkish-nationalist beliefs. The company presents itself as an ideological organisation working to strengthen the security forces of Muslim countries and help them resist hostile Western, Israeli, Russian or other encroachment, under Turkish leadership. To this end, it offers a variety of services, including advanced military and security training, courses in guerrilla warfare, and arms procurement. The company is led and staffed by former Turkish military officers and has been dogged by accusations of operating as a front for Turkey's National Intelligence Organisation, MİT. It rejects these allegations.[196]

The head of SADAT, Tanrıverdi, was appointed as a security adviser to Erdoğan in 2016, but he resigned from the advisory position in January 2020, just days after the start of the Libya intervention. In announcing his resignation, Tanrıverdi cited his advanced age (he had turned 75) and recent "smear campaigns", apparently in reference to media controversies about his position and his religious views.[197]

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[192] *Orient News* 2016; US Department of the Treasury 2021.
[193] Moussa 2020.
[194] UN S/2021/229, p. 33; Pentagon 2020a, p. 35.
[195] Pentagon 2020a, p. 35.
[196] Tuncel 2021; SADAT (n/d).
[197] Tuncel 2021. *Duvar English* 2020.

Whether the resignation was linked to SADAT's new role in Libya remains unclear.

While solid evidence remains scarce, SADAT has also been connected to Turkish operations in Syria. SADAT may, additionally, have been involved in the September 2020 deployment of Turkish-led Syrian mercenaries in support of Azerbaijan, following the same template as the Syria and Libya interventions.[198]

SADAT's apparent role as a flexible and deniable instrument for Turkish interventions abroad mirrors that of the Wagner Group in Russian policy, but Turkey vehemently rejects the idea that SADAT or its Syrian fighters could be viewed as "mercenaries" of the Wagner kind. In the Turkish view, the Syrians are contract soldiers legally present in Libya as part of a deployment invited by the UN-recognised government in Tripoli.[199]

Illicit arms deliveries and military training

Like its opponents, Turkey routinely violates the UN arms embargo on Libya, in place since 2011. UN investigators have published detailed information on arms transfers from Turkey and the use by Ankara-linked armed groups of Turkish-manufactured equipment. Some of these deliveries may have been coordinated with or funded by Qatar.

According to UN investigators, Turkey initiated an air bridge to GNA territory in May 2020. The UN team tracked a monthly average of eleven suspicious cargo flights from Turkey to airports in western Libya from May until December 2020, using *Airbus* A400M or C-130 *Hercules* cargo planes belonging to the Turkish Air Force. Several Qatari flights took place during the same period.[200]

Mainly, however, Turkey appears to be shipping arms to western Libya by sea. This dependence on maritime transport puts Turkey at a disadvantage vis-à-vis its rivals, who can supply the LAAF across the Libyan-Egyptian border, since the UN Security Council authorises member states to enforce the embargo at sea but has made no provision for the interdiction or inspection of cargo delivered by air or land. The EU has established a naval mission patrolling against Libyan embargo violations, Operation IRINI, which threatens Turkey's ability to supply its clients in Tripoli and Misrata.[201] To overcome this problem, the Turkish Navy provides armed escorts for ships transporting weapons to Libya.

In a 2021 report, a UN panel investigating breaches of the Libyan arms embargo documented the case of the M/V *Cirkin*, a Tanzanian-flagged cargo vessel that appears to have smuggled illicit arms from Turkey to Misrata.

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[198] Hedenskog *et al.* 2020.
[199] Aslan 2021.
[200] UN S/2021/229, pp. 180–90.
[201] Kirechu 2021

Sailing from Istanbul's Haydarpaşa Port on 24 May 2020, the *Cirkin* originally declared its destination to be Alexandria, Egypt, but then switched course, alleging a new destination in Tunisia and changing its name to *Kin*. Conspicuously, it was escorted by two Turkish naval vessels until reaching Misrata, where its cargo was offloaded in a concealed fashion on 28 May. On 7 June, the *Cirkin* repeated the same voyage, escorted by three Turkish frigates registered as providing associated support to NATO's Operation Sea Guardian, a maritime security mission in the Mediterranean.[202]

When approached by warships serving in Operation IRINI, the Turkish frigates refused to allow the inspection of the *Cirkin*'s cargo, stating that the vessel had been chartered by the Turkish government, sailed under its protection, and was transporting medical supplies. Soon after, the French *La Fayette*-class frigate *Courbet*, also part of Operation Sea Guardian, approached. Franco-Turkish relations were already very poor at the time, due to tensions over Libya and Turkish actions in the eastern Mediterranean. Rather than allow an inspection, the *Oruçreis*, a Turkish *Barbaros*-class frigate, repeatedly illuminated the *Courbet* with its fire control radar – the equivalent of aiming a gun. The French warship backed off.[203] Once the *Cirkin* had anchored at Misrata, its cargo "was unloaded in secrecy with the port 'locked down' for all other commercial activities".[204]

The French government condemned Turkey's actions as "extremely aggressive". Turkey denied the French account.[205] UN investigators concurred with the French version and concluded that the *Cirkin* and the frigates escorting it had violated the UN embargo. As part of the fallout from the incident, France left Operation Sea Guardian in protest, saying it wished to "shine a light on the fundamental ambiguity of an anti-smuggling operation that contains smugglers".[206]

Turkey also provides its Libyan partners with training in cooperation with Qatar, which likely helps fund the endeavour. To this end, a tripartite Libyan-Turkish-Qatari agreement was signed in August 2020.[207] Following the agreement, Turkish military advisers and trainers began to deploy to several locations in Libya, including Khums and Tripoli; Libyans are also trained in Turkey. The programme includes a two-month basic infantry training course as well as a range of specialised classes for frogman, rocket artillery, air defence, bomb disposal, and other roles. Libyans are also offered academic military education at the National Defence University in Istanbul. In November 2020, Turkish state media reported

[202] UN S/2021/229, pp. 171–3.
[203] Tenré 2020; UN S/2021/229, pp. 172–3.
[204] UN S/2021/229, p. 20.
[205] Tenré 2020.
[206] Guibert 2020.
[207] Özer 2020.

that more than 2,000 Libyans had graduated the programme, with hundreds more enrolled at that time.[208]

4.3.2 Political and informational activities

Turkey provides various forms of political and diplomatic support to its Libyan partners, wages an energetic media campaign on their behalf in several languages, and is actively involved in trying to shape international discussions about the conflict.

Politics and diplomacy

Turkey's Libya policy appears to be closely directed by Erdoğan himself and a small circle of trusted advisors. The president's chief representative on Libyan affairs is Emrullah İşler, a former Turkish deputy prime minister and member of the AKP, who has served as the president's special envoy to Libya since October 2014. İşler's background as a Muslim theologian and a preacher has reinforced the perception that Turkey primarily supports Islamist forces in Libya and views its policy through a religious prism.[209]

In its diplomatic outreach, Turkey stresses that it backs the legal, UN-recognised government of Libya (GNA, then GNU) and casts Heftar and his supporters as "coup-plotters" or "putschists".

Apart from engaging Russia, the EU, and other external actors diplomatically, Turkey also uses its political clout inside Libya to rally fighters against the LAAF and to facilitate conflict resolution within the west-Libyan camp. That is not to say that Turkey fully controls all political or military forces in western Libya, or even the GNU. Ankara's influence on these actors is significant, but its extent remains unclear and it is certainly not unlimited.

Media support

Turkey promotes the interests and narratives of its Libyan partners both internationally and inside Libya, through a variety of media outlets in several languages. For example, the official news agency *Anadolu Agency* has an Arabic service that is frequently quoted in sympathetic Arabic newspapers and online media. The Turkish Radio and Television Corporation, TRT, also operates an Arabic-language channel available via satellite, called *TRT Arabi*. In addition, formally independent Turkish media may function as semi-official mouthpieces of the Ankara government. Such is the case with the English-language newspaper *Daily Sabah*, which publishes an Arabic-language version online.

[208] *Anadolu Agency* 2020; *Daily Sabah* 2020d.
[209] Hogg 2014.

Since 2011, Istanbul has come to serve as a major hub for Arab dissidents, activists, and journalists aligned with the Qatari-Turkish camp in regional politics. It is a diverse group, but heavily slanted toward Islamists and Muslim Brotherhood-linked factions.[210]

The city is home to several Arabic-language satellite television channels operated by exiled political groups and aimed at audiences in Egypt, Iraq, Syria, etc. They can normally be counted on to also support Turkish narratives on Libya.

At least three Libyan satellite television channels broadcast from Istanbul:

- *Libia al-Ahrar* (formerly *Libia li-Kull al-Ahrar*), which moved to Istanbul from Doha in 2017 and is now under Muslim Brotherhood management;
- *Al-Tanasuh*, an Islamist channel run by a son of the Tripoli-based Mufti of Libya, al-Sadeq al-Ghariyani;
- *Febrayer* (formerly *Naba*), which is connected to remnants of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, a former jihadist organisation.[211]

As might be expected, pro-Heftar media describes the Turkey-backed media platforms as terrorist propaganda centres. All three were included on a list of eleven television channels banned by the Heftar-linked east-Libyan authorities in July 2019 for allegedly "justifying terrorism" and "threatening social peace".[212]

While Turkey enjoys some influence on the Arabic media scene, it pales in comparison to the reach of Qatar-controlled media. The Qatari government controls one of the Arab World's most watched television channels, *Aljazeera*, whose Arabic-language coverage (unlike the more restrained and professional sister channel, *Aljazeera English*) is vehemently partisan. Qatar-aligned media also includes the television channel *Al-Arabi* and the newspapers *Al-Arabi Al-Jadeed* and *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*. They will often directly echo Turkey's views by reproducing *Anadolu* material.

4.3.3 Economic and humanitarian activities

Turkish pro-government media will regularly report on the generosity of the Turkish state agencies and humanitarian NGOs in Libya. In 2020, for example, the Turkish Defence Ministry was said to have sent unspecified amounts of medical supplies to help combat Covid-19 to its partners in Libya. In the same year, the Humanitarian Relief Foundation (İHH), an Istanbul-based Islamic NGO that works closely with Turkish authorities in several conflict zones, reported that it was assisting displaced civilians in Misrata.[213]

[210] Keddie 2020; Ayyash 2020.
[211] Lacher 2020, p. 46. On LIFG in the Gaddafi era, see Al-Tawil 2007, pp. 71–96.
[212] *Al-Arabiya* 2019; RSF 2019.
[213] Zorlu 2020; *Daily Sabah* 2020c.

Despite the positive coverage such initiatives receives in Turkish and Turkey-friendly media, most aid programmes seem to be small and local in scope. Public data from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs did not list Turkey as a contributor to UN-led aid operations in Libya at any point from the start of data collection in 2014 to 2021. Rather, the UN-coordinated humanitarian efforts in Libya are overwhelmingly financed by EU institutions and European nations and, to a lesser extent, by the United States.[214]

[214] UN OCHA n.d.

5 Conclusion

As stated in Chapter 1, this FOI report has sought to describe and analyse *why* and *how* Turkey has intervened in the Libyan civil war, by investigating (a) Turkey's aims and interests in Libya and (b) the means and actions deployed by the Turkish government in pursuit of those aims and interests; and to draw some tentative conclusions about the intervention's effect on Libya and on Turkish foreign policy going forward. It has also sought to provide necessary background on the Libyan conflict and Turkish foreign policy.

The present chapter will summarise the findings of that investigation, point by point, and concluding with a forward-looking analysis.

Why Turkey intervened: aims and interests

- Turkey's intervention was not motivated by any single goal, but by a combination of factors.
- Geopolitical interests and regional ambitions appear to have been key to the decision to intervene. These include the Erdoğan government's quest for prestige and regional power status; Libya's importance for Turkey's Middle Eastern allies and rivals; Turkey's use of the conflict to engage Russia and the EU; its interest in Libya as a gateway to African markets; and Libya's ability to support Turkish maritime claims.
- Other ideological and political factors, including the attachment of some Turkish groups to specific narratives or groups in Libya, appear to have played a limited role in Turkey's decision to intervene. Ideological and political factors were, however, important in shaping Turkey's early Libyan partnership choices, from which the current policy has evolved in a path-dependent fashion.
- Turkey seems determined to find ways to benefit economically from the intervention. This motivation may have grown more salient over time due to Turkey's mounting domestic economic distress.
- In all likelihood, Turkey has also operated on a principle of sunk costs, hoping to protect and make use of already-invested resources.

How Turkey intervened: means and actions

- Turkey has used a variety of means to intervene in Libya, moving flexibly between state and substate/informal means of engagement.
- The military intervention launched in 2019–20 was swift and effective, building on an ad hoc combination of existing assets, including Libyan client militias, Turkish military resources, and a model of drone-and-mercenary warfare first developed in Syria. While unconventional in its overall form, the intervention did in fact rely heavily on conventional capabilities such as air defence systems, sensors, and warships.

- The Syrian mercenary contingent appears to have been organised by SADAT, a military contractor operating in the intersection between government and private business. It parallels the role of the Wagner Group in Russia.
- The political-informational campaign on behalf of Turkey's Libyan clients has used Turkish state and pro-government media, and has benefitted from a more extensive Arabic-language campaign overseen by Turkey's ally, Qatar.
- The intervention has not had a major economic component, likely reflecting a limited capability and Turkey's domestic economic troubles. Turkey's own military activities appear to have been subsidised by Libyan and Qatari financing.

Results of the intervention

By deploying in Libya, Turkey has successfully demonstrated that the model for interventions in low-intensity conflicts that it developed in northern Syria after 2016 can be applied elsewhere, including at a distance and even across the Mediterranean Sea. The initial 2019–20 operation to establish Turkey's foothold was swift, surprising, and effective, marrying conventional and unconventional capabilities in innovative ways. Two years later, Turkey appears to have scored several clear successes:

- The intervention turned the war around by securing the GNA's hold on Tripoli and forcing LAAF troops to retreat to central Libya, at limited cost to Turkey;
- It enhanced Ankara's regional standing by demonstrating that Turkey is capable of rapid and effective interventions, even beyond its immediate neighbourhood;
- It deepened Turkey's influence in western Libya and over the GNA/GNU, the favoured interlocutor of the United States and the EU;
- It was instrumental in persuading the GNA/GNU to endorse Turkey's maritime claims;
- It demonstrated the effectiveness of Turkey's drones-and-mercenaries model of foreign warfighting, and burnished the reputation of the Turkish arms industry, particularly as relates to unmanned aerial vehicles;
- It increased Ankara's leverage over two key rivals, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, which likely contributed to a partial rapprochement between Turkey and these nations since 2020;
- It created a new arena for high-level engagement with Russia, in which Turkey was able to seize the initiative and operate on terms largely favourable to itself, which has likely been beneficial to Ankara's general position vis-à-vis Moscow.

On the down side, Turkey's 2019–20 wager in Libya failed to bring the conflict to a conclusion or even to a sustainable and reliably pro-Turkish status quo. Libya's continued instability will require a continued Turkish investment of resources. Several weaknesses or negative effects of the Turkish approach can be discerned:

- The costs of Turkey's involvement may grow over time, or as a result of hostile escalation, which could kindle domestic opposition or lead to military overstretch, especially of niche capabilities;
- The Turkish deployment is numerically small and dependent on UN-sanctioned maritime supply lines, leaving it vulnerable to a serious escalation by Russia, Egypt, or other state actors;
- The intervention and the maritime agreement have inflicted political and reputational damage, especially on the Turkey-EU relationship;
- The Libyan experience may encourage the further radicalisation of Erdoğan-era Turkey's strategic culture, which was already tending toward unilateralism and high-risk gambles;
- The UN peace process remains ineffective and there is no evidence that Erdoğan has any other endgame in mind, which leaves Turkey without an exit strategy and at risk of mission creep.

In sum, then, the intervention as it played out in 2019 and 2020 was successful on its own terms and has furthered many of Turkey's main aims and interests in Libya. But the conflict is far from over, and Turkey's increased investment in it has created new risks.

Future prospects for Libya and Turkish policy

The ebb and flow of violence in Libya is intimately connected to the role of foreign actors. Most new rounds of escalation have been preceded by an influx of foreign support, typically by one side first and then matched by the other.

Turkey has rarely been the first mover. It has, however, met each of the major foreign-backed LAAF offensives with a counter-escalation, as in 2014 and in early and late 2019. Turkey's intervention in late 2019 did not merely mirror the pro-LAAF camp's actions. Instead, Ankara suddenly moved several steps up the ladder, out-escalating its rivals through an overt military intervention. A few months later, however, Ankara declined to test Russian and Egyptian red lines, instead agreeing to restrain its clients and freeze the fighting, as a basis for renewed talks. Turkey had by then achieved its immediate goal of saving the GNA, and was unwilling to risk state-on-state warfare. Turkey may also have lacked faith in the GNA coalition's ability to push on toward eastern Libya, and Erdoğan may have been enticed by the possibility of high-level Turkish-Russian deal making and a Libyan peace process under Turkish influence.

Two years after the intervention, Libya remains divided, only along new lines. Since the failure of the planned 24 December 2021 election, all sides seem to

expect that some form of violent conflict will resume, at some point. If or when that happens, the violence will not necessarily be on the same scale as that seen in 2019–20, since, at this moment, no external actor appears to be keen on a return to major hostilities.

As things stand, and going by its past behaviour, Turkey seems very unlikely to pursue a military solution to the conflict in the face of Russian and Egyptian resistance. It may deploy military means (or the threat thereof) for coercive effect, but it will probably shy away from challenging the core interests of Russia and Egypt. It is, however, very likely to actively defend its position and respond in kind to hostile escalation, if possible. Ankara is also very likely to remain invested in Libya's economy and politics, developing local assets with an eye to future financial rewards. It will certainly remain protective of the 2019 maritime agreement. Turkey is also likely to seek the establishment of one or more military bases in Libya, probably by developing existing facilities in port cities like Misrata or Khoms or air bases like al-Watiya.

Internally in western Libya, Turkey may hope to expand its influence over the GNU and key militias, such as those in Tripoli, and to fashion a better-organised and more durable pro-Turkish order. However, its own experiences with the FSA/SNA rebels in Syria offer little reason for optimism in that regard. Ultimately, Turkey is unlikely to want to jeopardise basic stability within the GNU camp by pushing too hard for structural changes.

Erdoğan will continue to seek European and US support for his policies, including by pointing to the GNU as the legitimate offspring of a UN-led peace process. The focus of his diplomatic energy is nonetheless likely to be on bilateral bargaining with Putin, Sisi, and other actors with ground-level influence. Turkey's relationship with the LAAF's backers will be critical to conflict management going forward, but it is unlikely to suffice for the achievement of a peaceful political settlement. Although Egypt and the United Arab Emirates are important actors in Libya, Turkey is likely to prefer working along a Turkish-Russian track, when possible, due to Russia's stronger political hand, the added prestige it may confer, the already-established relationship between Erdoğan and Putin, and their shared experience of crisis diplomacy.

In the absence of major policy changes on either side of the Libyan war, the most plausible outcome in the medium term remains a semi-frozen conflict, in which low-level tension occasionally gives way to externally induced flare-ups of heavy fighting. Such an outcome would not necessarily be sustainable in the longer run, however, considering the fluid international environment and the uncertain viability of the currently dominant militia coalitions in both western and eastern Libya. A renewal of serious infighting in western Libya could be very damaging to Turkey's position. Conversely, the passing of Khalifa Heftar or some other disruptive event on the LAAF side might benefit Turkey.

The perceived success of the Libyan intervention will likely contribute to lowering the Erdoğan government's threshold for the use of military force in other crises. In fact, the template for intervention used first in Syria, and then in Libya, has already been replicated once more, in the South Caucasus in 2020. Turkish leaders may therefore be prone to choose an interventionist/military response in forthcoming crises, too. Turkey's geopolitical environment offers both risks and opportunities in that regard, with a long list of potential future hotspots, including, but not limited to, Iraq, Cyprus, and Bosnia. In all of these theatres, however, some combination of resource constraints and resolute opposition by stronger state actors could plausibly restrain Turkey from indulging its growing appetite for intervention. Even if Erdoğan has played his cards well in Libya, his country suffers from serious internal problems, is now embroiled in several simultaneous conflicts, and may be vulnerable to Russian escalation in Libya, Syria, and the South Caucasus.

Ukraine: A game changer?

As this report was finalised in spring 2022, new crises erupted in Libya and – on a far larger scale – in eastern Europe. On 24 February, Russian military forces invaded Ukraine, triggering a major international security crisis. The United States, the European Union, and like-minded nations all over the world have responded by providing military and economic support to the Kyiv government and by imposing unprecedentedly tough sanctions on the Russian economy.

The invasion of Ukraine, and Russia's attempt to force a new security architecture on Europe, have virtually collapsed an already difficult Western-Russian relationship. At the same time, the conflict has highlighted Turkey's role in the Black Sea region and within NATO, as well as its complex relationship with Russia. While condemning the invasion, supporting Ukraine, and restricting naval passage through the Bosporus and Dardanelles straits, Turkey has also sought to limit the clash with Russia. For example, Ankara has been critical of US and EU sanctions, and, unlike other NATO members, it will not close its air space to Russian planes.

In parallel to the developments in Ukraine, and overshadowed by them, the situation in Libya continued to deteriorate through spring 2022, following the failure of the UN peace process. The re-emergence of a Haftar-backed cabinet challenging the GNU, this time with the support of some Misrata and Tripoli forces, has led to renewed polarisation and sabre-rattling.

The war in Ukraine is a major international event, and it is certain to influence events in Libya, too. For example, Western powers could decide to push back against Russia's role in Libya, in ways that they have not done before. They may be less tolerant than before of Russian-Turkish understandings, but perhaps also more prepared to work with Turkey, in so far as that allows them counter Russian-aligned forces. Russia's ability to influence Libya's warring forces could, meanwhile, suffer from its preoccupation with Ukraine and from the effect of Western sanctions, even as Libya may gain greater strategic significance to Moscow in a

more conflict-prone international climate. As for Turkey, the government in Ankara may reason that the tense international situation calls for greater caution, to avoid additional friction with Russia at a sensitive moment. Conversely, however, it may also see an opportunity to press forward in Libya while Russia is under pressure.

Whatever the case, Turkey's ongoing intervention in Libya will, from this point on, evolve in a new international context.

6 Timeline of major events in Libya

1911–12		Italy seizes Ottoman holdings in North Africa
1934		Italy merges North African colonies, forms Libya
1943–51		Libya under British-French and UN control
1951	24 Dec	UN grants independence to Kingdom of Libya
1969	1 Sep	Gaddafi seizes power, abolishes monarchy
1977	2 Mar	Gaddafi abolishes republic, declares Jamahiriya
1978–87		Libyan war in Chad
1986	14–15 Apr	U.S. Air Force bombs Libya
2003	12 Sep	UN Security Council ends sanctions on Libya
2011	14 Jan	Tunisian president falls; “Arab Spring” spreads
	11 Feb	Egyptian president falls
	mid-Feb	Uprising against Gaddafi begins
	26 Feb	UNSCR 1970 imposes arms embargo
	17 Mar	UNSCR 1973 authorises protection of civilians
	19 Mar	US-led intervention begins
	Aug	Tripoli captured by rebels
	20 Oct	Sirte captured by rebels, Gaddafi killed
	31 Oct	NATO ends mission in Libya
2012	7 July	Parliamentary elections
	11 Sep	US ambassador killed by Islamists in Benghazi
2013	3 Jul	Sisi overthrows Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt
2014	Feb	Heftar denounces Tripoli leadership
	Spring	Major fighting, east-west split crystallises
	25 Jun	House of Representatives (HoR) elected
	Jul	Islamist groups seize much of Benghazi
	Aug	HoR majority leaves Tripoli for Tobruk
	Sep	Tripoli groups declare creation of GNS
2015	Mar	HoR appoints Heftar head of LAAF
	May–Jun	Islamic State seizes Sirte

	17 Dec	UN-brokered Skhirat agreement creates GNA
2016	Mar	GNA seated in Tripoli, replacing GNS
	Spring	USA, Europeans intervene against Islamic State
	14 Jun	UNSCR 2292 authorises searching ships for arms
	Nov–Dec	Misrata forces expel Islamic State from Sirte
2017	Jul	LAAF declares victory over Islamists in Benghazi
2018	Jun	LAAF seizes Derna, controls eastern Libya
	Oct	Russian Wagner forces begin to operate in Libya
2019	Jan	LAAF expands into southern Libya
	4 Apr	LAAF launches major offensive against GNA
	Apr–May	Clandestine Turkish intervention escalates
	Aug–Sep	Wagner forces escalate combat involvement
	26 Nov	Turkey-GNA deals; Turkish intervention begins
2020	2 Jan	Turkish parliament approves deployment in Libya
	Jan	LAAF seizes Sirte from Misratan-GNA militias
	May	LAAF begins retreat toward Sirte-Jufra line
	May	Unmarked Russian fighter jets arrive in Libya
	Jun	GNA forces seize Tarhouna, LAAF in full retreat
	Jun	Egypt threatens intervention, war stalemated
	23 Oct	UN-brokered ceasefire, political talks to resume
2021	15 Mar	New GNU government sworn in, replaces GNA
	21 Sep	HoR withdraws confidence from GNA
	23 Dec	Elections planned for 24 December are cancelled

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