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The East Mediterranean and Regional Security: A Transatlantic Trialogue

COMPETING POWER SCHEMES OVER LIBYA AND THE CHALLENGE FOR EUROPE

Dorothee Schmid



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This report is part of The Eastern Mediterranean and Regional Security: A Transatlantic Trialogue series. The full series is available at www.fpri.org.

National Security Program Leadership

Director: Aaron Stein

Editing: Thomas J. Shattuck

Design: Natalia Kopytnik

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December 2020



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In May 2020, French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian coined the word “syrianisation” to describe the growing complexity of the conflict in Libya. He described the “Syrian scenario” of a proxy war involving more and more uncontrollable Islamic mercenaries and setting the ground for military escalation between Turkey and Russia. He also expressed his fears that this fierce competition for power between foreign actors would have very dire consequences for Europe.¹ While France pretends to speak on behalf of Europe, the European Union looks impotent as it is riddled by internal divisions, which always appear more acute when it comes to defining a strategic outlook. Libya is another especially hard test, as Europeans seem willing to engage, but fail to coordinate—to the point of antagonizing one another. Disagreements have taken an even bitter turn with Turkey’s aggressive moves in the Eastern Mediterranean, finally connecting different areas of conflict into a single strategic concern.

CONNECTING THE LIBYAN CONFLICT TO MIDDLE EASTERN DYNAMICS

Notwithstanding Muammar Gaddafi’s ambitions to be considered as a global leader in his time, the domestic political dynamics of Libya were immune to Middle East regional dynamics until the Arab Spring. An intervention by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) under the guise of the “responsibility to protect” accelerated the fall

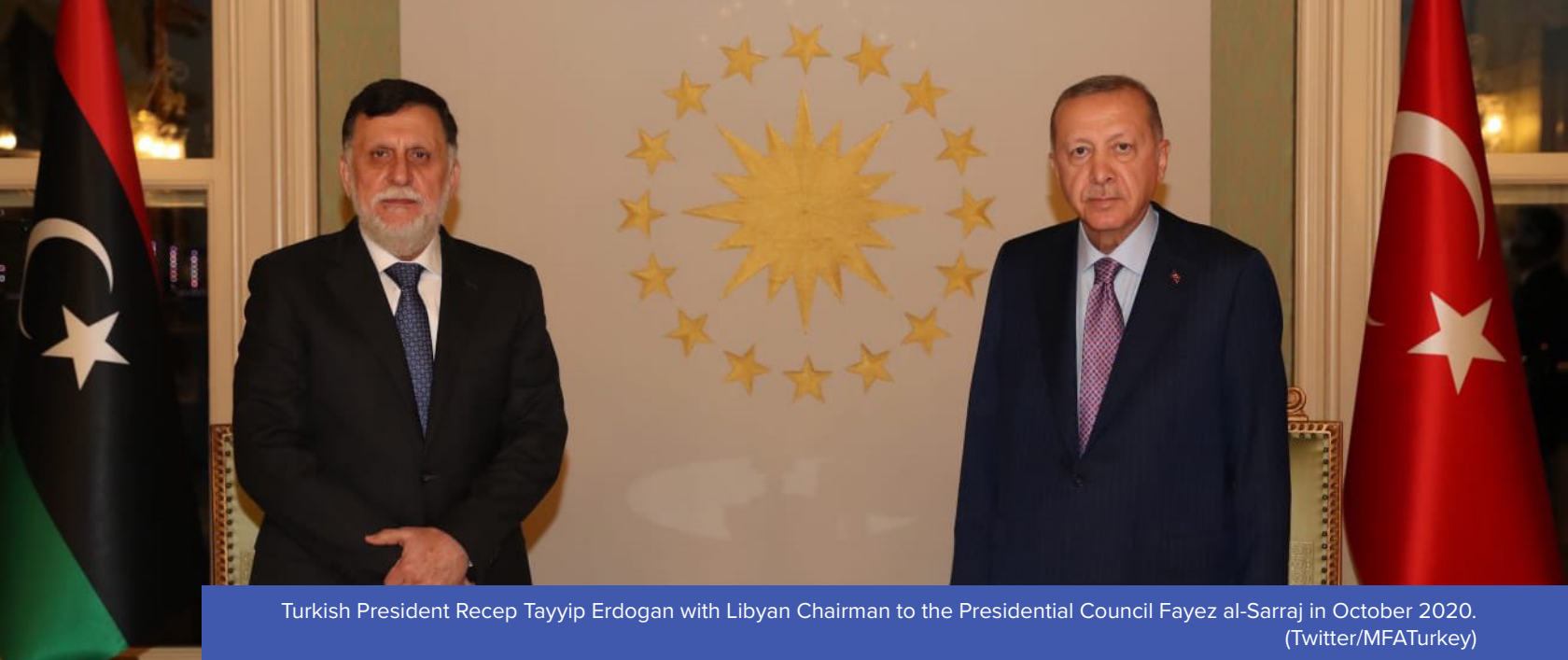
of the Libyan leader, provoking the collapse of state authorities and triggering civil war. The de facto divide of the country into three separate areas of governance, the volatility of the status, and motives of combating factions offered many opportunities for further external interference.

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Mimicking Syria? Russia’s Wider Interests in Libya

Russia is the most important external actor to have developed a Libyan agenda even though the Kremlin denies its involvement in the country. Russian-sponsored military contractor Wagner Group allegedly sent up to 1,200 mercenaries, and Moscow provided weapons to back Khalifa Haftar’s Libyan National Army (LNA), which is fighting the United Nations-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) of Fayez al-Sarraj. Supporting Haftar ensures the continuity of Russian options: the man was trained in the Soviet Union in the 1970s, knows Russian, and poses as the strong man against the Islamist threat.

¹ Hearing of Jean-Yves Le Drian at the French Senate, May 28, 2020, <https://www.senat.fr/presse/cp20200528.html>.



The nature and scope of Russia's Libya campaign differs from its commitment with the Syrian regime. In Libya, Moscow is looking to win new energy assets, as part of a global strategy to control the hydrocarbon market, and Libya is a piece of the puzzle to control supply to Europe.² Russia is more generally looking for strategic depth. Libya's long coastline and ports would be critical to consolidate its footprint in the Mediterranean, while creating new opportunities in Africa. Libya's current state of chaos also confirms Europe's inability to preserve or re-impose order in its neighborhood, which is by itself another gain for Russia, whose expansionist and revisionist policies in Eastern and Central Europe were systematically countered by the European Union.

Extension to the Eastern Mediterranean: Turkey's New Geopolitics

Turkey's appetite for action largely mirrors Russia's motivations in Libya. First, Ankara's support for the GNA is ideologically motivated by its pro-Muslim Brotherhood inclination, while Haftar is backed by Egypt and the United Arab Emirates—both of which are

hostile to President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's regional ambitions. Second, Ankara has, like Moscow, African ambitions that can only be served by its presence in Libya.³ Third, Turkey hopes to reap the economic dividends of its commitment to the GNA. Erdogan conceives military assistance to Sarraj as a commercial service: The GNA has allegedly paid \$12 billion for Turkish military protection, and the Turks also obtained compensation for some of the contracts lost when their flourishing businesses were repatriated overnight in 2011.

In a more exotic way, Sarraj signed a maritime deal redefining respective maritime zones between Libya and Turkey, encroaching over Greek and Cypriot waters. This unexpected development finalized the reintegration of Libya into Middle Eastern geopolitics. Turkey's increasingly aggressive behavior in the Eastern Mediterranean is widely interpreted by worried analysts as the implementation of *Mavi Vatan*, or "Blue homeland" doctrine, assuming that Turkey wants to control the three seas surrounding its mainland. This doctrine—formalized by a Turkish admiral in 2006—reemerged almost incidentally, yet

² Antonio Carboti, "Russian Energy Interests In Libya," *Mediterranean Affairs*, April 2, 2019.

³ Barin Kayaoglu, "Libya is only small part of Turkey's ambitious Africa ouverture," *al-Monitor*, January 27, 2020.

remains in line with Turkey's historical sense of threat. Erdogan's endorsement of this chauvinistic dogma confirms the revisionist turn in his foreign policy intentions.⁴

French Interference and the Connection with the Sahel

France has also interfered almost uninterruptedly, albeit in a covert manner, since then-President Nicolas Sarkozy assumed political leadership for the military intervention that toppled Gaddafi in 2011. The ensuing civil war left Paris embarrassed and willing to stay back, yet the rise of the Islamic State in Syria in 2014 alerted French intelligence, who feared Libya could become an incubator for radical jihadism in Africa. Paris had already deployed troops in the Sahel to contain Islamist groups, and, in 2016, several media reports revealed that French special forces and intelligence services secretly operated in Libya, avoiding open military engagement. By 2019, it became widely admitted that they clandestinely supported Haftar, in contradiction to Paris's official diplomatic position.⁵

NEW ALLIANCES IN THE MAKING?

The globalization of the Libyan conflict is shaking traditional alliances and forcing new communities of interests into military alignment. Yet, no stable security architecture has emerged yet, as leading powers are still uncertain about an adequate level of engagement.

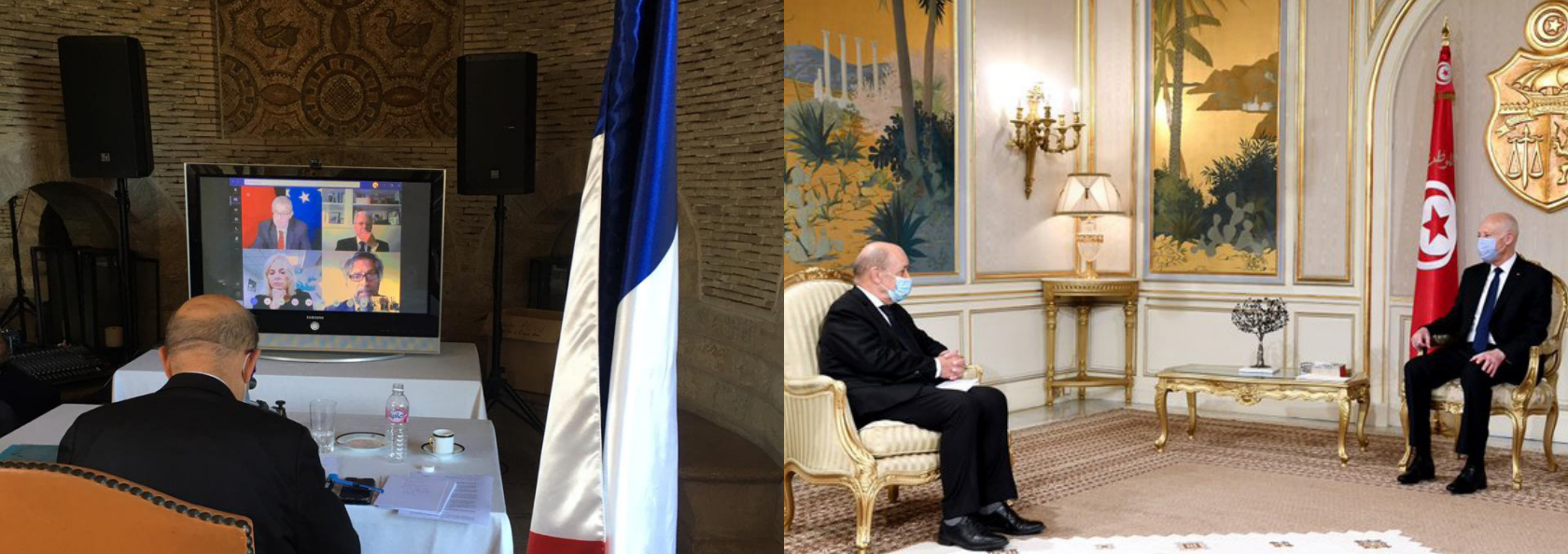
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Severed Alliances

Continued fighting between externally sponsored local militias, reinforced by incoming mercenaries, has escalated tensions between their respective patrons. The challenge for NATO, an organization that French President Emmanuel Macron lately portrayed as weakened and obsolete, is especially important. With Washington more hesitant regarding external commitments and the United Kingdom paralyzed by Brexit, NATO has become hostage to quarrels between France and Turkey—especially in Libya and the Eastern Mediterranean.

4 Ariane Bonzon, "En Turquie, la 'Patrie bleue' révèle l'alliance des islamistes et des nationalists," *Slate*, September 25, 2020.

5 Jihâd Gillon, "France-Libye : le maréchal Haftar, l'ami controversé de l'Élysée," *Jeune Afrique*, March 18, 2020.



French Minister of Foreign Affairs Jean-Yves Le Drian conducting in person and virtual meetings with Italy, Libya, Spain, and others regarding security in the region in October 2020. (Twitter/francediplo)

The fragile Russia-Turkey rapprochement forged in the wake of the failed 2016 coup attempt has already stumbled in Syria over Idlib. Turkey's activism in Libya in summer 2020 further upset Moscow, as it forced the retreat of Haftar and the withdrawal of hundreds of Russian mercenaries from Tripoli. Russia stayed away from the Eastern Mediterranean dispute, watching the EU-Turkey confrontation exacerbate. Yet, Turkey's explicit willingness to meddle in Caucasus affairs through the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia revived tensions with Moscow in the fall.

New Strategic Groupings

At the same time, this chain of conflicts has exposed new alliances that started to build during the Arab Spring.⁶ On one side, the conservative, anti-Muslim Brotherhood camp, led by the UAE, includes Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Egypt. The spectacular reconciliation between the UAE and Israel has consolidated the first group. France, who assisted Greece in barring Turkey's aggressive moves in the Eastern Mediterranean, is also very close to

the UAE—Paris has a military base in Abu Dhabi, and some suggest it is eyeing to open another one in Cyprus. On the opposite side, Turkey aligns with Qatar, with a virtual connection to Iran.

The selling of 18 French Rafale aircrafts to Greece increased Turkey's sense of isolation and threat. Within NATO itself, Spain and Italy are another informal sub-group equally concerned with regional instability, wishing to re-balance what they perceive as heedless adventurism from “big” members such as France and Turkey.

American Red Lines

Recent developments in the Eastern Mediterranean have also led to the re-involvement of Washington. Pursuing their long-time effort to disengage from the Middle East and still haunted by the death of Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens in Benghazi in 2012, Americans turned a blind eye to developments in Libya. Yet, persistent chaos and rising Russian engagement led the United States to reassess the situation,

⁶ Chloé Fabre and Dorothee Schmid, “Soutien turco-qatari au gouvernement Sarraj: de la convergence idéologique à l'alliance pragmatique et financière,” *Diplomatie* n°107, Janvier-Février 2021.



Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis met with U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in September 2020. (Twitter/PrimeministerGR)

warning the LNA that its affiliation with Wagner paramilitaries and the oil shutdown “are at odds with U.S. and Libyan interests.”⁷

Recent tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean also triggered a late reaction from the Trump administration. U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo travelled to Athens in September 2020 to express his support for Greece and to call for direct talks with Turkey; his admonitions prompted Ankara to temporarily withdraw one of its drilling ship from the Aegean Sea. In mid-October, Pompeo blamed Turkey for inflaming the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh and rebuked Ankara again in early December for purchasing Russian weaponry.

An Unstable Architecture in the Making

Some neglected parameters should be recalled in order to assess the solidity of emerging alliances and predict future fronts. First, the UAE’s posture may be less solid than its very assertive foreign policy

suggests. The precedent of Qatar points to the structural weakness of rich yet small emirates, confronted to the ambitions of bigger, solid states (Iran, Turkey) whose objectives are arguably more sustainable in the long run. Second, Turkey’s quest for autonomy looks excessively risky in an especially hostile environment. Ankara might realize it is in its interest to stay anchored to NATO, while Washington has an obvious interest to restore a close link if it wants to return to a “leading from behind” strategy in the Middle East. The Turkish economy would probably not survive a complete breakaway from the EU, either. Third, Egypt—still primarily focused on its domestic vulnerabilities—may be reluctant to become the pivot in the next regional security architecture. It has shown little willingness to send troops to Libya, and, while being currently the strongest maritime force in the Eastern Mediterranean, one can doubt that it would engage in the Aegean Sea and confront Turkey beyond maneuvers.

⁷ “U.S.-LNA Discussion on Militia Demobilization,” U.S. Department of State, July 2, 2020.

PEACEMAKING: THE DIFFICULT CONTRIBUTION OF EUROPEANS

The ability of the European Union to respond to the Libyan crisis as a unified entity appears limited and essentially defensive. Some member states are more engaged, but they do not necessarily agree on a common method and principles of action.

Europe's Perception of Threats

Geography makes Europe closer to the Libyan frontline than any other currently engaged foreign protagonist. Energy supply, human flows, and, broadly speaking, the development of the Maghreb are direct stakes for the Europeans. In practice, Libya's instability is currently perceived as a direct threat, with its 1,800-kilometer Mediterranean coastline making it an immediate neighbor. War has allowed for human trafficking, feeding illegal migration to the northern shore. The security situation in the Sahel-Saharan strip is a matter of grave concern, especially as the presence of thousands of Syrian jihadi fighters in Libya could fuel the radical Islamist threat even after a peace settlement is reached—the Algerian civil war stands as a precedent. The enduring presence of Russian and Turkish military forces also alters the strategic outlook for Europe at a time when America looks less eager to engage in long-distance confrontations to protect Europe.

Enforcing the Embargo: The EU Contribution

The February 2011 United Nations Security Council arms embargo on Libya is regularly breached by foreign players in Libya, reinforcing their support to military factions in the country's east and west. The UN has

clearly exposed the UAE, Turkey, Jordan, Egypt, Syria, and Russia as illegal arms providers to both parties of the conflict. In March 2020, the European Union stepped up its efforts to enforce the embargo by launching Operation EUNAVFOR MED IRINI, as part of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) in the Mediterranean. In addition, the EU enforced legal sanctions on several companies (Turkish, Jordanian, and Kazakh) violating the embargo, who will be banned from EU markets.

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Enforcing the embargo has actually become *per se* a new source of tension. Since the January 2020 Berlin Conference stressed again the importance of the embargo, EU member states have committed to exert firmer maritime surveillance, and several incidents have taken place with Turkish ships off the Libyan coast. The most serious involved a French frigate operating under a



Berlin Conference on Libya in January 2020.
(unsmil.unmissions.org)

NATO mission in June 2020, which claimed to inspect a Tanzanian cargo suspected of carrying arms. The cargo was escorted by a small Turkish armada who lit up the French ship, warning for fire. The incident brought both countries on the brink of military escalation, yet Paris failed to reach a consensus inside NATO condemning Turkey.

Overall, the main outcome of the EU's maritime surveillance and sanction system has been to help document the numerous embargo violations. The tightening of the embargo is not realistically enforceable at this stage without the prospect of a negotiation between all involved parties.

Europeans as Peace-brokers

The EU's political fragility has been exposed by the Libyan crisis. In the words of EU High Representative Joseph Borrell, the EU is "convinced there is no military solution to the Libyan crisis," and calls "all parties to commit to a political process" under the auspices of the United Nations. Yet, this general statement does not accurately reflect the variety of positions of EU member states, some of them playing a competitive game to make their national interests prevail.

Macron is personally following the Libyan issue, with a view to erase the disastrous

record of Sarkozy and promote his own diplomatic skills. His relationship with former head of the United Nations Support Mission in Libya Ghassan Salamé encouraged him to organize several rounds of peace talks without coordinating with other European partners. This antagonized the Italian government, with competition building in the background between France's Total and Italy's ENI for access to Libyan oil resources. Posing as a peace-broker, Paris actually backed Haftar in the shadows, while the Italians repeatedly expressed their support for the GNA and flirted diplomatically with the Turks.

Germany's contribution came at a later stage, but the January 2020 Berlin Conference remains to this date the most comprehensive effort to gather all stakeholders to the same table. The complexity of issues and rivalries among potential third parties left little space to produce effective political conciliation, limiting again the potential results to an inventory of problems. Participants agreed on emphasizing the importance of the arms embargo and expressed support to the Skhirat Agreement as endorsed by UN Resolution 2259—but this did not stop fighting on the ground. The main merit of the conference was thus probably to expose the profusion of protagonists and complexities of their interactions.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS



The European Union should increase its internal coordination efforts within the frame of the Common Security and Defence Policy, in order to avoid contradictions between member states.




The NATO and EU should keep working in parallel, yet not overlap to avoid damaging European political credit.



Turkey's perceived aggressive behavior should be addressed with a dedicated apparatus: a strategic conference addressing all problematic bilateral issues, including the Libyan war, Syria's political process and refugees, and Eastern Mediterranean maritime zones.



Economic stakeholders should convene to a parallel conciliation format, anticipating the issue of post-conflict reconstruction. 

About the Author

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