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THE EAST MEDITERRANEAN AND REGIONAL SECURITY:

A TRANSATLANTIC TRIALOGUE



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PREFACE

Turkey has been a military ally of the United States and the European Union for decades, and both Washington and Brussels consider a stable relationship with Ankara of strategic importance. However, Turkey's authoritarian turn and continued violation of the rule of law, its stance in the conflicts in Syria and Libya, and its claim for energy resources in the Eastern Mediterranean, among other recent events, have led to a deterioration of relations between the three. At the same time, regional instability in the Eastern Mediterranean has become a reason of concern for all three—although for different reasons.

Since 2019, the Heinrich Böll Foundation offices in Washington, D.C. and Istanbul and the Foreign Policy Research Institute have partnered to bring together regional experts in order to discuss how the precarious security dynamics and alarming humanitarian situation in the region could be better addressed. This publication analyzes the policies of the United States, and the European Union, and Turkey in the region and their impact on the relationship between Ankara, Washington, and Brussels.

Our sincerest thanks to Dr. Aaron Stein and the Foreign Policy Research Institute for their cooperation on this project, as well as the experts who have participated in the virtual workshops and shared their expertise. We also would like to thank the authors for their insightful and thought-provoking contributions to this publication.

The views expressed in this report are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Heinrich Böll Foundation or the Foreign Policy Research Institute.

— Kristian Brakel, Cem Bico, and Dominik Tolksdorf (Heinrich Böll Foundation offices in Istanbul and Washington, D.C.)

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BEYOND ENERGY:

The Geopolitical Determinants of Turkey's Mediterranean Policy

Tolga Demiryol



INTRODUCTION

The Eastern Mediterranean has recently emerged as one of the hottest conflict zones in the world. It has everything one would need for a nail-biting thriller: energy reserves, international companies, reckless leaders, and battleships trying to outmaneuver each other in close quarters. In many ways, the Mediterranean case looks like yet another maritime conflict, where actors with opposing legal claims compete over the distribution of resources. Historically, such maritime disputes are often resolved through negotiation, compromise, and sometimes referral to international courts. However, the distinctive feature of the Mediterranean case is the complexity and intensity of the geopolitical rivalries that accompany the energy disputes, which in turn has led to conflict escalation and entrenchment.

While the Mediterranean drama has a large cast, Turkey has surely one of the leading roles. Ankara regularly conducts seismic research operations in the disputed territorial waters of the Mediterranean. Turkish research vessels are often accompanied by naval escorts, which in several instances has resulted in close calls at sea. Turkey is also seeking a stronger naval presence, supported by an ambitious initiative of shipbuilding and modernization. Rejecting accusations of gunboat diplomacy, Ankara says it is committed to dialogue. Ankara's unique blend of drilling, diplomacy, and deterrence, however, has drawn criticism from rivals and allies alike. The EU has repeatedly warned Ankara to respect the sovereignty of the Republic of Cyprus (RoC) and Greece. The US, while not keen on reasserting itself into the region, has also been quietly critical of Turkey's actions.

What is driving Turkey's increasingly assertive Mediterranean policy? Ankara is undoubtedly keen on getting its share of the region's energy riches. Despite its recent gains in the diversification of natural gas imports, Turkey still suffers from energy import dependence. Even at limited volumes, Mediterranean gas reserves would be a welcome addition to Turkey's import portfolio, if only to increase Ankara's leverage against existing suppliers like Russia. Ankara has also long pursued the position of a regional energy hub, which will require the ability to attract gas imports from multiple regions.

MEDITERRANEAN GAS RESERVES WOULD BE A WELCOME ADDITION TO TURKEY'S IMPORT PORTFOLIO, IF ONLY TO INCREASE ANKARA'S LEVERAGE AGAINST EXISTING SUPPLIERS LIKE RUSSIA.

Yet it is not energy security, but rather geopolitical considerations that principally drive Ankara's Mediterranean strategy. While competition over energy reserves and transit routes plays a key role, its impact is mediated through the geopolitical dynamics of the region. The chief proposition here is that rather than an upfront "energy grab," Turkey's policy is best understood as a response to perceived threats to its maritime sovereignty, as well as a product of an increasingly pervasive perception of regional isolation and encirclement.



Turkey's drillship YAVUZ. (murartart/Adobe Stock)

This paper's analysis proceeds in two sections. The first section discusses two interrelated issues that have shaped Ankara's decidedly securitized Mediterranean outlook: maritime delimitation disputes and the divided status of Cyprus. The second section focuses on recent shifts in regional alignments, most notably the emergence of a regional bloc consisting of Israel, the RoC, Greece, and Egypt. It is this latter development that has paved the way for the perception that Turkey is being excluded from the emergent regional order. To evade this geopolitical predicament of encirclement and isolation, Turkey has adopted a posture of "forward defense," which relies on hard power instruments coupled with an assertive diplomacy to extend control over cross-border areas.

MARITIME DELIMITATION AND CYPRUS ISSUES

The question of maritime borders precedes the onset of the Mediterranean gas bonanza. Throughout the 2000s, several littoral states signed bilateral EEZ delimitation agreements in preparation for hydrocarbon exploration. In 2003, the RoC signed an EEZ delimitation agreement with Egypt, followed by national legislation in 2004 unilaterally designating a Cypriot EEZ. Ankara objected, but did so relatively quietly so as not to jeopardize EU accession negotiations at the time. In 2007, the RoC signed an EEZ deal with Lebanon, which was again protested by Ankara on the grounds that it violated the sovereign rights of both Turkey and the Turkish Republic



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, at the TCG Kinaliada (F- 514) Commissioning Ceremony. (msb.gov.tr)

of Northern Cyprus (TRNC).¹ The RoC government also designated 13 drilling blocks to be licensed, five of which Ankara claims to be overlapping with the Turkish continental shelf. In 2010, shortly before the discovery of the Leviathan gas field, Israel and the RoC signed an EEZ agreement. Ankara, once again, protested vociferously.

Turkey's diplomatic objections to the bilateral maritime delimitation agreements by third parties rely on the proposition that the Mediterranean is a semi-enclosed sea and all littoral states with a vested interest should be involved in delimitation agreements.² Ankara, therefore, advocates for a multilateral approach to resolving the region's outstanding border issues. However, in the

absence of a multilateral solution, Turkey also pursues the bilateral track of signing maritime demarcation deals with its few remaining regional allies, such as the 2011 continental shelf agreement with the TRNC and the 2019 EEZ agreement with the Government of National Accord (GNA) in Libya.

Ankara's concerns over its maritime sovereignty intersect with Turkey's historical role as the guarantor of the rights of Turkish Cypriots. Given the division of the island, Ankara holds that Cypriot natural resources, including any seabed riches, belong to both communities. The Turkish government also insists that the RoC government cannot unilaterally demarcate maritime borders, issue licenses, or otherwise monetize natural

¹ TRNC is only recognized by Turkey.

² "From Rep. of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs," Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, accessed August 14, 2020, http://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_-181_-5-august-2011_-press-release-regarding-the-greek-cypriot-administration_s-gas-exploration-activities-in-the-eastern-mediterranean.en.mfa.



Port of Famagusta in Northern Cyprus
(A.Savin/Wikimedia Commons)

gas until there is a mechanism for revenue sharing between the two communities.³ The Greek Cypriot side does not in principle reject that Turkish Cypriots are entitled to have their share. However, the RoC government insists that it has an inalienable right to develop such resources even in the absence of a political agreement.

The turning point in the dispute over drilling rights in Cypriot waters was Sept. 19, 2011, when the RoC initiated drilling in Block 12 (the Aphrodite gas field). Ankara responded by signing a continental shelf delimitation agreement with TRNC the next day. The TRNC issued drilling licenses to the Turkish Petroleum Corporation in areas that partially overlap with the 13 blocks licensed by the RoC. To this day, these overlapping blocks constitute the principal source of dispute in Cyprus.

It was during these earlier stages of the dispute that Ankara started testing out the tactical use of seismic research and drilling platforms as a bargaining instrument. Often escorted by naval elements, survey vessels raise the stakes in the conflict, thus increasing Ankara's leverage. As these expeditions are announced through the publicly available NAVTEX system, they create audience costs for Ankara, facilitating credible signaling of Turkish preferences. On several occasions, however, Turkey's seismic research operations have created serious diplomatic consequences. For instance, in 2014, UN-mediated talks in Cyprus were interrupted by the Greek side when a NAVTEX was issued for a Turkish vessel to carry out a seismic survey offshore of Cyprus. In July 2017, Turkey dispatched naval vessels to track the drillship commissioned to operate in Cypriot Block 11, disputed by Turkey. In

3 Ayla Gürel and Laura Le Cornu, "Can Gas Catalyse Peace in the Eastern Mediterranean?," *The International Spectator* 49, no. 2 (April 3, 2014): 15, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2014.906799>.

February 2018, tensions flared when an ENI drillship sailing from Block 6 was intercepted by Turkish warships, resulting in a brief standoff. In August 2020, Turkish and Greek navies were mobilized as both sides issued opposing NAVTEX messages for the waters near the Greek island Kastellorizo (Meis), about two kilometers off the coast of Turkey. A major naval escalation was avoided through Germany's mediation.

GEOPOLITICAL DYNAMICS

Over the past decade, many expressed hopes that energy resources would bring not only prosperity, but also peace to the region.⁴ Unfortunately, these expectations have so far failed to materialize. However, shared economic interests succeeded in bringing closer Israel, the RoC, Greece, and Egypt. Given the relatively limited size of the discoveries, Israel and the RoC explored various options to jointly develop and export the gas. Egypt, initially more of a silent partner of the so-called “energy triangle”⁵ would assume a greater leadership role later with the major gas field discovery in the Zohr field in 2015.

OVER THE PAST DECADE, MANY EXPRESSED HOPES THAT ENERGY RESOURCES WOULD BRING NOT ONLY PROSPERITY, BUT ALSO PEACE TO THE REGION.

While the shared interests in the monetization of gas provided an economic rationale for cooperation, the convergence of security interests also facilitated the realignment. Israel, which had long kept its distance from the RoC so as not to jeopardize its relationship with Ankara, was ready to consider new partnerships following the Mavi Marmara incident that severed ties with Turkey in 2010. Greece and the RoC welcomed closer relations with Israel as a means of containing Turkey's growing regional influence. And most importantly, the regional rivalry between Turkey and Egypt under President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi provided an additional impetus for the quadrilateral partnership. Even though it falls short of a formal military alliance, the quadrilateral partnership does extend into the area of security cooperation, including several joint military exercises and bilateral defense cooperation agreements.

4 Isabelle Ioannides, “Gas Resources in the Eastern Mediterranean,” SSRN Scholarly Paper (Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, November 1, 2012), <http://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=2170105>; Emre Iseri and Panagiotis Andrikopoulos, “Energy Geopolitics of the Eastern Mediterranean: Will Aphrodite's Lure Fuel Peace in Cyprus?,” *Ortodogu Analiz (Middle Eastern Analysis)* 5, no. 51 (2013): 37–46; Chrysostomos Pericleous, “Cyprus: A Last Window of Opportunity?,” *Insight Turkey* 14, no. 1 (2012): 93–108.

5 George Stavris, “The New Energy Triangle of Cyprus-Greece-Israel: Casting a Net for Turkey?,” *Turkish Policy Quarterly* 11, no. 2 (2012): 87–102.



TCG Anadolu (L-400) amphibious assault ship (LHD) during its construction in Istanbul, Turkey. (2020Istanbul/Wikimedia Commons)

Close cooperation among Greece, the RoC, and Israel raised Turkey's threat perception toward the Mediterranean, reinforcing Ankara's highly securitized perspective of the region. Unable to enlist any regional allies to counter perceived threats, Ankara opted for internal balancing, i.e. increasing its military capabilities. On numerous occasions, Turkish Navy commanders emphasized that defending Turkey's interests in the Eastern Mediterranean was the highest priority, which would in turn necessitate greater power projection capabilities for the Turkish Navy. As part of the efforts to build a blue-water navy, Ankara fast-tracked various domestic programs, including the National Warship Project (MILGEM). Under MILGEM, Turkey has developed at least 15 multipurpose corvettes and frigates, significantly extending its littoral warfare capabilities. The national submarine project (MILDEN) aims to develop and build six submarines by 2030. Turkey's first Amphibious Assault Ship (LHD), *TCG Anadolu*, is expected to be completed in

2020. Originally conceived to operate F-35 combat aircraft, the LHD is a blue-water asset that will increase Ankara's power projection capabilities in the Mediterranean.

Ankara's heightened perception of threat is reflected in the prevalence of the notion of *Mavi Vatan*, "Blue Homeland," in the Turkish security discourse. Coined by a high-ranking Navy officer in 2006, the term originally signified Ankara's maritime claims in the Mediterranean. Over the past four years, Blue Homeland has gained traction both in decision-making circles and public discourse.⁶ However, Blue Homeland is not a novel notion. It recycles the security-oriented outlook of Turkish foreign policy in the 1990s, mixing it with frequent references to potent historical imagery, such as the bitter memory of the *Treaty of Sèvres*, the Treaty that the victorious powers in World War I failed to impose upon the Ottoman Empire. Linking up with the Eurasianist strands of thought prevalent among Turkey's security elites,

6 İlhan Uzgel, "The 'Blue Homeland' and Turkey's New Forward Defence Doctrine," 2020, <https://www.duvarenglish.com/columns/2020/06/25/the-blue-homeland-and-turkeys-new-forward-defence-doctrine/>.

the Blue Homeland doctrine celebrates multipolarity and charts a course of leadership for Turkey in the Mediterranean and beyond. It is too early to conclude that Blue Homeland has become the national security doctrine of Turkey. Indeed, its current popularity reflects the domestic coalition dynamics that brought closer secular nationalist elites with the Justice and Development Party after the failed coup attempt in 2016. Nonetheless, the Blue Homeland doctrine is increasingly popular, as evidenced by the frequent references to the concept in official discourse.⁷

Two recent developments have reinforced Ankara's perceptions of threat and deepened the sense of encirclement. The first is the establishment of the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) in January 2019. Headquartered in Cairo, the EMGF consists of the RoC, Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan, Palestine, and Egypt. The EMGF is also supported by France and the United States, which requested to join the organization as a member and a permanent observer, respectively. The second key development is the signing of the EastMed Pipeline Accord in January 2020 by Greece, the RoC, and Israel. The EastMed pipeline would connect Mediterranean gas fields directly to Europe. Ankara considers both the EMGF and the EastMed pipeline elements of a larger effort to box Turkey to the margins of the Mediterranean. The fact that the EMGF, the EastMed pipeline, and other regional initiatives are being supported by the US and the EU further contribute to the conviction that Turkey is being sidelined by its allies.

TURKEY'S SENSE OF ISOLATION IN THE MEDITERRANEAN OVERLAP WITH ANKARA'S FRUSTRATIONS IN TERRITORIAL CONFLICTS, MOST NOTABLY IN SYRIA AND LIBYA.

It is important to note that Turkey's sense of isolation in the Mediterranean overlap with Ankara's frustrations in territorial conflicts, most notably in Syria and Libya. Due to the overwhelming military presence of Russia in Syria since late 2015, Turkey's influence on the ground has been limited. Ankara has also been involved in the Libyan conflict, initially to protect its economic interests, including substantial business contracts granted by the GNA. Determined to break through the perceived encirclement of Turkey's interests across the Mediterranean, Ankara signed a security cooperation agreement with the GNA in November 2019, facilitating the supply of military equipment and personnel. Turkey's involvement, particularly the apparent effectiveness of domestically produced unmanned aerial vehicles, rebalanced the battlefield and secured GNA's survival. Along with the security cooperation agreement,

7 "Erdoğan'dan 'Mavi Vatan' Vurgusu - Haberler," accessed October 20, 2020, <https://www.milliyet.com.tr/siyaset/erdogandan-mavi-vatan-vurgusu-6316092>; "Cumhurbaşkanı Yardımcısı Oktay'dan 'Mavi Vatan' Mesajı," accessed October 20, 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/turkiye/cumhurbaskani-yardimcisi-oktaydan-mavi-vatan-mesaji/1938411>.

Ankara and GNA signed a maritime delimitation agreement, which established two EEZs that partially overlap with the areas claimed by Greece. The deal also blocks the path of the EastMed pipeline. Both aspects of Turkey's involvement in Libya have been celebrated in Ankara as critical gains towards tilting the Mediterranean balance of power in Turkey's favor.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The Mediterranean is at an impasse. Gas discoveries over the past decade have largely failed to meet the expectations that they would bring peace and prosperity to the region. Given low energy prices, it remains a challenge to attract financing for costly export infrastructure. More importantly, disputes over maritime borders not only hamper exploration, but also raise the probability of region-wide conflict. As maritime disputes overlap with regional rivalries, it is conceivable that tensions could spiral into open confrontation.

To de-escalate tensions, it is imperative to unpack the interests of the key actors in the conflict. This article suggested that Turkey's actions in the region are best explained as a reaction to an increasingly prevalent perception that there is a new geopolitical order emerging in the Mediterranean and Turkey is being excluded. Some policy implications follow:

European sanctions on Turkey will likely be ineffective, as they will further exacerbate Ankara's threat perceptions and possibly create a rally-around-the-flag effect.

De-escalation of tensions between Greece and Turkey is a necessary, yet ultimately insufficient, step. Given the involvement of a multitude of regional interests, a multilateral effort is warranted.

The exclusion of Turkey from the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum has been a major driver of Turkey's concerns. Regional energy cooperation platforms will need to be inclusive.

Normalization of Turkey-Israel ties would help further defuse regional tensions. This would, however, require a substantial recalibration of security policies, particularly in the area of counter-terrorism cooperation.

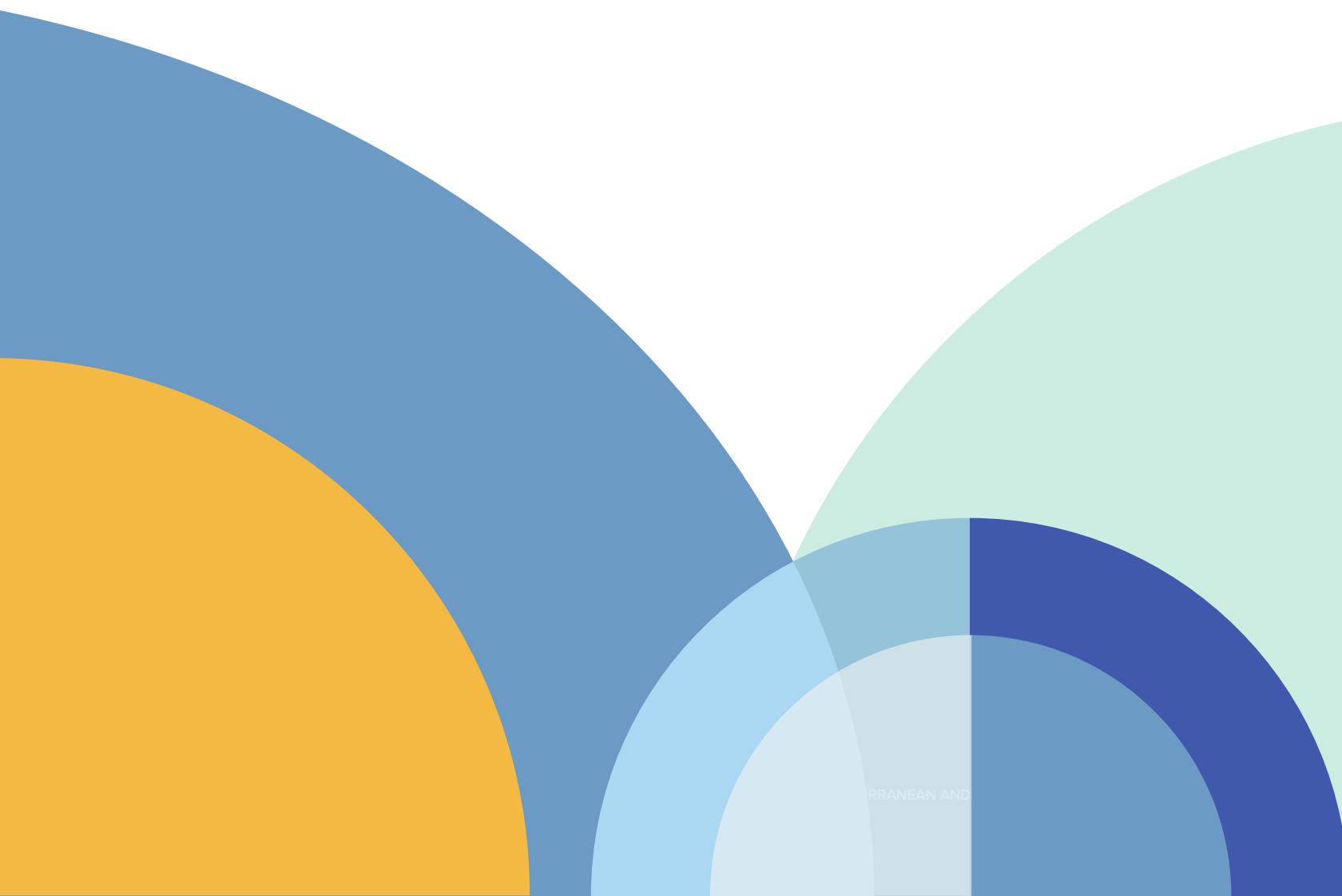
Any sustainable political solution in the Mediterranean will eventually need to involve a dialogue between Turkey and Egypt. While reconciliation between Ankara and Cairo appears improbable at this point, the two regional powers need to devise mechanisms to effectively manage their rivalry. 

About the Author

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IS THE ATLANTIC PACT SINKING IN THE DEEP EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN?

Oya Dursun-Özkanca



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THE UNRESOLVED CYPRUS PROBLEM IS A MAJOR CONTRIBUTOR TO THE INCREASINGLY AMBITIOUS FOREIGN POLICY OF TURKEY IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN.

The transatlantic alliance has periodically experienced deep divisions and diplomatic crises. The current situation in the Eastern Mediterranean seems to add one more such episode to its tumultuous history. Ever since the discovery of offshore hydrocarbons off the coast of Cyprus in 2011, the Eastern Mediterranean has experienced enhanced geostrategic competition. In 2012, Turkey started onshore drilling for oil and gas in the northern part of Cyprus, recognized by Turkey as the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC).¹ Since then, it has intermittently engaged in hydrocarbon explorations in the region, drawing heavy criticism for its gunboat diplomacy and display of military power at sea, based on a much-debated “Blue Homeland” (*Mavi Vatan*) doctrine for its maritime claims in the Eastern Mediterranean.²

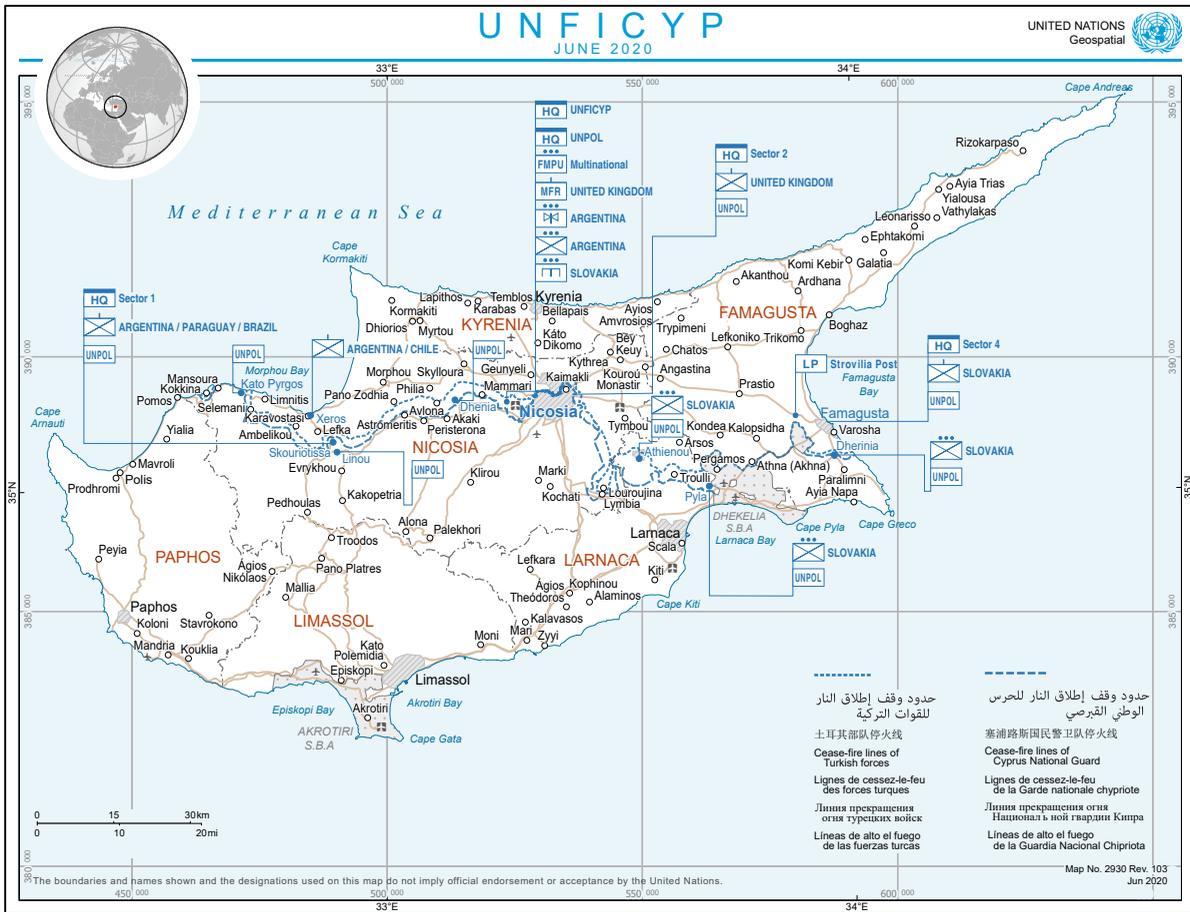
The unresolved Cyprus problem is a major contributor to the increasingly ambitious foreign policy of Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean. When Turkey first started drilling in the Eastern Mediterranean, it initially aimed to put pressure on the government of the Republic of Cyprus (RoC) with regard to reaching a negotiated settlement with Turkish Cypriots for sharing the profits from natural resources. Turkey’s awareness of its increased isolation in the Eastern Mediterranean is yet another contributor to its foreign policy in the region. To illustrate, in December 2018, the agreement concluded between Cyprus and Egypt declared their intentions to construct a pipeline connecting Egypt’s liquefied natural

gas facilities to Cyprus’s Aphrodite field. In January 2019, the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum was created between the RoC, Greece, Italy, Egypt, Jordan, Israel, and the Palestinian Authority, in order to develop a regional natural gas market. In February 2019, ExxonMobil made an announcement of a new natural gas discovery in offshore Cyprus.³ At the beginning of January 2020, Greece, the RoC, and Israel signed a trilateral undersea gas pipeline deal, bypassing Turkey. This, in turn, increased the stakes for Turkey’s maritime policies in the region, contributing to the momentum behind its hydrocarbon exploration. Turkey wanted access to natural resources and increased its regional presence in response to its perception of an anti-Turkish coalition appearing in the region. Moreover, Turkey’s unresolved maritime boundaries with Greece and the RoC are an additional factor in explaining the rising tensions in the region.

1 Reuters, “Timeline: Turkey’s Gas Exploration off Cyprus Raises Tensions,” 14 October 2019.

2 Ryan Gingeras, “Blue Homeland: The Heated Politics behind Turkey’s New Maritime Strategy,” *War on the Rocks*, 2 June 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/06/blue-homeland-the-heated-politics-behind-turkeys-new-maritime-strategy/>.

3 Helena Smith, “Huge Gas Discovery off Cyprus Could Boost EU Energy Security,” *The Guardian*, 28 February 2019.



Map of Cyprus and Northern Cyprus. (United Nations)



The East Med Pipeline would connect the East Mediterranean fields to Europe. (Agenor Energy)

THE CRUX OF THE PROBLEM GOES BACK TO THE EXISTENCE OF OVERLAPPING CLAIMS FOR TURKEY'S CONTINENTAL SHELF AND THE ROC'S EEZ AND CONTINENTAL SHELF.

It is against this background that Turkey's involvement in the Libyan civil war should be interpreted. The military cooperation and the maritime delimitation agreements Turkey signed with the UN-backed Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA) in November 2019 served the needs of both parties. The GNA needed help with the civil war that has gripped the Libyan state after the fall of Muammar Qadhafi in 2011. Turkey's deal with the GNA served as a spoiler for the hydrocarbon exploration and transportation efforts in the Eastern Mediterranean, as it increased the risks involved in energy companies' investments in the region.⁴ Greece, the RoC, Israel, Egypt, and the United States (US) criticized the deal, noting that it violates international law by ignoring the sovereign rights of third states such as Greece. On May 11, 2020, Greece, Cyprus, Egypt, France, and United Arab Emirates (UAE) expressed concerns over "continuous provocative actions in the Eastern Mediterranean" and condemned Turkey's drilling in the Cypriot Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) as "illegal" according to the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).⁵ The Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs criticized Greece and Cyprus for their lack of engagement in dialogue with Turkey and TRNC and for "relying on irrelevant non-regional actors," and accused them of creating an "axis of malice."⁶

The crux of the problem goes back to the existence of overlapping claims for Turkey's continental shelf and the RoC's EEZ and continental shelf. The RoC, pursuant to UNCLOS, has a territorial sea that extends to 12 nautical miles from the baselines.⁷ Turkey is not a party to UNCLOS and does not diplomatically recognize the RoC. There are grave concerns on the part of Turkish elites and the public about Turkey's confinement in the Mediterranean, despite the fact that Turkey has the longest shoreline of all Mediterranean countries. There are also long-lasting maritime disputes between Greece and Turkey on the use of Greek islands in determining the national coastline and the EEZ. Due to the close proximity of many Greek islands to Turkey's coastline, Turkey risks getting bottled in and losing almost half

4 Charlotte Gifford, "Will the Eastern Mediterranean Pipeline Deal Create a Regional Energy Hub?" *EuropeanCEO*, 15 May 2020, <https://www.europeanceo.com/home/featured/will-the-eastern-mediterranean-pipeline-deal-create-a-regional-energy-hub/>.

5 Hellenic Republic Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Joint Declaration Adopted by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Cyprus, Egypt, France, Greece and the United Arab Emirates," 11 May 2020, <https://www.mfa.gr/en/current-affairs/statements-speeches/joint-declaration-adopted-by-the-ministers-of-foreign-affairs-of-cyprus-egypt-france-greece-and-the-united-arab-emirates-11052020.html>.

6 Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "QA-33, 11 May 2020, Statement of the Spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Hami Aksoy, in Response to a Question Regarding the Joint Declaration Adopted by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Egypt, Greece, GCA, France and the United Arab Emirates," 11 May 2020, http://www.mfa.gov.tr/sc_-33_-gkry-ortak-bildir-hk-sc.en.mfa.

7 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Cyprus, "The Sea of Cyprus: The International Legal Framework," 2020, http://www.mfa.gov.cy/mfa/mfa2016.nsf/mfa83_en/mfa83_en?OpenDocument.

of its maritime territory and access to deep water resources in the Mediterranean Sea.

Since the future of the Libyan civil war is important for Turkey's strategic interests in the Eastern Mediterranean, Turkey needs to ensure that the Tripoli government survives in order to continue playing the role of a spoiler in energy-related developments in the Eastern Mediterranean. Furthermore, Turkey's involvement in the Eastern Mediterranean diverts public attention away from the economic recession that was exacerbated by the pandemic. Finally, the majority of the Turkish public supports Turkey's actions to defend its maritime rights in the Mediterranean, which gives a free pass to the Turkish government.

THE MAJORITY OF THE TURKISH PUBLIC SUPPORTS TURKEY'S ACTIONS TO DEFEND ITS MARITIME RIGHTS IN THE MEDITERRANEAN, WHICH GIVES A FREE PASS TO THE TURKISH GOVERNMENT.

Tensions in the region have been further on the rise recently — due to a number of developments such as the naval incident

between Turkey and France off the coast of Libya, skirmishes between Turkish and Greek militaries over maritime delimitation around the Greek islands, and the naval involvement of France to support Greece — illuminating deep divisions among North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies. This article, therefore, addresses the impact of the developments in the Eastern Mediterranean on the transatlantic alliance, with a special focus on the crisis in Libya. It makes the argument that the Libyan quagmire adds to the already-difficult relationship between Turkey, Europe, and the United States, while creating certain windows of opportunity to reaffirm the importance of the transatlantic partnership. It first discusses US interests in Libya, followed by how the latest developments in Libya influence trilateral relations between Turkey, the US, and Europe. It provides an overview of the involvement of various European nations in Eastern Mediterranean politics and discusses how the crises in the region have influenced the military partnership between the three parties.

Even though the US was instrumental in leading NATO's operation against Qadhafi in 2011, its current role in the Libya conflict is quite limited.⁸ The US seeks to contain the impact of state collapse and resolve the conflict, while simultaneously paying lip service to curbing the intensified foreign intervention in the country, which it argues is serving Russian interests.⁹ The US has a number of important strategic interests in the Libya conflict, ranging from counterterrorism, to ensuring the security of Libyan oil and gas, to containing the refugee crisis it creates for allies in Europe, to the protection of weapons stockpiles from the Qadhafi era, as well as the containment of Russian influence in

8 Kali Robinson, "Who's Who in Libya's War?" *Council on Foreign Relations*, 18 June 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/whos-who-libyas-war>.

9 Christopher M. Blanchard, "Libya: Conflict, Transition, and US Policy," *Congressional Research Service* RL33142, 26 June 2020, <https://fas.org/sqp/crs/row/RL33142.pdf>.

the country.¹⁰ Officially, the US supports the GNA, but this support has not translated into military support against the Libyan National Army (LNA).¹¹

The same reluctance can also be detected when it comes to intervention in the recent skirmishes between its NATO allies: Turkey, Greece, and France. The US would have been well-advised to pursue its traditional mediation role and to invite the parties to resolve their differences through diplomatic means. However, the Trump administration did not show much interest in mediating between the allies. In fact, the 2018 US-Greece Strategic Dialogue, the US-Greece Mutual Defense Cooperation Agreement updated at the beginning of 2020, the recent high-level US diplomatic visits to Greece and Cyprus, and the US lifting of the arms embargo against the RoC last month might be interpreted as US diplomatic support for Greece and Cyprus.

Any deepening of the crisis between Turkey, Greece, and France would jeopardize the stability of the transatlantic alliance, especially at a time when Western strategic interests require an enhanced dialogue on Belarus, Ukraine, Libya, Iraq, and Syria. NATO has been, therefore, heavily involved in bringing the Turkish and Greek delegations into technical military dialogue with each other. It helped establish a “de-confliction mechanism” in the beginning of October 2020, with the goal of preventing “incidents and accidents at sea or in the air.”¹² Due to

the decision to renew the diplomatic process between Turkey and Greece, the EU brought the modernization of the Customs Union Agreement, the Visa Liberalization process, EU-Turkey high-level dialogue, and migration-related issues back into its agenda with Turkey, while noting that other options, such as sanctions, are a possibility in the case of Turkey’s renewed unilateral actions in breach of international law.

The civil war in Libya has effectively turned into a proxy war waged by Turkey, Russia, and other actors in the region. France, along with Russia, Egypt, and the UAE, is supportive of Haftar’s forces, whereas Turkey, Qatar, and, to some extent, Italy support the GNA.¹³ There has been an arms embargo against Libya since 2011, which has been ostensibly undermined by actors such as Turkey, Russia, and France. Acting Special Representative to the Secretary-General Stephanie Williams warned the United Nations Security Council of “an alarming military build-up as a result of the uninterrupted dispatch by the foreign backers of increasingly sophisticated and lethal weapons” and “the recruitment of more mercenaries to both sides of the conflict,” and noted “the flagrant violation of the UN arms embargo” since the LNA offensive against Tripoli on April 4, 2019.¹⁴

The EU’s Operation IRINI, launched in March 2020, has the goal of enforcing the UN sanctions against weapon smuggling to Libya. In June 2020, Turkey committed to helping GNA in its advance to Sirte, and discussed

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Robinson, “Who’s Who in Libya’s War?”

¹² NATO, “NATO Secretary General Discusses Situation in Eastern Mediterranean with President Erdogan,” 23 September 2020, <https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/178130.htm?selectedLocale=en>.

¹³ Erin Ogunkeye, “France Suspends Role in NATO Naval Mission over Tensions with Turkey,” *France24*, 1 July 2020, <https://www.france24.com/en/20200701-france-suspends-role-in-nato-naval-mission-over-turkish-warship-incident>.

¹⁴ United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), “Acting SRSG’s Oral Update to the 44th Session of the Human Rights Council, Pursuant to Human Rights Council Resolution 40/271,” 18 June 2020, <https://unsmil.unmissions.org/acting-srsg%E2%80%99s-oral-update-44th-session-human-rights-council-pursuant-human-rights-council-resolution>.



plans for its use of Libyan military facilities.¹⁵ Turkey expressed skepticism about IRINI's objectivity, criticizing the lack of scrutiny of shipments to the LNA.¹⁶ In early June 2020, there was an incident between Turkey and Greece, when the Greek frigate *Spetsai*, operating under IRINI, was prevented from inspecting a Tanzania-flagged freighter escorted by the Turkish Navy.¹⁷ Following this incident, the EU asked for cooperation with NATO's Operation Sea Guardian, which was launched in 2016 to engage in maritime security capacity building and to provide support to maritime situational awareness and counterterrorism;¹⁸ but to date, there is no formal cooperation between the two missions.

On June 10, 2020, Turkish warships allegedly flashed their radar lights at the French warship *Courbet*, operating in the NATO Sea Guardian Operation, following its attempts to inspect the Turkish cargo ship *Cirkin* for a suspected violation of the arms embargo.¹⁹ Turkish authorities denied the allegations and insisted that the vessel was carrying humanitarian aid. The investigation by NATO on the incident was "inconclusive," and its findings were not made public.²⁰ France withdrew from NATO's Sea Guardian Operation following the incident²¹ and is now working under IRINI.²² On June 12, 2020, Turkey conducted the Operation Sea Training exercise in Libya's territorial waters, with the participation of eight frigates and corvettes,

¹⁵ Blanchard, "Libya: Conflict, Transition, and US Policy."

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Federico Petrangeli, "Operation IRINI: Can a "No Longer Naive" EU Tame the Libyan Conflict?" *Italian Institute for International Political Studies* (ISPI), 31 July 2020, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publicazione/operation-irini-can-no-longer-naive-eu-tame-libyan-conflict-27128>.

¹⁸ NATO, "Operation Sea Guardian," 28 March 2020, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_136233.htm.

¹⁹ Ogunkeye, "France Suspends Role in NATO Naval Mission over Tensions with Turkey."

²⁰ Lorne Cook, "EU Sanctions Turkish Firm over Libya Arms Embargo Violations," *The Washington Post*, 21 September 2020.

²¹ John Irish, "After Turkish Incident, France Suspends Role in NATO Naval Mission," *Reuters*, 1 July 2020, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-libya-security-france-nato-idUKKBN2425FD>.

²² Cook, "EU Sanctions Turkish Firm over Libya Arms Embargo Violations."



In August, 2020, France sent naval vessels in support of Greece following Turkish exploration in disputed waters. (Greek National Defense)

along with 17 planes.²³

While temporary de-escalation was observed afterward, the signing of an agreement between Greece and Egypt in August 2020 on setting up an EEZ renewed tensions. Turkey declared the agreement null and void.²⁴ In August, French President Emmanuel Macron ordered two Rafale fighter jets and the *La Fayette* frigate into the Eastern Mediterranean and tweeted, “I have decided to strengthen the French military presence temporarily in the Mediterranean, in co-operation with Greece and other European partners.”²⁵ France also supports Cypriot claims on gas deposits in the Eastern Mediterranean²⁶ and has been critical of Turkish foreign policy in Syria, especially in the aftermath of Turkey’s Operation Peace

Spring. Germany intervened in the situation in order to de-escalate the renewed tensions and managed to convince Turkey and Greece to engage in diplomatic talks.

Nevertheless, the troubles do not end there. In September 2020, the EU found that the Avrasya Shipping company, which operated *Cirkin*, violated the arms embargo by transporting “military material to Libya in May and June 2020.”²⁷ On Oct. 11, 2020, following the agreement on restarting the exploratory talks between Turkey and Greece, Turkey announced the renewal of its survey activity in disputed areas in the Eastern Mediterranean, which was severely criticized by many NATO allies, including the US, Germany, Greece, and France, as “unilaterally rais[ing] tensions in the region and deliberately complicat[ing]

23 The Arab Weekly, “Turkey Flexes Muscle in Mediterranean While EU Tries to De-escalate Tensions,” 13 June 2020, <https://theArabweekly.com/turkey-flexes-muscle-mediterranean-while-eu-tries-de-escalate-tensions>.

24 Reuters, “Egypt and Greece Sign Agreement on Exclusive Economic Zone,” 6 August 2020.

25 BBC News, “France Sends Jets and Ships to Tense East Mediterranean,” 13 August 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-53767792>.

26 Ibid.

27 Cook, “EU Sanctions Turkish Firm over Libya Arms Embargo Violations.”

the resumption of crucial exploratory talks.”²⁸

THE RESOLUTION OF THE LIBYAN CONFLICT HAS IMPORTANT IMPLICATIONS FOR EUROPEAN SECURITY, AS IT WOULD SIGNIFICANTLY REDUCE THE FLOW OF MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES TO EUROPE.

All in all, it is possible to argue that the Libya crisis has contributed to the lack of trust between Turkey and the EU, and created additional tensions between Turkey, France, and Greece. Turkey was already alienated from the transatlantic alliance due to developments in Syria and its acquisition of S-400 missile defense systems from Russia. Developments in Libya made it evident that the transatlantic partners do not share a common strategic vision with regard to the future of the region.

The resolution of the Libyan conflict has important implications for European security, as it would significantly reduce the flow of migrants and refugees to Europe. Libya also plays an important role in terms of European energy security and the economic interests of Italy and France. Moreover, the divergent views presented by Italy and France on the Libyan conflict serve to undermine the reputation of the EU internationally. The EU has vested interest in calming the situation in Libya and in bringing France and Italy together on Libya.²⁹ The announcement of GNA Prime Minister Fayeze Sarraj’s resignation may further complicate the crisis in Libya, as it is uncertain who will succeed him and how his successor will impact Turkish influence, as well as GNA-LNA relations.³⁰

After all the maritime disputes, as well as the crises in Syria and Libya, it is reasonable to question whether the US, Turkey, and Europe are still military partners. While tensions are certainly high, Turkey is still interested in maintaining its alliance commitments within NATO. It is cognizant of the fact that it would risk overstressing if these conflicts escalate further.³¹ For instance, Turkey recently reaffirmed its interest in purchasing a EUROSAM missile defense system from France, which may be interpreted as an attempt to reconcile with the country following a tense couple of months.

Despite the fact that Turkey and Russia have engaged in rapprochement since 2016, the LNA-GNA conflict has drawn Russia and Turkey “into the conflict on opposing sides,

28 Morgan Ortagus, “US Response to Turkey’s Renewed Survey Activity in the Eastern Mediterranean,” US Department of State Spokesperson Press Statement, 13 October 2020, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-response-to-turkeys-renewed-survey-activity-in-the-eastern-mediterranean/>.

29 Tarek Megerisi, “How to Repair Europe’s Credibility in Libya?” *European Council on Foreign Relations* Commentary, 16 January 2020, https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_how_to_repair_europes_credibility_in_libya3.

30 Marc Daou, “UN-backed Libyan PM Sarraj’s Mysterious Resignation Announcement,” *France24*, 18 September 2020, <https://www.france24.com/en/20200918-un-backed-libyan-pm-sarraj-s-mysterious-resignation>.

31 International Crisis Group, “Turkey Wades into Libya’s Troubled Waters,” Report No. 257, 30 April 2020, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/western-europemediterranean/turkey/257-turkey-wades-libyas-troubled-waters>.

such that they have become key power brokers.”³² The renewed Nagorno-Karabakh conflict adds yet another front where Turkey and Russia support opposing sides. These developments present an important window of opportunity for transatlantic actors to pull Turkey to their side.

At a time when Turkey’s relations with Russia are deteriorating, Turkey might be motivated to find common ground with its transatlantic allies, especially if the recently-announced positive EU agenda is successfully implemented. Finally, the outcome of the US presidential elections will have an important impact on US-Turkey relations. Solidarity and cohesion within the NATO alliance are at stake here. Any public skirmishes and conflict between the allies would serve the hand of Russia. Therefore, the allies should engage in de-escalation in the Mediterranean, while seeking to bring the warring parties in Libya into a negotiated settlement, before the transatlantic alliance sinks into the deep waters of the Mediterranean. 

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32 The International Institute for Strategic Studies, “Domestic Divisions and External Actors in Libya’s Civil War,” *ISS Strategic Comments*, Volume 26, Comment 21, September 2020, <https://www.iiss.org/~/publication/79f588dc-31fb-4575-b536-0115b4fe6401/domestic-divisions-and-external-actors-in-libyas-civil-war.pdf>, 1.

ECONOMIC INTERESTS, POLITICAL CONFLICTS, AND EXTERNAL INTERFERENCES:

The Complex Interlocking of the Libyan Crisis

Karim Mezran & Alessia Melcangi



IN APRIL 2020 OIL PRODUCTION DATA SHOWED A DROP OF MORE THAN 80% WITH A LOSS OF MORE THAN \$10 BILLION IN OIL REVENUES.

In the last days of September 2020, Libya's oil industry seemed to be on the verge of restarting its production after Gen. Khalifa Haftar announced the reopening of the oil fields and terminals that he had occupied and closed in the course of his offensive against Tripoli. The main damage caused by Haftar's blockade is the dramatic plummet of oil production to less than 100,000 barrels per day (bpd) from the previous 1.2 million. The importance of the oil and gas industry in Libya cannot be underestimated since it is the main driver of the Libyan economy and accounts for about 60% of the country's GDP. Oil production revenues and the dividends from oil sales are one of the main causes of the conflict that has been continuously ravaging the country since the fall of Muammar Qadhafi in 2011. The announced reopening represents good news that bodes well not only for a real resumption of political talks between the warring parties, but also for a more general improvement of the economic and social condition in the country, which is now on the verge of collapse.

After the January 2020 blockade, the quick shutdown of oil sales led to a budget collapse: In April 2020 oil production data showed a drop of more than 80% with a loss of more than \$10 billion in oil revenues¹. The economic impact of this stoppage directly hit the Tripoli-based National Oil Corporation (NOC), preventing the company from fulfilling contracts with international oil companies. After so many years of civil war, it has become evident that competition among various actors is principally over the country's resources and control of its financial institutions. According to the 2015 UN-backed Libyan Political

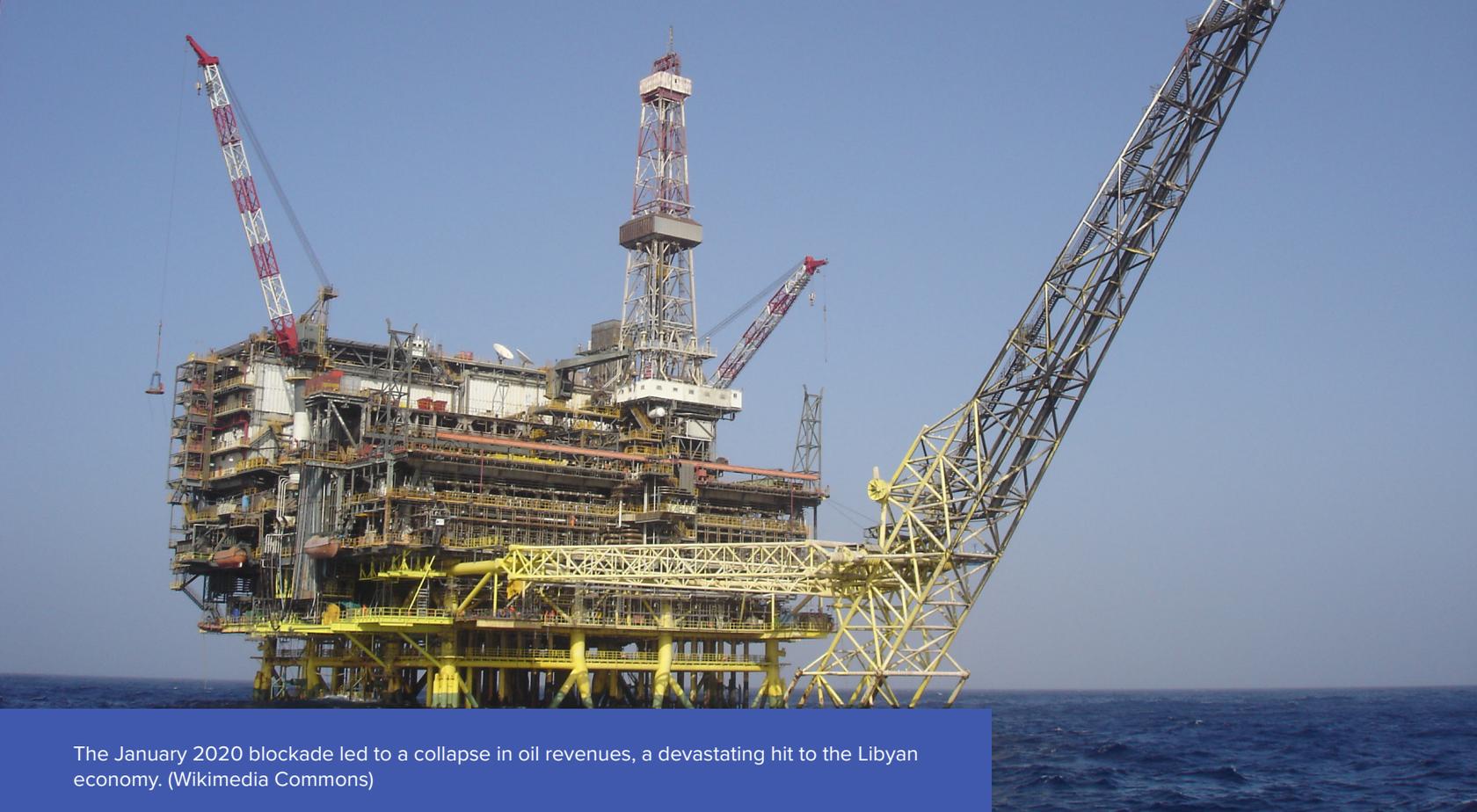
Agreement, the Tripoli government headed by Fayeze Serraj retains control of the Tripoli-based NOC and oversees the allocation of state funds deposited in the Tripoli-based Central Bank — these are the two channels through which oil revenues can flow legally and the only two institutions recognized by the UN Security Council². Haftar and the Eastern government accuse Tripoli of mismanaging hydrocarbon revenues and state funds, using them to fund militias backing the Government of National Accord (GNA), and failing to carry out reforms to stabilize the economy. For this reason, the Eastern authorities demand a change of leadership in both institutions: The Central Bank and the NOC³. Indeed, the problem for Haftar has always been that he controlled oil production, but not oil revenues.

After almost a year locked in a stalemate, the situation on the battlefield was reversed in April 2020. Thanks to Turkey's military support, the GNA was able to counterattack and defeat the Haftar-controlled Libyan National Army (LNA) and push them back to the gates of the city of Sirte near the "oil

1 Tsvetana Paraskova, "Libya's Oil Production Soars After Blockade Ends," *Oil Price*, September 28, 2019, <https://oilprice.com/Latest-Energy-News/World-News/Libyas-Oil-Production-Soars-After-Blockade-Ends.html>.

2 "After the Showdown in Libya's Oil Crescent," *International Crisis Group*, August 9, 2018. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/libya/189-after-showdown-libyas-oil-crescent>.

3 Tim Eaton, "Libya's War Economy: Predation, Profiteering and State Weakness," *Chatham House*, April 12, 2018. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2018/04/libyas-war-economy-predation-profiteering-and-state-weakness>.



The January 2020 blockade led to a collapse in oil revenues, a devastating hit to the Libyan economy. (Wikimedia Commons)

crescent,” a coastal area home to most of Libya’s oil export terminals. The ceasefire proposed by the GNA at the end of August 2020 and accepted by the Tobruk parliament and its spokesman, Aguila Saleh, has restarted the political dialogue between the conflicting parties. Meanwhile, the malcontent of the population in both Tripoli and Benghazi, due to the deterioration of living conditions and lack of economic reforms, led to protests and demonstrations in both cities.

The eventual success of this ceasefire could lead to an agreement between the main factions on the management and redistribution of economic resources. This eventual agreement in the economic sphere could be an essential first step towards reaching a positive agreement around the political issues. Nevertheless, albeit essential,

the possibility of reaching an agreement remains uncertain because of the complex interlocking of different and often conflicting interests both within Libya and outside of the country. These interests are difficult to resolve due to deep institutional divisions, mistrust accumulated by the failure of the Shkirat agreement, and divergent strategies between Libyan actors and external players.

On Sept. 18, 2020, a very important step toward improving the situation occurred. GNA’s Deputy Prime Minister Ahmed Maiteeq reached a deal with Haftar’s LNA⁴ to lift a nine-month blockade on Libyan oil assets. The immediate effect was that the NOC could gradually reopen the fields and terminals that it designates as being “safe” from armed groups. This first initial opening allowed the production of oil to reach 270,000 b/d, up

4 Sami Zapita, “Maiteeq Publishes Details of “Agreement” with Haftar for Resumption of Oil Exports,” *Libya Herald*, September 19, 2020, <https://www.libyaherald.com/2020/09/19/maiteeq-publishes-details-of-agreement-with-haftar-for-resumption-of-oil-exports/>.



In September, Libya's Prime Minister Fayez Al Sarraj announced plans to step down by the end of October. (U.S. Secretary of State/Flickr)

from around 100,000 b/d⁵. Unfortunately, this initial positive step on the economic level has not been matched by an improvement on the political stage, where a new phase of tensions appears ready to emerge among rival factions.

Beyond the decision to reopen the oil fields, the new proposed deal also includes an economic settlement over oil revenues, involving the creation of a mixed joint technical committee with participation of representatives from both regions. This mixed joint technical committee would have the task to ensure fair distribution of revenues, avoiding their utilization to finance militias, and, simultaneously, to resolve financial disputes between the two conflicting sides. This oil deal definitely represents an excellent opportunity for Ahmed Maiteeq, Libya's Deputy Prime Minister, who could take advantage of this pact to overshadow

Serraj and reposition himself within the Tripoli government. At the same time, this deal provides an escape route for Haftar, whose position after the failure of the attack on Tripoli has been faltering in the East, as well as within the ranks of his external sponsors.

However, the Maiteeq oil deal appears to be impractical since the agreement would cancel the debt contracted by the East in years of financial mismanagement and parallel monetary policy by absorbing it within the Western national debt. This means that, paradoxically, the Tripoli Central Bank would have subsidized Haftar's war on Tripoli and all the destruction it caused. Even more serious is the problem linked to the establishment of the joint technical committee, which would infringe on the legal jurisdiction of the Central Bank by directly acquiring oil proceeds to distribute nationwide, thus jeopardizing the independence of internationally recognized

5 Aydin Calik, "Libya's One Million Barrel Question," *Mees*, September 25, 2020, <https://www.mees.com/2020/9/25/oil-gas/libyas-one-million-barrel-question/07c92a60-ff41-11ea-93d2-31ba3c73b824>.

Libyan economic institutions. Finally, this agreement, signed in Sochi, appears to be sponsored by Russia and not under the auspices of the UN or the respective leadership of both Libyan governments. This is more than enough to provoke the disappointment of several actors within the GNA, the Central Bank and the NOC.

HAFTAR'S DECLARATION OVER THE RESTART OF OIL PRODUCTION COMES AFTER SARRAJ ANNOUNCED HIS DESIRE TO RESIGN FROM HIS POSITION BY THE END OF OCTOBER.

The oil controversy will inevitably weigh on the apparently reactivated political dialogue, as the next struggle seems to be over oil revenues funneled through the Central Bank. Haftar's declaration over the restart of oil production comes after Sarraj announced his desire to resign from his position by the end of October⁶. This action will inevitably bring out deep internal tensions within the various components of the GNA. At the same time, Abdullah Al-Thani, prime minister of the Eastern-based government, resigned from his position following public riots over corruption and deteriorating living conditions

in Benghazi. In the midst of this confused scenario, rogue militias, criminal organizations or terrorist groups could take advantage of this political vacuum and increase their activities, particularly in Southern Libya. Despite the proliferation of official meetings and under-the-table deal-making, either led domestically or sponsored by international actors, the situation within the Libyan context seems more fragmented than ever with GNA and LNA supporters no longer cohesive but internally divided and in competition for diverging interests.

THE EXTERNAL ACTORS AND THEIR CONFLICTING INTERESTS: WHO ASPIRES TO GAIN WHAT?

In light of these internal tensions, local actors increasingly need the support of external players to gain more leverage in this complex and unstable political landscape. As a consequence, the influence of foreign sponsors continues to weigh on the Libyan theater, dragging the conflict into regional tensions and making it one of the most dramatic on-going proxy wars in the world. On the verge of reactivating political dialogue between parties, foreign powers such as Egypt, Morocco, Turkey and different international organizations appear committed to sponsoring the different intra-

6 "Libya's UN-Backed PM Al-Sarraj Says he Plans to Quit," *DW*, September 16, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/libyas-un-backed-pm-al-sarraj-says-he-plans-to-quit/a-54955557>.



GNA President Faiz Al Saraj meets Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Istanbul, 2020. (pm.gov.ly)

Libyan political talks⁷ aimed at seeking a common institutional framework for future developments.

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is, without doubt, one of the main external actors interfering in Libya. The Emirats' interest in Libya goes back to the days of the revolution in 2011, during which it backed anti-Qadhafi's rebels. This action of the Emirates in supporting the rebels has continued until now, but support has only gone to faction who opposing the Islamist component of the rebel forces. The main motivation of the UAE's action in Libya — among other interests, especially economic interests — is its hostility towards any form of political Islam, as well as the UAE's ambition to become a

relevant active geopolitical player⁸. Because of this, the UAE will support any actor that could prevent the ascent to power of any Islamist party in any Middle Eastern country. The UAE is having a difficult time in reconciling its official position of supporting the UN-sponsored GNA (reiterated in January 2020 at the Berlin Conference), with that of breaking international laws, in particular the arms embargo on Libya, by continuing to arm Haftar's forces⁹.

Egypt is another extremely important actor in the Libyan crisis. The official motivation for Egypt's support of Haftar's adventure is necessary to keep stable and secure its western border with Libya. Undoubtedly in Cairo's mind are the many economic

⁷ On September 6, 2020 in Bouznika, Morocco; on September 17, 2020 in Geneva, Switzerland; on September 23, 2020 in Cairo and on September 27, 2020 in Hurghada, Egypt.

⁸ Mohamed Eljarh, "Turkey's Intervention in Libya Disrupts the UAE but Opens the Door for Russia," *The Washington Institute*, June 1, 2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/Turkey-Intervention-Libya-UAE-Russia-USA-Middle-East>

⁹ Ruth Michaelson, "Turkey and UAE Openly Flouting UN Arms Embargo to Fuel War in Libya," *The Guardian*, October 7, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/oct/07/turkey-and-uae-openly-flouting-un-arms-embargo-to-fuel-war-in-liby>.

advantages and possibilities that could derive from Egypt's control of Libya. After Haftar's defeat in June 2020, in order to protect the position of its ally, the Egyptian regime declared the line that goes from Sirte to Jufra, where Haftar forces were regrouping, as a red-line not to be crossed by GNA forces; violation of this position would trigger a strong military reaction by Egypt¹⁰. When the truce around Jufra and Sirte seemed to hold, the Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi started devoting significant effort to the development of an Egypt-sponsored intra-Libyan political negotiation¹¹.

Russia and France are the two other main supporters of Haftar. Russia's interests in intervening in the North African states are various: They range from the possibility of recuperating important credits owed to Russian companies by the Libyan government since the time of Qadhafi, to exploiting Russia's relevant position in the post-war reconstruction of the country. Having a military presence in a country that is strategically located on the southern shore of the Mediterranean, just a few hundred miles from Italy, a strategically significant NATO member country, constitutes a bonus for Russia's projection of power. As of today, Russian mercenaries loosely affiliated with the official Moscow government constitute the main military support for Haftar's troops on the ground¹². France also has played an important role in supporting Haftar's position. With its actions, Paris has gained the golden medal of ambiguity. In words, it has been a supporter of the GNA government, but in fact, as has been proven many times, France has

supported Haftar's forces. This ambiguity of France has *de facto* blocked any meaningful action by the European Union.

THE LACK OF ACTION FROM EUROPEAN COUNTRIES TO DEFEND THE LEGITIMATE GOVERNMENT IN TRIPOLI IN THE FACE OF HAFTAR'S ATTACK AGAINST THE LIBYAN CAPITAL HAS OPENED A WIDE DOOR FOR TURKEY'S INTERVENTION.

The lack of action from European countries to defend the legitimate government in Tripoli in the face of Haftar's attack against the Libyan capital has opened a wide door for Turkey's intervention. For Turkey, there is not a single driving interest to point to, but rather a mixture of economic, political and ideological

10 Alessia Melcangi, "A Two-Pronged Egyptian Strategy to Deal with the Libyan Chaos," Italian Institute for International Political Studies, September 24, 2020, <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/two-pronged-egyptian-strategy-deal-libyan-chaos-27488>.

11 Karim Mezran, Alessia Melcangi, "The Cairo Declaration is a False Resolution to Libya's Conflict," Atlantic Council, June 11, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/the-cairo-declaration-is-a-false-resolution-to-libyas-conflict/>.

12 Saurabh Kumar Shahi, "Understanding the Russian Roulette in Libya," *National Herald*, June 25, 2020, <https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/international/understanding-the-russian-roulette-in-libya>.

factors that have prompted Turkey's action in Libya¹³. As of today, Turkey is negotiating a more permanent military truce with Russia and, at the same time, fostering intra-Libyan negotiations to resolve the crisis¹⁴. The USA has played a backside position by supporting UN-led negotiations and limiting its involvement to the diplomatic level.

ARE THERE ANY CHANCES FOR A RETURN TO THE NEGOTIATING TABLE BETWEEN THE CONFLICTING PARTIES? SOME FINAL CONSIDERATIONS.

The different phases of the Libyan crisis, from 2011 to date, remind us that the conflict has an economic dimension as significant as the political and the military dimensions. Any strategy aimed at stabilizing the country should consider all these three correlated components in an integrated way. Over the years, the priority has been given to the political aspects of the crisis, mainly offering political solutions to reunify the country.

However, without further progress to heal the rifts in the country's economic and financial institutions, military and political tensions will become endemic, making the prospect of a concrete solution even more remote.

WITHOUT FURTHER PROGRESS TO HEAL THE RIFTS IN THE COUNTRY'S ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL INSTITUTIONS, MILITARY AND POLITICAL TENSIONS WILL BECOME ENDEMIC, MAKING THE PROSPECT OF A CONCRETE SOLUTION EVEN MORE REMOTE.

Since the ceasefire proposed by the GNA at the end of August, intra-Libyan dialogue seems to have regained momentum. Unfortunately, current conditions on the ground differ from those of the past few years. The two rival factions appear more fragmented and

13 Göktuğ Sönmez and Nebahat Tanrıverdi Yaşar, "Making Sense of the Crisis in the Eastern Mediterranean and Turkish Involvement in Libya," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, June 15, 2020, <https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2020/06/15/making-sense-of-the-crisis-in-the-eastern-mediterranean-and-turkish-involvement-in-libya/>.

14 Anatolianet, "Turkish President Receives Libyan Premier in Istanbul," *Turkish Press*, October 4, 2020, <https://turkish-press.com/turkish-president-receives-libyan-premier-in-istanbul/>; Patrick Wintour, "Turkey and Russia's Deepening Roles in Libya Complicate Peace Efforts," *The Guardian*, October 5, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/05/turkey-and-russia-deepening-roles-in-libya-complicate-peace-efforts>.



Satellite images show travel of C-17 planes from UAE's Qusahwira airbase to Egypt's Sidi Barrani military base to support Haftar's Libyan National Army. (Google Earth/Guardian)

divided than before, meaning that the use of GNA-LNA duality as a tool for interpreting the current conflict is losing its relevance and efficacy for understanding the Libyan context. Both factions suffer internal tensions and a progressive erosion of internal consensus: Within the GNA, this process is caused by the weak political posture of Serraj and the recent moves of actors such as Maiteeq and Interior Minister Fathi Bashagha, who appeared to be acting on their own, probably frustrated by the lack of initiative and a low performance of the GNA as a collective entity; within the LNA, the rift between House of Representatives (HOR) Speaker Agila Saleh and Haftar has grown larger, with many Eastern militias distancing themselves from the Cyrenaica general following the unsuccessful siege of Tripoli. On top of it, these actors have to consider the dangerous consequences that could arise from the growing malcontent and the restlessness of the population both in the West and in the East.

Considering this context, it is relevant to note that popular mobilization throughout Libya against the ongoing intra-Libyan talks is

emerging: It is fueled by general skepticism shared by part of the population about the capacity of these dialogues to lead to a real solution, especially in light of the egotism of various personalities, the high level of corruption and incompetence of the political class, as well as the failure of UN and EU mediation and continuing interference from external actors.

Given this fragmentation within the two main factions, the various intra-Libyan talks are now mostly led by individual actors who consider these negotiations an opportunity to secure a personal position in this new fluid power structure. It is apparent that Libya is witnessing a progressive return to the traditional Libyan way of play politics, which focuses on the role played by an eminent personality, a leader, a notable or a tribal chief around whom different interests converge regardless of political affiliations or individual beliefs. These emerging actors seem more interested in holding positions of power rather than ensuring the end of hostilities and the resumption of a transparent and democratic political path forward. An

example is evident in the reaction to Serraj's resignation announcement, which unleashed a race by many individuals to present themselves as the best candidates for the position of prime minister or at least in the new government that most probably would follow the resignation of Serraj.

Looking at external interferences, a reason why every political process until now has failed could be the lack of an actor strong enough to bring together all the rival parties and their external sponsors to the negotiating table. In the absence of a pivotal actor, it is incumbent upon the UN to organize a series of meetings among the opposing groups to create consensus for a UN-backed solution, leading to the formation of an effective national unity government.

WHAT IS NECESSARY TO REACH A REAL PACIFICATION PROCESS IN LIBYA?

Avoid the partition of the country to keep Libya united and pacified and focus on the restart of UN-led negotiations along military, financial and economic tracks.

Demobilize militias. They represent an endemic problem that can be solved with a strong internationally-backed peace agreement and an institutional reconciliation strategy to favor their institutionalization, merging and integration under a unified central command.

At the political level, focus on local authorities, who have been considered custodians of true reconciliatory processes, to de-conflict the situation in Libya.

Control and eliminate economic-based threats to peace, and begin a deep process of reform to address the economic crisis caused by low oil prices.

Reach an agreement signed by the main stakeholders based on a comprehensive roadmap that includes identifying the main interests of the opposing sides and guaranteeing that these interests are respected, and ensuring that the Central Bank remains the only actor controlling the distribution of oil revenues in the country.

Create a minimum consensus among the two sides' foreign backers on the UN-led political process.

Of course, it is clear that undertaking each of these points is not an easy task, but could give purpose and energy to an unmotivated and angry population. 

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THE SIEGE MENTALITY:

How Fear of Migration Explains the
EU's Approach to Libya

Roderick Parkes



INTRODUCTION

The European Union's stance towards the crisis in Libya is bewildering – at least without deep background on Europe's workings. The EU classifies problems and players in odd ways, and the way it links them up is odder still. Libya is a complex problem in its own right, but the EU treats it through three broader complexes: one around the integration of its regional market, one around the transformation of the Arab world, and one around its attempts to find a *modus vivendi* with Turkey.

Each has involved an effort by the EU to reform other countries, and each has failed for the same reason: The EU pictures itself as the main pole for neighboring regions, meaning it both underestimates the shift of power away from Europe and overestimates the risk of attracting migrants. Ultimately this makes its fears of being overwhelmed by migrants self-fulfilling, because instead of working with emerging international partners, it surrounds itself with a buffer of oppressive autocratic regimes.

This chapter explains those three complexes in turn, each time picking out four key characteristics. It ends by showing how they have culminated in a readiness for the EU to get “geopolitical”¹ – not in Libya, which genuinely requires its geopolitical engagement, but rather vis-à-vis Turkey, whom the EU accuses of weaponizing migration flows all along its southern flank.

MIGRATION: WHY THE EU TURNED A “RING OF FRIENDS” INTO A “SAFETY RING”

The EU's posture towards its neighbors can increasingly be explained by one thing: fear of migrants. Fifteen years ago, the EU set itself the task of reforming a huge swath of nearby countries using trade, aid and technical support. Its aim, increasingly, was to reduce the drivers of migration. And its failure explains its swing from high-handed engagement to protectionism:

The EU pictures itself at the center of a huge regional economy, demarcated into rings of countries.

In 2004 the EU enlarged and pushed its borders deep into the Mediterranean (Malta and Cyprus) and Eastern Europe. It now pictured itself at the heart of a huge regional economy, stretching south to Nigeria and Ethiopia and east to Ukraine and Armenia. Its stated goal was market integration and normative convergence, and it began transforming its neighbors in salami slices: It sorted them into rings, and leveraged market access to reform these one by one.² In the inner ring were the Western Balkans and Turkey, countries prepped for EU accession. In the second, an arc from Belarus right round to Morocco, which received technical support. A thick outer ring, across Eurasia, the Americas and above all Africa, benefited from trade and aid.

¹ Steven Blockmans and Daniel Gros, “From a political to a politicised Commission?” Policy Insight No 2019/12, Brussels: CEPS, <http://aei.pitt.edu/100392/>.

² Michael Emerson, “Just Good Friends? The European Union's Multiple Neighbourhood Policies,” *The International Spectator* 46, no.4 (2011): 45-62.



Water system and bridge funded by the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa. (ec.europa.eu)

The EU cannot absorb immigration.

Although unspoken at first, a fear of large-scale disorderly migration always motivated the EU's engagement abroad. The EU addressed the drivers of forced migration (illiberal government, unemployment, conflict) with the long-term vision of people crossing this huge region as freely and smoothly as goods and capital. Only so could the EU protect and extend its own internal border-free travel zone, the Schengen Area. But herein lay a problem: The EU's internal travel zone was originally conceived as means to get freight across borders quicker.³ That leaves the EU with no collective labor market to absorb immigrants, whereas *they* are free to use Schengen to pick and choose their preferred destination (Germany, France, Sweden). Consequently, even a small influx of immigration can trigger political crisis here.

International engagement has given way to buffering.

The EU initially focused its reform efforts on those countries closest to it, but was drawn to migration pressures from sub-Saharan Africa. Around 2005 the EU refocused its development aid on the causes of migration in (West) Africa. Almost at once, it experienced a new and bigger wave of irregular migration. Forced to acknowledge that migration was not curable after all, it now created "migration partnerships," bilateral development frameworks in which it gained a flexible workforce, while reducing the cost for immigrants of remitting wages home to Africa. Soon after, it faced a new wave of people, not least through Libya. Now the EU simply created a buffer. It used development aid to bribe African governments, and turned the inner ring of states into a "safety ring."⁴

³ In the early 1980s, the EU was looking for ways to deepen European market integration, and the idea of lifting border controls between member states promised a means to keep traffic fluid. The possible benefits to tourists and unemployed workers in borderlands were clear too. But member states pursued the option because there was little risk of mass immigration from their neighbors: European labor markets are scarcely integrated and labor mobility low. On the roots of Schengen: Ruben Zaiotti, *Cultures of border control: Schengen and the evolution of European frontiers* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2011).

⁴ Irene Diaz de Aguilar Hidalgo, "The Niger-Libya migration route. An odyssey shaped by Saharan connections and European fears, 2000-2017," Framework Document, 1/2018, Madrid: Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, http://www.ieee.es/en/Galerias/fichero/docs_marco/2018/DIEEEM01-2018_Migraciones_Europa_Niger-Libia_IreneDiazdeAguilar_ENGLISH.pdf.



EU senior officials met in March 2017 to discuss migration partnerships and challenges. (ec.europa.eu)

The EU's fear of African migration became self-fulfilling.

Insofar as they have had any effect, the EU's attempts to reduce migration at source have probably led to an increase. Its early focus on alleviating the "root causes" of migration spurred modernization in Africa, causing instability. The newly prosperous looked for opportunities abroad, logically focusing on the EU as the development driver.⁵ As for its "migration partnerships," these reduced the cost of migrants remitting wages from Europe, giving African partner countries an incentive to push workers towards the EU.⁶ Its recent buffering approach has relied on oppressive governments and militias, as well as leading to a growth in smuggling networks. The sum effect has been to let increasingly wealthy African states off the hook when it comes to taking responsibility for their citizens.

LIBYA: WHY THE EU PREFERS CONTAINMENT TO ENGAGEMENT

A scattering of autocratic leaders—particularly in the Arab and Muslim worlds—were able to secure themselves an exemption from EU reform policies by offering stability in return for cash.⁷ The result, over time, was chaos and collapse. But because the EU had few established partners in these countries, it stuck with a policy of containment. Libya (like Syria and Eritrea) is a case in point.

5 Hein De Haas, "Turning the Tide? Why Development Will Not Stop Migration," *Development and Change* 38, no.5 (2007): 819-841.

6 Luigi Scazzieri, John Springford, "How the EU and third countries can manage migration," Policy brief November 2017. London CER, <https://www.cer.eu/publications/archive/policy-brief/2017/how-eu-and-third-countries-can-manage-migration>.

7 Danuta Huber, "Mixed signals' still? The EU's democracy and human rights policy since the outbreak of the Arab Spring," Working Paper 13/2012. Rome: IAI.

Libya leveraged an exemption from EU reforms.

The EU has typically been readier to engage with regimes to its east than its west, despite their similar levels of readiness to adopt EU rules.⁸ It seems the EU has greater fears about destabilizing Morocco than Ukraine — again, perhaps due to its greater fear of mass immigration from the south. This is borne out by its relations with Muammar Gaddafi. When the financial crisis hit, Gaddafi sought relations with the EU, but through blackmail: He threatened to turn the Mediterranean “black” with migrants if Europe did not prop up his regime.⁹ The threat was idle. African workers see Libya not as a stepping stone to Italy, but as a market for jobs in the oil and household sectors.¹⁰ Europeans nevertheless propped up Gaddafi, and later a string of Libyan strongmen who promised to hold back migrants.

Libya presents a theater where EU engagement might have had a positive impact.

The EU has a foreign policy toolbox honed to deal with tricky situations: In the 1970s, when the UK joined, EU leaders consolidated the rather technocratic methods they had used to build cross-border links inside the EU and turned them into a full Cold War toolbox for action outside.¹¹ These tools remain relevant in spots like today’s Libya. By getting cities across the region to link up, for instance, the EU might have created a political bedrock in Libya, as well as improving the treatment of migrants.¹² But the EU seems to consider

its means too soft and technocratic to use. It has deferred instead to member states like France and Italy, which boast a more retrograde understanding of geopolitics.

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The EU’s crisis mentality led it to mishandle the real migration dynamics.

Reduced to a position of watching events across the Mediterranean, the EU misread the dynamics there. At the beginning of the Libyan civil war, the EU overlooked the return south to Mali of heavily-armed militias who had been in Gaddafi’s pay. Surprised by the sudden violence, the EU responded by helping West African countries, including regional hegemon Nigeria, strengthen their border controls.

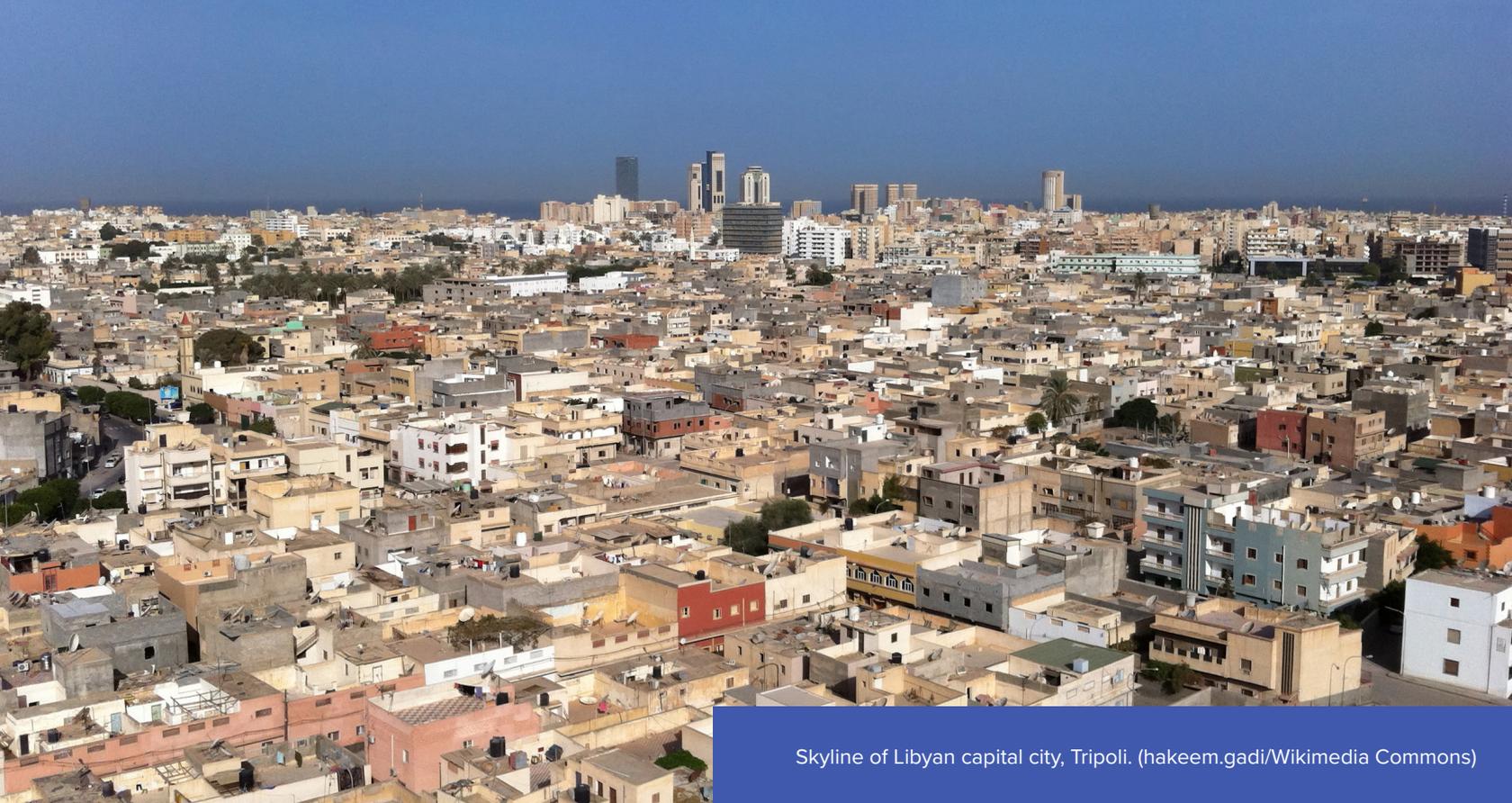
8 Tina Freyburg, Sandra Lavenex, Frank Schimmelfennig, Tatiana Skripka and Anne Wetzel “Democracy promotion through functional cooperation? The case of the European Neighbourhood Policy,” *Democratization*, 18 no.4 (2011): 1026-1054.

9 Barbie Latza Nadeau, “Femme Fascista: How Giorgia Meloni became the star of Italy’s far right,” *World Policy Journal* 35, no.2 (2018): 14-21.

10 Even in 2015, with Libya an extremely hostile environment and smuggling networks rife, only an estimated 20% of those entering Libya intended to move on to the EU. Fransje Molenaar and Floor El Kamouni-Janssen, “Turning the tide. The politics of irregular migration in the Sahel and Libya,” The Hague: Clingendael, CRU Report, February 2017, p.2, https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/turning_the_tide.pdf.

11 Veit Bachmann and James Sidaway, “Zivilmacht Europa: A critical geopolitics of the European Union as a global power,” *Transactions*, 34, no.1 (2000): 94-109; Robert Cooper, “The Postmodern State and the World Order,” Paper 19/1996. London: Demos.

12 Tarek Megerisi, “Order from chaos: Stabilising Libya the local way,” July 2018, Berlin: European Council for Foreign Relations, https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/order_from_chaos_stabilising_libya_the_local_way.



Skyline of Libyan capital city, Tripoli. (hakeem.gadi/Wikimedia Commons)

More recently, it has pressed Morocco to reinforce its southern border, which it perceived as a second route for Africans to the EU. The effect of all this has been to undermine efforts in West Africa to create a regional labor market particularly on the part of Morocco, which saw immigration from Cote D'Ivoire and Nigeria as a way to build bridges to those countries.¹³

The effect of EU policy in Libya has been to build smuggling networks to Europe.

Early in the Libyan civil war, the EU took the lead in managing Libya's customs controls. But the Europeans overseeing the customs posts were unsympathetic to the way of life in the southern borderlands, and cracked down hard on the relatively harmless smuggling of subsidized foodstuffs. Local smugglers, facing stiff penalties for minor offenses, felt they might as well risk smuggling lucrative cargoes of weapons and humans. They linked into networks right across West Africa.

West African states now began pushing their young male population northwards, as well

as closing down consular support for those seeking to return home. For the young men who survive the trip across the Sahel, the journey across the Mediterranean is a doddle.

TURKEY: HOW EU ENGAGEMENT LED TO THE “WEAPONIZATION OF MIGRATION”

In 2005, the EU elevated Turkey to an inner “ring of friends,” and began readying it to join the bloc. This involved an intensive tutelage relationship, whereby the EU defined a growing range of Turkish domestic and foreign policies. But the EU had no real intention of allowing Turkey to join, eventually poisoning relations and precluding alternative forms of

¹³ Kelsey Norman, “Between Europe and Africa: Morocco as a country of immigration,” *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa*, 7 no.4, (2016): 421-439.



Greek Consulate in Turkey. (M. Flesier/Wikimedia Commons)

partnership.

Greek-Turkish tensions, and not Turkey itself, have been Europeanized.

In the 2000s, Athens had given up hope of other EU member states supporting it in case of war. At the same time, Greece perceived that EU enlargement had successfully dissipated tensions between old enemies like Ireland and the UK, and it chose to trust in this process to pacify its relations with Turkey.¹⁴ In many ways, Greece was calling the bluff of the other members. States like the UK and Germany had felt able to make positive noises to Turkey's (large, Muslim) population about one day joining the EU because they assumed Greece would always veto this. Greece, by shifting its position, forced its EU partners to resolve the territorial dispute in the Aegean or bear responsibility for the failure. Athens had Europeanized Greek-Turkish relations.

European engagement helped polarize Turkey.

Until as late as 2013, it seemed EU integration would indeed settle the question of Turkey's post-imperial identity, anchoring it to Europe, and cementing a secular constitution.¹⁵ The EU had begun to build up cross-border links to Turkey. But the EU response to the Gezi Park protests, and its maintenance of visa restrictions towards Turks, damaged its power of attraction. Power in Turkey shifted back from the pro-European urban middle classes to rural working classes, polarizing the country on identity lines and facilitating the government's shift to a majoritarian democracy. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is now able to play the familiar strongman role, demanding from the EU market access and an exemption from Europe's reform agenda in return for stability.

¹⁴ Ioannis Armakolas and Giorgos Triantafyllou, "Greece and EU enlargement to the Western Balkans: Understanding an ambivalent relationship," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 17 no.4 (2017): 611-629.

¹⁵ Soner Cagaptay, "The Middle Class Strikes Back," June 5, 2013, *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/06/opinion/turkeys-middle-class-strikes-back.html>.

The EU has proved unable to build a geostrategic partnership with Turkey.

By keeping Turkey locked in an artificial grouping of accession states alongside Western Balkan countries, Brussels has disconnected Ankara from its strategic environment. Although power has seeped away from Europe, the EU would still not think to sit down with Turkey and, say, Ukraine and Russia (not least because it sorted them into different rings of states back in 2005). Nor does the EU view Turkey as a means of reaching out to Central Asia, or as a partner in improving the treatment of China's Turkic populations. As for Turkey's decision to build physical and diplomatic links to Muslim countries in Africa and the Middle East, the EU sees this as a risk to its transport links to Europe, which have been built up as part of the accession process.¹⁶

The EU has made the Greek-Turkish border into a geopolitical hotspot.

EU states have once again started building buffers to the Aegean: During the 2015 migration crisis, they created a buffer towards Greece by posting border guards to the Western Balkans. The EU Commission, meanwhile, created asylum camps on the Greek islands, which it administers, but for which it denies responsibility. Consequently, Greece has returned to its "front-line" strategy, setting up a geopolitical fault line in the Aegean between Europe and Turkey. Taken together, this has turned the tiny overfilled asylum camps on the Greek islands into the focal point of huge regional tensions. Turkey is able to use these camps as a means of keeping Europe plugged into the situation in Syria and its broader strategic neighborhood, feeding migrants into them.

TURKEY, LIBYA, AND TURKEY IN LIBYA: A TEST CASE FOR THE "GEOPOLITICAL EU"

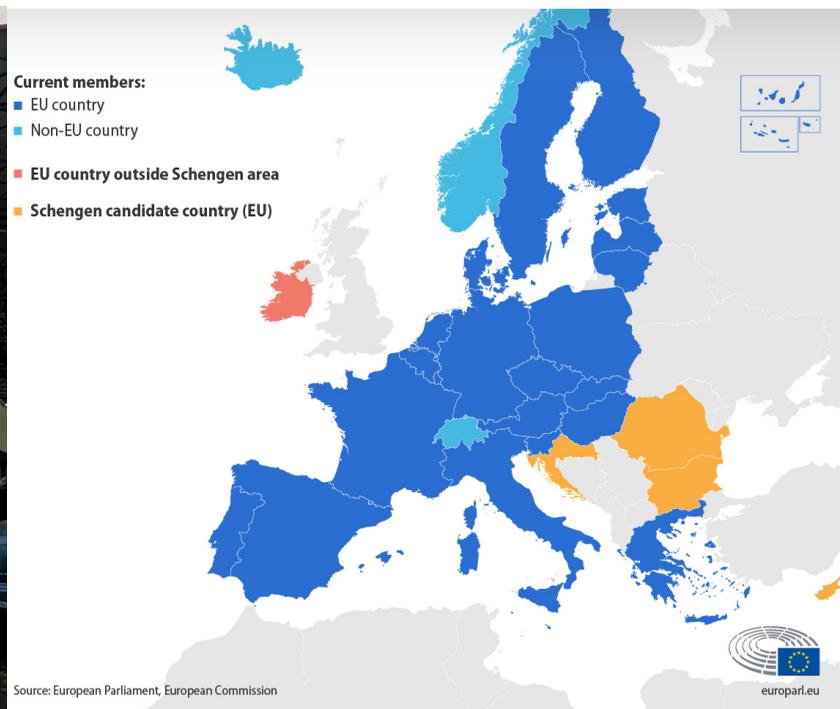
When the EU looks at the crises along its southern flank, it perceives Turkey and its actions across the Mediterranean as a test for a new European geopolitics. Whereas the EU's old geopolitics involved building cross-border links, its new geopolitics is designed to prevent Turkey from weaponizing this vulnerability in multiple theaters, of which Libya is just one.

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¹⁶ Asya Akca "Neo-Ottomanism: Turkey's foreign policy approach to Africa," Washington, DC: CSIS, <https://www.csis.org/neo-ottomanism-turkeys-foreign-policy-approach-africa>.



Cars passing through a border control in Schengen. (europarl.europa.eu)



A map identifying Schengen, the EU's passport-free travel area. (europarl.europa.eu)

The EU pictures Turkey as its weak hinge.

Fifteen years ago, the EU envisioned expanding Schengen to the east and possibly even the south. Today it sees the Schengen Area hemmed in by a hostile geopolitical situation. To the east, it sees a “counter-Schengen” (the Eurasian Economic Union, where Russia uses its neighbors’ dependence on migrant remittances to dominate them) and the “anti-Schengen” (the zone around Libya, a de facto border-free area where arms, fighters and dangerous ideas circulate).¹⁷ It perceives Turkey sitting at the hinge between all three. Turkey, the EU believes, can politicize the movement of Muslim workers within the Eurasian Economic Union, and of course direct flows within Libya and across the Central Mediterranean. Above all, it can funnel Syrians, Afghans and Iraqis directly into the Schengen Area.

Turkey instrumentalizes migration only as a last resort.

Despite the Turkish president’s frequent rhetoric about “opening the floodgates to the EU,” weaponizing migration from Syria is a last resort for Turkey.

Each time Ankara allows migrants to put off from the shores of the Aegean, Turkey not only squanders the main vector of its foreign policy (solidarity towards Muslims), it also loses control over all its other borders (migrants from the Horn of Africa begin using Turkey as a means of entering the EU, for instance).¹⁸ In this context, Turkey rather sees itself as a victim of the weaponization of migration, not least after Russia displaced large numbers of Syrian refugees after Ankara downed a Russian jet in November 2015. Nevertheless, its role as a buffer to the EU has allowed it to establish a kind of protection racket, playing on EU fears.

17 Florence Gaub, “The Arab common market: Fighters, weapons, ideologies,” Policy Brief, 2016/22, Paris: EUISS, https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep06755?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents.

18 In 2019, a rumor went out that Turkey was about to open the border for migrants to Greece. Thirty-thousand migrants moved across Turkey towards Greece, but an estimated 1 million moved within Syria towards Turkey.



Turkey's concrete barrier wall along the Syrian border.
(W.J. Gauthier/Wikimedia Commons)

The EU's new geopolitical approach has worsened Turkey's threat perception.

Officials in Ankara accuse the EU of military action to weaponize migration. They say, for instance, that the creation of an EU naval operation off Libya coincided with a wave of Syrians into Turkey. This is nonsense of course, but it is easy to see how the EU's heavy-handed and poorly communicated policies might have played into Turkey's threat perception.

When Europeans launched their Mediterranean operation, Libyan people smugglers altered their business model, shifting from middle-class Syrians who demanded safe passage to the EU, and catering to the mass African market whom they put to sea in large, unsafe vessels with a promise of rescue by EU vessels.¹⁹ Syrian middle classes then took the far safer land route towards the EU, via Turkey.

Europe has fallen into an old geopolitics.

From the 1970s, the EU developed a modern form of geopolitics, based on building up cross-border links. But its fear of migration and its eurocentrism have gradually led it to see those links as a vulnerability. It feels exposed to population explosion in Africa, the loss of habitable land through climate change, war and chaos. This is classic Malthusian geopolitics, *realpolitik*.²⁰ It is entirely at odds with the EU's decentralized network structure. It also obscures the positive lessons drawn during the migration crisis — for instance that it *is* possible to build up inter-linked regional labor markets in Africa (the Horn and West Africa),²¹ or to persuade African leaders to repatriate nationals from Libya (following the slave market scandal there).²² 

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19 House of Lords, European Union Committee, "Operation Sophia: a failed mission," HL Paper 5, 2nd Report of Session 2017.

20 Stefano Guzzini, "Which geopolitics?" in: *The Return of Geopolitics to Europe?* Guzzini ed. (Cambridge: CUP, 2012) p. 24.

21 Clare Castillejo, "The influence of EU migration policy on regional free movement in the IGAD and ECOWAS regions," Discussion Paper, 11/2019, Bonn: DIE, <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/205251/1/die-dp-2019-11.pdf>.

22 Bel Trew, "New deal to return African migrants from Libya" *The Times*, December 1, 2017, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/flights-from-libya-to-double-in-repatriation-plan-after-slavery-footage-rm5ssms5b>.

WHY TURKEY INTERVENED IN LIBYA

Jalel Harchaoui



INTRODUCTION

Through a historical analysis of Turkey's military intervention in Libya, this essay identifies the various motivations, reasonings, and threat perceptions underlying Ankara's current Libya strategy.

On January 2, 2020, the Turkish parliament approved an official intervention in Libya. A few weeks earlier, on November 27, 2019, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan had convinced the Government of National Accord (GNA), the internationally recognized government in Tripoli, to sign a maritime memorandum with Ankara. The as-yet-ratified document declared a 16-nautical-mile-wide corridor from southwest Turkey to northeast Libya as an exclusive economic zone (EEZ) that ignores the rights of Greece.¹ In return, through a security memorandum, Turkey committed to defending Tripoli and launched an operation whose primary tactical objective was to put an end to the then-eight-month-long attack waged on the capital by the eastern Libyan-based rebel commander Khalifa Haftar's armed coalition.² By late spring 2020, the Turkish-backed forces aligned with the Tripoli government had forced Haftar's main brigades out of northwestern Libya.

The warlord's discomfiture elicited stark comments from several capitals. The United Arab Emirates (UAE), the principal booster of Haftar's military campaign since 2014, denounced Turkey's Libya move, saying

that Ankara "undermined efforts to reach a peaceful solution [there] and destabilized the entire region."³ France and Greece, too, issued a harsh condemnation, while neither Washington nor Moscow issued a firm statement.⁴

**THE IMPERTURBABLE
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The imperturbable frequency at which the Turks have sent military cargo flights and consolidated their assets in Libya after Haftar's defeat is a reminder that they have no intention to leave within the foreseeable future. It is therefore worthwhile to study

1 Abdullah Bozkurt, "Full text of Turkey-Libya maritime agreement revealed," *Nordic Monitor*, December 5, 2019.

2 Abdullah Bozkurt, "Full text of new Turkey, Libya sweeping security, military cooperation deal revealed," *Nordic Monitor*, December 14, 2019.

3 "UAE foreign minister: Israel deal paves way for comprehensive Middle East peace," *Arab News*, September 30, 2020.

4 On France's condemnation of Turkey's Libya intervention, see, Rym Momtaz, "Macron accuses Turkey of 'criminal responsibility' in Libya," *Politico Europe*, June 29, 2020. On France's pro-Haftar policy in Libya, see, Jalel Harchaoui, "La politique libyenne de la France et ses antécédents historiques," *Revue Internationale et Stratégique*, December 11, 2019. On Greece accusing Turkey of violating the sovereignty of Libya, see, "EU Foreign Chief Visits Greece-Turkey Border, Hears Greek Complaints," *The National Herald*, June 25, 2020.



A 2011 press conference with U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta and Transitional Libyan Prime Minister Abdurrahim El-Keib in Tripoli, Libya. (defense.gov)

the events and rationale that gave rise to Ankara's November 2019 memoranda.

Although their signing and the massive operation that followed were greatly facilitated by the destructive inefficacy of Haftar and his Emirati sponsor, their roots had developed over several years, if not decades.

THE 2020 INTERVENTION WAS NOT ENTIRELY NEW

The numerous declarations lately portraying Turkey as a disrupter within the Libyan theater can easily cause observers to forget that in February-March 2011, when popular uprisings broke out against Muammar Gaddafi, Ankara

was opposed to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and its Gulf partners going to war against the Libyan autocrat's regime. Turkey's closeness to Gaddafi had first burgeoned when he backed Turkey's 1974 invasion of northern Cyprus,⁵ and economic activity between Libya and Turkey grew over the subsequent years. That growth accelerated after a diplomatic deal with the United States in 2003 helped lift international sanctions on Libya amid an era of high oil prices.⁶ Also, when Libya declared an EEZ in May 2009, and signaled that it was open to international agreements, Turkey's interest was piqued.⁷ By early 2011, Turkish companies had over \$20 billion of outstanding projects there, mostly in construction, engineering, and energy.⁸ These enormous economic interests suffice to explain why Turkey first tried to oppose the intervention.⁹

5 Alon Liel, *Turkey in the Middle East: Oil, Islam, and Politics* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2001), p. 176.

6 Geoff Porter, "The Faulty Premise of Pre-emption," *New York Times*, July 31, 2004; and Bruce W. Jentleson and Christopher A. Whytock, "Who 'Won' Libya? The Force-Diplomacy Debate and Its Implications for Theory and Policy," *International Security*, vol. 30, no. 3 (2006), pp. 47-86.

7 Cihat Yayci, "Libya's Role and Effect on the Efforts to Limit the Maritime Jurisdictions in the East Mediterranean" (in Turkish), *Güvenlik Stratejileri Dergisi*, vol. 7, no. 14 (2011), pp. 17-41.

8 Graham Fuller, *Turkey and the Arab Spring: Leadership in the Middle East* (Vancouver: Bozorg, 2014), p. 197.

9 Birsan Erdogan, *Humanitarian Intervention and the Responsibility to Protect: Turkish Foreign Policy Discourse* (London: Palgrave Pivot, 2016), p. 32.

IN ORDER TO ADVANCE ITS GEOPOLITICAL AGENDA IN THE REGION, ANKARA INSTRUMENTALIZES ITS SWAY OVER, AND PROXIMITY TO, ISLAMIST NETWORKS IN ARAB COUNTRIES LIKE LIBYA.

After American insistence helped convince Turkey to renounce using its veto and join the NATO operation, the Justice and Development Party-led (AKP) government came to appreciate the aura and ideological advantage it possessed in post-Gaddafi Libya.¹⁰ Its brand of modernist, semi-democratic Islamic populism is, in several regards, akin to that of the Muslim Brotherhood. Between 2011 and 2013, the Egyptian and Syrian crises brought Qatar and Turkey closer together, as both propped up Islamist currents there. Libyan Islamists also played a role in Syria at that time, working with Doha and Ankara on undermining the Bashar al-Assad government.¹¹ Those connections have remained ever since, and Erdogan, despite his ideological versatility during the last decade, hasn't ceased to support reformist, bottom-up Sunni Islam in Arab countries. This, however, is not to say that strengthening the Muslim Brotherhood is a Turkish objective unto itself. Rather, it is the other way around. In order to advance its geopolitical agenda in the region, Ankara instrumentalizes its sway over, and proximity to, Islamist networks in Arab countries like Libya.

Although the Muslim Brotherhood was never very popular in Libya, the 2011 war against Gaddafi catapulted a number of proponents of political Islam into positions of power. Separately, deep historical ties bind Libya's west coast to Turkey.

The rise of Abu Dhabi as a major regional actor in 2013 was yet another factor for Qatari-Turkish collaboration. Indeed, in the years following the Arab Uprisings, the UAE along with several other U.S. allies, including Saudi Arabia, Egypt, France, and Jordan, ramped up their hostility to the notion that citizen initiative and activism should be tolerated in the Middle East and North Africa, regardless of whether that reformist thrust against traditional authoritarianism involves extremist or moderate methods.

In Libya, Turkey's support for a motley spectrum of Islamist and revolutionary forces took on a military dimension in the second half

¹⁰ Paris failed to invite Ankara to its March 19, 2011, Summit on Libya. On March 22, Turkey threatened to use its veto as a NATO member and thus prevent the consensus necessary to unify the various individual Libya interventions into one NATO operation. On March 24, Ankara finally gave in to U.S. pressure and embraced the no-fly zone on Libya. See, Ian Traynor, "Turkey and France clash over Libya air campaign," *The Guardian*, March 24, 2011; and Rebecca Adler-Nissen and Vincent Pouliot, "Power in Practice: Negotiating the International Intervention in Libya," *European Journal of International Relations*, January 29, 2014.

¹¹ On Libyan-Turkish coordination in backing the anti-Assad rebellion, see Jalel Harchaoui, "Libya's Looming Contest for the Central Bank," *War On The Rocks*, April 1, 2019. On Libyan-Turkish-Qatari coordination in backing the anti-Assad rebellion, see, Rania Abouzeid, *No Turning Back: Life, Loss, and Hope in Wartime Syria* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2018), pp. 161-4; and Christopher Phillips, *The Battle For Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East* (New Haven: Yale University Press), p. 137.



Turkish Defense Minister Akar receives Libyan chief of general staff al-Haddad in October 2020. (msb.gov.tr)

of 2014 when Haftar’s campaign against all Islamist groups in Benghazi started showing signs of resilience. Ankara’s interference in those years wasn’t massive, nor did it reflect a systematic policy. It manifested mainly with Ankara’s *laissez-faire* attitude, which turned a blind eye whenever Libyan actors based in Turkey shipped weapons to Islamist brigades committed to fighting Haftar’s armed coalition.¹²

In the two years leading up to Haftar’s April 2019 offensive against Tripoli, interference emanating from Turkey diminished. In that period, when the hardline revolutionaries and radical Islamists weren’t killed, they were arrested or forced to leave the country by more centrist militias in Tripolitania.¹³ As a result, the Libyan figures living in Turkey were now more in passive exile than plotting

any new moves.¹⁴ The Turkish state itself had neither a clear Libya policy, nor a workable point of entry. For instance, in November 2018, a few days before the peace conference that took place in Palermo, Italy, Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar visited GNA officials in Tripoli and presented them with maritime maps meant to highlight Greece’s alleged attempts to encroach upon Libya’s continental shelf.¹⁵ He was ignored. The Tripoli authorities deemed it out of the question to enter any form of maritime arrangement that would alienate Greece, Cyprus, and, perhaps, the entire European Union.

But the frontal assault by Haftar’s Libyan National Army (LNA) on Tripoli in April 2019 acted as a systemic shock that would change everyone’s outlook. That same month, the UAE, eager to offset the LNA’s frailty on the

12 On weapons shipments from Turkey to Misrata and its allies in Benghazi, see, Frederic Wehrey, *This War is Out of Our Hands* (Washington: New America, 2020), p. 19; United Nations Panel of Experts on Libya, *Letter dated 4 March 2016 from the Panel of Experts on Libya established pursuant to resolution 1973 (2011) addressed to the President of the Security Council*, UN Security Council, 2016, p. 32; and Jonathan Schanzer, “Turkey’s Secret Proxy War in Libya?,” *The National Interest*. March 17, 2015.

13 Frederic Wehrey and Emadeddin Badi, “Libya’s Coming Forever War: Why Backing One Militia Against Another Is Not The Solution,” *War On The Rocks*, May 15, 2019.

14 Author interviews with several members of the Libyan diaspora figures in Istanbul, December 2018.

15 “Turkish defense minister accuses Greece of violating Libyan continental shelf,” *Kathimerini*, November 12, 2018.



In November of 2019, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Chairman of the Presidential Council of Libya Fayez Al Sarraj meet in Istanbul to sign a maritime memorandum of understanding. (facebook.com/trpresidency)

ground, initiated a substantial campaign of air strikes on the greater Tripoli area.¹⁶ The Emirati bombs helped contain the GNA's forces, but never managed to propel Haftar into the heart of the capital.

Turkey, seeing no meaningful institution on the international stage decry the UAE's military intervention, responded by imitating it. After making sure Tripoli would fund the effort, Ankara deployed Bayraktar TB2 drones and several dozen Turkish officers to operate them on behalf of the GNA.¹⁷ Starting in September 2019, the Wagner Group, a Kremlin-linked mercenary company, sent hundreds of Russian fighters to the frontline south of Tripoli to assist Haftar's coalition in attacking the GNA-aligned forces.

In October 2019, owing to a combination of technical and politically motivated reasons, Turkey's clandestine mission in Libya ceased altogether for several weeks. It resumed only after a friendless, existentially threatened

Tripoli signed the maritime memorandum it had declined to consider several times over the preceding months. Once the signature was obtained, Erdogan rolled out a much more comprehensive, more overt military intervention in Tripolitania.

AFTER THE TRIPOLI BATTLE WAS WON

Since the Turkish-backed GNA expelled Haftar's armed coalition from northwestern Libya in June 2020, the territorial divide between the two main camps has been static. The fault line goes from the city of Sirte, located in the middle of Libya's littoral, to Jufrah Airbase 260 kilometers to the south; this line essentially separates the southwestern part of the country from its northwest. The lull since June has in large part been attributable to continued work by Wagner, coordinating tightly with the UAE.

¹⁶ Tom Kington, "UAE allegedly using Chinese drones for deadly airstrikes in Libya," *Defense News*, May 2, 2019; and Jalel Harchaoui, "The Libyan Civil War Is About to Get Worse," *Foreign Policy*, March 18, 2020.

¹⁷ On Ankara's interest in being paid \$350 million in 2019, see, Raja Abdulrahim, "Foreign Backing Brings Militias in Libya to a Stalemate—and No Further," *Wall Street Journal*, October 1, 2019.

Both the Russians and the Emiratis continued interfering and sending equipment.¹⁸ As part of that effort to dissuade Turkish-backed forces from venturing into the east or the south, the Russians even introduced a dozen fighter jets piloted by mercenaries.¹⁹

Seemingly unfazed, Turkey used the multi-month pause since June to entrench its presence in northwest Libya. Turkish assets are now substantial and include two full-blown, permanent military bases and about 3,000 Syrian mercenaries.²⁰ On the financial front, Ankara has shown an acute interest in Tripoli's coffers. This was manifest when, in August 2020, it signed an undisclosed agreement with the dollar-rich Central Bank of Libya.²¹ The same anxiousness to collect economic dividends helps explain Turkey's temporary dovishness toward (1) Russia, knowing that Moscow did pressure Haftar into lifting his nine-month-long blockade on oil exports, and (2) the UN's attempts to bring about the formation of a new government of national unity that would be accepted across Libya.²² The Turks' thinking assumes that such an arrangement would allow for an indirect sharing of the country's resources.

THE OTHER MAJOR DRIVER BEHIND TURKEY'S RELATIVE WILLINGNESS TO SEE THE UN SUCCEED IN THIS DELICATE UNDERTAKING IS ITS MARITIME CAMPAIGN IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN.

The other major driver behind Turkey's relative willingness to see the UN succeed in this delicate undertaking is its maritime campaign in the Eastern Mediterranean. In that regard, Ankara views as imperative and strategic the survival of an internationally recognized government in Libya that is friendly to it. By the same token, Ankara also needs to prevent a *de jure* partition of the country. Despite the modicum of restraint shown by Turkey, its proclivity for hard power

18 On Russian activity after June 2020, see, Omar al-Hawari, "Tensions rise in Libya's Sirte as the city becomes central to the conflict," *The Middle East Directions Programme Blog*, October 12, 2020; Jared Malsin, "U.A.E. Boosted Arms Transfers to Libya to Salvage Warlord's Campaign, U.N. Panel Finds," *Wall Street Journal*, September 29, 2020. On Emirati activity after June 2020, see, Jared Malsin, "Russia Reinforces Foothold in Libya as Militia Leader Retreats," *Wall Street Journal*, June 29, 2020.

19 Thomas Newdick and Joseph Trevithick, "Two Russian MiG-29s Have Crashed In Libya According To Top American Intel Official," *The Drive*, September 11, 2020; Paul Iddon, "Who's Flying Those MiG-29s In Libya And Why Does It Matter?," *Forbes*, June 29, 2020; and Thomas Grove and Jared Malsin, "Russian Warplanes in Libya Signal New Risky Phase of Conflict," *Wall Street Journal*, May 29, 2020.

20 Rough estimate compiled by the author based on telephone interviews with an array of eyewitnesses in the Tripoli and Misrata areas, October 2020. As of August 2020, the U.S. Department of Defense assessed the number of Turkish-backed Syrian fighters to be around 5,000. *East Africa Counterterrorism Operation North And West Africa Counterterrorism Operation: Lead Inspector General Report To The United States Congress*, p. 6.

21 "Turkish central bank signs MoU with Libyan central bank," *Reuters*, August 31, 2020. For more insight into the Libyan Central Bank's foreign-exchange reserves, see, Jalel Harchaoui, "Libya's Monetary Crisis," *Lawfare*, January 10, 2018.

22 Frédéric Bobin, "En Libye, un cessez-le-feu en attendant un hypothétique accord politique," *Le Monde*, October 24, 2020; and Angus McDowall, "Libya talks pause without naming transitional government," *Reuters*, November 16, 2020.



Turkey's seismic research vessel Oruç Reis. (Twitter/MTAGeneIMd)

and obstinate determination to maintain a permanent military mission may compromise its political objectives with the UN and vis-à-vis some moderate Libyan currents.

One reason Turkey is unlikely to accept reducing its military entrenchment in Tripolitania is related to lands beyond Libya's borders. By securing a footprint in northwest Libya, Ankara is in the process of slowly acquiring a passageway into the Sahel and the rest of Africa.²³ Indeed, the African market's paramount importance will only keep growing over the coming decades for Turkey's construction companies and export-oriented manufacturers.

THE STAKES FOR TURKEY IN LIBYA AND IN THE SEA

The brief overview above has delineated the principal goals fueling Turkey's Libya adventure: (1) assertiveness on the water; (2) commercial interests on Libyan soil, including in the energy sector; and (3) political and commercial ambitions in the remainder of Africa.

The maritime ambitions of Turkey require additional nuances. Its recent gas-survey sorties in the Eastern Mediterranean—aggressive gestures that multiplied after the GNA's Tripoli victory—are in fact not primarily about gas reserves.²⁴ The motivation behind them has more to do with territorial sovereignty and other political stakes void of

²³ Fehim Tastekin, "Turkey's militarized Africa opening fuels influence wars," *Al-Monitor*, August 31, 2020; and Barin Kayaoglu, "Libya is only small part of Turkey's ambitious Africa overture," *Al-Monitor*, January 27, 2020.

²⁴ Zenonas Tziarras in Diego Cupolo, "Turkey resumes energy research in disputed waters," *Al-Monitor*, October 14, 2020; "Turkey's East Med Drilling Campaign: Politics By Other Means," *MEES*, October 9, 2020.

direct economic windfalls. To understand why this is, one needs to gain more perspective on how Turkey sees the Eastern Mediterranean and how, quite crucially, Libya fits into its geopolitical calculus.

ANKARA'S MARITIME PURSUITS, FOR INSTANCE, ARE IN LARGE PART DRIVEN BY A MAXIMALIST SENSE OF SOVEREIGNTY AND INTANGIBLES, SUCH AS IDENTITY, NATIONAL PRIDE, AND THIRST FOR PRESTIGE ABROAD.

The naval doctrine dubbed “Blue Homeland” that inspired Ankara’s November 2019 memorandum with Tripoli was first articulated 13 years earlier, long before the last decade’s natural-gas discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean. The doctrine’s main author is Admiral Cem Gürdeniz, a figure better characterized by his staunch nationalism and secularism than any sympathy for the AKP’s own ideology.²⁵ After Erdogan’s party lost its parliamentary majority in 2015 owing to the rise of a pro-Kurdish grouping, the Turkish president struck an alliance with several nationalist organizations.²⁶ The most powerful one is veteran political leader and

former Deputy Prime Minister Devlet Bahçeli’s far-right party, which emphasizes national security and nurtures strong anti-Western views. Despite philosophical differences, Erdogan and Bahçeli promote a worldview dominated by the belief that the Turkish state is under threat, hence a reflex toward preemptive expansionism.²⁷ Giving free rein to ultranationalists has helped Erdogan maintain his grip on power. In the process, the ultranationalists became the key engine behind Ankara’s militaristic foreign policy that has been on display since 2018. A few of its tenets are rooted in rationality, discipline, and pragmatism as far as seizing the geoeconomic rewards that U.S. apathy and the growing international anarchy offer. Yet, other aspects of present-day Turkey’s aggressive revisionism go beyond strict *realpolitik*. Ankara’s maritime pursuits, for instance, are in large part driven by a maximalist sense of sovereignty and intangibles, such as identity, national pride, and thirst for prestige abroad.

The current imbroglio over the competing EEZs in the East Mediterranean has roots tracing back to the 20th century, and sometimes further into what has been a centuries-old rivalry. Some of them are linked to Turco-Greek grudges of the Cold War era. Initially, the crises between the two nations—such as the Istanbul pogrom in 1955 or the killing spree targeting Turks in Cyprus after the latter became an independent state in 1960—featured no maritime dimension. Then, after Turkey invaded the northern part of Cyprus in 1974, Ankara began issuing maritime claims with regard to the Aegean Sea. Such grievances are arguably a reflection of the fact that modern-day Greece controls an extraordinary number of small islands in the eastern half of the Aegean, a peculiar

25 Matthieu Caillaud, “Qu’est-ce que la « patrie bleue » ? Une conversation avec l’idéologue de la doctrine géopolitique turque ?,” *Le Grand Continent*, October 26, 2020.

26 Gonul Tol, “Viewpoint: Why Turkey is flexing its muscles abroad,” *BBC News*, October 15, 2020.

27 Ariane Bonzon, “En Turquie, la « Patrie bleue » révèle l’alliance des islamistes et des nationalistes,” *Slate France*, September 25, 2020.



The Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum has contributed to tensions in the region. (sis.gov.eg)

geography that puts Turkey at a structural disadvantage.

Distinct from Turkey's resentment vis-à-vis Greece about the Aegean Sea, the unresolved Cyprus crisis itself has important maritime facets, too. The waters surrounding the divided island are indeed crippled with tensions as a result of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus' unrecognized status and Ankara's continued military involvement there.

In the two cases above, the Turco-Cypriot crisis and the Turco-Greek crisis, the relevant parties are expected to resolve their respective issue of overlapping EEZs through bilateral negotiation on the basis of international law or, if no agreement can be reached, by referral to international courts. In reality, Ankara resists both paths and, instead, clamors for a special ad-hoc arrangement. While Ankara officially declares a willingness to go to the International Court of Justice in The Hague, it insists on a wholesale approach, encompassing several issues at once—arguably a way of undermining Greece's case from the outset.²⁸ All of this means that the overall problem is profound and complex. Turkey's arguments can hardly be dismissed

altogether, nor are they likely to be resolved through one simple concession by Greece, assuming that the latter is prepared to do so. The quantity of natural gas discovered by Turkey's international competitors since 2011 hasn't been very large, but it has helped galvanize their solidarity against Turkey while reigniting all the old, unresolved issues.²⁹ In 2019, Cairo inaugurated the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum to which it invited Italy, the Republic of Cyprus, Greece, Israel, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority. One of the Forum's main goals is to utilize Egypt's liquefied natural gas facilities for the purpose of streamlining the transportation of natural gas from the area into Europe. The endeavor not only excludes energy-poor Turkey, but it also undermines its long-standing aspiration to become a vital transit platform for foreign gas to Europe.

In sum, the last 10-to-15 years saw the cohesion amongst Ankara's rivals grow in the Eastern Mediterranean. This gives Turkey very real reasons to fear becoming trapped into a narrow strip of sea off its southern coast. Within that context, the Tripoli government is the only internationally recognized government nearby that it can invoke as embracing its interpretation of territorial

28 On Ankara's insistence that "all problems should be addressed as a whole," see, Petros Siousiouras and Georgios Chrysochou, "The Aegean Dispute in the Context of Contemporary Judicial Decisions on Maritime Delimitation", *Laws*, vol. 3 (2014), p. 43.

29 The recently discovered gas fields include Egypt's Zohr, Israel's Tamar and Leviathan, and Cyprus's Aphrodite. See, Pier Paolo Raimondi, "The new energy geopolitics of 'East Med,'" *Aspenia Online*, October 5, 2020.

waters conventions. If that interpretation is defended with relentless action over a sustained period of time, Ankara's thinking goes, Athens will eventually give in and accept a redrawing of the maritime jurisdiction zones in the Aegean.

At present, Greece is a long way from such a capitulation, as both France and the UAE strongly support it, including militarily. For instance, both French and Emirati warplanes participated in Greece's military exercises in late summer 2020.³⁰ In fact, on a regional level, Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed is emerging as the leader of the pushback against Turkey. In Libya specifically, although economic and geostrategic considerations do matter to the UAE, the latter's top concern—overriding all others—has been ideology. By ensuring the survival of a government, whose pluralistic character lets the Muslim Brotherhood exert a degree of influence on the national governance of a wealthy North African country, Ankara reinforces its ideological prestige in the eyes of various constituencies across much of the region and beyond. Erdogan's style of rule is authoritarian, but that form of authoritarianism is somewhat looser, less vertical, and more diffuse than Mohammed bin Zayed's own preferred model. The added political uncertainty associated with the kind of bottom-up dynamic that Erdogan encourages across the Arab World is regarded by the UAE as a threat to the survival of the Emirati regime.³¹ Eradicating it in Libya has been an important Emirati goal since 2011.

CONCLUSION

Support for the Muslim Brotherhood, although an indubitable reality on a tactical level, wasn't per se a primary motivation behind the Turks' decision to go to Libya. In fact, ultranationalism played a greater role as that decision's ideological engine than political Islam did. In all cases, the thinking underlying Ankara's foreign policy isn't as pragmatic as some of its advocates proclaim. They argue that it is producing "coercive diplomacy," or a dynamic that will compel Turkey's rivals into acquiescing to a new geostrategic configuration and, ultimately, accepting a negotiated settlement that is viable and satisfactory to Ankara.³² Things may end up going in that direction, but at the time of writing, no concrete clues indicate that they will. Ankara's Libya play—although not a failure thus far—still hasn't secured any of its strategic goals.

Meanwhile, Turkey's ever-intensifying urge to assert itself abroad in a cantankerous manner serves a domestic purpose for its leaders. Erdogan and his associates have a strong incentive to deflect the Turkish public's attention from a hard-currency debt crisis that has slipped out of control, halved the dollar value of the lira in two years, and hurt the real economy. This means that only an unequivocal, crushing defeat can uproot the Turkish juggernaut from Libya within the next few years.³³ 

About the Author

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30 "France joins military exercises in east Mediterranean," *Reuters*, August 26, 2020. For open-source pictures of an Emirati fighter jet participating in those same exercises, see, twitter.com/g_mastropavlos/status/1299026750836543488?s=20.

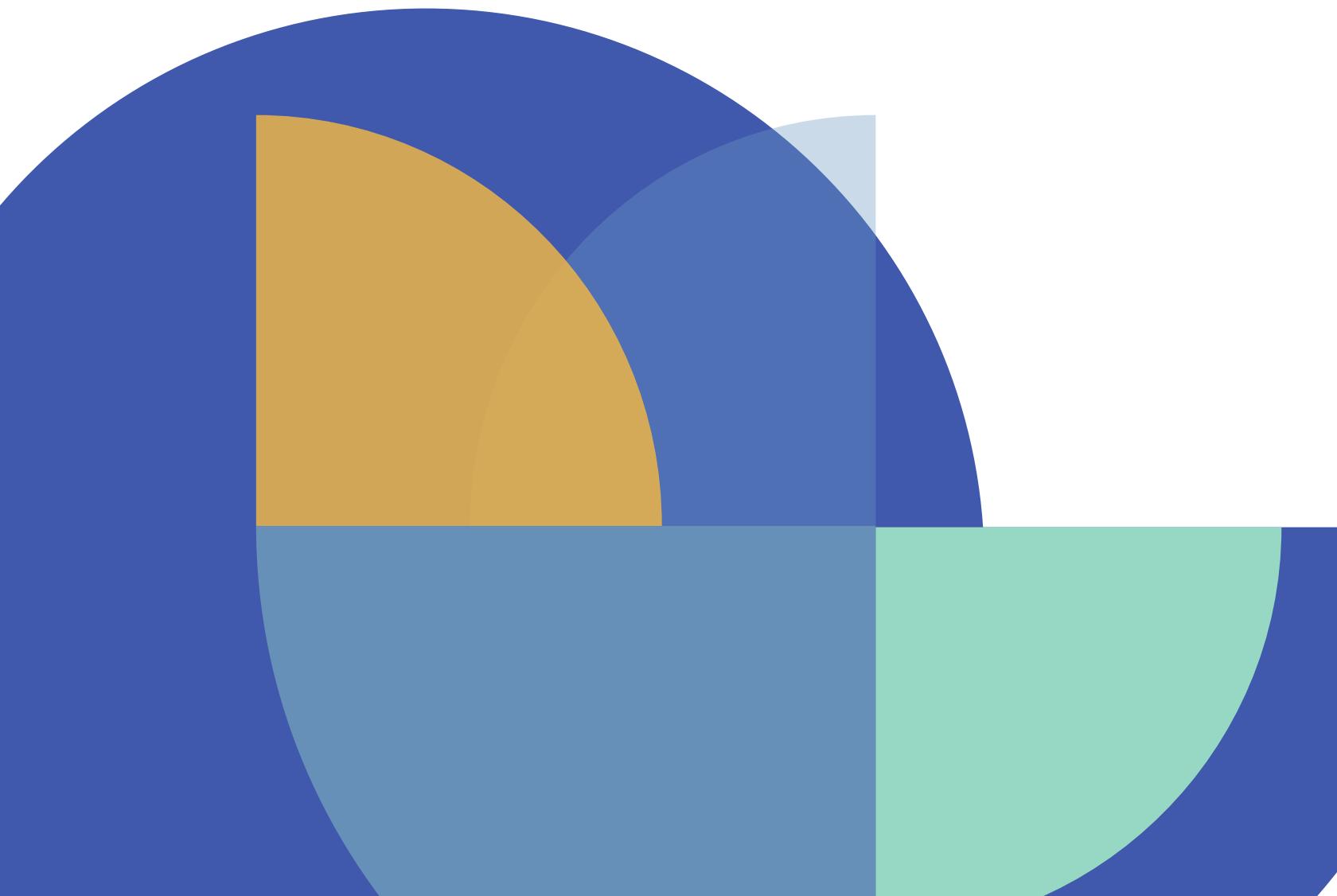
31 Soubrier Emma, "Les Émirats arabes unis à la conquête du monde?," *Politique étrangère*, March 12, 2020, p. 64; and Gregory Gause, "What the Qatar crisis shows about the Middle East," *Washington Post - Monkey Cage*, June 27, 2017.

32 Saban Kardas, "Understanding Turkey's Coercive Diplomacy," *German Marshall Fund of the United States - On Turkey*, August 13, 2020.

33 Sinan Ulgen, "A Weak Economy Won't Stop Turkey's Activist Foreign Policy," *Foreign Policy*, October 6, 2020.

COMPETING POWER SCHEMES OVER LIBYA AND THE CHALLENGE FOR EUROPE

Dorothee Schmid



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.

RUSSIA IS THE MOST IMPORTANT EXTERNAL ACTOR TO HAVE DEVELOPED A LIBYAN AGENDA EVEN THOUGH THE KREMLIN DENIES ITS INVOLVEMENT IN THE COUNTRY.

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 Fayeز 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 overture," *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.

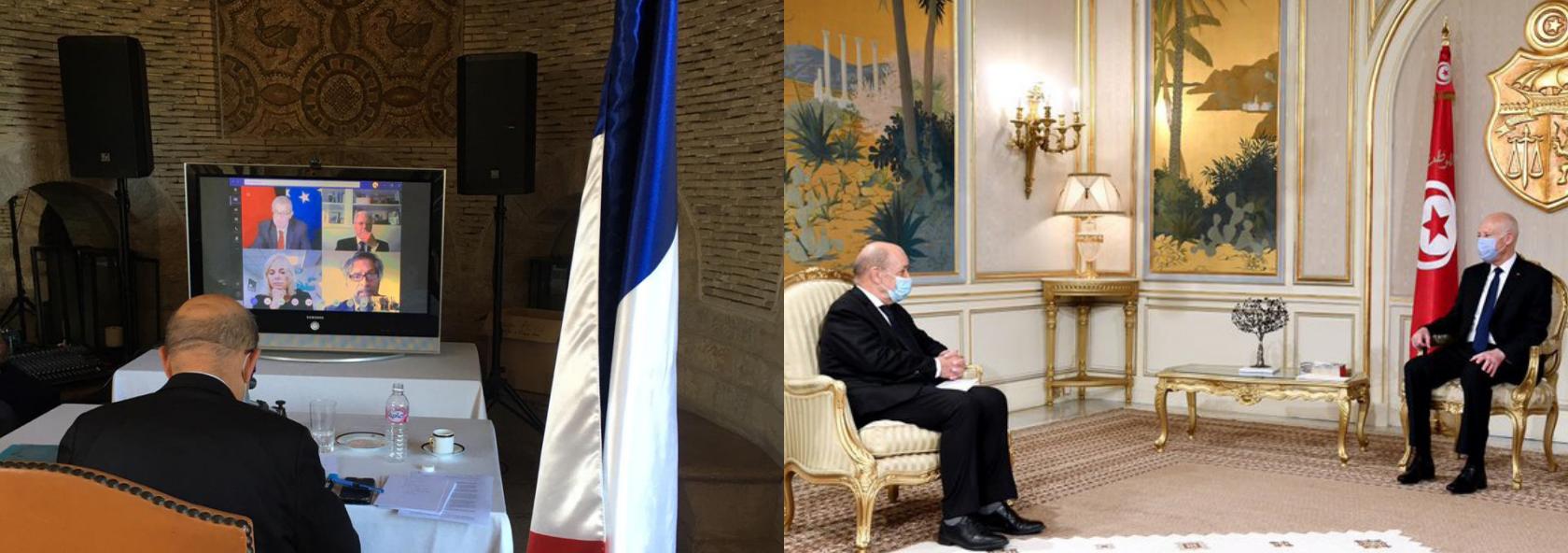
FRANCE HAS ALSO INTERFERED ALMOST UNINTERRUPTEDLY, ALBEIT IN A COVERT MANNER, SINCE THEN-PRESIDENT NICOLAS SARKOZY ASSUMED POLITICAL LEADERSHIP FOR THE MILITARY INTERVENTION THAT TOPPLED GADDAFI IN 2011.

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 nationalistes," *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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TRANSATLANTIC TENSIONS: LESSONS FROM THE 2020 TRIALOGUE

Aaron Stein

The United States and European Union are at odds with Turkey over a series of issues in the Eastern Mediterranean. As this series of reports has documented, serious disagreement exists over numerous interrelated issues that have, all at once, pitted Ankara against Washington and EU members, especially France. The disagreements have largely centered around the ongoing civil war in Libya, the declinations of maritime boundaries in the Eastern Mediterranean, and the failure to resolve the Cyprus conflict. Tensions over Libya stem from disagreements about the spheres of influence in Libya, the resolution of maritime disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean, and the sharing of natural gas resources discovered in Cypriot territorial waters. The Russian Federation, an actor seeking to upend Western interests in the region, has taken advantage of this tension by expanding its presence in Syria, tightening its bilateral relationship with Turkey, and deploying irregular forces in Libya.

This paper seeks to identify policy options to rectify the tensions that Brussels and Washington have with Ankara. The United States and European Union both share an interest in maintaining working relations with Turkey; however, they differ in the scope and importance of the relationship. For the United States, the relationship remains—and has always been—centered on security ties and the desire to retain cordial relations to ensure that the North Atlantic Treaty

Organization (NATO) remains unified and free of intra-Alliance disputes. A dispute amongst NATO members, the United States has argued, could detract from the common goal of strengthening member-state defense to deter a potential adversary, such as Russia.

The EU's relationship with Turkey is far more nuanced and remains grounded in the 1995 Customs Agreement, as well as the stalled accession negotiations. These two pillars underpin a broad-based agenda that has held the two sides closely together, but has also created intense friction within the EU itself, as well as with Turkey, over the obvious authoritarian turn Ankara has taken in recent years. The EU's agenda with Turkey is, now, transactional, with the two sides having unofficially recognized that accession talks are frozen and have tacitly agreed to focus on more short-term issues, such as the flow of irregular migration¹ and the maritime dispute between Cyprus and Greece.

The American-Turkish relationship has frayed in recent years, largely because the two sides do not share many overlapping security interests. Ankara has pushed to update the relationship, arguing that it is now a regional power and that Washington should accept this fact because it is additive to U.S. power. More specifically, Ankara argues that its interests—even when opposed to those in Washington—are critical to its own national security and that Washington has an interest in a strong Turkey. The Turkish government,

¹ "EU-Turkey joint action plan," European Commission, October 15, 2015, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/MEMO_15_5860.



Turkish Naval Forces/Wikimedia Commons

therefore, argues that the United States should accept Turkish actions that Ankara believes contribute to its national security. The United States, in contrast, has increasingly come to view Ankara as a destabilizing actor in the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean and has debated how to convince Ankara that its narrow national security interests are of lesser consequence than retaining close ties with NATO and the West.

France has adopted a more hawkish policy than the United States, but ultimately shares similar views. In Libya and the Eastern Mediterranean, Paris has opposed Turkish military action and has sought to position itself as the defender of EU sovereignty (in support of Greece and Cyprus) and as a counter to Turkish interests in Libya. Franco-Turkish relations have deteriorated, following a Turkish memorandum of understanding (MoU) with its ally in Libya, the United Nations-recognized Government of National Accord

(GNA), on an expansive maritime zone that infringes upon Greek territorial waters.²

This MoU fits with Ankara's updated naval strategy, dubbed *Mavi Vatan*, that seeks to maximize Turkish territorial control in the disputed Eastern Mediterranean. France has opposed Turkish actions in Libya by sending support to the Libyan National Army, which is hostile to the GNA, and by generally viewing Turkish actions in North Africa as an infringement on its sphere of influence. The MoU also extended this proxy conflict into the Eastern Mediterranean and pitted the French, Greeks, and Greek Cypriots against the Turks over maritime rights in the region.

At the core of this dispute are two islands: Kastellorizo and Cyprus. Greece's Kastellorizo is located just a few kilometers from Turkey's coastal city of Kas. The Greek position is that the terms outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) ensures that the island will extend Greco

² Daren Butler and Tuvan Gumrukcu, "Turkey signs maritime boundaries deal with Libya amid exploration row," *Reuters*, November 28, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-libya/turkey-signs-maritime-boundaries-deal-with-libya-amid-exploration-row-idUSKBN1Y213I>.



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territorial waters. Ankara is not a signatory to UNCLOS, but argues that this small island cannot be used to block Turkish territorial claims in the Eastern Mediterranean. The second island, Cyprus, has been a source of regional tension since the 1960s, and particularly following Turkey's 1974 invasion. The island remains divided, but despite the failure to resolve the frozen conflict, Cyprus was admitted to the European Union in 2004. The recent discovery of natural gas reserves in Cyprus' exclusive economic zone has exacerbated the conflict and has led to Turkey's more aggressive actions. Ankara has sent seismic vessels into Cypriot waters to explore for hydrocarbons and has escorted these exploratory missions with Turkish naval vessels.³ In response, France has sought to bolster the Cypriot position, sending its own naval vessels into the area.⁴ Germany has taken a different approach, positioning itself as a mediator and in tacit opposition

to the French effort to use coercive force to change Turkish policy. The Turkish position has been to take advantage of splits within the European Union and incentivize its implicit partners—Germany, Malta, and Italy—to resist the imposition of sanctions that France, Greece, and Cyprus have pushed for. This policy means that Ankara will pocket concessions, betting that EU action will be marred by internal divisions.

Ankara's strategy may eventually result in the imposition of some EU sanctions, but it is unclear if coercive action will prompt a serious change in Turkish policy. The United States, too, is gravitating towards imposing sanctions on Turkey for its 2017 purchase of a Russian air and missile defense system.⁵ In the most recent appropriation bill for the Department of Defense and the United States Armed Forces, language was inserted that called for President Donald Trump to impose sanctions on Turkey within 30 days of the

3 Sarp Ozer, "Turkish Navy guarded Oruc Reis ship for 82 days," *Anadolu Agency*, December 5, 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkey/turkish-navy-guarded-oruc-reis-ship-for-82-days/2066609>.

4 "France stokes Turkey tensions by sending naval vessels to waters off Cyprus," *Financial Times*, August 13, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/465ba697-451f-4601-b1a7-02eca6680edc>.

5 "Turkey signs deal to get Russian S-400 air defence missiles," *BBC*, September 12, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-41237812>.

legislation's passage.⁶ Trump has hesitated to impose sanctions despite Congress writing law that demands such action in the Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) in August 2017, but the administration eventually acquiesced to Congressional pressure just before leaving office in January 2021.⁷

The deterioration of Turkish relations with its traditional Western allies may result in European and American sanctions on Turkey by 2021, without a resolution to the maritime dispute in the Eastern Mediterranean. Further, the political dynamics on Cyprus are not conducive to a negotiated solution. The Greek Cypriots have little incentive to compromise with Ankara, owing to the fact that the island was admitted to the European Union and the island is imbued with the benefits that comes with membership. The Turkish Cypriot side was more amenable to compromise in the early 2000s, but the recent election of Ersin Tatar, a right-wing politician that has called for closely aligning Turkish Cypriot policies with Ankara, signals that the two sides of the island may be incapable of compromise.⁸

Faced with these likely challenges,

▶ The European Union and Turkey remain wedded to an accession framework that has stalled, and a change is needed to reset relations. The Customs Union is often held up as a possible mechanism to maintain a positive agenda between the two actors, while wedding Turkey to a Euro-centric economic framework.

▶ Turkish actions in the Eastern Mediterranean are antithetical to Western interests, but adhere closely to Ankara's own self-declared ambitions in the region. A focus on the economic side of the relationship could mollify European leaders eager to continue to engage with Ankara, and also create a pathway to manage security-focused tensions.

▶ The United States has an interest in managing tensions that involve two NATO members, such as between Turkey and Greece, and an incoming Biden administration should focus on easing tensions and building upon work done to establish a deconfliction line to manage maritime tensions.

▶ The Cyprus dispute remains at the heart of many of these issues, so renewed diplomacy to settle the conflict should be a priority for Brussels and Washington, even if political changes on the island make the possibility of a settlement unlikely in the near future.

▶ The United States and European Union should signal to Turkey that it is prepared to engage in dialogue about Turkish security concerns, particularly around feelings of encirclement in the region and how to mollify Turkish concerns.

6 William M. (Mac) Thornbury National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021, 116th Congress, December 2020, <https://docs.house.gov/billsthisweek/20201207/CRPT-116hrpt617.pdf>.

7 H.R.3364, Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act, 115th Congress, August 2, 2017, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/3364/text>.

8 "Northern Cyprus: Right-wing nationalist Ersin Tatar elected president," *BBC*, October 19, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-54594702>.

- ▶ The migration challenge is likely to endure for Europe, as well as for Turkey, and remains a point of opportunity and contention. Ankara has demonstrated a willingness to play the refugee card and threaten to open its borders to Greece. The current mechanism to deal with Syrians has also been fraught, with Turkey claiming that the European Union has reneged on its commitments, while Brussels maintains that it has adhered to the refugee agreement. The issue has been undermined by broader distrust between Ankara and Brussels, so dialogue is required to ensure that the agreement remains in force.
- ▶ The United States and Europe also share an interest with Turkey on resolving the Libyan civil conflict, even if within these groupings there is a divergence of interests over which faction to back. Dialogue to settle the conflict should continue and include a strong European and American, so as to pressure the various parties (including European states and Turkey) to make compromises needed to end the conflict.

The tenor of Western relations with Turkey has changed dramatically over the past year, and the scope of disagreement has expanded from Syria to the ongoing issues in the Eastern Mediterranean and North Africa. Turkish dissatisfaction with Western actions in the Eastern Mediterranean (and vice versa) has hindered cooperation and undermined trust. These tensions are pervasive and hinder true cooperation, relegating much of the trilateral relationship as a series of transactions. This status quo is likely to endure in the near-to-medium term, making continued dialogue even more important to explore ways to continue and deepen cooperation and overcome mistrust. 

About the Author

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