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How Turkey uses Libya to achieve its foreign policy objectives

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Article

How Turkey uses Libya to achieve its foreign policy objectives

DrYatharth Kachiar

Abstract

Amidst the global pandemic, the civil war in Libya has intensified as the rival forces in the country have defied the calls by the United Nations for a 'global ceasefire.' The forces loyal to General Khalifa Haftar have escalated the attacks and captured a series of towns in the country's north-west. To counter the offensive of General Haftar led Libyan National Army (LNA), Turkey, the main backer of the Government of National Accords (GNA), has started using drones deeper into the LNA-controlled territory. As the COVID-19 pandemic spreads across conflict-ridden Libya, the intensifying war and continuous foreign interference can have a potentially catastrophic impact on the country. Why is Turkey suddenly upping the ante in Libya? What are its major goals? Most importantly, what implications do Turkey's policy have for Libya and the peace and security in the region? The paper argues that Turkish foreign policy in Libya is a mix of ideological, economic, and geopolitical imperatives linked to its ambition of gaining more clout in the eastern Mediterranean.

At a time when the COVID-19 pandemic has engulfed the whole world, the civil war in Libya has intensified as the rival forces loyal to General Khalifa Haftar have captured several towns in the country's north-west, including the towns of Jumail, Regdalen, and Zultun. To counter the offensive of General Haftar led Libyan National Army (LNA), Turkey, the main foreign backer of the Government of National Accords (GNA), has started using drones deeper into the LNA-controlled territory.¹ On March 25, 2020, the Tripoli-based government of Fayaz al Sarraj launched a counter-offensive named 'Operation Peace Storm' against the LNA forces.² In April 2020, with military and logistical support provided by Turkey, the GNA forces seized the western town of Sabrata, a key military base for the

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LNA's military commander Khalifa Haftar.³ According to reports, Turkish military's direct military involvement became apparent when in April 2020, a "Turkish frigate off the shore of Sabratha, 55 kilometres (34 miles) west of Tripoli, fired SM-1 surface-to-air missiles on LNA drones."⁴ Since February 2020, the "Turkish navy's Goksu and Gokova frigates have been providing air and naval protection support to GNA forces off the coastline between Tripoli and Sabratha."⁵

Turkey's growing interest in Libyan internal affairs rekindled the historical memory of Ottoman-era when the country was widely known as the 'Tripoli *iyalah* or Regency' (1551-1864) in Europe. Interestingly, Libya was also the last dominion of the Ottoman *Sultan* in North Africa. The constant fear of foreign invasion prompted the *Sublime Porte* to end the autonomous status of Libya in 1835 and rule it directly from Istanbul. Later, in 1908, in response to Italy's ambition to invade Libya, the Committee of Union of Progress assigned Mustafa Kemal to Tripolitania where he organized armed resistance against the invading Italians. However, apart from rekindling these historical memories, Turkey's recent foreign policy adventure in Libya is also driven by the neo-Ottoman ambitions and ideological inclinations of President Erdogan, who like the Prime Minister of UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA), Fayeze al-Sarraj, is a staunch supporter of Muslim Brotherhood. This paper argues that what guides Turkish foreign policy in Libya is the mix of ideological, economic and geopolitical imperatives which include its desire to assert its regional power status by gaining more clout in the eastern Mediterranean.

Turkey's recent foreign policy adventure in Libya is also driven by the neo-Ottoman ambitions and ideological inclinations of President Erdogan, who like the Prime Minister of UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA), Fayeze al-Sarraj, is a staunch supporter of Muslim Brotherhood.

Recent Developments

After the fall of Muammar Gadhafi in 2011, Libya plunged into chaos, and since 2014 the country has been divided into rival eastern and western administrations. The UN-recognized Government of National Accords (GNA) controls Tripoli in northwestern Libya, whereas the oil-rich eastern part of the country is ruled by a parallel administration supported by Khalifa Haftar and his Libyan National Army (LNA). Libya's vast oil-riches makes it an ideal target for foreign intervention and some six to ten countries are supplying arms, money and military advisors to the country.⁶ On April 4, 2019, LNA forces backed by Saudi Arabia launched a renewed offensive to siege the capital Tripoli. The UN arms

embargo was also violated by other countries, including the UAE, Egypt, Russia, Jordan, Sudan and Turkey. Unlike other regional players and Russia which have been backing Khalifa Haftar's LNA in the conflict, Turkey has been the main supporter of the GNA.⁷

The Berlin Conference on Libya, which concluded on January 19, 2020, clearly stated that the ongoing conflict in Libya cannot be resolved through military means. At the same time, it asked all the actors involved, including the foreign powers, to refrain from supporting any activities conflicting with the UNSC arms embargo or the ceasefire, including the mobilization of mercenaries or boosting the military power of the conflicting parties. It also called upon the UNSC to impose sanctions on the parties violating the arms embargo or ceasefire. All the parties in the conference including Russia, Egypt, UAE-- which support and fund the eastern Libyan commander Khalifa Haftar, and Turkey-- which backs the UN-recognized GNA under Prime Minister Fayaz al-Sarraj, agreed to uphold the arms embargo and move towards a ceasefire. However, contrary to what was agreed during the Berlin conference, Turkey is still sending its warships carrying Syrian mercenaries to Libya to tilt the balance of the war in favour of GNA⁸.

Turkey has been supporting GNA against Haftar's offensive, openly since May 2019. However, what unnerved the regional and international actors alike and prompted the otherwise muted European community to take note of the changing scenario in Libya is the December 2019 decision of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey to deploy Turkish troops in Libya.⁹ Turkey's decision to deploy troops was based on a recently signed military and security coordination agreement and a maritime deal with the UN-recognized government of Prime Minister Fayeze al-Sarraj of Libya, following which the Libyan Prime Minister had requested Turkish President to assist his country against the ongoing offensive by Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA).¹⁰

Under the newly signed agreement, the Turkish government is set to deploy troops, military advisors, and pro-Turkish Syrian Islamist militias as mercenaries to Libya. According to reports, in an attempt to thwart the support provided by an increasing number of mercenaries from Russia who threaten to tilt the balance in LNA's favour which has made fewer gains since the beginning of offensive in April 2019, Turkey has recently deployed an estimated 2,000 Syrian mercenaries to Libya.¹¹ Turkey, through its hard power approach and strategy of tension in Libya, was able to get a seat at the high table in Berlin conference which also makes it a crucial player in any future settlement in Libya. Even before the Berlin conference, Turkey and Russia despite supporting the two opposing sides in the Libyan civil war brokered a ceasefire which did not last long as the conflicting parties accused each other of the breaches.

The pan-Islamist ambitions and confrontational approach of President Erdogan has alienated Turkey from its Western allies and other regional countries. The increasing isolation has further exacerbated Turkey's insecurity and compelled the country to safeguard its interests by adopting a more confrontational and hard power-based approach, as apparent in the case of Libya.

Reasons behind Turkey's foreign policy adventure in Libya

a. *Ideologically driven foreign policy and Ottoman legacy*

Since coming to power in 2002, Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP) has pursued its relations with the Muslim world with much rigour. Under the 'Strategic Depth doctrine', a unique combination of realpolitik and ideology, developed by former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, Turkey aimed at becoming a decisive actor in the region by taking advantage of its geopolitical and geocultural assets. The core of Davutoglu's

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Strategic Depth concept is built on the premise that a nation's influence in the international arena is based on its historical and geographical depth. Turkey, due to its geostrategic location, belongs to multiple regions like West Asia, North Africa, the Balkans, Europe and Central Asia. Likewise, Turkey's historical legacy, which arises from being the successor state of the Ottoman Empire gives the country a shared common history and cultural ties with most of its neighbouring regions. By renouncing its secular Kemalist past, Turkey's new political elites led by President Erdogan and AKP started shaping the country's foreign policy by appealing to its historical grandeur under the Ottoman Empire. Following the political unrest in the Arab world since the beginning of the mass uprisings, Turkish foreign policy began to take a confrontational approach in dealings with the neighbouring countries in the Middle East. At the same time, President Erdogan's political lineage of being part of the Islamist political movement in Turkey and his close association with the Muslim Brotherhood had a significant impact on Turkey's foreign policy approach. Turkey's increasing proximity with the Islamic world and a growing rift with the West and Israel under the AKP is indicative of the party's pan-Islamic approach in its foreign policy.

The role of pan-Islamist ideology in Turkish foreign policy became more visible with the beginning of the Arab Spring in 2011. Turkey's foreign policy choices in the case of Libya, following the uprisings in 2011, became coloured by its neo-Ottomanist ambitions and ideological inclinations of President Erdogan. In the case of Libya, Turkey adopted a

more cautious approach as the anti-Qadhafi uprising spread throughout the country. The no-fly zone demanded by the West, Arab League, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) failed to receive the backing of the Turkish government. After the mandate given by the UN Security Council for the no-fly zone, Turkey was left with no choice but to dilute its resistance to it. The reason behind Turkey's "soft position toward Qaddafi—despite his obvious crimes—was \$15 billion of Turkish contracts in Libya that would be jeopardised if Ankara crossed Qaddafi".¹²

In 2012, Turkey provided full support to the Muslim Brotherhood rooted Justice and Construction Party in Libya. According to reports, "a number of Turkish ships allegedly carrying weapons to the Libyan opposition and even jihadi groups were intercepted by Greek and Libyan navy units, and Egypt intercepted containers of alleged Turkish supplied weapons on its border with Libya."¹³ In 2015, Turkey-backed the UN-recognized government of national accords in Libya headed by Prime Minister Fayaz al-Sarraj, who is a Libyan Turk by origin and closely aligned to Muslim Brotherhood. Turkey's policy of backing candidates closely aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood has put it at odds with other regional countries, and its western allies. Turkey's foreign policy during Arab Uprisings and its vocal support to the Muslim Brotherhood have proved detrimental to its image in the region. According to a survey, the number of respondents who think that Turkey is playing a sectarian role in the region increased from 28 per cent in 2012 to 39 per cent in 2013.¹⁴

In addition to President Erdogan's pan-Islamist orientation, what further triggers Turkey's interest in Libya is Turkey's Ottoman legacy and the presence of over a million "Ottoman-descended Turkish people" in Libya.¹⁵ The people of Turkish origin in Libya are known as "Kuloglu Turks or Kouloughlis", the descendants of Ottoman soldiers and North African women.¹⁶ The Libyan Turks who are more ideologically aligned with Turkey's position of supporting the elements related to the Muslim Brotherhood, came under attack from Khalifa Hafta's Libyan National Army. Although a heterogeneous and ideologically fragmented group, Kuloglu Turks in 2015 formed the Libya Koroglu Association to assert their distinct identity and revive their Ottoman legacy.¹⁷

At present, the Kuloglu Turks inhabit the towns of Misrata, Benghazi, Tripoli, Zawiya, and Derna, with a maximum concentration of over 1.4 million in Misrata alone. Under Qadhafi's rule, Misrata was treated as a pariah province, and people of Turkish origin were kept out of high-level positions. They were mostly involved in "trade, truck freight, construction, real estate, repair and small-scale industries. When the uprising erupted in 2011, Misrata became the bastion of resistance, and Turco-Libyans figured prominently

in the war.”¹⁸ The presence of people of Turkish origin in Libya has been instrumental in fueling Turkey’s ambition towards Libya. While justifying Turkey’s decision to send troops to Libya, Turkish President Erdogan has often appealed to Ankara’s deep historical and social ties with the North African country. On one such occasion, President Erdogan had said: “Our sole purpose is to protect our and our brothers’ rights and future...In addition to our Arab brothers Haftar plans to murder, there are also over 1 million Ottoman descendants Kuloglu Turks there.”¹⁹ By labelling its interference in Libyan affairs as a moral obligation to protect the Turkish diaspora, Ankara has tried to gain a moral edge over other regional and international players involved in the Libyan conflict.

b. *Economic Considerations*

In the 1980s, Turkey decided to shift its economic development strategy from import-substitution to export-led growth. This shift had a significant impact on Turkey’s foreign policy since it pushed Turkey to tap previously unexplored markets by forging new partnerships abroad. The major thrust behind these newly established relations was the economic interests of the Turkish state. However, with the coming of AKP to power in 2002, the focus of Turkish foreign policy expanded beyond the economic imperatives to include political, cultural, and security dimensions in its relations with other countries, especially with countries with which Turkey had historical ties. The idea was to turn Turkey into a regional power by adopting a soft power approach in its foreign policy.

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Interestingly, Libya became one of the first countries with which Turkey commenced its economic partnership back in the 1980s. Since the 1980s, Turkish contractors have been present in Libya undertaking the construction of various harbours, pipelines, and other public and private facilities. When the anti-Qadhafi protests erupted in Libya, Turkey evacuated “20,000 workers, leaving behind an expensive machine park as part of construction work estimated to be worth over \$ 25 billion.”²⁰ The strong economic linkages between the two countries became the primary factor behind Turkey’s initial hesitant approach in taking a stance against Muammar Qadhafi’s repressive measures against the protestors in 2011.

As Table 1 indicates, in 2019, despite the ongoing civil war in Libya, Turkey exported \$ 1.96 billion to Libya and imported \$ 474.3 million worth of goods, with a total volume of trade reaching \$2.4 billion --a little more than what the two countries had achieved in 2010 before the overthrow of the Qadhafi regime. Therefore, Libya remains an essential part of Turkey’s economic outreach even today, and an important motivation behind Turkey’s

increasing interest in Libya is economic. Further, Turkey is planning to sign a \$ 2.7 billion compensation deal with GNA for the work carried out in Libya by Turkish contractors before the 2011 civil war, seeking to revive stalled Turkish business operations in the conflict-ridden country.²¹ The reports suggest that the deal will encompass “a \$ 1 billion letter of guarantee, \$ 500 million for damage to machinery and equipment, and unpaid debts of \$ 1.2 billion.”²² Also, Turkish contractors are looking forward to reviving billions of dollars of contracts abandoned in the chaos after Qaddafi’s overthrow. As explained earlier, despite the ongoing conflict, Turkish-Libyan trade remains buoyant, and the countries have signed new contracts in recent years, which includes projects like power stations, housing, and, business centres.

Table 1: Turkey’s Import-Export to Libya (2002-2019)

	Imports (US Dollar Thousand)	Exports (US Dollar Thousand)
2002	754,042	163,081
2003	1,072,548	254,741
2004	1,514,125	337,204
2005	1,989,269	384,167
2006	2,297,351	489,261
2007	399,720	643,150
2008	336,325	1,074,288
2009	357,417	1,795,117
2010	425,652	1,932,370
2011	139,763	747,629
2012	416,152	2,139,440
2013	303,957	2,753,096
2014	243,756	2,059,898
2015	195,796	1,420,087
2016	161,021	906,107
2017	247,965	880,729
2018	367,010	1,498,326
2019	474,329	1,960,500

Source: International Trade Centre²³

Turkey’s Independent Industrialist and Businessmen Association (MUSIAD) opened an office in Libya in 2019, and recently stated that it aims to boost Turkish exports to Libya “by over 571% reaching around \$ 10 billion compared to \$ 1.49 billion in 2018.”²⁴ Seizing the Libyan market and strengthening the economic relations with Libya is crucial to Turkey

because Libya is a gateway for Turkish economic and geopolitical interest in Africa. Turkey understands that its economic interests in Libya are protected as long as the GNA under Fayaz-al Sarraj survives the onslaught of Haftar's LNA. Therefore, since May 2019, Turkey is supplying military advisors, air cover, armed drones, and armoured vehicles to GNA, which has proved effective in restraining Haftar's efforts to seize Tripoli. Turkey's support to GNA has brought the country in direct line of fire with Khalifa Haftar who in 2019, banned Turkish flights from Libya to Turkey and ordered LNA to target Turkish ships and interests in the country.²⁵

Nevertheless, the meddling in Libyan affairs was still a better trade-off for President Erdogan since it gives Turkey a vital role in shaping the future of Libya in line with its interests. Moreover, interfering in Libyan conflict did not prove a financial burden for Turkey since GNA, was disbursing money to Ankara in return for the military and advisory support.²⁶ At the same time, this arrangement proved crucial in benefitting people close to President Erdogan, such as Seluck Bayraktar, Erdogan's son-in-law and the chief technology officer in Baykar Makina, the manufacturer of Bayraktar TB2 drone supplied to Libya. Moreover, a private security firm, SADAT, owned by Adnan Tanriverdi, a former advisor to President Erdogan, is supplying advisors and fighters to Libya.²⁷

c. *Geopolitical imperative: Gaining clout in the Eastern Mediterranean*

To understand Turkey's policy towards Libya holistically, it is important to pay attention to the developments in the eastern Mediterranean since both are intrinsically linked. The US geological survey has pegged the value of the natural gas resources in the eastern Mediterranean at \$ 700 billion. At present, the most pressing challenge for Turkish foreign policy stems from the growing bonhomie among states such as Greece, Israel, Cyprus, Egypt, and Italy which Turkey perceives as inimical to its interest in the eastern Mediterranean. In 2019, all these countries along with Jordan and Palestinian Authority established the Eastern Mediterranean (EastMed) Gas Forum to transform the region as the key source of gas export to Europe, which is already looking to diversify its energy needs to reduce its dependence on Russian gas.²⁸ Under this strategy, Greece, Israel and Cyprus signed an accord in January 2020 to build a 1,900-kilometer undersea gas pipeline. The idea behind the proposed pipeline is to link the gas fields in the eastern Mediterranean with markets in Europe via Greece and Italy. France and the US have expressed interest in joining the EastMed Gas forum during its third ministerial meeting held in Cairo in January 2020.²⁹

Here, it is important to understand why Turkey is objecting to the EastMed gas pipeline project, and how it is linked to Turkey's increasing interest in Libyan civil war. The

Turkish government views the EastMed Gas forum as politically motivated to exclude Turkey from the eastern Mediterranean's energy reserves. As explained earlier, in recent years, the ideologically driven foreign policy approach of Turkey under President Erdogan has left the country with few friends in the region. President Erdogan's confrontational approach has strained Turkey's ties with both Egypt and Israel.³⁰ Turkey shares an uneasy relationship with Egypt after President Erdogan fully supported former Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi in his rift with the army, principally because of Morsi's ties with the Muslim Brotherhood. The generals in Cairo perceived Erdogan's criticism of the military coup which overthrew President Morsi as interference in the internal affairs of Egypt. After Morsi's sudden demise in 2019, President Erdogan called him a 'martyr' and accused the government in Egypt of killing the former President.³¹ Further, Turkey's relations with Israel have never really recovered since the *Mavi Marmara* incident in 2010 in which the Israeli military killed 10 Turkish activists on a ship that was taking aid to Gaza in an attempt to breach the blockade imposed by Israel.³² The recent diplomatic crisis between the two countries ensued in 2018 when Israeli army in response to the protests against the US decision to move its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem killed at least 55 Palestinians and injured 2,700 others. In response, Turkey recalled its ambassador from Israel, and Israel followed suit.³³

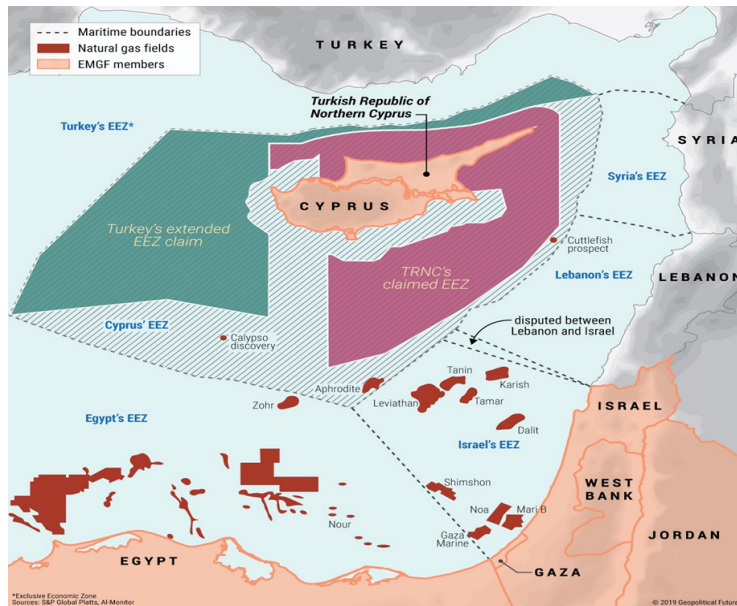
Another country in the EastMed Gas forum with which Turkey already shares a troubled relationship is Greece, owing to their maritime boundary dispute in the Aegean Sea. The two sides were on the brink of war in 1996 because of the conflict over uninhabited islets in the Aegean. Unlike Greece, Turkey is not a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Law of Sea (UNCLOS), a treaty which allows countries to demarcate their Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) tied to their continental shelves up to 200 nautical miles from the baseline.³⁴ It also allows the states to claim maritime boundary up to 12 nautical miles off their coasts. However, Turkey argues that any action by Greece to enforce maritime territory beyond six nautical miles will be viewed as an act of war by Ankara. Interestingly, enforcing maritime claim up to 12 nautical miles by Greece will bring 71.5 per cent of Aegean waters under Greece's jurisdiction. The fear of escalation has never allowed Greece to enforce its claims beyond six nautical miles. Similarly, Greece claims that its islands in the Aegean Sea have a continental shelf of their own, an argument if prevailed will make almost all of Aegean Sea Greek EEZ, a scenario which is opposed by Turkey.³⁵

Turkey's objection with the EastMed project also relates to the presence of its long-term foe Cyprus in the forum, and the exclusion of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus from the process. Since 1974, the island of Cyprus is divided between the Greek dominated and internationally recognized Republic of Cyprus, and the Turkish Republic of Northern

Cyprus which is recognized only by the Turkish government. In 1974, Turkish troops captured the northern part of the then undivided island of Cyprus in the aftermath of a coup led by a faction supporting country's union with Greece. Turkey still maintains 40,000 troops in Northern Cyprus. The negotiations to unify the island under one federation gained pace in 2015; however, it failed to resolve the conflict. This is why, Turkish government questions the legality of Republic of Cyprus's claim to commence drilling in the Aphrodite field, a natural gas field in the eastern Mediterranean on Cyprus's southern coast, without giving an equal share to Turkish Cypriots in the financial benefits emerging from the natural gas resources.

The increasing alienation of Turkey in the eastern Mediterranean has pushed the country to play the role of a spoiler in the ambitious EastMed gas pipeline, a project which already enjoys the strong backing of European Union and the US. Cyprus, in 2017, gave the license to three companies including Exxon Mobil, Italy' ENI, and France's Total Win to start drilling operations in the eastern Mediterranean. This provoked instant retaliation from the Turkish navy which blocked the attempt made by Italy's ENI to drill for gas off the coast of Cyprus.³⁶ Further, in 2019, in a muscle-flexing move to show its hard power, Turkey sent four drilling ships in the eastern Mediterranean off the coast of the Republic of Cyprus. Turkey deployed gunboats and military drones to escort its drilling ships near the island, raising tensions in the region.³⁷

Figure 1: Energy disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean



Source: <https://geopoliticalfutures.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Eastern-Med-Disputes.png>

As mentioned before, Turkey is not a signatory to the 1982 UN Law of the Sea Convention (UNCLOS) regulating maritime boundaries and thereby claims that its drilling operations in the eastern Mediterranean are taking place within its continental shelf, and therefore falls within the ambit of international law. This hostile approach by Turkey continued through January 2020 when President Erdogan retorted that country's seismic exploration vessel Oruc Reis would soon be deployed in the area closer to boundary zone agreed under the maritime agreement with Libya.³⁸

Turkey's aggressive approach in the eastern Mediterranean has alienated the country from its western allies, including the EU and the US. In July 2019, the European Union responded to Turkey's deployment of drilling vessels in the eastern Mediterranean through sanctions, which included the reduction in pre-accession funding available to Turkey as part of its bid to join the Union. At the same time, in July 2019, in a very significant move,

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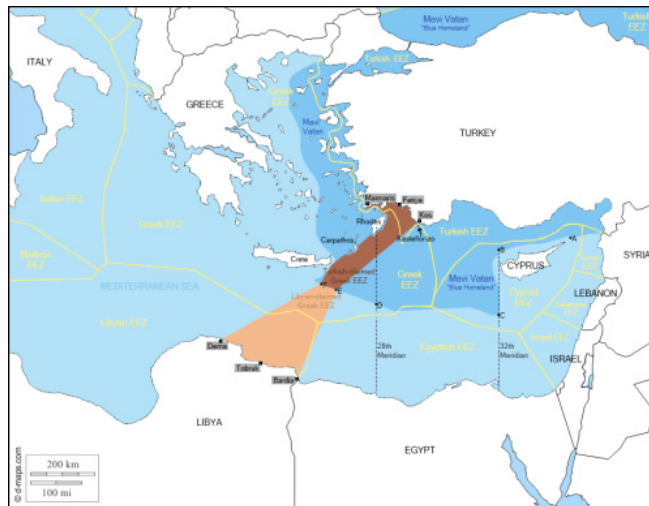
the United States Congress voted to end its 32-years old arms embargo on Cyprus. The US also promised to provide military training to Cyprus worth USD 2 million. The US made the lifting of the arms embargo and military training dependent on a condition that Cyprus will not allow Russians to use its ports.³⁹ Interestingly, this condition is in direct contravention to an agreement signed between Cyprus and Russia in 2015, which gives Russian ships access to Cypriot ports. Nevertheless, these

moves by the US have further raised the anxiety within the Turkish establishment which in turn responded by merging these ongoing tensions in the eastern Mediterranean with another long-standing issue in the region, i.e., the Libyan Civil war.

In its bid to end its increasing isolation, to curtail the development of EastMed gas pipeline, and to gain more clout in the region, in December 2019, Turkey signed a military and a maritime deal with the Government of National Accord (GNA) of Libya. The maritime agreement creates a joint maritime boundary between Turkey and Libya by juxtaposing two massive blocks of eastern Mediterranean, from the Turkish coast in the north to Libya in the south. The area claimed by Turkey in the north in the maritime agreement passes close to some Greek islands, notably the island of Crete, and some parts of Cyprus's EEZ.⁴⁰ More importantly, the maritime deal between Turkey and Libya blocks the route of proposed EastMed pipeline, thereby frustrating the efforts of the countries involved in EastMed Gas Forum. Therefore, Turkey's meddling in Libyan affairs flows from its ambition to have a government in Libya which can back its claim to the abundant energy deposits of the eastern Mediterranean. By supporting GNA, President Erdogan is aiming to make the recently

signed maritime agreement a permanent reality in international affairs. At the same time, by adopting an aggressive posture in Libya and the eastern Mediterranean, Turkey wanted to push the international community, especially European Union to recognize and support Turkey's claims in the ongoing dispute in the eastern Mediterranean. Furthermore, in Fayaz al-Sarraj's government, Turkey finds a rare Arab ally, given that Ankara's relations with most Arab states, except for Qatar, are currently not very cordial.

Figure 2: Proposed EEZ in Turkey-Libya maritime deal



Source: <https://mapsontheweb.zoom-maps.com/image/189681275939>

However, the maritime deal has already been discarded by Tobruk-based Libyan parliament and Khalifa Haftar, who was hosted by Greek Prime Minister in Athens just before the Berlin conference. The deal was also criticized by the European Union which has released a statement of “unequivocally” standing with the EU members Greece and Cyprus in the dispute and warned Turkey of more sanctions if it does not reverse its policy in the eastern Mediterranean.⁴¹ In retaliation to the maritime deal, Greek Prime Minister expelled the Libyan ambassador, filed a complaint to the UN, and also warned that his country would veto any political solution to the conflict in Libya on the EU council level if the Turkish-Libyan treaties are not reversed. Further, Egypt also launched a diplomatic offensive against Turkey, including sending a letter to the UN criticizing the Turkey-Libya maritime deal as null and void, and hosting the US and EU envoys to explain its objections to Turkish plans in Libya.⁴² It also called an urgent meeting of the Arab League following Turkey's decision to deploy troops to Libya, a move regarding which the 22-member block expressed “extreme concern.”⁴³

The emerging scenario in Turkey's neighbourhood indicates the deeply problematic nature of Turkish foreign policy in both Libya and the eastern Mediterranean as it has only strengthened the anti-Ankara front. The only positive outcome of Ankara's meddling in Libyan affairs is that it prompted the western countries to organize the Berlin conference to deal with the developments in Libya. Consequently, Turkey was able to secure a place for itself in all future negotiations concerning Libya. However, it did nothing to fulfil Turkey's key goal of turning the maritime agreement into an acceptable and abiding treaty at the global level.

COVID-19 and escalation of violence: Impact on regional security

As the COVID-19 pandemic spreads across conflict-ridden Libya, the intensifying war and continuous foreign interference in Libyan affairs can have a potentially devastating impact on the country and regional security. As compared to the non-combat zones, the population in the war zones are more vulnerable to such pandemics. At the time of writing, the war-torn country has reported 61 confirmed cases of COVID-19, 18 recoveries, and two deaths.⁴⁴ The plausible explanation behind the low number of infections in the country is the paucity of extensive testing in Libya, indicating that the actual number could be far higher. As of 20 April 2020, the country has performed a total of 808 tests to trace the infections for the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴⁵ Libya is highly vulnerable to COVID-19 due to the ongoing violence in the country, its fragmented state structure with two rival governments, badly damaged health infrastructure, and a great number of refugees and migrants. In this regard, the OCHA observes, "the preparedness and response capacity of the interim Ministry of Health in east Libya is reportedly minimal. Preparedness and response activities in south Libya are basically non-existent."⁴⁶

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It is important to note that in the Global Health Security Index, Libya ranks 27th out of 195 countries that are "most vulnerable to emerging outbreaks of illness."⁴⁷ The years of conflict have already decimated the country's health facilities. The COVID-19 pandemic is further pushing the country's health services towards a complete collapse.⁴⁸ After defying the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres's call for a 'global ceasefire' amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, the LNA forces under General Khalifa Haftar began indiscriminate targeting and shelling of hospitals, such as al Khadra in the GNA held territory of Tripoli. The targeting of health infrastructure in the country at a time when it is most needed to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic has put the Libyan population at heightened risk of infection.

It is important to note that the al Khadra hospital is the only health facility in Tripoli, which is dedicated to treating COVID-19 patients.⁴⁹ Further, in April 2020, as the war ravaged the Libyan western coast, it compelled the health care facilities in the towns of Sabratha and Surman to suspend their services.⁵⁰ The United Nations has severely condemned the attack on hospitals in Libya stating that “medical personnel, hospitals and medical facilities are protected under international humanitarian law and that attacks on them may constitute war crimes.”⁵¹

The ongoing violence in the combat zones such as Libya also inhibits the efforts of the government authorities and international organizations to provide humanitarian and medical aid to the afflicted population. Highlighting the difficulties faced by health professionals in Libya, the UK senior diplomat at the United Nations said: “it is next to impossible for the brave doctors and medical professionals in Libya to do what they need to do to save people.”⁵² In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, in March 2020, the UN-recognized government in Tripoli declared a state of emergency, imposed a night-time curfew, closed public spaces, and shut down the country’s air and seaports. The LNA forces also imposed night-time curfew in territories under their control. The Tripoli-based government of Fayaz al-Sarraj also allocated USD 360 million to fight the pandemic.⁵³ Further, to reduce the risk of COVID-19 pandemic in Libyan prisons, the Government of National Accord (GNA) decided to free more than 1600 prisoners from local and regional prisons under its control.⁵⁴ However, the weak state institutions and disputed political authority in Libya limits the capacity of government officials to prepare for the pandemic.⁵⁵ According to reports, “certain medical equipment and personal protective gear are already in short supply as a result of the civil war which has impacted imports and impeded the free flow of goods within Libya’s borders.”⁵⁶

What complicates Libya’s fight against the COVID-19 is the country’s dwindling oil-based economy. Since January 2020, the tribal leaders loyal to Khalifa Haftar in eastern and central Libya have imposed a blockade on oil ports and fields under their control. The decision to close the oil ports and fields came in the backdrop of Turkey’s growing interference in Libyan affairs. The tribal leaders had accused the Government of National Accords of using the oil revenues to fund the ongoing war in Libya. The implication was attributed to Turkey’s decision to deploy troops and fighters in Libya in order to aid the Tripoli government in its fight against the LNA forces.⁵⁷

Nevertheless, the closure of oil ports and fields in eastern and central Libya completely halted the country’s oil exports and resulted in a loss of USD 3.9 billion.⁵⁸ Also, the recent crash of the global oil prices will make it more challenging for the Libyan economy to

recuperate its losses even if oil production begins in the coming few months.⁵⁹ The reduced oil-based revenue for the GNA in Libya will hamper its ability to prepare robustly for the COVID-19 pandemic. There are already indications of increasing adversity in the war-torn country since the Tripoli-based government implemented preventive measures to deal with COVID-19. According to reports, “48 per cent of assessed cities reported food shortages and 86 per cent of assessed cities reported food price spikes. Shortages of basic food items, such as eggs, vegetables and wheat products, were most frequently reported.”⁶⁰

The international community has repeatedly called upon the warring parties in Libya for the cessation of violence, specifically in the backdrop of the unprecedented challenge posed by COVID-19 throughout the world. On March 17, 2020, the Western and Arab countries cited the extraordinary challenge posed by COVID-19. They appealed to “all parties in the Libya conflict to declare an immediate, humanitarian cessation of hostilities as well as a halt to the continuing transfer of all military equipment and personnel into Libya.”⁶¹ Again, on April 25, 2020, the EU, France, Germany, and Italy called on all the factions in Libya to get “inspired by the spirit of holy *Ramadan*” and declare the humanitarian truce in Libya.⁶² However, the repeated calls for a ceasefire by the international community did not yield any positive results, and at the time of writing, the violence continues unabated in Libya.⁶³ According to UNSMIL and UNHCR, in 2019, the civilian casualties in Libya surged by 25 per cent as compared to the previous year with a total of 284 deaths and 363 injuries.⁶⁴ The maximum number of casualties resulted from “airstrikes, which accounted for 182 deaths and 212 injuries, followed by ground fighting, improvised explosive devices, abductions and killings.”⁶⁵

In order to enforce the UN-authorized arms embargo on Libya, the European Union agreed to launch a naval and air mission in the eastern Mediterranean. The 27 member bloc reached the agreement after Austria withdrew its veto on a condition that the objective of the mission remains “military, and not humanitarian.”⁶⁶ The new operation *Irini* will replace now-defunct anti-smuggling Operation *Sophia* launched in 2015. Operation *Sophia* was suspended in March 2019 after repeated objections from Austria and Italy that international law obligates the naval patrol warships to rescue migrants set out to sea in an attempt to reach Europe from Libya. After rescuing more than 50,000 people at sea, the operation was terminated because the Italian government refused to allow rescued people to disembark.⁶⁷ Under the new operation *Irini*, the Greek government has made its ports accessible for debarkation of migrants rescued by the naval patrol warships.⁶⁸ However, Operation *Irini* will raise the risk of confrontation between the EU and Turkey since a large amount of weaponry supplied by Ankara to the Tripoli government is routed via the sea. The other

states such as the UAE and other supporters of the LNA supply arms via the air route and therefore are “unlikely to come across any EU interdiction.”⁶⁹

Conclusion

Turkey's foreign policy adventure in Libya is rooted in its ruling party and President Erdogan's ideological inclination towards creating a neo-Ottomanist and pan-Islamist sphere of Turkey. To further these ambitions, Turkey has leveraged the presence of a significant number of people of Turkish origin in Libya, especially in the town of Misrata. The second motivating factor behind Turkey's rising stakes in Libya is its economic interests in the country. Turkey's economic relations with Libya has remained buoyant since it first entered the Libyan market in the late 1970s. To safeguard its economic stakes, Turkey has cultivated its relations with Fayyaz al-Sarraj headed GNA. Turkey had lost billions of dollars in contracts and incomplete projects in Libya during the anti-Qadhafi protests and is looking for a way to recuperate and further strengthen its economic stakes in Libya. Most importantly, the geostrategic imperative of gaining influence in the eastern Mediterranean has also fueled Turkey's ambition in Libya. By signing a maritime deal with the GNA in Libya, Turkey is asserting its interest in the energy deposits in the eastern Mediterranean. Turkey's confrontational approach concerning the energy deposits in the Eastern Mediterranean is indicative of its policy that any energy deal in the region cannot bypass Turkish interest. Turkey's geostrategic position at the cusp of the Middle East, Europe, Mediterranean, and Balkans gives it an unparalleled edge in influencing developments in a vast region. However, President Erdogan's neo-Ottomanist ambitions and his continuous support for the Muslim Brotherhood throughout the region has made Turkey isolated. This ideological inclination in Turkey's foreign policy was further strengthened following the upheaval in its surrounding regions since the beginning of Arab uprisings in 2011.

At the same time, the consolidation of power by President Erdogan at home by resorting to undemocratic means impacted the country's foreign policy as well. To assuage the AKP's conservative voter base in Turkey, President Erdogan adopted a more neo-Ottomanist and confrontational approach in its foreign policy. However, Turkey's ambition to assert its regional power status and shape its neighbourhood according to its interests has brought the country in direct conflict with other regional powers. The country which until 2010 was experiencing a surge in its soft power in the region is largely isolated today. Except for Qatar and GNA in Libya, the Turkish government does not share cordial relations with any other state in the region. This isolation has further created anxieties for Turkey and left the policymakers with no other option but to pursue a more aggressive stance

while dealing with outside powers. However, this self-perpetuating cycle of isolation and confrontation has not served Turkey's interest.

At present, Turkey's closest Arab ally in the Middle East, Qatar, is also slowly showing signs of opening up to its gulf neighbours which can eventually result in the thawing of relations. This, in turn, will make Turkey even more isolated in the region. Also, the full-blown offensive in Idlib by Russian-backed Syrian regime shows that Turkey cannot rely on Russian support and the relation between the two countries is more fragile than it appears. The Idlib offensive will unleash thousands of refugees into Turkey, which is already hosting over 3.2 million refugees from Syria. Therefore, it is imperative for Turkish foreign policymakers to reorient the policy from an ideologically driven confrontational approach towards negotiation and accommodation. To break the self-perpetuating cycle of confrontation and isolation, Turkish policymakers need to go beyond the ruling party's pan-Islamist ambitions and think creatively in terms of bridging the gulf with its neighbours.

Turkey's ongoing fiasco in Libya can be resolved by opening up a channel of negotiation with countries like Israel and Egypt. Historically, Turkey has not shared a troubled relationship with these two countries. In fact, since the early 1990s, Turkey and Israel share a strategic partnership, and the trade relations between the two countries remain buoyant despite the nadir in diplomatic relations. What is required on the part of Turkey and President Erdogan is to lower the ideological rhetoric in favour of a more pragmatic foreign policy to safeguard Turkey's interest as well as peace and stability of the region. Otherwise, Turkey's interference in Libyan affairs, especially in the backdrop of rapidly spreading COVID-19 pandemic, has the potential of unleashing humanitarian catastrophe in the country. As explained before, war-torn Libya is far less equipped to deal with a health pandemic which has challenged the capacity of even the most developed countries in the western world. The prolongation of Turkey's foreign policy adventure in Libya will have serious repercussions for the country and the rest of the region.

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