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Turkey, Libya and the Mediterranean Carve Up

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The civil war that has prevailed in Libya since the fall of the Qaddafi regime in 2011 has become increasingly internationalized. Foreign powers have taken sides in the war, supplying weapons, mercenaries and other support. In recent months, Turkey's increased intervention in support of the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA) has added another element to the internationalization of the conflict. In order to obtain military support, the GNA has allied itself with Turkey's plan to gain control of access to the Eastern Mediterranean and its gas-fields. This poses a threat to Greece, Cyprus, Israel and Egypt, who are all cooperating in the utilization of those fields and the possible development of pipelines to Europe.

In November 2019, Turkey and the GNA signed agreements on maritime boundaries in the Mediterranean as well as on increased security and military cooperation. "The Security and Military Cooperation" and "Restriction of Marine Jurisdictions" agreements were signed at a meeting in Istanbul between Turkish President Tayyip Erdoğan and Fayeze al-Serraj, the head of the GNA. According to the Turkish foreign minister, the deals were designed to "protect Turkey's rights under international law" in the Mediterranean.²

Turkish support for the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA) including shipments of armored vehicles and military drones, helped save the GNA from an

onslaught by the rival Libyan National Army (LNA) led by Khalifa Haftar that threatened to capture the country's capital city last year.

Turkey has supported the GNA for commercial, maritime, and ideological reasons. Prior to 2011, up to 25 percent of Turks working in the Arab world were in Libya. The value of Turkish contracts outstanding in Libya going back to the Qaddafi period exceeds \$18 billion. These contracts in construction, infrastructure, and service business are unlikely to be implemented if Haftar were to take power. The LNA and its sponsors in the UAE would shun Turkey as a trading and business partner as well as politically.

The Turkish motive for involvement in Libya relates to territorial waters in the eastern Mediterranean. Greece has numerous islands in the Aegean Sea that make the application international sea conventions problematic. Turkey is interested in resuming its longstanding, unresolved talks with Greece but wants to defend its own interpretation of territorial waters conventions. (See map below).



Map of the Eastern Mediterranean with conflicting delimitations of Exclusive Economic Zone-Continental Shelf areas. Blue: areas claimed by Greece and the Republic of Cyprus; Red: areas claimed by Turkey. Section labelled "A-B": Claimed delimitation between Turkey and Libya as per November 2019 agreement.³

Turkey therefore feels it must try and ensure the survival of the GNA in Tripoli, the only friendly government in the region from a maritime perspective. It therefore insisted

on the GNA signing an exclusive economic zone deal, creating a sea corridor between western Turkey and eastern Libya. By late November 2019, the GNA, facing military pressures, had become desperate and agreed to Turkish demands. In return, Ankara resumed providing weapons and other military aid.

Ideologically, the existence of proponents of political Islam within the GNA is of value for Erdoğan. Moderate political Islam wielding some degree of power in a potentially wealthy country in North Africa is an important symbol. While the GNA is corrupt, it is also a framework in which Muslim Brothers and non-Islamist politicians coexist. The pro-Erdoğan faction represents, in a limited way, a populist form of participatory politics. The United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt are committed to eradicating that governance style, as it represents an alternative model to theirs. The survival of the GNA would also send a strong political message to constituencies in Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Somalia, Sudan, and elsewhere.⁴

In addition to the UAE and its allies, Russia has been supporting the LNA financially and tactically for the last five years. At the end of 2019 it intervened much more directly in the Libyan civil war by introducing Sukhoi jets, coordinated missile strikes, and precision-guided artillery, as well as snipers.⁵ In late 2019, Russia increased its leverage in Libya by allowing mercenaries from the private Wagner Group to operate near Tripoli on behalf of Haftar.⁶

Turkey is sending mercenaries to fight for the GNA. In January 2020, it was reported that two thousand Syrian fighters had flown from Turkey to Libya. In addition, 35 Turkish military advisors are in Tripoli.⁷ Turkey's support for the GNA therefore puts it on the opposite side of Russia, as it is, to a certain extent in the conflict in Syria.

There are potentially economic and possibly political benefits for Turkey that could result from its intervention in Libya. The economic benefits include the chance to regain economic power and influence lost after the fall in 2011 of Qaddafi. Libya possesses some of the richest hydrocarbon resources in Africa and, with a small population, has the potential to export most of what can be extracted. The complementarities of the two economies are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Turkey and Libya - main economic indicators

	Turkey	Libya
GDP (\$, billions)	771	48
Population (millions)	82.3	6.7
Fuel exports as share of total merchandise exports (%)	2	98
Energy imports: share of total use (%)	75	-103
Oil rents as share of GDP (%)	0.1	37.3

Source: World Bank

In 2018, Turkey was the nineteenth largest economy in the world. It has an industrialized economy and urbanized population but it has very few energy sources. In 2017, domestic supplies covered 24 percent of total consumption. About half of domestic supply was coal.⁸ Turkey's energy import bill in 2018 totaled \$43 billion, an increase of nearly 16 percent above the 2017 level according to Turkish Statistical Institute. Energy imports accounted for just over 19 percent of total imports. In 2018, Turkey's energy import bill increased as a result of higher international prices. Turkey imports 90 percent of its oil needs and 99 percent of its natural gas requirements and suffers chronic balance of payments problems.⁹

In 2019, Libya boosted crude output to a seven-year high of 1.15 million barrels a day.¹⁰ It has 48.4 billion barrels of reserves (6.3 m tons) equal to 2.8 percent of world reserves. In 2018, Libya accounted for 1.1 percent of world output.¹¹ The LNA currently controls most of the country's oil resources, while the GNA still holds oil refineries and some hydrocarbon reserves.

The discovery of huge gas reserves in the sea has prompted the development of gas fields in Egypt and Israel. Greece and Cyprus have joined them to form agreements on

the issue. Turkey's opposition to the Cypriot government's plan to exploit its off-shore resources has left it isolated due to disputes over how to divide up the territorial waters of the Mediterranean Sea for further gas exploration. Turkey views its relations with Libya as a possible solution to its isolation in the eastern Mediterranean.

At the beginning of January 2020, Greece, Cyprus and Israel on Thursday signed a deal to build a 1,900 km (1,180 mile) underwater pipeline to carry natural gas from the eastern Mediterranean gas fields to Europe. The so-called East-Med project, projected to cost \$6-7 billion is expected initially to carry 10 billion cubic meters of gas per year from Israeli and Cypriot waters to the Greek island of Crete, on to the Greek mainland and into Europe's gas network via Italy.¹² There are many doubts about the feasibility of this project but the mere fact of its announcement has raised tension with Turkey.¹³

Turkey is also concerned about another regional energy development. In July 2019, the East Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) was formed by the energy ministers of Egypt, Jordan, the Palestine Authority, Israel, Cyprus, Greece and Italy. The US Energy Secretary and the Director General of Energy of the European Union as well as representatives from France and the World Bank attended the launch.¹⁴

In January 2019, Israel started pumping natural gas to Egypt from two offshore fields. The partners in the Israeli fields signed a contract with a privately held Egyptian firm to supply 85 billion cubic meters (3 trillion cubic feet) from the Tamar and the Leviathan fields. The deal is worth an estimated \$19.5 billion.¹⁵

On 8 January 2020, the Libyan crisis and developments in the eastern Mediterranean resulted in a meeting of the foreign affairs ministers of Egypt, France, Greece, Cyprus and Italy in Cairo. Egypt seeks international action against the Turkish military intervention in Libya. The Turkish and Egyptian leaderships have been in conflict since the ousting of the Islamic regime of Muhammed Morsi in Egypt in 2013. Turkey has backed the Muslim Brotherhood and has received support from Qatar. Egypt and the UAE, as well as Saudi Arabia are allied against that organization and its offshoots around the Middle East and North Africa region. Following the meeting, four of the five ministers released a statement declaring both agreements signed between Turkey and Libya void. The Italian Foreign Minister did not sign the closing statement,

calling it "very unfair" to Turkey and the GNA. Libya was once an Italian colony; Italy considers it an ally and has significant oil investments there.¹⁶

Turkey claims an exclusive economic zone (EEZ) at sea, in which it has sole rights to fishing, mining and drilling. Under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, those extend 340 kilometers (212 miles) from a country's coastline, except in cases where the distance between two countries is less, in which case they have to negotiate a deal. The distance between the south Turkish coast and the North Eastern Libyan coast at their closest is about 700 kilometers (450 miles). Turkey has refused to sign the convention and instead is implementing its own rules, which stretches its EEZ halfway across the Mediterranean meeting that of Libya, as claimed by the GNA.

Turkey has used gunboat diplomacy to enforce its maritime claims with drill-ships with the Turkish flag entering Cyprus' EEZ. It has disrupted drilling by foreign companies in the Cypriot EEZ. The Italian energy company ENI, whose vessel was blocked by Turkish warships in 2018, was so intimidated that it announced it would no longer operate in the area if Turkish warships appear. Turkey's EEZ claims threaten the potential development of an East Mediterranean gas regime, including veto rights on plans for a pipeline to deliver Israeli, Egyptian and Cypriot gas to the European market because it would cross its EEZ. In recent years, Turkey has tried to block efforts by Cyprus to exploit gas discoveries by harassing drill ships operating there with Turkish naval vessels and sending its own drilling ships into Cypriot waters. By laying legal claim to large areas of the Mediterranean - especially between Greece and Egypt, it hopes to forestall those other countries' claims to the resources.

German-led efforts to achieve a cease-fire and political negotiations began in September 2019. The LNA's foreign supporters continued to provide military support and diplomatic cover, in the belief that it would be able to take Tripoli. It was dominant in air power through the United Arab Emirates' support. An influx of mercenaries by the Kremlin-linked Wagner Group to fight in support of the LNA further tilted the balance and led to rising confidence it would succeed. Backed into a corner, and with few other options, the GNA agreed to expanded security and military cooperation, as well as the maritime boundaries agreement with Turkey.

The Turkish and Russian presidents met on 8 January 2020, and agreed to support a cessation of hostilities. The ability of Russia and Turkey to enact the cessation to hostilities over the weekend, albeit with complaints of violations made by both sides, indicates the extent of their leverage. Putin is believed to have called Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed, a longtime backer of LNA military campaign, to request his adherence to the cease-fire. The LNA leader Khalifa Haftar however, failed to sign the deal brokered by Russia and Turkey that week. Western European countries had another chance to cement their leadership of the Libyan negotiation process with the conference in Berlin that began on 19 January.

At that conference, Russia, Turkey and other countries with competing interests in Libya called for a cease-fire and an arms embargo. They agreed to end their own interference on the ground to give Libyans space for a political reconciliation. Putin and Erdogan both attended the meeting. The leaders of Libya's two warring factions refused, however, spend time together in the same room. Haftar not only ignored the calls from compromise made in Berlin but has increased pressure on the GNA by shutting down the oilfields.¹⁷

The conflict in Libya is becoming akin to that in Syria in that an increasing number of foreign powers have become involved. Libya has oil, it is a market and its location is geo-politically significant. Tribal divisions have led to civil war, and until that ends, the country's potential will remain largely unrealized.¹⁸

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