



SEPTEMBER 2021

## Turkey's interventions in its near abroad: The case of Libya

The strategic objectives of the Turkish military intervention in Libya in 2019–2020 in favour of the Government of National Accord (GNA) were geopolitical (establishing an entry point into Africa in addition to Somalia), geo-economical (related to gas exploration in the Mediterranean) and commercial (facilitating repayment of outstanding business debts and enabling future profits). The deeper drivers of Ankara's intervention include a mix of more assertive nationalism based on a hegemonic conception of Turkey's 'near abroad', a perceived need to counter the military campaign of the Libyan National Army (LNA)'s to conquer Tripolitania, and Turkey's exclusion from Mediterranean gas politics. Ankara's intervention and its institutionalisation proved effective in counterbalancing the LNA and its international backers – chiefly Russia and the UAE, but also France and Egypt – and produced a more stable political situation in the process. While Turkey has achieved its short- to medium-term objectives and is likely to retain a substantial permanent military, commercial and political presence in Libya, it also created tensions with the EU and US as well as antagonizing the LNA's international backers. In brief, an improvement in Turkey's geostrategic position might have come at the cost of its regional strategic relations.

### Introduction

Turkey and Libya have a long history dating back to Ottoman times. In 1974, Libya was among the few countries that supported Turkish military intervention in Cyprus. In the 1980s and 1990s, Libya was a lucrative market for Turkish business, especially in the construction and energy sectors. Because of this, Ankara viewed Tripoli as a key partner in North Africa.<sup>1</sup> Libya even came to be

viewed as a vital foreign policy interest in the beginning of the 2000s. In his book, *Strategic Depth*, former Minister of Foreign

---

Council) and Erwin van Veen (Clingendael) for their constructive peer review. The brief's contents naturally remain the responsibility of its author. It should be noted that the analysis reflects developments until June 2021 and that the brief is part of a larger research project that examines a number of Turkish interventions in its neighbourhood with the aim of enabling evidenced bottom-up conclusions on the nature of contemporary Turkish foreign/military policy.

---

<sup>1</sup> My thanks go to Jalel Harchaoui (Global Initiative) and Mohamed Eljarh (Libya Outlook for Research and Consulting) for their contributions to this brief. I would also like to thank Emadeddin Badi (Atlantic

Affairs Ahmet Davutoğlu positioned Libya at the outer edge of Turkey's near abroad (*near continent basin*), which he argued ought to lie at the heart of Ankara's geopolitical strategies and calculations, together with its *near land* and *near sea* basins.<sup>2</sup> According to Davutoğlu, if Turkey alienates itself from its near abroad, for example by focusing excessively on Europe, it would not just lose shared historical, cultural and religious connections, but also strategic depth and geopolitical prominence. Consequently, Ankara increased its engagement with Libya between 2002 and 2011 during Davutoğlu's tenure as chief adviser to Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan via commerce and the offer of a maritime de-limitation agreement (November 2010).<sup>3</sup>

These developments meant that Turkey did not initially favour the overthrow of Qaddafi in 2011. Ankara nevertheless participated in NATO's operation in support of the Libyan opposition and provided political support for the National Transitional Council, in part due to US pressure. Turkey gradually increased its support for the revolutionary and Islamist armed factions in Tripolitania at the beginning of the second Libyan civil war (2014), which 'united' under the Government

of National Accord (GNA) against Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA).

It is in this historical and contemporary context that the brief examines the strategic rationale, methods and impact (in terms of both results and relations) of Turkey's 2019–2020 Libyan military intervention in favour of the GNA. It closes with a few recommendations on how the EU can engage with Turkey in Libya.

## Strategic rationale and security interests

Ankara's support for the GNA features several drivers. First and foremost, Ankara seeks to expand its *strategic depth* in North Africa based on its view of Libya as 'essential near abroad', especially in the wake of the opportunity offered by the uprisings of 2011. Libya acquired a particular foreign policy focus after Turkish influence in Tunisia and Egypt diminished in 2013. Davutoğlu's aforementioned view of Libya's geopolitical relevance to Turkey is widely shared in Ankara, including by Eurasianist cadres of the Turkish Navy, and by both left-leaning and far-right nationalists. In parallel with Ankara reversing its Kemalist-inspired pursuit of a status quo, pro-Western foreign policy under the rule of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), some of Turkey's elites have revived the notion that in the 1920s Western powers confined Turkey to the Anatolian mainland. In other words, a geopolitical pivot away from Europe is executed in tandem with the revival of a (perceived) historical grievance.

In addition, Ankara wishes to safeguard its commercial interests that consist of roughly US\$19 billion in outstanding contractual obligations to Turkish businesses.<sup>4</sup> The majority of these obligations consists of

2 In the book, Turkey's near abroad consists of 'near land', 'near sea' and 'near continent' areas. The near-land areas include the Balkans, Middle East and Caucasus regions. The near-sea area consists of the Black Sea, Adriatic, the eastern Mediterranean, Persian Gulf and Caspian Sea. The near continent area includes Europe, North Africa, South Asia, Central and East Asia. Davutoğlu, A. *Stratejik Derinlik: Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu*, İstanbul: Küre Yayınları, 2001, p. 132.

3 Van Veen, E. and Yüksel, E., *Too big for its boots: Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East from 2002 to 2018*, The Hague: Clingendael, July 2018; Polat, Ferhat, *Turkey's Strategy in Libya: Rationale and Challenges*, TRT World Research Centre: İstanbul, November 2020, [online](#) (accessed 1 March 2021). The 2010 maritime proposal is almost identical to the one that Turkey inked with the Government of National Accord in December 2019. See: Yayıcı, Cihat, *Türkiye-Libya Arasında İmzalanılan Münhasır Ekonomik Bölge Antlaşmasının Sonuç ve Etkileri*, Kriter, 2020, [online](#) (accessed 26 February 2020).

4 Harchaoui, J., *Into the Libya Vortex*, The Hague: Clingendael, 2020.

unfinished and/or unpaid construction work.<sup>5</sup> When the 2011 uprising started, roughly 100 Turkish companies with 25,000 workers had to rapidly leave Libya.<sup>6</sup> About 70 per cent of these obligations are estimated to pertain to eastern Libya where Turkey's political opponents are based, which makes it difficult to pursue them in the present situation.<sup>7</sup> Even though this is a more mundane consideration, its importance should not be underestimated given the fragile state of the Turkish economy.

Finally, Ankara views Libya as the key to securing its place in the 'great game' of eastern Mediterranean geo-economics between Egypt, Israel and Greece, which is centred on gas exploration and maritime border delimitation. An important element behind this particular driver has been the exclusion of Turkey from various Mediterranean energy partnerships. These include the EastMed project (Israel, Cyprus and Greece) to install a gas pipeline over the sea floor via Crete rather than across Turkish soil and organising collaboration through the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF).<sup>8</sup> Greece's long-standing and steep demands in the eastern Mediterranean have also reinforced this driver for Turkish

intervention.<sup>9</sup> In brief, to Ankara, Libya represents both an important point of forward projection of Turkish influence – into north Africa – as well as a point of backward power projection into the Mediterranean to re-assert its pipeline and territorial claims.

This logic was on display to some extent during a parliamentary session debating the Libya Deployment Bill in January 2020 when the National Movement Party (MHP)'s deputy chair, Erkan Akçay, argued that: 'The Eastern Mediterranean is one of the important geopolitical regions and regional developments obliged Turkey to become more powerful in this field... With this bill we are defending our *Blue Homeland* in the Mediterranean, securing our interests, and contributing to the stability of brother country Libya and regional peace.'<sup>10</sup> At the international level, however, Ankara's statements only emphasise the importance of Libyan sovereignty and state restoration. For example, the Turkish defence minister noted in December 2020 that Ankara's primary objective in Libya is to ensure an 'independent and sovereign Libya, led by the Libyans, and to support the liberation of all

5 Çakır, Merve Ö., *Türk müteahhitlerin Libya'dan alacaklarını tahsil için 1 yıllık yol haritası*, Anadolu Ajansı, 16 October 2020, online (accessed 23 June 2021).

6 *Ibid.*

7 Based on an interview with Mohamed Eljarh who is a researcher and consultant in Tobruk, 4 March 2021.

8 EastMed Pipeline Project, [online](#) and Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum, [online](#) (both accessed 22 March 2021).

9 Greece claims full exclusive economic zone and continental shelf entitlements for the islands that lie across the median line (i.e. in this case towards Turkey) between the Greek and Turkish mainland, as well as Cyprus. If these claims were to be accepted, the outcome of any delimitation would disadvantage Turkey since it would have to abandon almost two-thirds of the maritime area it claims for its own. Turkey takes the view that these islands and Cyprus cannot create maritime jurisdiction areas beyond their territorial waters. See: Açıkgönül, Y. Emre, *Turkey's East Med policy: Victory at home, isolation abroad*, Istanbul: Heinrich Böll Stiftung, September 2020; Schultheiss, Christian, *Charting a peaceful course for the Eastern Mediterranean Sea Disputes*, European Leadership Network, 21 May 2021, online (accessed 12 July 2021); Letter dated 18 March 2020 from the Permanent Representative of Turkey to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General, [online](#) (accessed 12 July 2021).

10 Adıyaman, S. Ocak and Balta, Adem, *Libya tezkeresi TBMM Genel Kurulu'nda kabul edildi*, Anadolu Agency, 2 January 2020, [online](#) (accessed 29 March 2021).

Libyans [from Haftar's LNA] by maintaining their territorial integrity and national unity.<sup>11</sup>

In sum, it is reasonable to suggest that geopolitical and geo-economic considerations are better explanatory factors of the 2019–2020 Turkish intervention in Libya than ideological elements.<sup>12</sup> Ankara's main objective in Libya is to increase its strategic depth by leveraging the country's location in the Mediterranean, to safeguard its economic interests (gas and commercial debts), and use its presence in Libya to project influence into the Sahel (akin to the role of Somalia with regards to the Horn of Africa to the southeast).

## The means of intervention

Initially, Ankara mostly used a variety of socio-religious networks to exert influence. For example, between 2011 and 2014, the ruling AKP established connections with Libyan Muslim Brotherhood members, alongside Qatar. While Qatar's commitment receded after 2014, the hub of Libyan Muslim Brotherhood networks gradually moved to Turkey.<sup>13</sup> In addition, the Karaghla (Köroğlu) community of about 1.3 million that is concentrated in Misrata offered Ankara other networks (Karaghlas are the descendants of mixed marriages between Ottoman Janissaries and native Libyans).<sup>14</sup> This community had been instrumental in facilitating the creation of bilateral business networks linking Turkey, Misrata and the Tripolitania merchant elite since the 1980s. It

also served as platform for post-2011 political influence.

Turkey only became militarily involved in the Libyan civil war in early 2014 by contributing to an international effort, which also included the US, UK and Italy, to form a 'General Purpose Force' in support of the General National Congress (GNC).<sup>15</sup> This initiative failed in the same year. Nevertheless, Turkey continued to back some GNC-aligned factions, Islamist-revolutionary groups and anti-Haftar factions under a bilateral agreement between the GNC and the Turkish government that was signed in January 2014.<sup>16</sup> As part of this agreement, Ankara trained an initial contingent of Libyan troops (the 12<sup>th</sup> infantry battalion) in Turkey in March 2014.<sup>17</sup> Between 2014 and early 2019, Ankara continued to provide training in Turkey for about 3,000 Libyan forces while also secretly transferring arms and ammunitions to Tripoli without interfering with overall command.<sup>18</sup>

It was only in the second half of 2019 that Turkey established greater command and control over (by then) GNA forces following the LNA's multiple-front offensive against Tripoli. This offensive posed an existential threat not only to the GNA but also to Turkey's strategic objectives in Libya, as discussed above. It was hardly a surprise, therefore, that Turkey responded positively to the GNA's request for military assistance in 2019.<sup>19</sup> The complete withdrawal of the US from Libya in April 2019<sup>20</sup> also facilitated

---

11 Turkey's defence minister Hulusi Akar's statement, 2020, [online](#) (accessed 15 March 2021).

12 See also: Harchaoui, J., *Why Turkey Intervened in Libya?*, Foreign Policy Research Institute: Istanbul, 2020 and Polat (2020) *op.cit.*

13 Badi, Emadeddin, *To Advance its Own Interests, Turkey Should now help Stabilize Libya*, War in the Rocks, May 2021.

14 Güvendik, Murat Özgür, *Libya'daki Köroğlu Türkleri Türkiye'nin altyapı yatırımlarını bekliyor*, Anadolu Ajansı, 13 September 2020, online (accessed 09 June 2021); Evans-Pritchard EE. 'Arab Status in Cyrenaica under the Italians.' *The Sociological Review* a36, 1-4, 1944.

15 Al-Shadeedi, Hamza, Van Veen, Erwin and Harchaoui, Jalel, *One thousand and one failings: Security sector stabilisation and development in Libya*, The Hague: Clingendael, April 2020, p. 26.

16 Libya Başbakanı Zeydan: İşbirliğimizi İlerletmek İstiyoruz, *Son Dakika*, 03 January 2014, [online](#) (accessed 7 June 2021).

17 Libya'lı askerlerden Bozkurt Selamı, *Vatan*, 24 March 2014, online (accessed 7 June 2021).

18 Harchaoui (2020) *op.cit.*

19 According to Turkish Defence Minister, Hulusi Akar, the GNA sent letters to the US, the UK, Italy, Algeria, Turkey as well as NATO. See: [online](#) (accessed 2 March 2021).

20 Shinkman, Paul D., U.S. Withdraws from Syria as Fighting Intensifies, *U.S. News*, 8 April 2019, online (accessed 8 June 2021).

greater Turkish intervention, while the opportunity to strike a blow to Russian and Emirati ambitions was a likely added bonus for Turkish decision makers (Russia is a ‘frenemy’ of Turkey in Syria, Libya and the Caucasus; the UAE’s antipathy towards the Muslim Brotherhood puts Ankara firmly in a relationship of animosity with Abu Dhabi). Finally, the GNA was able to pay for the costs of Turkish military services via its oil revenues, which made the intervention a clear win-win situation from a pragmatic point of view.<sup>21</sup>

Turkey signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the GNA to legitimise and organise its intervention in late November 2019, which focused on security and military cooperation.<sup>22</sup> Subsequently, high-ranking Turkish officials assumed command of military operations in the Tripoli area through the formation of a Joint Command Centre. Only then did Turkey’s strategy shift from indirect support to direct military assistance through the deployment of Turkish military personnel, modern weapon systems and Syrian mercenaries.<sup>23</sup> In line with the MoU, Turkey solidified its military posture in Tripolitania by setting up several operation centres, providing material and technical support to GNA-aligned forces, and restructuring these forces to respond more effectively to LNA incursions.

The Turkish deployment to the Tripolitania area included a few hundred Turkish military personnel, Bayraktar TB2 armed drone systems, HAWKS MIM-23 medium-range and KORKUT low altitude/very short-range air defence systems, MILKAR-3A3 V/ UHF electronic warfare systems, various armored army platforms, T-155 FIRTINA

and BORAN howitzers and TRG-300 TIGER tactical missiles.<sup>24</sup> In addition, Ankara fielded between 2,000 and 8,000 Syrian mercenaries to supplement GNA forces.<sup>25</sup> Ankara’s strategy was predicated on the assumption that attaining military superiority in the Tripolitania area could ensure GNA survival and maintain it as a partner in the pursuit of Turkish interests.

Turkey’s intervention of 2019–2020 turned the tide of war in favour of the GNA by reversing the LNA’s offensive in June 2020. A failed Egyptian attempt to broker a ceasefire in the same month was followed by a successful UNSMIL effort in October 2020.<sup>26</sup> Since then, Turkey has sought to institutionalise its military cooperation with the GNA and has expanded it to include Qatar (August 2020).<sup>27</sup> For example, the Turkish Army commenced a long-term training mission in the newly built Omar Mukhtar Army Training Center in

21 Libya’s Sarraj pays \$12 billion to Turkey for military protection, *Middle East Online*, 21 June 2020, online (accessed 10 June 2021).

22 Memorandum of Understanding between The Government of the Republic of Turkey and The Government of National Accord-State of Libya in Security and Military Cooperation, 27 November 2019, [online](#) (accessed 29 March 2021).

23 Yüksel, E. (2020). ‘Turkey’s approach to proxy war in the Middle East and North Africa’, *Security and Defence Quarterly*, Vol. 31., pp. 145-147.

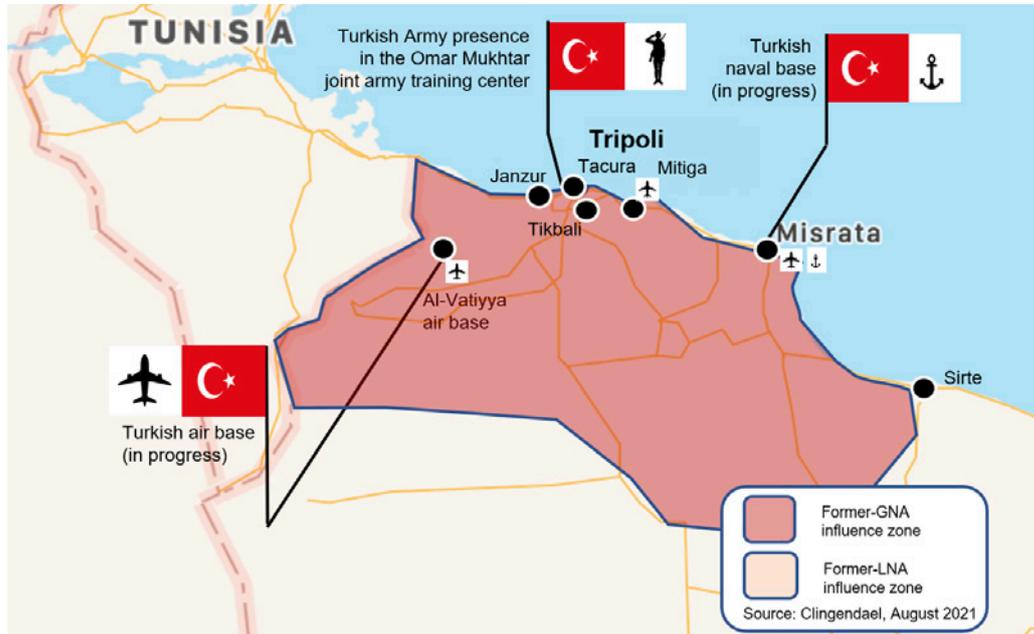
24 Atak, Erman and Marcuzzi, Stefano, *The Sultan and the Czar: Erdogan and Putin’s game-changing policies in Libya*, NATO Defence College Foundation Paper, May 2020, [online](#) and Gürcan, Metin. ‘Could Fragile cease-fire lead to peace in Libya?’, *Al-Monitor*, 13 Jan 2020, [online](#) (both accessed 19 April 2021).

25 Note that the MOU only authorises the Turkish Army to engage in conflict for reasons of self-defence. See: Aslan, M. (2020) ‘Seta panel on Turkey’s Libya policy and the future of the Libyan crisis’, SETA, [online](#) (accessed: 1 March 2020). Syrian forces are paid by the GNA at a rate of about US\$1,500–2,000 a month. Mckernan, B., Akoush, H. ‘Exclusive: 2,000 Syrian fighters deployed to Libya to support government’, the *Guardian*, 15 January 2020, [online and SOHR: Turkey Keeps 8000 Mercenaries in Libya, December 2020 online](#) (accessed 13 April 2021). On 20 February 2020, Erdogan mentioned that the Turkish Army and units of Syrian National Army are putting up a fight against Haftar’s forces, see: [online](#) and see: Al-Khateb, Khaled, *Syrian Mercenaries fight Turkey’s battle in Libya*, *Al-Monitor*, 3 February 2020, [online](#) (accessed 5 March 2021).

26 UN salutes new Libya ceasefire agreement that points to ‘a better, safer, and more peaceful future’, *UN News*, [online](#) (accessed 16 March 2021).

27 Libya signs with Turkey and Qatar cooperation deal to boost military build-up, *Libyanexpress*, 17 August 2020, [online](#) (accessed 22 March 2021).

**Figure 1 Overview of the main Turkish bases in Libya**



Note: The Turkish military supports its Syrian mercenary fighters with training and logistics in Tıkbali and Janzur. The Turkish air force also regularly uses the Mitiga and Misrata airfields.

Tacura, Tripoli.<sup>28</sup> Ankara also seeks to build a naval base in Misrata<sup>29</sup> and an air base in Vatiyya after having brokered a tripartite deal between Doha, Tripoli and Ankara on military cooperation in mid-2020.<sup>30</sup> Such facilities, once created, would put Turkish military power projection into northern Africa on a permanent footing. Despite being framed as a form of security sector reform, Turkey's train and equip programmes have focused on solidifying Ankara's existing relationships with local elites and militia rather than on

improving security provision, management or oversight.<sup>31</sup>

In exchange – and in addition to payment – the GNA accepted Turkey's maritime delimitation proposal of November 2019 (almost identical to the one of 2010).<sup>32</sup> The deal attempts to expand Turkey's maritime claims from 41,000 to 148,000 square kilometres in the Mediterranean and authorises the two signatories to cooperate on the exploitation of resources.<sup>33</sup> Overall, the maritime deal has been interpreted as a Turkish attempt to redraw maritime jurisdiction zones in the eastern Mediterranean as it ignores the Exclusive Economic Zone and continental shelf entitlements of Greek islands in the delimited

28 Libya'da 3500 Asker, *Yeni Safak*, 23 November 2020, [online](#) and Türkiye'nin Libya ordusuna yönelik askeri eğitim programı ilk mezunlarını Verdi, *Anadolu Agency*, 21 November 2021, [online](#): (both accessed 3 March 2021).

29 Başaran, Elifnur, Turkish Naval Forces set up a naval base in Misrata, *DefenceTurk.net*, 30 August 2020, [online](#) (accessed 7 September 2021)

30 Türkiye ile Libya arasında askeri üs müzakereleri, *DW*, 15 June 2020, [online](#) and Turkey and Qatar sign military cooperation deal with Libya government, *MEMO*, 18 August 2020, [online](#) (accessed 7 September 2021).

31 Badi (2021) *op. cit.*

32 Memorandum of Understanding between The Government of the Republic of Turkey and The Government of National Accord-State of Libya on Delimitation of Maritime Jurisdiction Areas in the Mediterranean, 7 December 2019, [online](#) (accessed 26 February 2021).

33 *Türk Askeri Libya da ne Yapacak?*, SETA, 6 January 2020, [online](#) (accessed 22 March 2021).

area.<sup>34</sup> Greece, Cyprus, France and Egypt immediately declared the Turkish-GNA maritime deal 'null and void' on the grounds that it infringes their sovereign rights as third states and does not adhere to the law of the sea.<sup>35</sup> In response, Greece signed a maritime delimitation deal with Egypt in August 2020.<sup>36</sup> When Turkey started drilling in the areas concerned, the EU imposed sanctions on a number of Turkish officials.<sup>37</sup>

## Results of the intervention

Turkish and Russian/UAE military support for, respectively, the GNA and LNA largely counterbalance one another. The resulting battlefield stalemate facilitated the resumption of the UN-led Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF) process in mid-November 2020.<sup>38</sup> By positioning itself as an actor that protects the UN-recognised party to the conflict, i.e. the GNA, Ankara has not only followed the path laid down in New York but also cleverly forced the international community's hand in de facto accommodating its gains in Libya. Moreover, a political agreement under the present circumstances secures and legitimises a strong position for Turkey without having to undermine a long-term Russian presence in eastern Libya – in practical terms, the country remains split into two broad camps.<sup>39</sup>

However, this seemingly favourable situation for Turkey is not without its problems.

To begin with, in eastern Libya (Cyrenaica) the Turkish presence is perceived as an attempt at occupation even though the GNA welcomes it.<sup>40</sup> This may trigger greater resistance against further expansion in the future. Moreover, the realisation that Turkey is there to stay has caused concerns among the international backers of the 'eastern camp' – such as Egypt and the UAE – especially with regards to the question of what form Turkish influence will take and what it might imply for the prospects of Libyan unification.<sup>41</sup> Finally, Turkey's military presence may not be viewed as positive in the Tripolitania area in the longer term if it does not help to improve local security conditions. Since the Turkish presence currently favours Ankara-aligned militias and works with particular elite(s) (networks), it secures Turkey's geo-economic objectives more than it strengthens Libyan institutions.<sup>42</sup>

## Effects on political processes and the future of Libya

On 5 February 2021, a new Libyan interim government was formed under the auspices of the UN-led Libya Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF). The interim government was also endorsed by the House of Representatives on 11 March 2021,<sup>43</sup> and will be in charge until 24 December 2021 when national elections are planned to be held. Abd al-Hamid Dbeibah, a businessman from Misrata, became interim Prime Minister. He played a central role in awarding business deals to Turkish companies and arbitrating between Ankara and Tripoli during the Qaddafi era. For instance, the head of the Turkish-Libya

34 Letter dated 21 August 2020 from the Permanent Representative of Turkey to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General, 24 August 2020, [online](#), Greece sends a letter to the UN concerning the illegal MoU signed between Turkey, *Greek City Times*, 27 February 2020, [online](#) (accessed 4 March 2020).

35 Turkey-Libya deals 'void': Egypt, France, Greece, Cyprus, *France 24*, 08 January 2020, [online](#) (accessed 7 September 2021).

36 Reuters, 6 August 2020, [online](#) (accessed 22 March 2021).

37 Wintour, Patrick, 'EU leaders approve sanctions on Turkish officials over gas drilling', 11 December 2020, the *Guardian*, [online](#) (accessed 25 March 2021).

38 Libyan Political Dialogue Forum, [online](#) (accessed 1 March 2021).

39 Based on an interview with Jalel Harchaoui who works for the Global Initiative, 21 February 2021.

40 Nevertheless, it bears keeping in mind that about 70 per cent of the unpaid pre-war business contracts of Turkish companies are held in eastern Libya, which will act as a stimulus for ongoing contact and cooperation. *Ibid.*

41 Based on an interview with Mohamed Eljarh who is a researcher and consultant in Tobruk, 4 March 2021.

42 Badi (2021) *op. cit.*

43 Zaptia, Sami, 'Names of Libya's newly endorsed Government of National Unity', *Libya Herald*, 11 March 2021, [online](#) (accessed 16 March 2021)

Business Council, Murtaza Karanfil, was a guest in one of Dbeibah's properties in Tripoli when the latter's electoral victory was announced on 5 January 2021.<sup>44</sup> In short, he is well-connected to Turkey and can be relied upon to defend Ankara's interests. For example, Dbeibah reaffirmed the validity of the maritime agreement between the GNA and Turkey on 13 April 2021 when he visited Turkey.<sup>45</sup> In other words, Turkey is well positioned to take on a large role in the future of western Libya (Tripolitania), but might do so by privileging its own networks over building longer-term stability.<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, it remains to be seen whether the post-24 December 2021 Libyan political establishment will endorse the agreements that anchor both Ankara's gains and its presence.<sup>47</sup>

### Effects on the Turkish economy

Due to the wartime conditions that were aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic, Turkey's trade volume with Libya has remained under US\$2 billion since 2018.<sup>48</sup> However, the head of the Turkish-Libya Business Council, Murtaza Karanfil, has announced that Turkey's ambition is to expand the trade volume to US \$10 billion and to make Libya Turkey's logistic hub in North Africa to expand economic activities into the Sahel and sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>49</sup> To that end, Turkey and the GNA signed a trade memorandum in August 2020 with

energy as a key sector of engagement.<sup>50</sup> The Turkish Government's Petroleum Cooperation Company (TPAO) already requested a licence to extract more oil in Libya.<sup>51</sup> More importantly, TPAO also applied for a licence to drill in the seven areas licensed under the maritime agreement with the GNA, which conflict with Greece's maritime claims (centred on Crete).<sup>52</sup> Moreover, Ankara organised the first Turkish-Libyan Economic Forum in mid-October 2020 – with about 100 Turkish companies – to ensure it is ready to reap the economic fruits of stability in Libya.<sup>53</sup> Finally, Ankara has signed a memorandum of understanding with the GNA to resume the aforementioned unfinished work of Turkish construction companies in August 2020 (and unpaid bills), at least insofar as these pertain to GNA-controlled territories.<sup>54</sup> In sum, these longstanding business networks along with Turkey's good relations with the GNA have put the country in pole position to benefit from any post-conflict reconstruction and recovery processes.

### Turkey's relationship with the European Union

When the LNA unleashed a full-blown military offensive against Tripoli in April 2019, the GNA formally asked for help from Turkey, the US, the UK, Italy, Algeria and NATO. Except for Turkey, none of these actors responded positively. Moreover, the EU as a whole was unable to intervene coherently due to disagreements between France and Italy. Italy initially supported the formation of the GNA in 2015 and regarded it as a potential partner in protecting Europe's

44 Murtaza Karanfil, *Yeni Libya Başbakan'ı Dibebe'nin ticari ilişkilere katkısından ümitli*, Karanfil Group, 8 February 2021 [online](#): (accessed 4 March 2021) .

45 Polidura, Andrea, 'Turkey and Libya renew controversial maritime agreement', *Atalayar*, 13 April 2021, [online](#)

46 Taştekin, Fehim, Berlin'den sonra: Milis gider ben gitmem, *Gazete Duvar*, 24 June 2021, online (accessed 1 July 2021).

47 Based on an interview with Mohamed Eljarh, a researcher and consultant in Tobruk, 4 March 2021.

48 Türkiye'nin 2020 Libya ihracatı 1,6 milyar dolar, Karanfil group, [online](#) and Aslanhan, Uğur, *Afrika'ya açılan kapı Libya'ya ihracat hedefi 10 milyar dolar*, Anadolu Ajansı, 26 December 2019, [online](#) (accessed 8 April 2021) .

49 Karanfil (2021) *op. cit.*

50 Turkey, Libya ink deal to boost trade, economic ties, *Anadolu Agency*, 13 August 2020, [online](#) (accessed 18 March 2021) .

51 Türkiye'nin Libya'daki petrol hamlesi büyük yankı uyandırdı! Türkiye'nin yakıt ihtiyacını karşılar, *Sabah*, 11 June 2020, [online](#) (accessed 18 March 2021).

52 'Turkey delineates 7 blocks in East Med under Libya pact, drilling to start in 3-4 months', *Daily Sabah*, 8 June 2020, [online](#) (accessed 18 March 2021)

53 'Turkish-Libyan Economic Forum begins in Istanbul', *Libyaobserver*, 15 October 2020, [online](#) (accessed 18 March 2021).

54 Çakır, *op.cit.*

shores from African migrants.<sup>55</sup> Nevertheless, once the GNA and LNA went into battle, Rome pursued a policy of ‘equidistance’ to the warring sides.<sup>56</sup> On the other hand, France supported the LNA with political and military means, effectively opposing Turkish policy in Libya. On top of this, Germany pursued a middle-ground through diplomatic initiatives, such as the 2020 Berlin Conference, to promote ‘intra-Libyan reconciliation’ and reduce the influence of international actors.<sup>57</sup>

Regardless of its internal divisions, the EU nevertheless views Turkey’s military intervention in Libya as unilateral and as undermining its own interests – including in the area of security – for several reasons:<sup>58</sup>

- The EU objects to Turkey’s deployment of military forces and mercenaries on the ground in that it further internationalises the conflict. In response, Ankara has argued that the Turkish military operations took place at the request of the UN-recognised GNA and have opened the door for political dialogue.<sup>59</sup>
- Ankara’s steady criticism of the EU’s naval operation, IRINI,<sup>60</sup> is viewed in

Brussels as undermining EU efforts to implement the UN-mandated arms embargo. Nevertheless, Ankara’s objectives have relative merit since, at best, IRINI represents a partial enforcement mechanism of UN sanctions since it leaves aerial and overland supply lines untouched. As it happens, the LNA benefits mostly from air/land supply whereas the GNA (and Turkey) depends more on maritime supply lines.<sup>61</sup> In protest, the Turkish navy has occasionally attempted to prevent Operation IRINI from checking Turkish ships.<sup>62</sup> This has led to diplomatic and military confrontations between the EU and Turkey.

- The EU views the Turkish-GNA maritime deal and Turkey’s subsequent exploration activities as provocative and dismissive of Greece’s rights.<sup>63</sup> For its part, Turkey considers the EU as both biased and incompetent in resolving its maritime delimitation issues with Greece and Cyprus.<sup>64</sup>

As a result of these factors, France, in particular, has adopted an adversarial attitude towards Turkey’s role in Libya while also siding with Greece to keep

55 Megerisi, Tarek and Varvelli, Arturo, *Italy’s chance in Libya*, European Council on Foreign Relations, European Council on Foreign Relations, 16 June 2021, [online](#) (accessed 23 March 2021).

56 ‘Turkey’s Intervention in Libya: Determinants and Challenges’, *Emirates Policy Center*, August 2020, [online](#) (accessed 2 March 2021).

57 Berlin Libya conference: A first step toward peace?, *DW*, 19 January 2020, [online](#) (accessed 21 March 2021).

58 European Commission, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Joint Communication to the European Council: State of Play of EU-Turkey political, economic and trade relations, 22 March 2021, [online](#) (accessed 25 March 2021).

59 Canlı, Enes, Ankara ve Trablus arasındaki mutabakat muhtıraları Libya’nın kaderini değiştirdi, *Anadolu Ajansı*, 26 November 2021, online (accessed 8 June 2021).

60 IRINI exists to enforce the UN arms embargo to Libya in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 2292. Operation IRINI, see: [online](#) (accessed 29 March 2021).

61 Rodriguez, Ana, *Turkey raises suspects in the Mediterranean by preventing Operation Irini from inspecting a cargo ship*, Atalayar, 12 June 2020, [online](#) and Güler, Sena, *Turkey decries illegal search of vessel by EU mission*, Anadolu Agency, 23 November 2020, [online](#) (accessed 18 March 2021).

62 See European Union Statement in 12 June 2020, [online](#) (accessed 18 March 2021).

63 Turkey’s acts in the eastern Mediterranean have also been regarded as provocative and contrary to international law and NATO commitments by the US. See: ‘U.S. says Turkey violated international law, NATO commitments in Mediterranean’, *Ahval News*, 11 March 2021, [online](#) (accessed 18 March 2021).

64 Bakan Çavuşoğlu: Sorunları AB değil, sadece Türkiye ve Yunanistan çözebilir, *TRT Haber*, 30 May 2021, online (accessed 23 June 2021); It is worth noting that NATO created a de-confliction mechanism between its member states in October 2020. See: ‘Military de-confliction mechanism between Greece and Turkey established at NATO’, [online](#) (accessed 22 June 2021).

Turkish ambitions in the Mediterranean in check.<sup>65</sup> The standoff between Turkey and the Franco-Greek bloc within the EU has produced a negative frame for discussion in German-led reconciliation efforts. Overall, the EU wishes to see a more collaborative and constructive stance from Turkey in Libya by, for example, accepting a swift transfer of power to the new Libyan authorities, promoting reconciliation/reunification by engaging with both major Libyan parties, and supporting the UNSMIL-facilitated political processes (including full implementation of the ceasefire and acceptance of operation IRINI).<sup>66</sup>

## Recommendations

On the basis of the preceding analysis of Turkey's motivations, methods and results of its intervention in Libya, the question arises as to how the EU should engage with Ankara given its own interests. The EU's interests amount to a desire for greater stability based on UN-led political dialogue and a ceasefire that works towards the re-establishment of national governance and security institutions as a foundation for nationwide reconstruction. Important to note in the context of this brief is that participants in the second Berlin summit on Libya on 23 June 2021, including the EU, concluded that the withdrawal of all foreign forces and mercenaries from Libyan soil is one of the preconditions for creating greater stability in the country (Turkey introduced a reservation on the 'foreign forces' part of the conference statement).<sup>67</sup>

The EU's underlying assumption is that a more stable and more prosperous Libya will produce fewer negative externalities such as refugees, extremists and/or transnational crime. Apart from its internal divisions, the

challenge for the EU is the fact that – except for its naval operation, IRINI<sup>68</sup> – it has few levers to pull as Libya itself is oil rich, while both Turkey and Russia benefit from having an established military presence onshore.<sup>69</sup> Nevertheless, the EU could consider the following actions:

- *Advocate for the authorisation of an international, UNSC-mandated peacekeeping force* to help the emergent Libyan authorities stabilise the current ceasefire and to accompany them during a 'transitional decade' in which security institutions, armed groups, commands and personnel are slowly (re-)integrated in a negotiated process of which the foreign sponsors of Libya's warring sides are also part. Such an international force would need to consist of European, Turkish and Russian contingents at a minimum, with forces rotating across strategic sites to delink presence from control.<sup>70</sup>

65 Irish, John and Penetier Marine, 'France "will not tolerate" Turkey's role in Libya, Macron says', *Reuters*, 22 June 2020, online. (accessed 8 June 2021).

66 *Ibid.*

67 German Federal Foreign Office, The Second Berlin Conference on Libya, 23 June 2021, [online](#) (accessed 1 July 2021).

68 Despite Mr. Borrell's stated preference, the likelihood of expanding IRINI's mandate to tasks related to the implementation of the ceasefire is low because of the need for a UNSC mandate and Russia's veto power. Operation Irini: Speech by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell at the Sigonella Naval Air Station Airport, 19 March 2021, [online](#) and Borrell (2021) *op. cit.* Burchard, Hans von Der, *Borrell suggests EU military mission to protect cease-fire in Libya*, Politico, 18 January 2020, [online](#) (both accessed 18 March 2021).

69 Harchoui, Jalel, SANA Expert Briefing series—Webinar 3: Libya—Where Do We Stand and What Is Next?, 1 June 2021, online (accessed 8 June 2021).

70 Currently, the Joint Military Committee (composed of five GNA and five LNA representatives) is responsible for implementing the ceasefire. The UN mission has only a limited monitoring role. In this construction, the sustainability of the ceasefire depends on the ability of the opposing parties – GNA and LNA – to deter each other. In practice, it ensures that each side maintains its supporting foreign forces. What is needed instead, is a more intrusive UN peacekeeping presence that guarantees the ceasefire so that foreign forces can leave without jeopardising the position of one of the opposing camps. On the current mechanism: German Federal Foreign Office (2021), *op.cit.*

- *Increase diplomatic, economic and humanitarian engagement<sup>71</sup> with Tripoli and Benghazi*, based on the logic that the EU is ultimately Libya's closest and most powerful neighbour and able to offer positive long-term economic, educational and trade relations based on the size of its internal market. If enough Libyan politicians view an international troop presence as more conducive to their interests than a bilateral Turkish military presence or a Russian military (mercenary) presence, pressure might increase to reduce bilateral influences.
- *Support the gradual rebuilding of Libyan security institutions* in a manner that allows for decentralised security provision in reflection of Libya's complex security landscape, professionalises new security forces, and incentivises armed groups to cooperate with such new security structures under increasingly centralised control.<sup>72</sup> To do so, European countries and/or institutions keen to engage could launch a large-scale, multi-year SSR institution-building mission under either the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy, with a role for the recently-established European Peace Facility, or under NATO's Defence and Related Security Capacity Building initiative, contingent on the agreement of Libya's authorities.<sup>73</sup>

Together, such initiatives could put the EU back on the map in Libya in a manner that is reasonably compatible with Turkish political interests. While Ankara's military presence would need to take a step back, it could maintain its politico-economic influence in a

broader UN or NATO framework that has the advantage of also moderating Russian, UAE and Egyptian influences. As a conciliatory gesture of goodwill to Turkey, the EU could push ahead more firmly with its intention to hold an eastern Mediterranean conference<sup>74</sup> that includes Turkey or, alternatively, facilitate an invite to Ankara to join the EastMed Gas Forum.

---

71 Zaptia, Sami, 'EU reopens its mission in Tripoli', *Libya Herald*, 17 May 2021, online (accessed 8 June 2021).

72 Shadeedi, Van Veen and Harchaoui, *op. cit.*, p.4.

73 Council of the European Union, EU sets up the European Peace Facility, 22 March 2021, online and Defence and Related Security Capacity Building Initiative, NATO, 9 June 2021, online (accessed 21 June 2021); Emmott, Robin and Stewart, Phil, 'Libya sends new request for military training to NATO', *Reuters*, 16 February 2017, online (accessed 1 July 2021).

---

74 European Commission, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Joint Communication to the European Council: State of Play of EU-Turkey political, economic and trade relations, 22 March 2021, [online](#) (accessed 25 March 2021).

### About the Clingendael Institute

Clingendael – the Netherlands Institute of International Relations – is a leading think tank and academy on international affairs. Through our analyses, training and public debate we aim to inspire and equip governments, businesses, and civil society in order to contribute to a secure, sustainable and just world.

[www.clingendael.org/cru](http://www.clingendael.org/cru)  
[cru@clingendael.org](mailto:cru@clingendael.org)  
+31 70 324 53 84

 @clingendaelorg  
 The Clingendael Institute  
 The Clingendael Institute  
 clingendael\_institute  
 Clingendael Institute  
 Newsletter

### About the author

**Engin Yüksel** is a research associate at Clingendael's Conflict Research Unit who focuses on Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East. He is also a PhD candidate at the University of Leiden where he researches Russia's historical and contemporary approaches to warfare.