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Turkey Turns the Tide in Libya – For Now

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Turkey's military intervention in Libya has recently enabled a series of victories for the internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA), to the detriment of Khalifa Haftar and his backers in Cairo, Abu Dhabi, and Moscow. The reversal of fortune for the GNA, which over the weekend forced Haftar to propose a ceasefire, marks a major shift in the trajectory of the Libyan civil war and will likely cement Turkey's role as a key arbiter in the ultimate resolution of the conflict. Should the recent developments prove durable, Turkey will exert significant influence in the North African country, enabling Ankara to project power across the Eastern Mediterranean region and further challenge Israeli interests in the region, along with those of Israel's Egyptian, Cypriot, and Greek partners.

In recent weeks, Turkish-backed forces in western Libya aligned with the internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli recaptured several key towns and military bases formerly held by Khalifa Haftar and his self-styled Libyan National Army. The rapid succession of victories for the GNA, which over the weekend prompted Haftar to propose a ceasefire and a resumption of negotiations, marks a significant reversal in the trajectory of the Libyan civil war, whose latest round began just over a year ago (April 2019) when Haftar launched an offensive aimed at capturing the capital and extending his control over the entire country. Whether the shift proves temporary or ushers in a more permanent rebalancing of forces remains to be seen, but in the meantime the latest developments suggest that Turkey is emerging as a key arbiter in the Libyan conflict and could ultimately exert additional regional influence from the perch of the besieged North African country. To the extent Turkey's intervention elicits heavier Russian involvement in the Libyan arena – as evidenced in recent days by Russia's deployment of fighter jets to assist Haftar's forces – developments on the ground could also ultimately draw in greater American engagement. Thus, while for now Turkey has managed to turn the tide in the Libyan war, the implications of Ankara's recent successes will likely extend far beyond Tripoli's shores.

Turkey's ability to maintain a durable presence in Libya signals its dominance among the outside powers seeking to influence the sparsely populated but oil-rich nation since longtime dictator Muammar Ghaddafi was ousted in 2011 as part of the regional

upheaval in the so-called Arab Spring. An initially promising political transition crumbled beneath the weight of tribal, geographic, and ideological divisions, and in the civil war that erupted in 2014, a loose alliance of western militias (some of which were affiliated with Islamist movements) drew support from Qatar, Sudan, and Turkey while an eastern amalgam of forces nominally under Haftar's control received assistance from Russia, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. In 2015, a UN-brokered agreement formally established the GNA as the country's sole legitimate representative, but it largely left unresolved the matter of Haftar's role, and an eastern-based government supportive of Haftar ultimately withdrew its recognition of the GNA.

In the ensuing years, as the UN continued to hold various unsuccessful rounds of negotiations, the original constellation of outside actors funneling money and weaponry to rival groups within Libya (in violation of a UN arms embargo) underwent certain modifications. Turkish and Qatari involvement receded somewhat after 2015; France and Jordan threw their support behind Haftar while Italy backed the GNA; and whereas Sudan, beset by its own uprising in 2019, withdrew its support for Islamists, Sudanese mercenaries have more recently been fighting alongside Haftar's forces. For its part, the United States has remained largely absent from the Libyan scene since 2012, when its ambassador was killed by militants affiliated with the terrorist group Ansar al-Sharia. Ongoing interference of outside actors has long been blamed for hindering negotiations. Just as UN-sponsored talks appeared to be headed for a breakthrough in early 2019, Haftar launched a surprise attack to subdue a largely ungoverned south, wrest control of Tripoli from the GNA, and firmly establish his hegemony over the country.

He appeared to be on a steady, if slow, march toward achieving those goals, assisted by an estimated 800-1000 Russian mercenaries from the Wagner Group and hundreds of Emirati drone and jet strikes launched from Egyptian territory. Then in November 2019, Turkey and the GNA signed a military memorandum of understanding. Contrary to other outside actors operating covertly in Libya, the Turkish Parliament openly voted to approve a one-year mandate for military assistance to the GNA, and in January 2020 Turkey declared it was deploying troops in the country. Since then, it has also employed a growing number of mercenaries from Syria to fight in Libya; estimates are of at least one hundred Turkish officers coordinating the GNA military campaigns alongside thousands of Syrian mercenaries. Over the last several months, Ankara has also used its navy and air force to assist the GNA, and the most notable effect in bolstering the GNA's military efforts has come from the use of its drones over Libya. In parallel to the November 2019 military agreement, Turkey and the GNA signed a maritime delimitation agreement, which was roundly rejected by Haftar, along with the governments of Greece, Egypt, Cyprus, and France. The European Council likewise denounced the agreement for violating the UN Law of the Sea. Israel's then-Foreign Minister Israel Katz said in

December 2019 that while Israel opposes the accord, “that doesn’t mean we are sending battleships to confront Turkey.”

Turkey’s efforts to assist the GNA should be understood in the broader regional context. Turkey’s growing sense of isolation in the Eastern Mediterranean, as well as its tense relations with the UAE, propelled Ankara to raise the stakes in Libya. Its relationship with the GNA, and the maritime delimitation agreement in particular, will obstruct plans to build the EastMed pipeline, which was slated to export natural gas from Israel through Cyprus and Greece and on to Europe. Had Haftar, with the support of the UAE and Egypt, managed to take Tripoli, the achievement would have marked a major victory for countries staunchly opposed to Turkey. In this respect, Ankara does not need a full reversal of Haftar’s military achievements – even a partial halt to his designs fulfils its goals. Following the recent defeats of Haftar’s forces, there were already reports that Wagner mercenaries had retreated from the battleground in Tripoli, a development that undoubtedly pleases Ankara. Still, in response to Haftar’s setbacks, Russia reportedly deployed MiG29 fighter jets and SU-24 fighter bombers to Libya’s al-Jufra air base, drawing a rare, pointed rebuke by the US Africa Command and prompting reports the US may deploy a small brigade in Tunisia. Should the GNA ultimately gain control of Libya’s oil facilities (which remain largely under Haftar’s forces), Turkey would reap substantial economic benefits as it lacks energy resources of its own and would likely secure lucrative contracts for Turkish companies to assist in Libya’s reconstruction. Last month, Turkish Minister of Energy and Natural Resources Fatih Donmez said Turkey may start oil exploration in the Eastern Mediterranean in three or four months, “within the framework of the agreement reached with Libya.” It also appears that Turkey may have long term plans to stay in the strategic al-Watiya airbase captured from Haftar’s forces.

The success of Turkey’s latest gambit is by no means a foregone conclusion, given the myriad twists and turns of Libya’s post-2011 trajectory, and the possibility that pandemic-related economic woes could force Ankara to temper its ambitions. Still, while developments in Libya do not usually bear directly on Israel, an established Turkish presence in the North African country warrants close attention from policymakers in Jerusalem, not only because it would affect Libya’s internal dynamics (e.g., by significantly weakening Haftar and likely guaranteeing a seat at the political table for certain Islamist groups), but also as it would also carry significant regional implications by weakening the evolving Greece-Cyprus-Egypt-Israel camp. Israel was notably absent from a joint declaration of May 11 by the foreign ministers of Cyprus, Egypt, France, Greece, and the UAE denouncing Turkey’s interference in Libya, a silence reflecting Jerusalem’s dilemma concerning potential involvement in the Libyan proxy war. Given that Israel’s ties with Turkey have been highly problematic and relations with Russia

remain delicate, Jerusalem needs to prepare for the possibility of a continuing and even growing regional influence of both, especially in light of Washington's continued reluctance to assume a more active diplomatic or military role.