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Turkish Intervention in Libya

Background

At the very beginning of 2020, the Turkish Grand National Assembly approved Turkey's military intervention to the Second Libyan Civil War. [The legislation](#) was passed on the 2 January and the deployment of troops started on 5 January. Even though, at first glance, Turkish intervention seems quite odd considering Turkey's geographical position and regional dynamics, it is in line with Turkey's foreign policy transformations under the Justice and Development Party (JDP) period since 2002 as well as the political desires of the Turkish President Erdogan. Rather than being an adventurous move, it was actually a calculated act to maximize Turkey's political and economic interests in Libya and the wider MENA region. For instance, this intervention meant economic gains for Turkey as it has been [selling weapons](#) to the UN-backed Libyan government. As a result of this military engagement, Turkey will also be able to become a more active agent in [oil and gas deals](#) in Libya.

Another important trend is Turkey [gradually withdrawing from international cooperation](#) and resorting to a new juxtaposition of civilizations by synthesizing nationalism with nostalgic visions of history, memory, and religion. This transformation has been eventuating under the control of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his unofficial coalition partners, Islamists, nationalists and Eurasianists. Even though this unofficial power coalition seems quite unconventional, they are the main components of Turkey's current ethno-religious and military-oriented foreign policy and Turkey's activities in Libya.

Discussion

In the beginning of 2021, Turkey argued that its military intervention in Libya was compatible with international law and order, and that it aims to help stabilise the divided country. Turkey has therefore been supporting Tripoli-based Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj who has close ties with the Muslim Brotherhood. Turkey has been aiming at three different things with its engagement in this conflict: a) to enhance its security measures and impact as a part of Eurasianists' very disputable [Blue Homeland Doctrine](#) which defines Turkey's maritime claims in the Eastern Mediterranean area; b) to extend its competition with Egypt and Saudi Arabia in the region and indirectly assist the [Muslim Brotherhood](#) - which also helps Turkey to create an image as the leader of the Global

Ummah; and finally, c) to establish a new front in order to compete with France regarding both countries' neo-imperial desires.

In late November 2019, Turkey and Libya's UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) signed a disputable agreement regarding military cooperation and after that, directly and indirectly, Turkey has started to support the pro-Muslim Brotherhood Fayed al-Sarraj government against British, French, US and United Arab Emirates supported Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar. According to the current situation it seems that Turkey's intervention has proven decisive in the Libyan conflict, enabling the al-Sarraj government to re-establish control over key Libyan territories. The reality of this story is, however, far more complicated and it is related to both Turkey's domestic political dynamics, and new foreign policy vision.

Since the attempted coup on 15 July 2016 in Turkey, the Justice and Development Party crafted an alliance with the [Eurasianist wing](#) of the state, which desires the severing of Turkey's ties with Western powers and the reorientation along an axis of Russia and China. This wing also aims to make Turkey a dominant actor in the Eastern Mediterranean. According to them, if Turkey wants to reach that aim, then it should establish its own alliance in the region since other actors such as Egypt, Greece and Israel are acting against Turkey's economic and strategical priorities. Therefore, Turkey has been trying to challenge these countries and their leverage in the region by creating its unique agreement with the al-Sarraj government in Libya.

For a long while, Turkey's Erdogan regime has been conducting an ethnically nationalist and Islamist approach in domestic politics and the regime began to descend into a state of belligerence with the West in its foreign policy endeavours. In line with this policy shift, Turkey has indirectly started to support [Muslim Brotherhood](#) affiliated groups and political actors around the world. This new policy approach placed the Erdogan regime in a new competition with Egypt, United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. In this regard, it is known that Turkey has been supplying modern drones, air defences with advisers and also brought some [Syrian opposition fighters](#) to Libya. The Turkish military support appears to have changed the balance of power in the Libyan civil war.

Another important driver of Turkey's involvement is directly related to its [aggressive Neo-Ottoman approach](#) in its foreign policy. Since the reign of former foreign minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, Turkey has been implementing [a new version of the neo-Ottoman approach](#) in its foreign policy. Davutoğlu suggested that the core issue for the Islamic policy seems to be the reinterpretation of its political tradition and theory as an alternative world-system rather than merely as a programme for the Islamisation of nation-states. Davutoğlu believes that governments in the Islamic world cannot derive their legitimacy from the same sources as Western states, such as elections and representative institutions, but must instead have a religious foundation. According to his reading, the Ottoman Empire collapsed due to its separation from the Muslim majority in the Middle East and North Africa. Therefore, if Turkey wants to be one of the leading actors in the region, then it should be active in every single corner. Turkey has partially followed Davutoğlu's ideas in its foreign policy decisions until his dismissal from the party, but some of his policy visions remained intact. It was no coincidence that Erdogan [referred to the Ottoman legacy](#) when he claimed Turkey has a legitimate stake in Libya.

These ideals look good on paper, but in practice these ambitions bring more diplomatic tensions with the West. Given contemporary political dynamics for instance, being active in North Africa also means another [struggle with France](#) who is the neo-imperial component for the region. In this regard, it is obvious that Libya has become one of the main battlegrounds in Turkey and France's clash of strategic interests and beyond that, it has become another example of how former empires have been revitalizing former rivalries in the age of uncertainties.

Conclusion

Due to Turkey's military and strategic support, the Tripoli-based Fayed al-Sarraj government has managed to survive against Haftar and his Tobruk-based Libyan National Army. Turkey's relatively unexpected activities and intervention have changed the balance of power in the country and also the future of Libya. But beyond that,

this intervention was also important for Turkey's positionality in the Eastern Mediterranean and for its new diplomatic games with Western powers. Turkey's appearance as a potent actor in MENA politics also strengthened the image of its leader and the ruling party in the eyes of their supporters. Therefore, it can be said that Turkey's transformative activities in Libya are not only related to the region's geopolitical setting or Turkey's foreign policy strategies *per se*, but it is also a reflection of Turkey's own domestic political transformations and its foreign policy desires.

Recommended Reading

- Murinson, A. (2006). The strategic depth doctrine of Turkish foreign policy. *Middle Eastern Studies*, 42(6), 945-964.
- Quamar, M. (2020). Turkey and the Regional Flashpoint in Libya. *Strategic Analysis*, 1-6.
- Joffé, G. (2020). Libya: the new geopolitical arena. *The Journal of North African Studies*, 25(5), 681-688.
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