Turkey Wades into Libya's Troubled Waters

April 2020

Pluralism, Human Security & Sustainability Centre
Centre du pluralisme, de la sécurité humaine et du développement durable

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Principal Findings

What's new? In January, Turkey stepped up military support to Libya's UN-backed government of Prime Minister Faiez Serraj, stalling an offensive by forces allied with Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar. Its foray, underpinned by its own strategic, political and economic interests, has further complicated the already multi-layered Libyan crisis.

Why does it matter? Turkey's intervention has neither de-escalated the conflict nor yielded productive negotiations between rival political and military factions. It has instead exposed a different risk: the more outside actors provide military hardware and fighters to their respective Libyan allies, the longer the conflict may last and the deadlier it may become.

Executive Summary

By intervening militarily in the Libyan conflict in January, Turkey helped forces aligned with the UN-backed Tripoli government of Prime Minister Faiez Serraj stand their ground against an offensive by a coalition headed by Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar. From Ankara's perspective, supporting the Tripoli government is necessary to confront an arc of inimical forces bent on containing Turkey's strategic and economic influence in the Mediterranean and broader Middle East. Haftar's foreign backers likewise see Libya as a key geopolitical battleground and have shown no hesitation to escalate. While Ankara deems its intervention worthwhile as long as it prevents Tripoli's takeover, the costs may rise if as a result the conflict becomes more prolonged and deadly. It will be interesting to see if both Turkey's and Haftar's external backers conclude that their interest lies in exploring areas of mutual accommodation, working toward a ceasefire, and finding ways to bring their respective Libyan allies around the table to pursue a compromise that would also meet some of their own core needs.

After six months of stalemated war in the Tripoli outskirts, Haftar-aligned forces started to slowly advance toward the city centre in November 2019 in a push to remove the Serraj government and disarm forces allied with it. Alarmed by this development, officials in Ankara calculated that, by balancing Haftar's military power on the ground, they could create conditions for a ceasefire and negotiated political solution to the Libyan crisis. Starting in January, Turkey reportedly sent around 100 officers and at least 2,000 allied Syrian opposition fighters to Libya, as well as aerial defence and other weapon systems.

Ankara's actions in Libya are also motivated by larger goals. From Turkey's per-spective, Libya intersects with two hostile axes that Ankara must confront. The first is a perceived campaign by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Egypt (and to a lesser extent Saudi Arabia) to contain Turkish influence across the Middle East and North Africa. The second is what Turkey sees as an effort by Greece and Cyprus (and, by extension, the EU), as well as Israel, to box it into a small corner of the Mediterranean Sea and thus exclude it from hydrocarbon projects that could also be geopolitically significant. From Ankara's perspective, its Libya policy is closely in-tertwined with its desire to break through such imposed barriers.

Turkey is not alone, of course, in viewing Libya through the prism of strategic in-terests. In doing so, it joins a host of other countries – including the UAE, Egypt, and Russia, which are backing Haftar, and Qatar, which backs the Tripoli govern-ment.

Publicly, Western countries have criticised Turkish actions, including its violation of the UN arms embargo on Libya. But the same Western governments (with the exception of France) have also expressed tacit sympathy. They, too, want to prevent the Serraj government's collapse. And they, too, hope that Turkey's direct involve-ment to bolster the government will first stop Haftar's offensive and then compel him to negotiate. Diplomatic initiatives in January, in Moscow and then in Berlin, provided a glimmer of hope that negotiations would indeed begin, but these initi-atives faltered, and the resignation of UN Special Representative to Libya Ghassan Salamé further undermined chances of reviving them.

Turkish intervention slowed the advance of Haftar's forces, allowing the Tripoli government's forces to regain some of the territory they lost when the war broke

out in April 2019. But it did not halt the war. Haftar's coalition condemned Ankara's actions and recast its own efforts as a war against what it terms "the Turkish occupation". It intensified artillery attacks on Tripoli's port and airport, on the grounds that Turkish officers have been using these sites. At least two Turkish army officers and several dozen pro-Turkey Syrian fighters have been killed, although exact numbers are not available. Meanwhile, pro-government forces lost Sirte, the site of a military base in central Libya that has become an important staging ground for Haftar's forces. Finally, and crucially, Haftar-allied tribal groups shut down the country's oil production and all hydrocarbon exports in January, saying they did not want to see Libya's oil revenues used to pay for Turkish and Turkey-backed forces. This shutdown has cut off the funds that were keeping the Tripoli government afloat.

By intervening, Turkey has further enmeshed itself in an escalating conflict with a complex mix of players and stakeholders. As Ankara's allies in Tripoli attempt counterattacks against pro-Haftar strongholds in other parts of the country, Turkey risks being dragged into a war well beyond what it originally signed up for. Further escalation is a distinct risk and could both backfire for Turkey and come at the expense of Libyans at large.

Neither Turkey nor any of Haftar's foreign backers is likely to make one-sided concessions. The choice is between further escalation and a search for mutual accommodation that paves the way for peace among their Libyan allies while meeting as much as possible their own interests.

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I. Introduction

Turkey's 2 January 2020 decision to intervene openly in Libya to support the UN-recognised, Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA) of Prime Minister Faiez Serraj did not come out of the blue. Turkey had covertly been providing armoured personnel carriers and drones to the government since April 2019, when Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar launched his offensive on the Libyan capital.[1] In November 2019, it signed two security and maritime memoranda of understanding with Tripoli. By moving to open military support, Turkey raised the level of its involvement in the Libyan crisis significantly in an effort to slow the advance of Haftar's military coalition, the Arab-Libyan Armed Forces. Authorities in Tripoli welcomed Turkey's military support as a "life jacket" that has saved them from drowning.[2]

Since January, Ankara has deployed at least one hundred Turkish military officers to help the Serraj government coordinate its war efforts, and transferred shiploads of weapons, military equipment and aerial defences to Tripoli and nearby Misrata. It has used its warships stationed off the Libyan coast as launching pads for missile strikes against Haftar's forces and sent its jets flying through Libyan skies. And it has deployed a contingent of at least 2,000 fighters of the Syrian National Army, a Turkish-backed Syrian rebel group, to support militias loyal to the Tripoli government.[3]

If the conflict escalates further, Turkey risks overstretch. It is simultaneously militarily involved in northern Syria against the People's Protection Units (YPG) – which is linked to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) – as well as against Russian-backed Syrian government forces.[4]

[1] During the war's first six months, Turkish covert military support for pro-government forces consisted mainly of BMC Kirpi armed personnel carriers and Bayraktar TB2 combat drones, both pieces of equipment manufactured in Turkey. For details, see "Letter dated 29 November 2019 from the Panel of Experts on Libya established pursuant to resolution 1973 (2011) addressed to the President of the Security Council", S2019/914 (henceforth UN Panel of Experts report 2019), 9 December 2019, annex 27. Provision of war materiel to Libya, be it by Turkey or other states, is a violation of the UN arms embargo on Libya imposed in 2011 through UN Security Council Resolution 1970. For an analysis of the start of the April 2019 offensive, see Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°69, *Stopping the War for Tripoli*, 23 May 2019.

[2] Deputy Prime Minister Ahmed Maiteeq quoted in "Lack of U.S. support left desperate Libya to accept aid from Syrian extremists, official says", *Washington Times*, 15 February 2020.

[3] A few hundred Syrian fighters alighted in Tripoli in late December 2019, but the majority arrived only after Turkey's January decision to intervene militarily. On estimates of their numbers, see fn 93.

[4] See Crisis Group Conflict Alert, "The Eleventh Hour for Idlib, Syria's Last Rebel Bastion", 7 February 2020. Turkey considers the YPG an extension of the PKK, which has carried out a decades-long insurgency against the Turkish state; Turkey, the U.S. and EU designate the PKK as a terrorist organisation.

Turkey is not the first foreign power to intervene in the Libyan conflict, which has already killed over 2,000 people since April 2019, but it is the first to do so openly.[5] Turkey's sometime partner Russia has covertly supported Haftar, as have the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Egypt, Turkey's foes.[6] These countries are backing Haftar mainly to achieve long-term strategic objectives that transcend Libya. For Haftar's backers in the Gulf, these aims include curbing the role of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist groups that they classify as terrorist. They also include support for like-minded governments that take a firm hand in suppressing Islamist opposition movements. For Russia, they mean establishing itself as a powerful regional player, pushing back against the tumult caused by the 2011 Arab uprisings and getting economic rewards for its trouble. Conversely, for other backers of the anti-Haftar camp, such as Qatar, these goals entail preventing the fall of the Tripoli government and the consequent emergence of a new power structure allied with Doha's regional foes.

This report lays out Turkey's motivations for militarily backing the Libyan government against the Haftar-led offensive and analyses that support's effects on both the battlefield and the diplomatic front, assessing prospects for de-escalation. It argues that Turkey's military intervention and deployment of Syrian fighters to Libya has had the short-term result of bolstering government forces in the capital, but that there is no end in sight for the military escalation. The report is based on dozens of interviews with Turkish and Libyan officials and experts, as well as representatives of Western and Arab governments.

[5] Turkey's intervention represents its first direct military action in North Africa since Ottoman troops left the former Tarablus al-Gharb province (Western Tripoli) at the end of World War I. Mehmed Mazlum Çelik, "Türk ordusu 108 yıl sonra Enver Paşa'nın izinde Trablus-ı Garp yolunda" [Following in Enver Paşa's footsteps, the Turkish army is in Tripoli again after 108 years], *Independent Turkish*, 21 December 2019.

[6] To supplement their own aviation, Haftar's forces relied on UAE-supplied Chinese Wing Loong II combat drones throughout the Tripoli siege; these are based at the Jufra air base in central Libya and, at least until late 2019, were allegedly operated by Emirati pilots stationed there. Crisis Group interviews, government military officers, Tripoli, May-September 2019; and Western diplomat, Abu Dhabi, September 2019. See also UN Panel of Experts Report (2019), annex 28. According to the UN, Haftar's forces have carried out "some 850 precision air strikes by drone and another 170 by fighter-bomber, among them some 60 precision air strikes by foreign fighter aircraft" since the outbreak of hostilities. Report of the UN Secretary-General (S/2020/41), 15 January 2020. The UAE's exact role in Libya is difficult to ascertain. An Emirati official summarised his country's position as follows: "The UAE's main goal in Libya is stability. We are also focused on foreign fighters and fighting terrorist organisations. We do not want to see a capital like Tripoli controlled by militias. To achieve these goals, the UAE fully supports UN efforts to bring the warring sides together to secure a ceasefire and a political process. The UAE fully supports the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) and the outcomes of the Berlin summit. We do not have any troops on the ground in Libya. As for Haftar, we can communicate with him, but we do not control his behaviour". Crisis Group interview, UAE official, April 2020. Egyptian officials express similar views with regard to their aspired end state in Libya and echo the claim that they do not control Haftar's moves. Egypt reportedly initially opposed Haftar's plan to launch an attack on Tripoli. But once the offensive began, officials in Cairo admit, they lent him their support (mainly by allowing transit of military equipment across Egypt's border with Libya). They categorically deny having boots on the ground, however. Crisis Group interviews, Egyptian officials, Cairo, October and December 2019.

II. The View from Ankara: Why Turkey Intervened in Libya

When Turkey decided to intervene in the Libyan conflict, its leadership claimed that the main purpose was to rebalance the situation on the ground and force Haftar to the negotiating table. Yet Ankara's objectives in protecting the Serraj government are also part and parcel of its broader aspirations to safeguard its geopolitical interests in the eastern Mediterranean Sea and preserve a sphere of influence in North Africa. Turkey also has vested economic interests in maintaining an ally in Tripoli.

A. *Protecting the Tripoli Government*

Ankara's decision to intervene in Libya came after slowly advancing Haftar forces, backed by UAE weaponry and Russian private military contractors, started to seriously threaten the Tripoli government's survival by November 2019. Ankara's covert support of the government since the outbreak of hostilities in April 2019 was not enough to turn the tide.[7] Officials in Ankara say it was these "realities on the ground" and the Serraj government's official request for help that led to their decision to intervene.[8] It appears that Turkey and the Serraj government agreed on the formal request to ensure legal cover for Turkish aid. Once Turkey guaranteed it would intervene, Serraj issued the request for help to not just Turkey but four other states as well.[9]

Domestically, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan relied on two complementary narratives to justify Turkey's intervention in defence of the Tripoli government. One concerns Ottoman imperial history and what are ostensibly hundreds of thousands of Libyans of Ottoman ancestry, by now completely Arabised, whom the president vowed to defend.[10] The other is about legitimacy. Erdoğan has described

[7] The number of Russian private security contractors on the ground in Libya is a source of debate, as is their role in the fighting. Some Western diplomats and Tripoli government officials contend that more than 1,000 Russians are embedded with Haftar's forces and participating in front-line combat. A U.S. diplomat speaking in March 2020 alleged that some 3,000 Russians were on the ground in Libya. Crisis Group telephone interviews, Western diplomats, government officials and government-aligned military officers, Tunis, Tripoli, Misrata, December 2019; U.S. diplomat, Washington, March 2020. Haftar supporters claim that the number of Russian contractors never exceeded a few hundred and that their role was mainly airplane maintenance and operating aerial defences. Crisis Group interviews, Haftar supporters, Tripoli, Benghazi, December 2019. Moscow has denied any direct role in the deployment of Russian fighters to Libya. "Putin says he hasn't sent Russian mercenaries to Libya", Bloomberg, 11 January 2020.

[8] A Turkish foreign ministry official said: "Haftar was about to gain ground with the help of Russian mercenaries". Crisis Group interview, Ankara, February 2020.

[9] Crisis Group interviews, Western diplomats, Tripoli, Rome, January-February 2020.

[10] In a 14 January speech at a Justice and Development (AK) Party parliamentary group meeting, Erdoğan underscored the Ottoman link to Libya: "In Libya, there are Köroğlu Turks remaining from the Ottomans, whose number exceeds one million; they are descendants of Barbarossa and Dragut, and they are being subjected to ethnic cleansing. Haftar is bent on destroying them, too. As is the case across North Africa, in Libya, too, one of our main duties is to protect the grandchildren of our ancestors". AA Haber, 14 January 2020. (Crisis Group translation from Turkish.) Barbarossa and Dragut are 16th-century Ottoman admirals who ruled over Tripoli. The Libyans

Haftar as "a putschist" and termed his attack on Tripoli "a coup attempt", backed by various foreign powers hostile to Turkey.[11] In enumerating those powers, Erdoğan has pointed the finger primarily at Egypt and the UAE, but also at Israel, Russia, Saudi Arabia and France.[12]

Ankara officialdom also argues that the Libyan public, including even the public and officials in Haftar-controlled eastern Libya, supports Turkey's military action and opposes Haftar. A senior Turkish official said:

> Libyans see that Turkey is their only friend. There are MPs in the east who tell us privately: 'Don't just save the west [of Libya], save us in the east also from Haftar's persecution; we are compelled to publicly appear to support him, but we do not'.[13]

Most importantly, Turkish officials emphasise that their actions in Libya are legitimate and in full compliance with international law. Turkey's special adviser to Libya, Emrullah İşler, explained: "We foresaw there would be criticism [from abroad] of our intervention, so our president told us, 'we will only go to Libya if we are invited'".[14] Prime Minister Serraj made the request on 20 December, calling on the U.S., UK, Italy, Algeria and Turkey, all of which had previously supplied security and anti-terrorism assistance to the Tripoli government, to help fight "foreign mercenaries, armed groups and formations who refuse to recognise the legitimacy

whom Erdoğan refers to as "Köroğlu Turks" are said to be descendants of Ottoman soldiers who settled in Libya starting in the early 16th century. They are also called "Kuloğlu".

[11] In Libya, neither argument has much resonance. Most Libyans, even those from Misrata who can claim a distant Turkish lineage and are most supportive of Turkey's intervention, consider themselves Arab. As for Haftar, his opponents label him "a war criminal" (*mujrim harb*) rather than a putschist.

[12] In one speech, Erdoğan said Haftar "gets support from undemocratic countries like Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE". Quoted in *Diken*, 18 January 2020. In another, he said: "The UAE and Egypt are in the lead. Unfortunately, Saudi Arabia is providing significant support. They are in cahoots with Israel. They are descending on Libya like hungry wolves". "Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: ABD-İran gerginliğinin azaltılması için çok ciddi gayretler gösteriyoruz" [President Erdogan: We are making serious efforts to reduce U.S.-Iranian tension], Directorate of Communications, 5 January 2020. The Turkish president accused others as well, while showing a photo to journalists: "The man in the front is Haftar", he said. "The one in the circle is very close to Mr. Putin. He is the head of Wagner [the Russian private security company]. He manages it. And here is the Russian Minister of Defense Shoigu. Right next to him you see Russian Chief of General Staff Gerasimov. These are currently the top brass of the Russian military. They are now directing Wagner there. They still say, 'we don't have a relationship like that there'. Currently, Russia itself at the highest level is directing the war there". He also said: "those who are with Haftar are obvious. Egypt, the Abu Dhabi administration and, in the same manner, the Saudis and France support Haftar". "Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan, Pakistan ziyareti dönüşü gazetecilerle söyleşi gerçekleştirdi", Directorate of Communications, 15 February 2020.

[13] Crisis Group interview, senior Turkish official, Ankara, February 2020.

[14] Crisis Group interview, Emrullah İşler, special representative of the Turkish president for Libya, Ankara, February 2020. Western diplomats concur that Tripoli directed its letters requesting military support to the U.S., the UK, Italy, Algeria and Turkey on 20 December, only after Serraj had been assured of Turkey's intention to openly support the Tripoli government. They added that Serraj knew from the outset that, aside from Turkey, none of the states would intervene militarily to support the Tripoli-based forces. Crisis Group interviews, Western diplomats, Tripoli, Rome, January-February 2020.

of the state, and threaten security and peace in defiance of state sovereignty".[15] Soon afterward, Turkey formalised its military support to Tripoli: on 21 December, the Turkish parliament approved a security cooperation memorandum of understanding that Erdoğan and Serraj had signed on 27 November.[16] On 30 December, Erdoğan sent a request to parliament to approve sending Turkish armed forces to Libya for a period of one year, which the legislators passed on 2 January.[17]

Ankara argues that, since Turkey responded to an invitation, its support for Tripoli does not constitute an illegal external intervention, thus sidestepping the fact that its supply of weapons and military equipment to the Tripoli government, covert or overt, violates the UN arms embargo. Ankara officials say Turkey is merely bolstering the defensive power of Libya's UN-recognised government, which has the right to self-defence but lacks the capacity. In addition, Erdoğan has frequently underlined the legitimacy of Turkey's intervention, compared to that of others.[18]

Officials in Ankara also lament what they term the hypocrisy of other international actors, such as Russia, the UAE, Egypt and France, which officially recognise the Serraj government but provide military aid and thereby indirect legitimacy to the Haftar camp. As a foreign ministry official put it, "if they support an armed attack against the GNA [the government in Tripoli], they should at least officially announce that they no longer recognise the GNA's authority".[19]

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[15] Assistance request letter signed by Faiez Serraj and directed to a foreign state (not Turkey), undated but shared with Crisis Group on 20 December 2019. The letter also says: "The Libyan state and its people have been subject to brutal aggression and threats by Haftar's rebel groups since last April. These groups are supported by numerous countries and foreign mercenaries, who provide them with weapons and logistical assistance in an illegal way, violating the sovereignty of the Libyan state and UN Security Council resolutions". It adds that Haftar's aggression has allowed "terrorist extremist groups led by ISIS and al-Qaeda" to resume their activities, and concludes: "We ask your support to employ all possible means, according to the requirements that the current circumstances impose, in coordination with the Libyan government and its security and military entities, in order to confront the consequences of this aggression and prevent international security and stability from being put in danger". (Crisis Group translation from Arabic.) See also "Serraj appeals to 'friendly' countries to counter Haftar advance on Tripoli", *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 21 December 2019.

[16] The vote was 269 in favour and 125 against. Not all MPs attended the vote; of those who did, MPs from the ruling alliance, comprised of the AK Party and Nationalist Action Party (MHP), voted in favour, while the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), IYI (Good) Party and People's Democratic Party (HDP) voted against. "Libya ile askeri işbirliği anlaşması kabul edildi" [Agreement on military cooperation with Libya has been ratified], *Gazete Duvar*, 21 December 2019. The text of the proposed law was posted on the parliament's website on 14 December 2019.

[17] Document signed by Erdoğan, Presidency of the Grand National Assembly, 30 December 2019. The 2 January 2020 vote passed with 325 in favour and 184 against. Again, AK Party and MHP MPs voted in favour; CHP, HDP and IYI Party MPs voted against. "Libya tezkeresi Meclis'ten geçti, Genel Kurul'da neler yaşandı?" [The bill authorising military deployment to Libya has been ratified in the parliament. What happened at the General Assembly?], BBC Turkish, 2 January 2020. The vote had initially been scheduled for 9 January but was brought forward after a meeting between Presidents Erdoğan and Vladimir Putin was slated for 8 January. "Erdoğan wanted to go to that meeting with parliamentary approval already in hand", said a European diplomat. Crisis Group interview, late January 2020. Think-tank analysts in Ankara voiced similar opinions. Crisis Group interviews, Ankara, February 2020.

[18] "The 5,000 Sudanese [fighters], the 2,000 people who came with the Russian Wagner Group – in what capacity are they in Libya?" Erdoğan press briefing in Tunisia, Turkish Directorate of Communications, 25 December 2019.

[19] Crisis Group interview, Ankara, February 2020.

Turkish officials also decry as two-faced the positions of Brussels and Washington, which claim to promote democracy and rule of law in the world but are ambivalent about an armed attempt to overthrow Libya's political leadership. They contend that this stance will discredit the West in the eyes of Arab societies.[20] Others in Ankara are convinced that the UAE has been spreading propaganda, accusing Turkey of supporting political and militant Islamists against secular forces, charges that they fear Europeans accept uncritically.[21] Turkish officials also express frustration at Europeans who, they say, without specifying which country, are mistakenly convinced that Haftar can establish strong rule and thus curb migration flows, which they claim is all Europeans care about.[22] Turkey viewed the EU's launch of a naval mission, Operation Irini, to monitor the UN arms embargo as unfair, because the EU will not be monitoring land or air delivery routes, which are used by Haftar's backers, whereas Turkey delivers weapons mainly by sea.[23] Accusations

[20] A senior Turkish official said: "Haftar wants to gain control of Tripoli by force and to rule it with a heavy hand. The Western world is hypocritical about democracy. History will reflect this, and the Arab world will never forgive those who stood against [Libya's] public will in these times". Crisis Group interview, Ankara, February 2020. That said, the Serraj government was not elected and governs by decree without being accountable to a parliament, slightly undercutting the argument about defending democracy. Indeed, Serraj was selected as head of the Presidency Council of the GNA in December 2015 following a year-long, UN-backed negotiation that produced a governing document known as the Libyan Political Agreement. UN Security Council Resolution 2259 (23 December 2015) endorsed the agreement and recognised Serraj's Presidency Council as the Libyan state's legitimate representative. Serraj, a member of parliament at the time, was supposed to submit for approval a proposed cabinet list to the House of Representatives, elected in 2014, within 30 days; however, the House never approved it. Nevertheless, the UN and member states recognised Serraj as Libya's prime minister and president, and they considered his government legitimate. Pro-Haftar constituencies contend that the lack of parliamentary support renders the Serraj government illegitimate under Libyan law; they support a rival government in the east that does not enjoy international recognition. On Libya's political crisis, see Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Report N°170, *The Libyan Political Agreement: Time for a Reset*, 4 November 2016.

[21] "The argument that Haftar is secular and Serraj is radical is false propaganda", said one think-tank analyst. Crisis Group interview, Ankara, February 2020. An AK Party spokesperson said some political party representatives in Turkey were ignorantly adopting the line that Serraj represents groups seeking to establish an Islamic state while Haftar is secular. "AKP sözcüsü Çelik: Sarrac hükümetine bağlı güçlere TSK eğitim verecek" [AKP spokesperson Çelik: TAF will train Serraj government's forces], T24, 6 January 2020. The leaders of several Arab states, notably the UAE and Egypt, view the Muslim Brotherhood as an Islamist threat, while the AK Party has invested heavily in the group's empowerment across the region, particularly after the 2011 Arab uprisings.

[22] Crisis Group interviews, government officials, Ankara, February 2020. Although officials in Ankara say many European states support Haftar because they want power to be held by a strongman capable of curbing migration flows, support for Haftar in some European capitals (and the U.S.) is prompted to a large degree by anti-terrorism considerations. French officials in particular view Haftar-led security forces as a reliable security partner, more serious than the Tripoli-based authorities in combating what they consider terrorist groups in areas under their respective control. Crisis Group interviews, European and U.S. diplomats, Tunis, Paris, 2019; UN officials, Tunis, 2019.

[23] Crisis Group telephone interview, former Turkish official, March 2020. In late March, the EU launched Operation EUNAVFOR MED Irini, a naval mission tasked with monitoring arms transfers to Libya. Although it is mainly a naval mission, EU planners contend that radar instruments on the vessels as well as additional air and satellite imagery will also help monitor arms transfers taking place via land and air, at least in the northern half of the country, which abuts the

that oil interests are at the core of Western positioning are also rampant in Ankara. As one official put it: "Russia is totally interest-driven. So is the U.S. Trump called Haftar right after 4 April. Why? Because of oil interests. Turkey, on the other hand, is not hypocritical and will end up on the right side of history".[24]

Ultimately, Ankara believes that Turkey's military support to Tripoli, by balancing out the forces on the ground, will convince Haftar that he cannot count on military victory and, as a result, will have to accept a negotiated political settlement. As an Ankara official said: "Haftar has no interest in negotiations and, without Turkey's presence, he would have stopped the offensive only if the Tripoli government had surrendered and accepted his terms". He added: "Due to the Turkish involvement, he saw that it would not be possible [for him] to get easy results".[25]

Turkish officials underscore that they intervened to force Haftar to the negotiating table and say they are willing to support the Tripoli-based forces indefinitely. In February, Ankara officials exuded confidence that Turkey would do "whatever is necessary" to prevent Haftar from taking Tripoli: "Either his backers tell Haftar he must engage in negotiations and accept a political settlement, or the war will be prolonged because Turkey will not back down from defending Tripoli".[26] Some officials have called on the U.S. to exercise its leverage over Egypt and the UAE to stop their military and financial support of Haftar's operations. If Haftar attempts an all-out attack on Tripoli, they say, Ankara is ready to deploy its own offensive forces.[27]

B. *Strategic Ambitions*

Ankara's decision to protect the Tripoli government from military defeat is part and parcel of Turkey's geostrategic ambitions, which it increasingly advances, including by projecting military power. This stance has its roots in a relatively new conception of national defence, in which the Turkish "homeland" (*vatan*) no longer solely denotes land but also sea, or the "blue homeland" (*mavi vatan*), an

Mediterranean. The details of Operation Irini are still under discussion and the rules of engagement not yet final. A thorny issue is whether or not the EU vessels will be allowed to intercept and inspect Turkish vessels bound for Libya, even those escorted by Turkish warships. If such rules are approved, which EU officials rate as highly unlikely, the operation would end up affecting Ankara disproportionately to the regional actors supporting Haftar. Whereas Ankara sends its aid to the Tripoli government mainly by sea, Haftar's backers send him military equipment mainly by land or air. The latter cargoes can be monitored but not intercepted. Crisis Group interviews, EU officials, Brussels, March and April 2020.

[24] Crisis Group interview, Turkish official, Ankara, February 2020.

[25] Crisis Group interview, senior Turkish official, Ankara, February 2020.

[26] Crisis Group interview, senior Turkish official, Ankara, February 2020.

[27] Crisis Group interview, senior Turkish official, Ankara, February 2020. In a speech to parliament on 14 January, Erdoğan intimated that Turkey would support an offensive against Haftar should he not desist from attacking the capital: "In the coming days, we will follow the choices made – who sides with the putschist Haftar and who with the country's legitimate government. And if the attacks on the country's legitimate administration and our brothers in Libya continue, we will never hesitate to teach the coup plotter Haftar the lesson he deserves. Our presence in this region will continue until Libya achieves freedom and stability". Communications Directorate of the Presidency of the Republic of Turkey. (Crisis Group translation from Turkish.)

expression first used by a navy admiral, Ramazan Cem Gürdeniz, in 2006.[28] It was popularised in March 2019 when the Turkish navy named an exercise in the eastern Mediterranean "Mavi Vatan". Turkey's ruling coalition of the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) and the Nationalist Action Party (MHP) is aligned around this more assertive regional foreign policy, which also reinforces Turkish nationalism and helps the Ankara leadership maintain domestic support.[29]

1. The maritime jurisdiction dispute in the eastern Mediterranean

In keeping with the "blue homeland" concept, Erdoğan signed a Memorandum of Understanding "on the delimitation of the maritime jurisdiction areas in the Mediterranean" with Serraj on 27 November 2019; the Turkish parliament ratified it the following week.[30] Turkey had long sought this agreement as a critical tool to begin redrawing maritime borders in the eastern Mediterranean and mitigate what it sees as disproportionate advantages accruing to two of Ankara's historical foes – Greece and the Republic of Cyprus.[31]

Turkish officials claim there is no connection between Turkey's Libya intervention and this maritime pact, and that it is "merely a coincidence" that Erdoğan and Serraj signed it on the same day they inked the security cooperation deal.[32] Many

[28] Cem Gürdeniz was among the military officers imprisoned after the controversial Sledgehammer trials (2011-2015), accused of leading a coup plot against Erdoğan, who was then still prime minister. In 2014, the government claimed that these trials had been part of a scheme by Gülen-affiliated members of the judiciary. (Fethullah Gülen is a Turkish preacher heading a transnational Islamic movement that the Turkish government accuses of illicitly infiltrating state institutions and holds responsible for the 15 July 2016 coup attempt.) Gürdeniz was freed in 2015 after the Constitutional Court ordered a retrial. He now writes a column entitled "Mavi Vatan" in the neo-nationalist *Aydınlık* daily. He authored a book, published in 2016, in which he formulated a since-popularised phrase: "The deck of a warship is equivalent to the homeland". *Ulusal Kanal*, 9 March 2019.

[29] "The nationalist resurgence in Turkish society and politics in recent years has served to enable a more activist and expansionist foreign policy, compared to the generally prudent policies of the republican era. Imperial nostalgia in both popular culture and political rhetoric has played up and played upon revanchist feelings and portrayed 'New Turkey' as a proud and strong country under a tough leader that will not bend to foreign adversaries". Paul T. Levin, "What's Driving Turkey's Foreign Policy?", *Texas National Security Review* (October 2019).

[30] On 5 December 2019, the Turkish parliament ratified the Memorandum of Understanding on maritime border delimitation with 293 votes in favour and 13 against. AK Party, MHP, CHP and IYI deputies voted in favour, while the HDP voted against. The memorandum's text is available in Turkish, Arabic and English on the parliament's website.

[31] The dispute over the delimitation of maritime borders in the eastern Mediterranean stems from the discovery of hydrocarbon resources by Israel and Cyprus and the lack of an agreed definition among coastal states on their reciprocal Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ). There are two main sets of disagreements at the root of this controversy: the Cypriot question, which Turkey, Cyprus and Greece have never settled and is a source of disagreement in relation to the maritime border between Turkey and Cyprus; and the interpretation of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, a treaty that, according to Athens, gives Greece the right to establish its maritime borders starting from its islands. Turkey challenges this interpretation and considers only a country's mainland as the starting point of every country's EEZ. In addition, Turkey and Israel are not signatories of the UN Convention.

[32] A senior Turkish official said: "there is no connection between the two MoUs being signed on the same day. They had both been in progress for a long time. We just took advantage of Serraj's visit to have both signed together". Crisis Group interview, Ankara, February 2020.

Turkish experts, however, agree that the sequencing of events suggests that the maritime deal was a gateway for increasing Turkish military support.[33] At the time, public debate focused on the maritime deal, largely neglecting the security agreement, which parliament took longer to ratify.[34] Opposition parties that voted in favour of the maritime deal subsequently criticised the government for linking it to its decision to send Turkish troops to Libya, which they opposed.[35]

The maritime border agreement establishes an 18.6 nautical mile (35km) maritime boundary between Turkey and Libya.[36] In line with this agreement, both Turkey and Libya claim for themselves cone-shaped Economic Exclusive Zones (EEZs) respectively north and south of the boundary line.[37] Most of the Turkish EEZ and part of the Libyan EEZ overlap with waters Athens considers part of Greece's continental shelf.

In the eyes of Turkish officials and public opinion, the maritime agreement with Tripoli was a strategic win, and voices across the political spectrum lauded its conclusion.[38]

For over a decade, Ankara has sought maritime boundary delimitation agreements with Egypt and Libya that would challenge Athens' assignment of large maritime jurisdiction areas to Greek islands and Cyprus, leaving a narrow strip of water and seabed to Turkey.[39] Turkish officials and experts have long contended that

[33] Crisis Group interviews, Turkish politicians and analysts, Ankara, February 2020.

[34] Following the signing, headlines of leading Turkish media outlets focused on the maritime deal. See, for example, "Greece and Israel can no longer exclude other coastal states", *Daily Sabah*, 11 December 2019; "The worst scenario in the East Med has been averted", CNN Turk, 25 December 2019; and "Libya deal ensures Turkey's maritime freedom", Anadolu Agency, 27 December 2019.

[35] A CHP MP said: "we signed off on [the maritime] agreement, but right afterward they brought forward the bill calling for sending our armed forces to Libya. They want to send our troops to a place that is tangled up in conflict … into that mess. We are against it". Quoted in "Birine evet diğerine hayır", *Yeniçağ Gazetesi*, 24 December 2019. (Crisis Group translation from Turkish.) An IYI MP said: "they [the AK Party] entangled the maritime delimitation agreement with the bill to send troops to Libya. Yet they are very different. We voted against sending troops". Quoted in "İYİ Parti'li Dervişoğlu: Haberdar olsak CHP'yi uyarırdık", Haberler.com, 7 January 2020. (Crisis Group translation from Turkish.)

[36] Selcan Hacaoglu and Firat Kozok, "Turkish offshore gas deal with Libya upsets Mediterranean boundaries", *World Oil*, 12 June 2019.

[37] The intellectual driver behind Turkey's need to sign a maritime delimitation agreement with Libya and developer of the maritime criteria on which it should be based is Admiral Cihat Yaycı. His ideas were the basis for a proposed bilateral delimitation agreement that Turkey presented to Muammar al-Qadhafi on the margins of the 2010 EU-Africa summit shortly before the Libyan leader was toppled. Yaycı authored a 2019 book presenting this idea in depth to wider audiences, entitled *Libya Türkiye'nin Denizden Komşusudur: Doğu Akdeniz'de Deniz Alanlarının Sınırlandırılmasında Libya'nın Rolü* [Libya is Turkey's Neighbour from the Sea: Libya's Role in Maritime Delimitation of the Eastern Mediterranean], published by Avrasya Stratejik Araştırmalar Merkezi, a think-tank.

[38] Crisis Group interview, senior figure of main opposition party, Ankara, February 2020. The only party that did not vote for the maritime agreement was the pro-Kurdish HDP.

[39] Turkey does not recognise the Republic of Cyprus and holds that it cannot enter EEZ agreements or exploit natural resources in the eastern Mediterranean without sharing revenues with the separate northern Turkish Cypriot entity. As mentioned, Turkey is not a signatory to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, and for decades has been locked in a separate dispute with Greece over the territorial waters and continental shelf delimitation in the Aegean Sea. On this long-running stalemate, see Crisis Group Europe Report N°216, *Aphrodite's Gift: Can Cypriot Gas Power a New Dialogue?*, 2 April 2012.

the Greece-claimed continental shelf and its EEZ amount to an "imprisonment" of Turkey, "the country with the longest coast" in the Mediterranean.[40] In 2011, the Arab uprisings interrupted Turkish plans to sign agreements with Muammar al-Qadhafi's Libya and Hosni Mubarak's Egypt that would have staked Ankara's own claims.[41]

The Cyprus Republic's EEZ agreements with Israel (2010), Lebanon (2007) and Egypt (2003) for natural gas exploration and drilling follow Athens' demarcation lines.[42]

In 2019, the stakes rose with the discovery of large natural gas reserves off the shores of Cyprus. The big find led in January 2020 to the signing of the EastMed Pipeline Project agreement by Israel, Greece and Cyprus, bypassing Turkey, to transport natural gas from the eastern Mediterranean to Europe via Greece.[43]

Rising regional tensions and unsettled disputes further complicate the picture. Turkey's relations with Egypt have significantly worsened since the 2013 coup against President Mohamed Morsi, a Muslim Brotherhood member whom it supported, while its ties with Israel have soured since 2010.[44] Moreover, Turkey does not recognise the Republic of Cyprus.[45] Decades of maritime delimitation negotiations with Greece about the Aegean have proven fruitless. Libya was left as the only coastal country with which Turkey still enjoys good relations, making it a critical potential ally if Ankara were to advance its maritime claims. For its part, Tripoli needed Turkish military support.[46]

No country other than Libya accepts the legality of Turkey's delimitation scheme, and the likelihood of international oil companies agreeing to carry out exploration activities in "disputed waters" is low.[47] Turkey is therefore unlikely to

[40] Turkey's Mediterranean coastline is 1,577km long, but taking Greek islands into account, Greece's coastline is longer. Libya's mainland coastline (1,700km) is also longer than Turkey's, but most of it is considered part of the Ionian Sea basin.

[41] Crisis Group interviews, Egyptian diplomat, Cairo, December 2019; Libyan diplomat, Doha, December 2019.

[42] The Cyprus Republic signed agreements on the Delimitation of Exclusive Economic Zones with Egypt (2003), Lebanon (2007) and Israel (2010). UN Office of Legal Affairs. Lebanon signed but did not ratify the agreement.

[43] The Italian, Greek and Cypriot governments approved the project in 2015, and a consortium (a 50:50 joint venture between Public Gas Corporation of Greece and a private company, Edison International, an Italy-based subsidiary of a French firm, EDF) soon started development. Israel joined in 2017. "Eastern Mediterranean Pipeline Project", *NS Energy*.

[44] For background, see International Crisis Group, *Tackling the MENA Region's Intersecting Conflicts*, 13 February 2018.

[45] For background on the Cyprus dispute, see Crisis Group Europe and Central Asia Report N°227, *Divided Cyprus: Coming to Terms on an Imperfect Reality*, 14 March 2014.

[46] Turkey had been requesting the Tripoli government's approval of the maritime agreement since early 2019, but Prime Minister Serraj repeatedly withheld it on grounds that international agreements of this sort were the competence of parliament, not the government. Turkey's pressing requests to secure a maritime agreement with Tripoli were not public knowledge in Libya, and only a few foreign and Libyan diplomats were aware of them. According to people familiar with the matter, Serraj changed his position on signing an agreement suddenly in late November 2019. They contend that he was motivated by the need to secure Turkey's military aid, which Ankara made contingent on him signing the maritime pact. Crisis Group interviews, foreign and Libyan diplomats, UN officials, Tripoli, Rome and Doha, December 2019.

[47] Greece and Cyprus condemned Turkey's agreement with the Tripoli government, which they claimed violated international law. France and Italy, whose oil companies have a stake in the East

derive financial gain from its move in the foreseeable future. Yet the agreement can help Ankara thwart other states' projects that would in effect exclude Turkey from the eastern Mediterranean and reduce its influence.

From Turkey's point of view, the new agreement achieves two objectives. In the short term, it can raise the cost of, and delay through lawsuits, the construction of the 1,900km (1,180 mile) eastern Mediterranean natural gas pipeline that Greece, Israel and Cyprus want to develop, rendering it unviable.[48] In the long term, it lays the groundwork for forcing Egypt and Israel to backtrack on their EEZ agreements with Greece. Ankara hopes that they would then sign new maritime delimitation agreements with Turkey, which would grant them larger areas of jurisdiction than their existing deals with Greece do, at the expense of Athens' claims.[49]

2. Contrasting hostile regional environment

Turkey's new assertiveness aims not only to contain long-time adversaries Greece and Cyprus, but also to counter a coalition of Arab countries hostile to Turkey, which includes Egypt, the UAE and Saudi Arabia, Haftar's main external backers. These countries staunchly oppose Muslim Brotherhood-related groups that gained political strength in the 2011 Arab uprisings and received support from Turkey's ruling AK Party. In Libya, Brotherhood elements are part of the Tripoli government, although they do not predominate. But their presence has led Ankara to view Libya as yet another case where its regional rivals are trying to exclude the Brotherhood from governance.[50]

In a broader sense, Turkey's activism in Libya is about sending a powerful signal to actors seeking to constrain it. In the words of an Ankara-based analyst:

Med Gas Forum, also condemned it. After a harsh initial reaction, Egypt toned down its criticism, but nevertheless went on to spearhead a 8 January 2020 diplomatic initiative with Greece, Cyprus and France that denounced both the maritime and security cooperation agreements between Ankara and Tripoli as "a violation of relevant UN Security Council resolutions and international law". The joint communiqué underscored that the signatories considered these agreements "null and void". "Meeting of the Foreign Ministers of Egypt, France, Cyprus and Greece – Final Communiqué", French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 8 January 2020.

[48] A European expert said: "Theoretically, Turkey's position could raise costs such as insurance because legal uncertainty has increased and a military incident cannot be excluded". Crisis Group correspondence, 23 March 2020. Reuters reporters explained the possible impact of Turkey's maritime deal with Libya on the East Med Pipeline Project as follows: "The Turkey-Libya deal adds another obstacle to making it achievable. While there are precedents for pipelines crossing other countries' exclusive economic zones, Turkey won't make it easy. What's more, Ankara will use the deal to step up its claims to explore for energy in waters off Cyprus, where for months it has sent drilling ships, and in recent days flown exploration drones". Luke Baker, Tuvan Gumrukcu and Michele Kambas, "Turkey-Libya maritime deal rattles East Mediterranean", Reuters, 25 December 2019. See also Caroline Rose, "Turkey tests the waters in the eastern Mediterranean", Real Clear World, 8 December 2019.

[49] A Turkish Libya expert explained that Israel could be enticed because the Aphrodite gas reservoir that is currently part of the Cypriot-claimed EEZ could fall under Israel's maritime jurisdiction in Turkey's proposed delimitation agreement. Crisis Group interview, think-tank representative, Ankara, February 2020.

[50] International Crisis Group, *Tackling the MENA Region's Intersecting Conflicts*, op. cit.

> There is a sense that we are boxed in with no place to move. We need to find new allies, deepen [relationships with] those we have and create space that we can be in. Turkey is following a [regional] trend in its power projection, in order not to lose ground.[51]

An expert on Turkey's regional policies with close ties to the government said, referring to Turkey's military activism: "Turkey acts like this [when it is cornered by a coalition and left with no other choice. In the East Med, this became urgent after the natural gas pipeline project came into play".[52] Ankara has a similar drive to wield hard power on the ground in Syria and the Horn of Africa, in order to prevent exclusion from perceived designs that would curb Turkish influence.[53]

3. Economic interests

Economic interests also play a role in the making of Ankara's Libya policy. Turkey has long sought to expand the market for its consumer goods and secure opportunities for its construction companies, including in Libya. With access to various other Middle Eastern and North African economies curtailed due to diplomatic rifts, Turkey sees potential for its building and other business moguls in Libya.[54]

Turkey hopes that reinforced ties between the two countries in the wake of the bilateral security and maritime agreements will create further economic windfalls. Underscoring such expectations, the same day that Ankara unveiled its intention to intervene militarily in support of the Tripoli government, Turkey's independent Industrialist and Businessmen Association (MÜSİAD) announced that it hoped to boost exports to Libya by over 500 per cent, reaching around $10 billion compared to $1.49 billion in 2018.[55] Turkey's defence industry, which is providing most of the weapons shipped to the pro-government forces, will likely account for a sizeable portion of these exports.

Turkey is also seeking to recoup business losses that its companies have suffered in Libya since 2011. For example, of the estimated 100 construction contracts awarded to Turkish companies during the Qadhafi era, many could not move forward after the start of the 2011 conflict, leaving building projects incomplete at a value of $19 billion.[56] Turkish construction companies contend that they have already spent $2 billion in equipment and other costs toward these projects, and therefore consider this amount a debt that the Libyan state owes them. Likewise, the Turkish Petroleum Corporation sank more than $180 million into Libya before the conflict, and from 2011 onward was unable to make its drilling investment productive.[57]

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[51] Crisis Group interview, think-tank representative, Ankara, February 2020.

[52] Crisis Group interview, think-tank analyst, Ankara, February 2020.

[53] Crisis Group Middle East Report N°206, *Intra-Gulf Competition in Africa's Horn: Lessening the Impact*, 9 September 2019; and Crisis Group Alert, "The Eleventh Hour for Idlib, Syria's Last Rebel Bastion", op. cit.

[54] "Turkish contractors want to return to Libya, resume projects once peace restored", *Daily Sabah*, 24 December 2019.

[55] "Turkey seeks to increase exports to Libya", *Asharq al-Awsat*, 2 January 2020.

[56] "İnşaat Sektörü Analizi: Arap Baharı, Borç Krizi ve Isınan Ekonomiler" [Construction Sector Analysis: Arab Spring, Debt Crisis and Overheating Economies], Turkish Contractors Union, July 2011.

[57] "Türkiye'nin Libya ile ekonomik ilişkileri ne durumda?" [What's the situation of Turkey's economic relations with Libya?], *Euronews*, 2 January 2020.

Turkey is not the only country with pending incomplete and unpaid contracts awarded during the Qadhafi era, when Libya signed more than $100 billion worth of contracts with foreign companies.[58] But Turkey is the only country so far to make progress in its efforts to obtain compensation. In April 2019, Ankara and the Serraj government established a working group to agree on compensation for these past contracts and establish financial guarantees for future Turkish investments. Turkey is reportedly seeking to formalise a memorandum of understanding, still in draft form, which envisages $500 million in compensation for lost machinery and equipment, another $1.2 billion for debts and a further $1 billion as a letter of guarantee against future purchases.[59]

It is not known how exactly the Libyan government will make such payments and to whom. Some sources in Libya claim that discussions are under way between Libyan and Turkish officials to deposit a total of $4 billion in a Turkish bank.[60] It is unclear whether this sum is solely aimed at covering the abovementioned compensation package or if the additional $2 billion deposited would serve as financial guarantee for future acquisitions, such as the purchase of the military equipment Turkey is providing.[61] Other Libyans are sceptical that this financial scheme exists, or that other such designs will crop up. Instead, they claim that there is no plan to add further funds to Libyan public deposits in Turkey, which according to them stood at around $1.5 billion in 2019. They claim that the Tripoli government has spent less than half this amount to cover the purchase of Turkish military equipment for its war effort since April 2019.[62]

Aside from these figures, the question of who pays for Turkish military support to Libya is clouded with mystery. Most of it is most certainly paid directly by Tripoli, but Libyan sources close to the establishment in Ankara allege that the GNA is not the only entity footing the bill. According to a Libyan businessman close to Tripoli and to Turkish officials, "Turkey itself shoulders part of the costs, and Doha also contributes".[63] Qatar has bankrolled various anti-Haftar armed groups and politicians in Tripoli over the years, and it has also funded the supply of defence equipment to Tripoli-based forces allied with the Serraj government, mainly via Turkey, following the breakout of hostilities in 2019.[64]

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[58] The Libyan government awarded a total of 21,000 contracts, cumulatively worth 157 billion dinars ($115 billion), during the Qadhafi era. Libya's National Audit Bureau, "The Annual Audit Report", 2013, pp. 290-293. Many of these contracts were signed, but not carried out, and are thus considered null and void by Libya. The World Bank, which Libya's post-Qadhafi authorities asked to analyse these pending projects, estimated that projects for which construction had begun and which constituted a contractual obligation for Libya were worth 100 billion dinars ($75 billion). Unpublished World Bank report viewed by Crisis Group, "Libya: Public Investment Management Legacy Project Review", 12 September 2017. This report does not break down the contracts by country.

[59] "Turkey aims to sign deal with Libya over Gaddafi-era compensation", Reuters, 2 January 2020.

[60] Crisis Group interview, Libyan close to government officials, Misrata, February 2020.

[61] Crisis Group interview, Libyan close to government officials, Misrata, February 2020.

[62] Crisis Group interview, Libyan with close contacts with Turkish officials, Tripoli, February 2020.

[63] Crisis Group interview, Libyan with close contacts with Turkish officials, Tripoli, February 2020.

[64] Crisis Group interviews, Libyans with ties to Qatar, Tripoli and Misrata, 2018-2020. A Libyan with ties to Doha complained that at the war's beginning in 2019, Qatar was sending funds

III. Is Turkey Achieving the Results It Intended?

To a certain extent, and for the time being, Turkey has rebalanced the battlefield: Ankara's military involvement has managed to slow down the advance of Haftar's forces, in some areas even forcing them to retreat, and to avert the Serraj government's fall. As long as Turkey's allied government in Tripoli remains in power, Ankara considers its immediate geostrategic and economic interests protected or at least not forfeited.

Turkey's intervention has not brought an end to the conflict, however, nor has it opened the door to negotiations between Libya's rival political and military factions. Quite the contrary: the war around the Libyan capital has intensified, peace talks are nowhere on the horizon, and tensions between Ankara and some capitals – including Abu Dhabi, Cairo and Paris – have risen. In the meantime, the Tripoli government's financial situation has worsened appreciably after pro-Haftar tribes cut oil production and thus Tripoli's only major revenue stream.

A. *Diplomatic Front*

At first, it looked as though Turkey was right to expect that its intervention in Libya would compel Haftar to accept a political settlement. On 8 January, Presidents Erdoğan and Putin issued a sudden joint call for a ceasefire in Libya.[65] The two leaders invited Libyan factions to stop military operations starting on 12 January and return to political negotiations. In subsequent days, both Haftar's coalition and the Tripoli government publicly expressed support for a ceasefire. Fighting in Tripoli diminished measurably.[66]

Optimism was short-lived, however, as the ensuing diplomatic initiatives to broker a ceasefire floundered. Moscow and Ankara tried to leverage their influence

directly to individual Libyan commanders and their respective forces. He said he pleaded with Doha not to support individual groups, "which makes it difficult to establish a command-and-control hierarchy", and instead channel its support to the government-led war efforts. He also noted the difference between Qatar's support and Turkey's: "Turkey only deals with the Tripoli government representatives, while Qatar supports its various allies in Libya". Crisis Group interview, Libyan with ties to Qatar officials, Misrata, October 2019. The Qatari government officially supports the Tripoli government and opposes Haftar's siege on Tripoli. It has called for the withdrawal of Haftar's forces from greater Tripoli and a return to political negotiations. It also says it supports Turkey's efforts in Libya. Speaking prior to Turkey's intervention, a Qatari official said Doha would help Ankara do whatever it takes to "save Tripoli". Crisis Group interview, senior Qatari official, July 2019.

[65] The two presidents called for an end of hostilities in Libya in a joint statement issued after a bilateral meeting in Istanbul. "Putin and Erdogan call for ceasefire in war-ravaged Libya", *Financial Times*, 8 January 2020.

[66] "Announcement of the General Command of the Arab-Libyan Armed Forces with Regard to the Ceasefire of the Operations Rooms of the Western Region" (translation from Arabic), dated 11 January 2020, posted on the Facebook page of ALAF Spokesperson Ahmed Mesmari. Serraj also expressed support for the Turkish-Russian initiative and the ceasefire in a joint press conference with Italian Premier Giuseppe Conte in Rome on 11 January, but he stressed that his acceptance of a truce would be contingent on the withdrawal of Haftar's forces from Tripoli. Press conference, Al-Marsad, 11 January 2020. In the following days, several Tripoli residents said, they heard no explosions or sounds of gunfire for the first time in months. Crisis Group telephone interviews, Tripoli, 12 January 2020.

over their respective Libyan allies but failed, primarily because Haftar refused to sign on.[67] In a 13 January meeting in Moscow, Haftar rebuffed a seven-point ceasefire agreement drafted by Turkey and Russia. Only Serraj signed.[68]

The Russian-Turkish initiative jolted the UN and other foreign powers into convening a diplomatic conference on Libya in Berlin for 19 January, following months of protracted, difficult consultations among foreign stakeholders in the Libyan conflict. European capitals, in particular, feared that Ankara and Moscow intended to carve out respective zones of influence in Libya and propose a settlement that would sideline them. At the Berlin conference, after initially rejecting a ceasefire and allegedly under pressure from Egyptian representatives, Haftar eventually agreed to appoint five military officers to take part in subsequent UN-mediated talks with military officers designated by the Tripoli government.[69] The military-to military talks were part of a three-track negotiation package (the other two tracks were political and financial) that the UN proposed at the Berlin conference, UN Security Council Resolution 2510 endorsed, and the event's international participants, including Turkey and Haftar backers such as the UAE, Egypt and Russia, committed to support.[70]

The two sides failed to reach an agreement, however, after two rounds of Geneva-based negotiations in February. The Haftar coalition's delegation insisted that a ceasefire should be contingent on, among other things, the surrender of the Tripoli government's military forces, the handover of key military bases in the capital to Haftar's forces and the withdrawal of Turkish and Syrian troops from Libya, which to Tripoli was a non-starter. For its part, Tripoli demanded the withdrawal of Haftar's forces from Tripoli and the return of families to their homes in residential areas affected by fighting.[71] Likewise, the UN-mediated political negotiations, also

[67] Some Turkish officials suspect that Moscow did not genuinely try; others believe that it did, but that the UAE, Egypt and the U.S. discouraged Haftar from signing, a claim also made by Tripoli government officials. Crisis Group interviews, Ankara, Tripoli, February 2020.

[68] Crisis Group telephone interviews, Tripoli government officials, Tripoli, January 2020. See also Claudia Gazzini, "What Prospects for a Ceasefire in Libya?", Crisis Group Commentary, 18 January 2020.

[69] Crisis Group interview, Libyan close to the Serraj government, Tripoli, February 2020. The Berlin conference on Libya brought together representatives of the U.S., EU, UK, France, Russia, China, Italy, Germany, Turkey, Egypt, the UAE, Algeria and Congo-Brazzaville, as well as the UN, Arab League and African Union. Haftar and Serraj were both in Berlin, but neither officially attended the summit or signed the final declaration.

[70] The foreign participants of the Berlin conference signed a 55-point declaration, which was subsequently endorsed in UN Security Council Resolution 2510 (12 February 2020). The aim of the Berlin conference and final declaration was to reduce foreign intervention in the Libya war and ensure foreign stakeholders' backing for a three-track UN mediation process. Crisis Group Statement, "Libya: Turning the Berlin Conference's Words into Action", 22 January 2020.

[71] Crisis Group interviews, Libyans familiar with the Geneva ceasefire talks, Misrata and Rome, February 2020. The two Libyan delegations in Geneva reached no agreement on ceasefire terms as each delegation clung to its positions. The UN drafted what it considered a middle-ground agreement and submitted it to the two factions for consideration; however, the proposal lacked specifics and, most importantly, did not reflect any agreed-upon compromise. The UN proposal stated that, upon signing, military forces would withdraw "from private properties so as to ease the work of ceasefire observation teams and enable civilians to safely return to their properties", but it did not specify which forces on either side should withdraw nor to where. The proposal also said the continuation of the ceasefire would be accompanied by a process of collecting "heavy and medium-size weapons from militias and armed groups throughout the country"; halting the flow of

in Geneva, collapsed in late February before they even started when more than half of the fifty participants from both sides of the military and political divide boycotted them.[72] As for the financial track, negotiations took place but proved inconsequential.[73]

Overall, the resumption of hostilities since mid-February, the continuous flow of weapons to both sides and increasingly difficult diplomatic conditions suggest that negotiations are unlikely to succeed. Officially, the UN is still pursuing the three-track talks, but no negotiation took place in March and none is scheduled for April. Travel restrictions imposed to contain the spread of COVID-19 add to the difficulties, although they are not the primary reason for the impasse in consultations. Even if dates were to be set for military and political talks, the odds are high that both sides would either keep boycotting them or stick to their respective, irreconcilable demands. Meanwhile, clashes and attacks in the Tripoli area have intensified, while the sudden resignation on 2 March of the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative for Libya, Ghassan Salamé, the talks' chief architect, deals a further blow to mediation attempts.[74] In addition, global developments, such as the onset of the coronavirus crisis and a sharp drop in oil prices, have shifted attention away from Libya and reduced the international community's diplomatic engagement with the conflict.[75]

B. *Battlefield Dynamics*

Since January, Turkey has reportedly deployed approximately 100 army officers to Libya.[76] According to Turkish and Libyan sources, their role is primarily to

foreign fighters and mercenaries into Libya; and expelling within three months those already in the country. "Agreement for a Lasting Ceasefire in Libya", drafted by the UN Support Mission in Libya in late February 2020, viewed by Crisis Group in April 2020.

[72] Boycotting participants included people from both sides of the Libya conflict. Representatives of the High State Council, a Tripoli-based consultative assembly aligned with the Serraj government, refused to attend. On the Haftar side, a dozen members of the Tobruk-based House of Representatives and six so-called independents also withdrew their participation at the last minute. Reportedly, Haftar's side dispatched a plane to Geneva to pick up the delegates and return them to eastern Libya. Crisis Group interviews, participants of the Geneva talks, House members, Geneva, Cairo, Benghazi, 1 March 2020.

[73] Crisis Group telephone interviews, Libyans familiar with the UN-convened financial discussions in mid-February, late February 2020. The financial track is supposed to tackle management of oil revenues that accrue to the Central Bank in Tripoli, an issue that has contributed to escalating hostilities between Haftar supporters and the Tripoli government. On the financial roots of the conflict, see Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Report N°201, *Of Tanks and Banks: Stopping a Dangerous Escalation in Libya*, 20 May 2019.

[74] "The UN has not appointed a successor to Salame. This creates a vacuum". Ibrahim Kalın, spokesman and senior adviser to the Turkish president, in response to a Crisis Group question during a European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) Strategic Conversation over Zoom, 6 April 2020.

[75] European diplomats lament that the monthly meetings among foreign representatives that constitute the follow-up committee to the Berlin conference are now held via teleconference and as such have become a purely formal exercise that does not allow for more "useful private bilateral conversations" with the Libyan factions' foreign backers. Crisis Group telephone interview, European diplomat, early April 2020.

[76] Metin Gürcan, "Will Libya become Turkey's next Syria?", Al-Monitor, 16 December 2019. Libyan pro-GNA sources also estimated the number of Turkish officers involved in supporting GNA

coordinate the Tripoli government's war efforts and train its allied local forces. The latter include Libyan army officers who have remained loyal to Tripoli and refused to join Haftar-led troops, but the majority belong to militias formed in the wake of the Qadhafi regime's fall and who are on the Tripoli government's payroll.

Turkey has also upped its supply of military equipment and weaponry to Tripoli government-allied forces. Until January, Ankara had been providing combat drones, rockets and armoured vehicles, deploying Turkish technicians to operate this equipment and train Libyan fighters in its use. Between January and March, at least four cargo ships transporting military equipment from Turkey docked in Tripoli and Misrata, reportedly escorted by Turkish naval vessels.[77] What exactly they were carrying is not known, but Libyans with close ties to the Tripoli authorities claim that their load represents a sizeable qualitative and quantitative increase in military equipment.[78]

In February, sources in Tripoli said aerial defence equipment, namely the medium-range surface-to-air missile systems that Turkish forces have installed in the Tripoli and Misrata airports, had made the biggest impact of any upgrade in Turkish assistance to date.[79] Turkish officials concur that this type of support has saved lives.[80] A Western diplomat, speaking in February, expressed tacit sympathy for Turkey's provision of this equipment, which has effectively brought air and drone strikes on Tripoli to a halt:

> When you land in Tripoli airport now, you can actually see these air defence systems. Thanks to these, Haftar's aviation and the drones he used to bomb Tripoli can no longer fly over the capital. We have to thank Turkey for that.[81]

By April, Turkey had further increased its military exposure in Libya by tapping into its navy and air force. According to Libyan sources, Ankara has deployed two warships off the western Libyan coast to provide cover for the Tripoli government

war efforts to be around 100. Crisis Group interviews, Tripoli-based officials, February-March 2020.

[77] Crisis Group interviews, European security analysts, Libyan offiicals, Tripoli, Tunis and Brussels, February 2020. The role of the Turkish naval vessels is controversial. Turkish media reported Turkey had four military vessels off Libyan shores in late January, for the following objectives: contribution to NATO's Sea Guardian Operation, bilateral/bipartite training and security readiness. "Navy in Libya", *Yeni Şafak*, 25 January 2020. NATO headquarters, however, clarified that while some Turkish vessels in the area are "associated support to NATO's Operation Sea Guardian [...] associated support means that Operation Sea Guardian is an additional mission for these ships", and they "are not directed by NATO". Crisis Group correspondence, NATO's Public Information Office, 30 January 2020.

[78] Crisis Group interviews and telephone interviews, members of the Serraj government-aligned military, Tripoli and Misrata, February 2020.

[79] Crisis Group interviews, Western diplomats, Tripoli and Rome, February 2020; and Libyans close to the Tripoli government, Misrata, February 2020. Open-source intelligence reports suggest that these are the U.S.-manufactured MiM-23 Improved Hawk defence system and Turkish-produced Korkut system. Can Kasapoğlu, "Turkey's air defense system deployments to Libya", Defense Intelligence Sentinel, 17 January 2020. A video of these systems installed in Mitiga airport was posted on Twitter by Babak Taghvaee, journalist, @BabakTaghvaee1, 6:15am, 17 January 2020.

[80] Ibrahim Kalın, spokesman and senior adviser to the Turkish president, in response to a Crisis Group question during a ECFR Strategic Conversation over Zoom, 6 April 2020.

[81] Crisis Group interview, foreign diplomat, Tripoli, February 2020.

forces' ground operations.[82] In early April, one of these vessels fired surface-to-air missiles at military assets of Haftar-led forces.[83] The Turkish air force has also become active in Libya's skies, so far mainly for intelligence and deterrence purposes.[84]

But weapons deliveries to Haftar's forces have also continued. According to aviation analysts, more than a hundred cargo flights from Jordan, Egypt, the UAE and UAE-controlled bases in Eritrea landed in Benghazi between late January and the end of February.[85] Analysts speculate that these were carrying "hundreds of tons worth of equipment" to support Haftar's assault on Tripoli.[86]

While Turkey's intervention arguably prevented the Tripoli government's imminent fall, Haftar forces, far from stepping back, have intensified their offensive. In January, they reconquered the coastal city of Sirte in central Libya. It was the pro-Haftar coalition's most significant territorial gain since the outbreak of hostilities in April 2019.

By mid-February, heavy fighting had resumed in Tripoli as well. Haftar's forces pounded the city with missiles, as Turkish air defence systems forced the field marshal's planes and drones to halt operations. Haftar-aligned sources claimed that his forces were targeting Turkish positions in the capital, but several rockets clearly hit residential neighbourhoods, killing civilians.[87] On 18 February, a missile launched by Haftar forces from positions near the airport road, allegedly aimed at a Turkish ship, struck Tripoli's only functioning port. Subsequent on-site verifications confirmed that the missile had not hit any vessel but had damaged a warehouse. Nevertheless, military sources in Tripoli confirmed that a Turkish ship had departed only minutes before the missile struck, killing two Turkish officers in the port.[88] In late February, Haftar forces fired over a hundred rockets on Tripoli's Mitiga airport over a three-day span, claiming to be targeting an operations centre

[82] Crisis Group telephone interview, Libyan politician with ties to Turkey, 19 April 2020.

[83] Crisis Group telephone interview, Western diplomat, Tripoli, 2 April 2020. The event was widely reported in Libyan social media; residents also posted photos of shards of a U.S.-manufactured RIM-66E-5 missile purportedly launched from the Turkish vessel. See "Libya: Turkey warship fires missiles on sites controlled by Haftar militias", *Middle East Monitor*, 1 April 2020.

[84] According to a Libyan politician, Turkey has dispatched a surveillance plane to Libya, and on 18 April Turkish F16 fighter jets carried out their first-ever military exercise over Misrata. The politician said: "Such a display of military equipment on Turkey's side has had the effect of deterring Haftar forces and their foreign backers from using their own Pantsir air defence systems". Crisis Group telephone interview, Libyan politician with ties to Turkey, 19 April 2020. The Turkish Defence Ministry acknowledged that Turkish jets carried out exercises in the eastern Mediterranean, without specifying that they took place over Libya. "Hava ve Deniz Kuvvetlerimiz Müşterek Açık Deniz Eğitimi İcra Etti" [Our Air and Naval Forces Carried Out Joint Open Seas Training], Turkish Ministry of Defence, 17 April 2020.

[85] Flight tracking on Twitter by a Dutch analyst called Gerjon. See his entry at @Gerjon, 6:41am, 23 February 2020.

[86] Crisis Group interview, Libyan analyst, Tripoli, February 2020.

[87] Crisis Group interviews, Tripoli residents, 5-20 February 2020. On 6 February, a rocket hit Tripoli University; another on 12 February hit the residential neighbourhood of Nawfaliyin, killing a woman.

[88] Crisis Group interviews, Libyan officials, residents, Tripoli, late February 2020. A person with close ties to the Tripoli military establishment confirmed that two Turks and a third person (presumed to be a Syrian fighter deployed by Turkey) were killed in the port strike. Crisis Group telephone interview, Istanbul, late February 2020.

set up by the Turkish military.[89] Shelling and further missile strikes hammered the capital, including densely populated residential areas and hospitals, in late March and early April, killing at least five civilians including women and children.[90]

While fighting in the capital proceeded, in April Turkish-backed government forces scored successes in other parts of western Libya. They targeted supply routes from eastern Libya to Haftar's strongholds south of Tripoli, interrupting the flow of fuel, food and weapons to the field marshal's loyalists. On 14 April, they marched into the coastal towns of Sabratha and Sorman, which had been under the nominal control of pro-Haftar security forces for over a year. On 18 April, they advanced toward Tarhuna, Haftar's most important base in western Libya and the site of the operations rooms for the assault on Tripoli. (Allegedly, the foreign private security contractors backing Haftar forces are also based there.) Tripoli government forces bombarded and surrounded Tarhuna, but they stopped short of entering the town.[91]

In spite of these military gains, financial constraints may challenge the sustainability of Tripoli's defence down the line. Haftar-allied tribesmen have forced the closure of Libya's oilfields and export terminals to increase pressure on the Tripoli government, saying they did not want to see Libyan oil revenues, which accrue to the Tripoli-based Central Bank, used to fund Turkey's military intervention and Syrian fighters.[92] Their action cut Libya off from all its oil money, leaving the Tripoli government without resources to cover public expenditures. As of mid-April, the shortfall amounted to over $4 billion. Although Tripoli-based authorities say they have sufficient reserves to pay public-sector salaries for up to a year, foreign diplomats expressed scepticism that they will be able to sustain payments for more than several months.[93]

Beyond this date, the Serraj government may suffer difficulties in paying personnel across the country, including in Haftar-controlled eastern Libya, where most public-sector employees remain on Tripoli's payroll. The pro-Haftar coalition

[89] Crisis Group interviews, Tripoli, March 2020.

[90] "UNSMIL expresses grave concerns over the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Tripoli and its surroundings, and in Tarhouna", UN Support Mission in Libya, press release, 20 April 2020.

[91] Crisis Group telephone interviews, Libyans with ties to Tripoli government forces, 20 April 2020. See also "Besieged airbase shows Turkey turning the tide in Libya's war", Bloomberg, 17 April 2020.

[92] Crisis Group telephone interviews, officials based in eastern Libya, late January and February 2020.

[93] Crisis Group telephone interviews, Tripoli-based officials, March 2020; UN official and Western diplomat, late March 2020. Prior to the oil blockade, Libya's foreign currency reserves were estimated at $50-70 billion. Oil sales accounted for almost the totality of revenues and covered 70 per cent of government spending. With the January blockade, oil revenues have dwindled to a trickle, accounting for barely 15 per cent of projected revenues in the approved 2020 budget. Other sources of revenue accruing to Tripoli-based authorities are taxes, customs fees, revenues of state-owned companies and a special fee imposed on foreign currency purchases, which cumulatively account for less than 15 per cent of projected revenues. According to the published 2020 budget, this year the government is expected to incur a 70 per cent deficit, which the Central Bank in Tripoli has promised to cover from its own reserves. "Central Bank of Libya Statement concerning Revenues and Expenditures for the period 1 January to 31 December 2019, along with the foreign currency sales for commercial banks (in USD) for the same period", Central Bank of Libya, 14 January 2020. See also Government of National Accord, 2020 budget, approved in March 2020.

benefits financially from Russian-printed cash, which it uses to cover part of the expenditures of the east-based government with which it is allied. But it does not have access to oil revenues, which according to UN resolutions can accrue only to Tripoli. The Haftar coalition's calculation may be that the Tripoli government will be forced to capitulate if it runs out of funds; or, alternatively, that Tripoli's financial distress will either open the door to independent oil sales by its rivals or force new UN-backed arrangements to share Libya's oil revenues between Tripoli and the east-based authorities. None of these outcomes would align with Turkey's stated interests.

C. *The Syrian Factor and Public Opinion*

The deployment of thousands of Syrian fighters is particularly controversial in Libya, stirring vocal opposition within pro-Haftar tribal groups and other constituencies, who refer to them as "terrorists".[94] Haftar's foreign backers echo these views. According to a UAE official, the direct Turkish military intervention was not only a hit to the Berlin process and a violation of UN Security Council resolutions but "led to a big escalation in violence, especially by repositioning foreign terrorist fighters from Syria to Libya and affording weapons and drones to militias in Tripoli".[95] UAE officials are also concerned that the provision of weapons and financial support to these fighters will make Libya a base for groups that they consider terrorist and could, they say, threaten neighbouring and European countries.[96] Meanwhile, Turkey's allies in western Libya have largely welcomed Ankara's assistance with open arms, without questioning its form or the nationality of the fighters who have been sent. In the words of a businessman in Misrata:

[94] High-ranking Libyan officials speaking in January estimated the number of Turkish-allied Syrian fighters to be around 2,000; a U.S. diplomat speaking in March estimated that they exceeded 4,500 by then, a figure that even a UN official stated was a realistic estimate. Crisis Group interviews, Libyan military officials, Misrata and Tripoli, January 2019; and Crisis Group telephone interview, U.S. diplomat, 23 March 2020; UN official, April 2020. Anti-Turkish Libyan sources close to Haftar, as well as Haftar's military coalition's spokesperson, claim that even more Syrians are present – over 6,000. A source within the Syrian National Army in Turkish-held northern Aleppo claimed that Syrian fighters deployed to Libya received a six-month contract with a monthly salary of $2,000 per fighter, and that the al-Hamza, Sultan Murad, Sultan Suleyman Shah and al-Mu'tasim factions are the most active in recruiting Syrians to fight in Libya. Mohammed Abdulsattar Ibrahim and Ammar Hamou, "Corpses sent home as Syrians fight Turkey's war in Libya", *Syria Direct*, 15 January 2020. While pro-Haftar constituencies condemn Tripoli's use of Syrian mercenaries, officials in Tripoli claim that Haftar's forces have also enlisted Syrian fighters in their ranks. They say Russian-backed pro-regime militias, which have been in conflict with Turkey-backed rebels in north-eastern and north-western Syria, are present in Libya alongside Haftar-led forces. Crisis Group telephone interviews, Tripoli-based officials, March 2020. An analyst writing in mid-April claimed that, in addition, some 300 Syrian former rebels from the towns of Jaba, Mamtina and Mashara who had surrendered to the Syrian army and joined its forces were en route to Libya, allegedly to fight alongside Haftar's forces. See tweet by Elizabeth Tsurkov, analyst, @elizrael, 5:35pm, 12 April 2020.

[95] Crisis Group interview, April 2020. The UAE has a broad definition of terrorism that includes a range of Islamist groups, the Muslim Brotherhood in particular, that it considers a gateway to organisations such as al-Qaeda and ISIS. Interviews with Syrian fighters travelling to Libya indicate they are motivated by financial incentives rather than ideological commitment. Crisis Group telephone interviews, Syrian fighters, Syrian rebel commanders, April 2020.

[96] Crisis Group interview, UAE official, April 2020.

> We were ready to accept whoever was willing to help us, as long as they allowed us to push back Haftar and his men. Turkey offered help and Syrian fighters joined the fight. So be it. Better this than nothing.[97]

Nevertheless, not everyone in western Libya is uncritical of the deployment of Syrian combatants. Tripoli government officials say they were caught by surprise when the Syrians began to arrive in late December, having expected only Turkish army officers.[98] Some fighters on the ground in Tripoli expressed reservations, or "unease", about the deployment as well. One of them said: "while we wouldn't have had any problem with Turkish soldiers, we see these Syrian fighters but don't really know what their ideological inclination is or their objective".[99]

Speaking in early February, Ankara officials denied any knowledge of these deployments. Questioned on the issue, a Turkish official said, referring to the Tripoli authorities, "maybe the Accord government invited them". Another said, tongue in cheek, "just like Russia is not aware [of its nationals in Libya], Turkey is not aware of the Syrians".[100] The reference is to officials in Moscow denying their role in the dispatch of the Russian private military company Wagner Group, whose personnel are operating in Libya on Haftar's side. By late February, however, President Erdoğan had turned vocal about Syrian rebels supporting the Turkish military in Libya, although he also referred to a private Russian company in parallel.[101]

From Ankara's perspective, there is a silver lining in international criticism of the deployment of Syrians. "Before Syrian combatants went to Libya, the international community wasn't talking about the foreign fighters there. Now attention is drawn to this issue", a Turkish official said, referring to Russian and Sudanese fighters whom "the international community has been overlooking".[102]

The matter has stirred some debate in Turkey. Leading opposition parties have been critical of the deployment of Syrian combatants.[103] A Libyan analyst pointed

[97] Crisis Group interview, Misratan businessman, February 2020.

[98] A foreigner familiar with the matter said: "it was a mess. Those few in the government apparatus who got to know this put up a fuss. They did not want to let Syrians join the government forces' ranks. But eventually they had to give in". Crisis Group interview, Tunis, late December 2019.

[99] Crisis Group interview, government-allied fighter, Tripoli, February 2020.

[100] Crisis Group interviews, Ankara, February 2020.

[101] At a press briefing at the Ankara airport, Erdoğan said: "There are people from the Syrian National Army working under our training cadres [in Libya]. … We have common ground in Libya. They are with us in Syria, and they are honoured to be with us in Libya". "President Erdoğan's violent response to the question of the Fox reporter on Libya", *Milliyet*, 25 February 2020. He also acknowledged Syrians working with Turkish trainers in Libya. "Last exit before the operation", *Karar*, 21 February 2020.

[102] According to the UN Panel of Experts, over 2,000 Sudanese fighters recruited both from Sudanese rebel groups (Sudan Liberation Army-Abdul Wahid, Sudan Liberation Army-Minni Minnawi, Gathering of the Sudan Liberation Forces) and Sudanese government forces (Rapid Support Forces) operated in Libya on Haftar's side throughout 2019. Some 700 fighters of the Chadian Front pour l'alternance et la concorde au Tchad were also employed to guard Haftar forces' military bases. The UN report states that the Tripoli government also recruited Sudanese and Chadian fighters. UN Panel of Experts Report (2019), pp. 9-11. The report makes no mention of Russian fighters in Libya, but these are believed to have been in the hundreds in late 2019. See fn 7.

[103] See fn35. IYI Party MP Aydin Sezgin submitted a parliamentary inquiry on 20 January concerning the allegations of the transfer Syrian fighters to Libya: "…what kind of calculations were made by the government concerning the cost our country will incur in terms of image and international

out that the Syrians have been serving a practical purpose: they translate from Arabic into Turkish for Turkish officers.[104] Turkish analysts have claimed that deploying Syrian fighters can help keep the Turkish death toll lower.[105] Erdoğan has further deflected criticism by inviting the opposition to question the presence of Sudanese, Russians and other non-Libyan fighters supporting Haftar's side.[106]

Irrespective of the debate about the Syrian fighters, Turkey's intervention in Libya has little buy-in among ordinary Turkish citizens. While the intervention fell off the agenda due to the Idlib escalation in January-February, and the COVID-19 pandemic thereafter, many observers worry that Turkey could get bogged down in an unwinnable war.[107]

Libyans who prior to Turkey's intervention were sitting on the fence and did not claim allegiance to either side in the war also have criticised Turkey's intervention. In the words of one such individual, the main problem is how Turkey has essentially taken charge of Tripoli's war:

> There is a big difference between the way Haftar uses his foreign military support and what the Tripoli government is doing with Turkey. The Haftar camp taps into his foreign backers and gets them to give him what he needs. In the eyes of the Libyan public, Haftar retains the role of the commander. But the

law? What is your assessment of the possible risks that our country will face in the context of its international interests?". On 16 December 2020 CHP deputies of the Parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee added the following annotation to the military cooperation agreement with Libya: "The arrangement may allow the transfer of paramilitary forces from Turkey and even foreign fighters from Syria's Idlib to Libya, under the pretext of providing consultancy and coordinating intelligence and operational activity, which poses a great threat to the security of the region."

[104] Turkish officials and analysts note that Turkish advisers used these Syrians initially (from May 2019 onward) as translators and security technicians, but in combat operations since December. In the words of a Libyan analyst: "Most are Syrian Turkmen [who speak both Turkish and Arabic], but not all are combatants. Some are deployed for logistical purposes, and others for language support in the field, so that Turkish officers can communicate with Libyans. The process of sending Syrian mercenaries started in conjunction with the signing of the memoranda in 2019. They started being deployed in front-line positions in August. An omitted fact is that virtually no Libyans could understand the Turks [what they were saying]. It was important to establish good communications, including in the operation of certain weapons systems. As such, only a few Syrian mercenaries were deployed as front-line fighters at the beginning, with many supporting the training the Turks provided to the Libyans". Seminar organised by Istanbul Political Research Institute and Heinrich Böll Turkey Representation, Istanbul, 12 February 2020.

[105] Crisis Group interviews, Turkish media and academia representatives, January and March 2020.

[106] Erdoğan said: "[We have told them] 'Wagner, on the other hand, has 2,500 security forces there. Why are not you discussing that?' When we say this, they have no answer to give us. And it is not just Wagner. There are around 5,000 soldiers from Sudan, for instance. There are also soldiers from Chad and Niger. There are military troops like this in Egypt as well. Apart from these, however, there is another issue that should be discussed. Regarding the defence systems, air forces and all, particularly Russians and the Abu Dhabi administration have provided support. We told them that we expect them to act with sensitivity on these matters". "President Erdoğan: Turkey is Key to Peace", Directorate of Communications, 20 January 2020. Note that the numbers presented in this quote are likely inflated, per fn 101 above.

[107] On the parliamentary bill to authorise the use of military force in Libya, Yavuz Ağıralioğlu, the spokesperson for the IYI opposition party, said: "Here we are trying to manage the possibility of sending Turkish soldiers to an open-ended conflict. We see it as if the government is being lured into a trap, being pulled into a swamp [in Libya]". T24, 2 January 2020.

> Government of National Accord is doing quite the opposite. Serraj is officially telling Turkish officers 'you are welcome to Libya' and 'go ahead please, lead this war for us'. The Turks have the driver's seat in the war. The Turkish officers are perceived as directing the GNA's war. This is completely unacceptable to us Libyans.[108]

Among Libyans, even "those who wanted Turkey involved, did not want Turkey *this much* involved", another said.[109] Libyans who are critical of Serraj and Turkey have said they are baffled by how much Erdoğan publicly slams Haftar, "as if it is his or Turkey's own war, and not one between Libyans".[110] They are likewise concerned that Ankara, by constantly demonising the field marshal, ends up underestimating the considerable popular and tribal backing he enjoys.

[108] Crisis Group interview, influential Libyan from the east, Cairo, January 2020.

[109] Crisis Group Skype interview, Libyan international NGO representative, 10 March 2020.

[110] Crisis Group telephone interview, Benghazi resident, early February 2020. He added, "I counted the times Erdoğan said Haftar's name in his speeches over the last few days: it is 74! Can you believe it? That is way more than Serraj ever said Haftar's name in months".

IV. A Way Forward

Four months since the official announcement of its intervention in Libya, Turkey has succeeded in preventing Tripoli's takeover by Haftar's forces. Yet odds remain poor that the Libyan war will end in the coming months, especially since global concerns over the COVID-19 pandemic have disrupted diplomatic initiatives aimed at pressing Libyan parties to accept peace talks.

Looking ahead, Turkey will have to make some difficult choices. For one, it will have to gauge how much military support to Libya it can afford, financially and politically. If fighting continues or escalates further, Ankara may have to scale up both military supplies and personnel just to maintain the balance it helped create. Recruiting foot soldiers may become harder for both sides, due to the COVID-19 outbreak. An official in Tripoli said: "Some Turks have asked to leave Libya, and some Syrians are demanding the same".[111] (Foreign fighters on Haftar's side will face the same challenge.) If Turkish fatalities in Libya rise, the deaths will surely feed the intervention's unpopularity within Turkish society. As Turkey's economic conditions deteriorate, it is likely that opposition parties will also further question the financial costs of the deployment in Libya.

Ankara will also have to re-evaluate the extent to which it will be able to use its strategic involvement in Libya and alliance with the Tripoli-based government to rebalance regional relations. Although Ankara is betting on winning the hearts and minds of Arabs antagonistic to monarchies and coups, it may have neither the capacity nor the influence to rally popular support in the region. All that being said, and for the time being at least, Ankara seems to be convinced that Turkey's core geostrategic and economic interests would be undermined if it were to pull back military support from the Tripoli government.

Turkey is, of course, only one of many foreign parties that have intervened in Libya's war. As Crisis Group has emphasised in the past, any such foreign military intervention inevitably damages prospects for a political solution.[112] In particular, by supporting their respective local allies and feeding the warring sides' conviction that they can be victorious, Turkey and other foreign powers competing in Libya have discouraged compromise.

A wiser course might be for all foreign backers to stop pouring fuel on the fire. They could try to bring the two warring sides together, press them to accept a ceasefire and embark on negotiations. At the current juncture, a ceasefire might require concessions from Turkey and the Tripoli-based authorities, such as agreeing to halt any further offensives while Haftar's forces and their foreign supporters might need to desist from strikes on Tripoli. These preliminary steps could lay the groundwork for more comprehensive arrangements, including removal of military forces and heavy artillery from residential areas, departure of foreign fighters, and possibly agreement on a ceasefire monitoring mechanism.

Beyond that, any comprehensive political agreement would presumably need to accommodate the two warrying parties' primary goals: for Haftar backers, these are disempowering militias, ensuring transparent management and distribution of Libya's oil revenues and securing appointment of a new unity government with buy-in from the east-based authorities. For those standing behind Tripoli, the

[111] Crisis Group telephone interview, businessman with GNA ties, Tripoli, early April 2020.
[112] Crisis Group Conflict Alert, "Averting a Full-blown War in Libya", 10 April 2019.

goals are ensuring civilian oversight over security forces and warding off a power grab by Haftar or any other military leader.

The foreign powers that have become involved in Libya have been vague about their red lines, and their interest in compromise may well change with time and events, both in Libya and beyond. But some broad conclusions appear possible. Ankara in particular likely will insist on a solution that maintains a key role for its allies currently part of the Tripoli government in a viable power-sharing agreement that also helps cement Turkish influence, provides Ankara with assurances that its maritime deal will remain intact until and unless a democratically elected Libyan government declares otherwise, and pursues compensation for Turkish companies that operated in Libya prior to 2011.

Likewise, Haftar's supporters will seek to ensure that a resolution protects their critical interests. In particular, they likely will want a reset of the international governing arrangements for Libya, including a new UN-backed government that is not dominated by pro-Muslim Brotherhood and/or pro-Turkish representatives as well as security arrangements that make room for Haftar's forces.

To reconcile these reciprocal interests, both sides will likely need to make concessions. Ankara may have to accept that a future unity government might not be explicitly pro-Turkey and that interim security arrangements should include Haftar-led forces. On the other hand, Haftar's backers may have to accept that politicians and military officials who have been on the opposite side will be part of the transitional governing and security arrangements. All may need to agree to stop using foreign fighters in Libya and to refrain from actions that fuel the war.

V. Conclusion

By intervening militarily in the Libyan conflict, Ankara hoped to help the UN-backed Tripoli government stand its ground against Haftar's offensive and to speed up the political process. This decision was driven by Ankara's concerns that a Haftar victory would result in strategic losses for Turkey in North Africa and the eastern Mediterranean. To some extent, the gambit paid off: the Turkish intervention contained Haftar's forces' advance into Tripoli. But it also incurred undeniable costs. It spurred a strong counter-mobilisation and triggered an escalatory cycle that, far from promoting a political settlement, prolongs and exacerbates an already deadly war. To break it, external supporters of local warring parties will probably need to seek mutual accommodation and encourage their allies to agree to a ceasefire. If all involved foreign parties seek ways to bring their respective Libyan allies around the table to pursue compromise, they may find ways forward that better meet their own interests as well.

April 2020

Appendix A: Map of Maritime Delimitation Areas