



Turkey's Involvement in the Libyan Conflict, the Geopolitics of the Eastern Mediterranean and Drone Warfare

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STRATEGIC UPDATE



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of the Eastern Mediterranean
and Drone Warfare**

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Although Ankara's relationship with Muammar Gaddafi had many ups and downs, Libya had an important place in the post-Cold War re-assessments of Turkish foreign policy that envisaged Turkey as an inter-civilisational powerhouse.

Introduction

Long-time leader Muammar Gaddafi more than a decade ago. The conflict, which began as a part of the Arab Spring in 2011, transformed into an internationalised civil war where foreign governments provided weapons, money, and even fighters to opposing sides on the ground. Today, peace is fragile, political polarisation is high, and the involvement

influence developments in Libya. Ankara's interventions, especially its military involvement, have raised questions about what Turkey's endgame in Libya is.

Turkey's policy toward Libya, including geopolitical considerations, economic interests, and the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government's policy

been able shape the course of the conflict in line with its preferences, countering the influence of the rebel general, Khalifa Haftar, in the country. It identifies recent trends in Turkish foreign policy behaviour, namely a certain shift in Ankara's foreign policy approach from an emphasis on soft power and multilateralism in the early years of the AKP era to a more hawkish approach based on the projection of hard power—unilaterally, if necessary—as seen in several conflicts in Turkey's neighbourhood. It also looks at the way in which Ankara has projected hard power, focusing on the use of

unmanned aerial vehicles in Libya and beyond, and draws attention to broader debates concerning modern warfare and lethal autonomous weapons.

to maintain and expand its influence in Libya and in the wider region. It

development of mutually beneficial ties with Libya, but also to international

the 2020 ceasefire agreement for achieving sustainable peace in Libya.

Turkey's engagement with Libya and the geopolitics of the eastern Mediterranean

Turkey's involvement in the Libyan conflict can be seen in the broader context of Turkey's pursuit of greater influence in the eastern Mediterranean

Ankara's support for the UN-recognised Tripoli-based government in Libya, the Government of National Accord (GNA), was the desire to secure Turkey's geopolitical interests in the

Most notably, the deal signed in 2019 between the Turkish government and the GNA to demarcate maritime borders was

was about Turkey's presence in the Libyan conflict. Specifically, the deal, which triggered protest from Greece, Cyprus, and Egypt, showed that Ankara regarded Libya as a strategic partner

Libya has a long history of being strategically important in Ankara's

and into the early 2000s, Turkish foreign policy makers often emphasised capitalising on the country's

notable example was the development of the Africa Action Plan (1998), which later paved the way to Turkey's policy of "Opening to Africa" (2005), through which Turkish foreign policy makers turned their attention to the whole of the African continent with the aim of boosting Turkey's global outreach.

Following the AKP's rise to power in Turkey in the 2000s, which corresponds with the time when Libya normalised its relations with the West and discontinued its nuclear programme, bilateral relations between Turkey and Libya were greatly improved. In Tripoli in 2009, then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, accompanied by a large group of business leaders and government ministers, highlighted that the Turkish government saw Libya as a "vital partner in Turkey's Opening to Africa strategy",

and economic cooperation in the Mediterranean, and signed bilateral agreements covering a wide

zones. Turkish policy makers were

would potentially have faced in the

had been harmed in Libya. They also
did not wish to jeopardise the mutually
beneficial relationship they had built

with Gaddafi before the Arab Spring. F B KpP I Ppl X K 2 #a! S X M•# M I

conditions created by the government's close relations with Tripoli, have been

in Libya.

hubs, such as in the Libyan port city of Misrata, where their European counterparts (e.g., major French firms)

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Emphasis on hard power

An example of such power struggle can be seen in how Turkey and Egypt

in Libya. Explaining the deterioration of Turkey's relations with Egypt requires

government has pursued following the Arab uprisings. For various reasons, mostly ideological, Ankara sided with Islamists aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt at the expense of cutting diplomatic ties with Cairo. Specifically, following the July 2013 coup d'état, Ankara sided with Egypt's ousted President, Mohamed Morsi,

leader of the country. Consequently, tensions were raised to the point of burning bridges with the new government in Cairo, who expelled Turkey's ambassador in November 2013. As of this writing, Turkey does not have an ambassador in Egypt, however

Libyan war, the success of the GNA also meant that Ankara's interests would prevail over the interests of Cairo, who provided arms to General Haftar in his pursuit of dominance in Libya.

for Morsi in Istanbul in June 2019, Turkish President Erdoğan referred to Morsi as "our martyr" and condemned Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi for being a "tyrant".
press conference, he explained that Turkey was providing arms to the GNA because the GNA lacked defensive

Libya without delay.

with Libya and therefore cannot be

other foreign powers, whom Turkey's as "illegitimate". He also said Turkey agrees that "many foreign fighters and mercenaries present in Libya" should withdraw, but underlined that "foreign

there should not be confused". things considered, it remains to be seen how international politics and the political process in Libya will play out and what the implications might be for Ankara's presence and influence in Libya.

"Drone war" in Libya, Turkish drones, and killer robots

Another interesting aspect of Turkey's involvement in Libya which is worthy of

aerial vehicles (UCAVs), or drones.

Air and Space Power Conference in July 2020, the United Kingdom Defence Secretary Ben Wallace talked about "the threats and opportunities we face in the new domains of warfare" and added, "we need to look at the lessons of others. Look how Turkey has been operating in Libya where it has used Bayraktar TB-2 UAVs since mid-2019 [...] Even if only half of these claims

changing". Reports on Turkey's use of drones in Syria and Libya and how

have highlighted how these drones "reshape battlefields" and discussed Turkey's growing drone industry.

The use of drones in warfare is not something new. They have most notably

its "global war on terror" for carrying

Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere. What is arguably different now is that there are many new players and a more diverse group of powers—not just major powers but also smaller middle-powers such as Turkey, who invest in their own drone programmes

purposes both at home (e.g., in counter insurgency) and abroad (e.g., in military

The UN's Special Representative for

types of drones, and noted various foreign powers who provided weapons technology to fighting groups. Having the upper hand in the air arguably resulted in gains on the ground. This was most evident when General Haftar's campaign to capture Tripoli came to abrupt end after Turkey's military intervention on the side of the GNA and provision of sophisticated weapons, including combat drones with precision air strike capabilities, turned the tide in the conflict.³⁵

Turkey's arms industry has grown significantly over

been a niche area of focus. They have attracted wider interest after their deployment in Syria and Libya, possibly due to their effective use in battlefields and ability to counter the advances of Russian-backed forces. To give a specific example, Poland purchased Bayraktar TB2 drones, becoming the first NATO country

During a visit to Turkey, the Polish Foreign Minister Zbigniew Rau referred to these drones as "battle-proven and effective" and said they would "strengthen capabilities of the Polish Army and contribute to the reinforcement of NATO's Eastern Flank". Today, these drones are most notably used by Ukraine against Russian forces in the ongoing war which started in February 2022. They are also

Furthermore, there are wider political

to the use of technology in warfare,

autonomy with which some weapons

weapons systems (LAWS), broadly speaking, refers to the degree of human control over the actions or specific tasks the weapons systems undertake.

“Killer robots”, i.e., fully autonomous weapons systems that can select targets and make kill decisions without human intervention, is an idea that has been

artificially intelligent systems.

Endnotes

- 1 A new unity government, the Government of National Unity, took office in March 2021 with an aim of unifying rival administrations in the east and the west.
- 2 See e.g., Sinan Ülgen and Aslı Aydıntaşbaş, "A Conflict Could Be Brewing in the Eastern Mediterranean. Here's How to Stop It", *The Washington Post*, 17 September 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/09/17/conflict-could-be-brewing-eastern-mediterranean-heres-how-stop-it/>; Galip Dalay, "Turkey, Europe, and the Eastern Mediterranean: Charting a way out of the current deadlock", *Brookings Doha Center*, 28 January 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/turkey-europe-and-the-eastern-mediterranean-charting-a-way-out-of-the-current-deadlock/>; Reuters, "U.N. registers Turkey-Libya maritime deal - Turkish ministry", 2 October 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-turkey-libya-un-idUKKBN26NOZS>.
- 3 This visit did not go as expected – Necmettin Erbakan became a target of

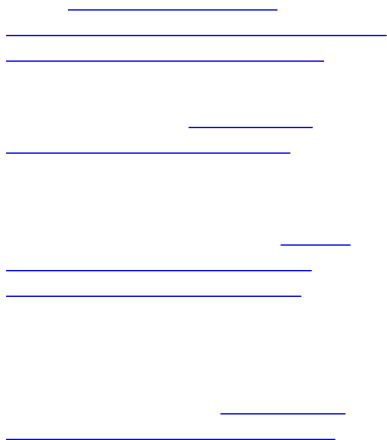


Sino-North Africa relations", *The Brookings Institution*, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/china-in-the-mediterranean-implications-of-expanding-sino-north-africa-relations/>.

- 14 TRT, "Trkiye'nin Libya'ya ihracatı 826 milyon dolara ykseldi" [Turkish exports to Libya increased to \$826m], 15 May 2021, <https://www.trthaber.com/haber/ekonomi/turkiyenin-libyaya-ihracati-826-milyon-dolara-yukseldi-580957.html>.
- 15 *Milliyet*, "Svey kanalındaki kaza Libya'nın Trkiye iin önemini ortaya koydu" [The Suez Canal blockage show25>8 0052>93l.2 00490(w)1.5 4.4 E1 Tf004B>14004C>15y4.5 (/8m)-0.6 (w (/7.3 (a)7-F.4 (n23R3.2

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- 47 See e.g. Maria Cramer, "A.I. Drone May Have Acted on Its Own in Attacking Fighters, U.N. Says", *The New York Times*, 3 June 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/03/world/africa/libya-drone.html>; David Hambling, "Drones may have attacked humans fully autonomously for the first time", *New Scientist*, 27 May 2021, <https://www.newscientist.com/article/2278852-drones-may-have-attacked-humans-fully-autonomously-for-the-first-time/>; Vivek Wadhwa and Alex Salkever, "Killer Flying Robots Are Here. What Do We Do Now?" *Foreign Policy*, 5 July 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/07/05/killer-flying-robots-drones-autonomous-ai-artificial-intelligence-facial-recognition-targets-turkey-libya/>.
- 48 See e.g., Ulrike Franke, "Laws on LAWS? Germany" <https://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/publications/working-papers/2021/07/05/laws-on-laws-germany>.





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Dr Bu r a Süsl er's Strategic Update explains Turkish foreign policy-making around a fragile Libya, highlighting its impact on power dynamics in the North Africa and the Middle East, as well as opening a gateway to sub-Saharan Africa. The paper addresses Turkey's regional economic and political motives, the AKP's increasingly hawkish use of hard power—especially the diplomatic and ethical implications of the Turkish military's specialisation in drone warfare—and Ankara's desire to maintain mutually beneficial relations with Libyan power-brokers key to post-civil war reconstruction.