



PERSPECTIVES

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Turkey and the Libyan and Syrian Civil Wars

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Turkey under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is constantly looking for opportunities to enhance its status as a regional superpower and promote its Islamist ideology in the Arab Middle East. Libya is the newest arena in which Erdoğan is trying to capitalize on inter-Arab rivalries, this time in service to his desire to lay claim to gas under the seabed of the Mediterranean.

The so-called “Arab Spring,” which erupted in late 2010, brought several Arab countries to a state of near or in some cases total collapse. Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan saw this as an opportunity to further his perpetual quest for broad regional power. Earlier in 2010, prior to the uprisings, he had sent the Mavi Marmara cruise ship to “save” Hamas in Gaza from the “Zionist blockade.” In February 2011, following the ousting of President Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, he threw Turkish support behind the Muslim Brotherhood and provided support to Qatar, the Brotherhood’s main financier.

Recently, a representative of the Khalifa Haftar government in Libya was named ambassador to Syria. He reopened the Libyan embassy in Damascus with the full consent of Assad’s government. The embassy had shut its doors in 2013, as did all Arab League diplomatic missions in Damascus following the suspension of Syria’s membership in that organization. That occurred in response to the Assad regime’s refusal to comply with a 2011 League resolution mandating a ceasefire in the Syrian civil war.

Khalifa Haftar’s rival in the bicephalic control system that has ruled Libya since the start of the second Libyan civil war in 2014 is the Tripoli-based

Government of National Accord. That government has signed cooperation agreements in the economic, energy, security, military, and maritime borders areas with Ankara, its chief ally and patron. Ankara is also a supporter of the rebel groups currently fighting Assad in Syria.

The creation of these two oppositional axes—Assad-Haftar vs. Tripoli-Ankara—deserves notice. Other theaters of conflict that are still simmering ten years after the explosion of the “Arab Spring” undoubtedly contributed to the alignment of Haftar with Assad and pushed Fayeze Sarraj’s Government of National Accord into Erdoğan’s arms. These practical alignments have deep ideological common denominators: on the one hand the remains of “Arab nationalism,” which is claimed by both the Baath party of Assad’s Syria and by Haftar’s Libyan National Army; and on the other hand the primarily Islamic Brotherhood foundations that underpin both Erdoğan’s policies and Tripoli’s orientation.

The implications of these new alliances are not confined to their immediate theaters of conflict (Idlib in Syria and Misrata and Tripoli in Libya). Russia and Turkey have been trying to cooperate with one another for some time, but keep supporting opposite sides in Middle Eastern conflicts. This occurred in Syria and is happening again in Libya. Turkish forces are being sent to reinforce Sarraj’s forces in the battle for Tripoli, where they find themselves fighting “official Russian mercenaries” (the Wagner group, which captured Crimea and provinces in Donbass in eastern Ukraine) that have been incorporated into the Libyan National Army. Israel, Cyprus, and Greece find themselves blocked by the sudden delineation of a direct maritime border between distant Turkey and Libya, a border that threatens the maritime gas line from Israel to Europe. The anti-Muslim-Brotherhood Sisi government in Egypt is menaced by a disquieting Islamic Turkish presence on its western border. NATO members France and Greece are supporting Haftar’s forces while the US, the UK, and Italy support Sarraj’s.

Hulusi Akar, the current Turkish minister of defense and former Turkish chief of staff who headed NATO’s military missions in Afghanistan, Bosnia, and Kosovo and commanded most of the Turkish involvement in the Syrian Civil War, now oversees the Turkish military intervention in the second Libyan civil war. The deployment of troops to support Sarraj’s forces started on January 5, 2020, and consists mainly of rebel fighters from the anti-Assad Syrian National Army accompanied by Turkish military “advisors.” Six thousand of those fighters have already been deployed, and they have suffered 151 combat casualties so far.

It seems that combining elements of the second Libyan Civil War with the Syrian Civil War is adding fuel to the fire and perpetuating these conflicts, which arose from the “Arab Spring.”

The violence in Libya will continue to devastate that oil-producing country as long as domestic rivalries are supported by external intervention. The Turkish involvement in Libya and Syria prolongs the agonies of the Libyan and Syrian people and propels more refugees toward Europe. Turkey’s intervention in Arab countries should be viewed by the world as a major crime against those countries and Europe alike.

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