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UAE-Turkey Rivalry Wreaks Havoc in Libya and Syria

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The United Arab Emirates and Turkey are locked in a regional power struggle that has fueled conflict in Libya and could spark renewed fighting in Syria. This struggle, like that between Saudi Arabia and Iran, threatens to keep the Middle East and North Africa on edge.

The Saudi-Iranian dispute might dominate headlines, but a similar rivalry between Turkey and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is wreaking just as much havoc in the Middle East and North Africa.

While Saudi Arabia may have a leg up on Iran in some ways, Turkey and the UAE are at a virtual draw.

In Libya, forces of the Turkish-backed, Tripoli-based internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) are pushing UAE-backed rebels led by renegade Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar out of western Libya. In addition to the UAE, Haftar has support from Saudi Arabia and Egypt, with whom Turkey is also at odds.

In contrast to Libya, Turkey is discovering that in Syria the odds are stacked against it, even if its objectives in the country are more limited.

In Libya, Turkish support for the GNA amounts to an effort to shape who controls the country as well as its energy-rich waters in the Eastern Mediterranean. In Syria, Turkey is determined to a) prevent Syrian Kurdish nationalist forces from establishing a permanent and meaningful presence on its borders and b) control jihadist forces in Idlib, the last major Syrian rebel stronghold.

The US abandonment of its alliance with the Kurds in the fight against the Islamic State pushed the Kurds toward cooperation with the regime of Syrian President Bashar Assad. The Kurds expect this cooperation to shield them from Turkish efforts to push them further out of border areas.

At the same time, Turkey—already home to 3.6 million Syrian refugees (the largest single concentration of Syrians fleeing their war-torn and dilapidated homeland)—wants to stymie a potential new influx of many more refugees if and when Idlib falls to Russian-backed Syrian government forces.

The UAE-Turkish rivalry, which is rooted in a battle for dominance of global Muslim religious soft power; geopolitical competition across the Muslim world, including the Middle East and the Horn of Africa; and fundamentally opposed attitudes toward political Islam, has escalated military confrontations and severely complicated efforts to resolve the conflicts in Libya and Syria.

The UAE-Turkey scorecard is 1:1, and so far, Turkey has a winning hand in Libya.

In Syria, however, few doubt that Turkey will struggle to secure its interests with a firmly reinstated Assad, who is backed not only by Russia and Iran but also the UAE.

UAE Crown Prince Muhammad bin Zayed reportedly [promised](#) Assad \$3 billion in April, of which \$250 million was paid up front. This was intended to break the ceasefire in Idlib imposed on Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan by his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin.

Russia appears to have successfully thwarted Prince Muhammad's move.

The Emirati crown prince had hoped to tie Turkey up in fighting in Syria, which would complicate Turkish military support for the GNA in Libya. Assad's failure to take up the offer likely contributed to Turkey's recent ability to successfully focus on Libya.

The UAE does have one strategic advantage. Turkey's reputation in Washington, DC, much like that of Saudi Arabia, is severely tarnished. The UAE has skillfully evaded a similar fate so far, enjoying not only close ties with the US but also with Russia.

Turkish-US relations are strained over multiple issues, including Turkey's acquisition of Russia's acclaimed S-400 anti-missile defense system, its close cooperation with Russia and Iran, and the continued presence in the US of

Fethullah Gülen, a Turkish preacher whom Erdoğan accuses of staging the failed 2016 military attempt to remove him from office.

The Trump administration has nevertheless offered Turkey ammunition to be used in military operations in northeastern Syria as well as humanitarian assistance in a hopeless bid to persuade Ankara to push back Iranian forces in the country.

In a surprise move, Erdoğan recently demoted and then accepted the resignation of [Rear Admiral Cihat Yayci](#), the popular architect of Turkey's intervention in Libya and aggressive stance in the Eastern Mediterranean. Yayci is believed to be an anti-Western Eurasianist who advocates closer Turkish relations with Russia and China.

Turkey's ties to Russia are equally complex.

While Turkey and Russia support opposing sides in Libya, they have for the most part been able to balance their interests in Syria so far. Those interests sometimes coincide and sometimes diverge, leading earlier this year to clashes between Turkish and Syrian forces.

In Libya, Turkish drones allegedly destroyed a [Russian-made Pantsir air defense system](#) even as hundreds of Russian mercenaries working for the [Wagner Group](#), which has close ties to the Kremlin, reportedly supported Haftar's forces.

If Russia's support for Haftar is its attempt to capitalize on an opportunity to stoke a fire, the UAE's backing reflects Prince Muhammad's determination to confront political Islam across the Middle East and North Africa.

"Turkey and the UAE [are] engaged in a regional power struggle. They see it as a zero-sum game in which there is no way for both sides to win. If one wins, the other one loses," said Sinan Ulgen, a former Turkish diplomat and chairman of the Istanbul-based Center for Economics and Foreign Policy Studies (EDAM).

This zero-sum game is being played on proxy battlefields, and it bodes ill for those unwillingly sucked into it.

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