



Will Israel Find Itself Facing Down Iran, Turkey, and the US in Libya?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Israel does not need to be directly engaged in combat to help its allies confront and prevail over mutual adversaries. In Libya, it can play a role in training LNA troops, provide important logistical and intelligence support, and politically influence Washington to cease its backing of the GNA and hostile Islamist militias and state actors.

[Several reports](#) (most recently in *Makor Rishon*) have been published on Libyan National Army (LNA) outreach toward Israel. The LNA makes the point that Libyans and Israel have common foes in Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, his Syrian mercenaries, and the militias affiliated with the Islamist Government of National Accord (GNA). The LNA posits that it can work together with Israel to thwart the expansion of a hostile Islamist network in North Africa.

There has been no news of a response from Jerusalem or any evidence of its involvement in the theater of operations. However, Israel is already assisting some of Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar's backers—Egypt, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia—in other operations against threats that are now reemerging in heavily populated urban areas in western Libya that are under the control of the GNA.

There are several complications Israel must consider regarding involvement in the Libyan theater. First and foremost, the GNA militias in Misrata have [enjoyed US support](#) since 2011. The US did not shift its stand even after reports of a [sanctioned Iranian vessel](#) making its way to local shores from a Bulgarian port.

The trajectory of the container ship should not be surprising. Iran and Bulgaria [widened](#) cooperation on ports and maritime security in 2019, making Bulgaria an outpost for a fleet of unwelcome Iranian vessels. These [cargo and bulk shipment](#)

[barges](#) travel all over the world, as far as [Bangladesh and Brazil](#). Presumably they are used to smuggle contraband of various types.

Despite evidence that the GNA detained and may have inspected the Iranian ship, it is more likely that the inspectors assisted in the unloading of a shipment of arms that ended up in the hands of GNA militias and Iranian mercenaries. The Turkish correspondent for Qatar-backed *Middle East Eye* [confirmed](#) that according to a statement by Iranian FM Muhammad Zarif, Iran and Turkey agree on Libya, as they do on many other issues.

Earlier analysis of the events projected that Iran would [stay in the background](#) of this conflict, not wishing to exacerbate tensions with Moscow or overextend its own troops by openly siding with Turkey—an alliance that until very recently was very much in doubt among pro-Turkish lobbyists in Washington. In fact, the cornerstone of US policy in the region has been to appease Turkey in the vain hope that pacifying Erdoğan would make him useful in countering Iran's aggression in the region.

Instead, Erdoğan's Turkey has become part and parcel of the intertwined geopolitical agenda between the two countries. Iran appears to be limiting its involvement to arms provision—though new evidence is emerging that loosely affiliated Iran-backed Shiite Iraqi fighters known as “Saraya Ansar” have entered the fray. According to Ben Minick, this group of pro-Iran combatants recently [entered](#) Misrata through Turkey. The Libyan Human Rights Center provided [photos](#) of an Iraqi presence on the ground, lending credence to reports of Iran's escalating role in this increasingly complicated conflict. On the other side, Sudanese and Chad-based mercenaries have [allegedly entered](#) the conflict backed by Egypt, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia.

While the Russians appear to be pursuing their own agenda of influence in the region while backing Haftar, the African mercenaries seem to be more integrated into the Anti-Terrorist Quartet network of allies. In the past, the Sarraj government has blamed these mercenaries for escalating the violence. All the evidence indicates, however, that the GNA is much more to blame for civilian casualties.

There are increasing reports of a [resurgent ISIS and al-Qaeda presence](#), some of whom are entering via Tunisia, as well as of Nusra affiliates backed by Qatar finding a new theater of war in which to back Turkey against a year of LNA advances and victories. There are reports of [gross human rights abuses](#) by GNA militias, which boast of a heavy [criminal, Islamist, and terrorist](#) contingent in their midst. Some of these militias are in fact [linked](#) to the attack on the US Embassy in Benghazi that killed US Ambassador Chris Stevens and three others. Benghazi has since been liberated by the LNA, but according to local sources, sleeper cells of Islamist militias are still on the ground and have issued death threats to active LNA affiliates in the area.

Recent events should be viewed as more than just another scuffle and temporary escalation following the switching of allegiances to LNA by GNA-affiliated tribes (some of which once supported Qaddafi). The tribes made this move following the GNA's failure to hold up its end of the financial and social bargain and concentration of most of its resources in the hands of urban elites and Islamists.

Iran and Turkey are converging on plans to gain control of most of Africa, which is rich with natural resources and material for smuggling and money-laundering such as [gold](#), [diamonds](#), phosphates, and [rare minerals](#), as well as key naval bases and shipping routes.

Turkey has articulated a "[defense line](#)" by which it hopes to restore the boundaries of the Ottoman Empire from its own shores to Libya and onward, presumably as far as the Gates of Vienna. It has reached out to all sorts of Islamists ranging from former ISIS fighters to Salafist extremists and Muslim Brotherhood members to Khomeinists and Iraqi militias in an effort to cobble together a coalition of the willing—but also to [bridge the ideological divide](#) between the groups and eventually subsume them.

While the official goal of the newly formed Islamist bloc that Turkey recently joined is to counter Saudi Arabia's influence in the Middle East and the world, the far greater source of regional influence in Turkey's vision of the Ottoman borders is erstwhile colony and now Ankara's nemesis, Egypt.

Egypt is a strong military power, and it has declared Libya to be a national security priority. Should Egypt enter the war, the conflict could escalate to a direct confrontation with Turkish troops, which would be very damaging to Ankara. However, Cairo remains the ultimate prize in Erdoğan's populist rhetoric. While there is no real hope of conquering over 100 million Egyptians with the forces Erdoğan now has under his control, it is entirely possible that Egypt could be drawn into a costly extended conflagration that destabilizes everything around it. A prolonged conflict could build a stronger alliance of Islamists and their ideological backers and funders throughout North Africa. In the event that most of the region falls to Islamism, the ideological vitriol of the Muslim Brotherhood could make its way back to Egypt, where the security threat it poses has not been fully eradicated despite President Sisi's best efforts. The Muslim Brotherhood [still lingers](#) in Egypt on the level of education, culture, and the media.

Iran, for its own part, seeks to [export](#) the Islamic Revolution, but just as importantly to create a network of Islamist militias and combatant supporters who can be called upon to launder money, engage in intelligence gathering and other active measures, subsidize Iran's shadow economy through an assortment of globalized criminal schemes, or even attack targets anywhere in the world. For that reason, Iran has been

willing to [align](#) with local separatist or terrorist movements like the Polisario Front in North Africa. The Islamic regime is subsidizing and training Nigerian militias to become yet another serious, well-armed organization following the models of Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis, and is even willing to engage with Sunni Islamists who share some basic ideological and revolutionary precepts and are willing to share intelligence. This explains why Iran was happy to [cooperate](#) with Muslim Brotherhood figurehead Muhammad Morsi during his brief tenure as president of Egypt.

Turkey's ambitions, therefore, do not stand in Iran's way. Iran cannot topple the Egyptian government on its own, but should an Islamist supporter ever regain power in the heavily Sunni country, the Islamic Republic could count on a far friendlier reception as well as intelligence and operational coordination.

This leaves Israel facing sprawling networks of enemies with global plans far beyond the borders of Libya. Both groups of enemies are dedicated to a supranational vision of empires and caliphates that eschew national borders. They are racially and ethnically supremacist and ideologically radical, fundamentalist, and revolutionary.

As of now, Israel is in a tricky situation, given that LNA has been suffering setbacks due to Turkey's ability to overwhelm its forces with scores of new recruits from every conceivable background. In addition, [according to Seth Frantzman](#), the LNA troops are poorly trained and have very limited real backing from their allies. These are the two fronts where Israel can be helpful without having to get directly involved. Jerusalem could also—and, indeed, should—prevail upon Washington to withdraw its support from terrorists and Islamists before they end up coming head to head with America's real allies. Those allies include Israel, which will not allow its security to be jeopardizing by sprawling, sweeping bands of extremists.

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