



Turkey's Military Intervention in Libya: A Surprise Triumph for Erdogan

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Turkey's intervention in Libya transformed the strategic balance of a years-long conflict and bolstered its geopolitical standing in the eastern Mediterranean.

In early January, Turkey embarked on an ambitious military intervention in Libya, which aimed to repel the Libyan National Army (LNA)'s advance on Tripoli, led by Khalifa Haftar, and revive the flagging fortunes of the UN-recognised Government of National Accord (GNA). As Turkey was the GNA's sole military backer and the LNA, which is supported by the UAE, Egypt, Russia, France and Saudi Arabia, was about to capture the city of Sirte, prospects for a successful Turkish offensive appeared slim. In spite of these long odds, Turkey, with the assistance of Syrian proxy militias, reversed Haftar's momentum and [expelled](#) his forces from the strategically significant Al-Wattiyah airbase on 18 May.

As Turkey's recent combat experience has been confined to intermittent campaigns in nearby territories, such as northeastern Syria and northern Iraq, Turkey's military intervention in Libya is a landmark success. Turkey's counter-offensive succeeded due to its first-strike advantage, as its rivals underestimated its resolve to intervene in Libya, and the Turkish military's effective use of proxy militias, air power and stealth weaponry. As the GNA continues its military advance, Turkey has bolstered its influence in the eastern Mediterranean. This increase in Turkey's influence allows it to exert diplomatic leverage in Libya and has encouraged its rivals to contain its rising influence, with mixed success.

How Turkey Leveraged its First-Strike Advantage in Libya

Although Turkey's deployment of air power and efficient use of drones contributed greatly to its military success in Libya, Turkey's repeated ability to surprise the LNA's backers with swift escalations strengthened the GNA's position on the ground. The combination of Turkey's effective leveraging of a first-strike advantage and the delayed reactions of the LNA's allies enhanced the efficacy of Turkish combat operations. Even though Turkey had [struck](#) a landmark maritime security deal with the GNA in November 2019 and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan warned on 9 December that he would [deploy troops](#) to Libya if Turkey was invited by the GNA, the expansive scope of Turkey's military intervention surprised its adversaries. This surprise was understandable, as [critical voices](#) within Turkey warned of a Vietnam-style war of attrition in Libya and polls showed 58% of the Turkish public [opposed](#) a military intervention in Libya. However, the LNA's backers ultimately overestimated the restraining forces on Turkey's involvement in Libya.

Once Turkey's military intervention in Libya gained steam, the [devaluation](#) of Turkey's lira and uncertainties about its ability to prosecute a two-front war in Syria and Libya perpetuated doubts amongst the LNA's sponsors about Erdogan's resolve. As a result, Turkey sent 2,000 Syrian [proxies](#) to Libya in early January, which was not reciprocated by comparably large

deployments from the LNA's backers. Even though Turkey had used Free Syrian Army proxies effectively during its October 2019 Operation *Peace Spring* offensive in northern Syria, the LNA's allies were confident that Ankara would not replicate this success in Libya and that rising casualties would halt Turkey's advance. Russian state media outlet *RIA Novosti* [contended](#) on 10 January that Turkey's military intervention would embolden Haftar by exacerbating rifts within the GNA's coalition. As late as 10 February, Salman Al-Dossary, a prominent Saudi commentator on foreign affairs, [predicted](#) that Turkish-aligned militias 'will turn on themselves, if they no longer have anything to eat up'.

The threat of retaliatory Egyptian military intervention has not precipitated a change in Turkey's policy in Libya

As a result of the swift expansion of Turkey's military intervention and the LNA's belated response to Ankara's actions, Turkey had [deployed](#) 13,000 Syrian proxies to Libya by mid-May. In contrast to Turkey's rapid mobilisation of additional manpower, Russia had only [between](#) 1,200 to 2,000 Wagner Group private military contractors on the ground. The UAE's belated efforts to recruit Sudanese mercenaries

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Moscow. Erdogan warned on 9 December that he would deploy troops to Libya if Turkey was invited by the GNA. Yet the scale of Turkey's intervention has shocked other players in the conflict. *Courtesy of Kremlin.ru*



to Libya, and Russia's deployment of Syrian government-aligned forces to Libya, with the alleged consent of Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad, insufficiently countered Turkey's deployments in the months that followed.

Turkey's military intervention on the GNA's behalf has been a resounding success

The magnitude of Turkey's first-strike advantage was compounded by the LNA-aligned coalition's strategic dissonance. The UAE's unilateral military operations in Libya have created frictions with Egypt, which refrained from using its deterrence capacity against Turkey and desired a firmer pivot towards diplomacy after the LNA's defeat in Al-Wattiyah. France and Russia's desire to maintain a balancing strategy between the LNA and GNA also restrained the escalation of their military operations on Haftar's behalf. The cohesiveness of the GNA's coalition, which smoothly

transitioned from defensive to counter-offensive operations as Haftar's forces retreated, contrasted with the divisions amongst the LNA's backers, and allowed Turkey's offensive to progress with fewer impediments than expected.

The Critical Role of Turkey's Use of Air Power and Stealth Weaponry in Libya

In addition to Turkey's first-strike advantage in Libya and swift deployment of proxy militias on the GNA's behalf, the success of Turkey's military intervention has hinged on its effective use of air power and drone technologies. During the initial weeks of Haftar's offensive on Tripoli, which began in April 2019, the LNA possessed a decisive advantage in terms of aerial capabilities and stealthy weaponry. Emirati pilots regularly used Chinese Wing Loong drones, which can precisely strike targets from a 1500-kilometre radius, and the LNA's control over Al-Khadim airbase in eastern Libya consolidated its aerial advantage. Although civilian casualties

caused by these airstrikes tarnished Haftar's international reputation, the LNA's aerial advantage besieged Tripoli and limited the ability of the GNA's principal partners, such as Italy, Qatar and Turkey, to remotely assist its largely immobilised army.

The entry of Turkish air power into Libya and in particular, Turkey's Bayraktar TB2 drones, helped overhaul the conflict's strategic balance. Turkey's ability to neutralise the UAE's Wing Loong drones was evident by September 2019. In military operations conducted during the summer of 2019, Turkey showed that it could use roads instead of runways to launch Bayraktar TB2 drones, and operated relay antenna spanning from Tripoli to Jufra to extend the reach of its drones. The ability of Bayraktar TB2 drones to avoid detection by LNA and UAE forces encouraged Turkey to make air power a central feature of its military intervention in January. Turkey's air cover assisted the GNA's ground advance, and Bayraktar TB2 drones have overpowered at least three of Russia's Pantsir S1 missile defence systems, which the UAE

purchased from Russia for use in Libya.

In addition to the technical sophistication and versatility of Turkish Bayraktar TB2 drones, Turkey's air war in Libya succeeded due to Ankara's ability to test out its stealth weaponry technology in Syria and strategic miscalculations by the LNA's main sponsors. During its 27 February to 6 March Operation *Spring Shield* offensive in Idlib, Turkish drones overpowered a diverse array of Russian weapons systems, including T-55, T-62 and T-72 tanks, as well as the Pantsir S1. Turkish military operations killed at least 197 Syrian army and Hizbullah troops, and Turkish-backed Syrian rebels seized the town of Saraqib, which is located at the intersection of the strategically vital M4 and M5 highways. Turkey achieved swift and decisive military successes in Idlib through the synthesis of drone strikes, conventional air power and a ground offensive, which provided an ideal prototype for a similar Turkish triumph in Libya.

In spite of the demonstrable success of Turkey's use of stealth weaponry in Syria, the LNA's principal allies did not marshal sufficient resources to stem the GNA's counter-offensive. Since early January, the LNA has been almost exclusively reliant on UAE air support, which consisted of drone strikes and the illegal supply of 11,000 tonnes of jet fuel to Benghazi. France has periodically flown jets over Libya's territory, in spite of strenuous objections from the GNA, but Paris's power projection displays have only resulted in the provision of limited logistical support for the LNA's offensive against Misrata.

Although the Egyptian air force redeployed jets to bases near the Libyan border on 13 January, in order to protect *Qadir 2020* drill participants from Turkey, Egypt has refrained from carrying out cross-border raids into Libya, like it did against the Islamic State in February 2015. Egypt's announcement on 20 June that it was prepared to militarily intervene in Libya is unlikely to radically overhaul Cairo's policy of restraint. Discord among the LNA's backers surfaced immediately

after Egypt's statement. Saudi Arabia and the UAE endorsed a prospective Egyptian military intervention in Libya by citing Egypt's sovereign right to self-defence. Even though French President Emmanuel Macron castigated Turkey's 'dangerous game' in Libya and Russia consulted with Egypt on the Libyan crisis on 21 June, France and Russia have not green-lighted an Egyptian offensive. Given these contradictions, Egypt could launch limited operations to enhance its influence in eastern Libya or carry out airstrikes to stem Turkey's advance, but it is unlikely to engage in a full-fledged intervention.

The inchoate response of the LNA's main allies to Turkey's air war in Libya mirrored their slow reaction to Erdogan's announcement of a military intervention and struggles recruiting ground proxies on Haftar's behalf. Turkey's 10 May warning that Haftar's militias were legitimate targets for airstrikes and the GNA's victories in May belatedly spurred the LNA's allies to action. On 21 May, Khalifa Haftar threatened to launch air operations against Turkish positions in western Libya, and Russia swiftly deployed 14 MiG-29 and Su-24 jets to assist the LNA's operations. The entry of Russian jets into the Libyan war is unlikely to do more than stall Turkey's advance, as Russia's adherence to plausible deniability restricts its freedom of action in Libya. These restrictions ensure that Turkey's air power advantage in Libya will likely remain intact for the foreseeable future.

Can Turkey Carve Out a Diplomatic Role in Libya?

In addition to its ambitions of emerging as a decisive military stakeholder in Libya, Turkey also wishes to entrench itself as a critical stakeholder in a diplomatic resolution of the Libyan war. This objective became apparent during the first days of Turkey's military operations. On 8 January, Erdogan and Russian President Vladimir Putin jointly called for a ceasefire in Libya. Turkey also helped facilitate the visits of

GNA Prime Minister Fayez Al-Sarraj and Haftar to Moscow on 13 January, which ended in the LNA chieftain's abrupt withdrawal from the peace process. Although Turkey has pivoted towards a military-first strategy in Libya over the past several months, Turkish policymakers have leveraged their diplomatic influence in order to secure reconstruction contracts. In early March, the Turkey–Libya Business Council announced its plans to negotiate \$120 billion in reconstruction contracts with Libya, if the war's conclusion left the GNA firmly in an ascendant position.

In spite of Turkey's successful military campaign and potential to profit from a diplomatic resolution to the Libyan war, the LNA's partners continue to dominate diplomatic proceedings in Libya and create barriers for Turkey's entry as an arbiter. The Cairo Declaration, which was unveiled by Egypt's President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi on 6 June, has laid out the clearest path for a truce in Libya and has received support from Russia, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Jordan. However, Turkey views the Cairo Declaration negatively as it calls for the removal of 'foreign mercenaries' from Libya, and believes that this clause would apply to its Syrian proxies, but not to UAE-backed Sudanese forces or Russia's Wagner Group private military contractors. France's diplomatic forays, which have included recent consultations with Serraj and Sisi; and Russia's shuttle diplomacy, which has consisted of Russian Foreign Ministry-arranged meetings with Serraj, House of Representatives President Aguila Saleh, Italy and the African Union, also aim to prevent Turkey's military clout from turning into diplomatic leverage in Libya.

In order for Turkey to insert itself as a diplomatic stakeholder in Libya from a position of strength, Ankara has used military force to strengthen the GNA's bargaining position and courted the support of the US, NATO, and EU for its intervention in Libya. In response to the Cairo Declaration, the GNA escalated its counter-offensive against Sirte, in order to expel Haftar loyalists

from the city and force the LNA to complete its retreat to eastern Libya. Al-Serraj has emphatically [announced](#) his intention to defeat the 'criminal gangs and mercenaries' in Libya, which is a veiled reference to the LNA, and to continue the GNA's counter-offensive until Libya is united under its rule.

The threat of retaliatory Egyptian military intervention has not precipitated a change in Turkey's policy in Libya. The GNA declared that Sisi's 20 June [comments](#) calling for an Egyptian military intervention in Libya were a 'declaration of war', and Turkey [insisted](#) that Egypt's threats would not cause it to abandon the GNA. It remains unclear whether Turkey believes that it can realistically unite Libya under GNA rule, but this rhetoric and the GNA's offensive in Sirte suggest that Ankara might try to seize LNA-occupied oil reserves in southern Libya before encouraging the GNA to sue for peace.

Although the scale of Turkey's commitment to using military force as a diplomatic bargaining tool is unclear, its desire to court Western support is much more evident. On 8 June, Erdogan [spoke](#) to US President Donald Trump and both leaders vowed to cooperate on the stabilisation of Libya. The US Department of State's rhetorical transition from its 28 February [claims](#) that 'there is a role for Haftar in shaping Libya's political future' to a more unambiguous pro-GNA stance in recent weeks has also been positively received in Turkey. A 14 May [comment](#) by NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg, which showed support for the 'Tripoli government' and emphasised that NATO did not place the GNA and LNA in the 'same equation', was also welcomed in Ankara.

According to Tarek Megerisi, an expert on Libya at the European Council of Foreign Relations, Malta's decision to [veto funds](#) for Operation IRINI, the EU's mission to monitor Libya's arms embargo, showcased Turkish influence in Libya, and Ankara also welcomed the EU's [perceived criticism](#) of the Cairo Declaration on 8 June. Turkey also interpreted United States Africa

Command (AFRICOM) commander Stephen Townsend's 22 June [meeting](#) with Al-Serraj as a rejection of Egypt's threatened military intervention in Libya. Through indirect endorsements of its conduct by Western countries and institutions, Turkey seeks to push back against UAE-led efforts to delegitimise its military intervention in Libya and burnish its standing as a future diplomatic arbiter.

Even though the preponderance of international stakeholders in Libya continue to back the LNA, Turkey's military intervention on the GNA's behalf has been a resounding success. Turkey's ability to leverage its first-strike advantage, coordinate a strategically cohesive counter-offensive and use stealth weaponry with decisive impact ensures that its ascendancy in the military sphere will be hard to overcome. In the weeks ahead, Turkey hopes that the LNA's growing desperation and pressure from the US, EU and NATO will allow it to occupy a prominent diplomatic position in Libya and take a giant step towards securing future reconstruction contracts.

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