

TURKEY'S NEW FRONTLINE IN LIBYA

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Turkey's president has met with Prime Minister Fayeze Sarraj, the head of Libya's "recognized" government, following heightened tensions between Turkey and forces loyal to General Khalifa Haftar, head of the Libyan National Army (LNA), a rival Libyan authority. In a statement from his office on July 5, 2019, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan reiterated his support for Prime Minister Fayeze Sarraj's forces. Erdogan called on Haftar's forces to cease their attacks.¹

A statement from Sarraj's office said he discussed with Erdogan the developments in Libya and regional affairs, as well as opportunities for cooperation between their countries.

He also voiced his appreciation for Turkey's opposition to the offensive against Tripoli and its keenness on ensuring the success of the political settlement.²

In a telephone call on July 6, 2019, Erdogan spoke with Russian President Vladimir Putin about the Libyan crisis, among other topics. Haftar is backed by Russia, along with his Arab allies of the UAE and Egypt.³

General Khalifa Haftar, head of the Libyan National Army (LNA), has ordered his forces to attack Turkish ships and interests in the country. On June 28, 2019, his spokesman, General Ahmad Al-Mesmari, accused Turkey of backing his rival, the internationally recognized, Government of National Accord (GNA), in Libya's conflict.⁴

Since the fall of the Dictator Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, Libya is divided between an internationally backed government- the Government of National Accord (GNA), led by Fayeze al-Sarraj, based in Tripoli and a rival authority, the Tobruk government, formed by the House of Representatives elected in 2014 and dominated by general Khalifa Haftar, commander of the Libyan National Army (LNA), in the east and south of the country.

Both sides accuse each other of using foreign mercenaries and receiving military support from foreign powers. Haftar has the backing of the United Arab Emirates and Egypt and accuses Turkey and Qatar of supporting the GNA. Haftar launched a surprise attack in early April 2019, to take the Libyan capital, Tripoli, in an attempt to remove the Government of National Accord (GNA).

General Ahmad Al-Mesmari said that: “orders have been given to the air force to target Turkish ships and boats in Libyan territorial waters. Turkish strategic sites, companies and projects belonging to the Turkish state (in Libya) are considered legitimate targets by the armed forces, all Turkish nationals on Libyan territory will be arrested and all flights to and from Turkey will be banned.”⁵

Eastern Libyan forces loyal to Haftar ban any commercial flights from Libya to Turkey and Turkish ships from docking in the country, LNA Spokesman Ahmed al-Mesmari said. Benghazi’s Benina Airport, which is under Haftar forces’ control, canceled all flights to and from Turkey’s Istanbul, demanding passengers there to cancel their Istanbul-Benghazi tickets and book another Istanbul-Damascus-Benghazi ticket. Any aircraft arriving from Turkey attempting to land in the capital Tripoli would be treated as hostile, said Mismari, adding that the same would apply to Turkish ships docking at Libyan ports.⁶

In an official response to Haftar’s threats, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said that his country will take “necessary measures.” In a press conference on the sidelines of G20 Summit in Osaka, Japan, Erdogan said he hasn’t heard about this decision.

“If there is an order like this from Haftar, my colleagues will study (it). We have already taken the necessary measures regarding this anyway, and after this, we will take much more different measures,” he said.⁷

Turkey's defense minister, Hulusi Akar, said that Turkey will retaliate against any assault from Khalifa Haftar's forces in Libya. "There will be a very heavy price for hostile attitudes or attacks, we will retaliate in the most effective and strong way." He said Turkey's efforts in Libya sought to "contribute to peace and stability in the region".⁸

The escalation between the LNA and Turkey

Forces loyal to eastern Libyan commander Khalifa Haftar said on June 30, 2019, they have arrested two Turks over Turkey’s support for “militias” in Libya. The security department of Ajdabiya, located near the oil port of Brega, published pictures of two Turks on its website who it said it had detained, and called on citizens to report any Turk or Turkish firm operating in the town.⁹

Turkey’s foreign minister earlier accused Haftar’s supporters of arresting six of its citizens, and warned that the eastern forces would become a “legitimate target” if the Turks were not released immediately.¹⁰

Turkish Foreign Ministry on June 30, 2019, warned its citizens to stay away from conflict zones in Libya. Turkish Embassy in Tripoli on its website advised its citizens to avoid any steps that will jeopardize their security and safety in the regions under control of militia loyal to Khalifa Haftar.¹¹

Six Turkish nationals were freed after Turkey threatened action but the Libyan National Army denied on July 1, 2019, that they had arrested any foreign or Turkish citizens, adding that local authorities of the interim government in Ajdabiya had stopped two Turkish people to verify their presence and then released them immediately. Maj. Gen. Ahmed al-Mismari said: “we have no authority to arrest any Turkish resident in the country.”¹²

The LNA airstrikes in Tripoli

In a related development, the air force of the Libyan National Army (LNA) destroyed on June 30, 2019, a Turkish drone at Tripoli’s Mitiga military air base. The LNA said in a statement on Facebook: "Our fighter [jets] targeted and destroyed a Turkish Bayraktar drone as it was taking off. The aircraft had been prepared to target our armed forces' positions," it said.¹³ Haftar’s forces said they hit the drone in an air strike on Mitiga airport, part of a series of measures meant to punish Turkey for its active involvement in battles.¹⁴ Air traffic was halted at the Libyan capital’s only functioning civilian airport, also at Mitiga, after the air strike but later reopened.¹⁵

The LNA announced that it had destroyed the main control room for Turkish drones that are operated from the military section of Tripoli’s Mitiga airport. The LNA also claimed on July 7, 2019, that " we have so far destroyed four Turkish drones".¹⁶

Meanwhile, Haftar declared a “general mobilization” as tensions between Ankara and the eastern administration mounted.

Maj. Gen. Ahmed al-Mismari stressed that Turkey’s targeting of the Libyan National Army was nothing new. “Turkey stepped up against the Libyan National Army after we accused it of supporting terrorism... Tripoli has become a center for the Muslim Brotherhood, which is supported by President Erdogan,” he said. “The Turkish people should put pressure on the Turkish President’s war in our country,” he said. “We will call upon the international community to prevent foreign intervention in Libya.”¹⁷

Forces loyal to Khalifa Haftar threatened a barrage of new air strikes on Libya's capital urging residents to stay away from what he called "confrontation areas." Air force commander Mohamed Manfour of Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA) said on July 2, 2019, aerial bombardment will be stepped up because "traditional means" to "liberate Tripoli" had been exhausted.¹⁸

Fighter jets conducted overnight raids in the capital's southern Salah al-Din neighborhood. Fighters aligned with the internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) were killed and others wounded.¹⁹

The LNA also said it deployed more troops to join the Tripoli fighting. On July 5, 2019, Haftar's media center posted footage shows “military battalions” that would be sent to the front. The footage showed dozens of armored vehicles moving in the desert under air cover. The reinforcements came less than two weeks after Haftar’s forces were driven out of the strategic town of Gharyan, in a surprise attack by militiamen aligned with the Tripoli government.²⁰

Summary

Khalifa Haftar’s Libyan National Army (LNA) launched an offensive to control Tripoli in early April 2019 and the GNA is currently fighting to prevent the LNA from taking the capital, Tripoli. As the fighting drags on, 75,000 people have fled their homes and hundreds of civilians have been killed, according to the latest U.N. figures.

Turkey had sided with the Government of National Accord (GNA) and Islamic parties led by the Muslim Brotherhood. As the continued support of Turkey for GNA and Islamic organizations became more and more apparent, hostility grew between Turkey and Haftar, whose army is the main obstacle to the development of political Islam backed by Turkey in Libya.²¹

Libya has been subject to a UN arms embargo since it plunged into chaos amid the 2011 uprising that ousted Muammar Gaddafi and the Turkish arms supply is a violation of the UN embargo.

Haftar’s battle to take Tripoli has been slowed by Turkish support for the pro-GNA militias and his attack has failed to achieve its objectives thus far. On June 26, 2019, the LNA lost control of the town of Gharyan, around 100 kilometers southwest of Tripoli, it had seized on April 2, 2019, and made his center of operations.²² Gharyan was the main forward base for the LNA where troops, weapons and ammunition arrived. The LNA still holds the town of Tarhouna southeast of Tripoli, its second main position in the campaign.

Turkey's defense minister, Hulusi Akar, said that Turkey will retaliate against any assault from Khalifa Haftar's forces in Libya. It is not clear yet what will be the Turkish response to Haftar's latest steps but direct Turkish military involvement in Libya could turn the local conflict into a regional one.

Notes:

¹Turkey's Erdogan urges end to Haftar attacks in Libya: presidency, the new Arab, July 7, 2019.

² LNA: Sarraj Seeking Weapons from Turkey to Compensate Militia Losses, Asharq Al Awsat, July 7, 2019.

³ Turkey’s Erdogan meets head of weakening Tripoli government Sarraj, Arab news, July 6, 2019.

⁴ Libya's Haftar orders forces to attack Turkish ships and interests: spokesman, Arab news, June 29, 2019.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Erdogan Says Turkey Will Take 'Necessary Measures' in Response to Haftar's Threats, Asharq al Awsat, June 30, 2019.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Turkey ready to retaliate after 'hostile' Haftar threatens attack, the new Arab, June 30, 2019.

⁹ Haftar's forces arrest two Turks over Turkey's support for 'militias' in Libya, Al Arabiya, June 30, 2019.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ahmet Furkan Mercan, Turkey warns citizens to stay away conflicts in Libya, Anadolu Agency, June 30, 2019.

¹² Libyan National Army spokesman denies arrest of any Turkish citizen, Al Arabiya, July 2, 2019.

¹³ Ankara warns Haftar over arrests as LNA says hit Turkish drone, Al Jazeera, June 30, 2019.

¹⁴ Haftar's army forces say they destroyed a Turkish drone in Tripoli, Al Arabiya, July 1, 2019.

¹⁵ Haftar's forces arrest two Turks over Turkey's support for 'militias' in Libya, Al Arabiya, June 30, 2019.

¹⁶ LNA: Sarraj Seeking Weapons from Turkey to Compensate Militia Losses, Asharq Al Awsat, July 7, 2019.

¹⁷ Libyan National Army spokesman denies arrest of any Turkish citizen, Al Arabiya, July 2, 2019.

¹⁸ Haftar's forces step up air strikes after loss of strategic city, Al Jazeera, July 2, 2019.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Turkey's Erdogan meets head of weakening Tripoli government Sarraj, Arab news, July 6, 2019.

²¹ Zvi Mazel, Erdogan's grand plan: is Libya next?, Jerusalem Post, January 7, 2019.

²² Libya's Haftar orders forces to attack Turkish ships and interests: spokesman, Arab news, June 29, 2019.