

# Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

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## THE DOOR FOR IRAN REMAINS OPEN IN BAHRAIN

*Brian M. Perkins*

Tensions between the United States and Iran following the killing of Major General Qasem Soleimani drew speculation of retaliatory attacks on U.S. military bases in Qatar and Bahrain or against U.S. allies, such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Iran opted instead to strike at the source of the tensions by launching airstrikes on a base housing U.S. troops in Iraq. While de-escalation appears to be the current strategy and another blatant strike by Iran is not seemingly on the horizon, countries less known for the strength of Iranian proxies, particularly Bahrain, remain in Tehran’s crosshairs.

In comparison to Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen, Iranian proxies in Bahrain are not nearly as prevalent or well-organized. Attacks by prominent Iranian-backed Shia militias have generally been sporadic and largely unsophisticated over the past five years. While there is nothing to suggest these groups will see a massive spike in their ranks or operational capabilities in the near term, there has been a slow creep of these groups increasingly aligning themselves with their Iranian backers. Further,

there has been evidence over the past few years of a noteworthy increase in support.

The most notorious of the Bahraini militias is the al-Ashtar Brigades, which has reportedly been trained by Kataib Hezbollah in Iraq and the IRGC in Iran. Explosive device materials seized by Bahraini security forces in 2018 were identified as being of Iranian origin, with blocks of plastic explosives bearing the same lot and year marks as plastic explosives seized in Iraq and Yemen. This discovery marked a significant development from al-Ashtar Brigade’s origins of using locally sourced and unsophisticated methods. Among other indicators of a move closer to Iran has been the emergence of Saraya Thair Allah, whose logo mimics that of the IRGC, and joint statements issued by various militias condemning the U.S. strike on Soleimani and declaring support for Kataib Hezbollah ([al-abdal.net](http://al-abdal.net), December 31, 2019).

Meanwhile, the Bahraini government has taken a hard stance against Iran by openly supporting the United States’ actions in Iraq. Bahrain was one of only three countries to send ambassadors to Trump’s unveiling of his Middle East Peace Plan ([Middle East Monitor](http://Middle East Monitor), December 30). Following Bahrain’s support of U.S. strikes on Kataib Hezbollah and the rising tensions with Iran,

the country's national oil company, BAPCO, was struck by a cyberattack originating from Iran ([Al Arabiya](#), January 12).

With the Bahraini government supporting U.S. actions in the Middle East and Shia militias supporting Iran and its proxies, the door will remain open for Iran to slowly develop more of an overt presence or to punish the country through various means for its relationship with other Gulf states and the United States. The prevalence of U.S. personnel and assets across the country also makes Bahrain an enticing location to facilitate a one-off attack by a pro-Iranian militia or a slow escalation of support to destabilize the country.

*Brian M. Perkins is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor.*

## Notes

[1] The IED Threat in Bahrain, *Conflict Armament Research*. <https://www.conflictarm.com/reports/the-ied-threat-in-bahrain/>

## SECURITY THREATS AND POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF FOREIGN FIGHTERS AND PRISONERS CONTINUE TO PLAGUE EUROPE

*Brian M. Perkins*

Europe's two biggest nightmares—the return of Syrian fighters and migrants and the conflict in Libya—have started to coalesce over the past several months as primary players from the two conflict zones have increasingly overlapped and European leaders have lost any control mechanisms. Developments in northern Syria over the past several months continue to stoke fears in Europe regarding the return of imprisoned Islamic State (IS) fighters and European families that populate the region's notorious camps. Europe has also long struggled with the conflict in Libya and the subsequent migrant crisis and its security implications. Most European nations have fervently fought against the repatriation of IS fighters and families. Outside of external security threats, many European nations are vulnerable to the political ramifications related to the release of a large number of foreign fighters who received relatively short sentences during the initial wave of arrests around 2015.

Despite IS' loss of its physical caliphate and a significant number of members, pro-IS groups scattered across the world continue to propagate the group's message, which still resonates with disenfranchised Europeans, including those currently imprisoned. Even the countries seemingly best prepared on paper to mitigate the threat from foreign fighters and locals released on more minor terrorism charges have often failed to prevent attacks or even the related political fallout.

The repatriation of IS-linked individuals proved particularly contentious in Norway and demonstrated the potential political implications regarding decisions related to repatriating IS-linked individuals. The return of a suspected IS member and her children led the right-wing Progress Party to withdraw its ministers from the government coalition, causing Prime Minister Erna Solberg to lose the parliamentary majority ([The Local](#), January 16). While this might be an extreme case, it stokes further fears and will likely serve as a form of evidence as to some of the potential ramifications related to returning Syrians, particularly for those governments with divided political coalitions.

Meanwhile, multiple attacks in London over the past six months have demonstrated that security forces simply

cannot cope with the sheer volume of high-risk individuals. Most recently, Sudesh Amman stabbed two people in Streatham, London on February 2, just weeks after being released from prison on charges of possessing and disseminating terrorism-related information ([BBC](#), February 5). At the time of the attack, Amman was under active surveillance, which did not prevent the incident but undoubtedly prevented a more devastating outcome.

The fact that Amman, like others before him, was being monitored prompted calls for a hasty overhaul of the UK's terrorism laws before those convicted of terrorism-related charges are automatically released at the halfway point of their sentence. Parliament is attempting to push legislation that will undo the automatic release at the halfway point before February 27, after which several in a series of prisoners are slated for release ([Guardian](#), February 5). The emergency legislation requires a break from the European Commission on Human Rights (ECHR) and will test not only relations between the UK's political parties, but also the relationship between the UK and the EU post-Brexit.

As developments in northern Syria and Libya continue to play out alongside the issue of domestic radicalization, the terrorist threat across Europe will continue. At the same time, contentious domestic politics in many European nations appear increasingly likely to cause these issues to have significant political ramifications in the coming year.

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## Counterinsurgency in the Sahel is at Risk of Unraveling

*J.H. Elswood*

In recent weeks, international attention has focused on the consequences of heightened U.S.-Iranian tensions in the Middle East, and more recently, on an attempted jihadist attack on the streets of South London on February 2. Away from the gaze of most international media, the latest in a string of increasingly deadly insurgent attacks unfolded in relative obscurity in the Sahel region of North Africa, which is now one of the largest hotbeds of terrorism. The government of Mali announced on January 23 that seven soldiers had been killed by "unidentified armed men" in an overnight raid at Diougnani, a military base close to the southern border with Burkina Faso ([Malijet](#), January 27). Soon afterwards, *al-Zallaqa*, a media outlet run by the militant jihadist group Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), published a statement claiming responsibility for the raid. Images accompanying the message showed several vehicles that the attackers had captured during the operation. The assault came shortly after French President Emmanuel Macron announced he would deploy an additional 600 troops to the multinational counter-insurgency effort in the region, and JNIM cited this so-called "occupation" as its primary motive ([Euronews](#), January 14).

### **A Storm Years in the Making**

The ongoing conflict across the Sahel has its roots in a Tuareg separatist rebellion that erupted in northern Mali against President Amadou Toumani Touré in 2012, and eventually spilled into neighboring Niger and Burkina Faso. The group, now known as JNIM, only formed five years later, when Tuareg warlord Iyad Ag Ghali merged his forces with several jihadist groups to bolster his tribal insurgency (see [Militant Leadership Monitor](#), February 29, 2017). Among them was al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the regional affiliate of what was then the global jihadist movement's preeminent network under Ayman al-Zawahiri. The merger was as much an opportunistic symbiosis as it was an ideological one, providing Ghali's forces with greater credibility and operational support in exchange for their own support for al-Qaeda's regional proliferation.

The need for cooperation became particularly acute after the emergence of rival Islamic State (IS), and later its Greater Sahara affiliate (ISGS) in 2015—a threat that swelled due to the return of foreign fighters to the Sahel region after IS’ territorial defeat in Syria and the death of its first leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. This inter-jihadist competition, which reflects al-Qaeda and IS’ irregular rivalry as far away as Afghanistan, will have partly driven JNIM’s latest attack, as in the last three months alone IS affiliates have conducted major operations against government forces in Indelimane, Mali and Inates, Niger.

Meanwhile, the location of the latest attack in Diougnani near Mopti, southern Mali, reflects another fundamental aspect of the insurgency. Much of the violence is perpetrated along tribal or ethnic lines, for instance between the Muslim-dominant Fulani people, and other groups such as the Dogon, who largely practice traditional pre-Islamic faiths and who populate areas close to the Burkinabe border where Diougnani is located. Tribal conflict is something jihadist groups have long been able to exploit for their own recruitment and operations, and Fulani-Dogon tensions are a case in point. JNIM’s attack on Diougnani, in an area with significant Dogon populations, is likely to have also been an attempt to undermine Dogon security, and in turn, appeal to potential Fulani recruits.

### **The International Response: “An Inconvenient Reality”**

France, which historically colonized much of the Sahel region, began its counter-insurgency efforts in 2013. Paris has deployed 4,500 troops to the Sahel for what has evolved into Operation Barkhane, an international campaign incorporating forces from the G5 countries of Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Chad and Mauritania, as well as European partners Estonia and the Netherlands. Nevertheless, militant groups like JNIM have persistently been able to exploit the security vacuum in areas that are proving extremely difficult to police, and their attacks—for instance around the sparse tri-border Liptako-Gourma area east of Mopti—have spurred major internal and cross-border displacement ([Malijet](#), January 25). In Mali alone, people in need of humanitarian assistance number nearly four million, and among them, the number of internally displaced persons has nearly doubled to almost 200,000 over the last nine months ([UN Security Council](#), December 30, 2019).

President Macron’s commitment of 600 additional troops was an acknowledgment that Operation

Burkhane, even when coupled with nearly 13,000 UN peacekeepers, has so far proven insufficient. But his intensification of the counter-insurgency effort already faces a major obstacle even before the first reinforcements have arrived. The obstacle comes, in fact, from Washington.

For its part, the United States has around 1,000 troops stationed in the Sahel and at least one drone operating base in Niger, making up around one-sixth of its AFRICOM contingent across the continent. Its forces have contributed to operations against JNIM and ISGS in recent years, making headlines when 10 U.S. troops were killed near Tongo Tongo, Niger in October 2017. However, pending a decision in the White House to conduct a large-scale strategic pivot toward the Indo-Pacific region, these contributions may imminently be scaled-down. Although AFRICOM commander General Stephen Townsend recently told Congress that North Africa is “key terrain for competition with China and Russia... [posing] an inconvenient reality in Africa,” Defence Secretary Mark Esper has conversely expressed the Trump administration’s desire to eventually switch focus to the Indo-Pacific theater instead ([AFRICOM](#), January 30).

### **Implications**

The potential for a protracted U.S. withdrawal from the Sahel, despite Washington’s geostrategic ambition of countering Chinese and Russian influence on the continent, threatens to erode Macron’s additional commitment to Operation Barkhane before it has operationally begun. The strategic redeployment of up to 1,000 U.S. personnel could credibly outweigh the likely benefits of any steady increase in French support for the G5 nations over the coming years. Moreover, it could credibly force regional governments to consider arming local self-protection groups, such as *koglweogo* in Burkina Faso, as a stop-gap measure for their insufficient local forces and lack of international support. This is something that security forces have done unofficially for several years, but the Burkinabe parliament enacted into law on January 23. It will generate limited and ephemeral support, but at the longer-term cost of seriously exacerbating social cleavages (see [Terrorism Monitor vol. 17 issue 23](#)).

Subsequently, and in spite of Paris’s efforts, the broiling insurgency in the Sahel is unlikely to change course for the time being, spiking during typical periods of jihadist activity such as Ramadan in April and May this year and in response to French efforts to bolster security in the

region. In the longer term, opportunistic attacks on churches and government assets could plausibly begin to be seen further afield if JNIM and its affiliates continue to operate at this tempo and with the same freedom of movement. While the much more stable coastal states of Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire have demonstrated higher levels of military and police readiness in recent months, they will nevertheless share concerns over their own electoral events later in the year. While JNIM's capabilities still remain largely unsophisticated, limiting the possibility of such attacks materializing in the near future, the governments in Accra and Abidjan will take little solace in the international community's differing responses to the evolving threat.

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## Continuation of Policy by Other Means: Russian Private Military Contractors in the Libyan Civil War

*Sergey Sukhankin*

### Introduction

Since the outbreak of the Libyan civil war in 2011, Moscow has been trying to demonstrate a balanced and pragmatic approach — considered in Russian conservative circles to be “excessively conformist” and even “defeatist” ([YouTube.com](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...), January 30, 2013). Director General of the Russian International Affairs Council, Andrey Kortunov, argued in July 2019 that Russia's key objective in Libya is to “maintain constructive ties with all actors” ([RussianCouncil.ru](http://russiancouncil.ru), July 31, 2019). For a considerable period of time, Russia was the only major player capable of preserving dialogue not only with Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar and Government of National Accord (GNA) Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj, but with Muammar Gaddafi's son Saif al-Islam ([Gazeta.ru](http://gazeta.ru), December 24, 2018). Sometime between late 2018 and early 2019, Russia seemed to have chosen Haftar as its main bet in the conflict. On the one hand, the field marshal was a much more understandable personality for the Russian military leadership; on the other hand, Haftar had reportedly promised Moscow “huge concessions” in the oil, transportation/construction, and defense sectors in exchange for military support ([Vz.ru](http://vz.ru), July 6, 2017). This pattern (“concessions for security” formula) was previously tested in Syria. In November 2018, Yevgeny Prigozhin, an alleged sponsor of the private military contractor (PMC) Wagner Group, was spotted at the meeting between Haftar and Russia's Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu, when, as argued by Russian sources, a decision to send a massive group of Russian mercenaries to Libya might have been made ([Graniru.org](http://graniru.org), November 9, 2018). As reported by Russian-language, Arabic, and Western sources, Russian mercenaries have taken an active part in the Operation Flood of Dignity (Haftar's offensive against Tripoli) that started in April 2019 ([Svoboda.org](http://svoboda.org), September 27, 2019; [Inosmi.ru](http://inosmi.ru), November 26, 2019; [Timesofmalta.com](http://timesofmalta.com), November 7, 2019). Based on the Russian experience in other conflicts in Africa, it is hardly a surprise that Moscow opted to use PMCs in pursuit of its geo-

economic and geopolitical objectives in Libya ([War by Other Means](#), January 10, 2020).

### **Russian Mercenaries in Libya: Continuity and Tradition**

The presence of Russian mercenaries in Libya is by no means a new phenomenon. In the late 1980s, Soviet military advisors deployed in the country were employed—acting as de-facto mercenaries—by Gaddafi in his infamous ‘border wars’ against Egypt, Niger, and other neighbors ([Gazeta.ru](#), accessed January 30, 2019). After the collapse of the USSR in 1991, many of these contractors (up to 5,000 men) chose to stay in Libya, becoming Russia’s first private military contractors in Africa ([Gazeta.ru](#), March 31, 2011). Following the outbreak of the Libyan civil war, various official sources claimed that Russian mercenaries were present and actively participating in the conflict ([Rosbalt.ru](#), September 24, 2011). In 2012, a group of mercenaries (headed by a Russian citizen) was detained in Libya. This participation, however, was largely uncoordinated and therefore could not change the trajectory of the conflict. A qualitatively new tendency started to take shape in 2017, when members of the RSB Group PMC were detected in Benghazi (controlled by Haftar) working on de-mining the local cement factory belonging to the Libyan Cement Company ([Rbc.ru](#), March 25, 2017). Based on deep analysis of the RSB Group’s activities in Syria and elsewhere, there is every reason to believe that the PMC was not involved in military engagements, rather its mission should be viewed as a combination of economic interests and, arguably, intelligence gathering/surveillance, which could have been used for preparing the ground for more “serious” players ([War by Other Means](#), March 20, 2019). In the meantime, much more disturbing information appeared in March, when Reuters (based on its diplomatic sources) suggested that Russian Spetsnaz (most likely, Airborne troops who are members of the *Vozdushno-Desantnye Voyska*—VDV) equipped with UAVs were deployed near Sidi Barrani (Egypt), some 100 kilometers from the Libyan national border – this was quickly shrugged off by the Egyptian authorities ([Reuters](#), March 13, 2017).

At this time though, Moscow was still pursuing a relatively balanced approach in Libya with a clearly visible “Chechen trace”: while the role of an intermediary was ascribed to Lev Dengov, the true locus of negotiation power was centered in Grozny ([EDM](#), October 29, 2018). The situation, however, seemed to begin changing from late 2018, when a bet on Haftar became more pro-

nounced, and the reliance on the “power option” (bringing in more mercenaries from the Wagner Group) was prioritized.

### **Wagner Plunges in – Intermediate Results and Consequences**

Wagner’s participation in the Libyan conflict could be conditionally divided into three main phases.

The first phase (spring – summer 2019) was marked by the first reports of the massive arrival of Russian mercenaries. At this point, Russia still pursued a mixed approach that combined both (para)military operations conducted by mercenaries, and non-military missions ([Proekt.media](#), July 5, 2019; [Interfax.ru](#), July 5, 2019). Yet, this approach did not seem to work out as planned: toward the end of summer, the western Libya offensive, even though initially successful, was (rather unexpectedly for Moscow) falling short of its initial objective to capture Tripoli.

During the second phase (September – December 2019), certain changes—primarily reflected in the growing number of Russian mercenaries and structural changes (employment of snipers with alleged experience fighting in the Donbass region of eastern Ukraine)—took place ([Rosbalt.ru](#), November 6, 2019). According to Russian sources (with reference to international information outlets), Russian mercenaries were sent to Libya at least twice (early September and November) in the amount of no less than two hundred fighters ([Interfax.ru](#), November 6, 2019). This phase was not only marked by a renewed intensity to the fighting between Haftar and his opponents, but also the strengthening of Turkish determination to protect its geo-economic/political interests in the basin of the Mediterranean Sea, which contrasted with Russia’s interests in the region ([Lefigaro.fr](#), December 16, 2019). According to Russian sources, this confluence of interests may have resulted in a military clash near Tripoli in September that reportedly caused massive casualties (between 10 to 35 dead) of Wagner personnel, allegedly owed to an airstrike by the Turkish air force ([Meduza.io](#), October 2, 2019; [Meduza.io](#), October 6, 2019).

The third phase (from January 7) brought new developments. First, forces loyal to Fayeze al-Sarraj managed to re-instate their control over strategically important Sirte (located west to Libya’s oil crescent) and repulsed LNA forces attempting to capture Misrata (January 29) ([Interfax.ru](#), January 7). Secondly, new questions pertaining to

the Russian mercenaries appeared. On January 11, Russian President Putin openly admitted to the presence of Russian mercenaries in Libya, claiming, however, that “they [mercenaries] do not represent the interests of the Russian Federation” nor do they “receive money from the Russian government” ([Rosbalt.ru](http://Rosbalt.ru), January 11). On the same day Russian sources, with reference to the Turkish media, claimed that “mercenaries from the Wagner Group have been withdrawn from the frontline in Libya”, adding that this gesture ensued “after an agreement between Erdogan and Putin” ([Lenta.ru](http://Lenta.ru), January 11). While the withdrawal might indeed have resulted from some sort of an agreement between the two leaders, there is a possibility that, given Erdogan’s continued accusations that the Russian side was pouring in more mercenaries into Libya—he argued that their number reached 2,500 men by the end of January—the chance of the military defeat of the PMCs could have been another potential reason ([Interfax.ru](http://Interfax.ru), January 20).

## Conclusion

The involvement of Russian PMCs in the Libyan civil war has delivered a different result than in Syria. The presence of the mercenaries has, for now, failed to tip the balance in Haftar’s favor via a decisive military victory. It has become quite clear that without the support of the Russian armed forces (the *Vozdushno Kosmicheskikh Sil*—VKS, and special operations forces), the actual military capabilities of Russian mercenaries are limited. Moreover, having encountered a technologically advanced power (Turkey), Wagner has suffered losses similar to the massacre near Deir ez-Zor in early 2018, when the group was struck by U.S. airstrikes. To try to achieve its objective, Russia might increase the number of mercenaries in Libya, though it is unlikely that would lead to ultimate victory due to growing Turkish involvement. Moscow could also start sending heavy weaponry and munitions to Haftar but doing so would sour the Kremlin’s ties with Ankara and runs against Russian plans, especially given the launch of TurkStream, a natural gas pipeline from Russia to Turkey. Therefore, given the fact that the participation of Russian mercenaries has failed to break the stalemate (although it is hardly possible that the Wagner Group will be fully withdrawn from Libya in a short-term prospect), the two most powerful external players in the Libyan civil war (Turkey and Russia) will have to seek a solution on the negotiation table, not the battlefield.

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# A Piece of a Greater Puzzle: The Libyan Civil War, External Influences and Regional Trends

*Dario Cristiani*

Over the past few months, diplomatic activism around the Libyan civil war has intensified sharply. Two dynamics drove this process. First, the visible presence of Russian mercenaries fighting alongside the forces of Khalifa Haftar, the eastern-based leader of the Libyan National Army (literal Arabic translation is the Libyan Arab Armed Forces). Second, the overt military support promised by Turkey to the Government of the National Accord (GNA), the UN-backed and internationally recognized Libyan government, in return for the GNA signing several agreements with Ankara. Among them, the most important was the agreement to delimit the maritime Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) between the Turkish southern Mediterranean coast and Libyan northeast shore in late November 2019. However, it is erroneous to assume that Turkey stepped in to support the GNA militarily only in late November. In reality, Ankara has delivered essential support to the GNA resistance against Haftar's military aggression. Turkey has provided weapons, drones, munitions, and technical support since late April 2019 at least, when the GNA Interior Minister Fathi Bashagha went to Ankara to plea for Turkish help ([Libyan Express](#), April 30, 2019).

This open Turkish activism turned into a sort of wakeup call for the Europeans. All of a sudden, after months of inaction, Germany, France, Italy, and the European Union through its new foreign minister, Josep Borrell, started working restlessly to accelerate the organization of the Berlin conference and to allow the Europeans to regain a role in Libya. Renewed attention due to the developments over the previous nine months prompted several foreign actors to meet in Berlin on January 17 ([Deutsche Welle](#), January 15). However, despite the hype, the conference brought minimal concrete results: the parties involved agreed on a truce, but without a mechanism to sanction arms embargo violations and external interference—the initial rationale of the conference. Its most significant result was the full diplomatic recognition of Haftar. About one week after the meeting, hostilities restarted in Libya, with countries backing

both sides providing weapons and military support to their proxies.

## Russia and Turkey: Dominating the Scene

The April 4 military operation launched by Haftar opened a new phase of the Libyan conflict, structurally shifting the strategic context of the civil war (see [TM](#), April 5, 2019; [The Independent Arabia](#), November 4). The room for a negotiated political settlement that was supposed to be defined in the national conference in Ghadames scheduled for mid-April 2019 disappeared. Despite the LNA's confidence in the achievement of a quick victory, the conflict became even more protracted.

Haftar's historical backers—the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, France—supported his offensive, but none of them ever publicly admitted this support. Strategic opacity has always been a feature of the external countries that were operating in Libya alongside both fronts. These actors were providing weapons and military support, violating the arms embargo that was imposed on Libya in 2011. Then, in November 2019, Turkey went public, announcing its intention to deploy military forces in support of the GNA. For the first time, one of the foreign backers openly said it would intervene in the conflict in favor of one of the sides. The other external parties did not follow suit. Yet, the Turkish actions had a tremendous effect on the conflict.

Russia was also among the countries supporting Haftar. That said, its role is slightly different from that played by other countries. Many noted the Russian role only when Russian mercenaries started appearing on the Libyan battlefield, significantly tilting the balance of power in favor of Haftar's forces. Highly trained mercenary forces, even in relatively small numbers, made a terrific impact in a war fought mainly by irregular and poorly trained militias mostly composed of youths with little to no experience of war. However, Russia already started increasing its role in eastern Libya years ago. Beginning in 2016, Moscow printed banknotes that later went into circulation in the east, in what is the de facto dual currency regime currently in place in Libya ([The Libya Observer](#), May 25, 2016). On top of this, Russia also managed to maintain open channels with all the parties in the conflict: including Sarraj, as shown by his presence in Sochi, and the Misratans ([Libya Herald](#), September 13, 2017; [The Libya Observer](#), October 24, 2019; [Libya Herald](#), April 19). Groups from Misrata represent the backbone of the GNA resistance, as shown by the centrality that Misratan leaders such as the already men-



tioned Bashagha or Ahmed Maiteeq played in organizing the GNA resistance. However, once Wagner's fighters appeared in support of Haftar forces, Russia became more and more influential, although the logic of its support for Haftar is different than that of the UAE—by far Haftar's most committed supporter—and Egypt. For Russia, Haftar's advancement is not a goal in and of itself. Instead, it is primarily a tool to increase influence vis-à-vis other actors involved in Libya, not only among those supporting the GNA but also among the other supporters of Haftar.

As previously mentioned, Erdogan went public on Turkey's intention to help the GNA militarily in late November 2019. This support, however, was not due to historical and cultural elements, though many GNA leaders have family names recalling their Ottoman origins. The argument that depicts the Turkish involvement in Libya as being driven by neo-Ottoman ambitions and historical relations is utterly misleading. Turkey intervened firmly and openly in support of the GNA primarily for economic and geopolitical reasons. Before the signing of the maritime agreement, Turkey had in fact begun de-escalating its military support for the GNA after the summer and especially after it launched operation "Spring of Peace" in Syria. Turkey had to focus on more pressing issues at its borders. The country was growing frustrated with the GNA, and domestic public opinion was, and remains, not very keen on a Libyan engagement.

The willingness of the GNA to sign the agreement on maritime delimitations and to preserve Ankara's contracts in Libya triggered renewed Turkish support. That the GNA would sign the agreement reflects its isolation and the then desperate situation. Erdogan realized that by pushing the agreement, Turkey could have a valuable asset that would increase pressure on those countries forming an emerging geo-economic bloc in the eastern Mediterranean—Egypt, Israel, Greece, Cyprus, and Italy.

Implementing the military support required by the GNA was nevertheless problematic amid a number of logistic, tactical and strategic constraints to project military power in a country which is 2,000 kilometers away. However, as the Libyan civil war remains a conflict with many weapons, but relatively few local fighters, it does not take much to change the military balance on the ground. Turkey first used groups predominantly consisting of Syrian Turkmen fighters—its historical proxies in the Syrian war—and then slowly built up its military

presence in western Libya. The project remains problematic, however, without military bases in countries neighboring western Libya from which to organize military operations.

Russia and Turkey's deep influence on both sides of the conflict brought the two countries together for a meeting in Moscow, before the Berlin conference. In this meeting, Libyan actors—Fayez al-Sarraj and Khaled al-Mishri (the Chairman of the High Council of State) from the Tripoli side and Khalifa Haftar and Aguila Saleh (the Speaker of the House of Representatives, the internationally recognized Libyan parliament) from the Tobruk side—went to Moscow to sign a ceasefire, although the two delegations did not meet directly. However, while Sarraj and Mishri signed, Haftar did not. This was further proof that while foreign powers are naturally essential in the Libyan conflict, they often have problems in imposing their wishes on local actors, and this has often been the case with Haftar.

### **The Libyan Civil War as a Function of Other Conflicts**

The Libyan conflict has to be seen as a part of the emerging dynamics in the eastern Mediterranean. For years, the conflict was seen as an appendix of Gulf politics, especially following the Qatar blockade; as an arena for intra-European competition, for instance between Italy and France; or intra-Maghrebi, as shown by the duplication of negotiations around 2014 and 2015 involving Algeria and Morocco. However, the nature of the proxy war and its increasingly internationalized nature has now entered a new stage. The linkage with the eastern Mediterranean is now more apparent: Turkey sees influence in Libya as a crucial element to breaking out from its own increasing isolation.

However, over the past few weeks, another regional dynamic emerged with the high potential to influence trends in Libya. On January 28, U.S. President Donald Trump unveiled what he defined as the "deal of the century," his long-awaited plan to resuscitate the Israeli-Palestinian peace process ([Al-Jazeera](#), January 28). In this context, Egypt remains the crucial element for any arrangement concerning Israeli regional security. Since the Camp David accords in 1978, it has been clear that there cannot be a state-led war against Israel without Egypt. Preserving this strategic reality is a crucial element driving American foreign policy in the region since the 1970s and it obviously remains vital to keeping the current plan alive, at least theoretically, in the coming years. The UAE is essential for this plan. Abu Dhabi said

that the project is a “serious initiative that addresses many issues raised over the years” and it is one of the most important Arab countries supporting the plan, especially economically ([The National \[Abu Dhabi\]](#), January 29).

This dynamic will have evident effects on the Libyan theater as well: it reduces, even more, the incentive of the United States to sanction Haftar and intervene in favor of the GNA. Since the outbreak of the conflict in April, it was clear that the U.S. administration had a sort of dual view over Libya. President Trump was leaning in favor of Haftar, while the State Department had a more nuanced view, tilting more towards the GNA. That said, the first proof of this emerging dynamic is the non-reaction from Washington on the ongoing oil blockade in Libya. In the past, the United States made clear that one of the few red lines they had in Libya was oil production: an oil blockade would have been unacceptable, and this was an influential factor preventing Haftar from instrumentally using the control of oil fields and terminals that he secured in the Sirte Basin since 2016 and in the Fezzan from January 2019. The events of the past few weeks, however, suggest this is not a red line for the United States anymore. Libyan production fell from 1.3 million barrels a day before the blockade to 0.2 million as of early February, without causing any response from the United States ([OilPrice.Com](#), February 4).

## Conclusion

The new phase of the Libyan civil war initiated in April 2019 has shown how external countries play an ever-growing role in a conflict that was already profoundly internationalized. All the actors involved in supporting both sides maintained a significant degree of strategic opacity, avoiding admitting their role in Libya openly. The military offensive launched by Haftar, destroyed the last hope for a negotiated political settlement. Still, this military operation did not deliver the quick victory Haftar and his supporters hoped. As the conflict became more and more entrenched, two dynamics became apparent—the increasing influence of Russia and Turkey. The latter did so by openly announcing a military deployment in support of the GNA. Turkish activism awoke European countries, which rushed to organize a conference in Berlin that, despite the hype, resulted in an apparent fiasco. As also shown by the diplomatic meeting promoted in Moscow under the auspices of Russia and Turkey, the momentum for a diplomatic settlement of the conflict has disappeared and any political agreement

will be the result of military developments on the ground. However, the Turkish actions clearly showed how the conflict in Libya is linked to geo-economic and diplomatic developments in the eastern Mediterranean. Yet, this is not the only external conflict that will play a role in shaping dynamics in Libya. The U.S.-led peace plan for the Middle East will also bear a significant influence on the Libyan landscape, as has already been shown by the lack of response to the oil blockade launched by groups linked to Haftar. The Libyan conflict is thus more and more a function of other regional conflicts, a piece of a wider geopolitical puzzle linking together Gulf dynamics, European politics, Maghrebi rivalries, developments in the Israeli-Palestinian domain and the emerging geopolitical competition in the eastern Mediterranean.

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