



A fresh start for Greece-Libya relations: A view from Nicosia

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Summary

- Mitsotakis' official visit to Libya and the reopening of the Greek embassy in Tripoli is a positive step towards normalization.
- The Libyan-Turkish memorandum on the delimitation of maritime zones will be difficult to revoke- but it must not be the only focal point of Greek-Libyan relations.
- The period leading to the December 24 elections in Libya is critical, and the situation in the country will remain volatile due to both internal and external challenges.
- Turkey retains a significant footprint in Libya with several political, military and economic implications.
- Libya is an important country for the European Union and remains a source of challenges for European security (irregular migration, terrorism).
- Greece can play an active mediating role in Libya, at a European, bilateral and regional level.

Introduction

On April 6 2021, Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis made an official visit to Libya, inaugurating a new chapter in Greek-Libyan bilateral relations with the reopening of the Greek embassy in Tripoli and the Greek general consulate in Benghazi. This visit marked the North African country's rising importance for Greek diplomacy, especially after significant developments in 2019 and 2020. The signing of the Turkey-Libya Memorandum of Understanding¹ in November 2019 on the demarcation of maritime zones in the Mediterranean was a negative surprise for the Greek diplomacy, bringing Libya into a wider context of geopolitical rivalry in the eastern Mediterranean, especially in relation with Turkey. It could be argued that what followed was a sequence of diplomatic miscalculations. On December 6, 2019, Athens expelled² Libyan ambassador Mohamed Yunus al-Menfi. Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias declared that the decision was meant to express "the Greek government's dissatisfaction with the Libyan government", that "does not constitute a severance of diplomatic relations".

In the following months, Greece focused its diplomatic efforts on the conflict between eastern and western Libya (LNA vs GNA), especially during Libyan general Khalifa Haftar's military effort to capture Tripoli and dismantle the GNA. Furthermore, Athens actively approached the LNA (Libyan National Army) government, inviting both Haftar and the Libyan Parliament Speaker Agila Saleh to Athens, in order to counterbalance the Libyan-Turkish memorandum. In retrospect Athens had also adopted a "wait-and-see" attitude, as the military conflict between Haftar and the Tripoli government played out.

Haftar reportedly requested that Athens³ be actively involved in monitoring its FIR to prevent the transfer of Turkish military aid to Tripoli with civilian flights and the bolstering of GNA defenses. The Greek side refused and put its focus on diplomacy, telling Haftar that it had asked both the EU and the UN special envoy for Libya, Ghassan Salamé, to activate the process of controlling all flights between Tripoli and Misrata and to uphold the arms embargo on Libya. What prevailed in the Greek press, the social media and public opinion was a superficial reading of the events in Libya. This was indicative of the fact that after 2011 and the fall of the Gaddafi regime, there was no serious monitoring and analysis among Greek experts, and Greek foreign policy took a passive stance.

The LNA-GNA conflict, which was essentially a fragmented civil war with many elements of a proxy war between a warlord and the United Nations-recognized government, was distorted by print and online media. For Greek public opinion it appeared apparent that general Haftar would advance on Tripoli, that the GNA -and with it Turkey- would be defeated, and that this would lead to the cancellation of the Libyan-Turkish memorandum.

A crucial factor of this was the reproduction of fake news⁴ which formed the basis of articles and analyses even among major media outlets that predicted a fast and triumphant victory for the LNA.

In late January 2020, Haftar failed⁵ to capture Tripoli and the GNA emerged as the

¹ "GeoIntel: The Turkey-Libya MoU [Document]", Geopolitical Cyprus, December 2019. Available at <https://geopoliticalcyprus.org/2019/12/05/the-turkey-libya-mou-document/> [last accessed on 25 April 2021].

² «Απέλαση Λίβυου πρέσβη: Τι αναφέρει η επίσημη ανακοίνωση του ΥΠΕΞ», *Vima*, December 2019. Available at <https://www.tovima.gr/2019/12/06/politics/apelasi-livyou-presvi-ti-anaferei-i-episimi-anakoinosi-tou-ypeks/> [last accessed on 25 April 2021].

³ «Το παρασκήνιο της επίσκεψης του Χ. Χαφτάρ στην Αθήνα», *Kathimerini*, January 2020. Available at: <https://www.kathimerini.gr/politics/1061645/to-paraskinio-tis-episkepsis-toy-ch-chaftar-stin-athina/> [last accessed on 25 April 2021].

⁴ «Προπαγανδιστικό προφίλ δίνει ρυθμό σε ελληνόφωνα ΜΜΕ για τη Λιβύη», Geopolitical Cyprus, January 2020. Available at: <https://geopoliticalcyprus.org/2020/01/16/propagandistiko-profil-dinei-rythmo-se-ellinofwna-mme-gia-tin-livyi/> [last accessed on 24 April 2021].

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winner of the conflict in military terms, with Turkey's assistance. During the same period, Greece was not invited to the Berlin diplomatic conference on Libya, which resulted in a bilateral ceasefire that paved the way for what followed.

Libya Today

“Various military formations continue to have a strong imprint on the ground, including mercenaries from at least six countries (Syrian militias, mercenaries and military advisors from Russia, Turkey, Chad, Sudan and the UAE).”

On February 5, 2021 in Geneva, four members of the interim government that would lead the transition to participatory elections on December 23, were elected by the 74 delegates of the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF). An "old acquaintance" of Athens, the expelled former ambassador Mohamed Yunus al-Menfi, was one of the four members elected. This development precipitated a new approach to the Libyan issue that culminated in an official visit by Greek Prime Minister Mitsotakis to Tripoli and the ongoing attempt for a fresh start in Greek-Libyan bilateral relations.

The situation on the ground in Libya remains fluid and dynamic. The main international and regional challenges for the long-suffering North African country can be summarized as follows⁶:

- Various military formations continue to have a strong imprint on the ground, including mercenaries⁷ from at least six countries (Syrian militias, mercenaries and military advisors from Russia, Turkey, Chad, Sudan and the UAE). Their presence poses a major challenge to the country's security and increases the possibility of an escalation of military violence/clashes in the event of a new political crisis. In this context we should not ignore the possibility of a resurgence of Islamic extremism given the role of both al Qaeda and the Islamic State (ISIS) in the country in the recent past, as well as the ethnic, sectarian and tribal dynamics between eastern, western and southern Libya. The important, strategically placed, coastal road⁸ remains closed and some militias, especially in western Libya, remain strong.
- While the control of the country's institutions (e.g. the country's Central Bank or the National Oil Company-NOC) is contested by rival coalitions, it is also a source of competition between allied actors. Systemic corruption, economic competition and the pressures brought by external actors pose serious challenges when it comes to the inclusion or exclusion of actors from the country's post-conflict environment. A rivalry to watch in the coming period is that between the main political actors in the transitional government, especially between Dbeiba and some circles within Tripoli. Prominent institutional actors such as the House of Representatives, the Government of National Unity and the Higher State Council prefer to maintain the status-quo and could block the current political transition leading to elections, with the encouragement from foreign actors. What is more, the national budget approval in Libya has been politicized and there is an ongoing struggle for controlling key economic and financial institutions –NOC is the most important among them since Libya is an

⁵ Ioannou, Ioannis Sotirios & Zenonas Tziarras (2020) Turning the Tide in Libya: Rival Administrations in a New Round of Conflict, PRIO Cyprus Centre Policy Brief, 1. Nicosia: PRIO Cyprus Centre.

⁶ The author of this policy travelled to Libya extensively during 2013-2015 and 2019 and conducted a lot of field work in the areas of Tripoli and Misrata.

⁷ “UN envoy urges foreign mercenaries to withdraw from Libya”, *The Sunday Times*, April 2021, available at <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/un-envoy-urges-foreign-mercenaries-to-withdraw-from-libya-s2qnpdh2f> [last accessed on 20 April 2021].

⁸ The Libyan Coastal Highway (Arabic: الطريق الساحلي الليبي), formerly the Litoranea Balbo or Via Balbia, is a highway that is the only major road that runs along the entire east-west length of the Libyan Mediterranean coastline. It is a section in the Cairo–Dakar Highway #1 in the Trans-African Highway system of the African Union, Arab Maghreb Union and others.

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“...the national budget approval in Libya has been politicized and there is an ongoing struggle for controlling key economic and financial institutions -NOC is the most important among them since Libya is an oil-rich country.”

oil-rich country.

- The conflict of external interests in Libya has led to a unique and particularly complex military, political and ideological landscape. In this context, the role of countries such as Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, France and Russia requires Athens to be very delicate in its handling of the situation.
- The Covid-19 pandemic has also had a significant effect and remains a serious challenge for Libya.
- The challenges faced by the European Union due to the situation in Libya. For years Libya has been a country of transit for undocumented migrants from Africa to countries in the European South - namely Italy and Malta. These challenges apply also to Operation Irini. The European Union Naval Force Mediterranean Operation IRINI was launched on March 31, 2020 with the aim to enforce the United Nations arms embargo to Libya due to the Second Libyan Civil War. Operation IRINI is a European Union military operation under the umbrella of the Common Security and Defense Policy. During the conflict between LNA and GNA Irini contributed to some extent in halting the delivery of illegal arms in Libya –via sea. However, most of the arms smuggling to Libya between 2019-2020 took place via commercial flights that the EU was unable, within the mandate of IRINI, to stop or traffic. IRINI can play an important role in regulating migration and human trafficking towards Europe and Athens must insist, on a principal basis, in strengthening its mandate and enlarging the participation among EU members.
- The regional spillover effect of the Libyan conflict to other countries, in relation to both Sahel⁹ and the Middle East. The possibility that the recent assassination of the President of Chad, Idriss Déby, was carried out through the involvement of militias that had previously been active in Libya, as well as the presence of Russian mercenaries¹⁰ in Libya could emerge as new focal points for US and EU foreign policy. Wagner is still active in Libya posing a wider challenge for the broader Euro-Atlantic security structures and security architecture in the African continent. Russia’s policy in Libya is an interesting trend to watch. Moscow is slightly gaining strategic ground in Libya. The recent appointment¹¹ of Hussein Mohamed Khalifa Al-Aaeb as the head of Libya’s intelligence service is widely seen an interesting political revival of the old “Gaddafists.”

The next day in Libya will be shaped by what transpires during the election campaign, the future of the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum, the new political realities that will crystallize immediately after the elections and, finally, the viability and outcome of the peace process itself.

During this important period until the December 2021 election, Greek diplomacy decision makers should monitor, in depth, not only the external dimensions of the Libyan crisis but also the internal political processes and dynamics. Special attention should be given to the competition between the main political actors in eastern and

⁹ “Khalifa Haftar and France do Idriss Deby's "housework"”, *African Intelligence*, February 2019. Available at https://www.africaintelligence.com/north-africa_diplomacy/2019/02/07/khalifa-haftar-and-france-do-idriss-deby-s-housework,108343608-brc [last accessed on 20 April 2021].

¹⁰ “US calls for withdrawal of Russian, Turkish forces from Libya”, *Al Jazeera*, January 2021. Available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/1/28/us-calls-for-withdrawal-of-russian-turkish-forces-from-libya> [last accessed on 25 April 2021].

¹¹ “New head of intelligence appointed”, *Libya Herald*, May 2021. Available at: <https://www.libyaherald.com/2021/05/07/new-head-of-intelligence-appointed/> [last accessed on 5 May 2021].

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western Libya. In terms of conflict transformation, the case of Libya should be approached not only through traditional efforts to strengthen state institutions, justice, security sector reform (SSR) etc., but also focus on the intrinsic dimensions of Libya's tribal politics.

“The recent appointment of Hussein Mohamed Khalifa Al-Aaeb as the head of Libya's intelligence service is widely seen as an interesting political revival of the old “Gaddafists”.”

Turkey in Libya

Since January 1975¹² and the Gaddafi-Ankara intergovernmental agreement on oil exports, Libya has been a key economic and trade partner for Turkey. Since the mid-1970s, Turkish investment in Libya has exceeded USD38 billion (in total), especially in the construction sector. STFA, the first Turkish construction company, entered the Libyan market in 1972. One of the company's numerous projects was the main building of the port of Tripoli.

Decision makers in Erdogan's circle and the AKP's economic elites approach the rebuilding of Libya as a "non-monopolistic involvement". This realistic approach gives Turkey the maneuvering space to work with other economic actors and investors such as Italy and Russia in the post-conflict reconstruction of the country. Moreover, the role of the Turkey-Libya Business Council¹³ at this level is of recognized value and falls within the framework of Turkey's general economic diplomacy/soft power through the Turkish Foreign Economic Relations Board (*Diş Ekonomik İlişkiler Kurulu-DEİK*). After 2014, and in the context of planning external financial relations of the Turkish private sector, DEİK is controlled by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey -and by extension the AKP. So far, Karadeniz Holding¹⁴ has won a tender to supply electricity to Libya, while Misrata's city chamber¹⁵ (Misurata Chamber of Trade, Industry and Agriculture) has been very active in concluding agreements with Turkey even before the January 2021 political transition process began.

“Turkey has realized that the current government in Tripoli (GNU) is facing similar challenges as the GNA (Government of National Accord) because of the fact that general Haftar remains a relevant actor in the East.”

The main immediate strategic goal of the Turkish involvement in Libya is a speedy and sustainable end to the Libyan crisis, as Turkey has been suffering by "bleeding" funds since 2014 due to the ongoing war in the country. Specifically, the accrued outstanding receivables of Turkish companies amount to a total of USD 1 billion and the value of their accreditation letters amounts to USD 1.7 billion annually. The loss of equipment and supplies due to the war has been estimated at USD 1.3 billion. Bearing in mind that, the total value of projects in the Turkish economy between 2011 and 2014 amounted to USD 28.9 billion, it is easy to understand how Turkey would save its economy to a large extent through strategically establishing itself in Libya.

Therefore, given present conditions in the area, Turkey's active involvement in the Libyan crisis is not only related to Turkey's revivalist geopolitical aspirations¹⁶ in the

¹² “Turkey and Libya Sign Wide-Range Economic Pact”, *The New York Times*, January 1975. Archived at: <https://www.nytimes.com/1975/01/06/archives/turkey-and-libya-sign-widerange-economic-pact.html> [last accessed on 26 April 2021].

¹³ “Turkish business council urges creation of Libya logistics center for trade with Africa”, *Daily Sabah*, September 2020. Available at: <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/economy/turkish-business-council-urges-creation-of-libya-logistics-center-for-trade-with-africa> [last accessed on 22 April 2021].

¹⁴ “Turkish floating power plant firm aims to end blackouts in west Libya”, *Reuters*, July 2020. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security-turkey-power-idUSKBN2481FK> [last accessed on 26 April 2021].

¹⁵ “Turkey, Libya trade to benefit from increased joint efforts”, *Daily Sabah*, December 2019. Available at: <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/2019/12/30/turkey-libya-trade-to-benefit-from-increased-joint-efforts> [last accessed on 26 April 2021].

¹⁶ “What Erdogan Really Wants in the Eastern Mediterranean”, *Foreign Policy*, January 2021. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/01/19/turkey-greece-what-erdogan-wants-eastern-mediterranean-sovereignty-natural-gas/> [last accessed on 26 April 2021].

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eastern Mediterranean and North Africa, but is also acquiring a deeply strategic economic aspect. The juncture is particularly critical for the Turkish economy, with its national currency in crisis, increased unemployment and double-digit inflation rates, which is accelerated by the global Covid-19 pandemic.

The recent visit in Libya¹⁷ by the Turkish Foreign Minister, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, accompanied by the head of the MIT, Hakan Fidan indicated that:

- Turkey has realized that the current government in Tripoli (GNU) is facing similar challenges as the GNA (Government of National Accord) because of the fact that general Haftar remains a relevant actor in the East.
- The Presidential Council is facing internal rifts –so a national reconciliation remains a difficult process.
- Ankara wants to ensure that Libya, post-elections, will remain its regional strategic partner and to maintain leverage. The Libyan-Turkish MoU remains, on this level, a top priority. For the Libyan prime minister, who seeks to strike a balance of power between the various foreign governments with vested interests in the country, Ankara's support is critically important.

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Moving away from a mistake?

After the visit of the Greek Prime Minister Mitsotakis to Libya, the agenda of Greece vis-à-vis Tripoli is developing along two axes:

- The silent institutional recognition of the essentially already *de jure* recognized GNA/Tripoli government, which is where the new transitional Dbeiba government (GNU) emerged from. The Greek Prime Minister emphatically confirmed the government's legitimacy during his visit, on the same day with the Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi.
- Greece's firm principled position on the need to abolish the Libyan-Turkish memorandum. This position was openly expressed by the Greek Prime Minister himself in his one-on-one meeting with Abdel Hamid Dbeiba¹⁸, but also during their joint statements after the meeting. This position has come with proposals for specific formulas and ideas to make this possible. The prevailing view on this among foreign policy makers in Athens was that if the situation in Libya normalizes, Turkey's external influence could be limited to security (which is the subject of the other memorandum signed by Tripoli and Ankara). The Libyan-Turkish memorandum on maritime borders will be "marginalized" and consequently cease to be an important aspect of the Libyan-Turkish strategic relationship.

The Greek PM's visit to Tripoli will certainly not remove Turkey's strong political, military and economic footprint in Libya and by extension its expression through the Libyan-

¹⁷“Turkish top officials visit Libyan capital”, AA, May 2021. Available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/politics/turkish-top-officials-visit-libyan-capital/2228060> [last accessed on 4 May 2021].

¹⁸ «Live οι δηλώσεις Μητσοτάκη και του πρωθυπουργού της Λιβύης», *In.gr*, April 2021. Available at: <https://www.in.gr/2021/04/06/politics/live-oi-diloseis-mitsotaki-kai-tou-prothypourgou-tis-livvis/> [last accessed on 26 April 2021].

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“The Greek PM’s visit to Tripoli will certainly not remove Turkey’s strong political, military and economic footprint in Libya and by extension its expression through the Libyan-Turkish memorandum, particularly given Turkey’s instrumentalization of the MoU.”

“Greece should support in all international fora the Presidential Council and UNSMIL (United Nations Support Mission in Libya) as key actors for a secure transition in the country.”

Turkish memorandum, particularly given Turkey's instrumentalization of the MoU¹⁹ in its efforts to advance its revisionist agenda regarding maritime zones in the Eastern Mediterranean. At the moment, the abolition of the MoU remains a difficult objective for Greece -but not an impossible one. Undoubtedly, Greece's decision to resume bilateral relations with Libya and to refrain from experimentations –that deviate from the country’s traditional principle-based approach—was a crucial first step.

How Greece could play its cards in Libya

Despite the cordial Greek-Libyan relations during the Gaddafi years, the events that followed the 2011 uprising and the country's plunging into civil war created a "Libyan gap" in Greek foreign policy. Libya went through a period of intermittent but intense violence between 2012-2017, while the post-conflict diplomatic efforts that followed the summer of 2017 and culminated in UN initiatives under Ghassan Salamé and French President Macron²⁰ failed under the pressure of key Libyan actors and due to external meddling. General Haftar's failed attempt to seize Tripoli not only led to Turkey becoming directly involved in the Libyan crisis, but also gave Ankara a broader geopolitical role which extended to maritime zones. In the coming critical months, Greece could move strategically in three directions:

- A principle-based approach with respect to the country's territorial integrity,²¹ the transformation of the security situation (arms embargo, withdrawal of all foreign forces) and non-exclusion of actors in the process of political transition towards the upcoming elections. Greece should support in all international fora the Presidential Council and UNSMIL (United Nations Support Mission in Libya) as key actors for a secure transition in the country.
- A pro-active diplomatic stance within the European Union and on a regional level through the group of the Med7, as well as within the framework of trilateral diplomacy schemes with countries in the region. Greece could pursue an active mediating role and ensure that it is not excluded from international conferences on Libya. This could even include dialogue initiatives on Greek soil.
- An active economic diplomacy in order to secure a share in investments in the country's post-conflict development, as well as to directly discuss the further enhancement of cooperation in the fields of education, defense, health and energy, adding an emphasis on renewables.

In conclusion, relations with Libya should not be seen exclusively in the light of the Libyan-Turkish memorandum and Turkey's active involvement. Relations should develop in the context of a broader policy designed to create the conditions to rebuild trust between Tripoli and Athens through sincere political dialogue. A bilateral negotiation on the delimitation of maritime zones between the two countries in keeping with International Law could be a part of this dialogue in the future. Greece can play a constructive role both within the LPDF’s mandate and the UNSC Resolution on Libya,

¹⁹ “Turkey-Libya deal seen as a game-changer in east Med”, *Hurriyet Daily News*, November 2019. Available at <https://www.hurriyetaidailynews.com/opinion/serkan-demirtas/turkey-libya-deal-seen-as-a-game-changer-in-east-med-149285> [last accessed on April 20 2021].

²⁰ “France to push Libya accord at new Paris meeting, diplomats say”, *Reuters*, March 2018. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/instant-article/idINKCN1IO2O2> [last accessed on 31 March 2021].

²¹ The author of this policy brief contacted the GNA on the circulating rumors of Tripoli recognizing the so called Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. GNA officially stated to the author that this is not true. Further read at: <https://geopoliticalcyprus.org/2020/11/23/psevokratos-sarraj-gna-anagnorisi/> [last accessed on 26 April 2021].

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“Athens can mediate on the EU level in order to help Libya as a mediator between key national institutions and stakeholders. [...] Greece could mediate in order to signal at both regional and European level that the elections must take place without external interventions.”

which enshrined the upcoming elections. But most importantly, Athens can mediate on the EU level in order to help Libya as a mediator between key national institutions and stakeholders. So far, Libya failed to prepare an electoral law (deadline is on July 1) and the political landscape in the country resembles the dynamics of the period just before April 4 2019 –when the LNA under Haftar launched its offensive on Tripoli. Greece could –since it currently is in good terms with all parties in Libya –mediate in order to signal at both regional and European level that the elections must take place without external interventions. The smooth conduct of free and fair elections and the country’s stabilization are a key priority of Athens. After all, a new Libyan government will also take final decisions regarding the fate of the Libyan-Turkish MoU.

In addition, the Libyan crisis can work as a serious case study of how Greece, ten years after the events of the Arab Spring, should approach the countries of the region. In building its relations with Libya, Greece can start laying the foundations of a central role in generating stability and supporting peace-building and post-conflict cooperation in the region, both as a member state of the European Union with a prominent position in the eastern Mediterranean and as a pro-active honest broker.