

## Turkey's Military Role in Libya and Its Wider Strategic Environment (interest) in the Eastern Mediterranean Basin

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### Abstract:

As a result of the Arab Spring and the return to building the sphere of interest of the Ottoman past, Turkey's relations with the countries of the North African region are increasingly appreciating, and they seem to be a longer-term vision in Turkish geopolitical thinking. Libya has historically been a part of the Ottoman Empire, a traditionally Turkish sphere of interest in this sense. The study seeks to present the drivers and goals of Turkish foreign policy in relation to a North African state, Libya. In the analysis, examining Turkey's expansive foreign policy, we can also get an idea of how Ankara intends to increase its sphere of interest in the wider region, namely in the Eastern Mediterranean, through its military support.

### Keywords:

Turkey; Libya; defence industry; hard power; military intervention; geopolitics.

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## ***Introduction***

The waves of anti-government protests that erupted in early 2011 brought significant change to the countries of the Middle East and North Africa. The “Arab Spring” has fundamentally changed the political map of the region, disrupted the status quo and created instability domestically and politically in many countries. The circumstances changed and challenged Turkey's regional power ambitions, and foreign policy. Accelerated processes have forced a reassessment of foreign policy concepts, thus Turkey had to give up its “zero problem with its neighbors” policy linked with the name of Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu. The Libyan civil war was one of the challenges that the zero-problem policy had seriously faced. The events highlighted the vulnerability of the concept and showed the Turkish leadership the need for a more active and proactive foreign policy to maintain the country's central power role. The research question of this paper is: Has the Turkish zero-problem foreign policy changed after the Arab Spring?

The aim of the study is to examine the changes in Turkish foreign and military policy in the aftermath of the Arab Spring in relation to Libya, a country most affected by the process. The hypothesis of the paper is that the Turkish problem of zero foreign policy changed during the Arab Spring and transformed into a more expansive, pragmatic real policy willing to intervene in domestic political processes with hard power (military power). For the purpose, the study examines in Chapter 1 Turkey's wider strategic (interest) environment in the Eastern Mediterranean basin. Chapter 2 covers the increase of Turkish presence in Libya, and Chapter 3 Ankara's strategic goals of geopolitics in the Northern African country. Chapter 4 examines Ankara's economic interests in Libya, and Chapter 5 the military intervention. Chapter 6 summarizes the influence of the Turkish military industry in Libya. The author verifies the hypothesis using an inductive method that focuses on how Turkish foreign policy has changed during the processes in the states of the Arab Spring. Due to length limits, the work seeks to focus on the current situation, describing and contextually examining and analyzing Turkish geopolitical goals and the evolution of Turkish-Libyan affiliates in light of the Arab Spring and the events of the Civil War. The study draws on the international literature and presents the changes in the events in Libya and the Turkish reactions to them from a Turkish perspective.

## ***Turkey's Wider Strategic (Interest) Environment in the Eastern Mediterranean Basin***

One of the important “side areas” of the Libyan conflict from the Turkish point of view is the Eastern Mediterranean basin and the strategically important natural gas fields there, which are at the intersection of Turkey's broader geopolitical goals. In recent years, the geostrategic importance of the Eastern Mediterranean region has clearly increased and foreign policy activity in the region has accelerated. This is largely due to the fact that several significant gas fields have been discovered since 2009 in the sea areas bordered by Egypt, Israel and Cyprus.

Some research suggests that there are additional significant hydrocarbon reserves in the region that have attracted the attention of governments in neighboring countries. By seizing the opportunities, countries that have hitherto needed to import can become gas exporters, energy hubs, and generate huge revenues (Chehabeddine and Tvaronavičienė, 2020, p. 431). Due to its significant gas assets in the Eastern Mediterranean, Turkey wants to achieve a "redrawing" of its maritime borders and is demanding significant areas. In this effort, Turkey sees Libya as an ally in the Mediterranean as a dominant state in the region (Tagliapietra, 2020).

As an adverse move, Turkish foreign policy has interpreted a close co-operation with the participation of Israel, Egypt and the Republic of Cyprus, which already have successful drilling, as well as Greece, which is important for transport, with the exclusion of Turkey. This led to a meeting in Cairo in January 2019 with the Republic of Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, Israel, Jordan, Italy and the Palestinian Authority to agree on the establishment of a regional institution (Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum) to coordinate energy cooperation. The rapprochement of the Turks with Libya can, in a sense, also be seen as a step taken to counterbalance this alliance. In response, on 27 November 2019, Ankara agreed with the Libyan Unity Government (Turkish-Libyan Maritime Agreement) on a common maritime border of approximately 18.6 nautical miles (35 km). In practice, this means that a significant part of the territory of the Mediterranean, which previously belonged to Greece and the Cypriot Greeks, has been declared to belong to, and by, Turkey (Hacaoglu and Kozok, 2019).

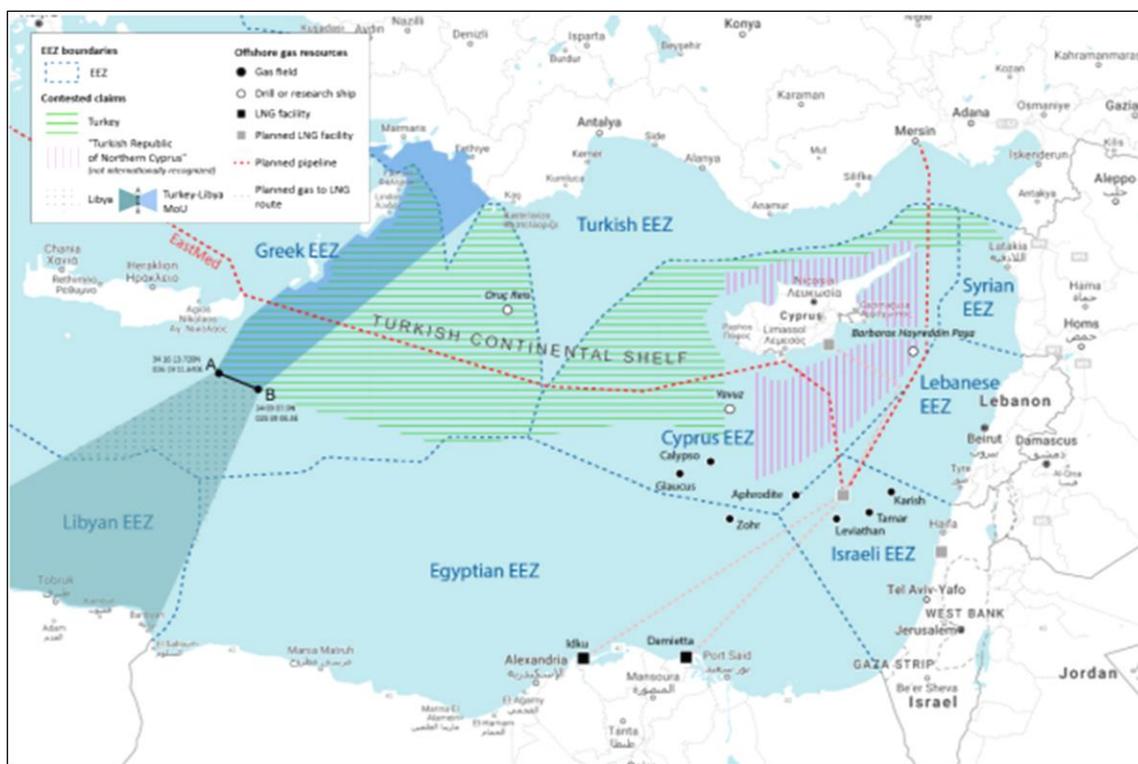


Figure 1: The Turkish-Libyan Delimitation Convention and the demands of actors in the region. Source: European Parliamentary Research Service (2020, p. 5).

Events in the region have been adversely affected by the signing in January 2020 by the Energy Ministers of Israel, Greece, and the Republic of Cyprus of the final documents of the plan for the 1,900 km long Eastern Mediterranean Pipeline Project on Israeli-Cypriot territorial waters, which, if realized, would supply natural gas to Europe bypassing Turkey. The project poses a serious threat to Ankara's interests and could result in the planned gas pipeline passing through the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) designated by the Libya-Turkey Maritime Agreement (Kansu, 2020, p. 55).<sup>2</sup>

On the one hand, the main problem in resolving the conflicts in the Eastern Mediterranean is the Cyprus dispute, which allows Ankara to look at the maritime borders from the perspective of Turkey's best interests (without recognizing the maritime borders of the Republic of Cyprus). On the other hand, a source of tension is that, as Turkey has not ratified the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), it does not interpret the creation of an exclusive economic zone in accordance with the convention. While Greece, for example, would count the border of the EEA from its islands, Turkey would count from the mainland, thus significantly reducing the territorial scope of the economic zone belonging to Athens (Málnássy, 2020, p. 80).

Turkey's goals in the eastern Mediterranean are clear. The Turkish government wants to guarantee itself the right to extract natural resources under its own continental shelf and, at the same time, in the territories of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. To this end, Turkey sought an ally in the region (Libya) and sent research ships and warships to the waters under its jurisdiction as demonstrations of strength. With this move, Ankara could put pressure on Eastern Mediterranean cooperation, especially in Cyprus, which has been unfavorable to it and has accelerated in recent years (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2020, p. 5).

### *The Increase of Turkish Presence in Libya*

Turkey, as well as other dominant powers in the Middle East and North Africa, were unprepared for the events and consequences of the Arab Spring. However, overcoming the initial "shock", Ankara adapted its priorities relatively quickly to the new circumstances and began to pursue an active foreign policy to achieve leadership in transformation. Turkey, a key player by virtue of its geopolitical location and its geographical proximity to the countries of the Arab Spring, has become almost indispensable in dealing with the problems (Kardaş, 2011, p. 5).

Following the outbreak of the Libyan civil war in February 2011, Turkey's policy towards Libya can be divided into several phases, which practically reflect the dynamics of the progress of events. The first phase is the period 2011-2014 consisting of two parts: the first is the Libyan

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<sup>2</sup> The exclusive economic zone may be a sea area extending up to 200 nautical miles, in which the state has sole control over the resources and raw materials located there.



civil war (2011-2012) and the second is the subsequent transitional period. In the former, the most important fault line was the attitude towards the Gaddafi regime, which determined the decisions and reactions of the opposing parties. While Western countries quickly broke with the support of Muammar Gaddafi and sided with the insurgents, the zero-problem policy<sup>3</sup> marked by the name of Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu dictated for Ankara to maintain good relations with the Libyan regime. The Turkish government initially took a neutral stance, but when the international image of the country in Asia was affected by the dictator's support, the Turkish foreign policy leadership abandoned that policy and sided with the insurgents. The status quo, no matter how favorable to Turkey, was no longer sustainable for Libya. As the process progressed, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's involvement in the Libyan conflict became a central element of its foreign policy, with the Ankara government trying to restore its battered economic ties by supporting the establishment of a stable central government. The chaotic situations in the country and the spread of violence have already caused more and more damage to Turkish economic interests at this stage (Fredriksen and Tziarras, 2020, p. 11).

The next phase (2014-2019) began with the Second Libyan Civil War, and there has been an acceleration in Turkish foreign policy activity and a gradual shift towards military intervention. Islamist parties sympathizing with the Muslim Brotherhood virtually took power over Tripoli in the first half of 2014, and more "driven" anti-Islamist, secular forces fled to Tobruk. This created two legislatures, the General National Congress (GNC) in Tripoli and the House of Representatives (HoR) in Tobruk, which created two loose power organizations in the country. General Khalifa Haftar, who formally made an alliance with the center of power in Tobruk and became a leader in the fight against Islamists, took a stand against Islamism. The strengthening of the Muslim Brotherhood in the country was also seen as a serious threat by neighboring Egypt, which retaliated against members of the organization following a military coup in the summer of 2013. The judgment of the Muslim Brotherhood has, in fact, defined and still defines the dividing line between international actors appearing in Libyan domestic politics, which can also be interpreted as an ideological organization of the opposing parties. He took a similar position and, as a result, supported the forces of General Haftar with arms and military means in addition to Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates, and to a lesser extent France and Russia. Meanwhile, the Islamist bloc supporting the Muslim Brotherhood included Turkey, Qatar, and Sudan, and this group was even assisted by Italy (Fredriksen and Tziarras, 2020, p. 14).

In the first six months of 2015, the Islamic State occupied the Cliffs and part of Libya's northeast coast, creating a third center of power in the country. The Libyan Political Agreement, signed in Morocco on 17 December 2015 in Morocco under the auspices of the United Nations (UN), proved to be a temporary solution to the Libyan National Unity Government (GNA) under Prime Minister Fayeze al-Sarraj. One of the key findings of the

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<sup>3</sup> Zero problem policy seeks to minimize conflicts with neighboring countries and regions and avoid involvement in international conflicts. Ahmet Davutoğlu's vision envisages Turkey becoming a global player.

agreement was that the Libyan crisis could not be resolved by military means, and the parties should seek to waive the use of force. Under the agreement, the GNA would have been tasked with weapons to be collected, disbanding various militias, and integrating them into a common Libyan army. Under the agreement, a transitional government was formed in January 2016, but the Tobruk House of Representatives did not vote for it. Internal tensions were also heightened by the inability of the unity government to effectively counter growing militias and radical organizations under the pretext of increasing pressure on the government by the Haftar-led Libyan National Army (LNA). With his anti-Islamic narrative, the general gave the impression that he alone was fighting against the advance of radical groups in the country that had also infiltrated the ranks of forces allied with the GNA. The former HoR-GNC confrontation at this stage transformed into a rivalry between pro-GNA and anti-GNA groups, and despite the initial results, by the summer of 2016, another crisis in Libya's domestic politics was clearly outlined. Over the next two years, there was still an intensive attempt to reconcile the parties, bringing the LNA and GNA to an agreement, but with little success (Missaglia, 2017, p. 2).

Haftar decided in early April 2019 to launch a military attack on Tripoli, throwing up the hitherto largely negotiated solution. However, the strategy of rapid military victory failed and the Third Libyan Civil War turned into a protracted armed conflict. This was most evident in the fact that after the initial minor clashes, the fighting became more and more brutal. And the attacks more often affected residential areas and the civilian population. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan announced in response to the process that Turkey was ready to provide all assistance to the unity government to curb Haftar's attacks. Support was also provided in the form of specific military assistance, and Turkey sent military equipment to the GNA. He described this move as an open threat to Camp Haftar, a spokesman for the LNA headquarters who spoke outright about the "Turkish invasion," which could lead to a military confrontation. The spokesman added that the LNA would then target Turkish ships stationed off the coast of Libya, soldiers in the country and economic interests. The announcement of the LNA threatened Turkey with an open military confrontation with consequences that Turkish citizens lost their lives in the clashes (International Crisis Group, 2020).

The signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the GNA on the sovereignty of the Mediterranean and military cooperation on 27 November 2019 marks the beginning of a new phase in Ankara's Libya policy. The political significance of both agreements goes beyond the borders of a country affected by the civil war and prepared for the actual military intervention by Turkey. The Maritime Agreement emphasizes that the borders concerned of the Eastern Mediterranean region may be the subject of debate, as a completely new situation has emerged in the region due to the exploration for oil and gas in recent years (Butler and Gumrukcu, 2019). The document points out that Turkey's political and economic goals do not stop off the Libyan coast, but that Erdoğan's efforts are much more part of an expansive regional policy to exploit raw materials in the Mediterranean, in which Libya is an important ally and partner for Turkey. The Military Cooperation Convention has been extended to include actual military assistance, counter-terrorism training, assistance in managing



migration, military transport, and the exchange of experts. Libya can "activate" the military assistance provided for in the agreement with a request formally submitted to the Turkish government, which, after approval by the Grand National Assembly, can send military units to assist Libya. The agreement was also ratified by the Libyan unity government and the Turkish parliament in December 2019 (Bozkurt, 2019).

In Libya, on March 15, 2021, under the leadership of Abdulhamid Dbeibeh, the new Provisional Unity Government took office. The Interim Government has good relations with Turkey, as evidenced by the fact that Ankara and Tripoli have reaffirmed their commitment to the Turkish-Libyan Mediterranean Maritime Accord, signed in November 2019, which guarantees the national interests of both parties (Kansu, 2020, p. 66).

### ***Ankara's Strategic Goals of Geopolitics in Libya***

In recent years, there has been unprecedented Turkish foreign policy activity in the Middle East and North Africa since the break-up of the Ottoman Empire. In September 2011, Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan made a historic tour of the three sites of the Arab Spring, Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia, which supported the rise of Turkish foreign policy activism in the region. Turkey is determined to become the leading regional power in the wider Middle East. Since the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002, the Turkish leadership has sought to create an area of stability, prosperity and economic cooperation in the Middle East and North Africa. Such an environment would be most suitable for Turkish interests. Ahmed Davutoğlu has also developed a zero-problem policy for the former (Mercan and Usta-Lazaris, 2012, p. 7).

In the aftermath of the events of the Arab Spring, policymakers recognized that the zero-problem of foreign policy needed to be reassessed and that changing regional political actors posed new challenges for Ankara. In order to maintain Turkey's position of power, Turkish foreign policy must be active and proactive rather than the previous cautious, wait-and-see attitude. The aim of this active foreign policy is to support the Muslim Brotherhood in Libya, to export the Turkish model where appropriate, and to weaken regional opponents, i.e. Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, which were key players in the Libyan conflict as foreign supporters. The former countries attacked all political groupings affiliated in some way with the Muslim Brotherhood, which enjoyed the support of the Turkish government and strengthened relatively during the Arab Spring. As the Libyan government is currently part of a political force that can be linked with the Muslim Brotherhood and is also supported by Ankara, it sees its weakening as an attack on Turkey's own foreign policy interests (Hiltermann, 2018, p. 16).

As has been suggested before, the events of the Arab Spring have seen an increase in Turkish geopolitical ambitions, as well as the fact that in many cases Ankara is pursuing its foreign policy goals with military force and means. Based on the experience of recent years,

this effort is now visible not only on land (e.g. Syria, Libya) but also at sea (Mediterranean). The advocacy strategy is that Turkey has spent significant financial resources in recent years on building a strong navy. According to Turkish plans, a total of 24 new ships will be completed by 2023, including four frigates. The expansive direction is also reflected in the concepts of Turkish foreign policy, according to which the Turkish Homeland (vatan) is not meant exclusively for the mainland (Anatolia), but also for the Blue Homeland, i.e. the seas (mavi vatan). The term was first used by Admiral Ramazan Cem Gürdeniz in 2006 (Gürdeniz, 2018), while in geopolitics the term was used from March 2019 after a naval exercise. Between 27 February and 8 March 2019, the largest naval exercise in the modern history of Turkey was held under the name “Mavi Vatan”. The operation in the Black Sea, the Aegean Sea and the Mediterranean involved 103 warships, submarines, and other ships, as well as drones. All of this symbolically marked the expanding direction of Turkish foreign policy towards the “blue homeland,” that is, the seas (Tsiplacos, 2019, p. 6).



Figure 2: Blue Homeland: Turkey's expanding naval horizons in Mavi Vatan Source: Turkeygazette (2020).

In Libya, Ankara's clear strategic goal was to ensure and support the survival of the Allied Tripoli government through military intervention and to protect its economic interests. The Turkish government's assistance with military equipment since April 2019 quickly became insufficient to achieve these goals and military intervention became inevitable. It didn't take long to do this, in November 2019 the Haftar-led units made significant breakthroughs, and Erdoğan opted for actual military intervention. The Turkish president used two



complementary narratives to justify this move. Support in part can be traced back to the time of the Ottoman Empire, according to which, as a “consequence” of the Turkish rule at that time, more than one million so-called Kōroğlu Turks still live in Libya, who need to be protected from Haftar’s ethnic attacks. The other argument for legitimizing Turkish military intervention was that, according to Erdoğan, Haftar should be seen as a legitimate "coupist" fighting for the overthrow of the UN-recognized Libyan government, and the attack on Tripoli as a "coup attempt" supported by anti-democratic countries such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (Akan et al., 2020). According to the International Crisis Group (2020), with military intervention, Ankara actually wanted Haftar not to be able to reap a military victory over GNA and move the parties toward the discussion again.

### *Ankara’s Economic Interests in Libya*

The African continent has not been a major target of Turkish foreign policy for a long time, but that changed in 1998. Since then, Turkey has built economic and trade relations with African countries under the "Opening to Africa Policy," in which various Turkish humanitarian and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play a significant role (Besenyő, 2021, p. 79).

Turkey already developed close ties with Gaddafi’s Libya in the 1970s. The economic relationship between the two countries was given a major boost by a similar political stance in the 1974 Cyprus crisis. Libya has supported the Turkish-led Operation Cyprus Peace and supplied military assets to Ankara as a covert operation. In January 1975, the two countries held high-level consultations, during which they signed the Economic Partnership and Trade Agreement and a number of other economic agreements that encouraged investment in the following years. As a result of the strengthening of relations, the volume of trade between the two countries increased significantly due to the increased number of joint projects and companies. The Turkish Arab Bank (A&T Bank) was established in Istanbul in 1977 with the specific aim of facilitating trade and economic relations between Turkey and the countries of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). As early as the late 1970s, the parties identified as a priority the need to significantly increase the number of Turkish guest workers in Libya (Öztaş and Polat, 2019, p. 14).

The construction sector, as indicated above, has always occupied a prominent place in the development of economic relations between Turkey and Libya. Turkish construction companies have long seen the country in North Africa as a prosperous market where increasing profits and further investment can be realized in the future (Beaumont, 2019). In the 1970s, hundreds of Turkish companies won infrastructure and construction projects in Libya. While in the 1990s Russia (35%) was the main area of operation for Turkish construction companies, ahead of Libya (14%), in the first decade of the 2000s, with a declining share of Russia (15%), the North African country (12%) became a major player partner. In 2011, 12% of foreign contracts of Turkish construction companies were related to Libya, with a total value of more than \$ 2.4 billion. During this period, more than 200 Turkish companies carried out

construction work on 214 projects, with ongoing construction in several major Libyan cities, Tripoli, Tobruk, Benghazi and Derna. For the entire period from 1972 to 2010, Libya was the second most important partner, with Turkish companies implementing construction projects worth more than \$ 26 billion (Öztaş and Polat, 2019, p. 13).

The quality of economic relations was demonstrated by the fact that in 2011 Turkey provided significant financial support and loans to Tripoli through the Turkish Arab Bank and the Turkish Savings and Insurance Fund (TMSF) (Öztaş & Polat, 2019, p. 14). Another important area for Ankara was the Libyan oil industry. Turkey's oil company, TPAO, invested more than \$ 180 million in Libyan oil production before the civil war, which was forced to give up its activities later (Can, 2020).

The Turkish government has consistently sought to "revive" the Turkish construction industry in Libya, which has suffered significant losses since 2011. Due to the lost revenues, the Turkish-Libyan Joint Construction Working Group met again in Istanbul on 31 January 2019, during which GNA set the goal of ensuring the continuation of project sin process. At the end of the event, the parties signed a MoU that will lay the groundwork for continued construction investment in Turkey. In November 2019, Turkey hoped for the development of bilateral economic relations from the conclusion of both the military and the naval agreement, but in another reading we can put it this way: the condition for maintaining economic positions was the military assistance provided to Tripoli. The Association of Independent Craftsmen and Businessmen (MÜSIAD), an advocacy organization that also influences Turkish foreign policy, has predicted that annual exports could rise from \$ 1.49 billion in 2018 to \$ 10 billion in the coming years as a result of closer ties. And the Turkish defense sector could be a significant part of the expected export surplus (Razek, 2020).

It is seen from the developments that, despite the previous prosperous Turkish-Libyan economic relationship, Turkey intends to continue to play a leading role in the country's economic life, recovery, and reconstruction, despite the negative effects of COVID. This is also supported by the Turkish-Libyan Joint Business Meeting held in Istanbul in February 2019. In the meeting the parties identified areas in which they intend to cooperate in the near future. According to the agreement, they want to create joint investments in the energy, small and medium-sized enterprises, banking, transport, technology, and agricultural sectors (Öztaş and Polat, 2019, p. 8). The position of the North African country is also appreciated for Turkey by the fact that Libya is seen as a "gateway" to gaining economic influence on the continent and a stable presence can facilitate access to potential economic investment in other African countries (Besenyő, 2021, p. 78).

### ***Military Intervention by Turkey in Libya***

In the following chapter, Turkey's military intervention in Libya is presented as a powerful foreign and geopolitical move. The domestic political events in Libya has brought about that the use of "hard power", i.e. military force, has become inevitable from Ankara's point of view in achieving its strategic goals. The offensive launched by General Haftar in April 2019 to occupy Tripoli in December 2019 posed an increasingly serious threat to the Libyan unity government. As a result, on 20 December 2019, GNA formally requested military assistance from Turkey by air, land and sea under a military agreement signed in November (Mahmoud, 2019). Erdoğan submitted a proposal to the Grand National Assembly on 30 December 2019, and on 2 January 2020, the Turkish parliament passed a bill authorizing the government to send troops to Libya to support the GNA for one year (Sayın, 2020).

Military assistance, as I mentioned earlier, had a precedent. Since the start of Haftar's operation against Tripoli, Turkey has unofficially supported the government of el-Saraj by various military means (International Crisis Group, 2020). However, with the signing of a military agreement in November, Turkey has entered into a phase of open military support that has significantly increased and deepened the country's involvement in the Libyan conflict, helping the unity government to slow the advance of Haftar's coalition forces. As a part of its military assistance, since January 2020, Ankara has sent more than 100 Turkish military officers to Libya, primarily to assist and coordinate the operations of government forces and to train local allied forces. Turkey has also increased the supply of military equipment and weapons to government forces and allies. By January 2020, Ankara had provided GNA with military drones (Bayraktar TB-2), missiles, armored personnel carriers (BMC Kirpi), Turkish operating personnel and experts. According to the International Crisis Group (2020), several cargo ships arrived from Turkey carrying military equipment. Medium-range anti-aircraft missiles were deployed by the Turkish army at Tripoli and Misrata airports, increasing the security and defense of strategic hubs. In April 2020, Ankara stepped up intervention and commanded two warships off the coast of western Libya. The Turkish Air Force has been deployed several times, primarily for reconnaissance and deterrence purposes (International Crisis Group, 2020).

In addition, of course, the forces supporting Haftar also increased arms deliveries to the country. In January 2020, LNA forces recaptured the city of Sirte, which has been the biggest military success for them since April 2019. In February 2020, Haftar's troops attacked Tripoli with missiles, and Turkish air defense missiles were also deployed during the defense. On 18 February 2020, an LNA-affiliated unit fired a rocket at a Turkish ship stationed in Tripoli, killing two Turkish soldiers. On 28 February 2020, more than a hundred missiles were fired at Tripoli's only operating airport, Mitiga Airport, where the Turkish army has set up an operations center (Aslan, 2020, p. 93).

On 26 March 2020, the Turkish-backed Libyan unity government launched a counter-offensive (Operation Peace Storm) to help the capital. While fighting continued in and around

the capital, in April 2020, GNA units achieved military success in western Libya. Government forces successfully cut off Haftar's supply route, which transported fuel, food, and weapons to their allies. As a result, on 14 April 2020, GNA units captured Sabratah and Surman, which were under the control of security forces loyal to Haftar for nearly a year. On 18 April, government troops advanced into the city of Tarhuna, which was Haftar's priority military base and from which they directed the operation against Tripoli. GNA forces began bombing and encircling the city, but were unable to occupy it until the moment the manuscript was submitted (Canli, 2020).

As a part of military aid to the Libyan government, Ankara recruited militants from groups fighting on the side of the Turks in northern Syria. Fighters recruited from the Faylaq al-Sham group, mostly affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as the Murad Sultan Squadron of the Turkmen resistance unit, were tasked with assisting the military objectives of the al-Sarraj government to be achieved. According to Akoush and McKernan (2020), the small Asian country had already transported 650 members of the Syrian National Army (SNA) opposition armed group to Turkey to Tripoli in December 2019, even before the authorization by the Turkish parliament of the intervention in Libya to strengthen the unity government. In January 2020, an additional 1,350 Syrian fighters arrived in the country. With them, GNA signed a half-year, \$ 2,000-a-month contract. Different figures are available for the number of Syrian soldiers present in Libya. According to the International Crisis Group (2020), about 2,000 fighters arrived in Tripoli in January 2020 and an additional 2,500 in March, but the LNA says the number could exceed 6,000.

The reception of Syrian fighters in Libya was quite mixed. Haftar and the United Arab Emirates, which supported the LNA, have sharply criticized Turkey, calling those coming from Syria outright foreign terrorist fighters or seen as a risk of escalation of violence. The views of the Syrian militants were not clear from the GNA either, who treated the situation with relative reservations. Rejecting criticism, however, Ankara justified "Syrian military assistance" by "outsourcing" tasks and likened the Wagner Group to some 2,000 Russian military mercenaries in Libya and some 5,000 Sudanese units (Jones, 2020).

### ***Influence by the Turkish Military Industry in Libya***

In addition to permanent civil war situations, many external actors have played and continued to play to varying degrees in shaping the country's political and military developments. These actors are also gaining more and more military influence in the country, whether it is arms transfers, support for political groups, or even direct military intervention (Ilchenko et al., 2021, p. 439). Turkey is also standing out among these actors, as it can intervene more and more effectively in the military development in Libya in terms of own objectives. The direct involvement of the Turkish armed forces in Libya, as explained in detail above, began early



2020. Turkey had been involved in the conflict before that, but mainly with military advisers, intelligence, and training assistance.

In a relatively short period of time, Turkish troops, mostly land units and air and naval units, helped advance GNA forces, recaptured several cities, and inflicted heavy losses on General Halifa Haftar's forces. Besides, Turkish unmanned aerial vehicles in Libya could destroy modern Russian air defense equipment. By mid-2020, owing to strong Turkish support, Tripoli had also been recaptured from Haftar. The balance of power changed in favor of the Turkish side during the summer months to such an extent that there were several airstrikes against Turkish targets by other external actors to limit Turkish influence. The August 2020 ceasefire between the two Libyan governments brought a temporary respite to the conflict. However, this proved to be only short-lived and served much more for both sides to prepare for further stages of the conflict (ACSRT, 2021, p. 4).

One of the Turkish weapons deployed in Libya is the Korkut Mobile Air Defense Unit. The crawler self-propelled air defense system, developed and manufactured by Aselsan is specifically designed to protect the air of mechanized units. The machine gun ammunition is also developed and manufactured in Turkey. The weapon is most effectively deployed against unmanned aerial vehicles and missiles. The former has been exemplified in many cases in Libya, as the device has successfully destroyed several drones belonging to the Eastern government or one of its foreign supporters. Another six-engine device is the T-155 Firtina self-propelled gun and the T-122 Sakarya rocket launcher. The means were used to destroy enemy artillery posts and assets in Libya, also with success. Combined with radars measuring enemy artillery shells and positions, the Turkish artillery was able to elicit a response in 30 to 60 seconds. In response, eastern government forces even reactivated mobile artillery units from the Gaddafi era and were able to successfully retaliate against Turkish forces for some time (Thomas, 2020, p. 8).

Another Turkish military technical device is the Bayraktar TB-2 unmanned aerial vehicle. The armed drones could be deployed by the Turkish forces in an extremely highly integrated system on the Libyan battlefield. It was used successfully not only to destroy the artillery devices already involved, but also against a variety of moving vehicles. In Libya, it has proven to be surprisingly resistant to various attempts at electronic interference. Another drone is the Anka S drone. The reconnaissance drone "cooperated" primarily with Bayraktar TB-2 and other armed drones, and took part in artillery guidance, surveillance, and reconnaissance tasks. The Akıncı unmanned aerial vehicle is a completely new HALE-category drone manufactured by Baykar and has been deployed in Libya (Pack and Pusztai, 2020, p. 5).

The Koral electronic warfare system assisted the activities of Turkish air and ground units. The Hisar-A and Hisar-O anti-aircraft missile systems were deployed in Libya by Roketsan's short- and medium-range crawler anti-aircraft missile systems, together with troop deployments in the spring of 2020. Hisar-A provided mobile air defense for maneuvering Turkish land formations, and Hisar-O provided air defense for Turkish advanced bases, air

bases, and warehouse facilities. The interesting thing about the TMR-II robot is that the military robots manufactured by the company Elektroland have already been deployed by the Turkish army in the controlled areas of Libya, where it was mainly used to detect and deactivate improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and mines and other installed explosives (Thomas, 2020, p. 8).

## **Conclusion**

During the the Arab Spring, Turkey realized that these geopolitical changes will create a different security environment in the Middle East as well as the Eastern Mediterranean in which if it wants to preserve the zero-problem foreign policy then it must be at the forefront instead of simply follow the events. The zero-problem foreign policy of the Turkish government that used to work well was no longer applicable to the “new” security situation. This recognition led to the revision of zero-problem policy and introduced a more realist Turkish foreign policy strategy which confirms the paper’s hypothesis. The events of the Arab Spring in Libya posed a threat to Turkish national interests but the Turkish government was able to forge an advantage from it by applying a reconsidered foreign policy that was used in the country.

With the Turkish military intervention in January 2020, the Libyan unity government managed to avoid a complete military collapse and even launched a counter-offensive in some areas. Paradoxically, Ankara’s political goal with open military intervention - counterbalancing the military power of the LNA and the countries that support it - was to strengthen the GNA affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood and to promote a ceasefire for the opposing parties as soon as possible and to resolve their political differences through negotiation. This goal was essentially achieved through the new Provisional Unity Government, which took office on 15 March 2021 under the leadership of Abdul Hamid Dbeibeh.

On the one hand, Turkey sees Libya as a “geopolitical buffer state” where gaining a stable position vis-à-vis Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia could have a positive impact on the political and economic influence of the Asia Minor country in the Middle East and North Africa region. On the other hand, gaining ground in Libya could also help Ankara’s goals in the Eastern Mediterranean and thus fight for a more favorable position in the negotiations on hydrocarbon reserves.

Finally, as regards the influence of the Turkish military industry, Turkey has successfully achieved its operational objectives in Libya with a high-tech intervention force, forcing external actors in support of the other government to take serious action.

## **Conflict of Interest**

The author hereby declares that no competing financial interest exists for this manuscript.



## Notes on Contributor

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