

The Cross-Regional Impact and Direction of Proxy War in Libya

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Since the unrest began in Libya, leading to regime change and then to war, most related studies have limited themselves to the civil war itself, without paying attention to its distinctive feature as a proxy war. In fact, the two conflicting sides in Libya are the armed forces of the Government of National Accord recognized by the United Nations and openly supported by Turkey and Qatar, and commander Khalifa Haftar and his Libyan National Army backed by Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates. Other extraterritorial powers such as the US, France, Italy and Russia are also involved and have placed their bets on one side or another. This paper provides a new perspective for academic research on the Libyan proxy war by analyzing its development, nature, cross-regional influence and future direction.

Development and Nature of Proxy War in Libya

Libya is an important Arab country in North Africa and is located on the southern coast of the Mediterranean Sea, bordering Egypt, Sudan, Chad, Niger, Algeria and Tunisia. It is a member of Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and one of the world's major oil producers and exporters, with rich natural gas resources and the 10th largest oil reserves in the world.

In February 2011, the turmoil in West Asia and North Africa spread

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to Libya. Street protests turned into a political movement calling for Muammar Gaddafi's resignation. On February 17, Libyan opposition parties established the National Transitional Council of Libya (NTC) in Benghazi. Western countries such as the United States, France and the United Kingdom immediately intervened, aiming to turn Libya into a testing ground for "new interventionism." At their instigation, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1973, establishing a no-fly zone in Libya. Some NATO countries misinterpreted the resolution and escalated the establishment of no-fly zone into a military operation to topple Gaddafi. From March 19, naval and air forces from France, the UK, the US, Canada, Norway and Belgium launched airstrikes against Libyan government forces while supporting the armed opposition, quickly changing the balance of power on the battlefield.¹ On August 20, NTC armed forces captured Libya's capital Tripoli, and on October 20, Gaddafi was captured, tortured and then shot in Sirte. At this point, regime change promoted by Western countries especially the US, France and the UK under the banner of "responsibility to protect" succeeded, and democracy-building in Libya began.

In November 2011, with the support of Western countries, Libya's transitional government was established and took upon itself the main responsibility for organizing national elections. In July 2012, Libya held elections for the General National Congress (GNC). Mohamed Yusuf al-Magariaf was elected GNC President, and NTC handed over power to GNC. In October, GNC elected Ali Zeidan as Prime Minister of the interim government. Notably, the GNC established in July 2012, although democratically elected, was controlled by the Muslim Brotherhood in Libya, with the Justice and Construction Party (JCP) as its political branch and the Libya Revolutionaries Operations Room (LROR) as the armed wing. The JCP was a strong force behind the efforts of GNC to suppress secularist forces and lead Libya to an Islamic fundamentalist society between 2012 and

1 "West Says Libya Campaign On Until Gadhafi Goes," *China Daily*, April 15, 2011, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2011-04/15/content_12331365.htm.

2014. First, the Political Isolation Law was adopted in May 2013, which banned persons serving in the Gaddafi administration from holding any state office, regardless of whether they had turned against the Gaddafi regime. The ban impacted a large number of politicians, businessmen, academics and lawyers who advocated a secularist state, and prevented them from playing a role in rebuilding the country. Pursuant to that law, Magariaf and Zeidan were dismissed and replaced by Nouri Abusahmain and Abdullah al-Thani, respectively. Second, in December 2013, a resolution on implementing Sharia law in Libyan schools was adopted, providing for the segregation of men and women in universities and junior colleges, and the compulsory wearing of headscarves by female students and teachers. On this basis, GNC also began to draft a resolution to implement Sharia law throughout the country.

The rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Libyan politics sparked discontent and heightened alarm among secularist forces in the country. Secularist forces in eastern and western Libya formed a united front and created momentum among the population to stop the country from taking the fundamentalist path. In June 2014, Libya held another parliamentary election and secularist forces prevailed in the newly elected House of Representatives, whose legitimacy during its term of office until October 2015 was recognized by the UN. Its first resolution was to order the LROR to disband and surrender their weapons. On July 13, the LROR launched an offensive code-named Libya Dawn against the secularist Zintan Brigade stationed at Tripoli airport and quickly seized control of the airport and, by extension, the capital. In August, the House of Representatives moved to the eastern city of Tobruk under the protection of Libya's eastern warlord Khalifa Haftar, and gave Haftar a veneer of legality to control the east and even to unify the country. At the same time, Islamic fundamentalists in western Libya insisted on the legitimacy and validity of GNC, while expanding armed groups including the LROR, the Misrata Central Shield, and Ansar al-Sharia (Supporters of Sharia Law). They launched a probative attack on the east of Libya from their bases in Tripoli and Misrata, with a view to

eliminating secularist forces in stages and unifying the country. At this point, civil war officially broke out in Libya.

With the growing Islamic fundamentalism in Libya, the countries concerned in West Asia and North Africa adopted different positions and strategies. Turkey and Qatar were quick to provide military and financial support to the Muslim Brotherhood regime in Tripoli. Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, on the other hand, provided military and financial support to Haftar and the House of Representatives, and even deployed their air forces to support Haftar's operations, fearing that the unification of Libya by the Muslim Brotherhood regime would stimulate its branching into their own countries and jeopardize the security of their systems.

In response to the war in Libya, the UN has convened several international conferences to broker a ceasefire between the two factions and achieve national reconciliation. In December 2015, under the auspices of the UN, the two factions respectively controlling the east and west of Libya signed the Libyan Political Agreement (LPA) in Skhirat, Morocco, agreeing to end the situation of "two parliaments and two governments" and form a Government of National Accord in Tripoli.² The UN accepted the nomination of Fayez al-Sarraj by the Muslim Brotherhood as Prime Minister of the Government of National Accord. However, the House of Representatives in Tobruk, which had agreed to the main political arrangements in the LPA, declared it unacceptable five days after the signing of the agreement. It argued that the UN had been "politically kidnapped" by the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood and that none of the three candidates were representative. The LPA became a dead letter. Despite this, Sarraj remained Prime Minister, and the UN recognized the Government of National Accord as the legitimate government of Libya.

However, the Government of National Accord was not taken seriously

2 "Libya: UN Envoy Urges Endorsement of Political Agreement as Way forward for 'Peace in Unity'," *UN News*, December 7, 2015, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2015/12/517442-libya-un-envoy-urges-endorsement-political-agreement-way-forward-peace-unity>.

by Haftar's separatist forces in the east.³ As early as February 2014, Haftar declared the Tripoli regime illegitimate and vowed to eliminate all armed forces loyal to the Tripoli regime in eastern Libya. On May 14 of the same year, Haftar ordered his forces to launch Operation Dignity, an offensive that led to the seizure of key cities such as Benghazi and Derna, as well as an air strike on the Tripoli Mitiga International Airport, demonstrating his determination and ability of regime change. In March 2015, Haftar completed the reorganization of his armed forces, officially raising the flag of the Libyan National Army. He expanded the main ground forces to 60,000 troops and began a gradual advance into western Libya. After four years of war, Haftar's forces approached Sirte, Misrata and southern Tripoli in early April 2019, and laid siege to the capital at the end of April. In January 2020, they seized the strategic outpost of Sirte, while taking control of almost all oil ports along the Libyan coast and essentially depriving the Government of National Accord of its oil revenues. In early March, COVID-19 emerged in Libya and Haftar suspended his offensive on the capital. In early April, the Government of National Accord, backed by Turkey, launched a counter-offensive against Haftar's forces in areas west and south of Tripoli.⁴ In late April, the Islamic holy month of Ramadan began, but the war in Libya did not stop.

Judging from the development of the Libyan War, the intensifying internal conflicts and the outbreak of warfare in Libya are essentially part of the struggle between secularism and the Muslim Brotherhood in the broader West Asian and North African region, which presents the distinct characteristics of a proxy war.

3 Formerly Gaddafi's Chief of Staff, Haftar was captured as a prisoner of war in Libya's ill-fated expedition into Chad. Gaddafi's seeming abandonment led Haftar to turn against Gaddafi. During the Libyan street movement in 2011, Haftar returned to Libya from the United States and was elevated to Commander of the National Transitional Council. After Gaddafi's overthrow, Haftar incorporated and transformed Gaddafi's army, most of the air force and half of the navy. With strong financial support from Saudi Arabia and the UAE, Haftar has recruited foreign mercenaries from countries such as Sudan and Chad, and from the Wagner Group, a Russian private security firm, allowing his forces to far overwhelm the armed forces of the Government of National Accord in terms of size, combat power and equipment.

4 "Libya's GNA Forces Carry out Offensive on Haftar's Forces in South Tripoli," April 23, 2020, <https://www.libyaobserver.ly/news/libyas-gna-forces-carry-out-offensive-haftars-forces-south-tripoli>.

A Proxy War Deeply Intertwined with Regional Hotspots and Power Struggles

Out of a diversity of strategic needs, countries inside and outside the region have used the Libyan War to achieve their geopolitical and geo-economic agendas, or to restrain their strategic competitors and ease their own difficulties in other regional hotspots, or even used it as simply a bargaining chip to reach an exchange of interests.

The strategic race between Saudi Arabia and Turkey

After the geopolitical reshuffle in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, Saudi Arabia emerged as the number one leader in the Arab world, with Egypt accepting reality and coming in second. Riding on this geopolitical success, Saudi Arabia has sought to lead the Islamic world, but has been challenged by Iran and Turkey. The challenge from Turkey is by far the more threatening. While Iran's efforts to expand its influence in the Middle East and the Islamic world have been met with a strong containment operation by the United States and its allies, Turkey has encountered less resistance in expanding its influence since the US has not given up on bringing Turkey into the fold despite conflicts between the two sides. Turkey and other Islamic countries in the Middle East and elsewhere enjoy high complementarity in terms of economy, trade and investment. Also, the Turkish model regarding institutions, development path and governance has become more attractive to countries in the Middle East and the Islamic world, surpassing that of Iran and Saudi Arabia. Historically, the Ottoman Empire ruled over the heart of the Islamic world for nearly 600 years, and its religious and cultural influence endures.

Since the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in Turkey in 2003, it has won five consecutive elections, making Recep Tayyip Erdoğan a strongman in the Middle East and the Islamic world. In April 2017, the AKP pushed for a successful constitutional referendum that

would see Erdoğan in power until at least 2029. The AKP has formulated two ambitious development strategies, namely the 2023 Vision, which aims to make Turkey one of the world's top ten economies and major powers by the centennial anniversary of the establishment of the modern Republic of Turkey, and the 2053 Vision, which aims to make Turkey a global force and a unique voice for the world's norm-shaping and reform by the 600th anniversary of the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople and the fall of the Byzantine Empire. Both strategic visions require a definition of the "frontier of interest" in the Middle East and the Islamic world. Turkey's challenge to Saudi influence is based on the above background.

Turkey's AKP advocates the improvement of Islamic societies and the establishment of justice within the Islamic world. Therefore, it supports and cooperates with all countries that have established branches of the Muslim Brotherhood to promote AKP values and export the Turkish model. Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the UAE regard the Muslim Brotherhood as a scourge that threatens the security of their own regimes and institutions, thus blocking Turkey from expanding its influence in West Asia, North Africa and the entire Islamic world.

Since the outbreak of the Arab Spring, with Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the UAE on one side, and Turkey and Qatar on the other, the struggle over the historical and current status of the Muslim Brotherhood has intensified and the main arenas of contention are Egypt, Sudan and Libya.

In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood seized power for a time, and Mohamed Morsi, whom it elected, became President of Egypt. Turkey declared an Axis of Democracy with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. In just one year of the Muslim Brotherhood's rule, Turkish investment in Egypt tripled to more than five billion US dollars. Qatar also provided financial assistance to the Morsi government. In July 2013, the Egyptian armed forces staged a coup to overthrow the Muslim Brotherhood, and key Muslim Brotherhood leaders fled to Turkey. In June 2014, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi was elected President of Egypt, and relations between Turkey and Egypt completely deteriorated, with Egypt joining the Saudi-led coalition

to contain Turkey. In August of the same year, Saudi Arabia, along with the UAE and Kuwait, in order to support Sisi's rule, provided Egypt with US\$12 billion in emergency aid. With the support of other countries especially Saudi Arabia, Sisi's position in power has been increasingly consolidated, thwarting Turkish efforts to support the resurgence of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood.

In Sudan, following the outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2011, the long-ruling Omar al-Bashir entered into a political alliance with the Sudanese Muslim Brotherhood to remain in power. In May 2011, Turkey signed a military and intelligence cooperation agreement with Sudan. In December 2017, Erdoğan visited Sudan, where he and Bashir announced the establishment of a Turkish-Sudanese Strategic Cooperation Council, and signed 12 cooperation agreements covering energy, transport, finance and shipping. After Bashir was overthrown in April 2019, Turkey granted political asylum to Bashir's two younger brothers and some of the Muslim Brotherhood cadres and shifted its focus to the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood.

Turkey, resigned to the Saudi victories in Egypt and Sudan, has increased its investment in Libya. The struggle between the two sides is turning white-hot. In terms of Turkish-Libyan relations, since Sarraj, who has Turkish roots, became Prime Minister of the Government of National Accord in Libya, Turkey has been taking advantage of the UN recognition of the Government of National Accord, and increasing its support for the Government and the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood, while beginning to cooperate with Qatar on the issue. Faced with the dire siege imposed on the capital by the Libyan National Army under Haftar's command since April 2019, Sarraj asked for Turkish military assistance and received positive feedback. On November 27, Turkey and Libya signed a military cooperation agreement and an agreement on maritime boundaries in the Mediterranean Sea. On January 2, 2020, the Grand National Assembly of Turkey adopted a resolution to send troops to Libya, quickly dispatching military advisers and special forces, stepping up the delivery of arms and ammunition to the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood under the command of Sarraj, and withdrawing

pro-Turkish mercenaries from the Syrian battlefield.⁵ As of early March 2020, there were more than 3,000 pro-Turkish mercenaries fighting in Libya. With extensive experience of fighting in provinces such as Syria's Idlib Province and familiarity with guerrilla and street warfare, they quickly stabilized the capital. In early April, pro-Turkish mercenaries and the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood jointly launched a war in western Tripoli, recapturing the cities of Surman, Sabrata and Ajarat, and reinforcing the capital's defense.

Attempts of extraterritorial powers to restore influence

In the course of its history, Libya was ruled by Spain, Italy, France and the United Kingdom, and the United States once established the Wheelus Air Base in Libya. During the Gaddafi era, Libya continued to enjoy friendly relations with Italy and France, both of which seized rich oil interests in Libya. After Gaddafi paid compensation for the 1988 Lockerbie bombing, Libya's relationship with the UK and the US was eased, and British and American capital entered the Libyan market to seek their profits. After the fall of Gaddafi and the plunge of Libya into war, the Western powers have adopted different policies based on their own particular interests. Italy's oil giant Eni supports the Government of National Accord as it operates mainly in western Libya. France's Total, which has oil blocks and major petrochemical companies in eastern Libya and also some oil interests in western Libya, is generally supportive of Haftar's forces, while engaging with the Government of National Accord and endorsing the reconciliation between the two factions. The US and the UK ostensibly recognize the Government of National Accord, but secretly support Haftar's forces for the following reasons. First, Haftar's open supporters such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates are US allies. Supporting Haftar is to support regional allies. It can restore US credibility on the Kurdish issue, consolidate the special relationship between the US and the UK, and even provide more leverage to persuade regional allies to go along with the US

5 "Crisis in Libya: A Proxy War between Big Powers," *China Daily*, January 21, 2020, www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202001/21/WS5e2635c3a3101282172725a0.html.

Middle East strategy. Second, Haftar's forces are up against the Government of National Accord backed by the Muslim Brotherhood, which the US and the UK have identified as a breeding ground for terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and Jemaah Islamiyah that have posed a threat to Western countries and their regional allies. Therefore, they hope to eliminate the major force and social base of the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood by supporting Haftar. Third, Haftar's forces and the House of Representatives under his patronage are the mainstream secularist force in Libya. A unified territory and power would be more conducive to Western countries regaining their traditional influence and oil interests in Libya.

Linkage between the Libyan War and the competition for gas resources in eastern Mediterranean

In 2004, Israel discovered an enormous natural gas field in the Levant Basin of the eastern Mediterranean region, with proven reserves of 399 billion cubic meters (bcm) and prospectively estimated reserves of 840 bcm. It then embarked on systematic development and invited the American company Noble Energy to participate in the development of the Tamar and Leviathan gas fields, transforming Israel from a gas importer into an exporter.⁶ Israel's exploration and exploitation of natural gas triggered a dispute with Lebanon over its exclusive economic zone, but Lebanon was the weaker party and its maritime claims lacked external sympathy and support. Greece and Cyprus have also successively discovered and exploited natural gas fields in their exclusive economic zones in eastern Mediterranean, but on a much smaller scale and with much less production than Israel. In the early days of Israeli gas exploration, there was also a dispute between Israel and Cyprus, but the two countries reached agreement for maritime delimitation and defined their respective exclusive economic zones in December 2010. Cooperation between the two sides began in February 2013, when Cyprus handed over the blocks related to the Aphrodite gas field to an Israeli

6 "Israel Science & Technology: Oil & Natural Gas," <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/oil-and-natural-gas-in-israel>.

company on a revenue-sharing basis.

The exploitation of natural gas in the eastern Mediterranean Sea by the countries concerned is of great concern to Turkey. Since 2008, Turkey has also been carrying out exploration activities in the eastern Mediterranean region, but no valuable gas-bearing structure has been found, and since 2014 Turkey has extended its exploration to the sea areas of Cyprus, claiming that they are part of Turkey's continental shelf and that Cyprus must share interests in gas development with the "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus."⁷

As the competition for natural gas resources in eastern Mediterranean intensifies, in January 2019, Israel, Egypt, Jordan, Greece, Cyprus, the Palestinian National Authority and Italy signed an agreement to establish the East Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF), with oil giants such as Total of France, Eni of Italy and ExxonMobil of the United States competing to join. In January 2020, France became a full member of the Forum and the United States an observer state.

The EMGF aims to structure cooperation between member and observer countries in the exploration, development, transport and marketing of natural gas, and plans to build a gas pipeline network linking Europe, West Asia and North Africa in stages. First, it will build the onshore and offshore pipeline linking Greece, Italy and the European hinterland, gradually freeing Europe from its dependence on Russian gas. Second, it will expand the capacity of the Egypt-Israel gas pipeline and increase the supply of Israeli gas to Egypt, consolidating peace and cooperation between the two countries. Israel will also meet the gas needs in the Gaza Strip if the Islamic Hamas movement and Islamic jihad are eradicated from Gaza and pro-Israel secularist forces seize power there. Third, it will build a gas pipeline between Israel and Jordan, consolidating bilateral peace and cooperation. If the Palestinian National Authority accepted the so-called "deal of the century" proposed by the US, Israel would meet the gas needs of the State of

7 The "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus" is a political entity in the north of the Island of Cyprus, established mainly by local Turkish descendants. It controls about 37 percent of the island's territory and declared independence in 1974, which was recognized only by Turkey.

Palestine in the West Bank and invite sovereign wealth funds such as those of Saudi Arabia and the UAE to participate in gas cooperation in eastern Mediterranean, thus facilitating a comprehensive breakthrough in Arab-Israeli relations through economic means.⁸ On March 20, 2019, Greece, Cyprus and Israel initialed an agreement in Tel Aviv to build an undersea pipeline from Israel to Greece via Cyprus, with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo attending the ceremony to express high-profile support for the pipeline and trilateral cooperation. The agreement was officially signed in Athens on January 2, 2020.

In order to strongly intervene in the competition for gas resources in eastern Mediterranean, Turkey signed a maritime boundary delimitation agreement with the Libyan Government of National Accord on November 27, 2019, making Libya a maritime neighbor and legally connecting the continental shelf of the two countries. The agreement extends Turkey's exclusive economic zone and stipulates that the two countries will cooperate in oil and gas exploration and development in eastern Mediterranean. Countries, including Greece, Cyprus, Israel, Egypt, France and Italy, strongly oppose the agreement. Greece asked the UN Security Council to consider and veto the agreement, and the European Union to initiate large-scale sanctions against Turkey and support the Greece-Cyprus-Israel gas pipeline agreement. In January 2020, the French aircraft carrier *Charles de Gaulle* and its battle group were deployed to eastern Mediterranean to conduct joint military exercises with the navies of Greece and Cyprus. So far, the competition over gas resources in eastern Mediterranean has further escalated, with US allies in Europe and the Middle East on one side, and Turkey and the Libyan Government of National Accord on the other. One of Turkey's motives for sending troops to Libya and fully supporting the Government of National Accord is to preserve the Turkish-Libyan maritime

8 The State of Palestine defined by the “deal of the century” would have smaller and fragmented territories and no real power in diplomacy, defense, border control and customs, which would all be subject to Israel. It is also not allowed to possess any heavy and anti-aircraft weapons. The Israeli settlements in the Jordan Valley would be put under Israeli sovereignty. The capital of the State of Palestine would be located on the outskirts of East Jerusalem, and the Palestinian refugees would be deprived of the right to return to their homeland.

boundary delimitation agreement and secure a legal basis for its participation in the natural gas competition.

The Libyan War as a bargaining chip for Turkish-Russian exchange of interests

The Libyan War is linked to the Turkish-Russian exchange of interests due to the interaction between Turkey and Russia on Syria. After Turkey thwarted a military coup in July 2016, US-Turkey tensions have escalated and the Turkey-Russia relationship has warmed up. In response to the US pressure, Turkey, Russia and Iran have closely cooperated on hotspot issues in the Middle East. In particular, a political solution to the Syrian issue has been the focus of their cooperation. In January 2017, the three countries launched the Astana peace process. In September of the same year, an agreement was reached at the sixth round of Astana peace talks, whereby Russia, Turkey and Iran agreed to set up four so-called de-escalation zones in Syria, of which the Idlib de-escalation zone would be managed by Turkey and returned to the Syrian government after the de-escalation of conflict. Turkey offered to eliminate terrorist organizations in this zone within two years.

From September 2017 to September 2019, Turkey attempted to integrate and transform terrorist or extremist groups such as Tahrir al-Sham, Jaysh al-Islam (Army of Islam) and Jaysh al-Izza (Army of Glory). Some 10,000 terrorists surrendered to Turkey, but the main force refused to do so. In early September 2019, Russia reminded Turkey to transfer sovereignty over Idlib to the Syrian government as promised. Turkey asked for an extension and Russia accused it of renegeing on its promise. Beginning in early October, Syrian government forces, backed by Russian air strikes, gradually regained lost ground in phases. As the war spread, nearly a million refugees fled to the Turkish-Syrian border, begging to be accepted by Turkey. In response, Turkey has increased its troops in Idlib since January 2020, and asked Russia to halt the Syrian army's offensive due to the resulting increase in the flow of refugees. From mid-February

to early March, the Turkish army supported pro-Turkish forces (including the extremists who had surrendered to Turkish forces) in their counter-offensive against the Syrian army, while engaging in direct combat with the Syrian army, with casualties and equipment losses on both sides. On March 5, Russia and Turkey reached a ceasefire agreement in Moscow, whereby Russia was to urge the Syrian army to suspend its offensive, and set up a security corridor along the M4 highway to be jointly patrolled with Turkey. After the agreement came into effect, the ceasefire has generally been maintained despite sporadic clashes between Syrian government forces and the rebels.

In the meantime, Turkey and Russia have engaged in intensive consultations on Libya and the eastern Mediterranean in an attempt to reach a mutually satisfactory agreement. On January 8, the Russian and Turkish heads of state announced in Istanbul their decision to broker a ceasefire in Libya. On January 13, the rival sides in Libya held indirect talks in Moscow, where the leader of the Government of National Accord, Sarraj, signed the ceasefire agreement while the head of Libyan eastern warlord, Haftar, refused. The mediation was thwarted. The Berlin Conference on Libya on January 19, attended by leaders of Turkey, Russia and the two rival Libyan sides, remained fruitless.

Turkey and Russia have different concerns and demands in brokering the Libyan War. Turkey hopes that Russia will use its influence over Haftar to persuade him to cease hostilities, negotiate and reach an agreement on co-ruling Libya with the Government of National Accord, thus sparing the Government the risk of being overthrown and rescuing the Turkish-Libyan maritime boundary delimitation agreement. Turkey also wants Russia to participate in the development of natural gas on the Turkish continental shelf and to work with EMGF. Russia, on the other hand, wants Turkey to return Idlib and allow the Syrian army to crush the terrorist forces and regain sovereignty there. If Turkey withdraws from Idlib, Russia is willing to cooperate with Turkey to promote a political solution to the Libyan issue. A deal is still possible given the demands of

both sides. However, Russia faces certain difficulties in meeting Turkey's demands. Russia has significant but not decisive influence over Haftar as Haftar has the additional support of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt.

Cross-Regional Implications of the Proxy War in Libya

The proxy war in Libya involves different extraterritorial powers, regional powers and non-state actors (terrorist groups) and has cross-regional implications.

Making the Saudi-Turkish competition regionwide and white-hot

Being regionwide means the competition covers the entire West Asia and North Africa, while being white-hot means the competition is impossible to cool down for a significant period of time. With the rise of the Russian-Turkish-Iranian coalition, the geopolitical contest between Saudi Arabia and Turkey has become more prominent. Saudi Arabia, like the US, is on high alert and guards against Russia, Turkey and Iran. In June 2017, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt broke off relations with Qatar, and introduced a land, sea and partial air embargo on Qatar. The Russian-Turkish-Iranian coalition then promptly gave Qatar strong support and deepened cooperation with Qatar in the field of energy, trade, investment and security. Meanwhile, Russia encouraged Qatar to withdraw from OPEC, Iran provided livelihood assistance to Qatar, and Turkey extended and expanded its military presence in Qatar, altogether enhancing Qatar's confidence and ability to cope with Saudi pressure. Among all the above supports to Qatar, Saudi Arabia was particularly wary of a prolonged presence of Turkish military in Qatar, which made it unlikely to send troops and overthrow Qatar's royal family if the need arose. Hence, Saudi Arabia saw Turkey as more of a threat. In March 2018, Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman visited Egypt and described Turkey along with Iran and regional terrorist groups as part of a "triangle of evil" that undermined

regional peace and stability.⁹ He also accused Turkey of trying to build a new “Ottoman caliphate” in the Middle East and called on Arab countries to thwart Turkey’s attempt.

In order to better contain Saudi Arabia, Turkey, together with Qatar, has built in strategic maneuverability by building military ports or bases in Somalia, Sudan, Djibouti and islands in the Gulf of Aden. The elevation of the Saudi-Turkish competition to a strategic level has had a profound impact on the geopolitical contest between Saudi Arabia and Iran, tilting the balance of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry in favor of the latter. Saudi Arabia’s strategic overspending is further accentuated by its resource allocation dilemma, as it has to deal with challenges from both Iran and Turkey. With the escalating proxy war in Libya, Turkey has directly sent troops, and Saudi Arabia’s plan to overthrow Libya’s Muslim Brotherhood Government has largely failed. Turkey will use Libya as a foothold to establish long-term influence in North Africa, in line with which Turkey’s relations with North African countries including Algeria and Tunisia have also grown rapidly. For many years, Saudi influence in North Africa was far greater than that of Turkey, while their influence today is fairly equal.

Turkey’s growing rift with the US and Europe spawning disagreement within the EU

The US supports Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates in Libya’s proxy war, and supports EMGF in the dispute over eastern Mediterranean natural gas, adding new obstacles to old grudges in Turkish-American relations. The US was involved in the 2016 coup attempt to overthrow Erdoğan, and has been providing shelter to Erdoğan’s nemesis, Fethullah Gülen. It has not completely severed its ties with Kurdish forces in northern Syria. In addition, the US supported Greece on the Cyprus issue and sided with Saudi Arabia over the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, while often blaming Turkey for the Armenian genocide of 1915. The US has

9 “Saudi Prince Says Turkey Part of ‘Triangle of Evil’ - Egyptian Media,” March 7, 2018, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/world/2018/03/07/saudi-prince-says-turkey-part-of-triangle-of-evil--egyptian-media/>.

also grossly interfered with Turkey's purchase of S-400 air defense system from Russia.

Similarly, there are old grudges in Turkey's relations with Europe. Germany, France and the EU supported Greece and the Republic of Cyprus on the Cyprus issue and have been blocking Turkey's accession to the EU. They also hyped the Armenian genocide and accused Turkey of regressing from democracy, suppressing press freedom, widespread torture and a poor human rights record. After the failure of the Berlin Conference on Libya, the EU, Germany and France accused Turkey of violating the arms embargo by supplying weapons to Libya's Muslim Brotherhood Government and hence spreading the war in Libya. In addition, the EU supported the building of the Greece-Cyprus-Israel gas pipeline by French, Italian, Dutch and British companies, causing serious rancor in Turkey. In response, at the end of February 2020, Turkey supported Syrian refugees storming the Turkish-Greek border in an attempt to pressure and retaliate against European countries. Within the European powers, serious disagreements especially among Italy, France and the UK over which side in Libya should be supported have held back European countries from promoting the Barcelona Process of Euro-Mediterranean partnership.

The expansion of terrorism

The war in Libya has provided an opportunity for the spread of terrorism from the Arab Maghreb to the African Sahel. In November 2014, the Libyan branch of the Islamic State was officially formed. It then announced the creation of three Islamic State provinces in the eastern city of Derna, pledged allegiance to the "caliph" of the Islamic State Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and elected Abu Nabil al-Anbari as its leader.¹⁰ When Anbari was killed in a US drone strike in November 2015, Abdul Qader al-Najdi was chosen as the new leader and he has led the Islamic jihad since then. From November 2014 to the end of 2019, the Islamic State in Libya waged battles of jihad in

10 The three Islamic State provinces include Wilayah Fizan, Wilayah Barqah and Wilayah Tarabulus.

Derna, Benghazi, Sirte and Sabha, all of which temporarily fell under their control, with Sirte being occupied for two years. Several ports on the eastern and central coasts of Libya were also controlled through which supplies and militants from Iraq and Syria could be brought in. Since gaining a foothold in Libya, the Islamic State has pursued a strategy of indigenization by recruiting fighters from among Arabs, Berbers and the Tuaregs, a cross-border ethnic group, in order to facilitate its expansion into the Sahel. By the end of 2019, the main force of the Islamic State in Libya had exceeded 3,000 fighters, making it the second largest branch after the fall of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, after the Islamic State in the so-called “Khorasan Province,” which is headquartered in Afghanistan with a force of more than 4,000 fighters.

Beginning in early 2015, Ansar al-Sharia in Libya, Boko Haram in Nigeria and Al-Shabaab in Somalia all pledged allegiance to the Islamic State and Baghdadi, and even to the new leader Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi, chosen by the Shura Council in October 2019 after Baghdadi was killed in a US raid. From October 2019 to April 2020, the security situation in the Sahel deteriorated dramatically with more terrorist activities, creating a situation where local terrorists became affiliates or proxies of the Islamic State and the Maghreb branch of Al-Qaeda.

In Nigeria, Boko Haram under the leadership of Abubakar Shekau has become the Taliban in western Africa. It has controlled the northern states of Yobe and Borno and imposed Sharia law, while killing and looting apostates and infidels and infiltrating major cities such as Abuja, the capital of Nigeria, and Lagos. In eastern Africa, the Islamic Courts Union became Al-Shabaab in Somalia, which has carried out cross-border terrorist activities in Somalia, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Kenya under the command of Ahmed Diriye. In Mali, a Tuareg terrorist group under the auspices of the Islamic State in Azawad, together with the Maghreb branch of Al-Qaeda, has controlled three northern regions. On March 23, 2020, Boko Haram, under the direction of the Islamic State in Libya, ambushed Chadian government forces in the Lake Chad region, resulting in 92 deaths and 47 injuries and a large seizure of heavy weapons and ammunition. Niger

and Burkina Faso also experienced frequent terrorist attacks on their government forces and populations during this period.

Conclusion

The direction of the proxy war in Libya suggests that both secularist forces in the east and the Muslim Brotherhood regime in the west want to get rid of each other. Judging from the power configuration on both sides, Haftar still enjoys an advantage as a proxy for external forces, and with strong financial support from Saudi Arabia and the UAE, Haftar can recruit more personnel and expand his forces. From behind-the-scenes support to direct military engagement, Turkey has reversed the passivity of the Government of National Accord on the battlefield. Precision strikes of Turkish drones have resulted in heavy losses of personnel and equipment for Haftar and basically restrained Haftar's offensive. In response, Haftar has asked the UAE to provide anti-drone weapons and late-model drones for another attack on the capital. Notably, external forces involved in this war are aware that the tug-of-war in Libya will continue for a considerable period of time. Peace talks will constantly be caught up in military stalemate. Regarding the internal contradictions and popular sentiment in Libya, there is still a possibility that secularist forces will gradually gain an overwhelming advantage and eventually unify the country. It is the general hope of the international community that the Libyan issue achieve a political solution, so as to eliminate the suffering of the Libyan people and restore regional peace, stability, development and cooperation. In this sense, the UN-brokered peace talks should not only facilitate negotiations between the two sides, but also serve to urge the behind-the-scenes stakeholders to realize that a political solution is in the interests of all parties, and at the same time to mobilize all parties to focus their efforts on counter-terrorism and promote the early advent of peace in Libya. 🌐