

French military actions in Libya



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About author

Justine Mazonier graduated with a Bachelor's degree in international public law from the Grenoble-Alpes University and a Bachelor's degree in English and Arabic languages. She studied international public law at the Peoples' Friendship University of Russia in Moscow. She holds a Master's degree in strategic and arms control studies from the Saint Petersburg State University. Her area of expertise concerns the Iranian missile program and hybrid warfare. She writes analyses on geopolitical issues in the Middle East for the Topchubashov Center and for the Gulf State Analytics.

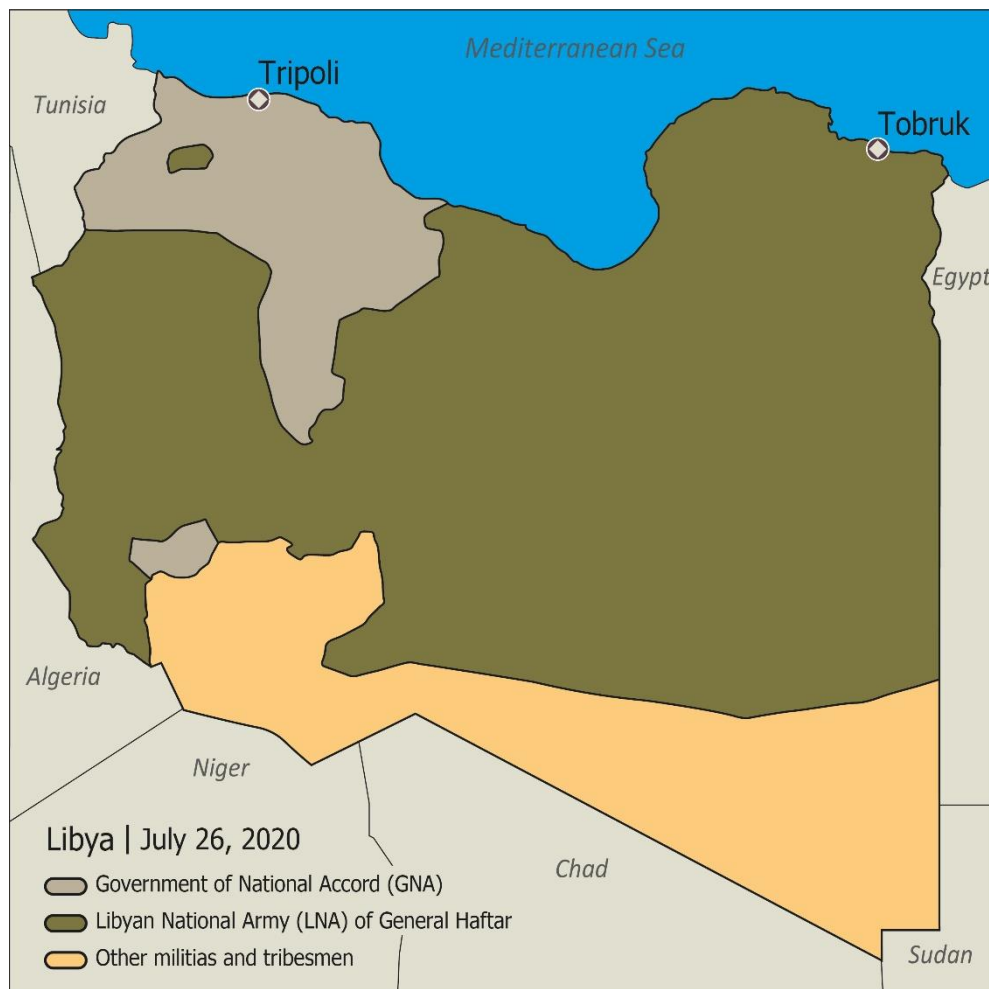
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Introduction

The operation launched by the international coalition in 2011 in Libya triggered the degradation of Libyan security and the division of the territory between different areas of influence. France was an active member of the 2011 coalition and developed under the mandate of the former President Nicolas Sarkozy specific interests in the Libyan crisis with Muammar Qaddafi and currently with General Haftar.

The first Libyan civil war resulted in two poles of power. The absence of a unifying power controlling the whole Libyan territory led to the multiplication of foreign actors in the conflict and the globalization of the Libyan war. The Government of National Accord (GNA) led by Fayez al-Sarraj was internationally recognised. It is supported by the Qatari and Turkish forces, trying to expand their foothold in the Mediterranean to counter the spread of influence of their regional enemies: the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Egypt supporting General Haftar in the Eastern part of the territory. France and Russia, too, back Haftar's forces in the current conflict.

Since April 2019, the civil war has intensified particularly in the west of the country, where General Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA) launched his offensive against Tripoli to overthrow the competing GNA power. However, the weak military successes obliged his partners to commit more on the ground and diplomatically. Trapped in a war of attrition led by the GNA's forces supported by Turkey, Haftar encouraged the military commitment of his regional allies. Russian mercenaries, Egyptian and Emirati aerial operations were increased in intensity to keep the military value of their Libyan partner. This situation led to the escalation of the Libyan conflict as well as the globalization of the war. Turkish forces stepped up in the Libyan territory to balance the threats brought by the arrival of Russian mercenaries and the massive exports of military hardware from the Gulf countries to the LNA.

With the escalation of geostrategic stakes in Libya, France is trying to offer its help to ensure the security of the Libyan territory. Its support to General Haftar stems from security and economic concerns linked to the Libyan war. However, the increased complexity of the conflict renders the French role in the war more diluted and the unification of the dislocated Libyan territory more difficult.

What are the French interests in the Libyan conflict?

Security issues

The French authorities started to increase their relations with Haftar's camp with the policy implemented since 2014 by Jean Yves Le Drian, the former defence minister under François Hollande's mandate and the current minister of foreign affairs under Emmanuel Macron's presidency. Le Drian defined the current French Libyan policy driven more by security concerns in parallel to the launch of the French operations in Mali and Sahel. In 2013, Hollande launched *Operation Serval* to fight terrorist cells in Mali which was afterwards perpetuated under *Operation Barkhane* in 2014 to counter these threats in the whole Sahel region. Under Hollande's, the French priority in the Libyan crisis was to foster the political unification of the territory to implement effective counter-terrorism operations and to ensure the stability of French positions in Sahel. General Haftar was the perfect candidate due to his previous background with the CIA and his stance to fight terrorist cells from GNA's troops. His forces and political discourse match with the desire of the French authorities to deal with a determined and authoritarian leader able to impose order on an undermined territory. The former head of the DGSE (Directorate-General for External Security, the French intelligence service), Bernard Bajolet reported that the General Haftar was perceived more effective than GNA's leader, Fayeze al-Sarraj.

During the presidency of Macron, the French policy on Libya became more assertive and bolder. The security of the Sahel region is the priority of the French government regardless of the nature of the regime ensuring it. The French strategy for Libya is

The French strategy for Libya is led by this pragmatism and realist vision of the conflict.

led by this pragmatism and realist vision of the conflict. The French support to General Haftar became more visible although the French government officially supports the UN-recognized GNA government. Michel Scarbonchi, a French businessman, and Le Drian remained the spearheads of the French policy in Libya.

The main goal was to stem the spread of terrorism and IS cells from southern Libya to other allies of France in the region (Niger, Chad, Mali, Algeria, and Tunisia). Since the death of Muammar Qaddafi, the interethnic conflicts in the southern Libya jeopardized the security of neighbouring states. This threat meets the deepening involvement of the French troops within *Operation Barkhane*, with the increasing number the soldiers deployed on the ground (4500) after the summit in Pau, France on January 13, 2020. The military presence of Haftar in southern Libya, supported by

Egypt and the UAE, allowed France to keep the region stable and to avoid the spread of the conflict to other regional allies.

To monitor this region, France relied mainly on two partners: Niger and Chad. The implementation of the Madama base in Niger (which was closed in 2019) served as a bulwark against the spread of terrorist cells to northern Niger and more specifically, in the village of Agadez where the Tubu tribes could destabilize the region. The base was used to avoid the transit of terrorist elements and weapon trafficking to northern Mali.

For France, the stability of Chad, a traditional French ally is crucial. Its territory is used as a foothold for the French operations in the Sahel region. However, the country is challenged by looming threats from the South in the Lake Chad region, with the presence of Boko Haram cells, from Darfur and with the destabilisation of the Libyan border on the Tibesti region and the issue of the Tubu tribes which risk endangering the government of Idriss Déby. France implemented military bases in Kossei (near N'Djamena) to support the efforts of the Chadian government within the G5 Sahel group.

For France, it is crucial to ensure the security of the southern Libyan region as the conflict can foster the transit of weapons and drug trafficking and smuggling routes between Libya and Mali, Chad, Darfur and Niger. According to a report of small arms survey, before 2015, large batches of Libyan light weapons were found between North East Niger and Mali.

However, although Haftar's troops are presented as an efficient bulwark against terrorist cells, the composition of the LNA remains very murky. According to the Middle Eastern Eye, the bulk of Haftar's forces are composed of foreign mercenaries from Russia and Sudan, as well as local tribes as militias, triggering the aggravation of internal conflicts. More specifically, the alignment of Makhdalist tribes (advocating a Salafist ideology and supported by the UAE and Saudi Arabia) with the LNA's forces was denounced among GNA's camp.

France started to doubt the ability of Haftar to unify Libya and this doubt increased with the military defeats of them since the offensive against Tripoli in 2019.

France started to call into question the ability of Haftar to unify politically Libya with such heterogeneous forces. This doubt increased with the military defeats of the LNA since the offensive against Tripoli in 2019.

Economic interests

France has strategic economic interests in the Libyan conflict. Before the fall of the Qaddafi, French companies were particularly interested in the potential energy markets in Libya. However, the former Libyan ruler advocated the national independence in the exploitation of natural resources and built the National Oil Company to ensure the Libyan self-sufficiency in this sector. The Pan-Africanist doctrine coined by Qaddafi in the 1970s was not aligned with the European interests to exploit the vast resources on this territory. During the Qaddafi era, Libya was the 4th biggest exploiter of oil of the African continent and could produce up to 1 million barrel per day. Moreover, the territory includes large resources of unexploited shale gas. The independent monetary and energetic institutions built by Qaddafi were destroyed by the action of the Western coalition in 2011.

Just after the end of the operations from the coalition, the French company Total obtained from the Libyan transitory council 35% of the shares of oil concession, a greater percentage compared to the Qaddafi era. The current presence of General Haftar coincides with the presence of the main gas and oil resources in the Crescent Oil. Haftar's territories include 85% of the whole Libyan oil resources and 70% of the gas. According to French sources, Total gained 16.33% of the shares of the Libyan market in addition to the concession from the American from the Waha oil company.

France has an interest in the development of its weapon market related to the Libyan conflict. Libya was considered as an interesting defence customer under Qaddafi with the increase of French weapons sales between 2007 and 2009, during the mandate of Nicolas Sarkozy. According to Mediapart, France would have negotiated the selling of Rafales with the former Libyan leader.

The current war in Libya allows France to export more weapons to the Gulf region and Egypt. The increase of French arms exports matches with the changing policy of Macron fostering the security against terrorist groups regardless of the nature of the regime implemented. In 2015, France exported 24 Rafales from the French company Dassault to Egypt. According to Amnesty International, the French exports of weapons to Egypt have skyrocketed since 2012. France also became the 5th provider of weapons and military hardware to the UAE, another partner of General Haftar, which is militarily involved on the ground. The French defence market represents 30,000 jobs in France and several large weapon companies such as Thales, Airbus, Mistral and Dassault. For France, the preservation of this sector hinges on the development of its exports and the development of military innovation. The biggest French weapon customers are Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Algeria, Egypt and Iraq, most of which are linked to the Libyan crisis militarily. In 2014, the Gulf weapon market represented about 7 billion dollars for France. These weapons exports allow France to gain better political relations with these countries and to develop its

defence industry. In 2014, Former President Hollande became the first foreign leader to attend the Gulf Council Cooperation summit in Riyadh.

More widely, France has other economic assets to protect in the Sahel region where security and economic issues are intertwined. For instance, Niger is the major provider of uranium to France through the Orano field. The security of the region is therefore needed to secure French economic interests in other countries. Finally, choosing the winning partner is also an advantage for Paris regarding the possibility to gain large shares in the reconstruction market just after the war.

French security and economic interests are intertwined in the Sahel region.

Political stakes

France is fulfilling mainly a political role whereas the other allies, the UAE, Egypt and Russia are helping General Haftar on the ground with the massive use of military hardware and troops. France is used as the provider of a presentable, credible image for the actions of the General.

In return, France needs to be depicted as an efficient mediator in a complicated conflict to increase its positive image among its Sahel partners. French influence is challenged by new actors in its African area of influence with the arrival of Russia, China, Canada, Turkey and Gulf countries, using and broadcasting newspapers degrading the image of French troops in the ground to gain themselves more influence. Moreover, the French *Operation Barkhane* was not always perceived by the local population as an efficient tool against terrorist cells. By supporting Haftar, France hopes that his military actions will lead to the unification of the Libyan territory and France would be presented as a significant partner to solve an international conflict.

Therefore, two meetings organized under President Macron's aegis helped the two parts to fulfil these objectives. Haftar was presented by French authorities as "a component of the Libyan solution" and put on the same equal footing as the GNA's government, giving him strategic political credibility.

French military support in Libya

France does not help Libyan troops directly by sending soldiers and directly exporting of military hardware, a role endorsed by Egypt, Russia and the UAE. Paris relies more on indirect support with intelligence services and advisory staff deployed with Haftar's troops. This strategy helps the French government to keep an appearance of neutrality in Libyan. The French government heavily encourages Egypt and the UAE to commit on the Libyan ground to limit the presence of Russian mercenaries in North Africa and also to feed the arms orders from its partner. However, the capabilities of Egypt and the UAE can be limited due to the division of their respective fronts. The Egyptian forces are already tackling terrorist cells in Sinai region while the UAE tries to find a way to pull out from the Yemeni conflict.

The French presence in Libya after the coalition could be remote from 2011, when Pierre Marziali, the head of the Private Military Company Secopex was executed in Benghazi. Secopex was allegedly a blackwater company specialized in Africa and accused of using mercenaries in its operations. Located in Carcassonne, France, Secopex was dismantled after the incident in Libya: while France has very few private military companies registered within its territory, the use of mercenaries is sanctioned under the prerogatives of French criminal code since 2003. However, some private military companies do exist and are mainly composed of former military personnel with advisory roles for businesses and French administration.

According to the French journalist Jean Guisnel, the DGSE has reportedly been present on the Libyan ground since 2014. Its first elements were allegedly present in Zintan and Benghazi to support Haftar's Karama operations against the Islamic State and Misrata militias. In 2015, French intelligence personnel were reported in Derna, Benghazi and the Benina airbase. According to French sources, they were deployed to advise Haftar to seize Benghazi and Derna and unify his power in the East. During the same year, several elements of CPIS (a military and operational branch of the DGSE) were reported at the Benina aerial base. According to Guisnel, between 35-60 soldiers from this unit would have participated in Derna fights later.

The same Guisnel reported that French intelligence services and special units would have helped Haftar in intelligence operations and imagery analysis. They would have provided some counter-sniper forces, ensured the personal security of the General and advised him on the targets and tactical operations. In 2016, 3 French militaries were reportedly killed in a helicopter accident near Benghazi. President Hollande recognized the presence of French intelligence services in Libya. For the first time since the beginning of the conflict, the presidential spokesman, Stephan Le Foll acknowledged the existence of French Special Forces in Libya.

In 2019, Arabi 21 reported the presence of special French consultants in Gharyan, 75 km from Tripoli. According to this source, the French militaries would have advised

using a mannequin to simulate a parachutist attack to distract the militias in Tripoli. According to Andrei Frolov, a Russian military expert, this tactic was already used by French troops in Sahel, confirming the presence of French advisers among Haftar's forces.

In 2019, 13 men were arrested in Tunisia while attempting to escape from the Libyan territory. These men were found holding French passports in Ras Ajdir. French authorities denied the presence of French militaries on the ground and justified this situation as special personnel charged with the protection of General Haftar.

There is little information relating to the possible transaction of weapons from France to Libya and no proof from open sources reporting the presence and use of French weapons by Haftar's troops. However, some incidents involving French military hardware in Libya can be reported. In 2019, French newspapers reported the discovery of 4 Javelin missiles in Gharyan, near Tripoli by GNA troops. These missiles were bought by France from the USA in 2010. Paris reported that these missiles were not used directly by Haftar's troops but for the protection of French intelligence personnel working in Libya. Moreover, they were allegedly too old to be used efficiently and left on the ground when the GNA's troops arrived.

The Berlin conference in January 2020 did not stop the procurement of weapons by both sides of the conflicts. Macron castigated during this event the role of Turkey for the export of weapons to the GNA's camps. The Turkish government recalled, however, the responsibility of France for the current security situation in Libya. The Turks also pointed that France had provided military hardware to military allies of Haftar which were used afterwards to defend his operations in the battleground.

France is part of the European code of conduct on Arms Exports ratified in 2008. This binding document prohibits the state parties to sell weapons if the risk to be diverted to an undesirable user is clear and if the weapons would be used against a State ally on the battlefield. France is the biggest European arms exporter to the UAE and Egypt which are heavily involved on the Libyan battlefield. According to EUobserver, the French grant permits to sell weapons to these countries represented 14.1 billion dollars for Egypt and 9.5 billion dollars for the UAE in 2018. Some reports indicated that the French weapons to these countries are diverted to the Libyan battlefield and contravenes to the UN arms embargo on this country. Regarding the UAE, several reports were already published demonstrating the diversion of Western weapons by Saudi Arabia and the UAE on the Yemeni battlefield and ending in the hands of uncontrolled militias and terrorist groups. The report from the Arab reporters for Investigative journalism published in February 2019, demonstrated that the UAE and Saudi Arabia do not respect any rules regarding the end user of the weapons imported from the USA or from European providers. This

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situation may happen also on the Libyan battlefield where the UAE and Egypt are buying French military hardware.

The UN embargo allows only the selling of some specific non-lethal items serving for the humanitarian protective use and some weapons for the UN-recognise GNA government. The French weapons used sometimes to commit war crimes by the UAE and Egypt can contravene to these international obligations. Moreover, no European mechanisms are monitoring the respect of arms embargo as the UN has. France and other European countries (Germany, the UK and Italy) can cash in from this legal gap to increase their arms sales in the Libyan conflict.

In 2017, Amnesty International outlined the French responsibility in a report for having sold the Rafale aircraft to Egypt which uses them to commit war crimes in Libya. A video released by the Egyptian army showed soldiers using the French Rafales allegedly against a terrorist position in Derna. In reality, these aircraft were used to strike civilian buildings (administrative buildings) in Houn, 700 km from Derna. According to Arte (a French-German media), this attack was probably launched to support Haftar troops' advancement to take al-Jufra, a strategic position. This information was also confirmed by Youssef al-Jakam, a former military chief from the LNA, captured in Zaouia by GNA forces. He reported that the strikes targeted civilian buildings with Rafales and F-16 aircraft.

The UAE would have been responsible for strikes against Tarjoura and have probably used aircrafts sold by the French government.

In 2019, a UN report from the Panel of experts accused the UAE (among other countries) of breaching the arms embargo against Libya and providing military hardware to the LNA's troops. The Panel investigated the aerial attack against the Tarjoura detention centre in Tripoli. The attack was launched on July 2, 2019 and killed 53 civilians and injured 130 others. According to this report, the UAE would have been responsible for these strikes and would have probably used Mirage 2000-9 aircrafts against this migrant centre. These weapons were sold by the French government to the UAE and would have been diverted on the Libyan ground to commit a war crime. According to the UN report from the Panel of experts, these aircrafts are allegedly located in two Libyan aerial bases in Al Jufra and Al Khadim and are operated by the UAE Aerial Forces.

On May 6, 2020, the Twitter account Obretix shared satellite images allegedly showing the presence of 6 Emirati Mirage 2000 in the Egyptian aerial base Sidi Barrani, located at 85 kilometres from the Libyan borders. This information was considered as a red flag for the GNA camp, considering that the UAE would use the Egyptian border to launch attacks directly on the Libyan territory. The presence of the French aircrafts in this Egyptian border was confirmed a few weeks later with the attacks by the UAE against the Al Watiya aerial base when these aircraft were used. They are used in the Libyan battlefield and are allegedly diverted to serve the

military interests of the LNA. This situation constitutes a serious breach of the UN embargoes and European code of conduct.

France also supports certain tribes in the Libyan conflict that fits with its security and economic interests. In southern Libya, the French authorities established contacts with the Tubu tribe, an African group from Chad which emigrated to Libya and Niger during the Qaddafi era. This tribe is scattered across these three countries and represents a minority in Fezzan, southern Libya. In the wake of the death of Qaddafi, the Tubu entered a long conflict against the Tuaregs and Ouled Slimane, also nomadic tribes present in Fezzan. Due to the policy of Qaddafi against this group, the Tubu were aligned with Haftar against Tripoli. The General tried to implement a tighter control on several militias in the Fezzan valley to keep this territory under his domination, jeopardizing the security and the delicate balance between the various tribes in the region and threatening the northern Chad border.

The Tubu tribe is currently located, after several conflicts against the Tuaregs, in Murzuk, Sebha, Gatun and Umm el-Araneb. In 2017, Haftar launched an offensive in Fezzan to conquer Sebha and to get control over the aerial base of Tamanhant and the extraction site of Sharara. Sarraj called on European countries to intervene and to stop the conflicts in the southern region.

France supports the Tubu tribe which is perceived as an efficient bulwark against terrorism in Southern Libya. The French authorities feared that the absence of any state control in Fezzan would lead to the increase of terrorist cells from Mali, Niger and Benghazi in this region. Moreover, the nomadic tribe was seen as particularly useful for *Operation Barkhane* for its comprehensive knowledge of the ground and the tribal structure of the region. This alliance could support the French military actions in the region.

The French authorities also try to keep Chad out of these Libyan confrontations. However, the Tubu already challenged the central Chadian power, which led in the past to direct French interventions. In February 2019, France launched aerial attacks with Mirage 2000 against the rebels' heavy vehicles resistance in northern Chad. The rebel groups were composed of tribes which fled the fighting in Sebha. Following the conflict in Sirte, France feared that new cells of the Islamic state would migrate southward through Chad to the Lake region to join Boko Haram bastions.

Finally, France had some economic interests in the region matching with the current positions of the Tubu tribes in Fezzan. They now control the Sharara oil fields and al-Feed field. The French giant Total currently holds 30% of the stakes in oil contracts in the afore-mentioned fields.

French inclusion in the Gulf Axis

The French support to Haftar must be understood within the broader alliance unifying Egypt, the UAE and France. The successes of the General allow these countries to cement their ideological and political influence in the Middle East region and curb the influence of Qatar and Turkey. This trend could be seen as a reversal of the regional balance of power in the MENA region with the growing implication of Gulf States outside the Arabic Peninsula, in Africa and the Maghreb.

The UAE and Egypt are especially involved in Haftar's success in Libya. French sources reported the presence of an Emirati aerial base in the east of Benghazi to support the Egyptian aerial operations launched from the Marsa Matruh airbase, near the border.

Since the Gulf crisis, the UAE and Saudi Arabia have been endeavouring to limit the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Middle East. The crisis drew two new

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alliances: Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt ruled by President Sisi and the Turkish-Qatari axis which is currently supporting the actions of the GNA in Libya. The French policy needs to be understood within the axis led by the UAE against the Turkish influence in the region. Recently, France and the UAE endeavoured to

promote the former Algerian minister (unsuccessfully, allegedly due to the veto of the USA), Ramtane Lamamra, as the new UN emissary for Libya. This support was aimed to include Algeria in the Libyan crisis resolution and to implement a new connection with a Russian military partner in the Middle East.

France seems to be dependent on the actions of the UAE and Egypt to ensure the military successes of Haftar on the ground, particularly for the victories of Benghazi and Derna. Since 2019, 850 drone strikes have been launched from UAE. In January 2020, the UAE and Egypt airlifted tons of weapons to Haftar.

The French alignment with the UAE interests is more visible at the ideological level. Hakim El Karoui, a French advisor, advocated for the creation of a French concept of Islam in cooperation with the UAE to spread a moderate version of this religion and compete with the Turkish movements in the Middle East. According to a report called the Islam factory, the UAE should become the spearhead of this movement. Macron is encouraging this evolution to promote the image of France in the Middle East and at the internal level. The French authorities established, for example, the Muslim Association for Islam in France which provides specific training for French imams to match the French Republican values with the rules of Islam.

A divided European policy

The actions of France to support Haftar smashed the possibility for Europe to reach a common compromise and to reach a united stance.

Europe started to increase its attention on the Libyan file in 2014 and appointed the Spanish diplomat Bernardino León as EU Special Envoy to Libya who later became UN Secretary General's Special Representative for Libya. He participated in the drafting of the Skhirat agreement in December 2015 in which the EU played a significant role as a mediator. The EU relied on sticks and carrots policy to lure the two parties to a mutual agreement and decrease the tensions. However, France adopted a different attitude regarding the GNA supported by Germany and Italy to curb the migration crisis in Europe. France plays with the absence of direct commitments from the USA on the ground and of a strong position of the European Union to confront Haftar's policies. This situation created the lack of coherence of the European discourse regarding the Libyan crisis and the impossibility to unite the various states effectively.

Moreover, the rivalry between France and Italy reached its apex in 2014, with the nomination of Federica Mogherini as the EU High Representative for Foreign Policy. EU external action service called for a condemnation of violence when Haftar's Dignity Operation was launched in May 2014.

France and Italy compete in Libya through mediation efforts.

Moreover, the EU launched *Operation IRINI* on March 31, 2020, to implement the arms embargo adopted by the UN Security Council against Libya. However, Italy chastised the operation accusing France of targeting only weapons coming from the sea and to GNA's forces. Haftar's weapons brought by air and land are not targeted by the European operation.

Italy did not accept the launch of French meetings gathering various Libyan and international actors of the Libyan crisis, both in 2017 (in Celle Saint Cloud) and on May 29, 2018. The last meeting advocating for democratic elections in Libya as well as the unification of the Libyan central bank was considered as a diplomatic success for the French authorities and was lashed by the Italian government, competing for the role of the European mediator. For Italy, this process challenged the Palermo conference held in November 2018, aiming at mediating the conflict between the warring parties. Italy accuses France of unilateral control of the Libyan peace process and leads the negotiation while France is not neutral and legitimate.

These criticisms stem from the differences in the political agenda between France and Italy. The latter is more concentrated on the migrant crisis that has political repercussions on the internal political stability of the country. Moreover, Italy particularly sniped at the operations led by the coalition led in 2011, destroying its

economic advantages granted by Qaddafi. Before the Italian company ENI was heavily present in the Cyrenaica region from 1959 and was the first foreign oil producer under Qaddafi. Italy lost its dominant position after the actions of the international coalition in 2011 and currently supports the GNA which secures the Mellitha oil field and controls Sabratha to stem the flood of migrants.

The confrontation between France and Italy increased with the arrival of Matteo Salvini, a representative of the neo-nationalist movement and populist leader, who adopted intransigent rhetoric on the migrant crisis from Libya and the French role in the war. In 2019, the French government recalled its ambassador from Rome due to the heightened political tensions with Italy.

The rivalry between the two countries also include security issues related to the spread of terrorist cells in the southern Libyan region. This dangerous situation could have helped the two European parts to ally their efforts to ensure the security of the Fezzan valley. However, they are still competing to gain maximum leverage and political influence in the Libyan peace process. Italy reproached France to support the Tubu tribe, accused of participating in the smuggling of migrants from Africa to Europe.

Risks of escalation and challenging actors

The lack of a unified European position on Libya has enabled other actors to gain leverage and expand their influence on Europe's southern flank and in the whole African continent.

The absence of internal stability on the Libyan conflict allowed the entry of a multiplicity of new actors on the Libyan ground, which are cashing in from this situation to extend their presence to other countries in Sahel region and Africa. The Libyan war led to the militarization of Africa with the coming of new, uncontrollable actors. Private military companies and Blackwater groups are flourishing on the Libyan ground such as the Russian Wagner Group, Stratford, Erickson, Ukrainian Omega consulting group, Syrian mercenaries and Sudanese groupings. France correlated the intensification of the Turkish military actions with the increased presence of Russian and other Blackwater private military companies. The lack of unification of actors left windows of opportunities for terrorist groups and undermines the possibility to reach an agreement between the different warring parties.

The multiplication of foreign actors in Libya triggered a "Syrianisation" of the Libyan conflict and created a power vacuum that is filled by two competing actors for France. Russia and Turkey particularly challenge the possibility for France to take political and security advantages on

"Syrianisation" of the Libyan conflict created a power vacuum that is filled by two competing actors: Russia and Turkey.

the ground. Russia is cashing in from the current European dispute to extend its influence in the Mediterranean and Africa. Turkey is directly confronting France on the ground and risks to destroy all the previous advantages gained from Haftar's military operations.

However, France does not perceive the two actors equally. The French authorities are more threatened by the Turkish actions than the Russian. The Kremlin hides its intervention on the Libyan soil through the use of mercenaries and covert actions and has never acknowledged the existence of Wagner mercenaries officially. Moreover, the Russian duality of power allowed the Kremlin to deny its political and overt support to Haftar. Therefore, the Russian actions are seen as being less ideological and more pragmatic by the French government, allowing it to negotiate more easily with the Russian authorities.

In September of 2019, Russia began to deploy between 800-1,200 Russian mercenaries through the Wagner Group led by Yevgeny Prigozhin to help Haftar's troops on the ground during its 2019 offensive against Tripoli. The Libyan conflict opened opportunities for Russia to showcase its military efficiency and to sell its services to other African and Middle Eastern states. Russia may, therefore, gain more influence in Africa where its mercenaries are already present in Central Africa, Madagascar and Sudan, decreasing the French outreach in these countries. Russia is perceived by these countries as a neutral partner, accepting to satisfy the will of authoritarian leaders regardless of the nature of their political regime. This offer can be particularly appealing for some African states looking for a discreet and efficient military partner.

Russia also provided military hardware to the LNA troops. According to the U.S. Africom, Russia delivered several Mig-29s and SU-24s to the LNA. Arabic sources highlighted however that these aircraft are piloted by Egyptians, not directly by Russians, to avoid any direct Russian involvement in the Libyan conflict. Moreover, these aircraft would have come from the Syrian Khmeimim airbase, limiting the direct responsibility of Russia for this export, hiding behind the Syrian government.

France and Russia cooperated in Libya to ensure their respective interests and to protect Haftar's military gains. However, their respective goals are not perfectly overlapping. The convergence was visible in Sirte, where Russian and French aerial operations repelled Turkey from this strategic location. Sirte is the nearest port to Africa from Europe and is connected to other strategic positions such as the Al-Qardabiya base and the main ports of Ras Lanuf, Marsa al-Brega, and al-Zuweitina controlling 11 pipelines and 3 gas conduits from the Mediterranean Sea until Benghazi. The Russian and Emirati strikes achieved to repel Turkish troops which won important locations of Misrata and al-Watiya base. For Russia, Sirte and al-Jufra allowed it to increase its reach on the Mediterranean in addition to the Russian

military base in Syria. France needs to repel the Turkish troops from these two locations to keep the strategic oil assets controlled by the LNA troops.

France is more afraid by the advances of the Turkish troops in Libya. On the one hand, the French government can be influenced by its regional defence partners, depicting Turkey and Qatar as the main threats for the region due to their ideological positions. Paris may also see the Turkish forces as less monolithic and harsher to address than the Russian hybrid forces.

Turkey is supplying the GNA with drones, logistic, operational and equipment support and has also allegedly sent 4,000 mercenaries from Syria, the Syrian Observatory of Human Rights reports. According to this centre, some members from al-Qaeda and ISIS would have infiltrated the Syrian mercenaries brought by Turkey, raising the French concerns on the control of the GNA forces in Libya. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported in February 2020 that there were around 130 former Islamic State or al-Qaeda fighters among the 4,700 Turkey-backed Syrian fighters sent to Libya. These mercenaries would have been hired in 4 centres of recruitment in Afrin, Syria, where Turkey is operating financially to employ these fighters.

Turkish forces would have also increased its military deployment in Libya. Contrary to Russian, Turkish support was officially approved by a parliament resolution passed on January 2. In May 2020, Turkish forces seized the base in al-Watiyah.

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According to the Twitter account of Obretix, Turkey would have deployed at least one MIM-23 Hawk air defense system on this base. Satellite images released on July 4, 2020 showed the missile launchers of this system in this aerial base. Thanks to their arsenal, Turkish aerial forces repelled the LNA troops which retreated to rear bases in Tarhuna, near Tripoli. However, in April 2020, the GNA

forces supported by Turkish military captured Tarhuna and are now endeavouring to seize Sirte and al-Jufra, strategic locations in the Libyan war. The GNA regained aerial superiority from Turkey, importing drones from Israel such as Harop loitering drone produced by Israel Aerospace Industries. According to the Jerusalem Post, a Harop drone would have crashed in Dirj town in April 2020. Earlier, in July 2019, two Orbiter 3 tactical drones (produced by the Israeli Aerospace Industries) were found at 40 km from Tripoli in the town of al-'Aziziya and in the Sidra district.

According to the Jerusalem Post, these drones would have been produced in Azerbaijan where the Israeli Aerospace Industries opened a new headquarter in 2019. For the French authorities, the increasing military presence of Turkey could lead to a more serious escalation of the Libyan conflict and increase the presence of Russian mercenaries to balance the threats posed by Turkey. Wagner mercenaries are less controllable and can lead to an increasing foothold of Russia in the Middle East, a result that is not especially encouraged by European states.

In January 2020, several French Rafales from the aircraft carrier *Charles de Gaulle* observed 3 Turkish ships in the Tripoli port. According to French sources, the first ship would have included heavy vehicles while the two others Turkish soldiers. During the same month, French military reported the presence of 40 Turkish soldiers in Misrata.

The Turkish presence in Libya increases tensions with Ankara's European and Middle Eastern enemies. On June 10, 2020, the French navy reported an incident involving its frigate *Courbet* which was threatened by the Turkish *Oruçreis*. The French operation aimed at interrogating the Turkish cargo ship *Çirkin*. The French authorities accused the Turkish naval forces of having "illuminated the *Courbet* with their fire control radar" three times, forcing the French frigate to retreat. In the wake of this incident, France announced on July 1, that it temporarily suspended its participation in the maritime security *Operation Sea Guardian* in the Mediterranean. Macron already castigated NATO for its lack of reaction after the incident involving Turkey and France. Only 8 members (of 30) supported the French side. French President described NATO as in a state of brain death and stated the necessity of a NATO dialogue on the Turkish behaviour. Macron accused Turkey of plunging the region in real chaos due to the spread of its military presence in Libya. He also blamed Turkey for violating arms embargo voted in the framework of the UN Security Council and during the Berlin conference in 2019. According to French President, Turkey would hinder the European operations aiming at curbing the shipment of weapons to Libya through the Mediterranean Sea and use its NATO membership to avoid any repercussions.

Turkish actions in Libya have also an impact on the Mediterranean geopolitical stakes. The expansion of Turkish economic interests and competition with other European partners leads to the spread of the conflict outside the Libyan territory. In 2019, Ankara achieved to sign with the GNA a Memorandum of understanding allowing Turkey delimiting the maritime borders between Turkey and Libya. Four more deals were reached between the GNA and Turkey to expand their military and economic cooperation. These agreements could reduce the possibility for

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neighbouring states to exploit the resources in the exclusive economic zone and hinders the project of the EastMed gas pipeline linking Cyprus, Israel, Italy and Greece, regional competitors of Turkey. In 2018, the discovery of significant gas reserves in the eastern Mediterranean led to the creation of a coalition between Greece, Cyprus, Israel, and Egypt to develop their security and economic cooperation. This alliance challenged the Turkish economic and political development in the region leading to the tightening relations between Turkey and the GNA. However, the lack of unity among European partners and the military leverage gained by Turkey in Libya led to the 2019

agreements with the GNA, limiting the maritime borders of the other states. In May 2019, the Turkish petroleum corporation started the oil exploration in the Eastern side of the Mediterranean Sea.

France is impaired by the spread of Turkish influence in Africa. The degradation of the security architecture in Africa leads to the opening of windows of opportunity for Turkey to expand its influence outside the Middle East. Turkey built, for example, a military training centre in Mogadishu, Somalia. More worryingly for France, Turkey extended its diplomatic links with Mali, a core partner of the French *Operation Barkhane* to curb the spread of terrorist cells. France fears that Turkey may disseminate its ideology in this territory, leading to the creation of new jihadist cells and complicating the French operations in the ground. On March 2, 2018, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan visited Mali and achieved to sign 8 agreements with the Malian authorities. This presence can also degrade the image of France in this African territory.

Consequences of the Turkish–Russian dialogue on Libya for France

The current security situation in Libya could become more challenging for French authorities which are betting all their support on General Haftar. Turkey and Russia, which are enemies on the Libyan ground, could, however, find a united agreement and lead to the partition of the country. This situation could be seen as detrimental to the French interests to control the Libyan territory for economic and security purposes. Le Drian qualified this situation as the “Syrianisation” of the Libyan war, leading to the ratification of an agreement between Turkey and Russia as it is the case for the Idlib region.

In January 2020, the two countries tried to reach a ceasefire agreement, which was rejected by General Haftar. Russian mercenaries were, therefore, pulled out of his Western offensive, leading to the seizure by Turkey of the al-Watiya base. On May 18, 2020, a new truce based on the inter-Libyan dialogue from the Berlin conference was reached. Russian forces accepted to leave Tarhuna to the Turkish forces which in exchange stopped its drone attacks.

Like in Syria, the Russian policy in Libya is assertive and pragmatic. Russian successes are not tightly intertwined to the maintaining of Haftar’s power and his control on the region. In Syria, Russian interests are not perfectly overlapping with the Iranian one, which depends on the presence of Bashar al-Assad to survive. French stakes can be vulnerable due to the overreliance on the military victory of General Haftar and the lack of flexibility regarding the negotiations with Turkey. Russia, on the contrary, can dialogue with its enemy despite its support to Haftar. The use of hybrid tools of warfare increases the Russian political manoeuvre in this

war. Besides, the successes of the French support to Haftar in Libya are linked to a more difficult victory, relying on the unification of the Libyan territory under Haftar's power. This result is far more complicated to obtain. The probability for France to lose its interests in Libya is higher regarding the weak military victories of General Haftar in 2019. Russia, on the contrary, as well as Turkey, is not against the freeze of the Libyan conflict and the sharing of the areas of influence in Libya, a result easier to obtain. This flexibility of the Turkish and Russian objectives in Libya leads to the dialogue between these two actors with the probability to isolate other participants in the conflict, including France which may lose its credibility in case of defeat of Haftar.

Moreover, Turkish and Russian interests in the conflict can be convergent. For example, the Turkish agreement with the GNA blocking the Eastern pipeline in the Mediterranean allows Russia to block other sources of energy products in the European energy market and to keep its powerful geopolitical tool in the region. Moreover, the Libyan crisis participates in the division of European states between France, Italy and Germany, a result that can be positive for Russia that is looking for a weak neighbour.

Topchubashov Center
Globus Center, Floor 7,
609 Jafar Jabbarli Str.
Baku AZ1065, Azerbaijan

info@top-center.com
www.top-center.com



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