



საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობების კვლევის ფონდი
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**“Syriazation” of the Libyan Crisis
Threats and Challenges**

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If up until now the confrontation between Russia and Turkey in the Middle East (Syria) was going with Moscow's clear superiority, more recently the military situation has changed in Ankara's favor in Libya where the center of the tensions moved in the spring of 2020.

Multiple foreign states, which have long been confronting one another in the Middle East's hot spots, got involved in the Libyan civil war with the aim of backing various groups of fighters. This caused the combat action to escalate and effectively internationalized the conflict. The conflict in Libya gradually became quite similar to the Syrian civil war (a "Syriazation" of the conflict took place) where foreign powers are fighting through their proxies (their supporters on the ground).

This civil war creates numerous threats and challenges both within the region as well as outside of it.

Escalation of Civil War

After the removal of the dictator Gaddafi from power in 2011, a power vacuum was created in Libya resulting in a civil war, destabilization, an enormous number of casualties and the partition of the state.¹

In 2019, the leader of the Libyan National Army, General Khalifa Haftar (supported by Russia, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, UAE, France and Jordan), secured a stronghold in the eastern part of Libya with the help of his foreign allies. He started launching attacks against the UN-recognized Fayeze al-Sarraj's government based in Tripoli (supported by Turkey, Qatar and Italy) in April 2019.²

Apart from Russian military machinery supplied from various countries, Haftar is also being supported by foreign fighters, including thousands of Sudanese combatants, Syrian troops from the Assad regime and Russian Wagner Group fighters from December 2019.³ According to a UN report, the Russian support comprises between 800-1,200 people.⁴

General Haftar would even have taken Tripoli (combat was already taking place on the streets) had it not been for Turkey's energetic and quick intervention from December 2019.⁵ Ankara, which is involved in the Syrian conflict and is also facing serious economic problems, also found time for Libya. By sending thousands of pro-Turkish Syrian fighters,⁶ military instructors⁷ and Turkish-made modern weapons (the most notable among those are the military drones. According to the statement of the UN Special Representative for Libya, Ghassan Salame, this conflict is "the largest drone war in history"⁸) to Libya, Turkey managed not only to save the pro-Turkish government in Tripoli but also mounted a counter-attack in many places. In May 2020, it obtained control of the territories bordering

¹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-52846879>

² <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-52846879>

³ <https://ahvalnews.com/turkey-libya/turkish-russian-proxy-war-jeopardises-peace-agreement-libya-bloomberg>

⁴ <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/middle-east-watch/turkish-proxy-gains-libya-are-no-cure-ankara%E2%80%99s-growing-isolation-157751>

⁵ <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/middle-east-watch/turkish-proxy-gains-libya-are-no-cure-ankara%E2%80%99s-growing-isolation-157751>

⁶ <https://www.france24.com/en/20200519-syrian-rebel-and-regime-forces-now-fight-in-libya>

⁷ <https://www.syriahr.com/%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%85%d8%b1%d8%aa%d8%b2%d9%82%d8%a9-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%b3%d9%88%d8%b1%d9%8a%d9%88%d9%86-%d9%81%d9%8a-%d9%84%d9%8a%d8%a8%d9%8a%d8%a7-%d9%85%d9%86-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%a5%d8%b0%d8%b9%d8%a7%d9%86/>

⁸ <https://ahvalnews.com/turkey-drones/how-turkeys-drone-war-saved-libyan-government-tripoli-al-jazeera>

Tunisia and the Al-Watiya Air Base. Pro-Turkish forces also chased their adversaries out of Tripoli's suburbs, taking the town of Tarhuna⁹ by which they practically occupied the western part of the country while having pushed up to the strategically important city of Sirte at the beginning of June.¹⁰

Hence, the pro-Turkish forces are closing in on oil fields in the southeast of the city of Sirte. In the case of taking Sirte, they will have opened the way to both the oil fields as well as Benghazi which is the main city held by the rebels.

Given the current situation, Egypt put forward a proposition of a ceasefire on June 6, 2020.¹¹ However, Turkey and the pro-Turkish government of Libya refused this offer.¹²

In response to the activation of Turkey and the pro-Turkish forces, Russia sent its military planes from Syria (Khmeimim Air Base) to the territory of Libya at the end of May 2020, thereby creating a serious counterweight for the pro-Turkish forces.¹³ That said, unlike the Wagner Group fighters, Russian military aviation has not thus far become involved in combat operations.

In the given situation, Ankara is in no hurry to enter into an open confrontation with Moscow, blaming the Arab states for the outbreak of the Libyan crisis in its official statements, while those Arab states are, of course, backed by Russia.¹⁴ On the other hand, however, Turkey is strengthening its military presence in the region. On June 11, Ankara conducted large-scale military exercises in the Mediterranean along the coast of Libya in which they displayed their military aviation and naval forces.¹⁵ This step is a clear signal for the adversaries that Ankara is not planning on backing down and will not avoid military escalation, should it become necessary.

⁹ <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/middle-east-watch/turkish-proxy-gains-libya-are-no-cure-ankara%E2%80%99s-growing-isolation-157751>

¹⁰ <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/how-turkish-drones-are-changing-the-course-of-the-libyan-civil-war-36544>

¹¹ <https://www.france24.com/en/20200606-egypt-announces-new-plan-to-end-war-in-libya-as-haftar-offensive-loses-ground>

¹² <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/06/turkey-dismisses-egypt-ceasefire-offer-attempt-save-haftar-200610134125828.html>

¹³ <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/en/originals/2020/05/turkey-russia-libya-may-lead-to-faceoff-similar-to-syria.html>

¹⁴ <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/en/originals/2020/05/turkey-russia-libya-may-lead-to-faceoff-similar-to-syria.html>

¹⁵ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkey-libya-military-drill-bases-gna>



A map depicting the June 11 military exercises in the Mediterranean Sea published by the Ministry of Defense of Turkey

Furthermore, according to a Turkish pro-government newspaper, *Yeni Şafak*, Ankara is considering establishing a military base in Libya in order to tip the local balance of power in its favor.¹⁶

To date, the Libyan civil war has taken the lives of thousands of people (including the peaceful population).¹⁷ Hundreds of thousands of Libyans have become refugees (about a third of the entire population by some estimations).¹⁸ The healthcare and the education systems have practically collapsed. State institutions are no longer functioning. For years, the country has been engulfed in chaos and a lack of order. The conflict has also taken on ethnic character (Arab tribes, on the one hand, and groups with Turkish, Circassian and Berber origins, on the other).¹⁹

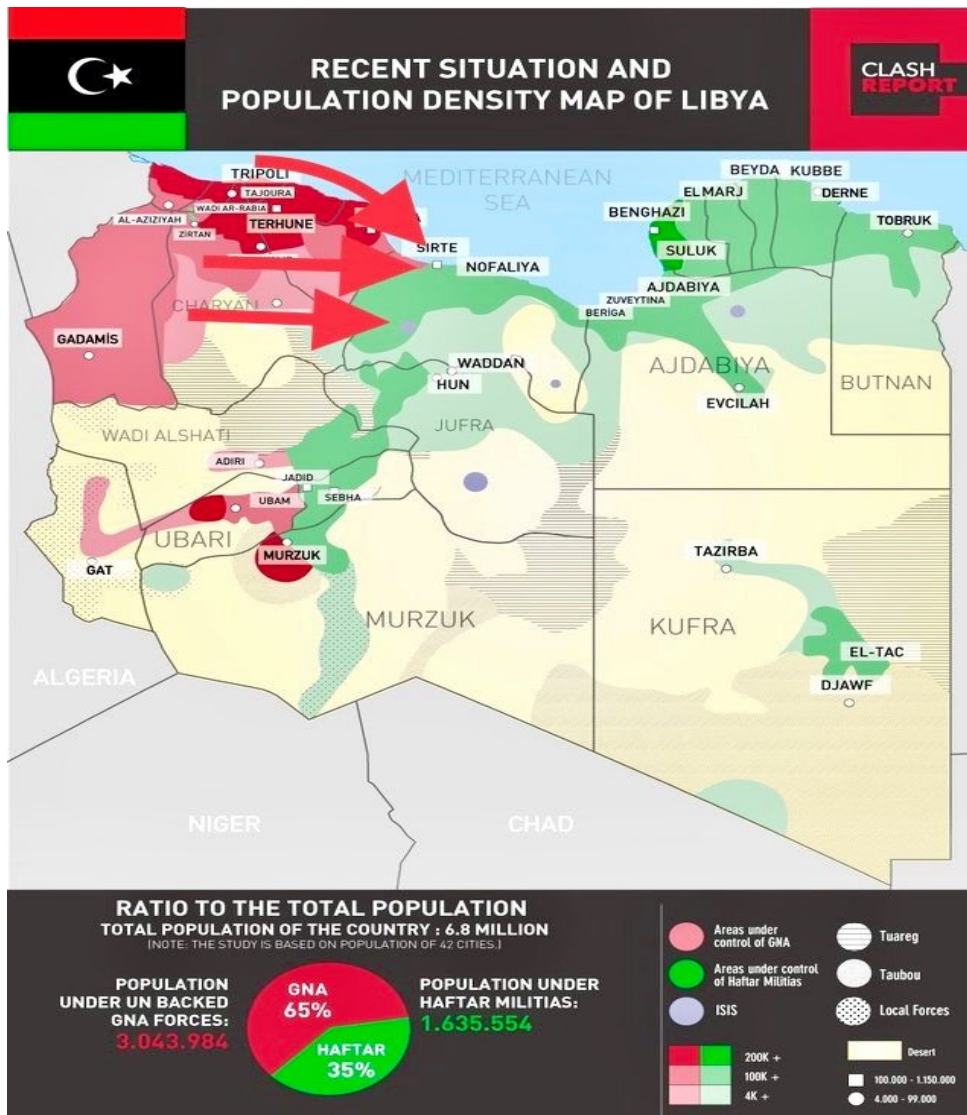
At the same time, numerous negotiations and agreements reached with regard to the issue of Libya have collapsed. Ultimately, much like many other states, Libya has turned into a so-called failed state with all of the respective consequences.

¹⁶ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkey-libya-military-drill-bases-gna>

¹⁷ <https://www.libyaobserver.ly/news/human-rights-solidarity-about-4000-people-were-victims-armed-fighting-libya-2018>

¹⁸ <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/02/23/unravelling>

¹⁹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/25/world/africa/libyan-unrest.html>



Military-Political Situation in Libya

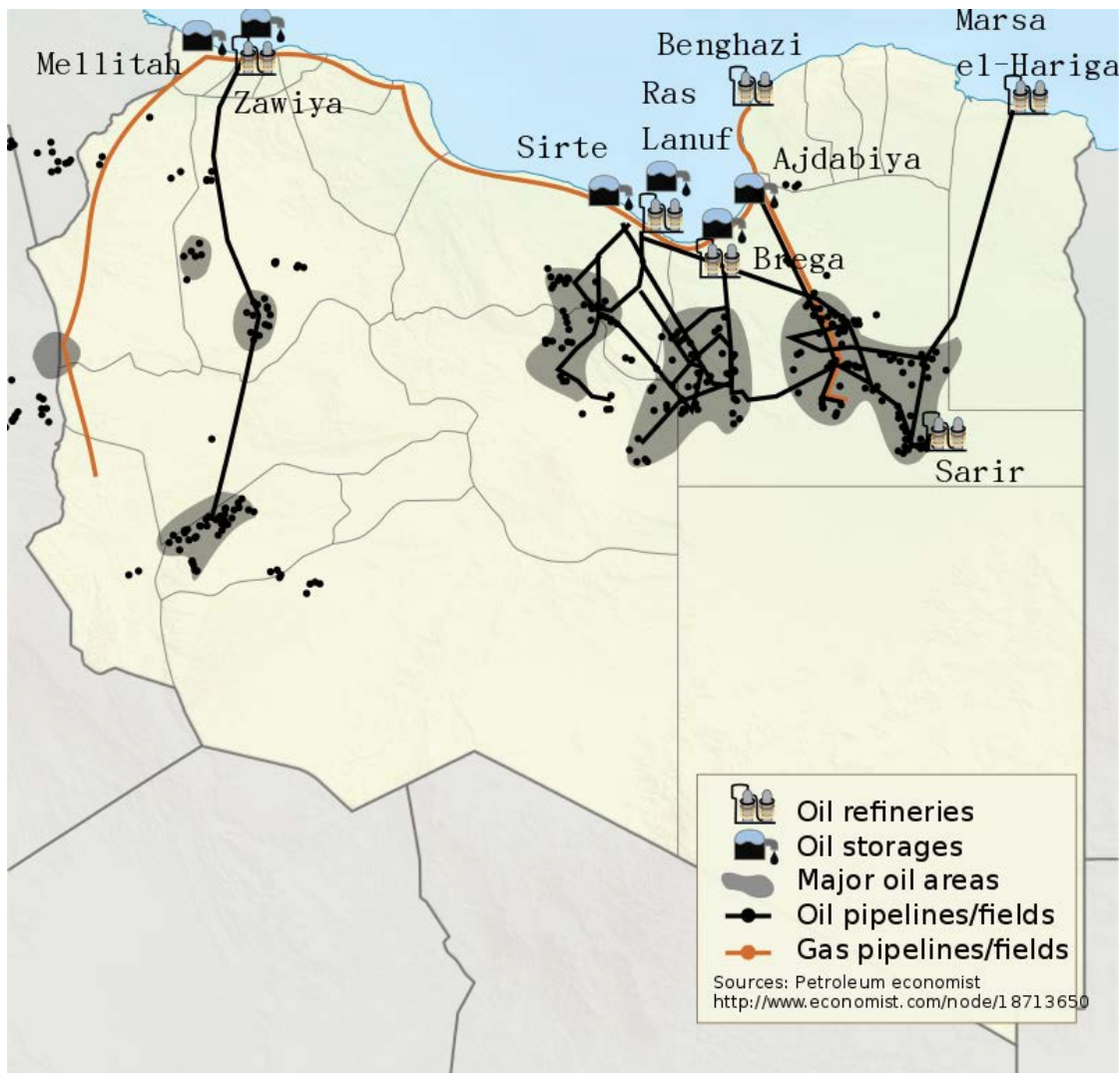
Importance of Libya and Interests of the Parties

Libya is an important state in a number of ways and, therefore, interest towards it never subsides.

First of all, Libya is rich with natural resources – it is the richest African state in terms of oil and natural gas (they produced 1.6 million barrels of oil in 2010).²⁰ In addition, unlike the Persian Gulf, it is geographically close to Europe. Transporting oil and gas from there is cheaper and safer.²¹ Therefore, these resources are attractive for many states.

²⁰ <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-dunya-52851716>

²¹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-52846879>



Libyan Oil and Natural Gas Production Fields

It must be pointed out that Libya is a geographic access point to other African states in which the parties of the conflict also want to spread their influence.

Given the fact that an unstable Libya could become a source of new waves of refugees moving towards Europe, it is in the interests of the European states to establish peace there.²² However, the current situation is beneficial for Russia which is infamous on the international arena for its policies of blackmail, currently seeing Libya as the next target for spreading its influence after Syria.

The United States initially sided with Haftar and was sporadically bombing the jihadist positions²³ while recently it has adopted a more anti-Moscow position. For example, on May 26, the Commander of the United States Air Forces in Europe and Africa, General Jeff Harrigan, stated that Russian activities create a real threat on the southern flanks of Europe.²⁴ On the other hand, however,

²² <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/middle-east-watch/turkish-proxy-gains-libya-are-no-cure-ankara%E2%80%99s-growing-isolation-157751>

²³ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-52846879>

²⁴ <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/en/originals/2020/05/turkey-russia-libya-may-lead-to-faceoff-similar-to-syria.html>

Washington does not want to see radical groups in the region strengthened²⁵ and, therefore, has limited itself to merely making statements about Libya without taking any real steps.

Apart from natural resources (Libyan and Mediterranean oil and natural gas), Turkish interests also encompass the Ottoman heritage (Libya was a part of the Ottoman Empire from 1551 to 1911). On January 14, 2020, the President of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, openly stated that Libya represents Ottoman heritage where about a million people with Turkish origins live and that Ankara will not allow Haftar to destroy them.²⁶

It is also a notable fact that on November 27, 2019, Turkey signed an agreement with Sarraj's government according to which the special economic zones of both countries in the Mediterranean Sea were determined.²⁷ Based on this, they were given the right to mine natural resources within the new maritime borders. That said, Egypt, Greece and Cyprus believe this agreement to be illegal and consider that it violates their national interests.²⁸



Turkish-Libyan Special Economic Zones According to the November 27, 2019 Agreement

The Turkish desire to become the leader of the Sunni world (supported by a large Sunni movement operating in the region – the Muslim Brotherhood) is strongly opposed by Saudi Arabia and other Arab states gathered around it – Egypt (Cairo is especially concerned with the strengthening of the Muslim Brotherhood's positions in neighboring Libya, considering this organization to be one of the greatest

²⁵ <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/en/originals/2020/05/turkey-russia-libya-may-lead-to-faceoff-similar-to-syria.html>

²⁶ <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/libya/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-haftere-hak-ettigi-dersi-vermekten-asla-geri-durmuyacagiz/1701917>

²⁷ <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/energy/energy-security/libya-hails-deal-with-turkey-on-maritime-boundaries/27600>

²⁸ <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/middle-east-watch/turkish-proxy-gains-libya-are-no-cure-ankara%E2%80%99s-growing-isolation-157751>

security threats for their country)²⁹, Jordan and the UAE. Therefore, these states naturally aligned themselves with Haftar against Turkey.³⁰

France also sided with this group as it is traditionally suspicious of the strengthening of the Turkish hold over the Mediterranean. Israel, Greece and Cyprus have a similar approach, also being counted as members of the anti-Turkish camp.³¹

The parties involved in the Libyan civil war need to take into account that the country is very large in terms of territory – about 1.8 million square kilometers³² (2.5 times larger than Turkey). Hence, even in the case of gaining military superiority, efficiently controlling the territory of that size will be very challenging.

Threats and Challenges

- The “Syriazation” of Libya shows that any so-called failed state is highly vulnerable and faces a real threat of intervention by confronted foreign powers. After Libya, other such states may also be in line (Yemen, Lebanon and others) which threatens regional security.
- If Russia decides that it is currently not in a position to get actively involved in Libya, it might consider taking revenge on Turkey in other areas and one of such areas could be the Eastern Mediterranean (including Syria). This is especially given the fact that Russian-Syrian forces are already quite active in the northern part of Syria (Idlib).
- Given the fact that there is no agreement between Russia and Turkey on the issue of Libya, this conflict, much like the Syrian civil war, causes threats of direct military confrontation between these two states which is not in Georgia’s interests.
- At the moment, neither of the conflict parties have the power to resolve it through military force. Therefore, the threat of Libya being de-facto divided into two or more parts is very real. Allowing such a precedent could cause a “domino effect” in the region where borders can in many cases be artificial and relative.
- Currently, the future fate of thousands of Syrian opposition jihadists fighting in Libya is unknown. After the end of combat operations, some might even try to go to Europe which will create additional threats and challenges for European states.
- Libya in its current situation is a reliable refuge not only for jihadists from Syria. If they were to establish themselves there, Libya could also become a powerful safe haven for jihadists in general, as well as a center of gravity for extremist groups, which will probably obtain serious financial resources through the sales of natural resources (oil and natural gas). As a result of all of this, similar to what happened in Iraq and Syria after the establishment of Daesh, the jihadists might start both exporting their radical ideologies to vulnerable states and communities as well as attracting new fighters. Given all of this, Georgia’s unfortunate experience in this regard must definitely be taken into account.

²⁹ <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/en/originals/2020/05/turkey-russia-libya-may-lead-to-faceoff-similar-to-syria.html>

³⁰ <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/middle-east-watch/turkish-proxy-gains-libya-are-no-cure-ankara%E2%80%99s-growing-isolation-157751>

³¹ <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200611-israel-research-centre-turkeys-role-in-libya-threatens-tel-aviv-interests/>

³² <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/products/dyb/DYB2003/Table03.pdf>

- The “Syriazation” of Libya and especially the growth of Russian influence there is not in Georgia’s interests as in such a case, the issue of recognizing the so-called “independence” of the occupied Russian regions might arise here as well (just like it happened in Syria).
- It is known that Georgian citizens who departed to fight in Syria are members of Syrian jihadist organizations. At the moment, it is not clear whether some of them have moved to Libya as well. However, if the situation in Syria worsens for them, Libya might be a strong alternative with all of the associated negative consequences.