Osservatorio TURCHIA CeSPI

Brief n. 73/December 2025

Türkiye's Strategic Engagement in Libya: Historical and Geopolitical Perspectives

Ferhat Polat

With the support of:

Fondazione CSF

Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo

Introduction

Türkiye's ties to Libya are deep, historically, politically, and economically, considering the long period of Ottoman rule in the country. Türkiye enjoyed good relations with Libya after it gained its independence in 1951, and following the oil boom, economic ties also surged. Especially in the infrastructure and construction sectors, many Turkish companies were active in Libya when the demonstrations that led to the end of Gaddafi rule started in 2011. But, after the fall of Gaddafi, Türkiye's relationship with Libya faced challenges due to the political instability and conflict that followed.

Türkiye's engagement in Libya over the past decade has emerged as a hallmark of its evolving foreign policy doctrine characterized by a mix of strategic autonomy, economic ambitions, geopolitical recalibrations, and pragmatic partnerships. With Libya occupying a uniquely critical position at the intersection of the Mediterranean, Africa, and the Middle East, Ankara regards its relationship with Tripoli as central to both its regional aspirations and its quest for influence in broader international affairs. Türkiye's policy in Libya is thus multifaceted, adaptive, and deeply entwined with complex local, regional, and global dynamics.

Strategic Interests

At the core of Türkiye's strategy in Libya is its drive for geopolitical leverage in the central Mediterranean. Libya's geographical location enables Türkiye to project power and exert influence not only over its immediate southern neighbourhood but also into the African Sahel a region historically dominated by European powers and, more recently, marked by the presence of Russia. Turkish policymakers see Libya as a key node connecting their country's interests in the Mediterranean basin, Sub-Saharan Africa, and the Middle East, enabling Ankara to present itself as an indispensable regional actor.

Security considerations are central to Türkiye's Libya policy. Historically, Türkiye's defence posture was oriented around its alliances in NATO and its integrated role within the Western security architecture. However, recent years have witnessed a shift towards greater "strategic autonomy." Ankara has increasingly adopted an independent approach, willing to act outside traditional Western parameters, particularly in theatres like Syria and Libya. In Libya, this translated into a decisive military intervention in 2019, which included the deployment of drones, military advisors, and special forces exemplifying Türkiye's expeditionary intervention model. This model seeks to achieve maximal strategic effect with contained risk and cost, by leveraging technology and forging partnerships with local actors.

Türkiye's involvement in the Libyan conflict holds strategic significance in foreign policy, with notable consequences for Türkiye and the broader region. Türkiye's involvement in the Libyan conflict demonstrated its growing assertiveness in regional matters and its readiness to use military force to protect its geopolitical interests (Koçak and Akgül 2022). Türkiye's foreign policy towards North Africa has undergone a significant shift in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings 2011 (Kutlay and Öniş 2021). This period was when Ankara sought to increase its influence through economic and diplomatic means, and military intervention. Türkiye's involvement in the Libyan conflict was a clear example of its desire to secure its strategic

interests in the Mediterranean and North Africa. This shift in foreign policy marked a departure from Türkiye's previous approach of non-interference, signalling its determination.

Economic Interests

Türkiye's policy in Libya also has a strong economic dimension. Libya is central to Ankara's ambitions to position itself as a regional economic powerhouse, particularly in energy and infrastructure. Turkish policymakers aim to integrate Türkiye with Libya's energy infrastructure, expand Turkish investments, and capitalize on reconstruction opportunities in post-conflict Libya. Turkish companies are involved in rebuilding airports, roads, and power plants, and seek to be at the forefront of Libya's long-term development. Moreover, new shipping links and economic corridors further intertwine Turkish and Libyan interests, potentially making Türkiye a logistics hub bridging Europe, Africa, and the Middle East.

Türkiye and Libya have a longstanding relationship that spans several decades, primarily driven by mutual interests in energy, trade, and security. In 1974, Libya supported the Turkish military intervention in Cyprus, which distinguished it as one of the few countries to offer such assistance, which was crucial at the time. This support from Libya further solidified the bond between the two nations and created a sense of trust and cooperation. Türkiye has been involved in various mega-construction projects, strengthening their bilateral ties (Koloğlu 2007).

During the 1980s and 1990s, Turkish companies found significant business opportunities in Libya, specifically in the construction and energy industries. Ankara considered Tripoli to be a crucial ally in the North African region. This alliance was strengthened by signing various trade agreements and establishing joint ventures between Turkish and Libyan companies. The construction sector, in particular, witnessed a boom as Turkish firms undertook significant infrastructure projects in Libya, contributing to the country's economic development (Kachiar 2020).

Türkiye's Strategic Objectives in the Mediterranean: The Libyan Connection

Türkiye's other important driver in Libya relates to territorial waters in the eastern Mediterranean. Türkiye has been involved in a dispute with neighbouring countries over the delimitation of maritime boundaries and the exploration of natural resources in the region. This has led to increased tensions and a desire for Türkiye to secure its interests in Libya, as it sees the country as a strategic gateway to assert its influence and protect its claims in the Eastern Mediterranean. The search for natural resources in the East Mediterranean Sea is of great strategic importance to Türkiye, attracting the interest of both regional and national stakeholders. The discovery of significant natural gas reserves in the region has sparked a race among countries to secure their energy needs and assert their influence. This has led to heightened tensions and competing claims over maritime boundaries, making the Eastern Mediterranean a hotspot for geopolitical rivalries (Kim and Shin 2021). The gas resources in the East Mediterranean have become the main subject of contention in regional politics since the discovery of gas reserves in Israel in 1999 and 2000 (Khadduri 2012).

The discovery of natural gas reserves prompted regional and international actors to increase exploration in Mediterranean waters. It sparked competition and cooperation among countries to secure their share of these resources and establish strategic partnerships for future energy

cooperation. This competition led to new alliances and geopolitical dynamics in the region. Countries like Türkiye, Libya, Greece, Egypt, Israel and Cyprus became key players in this energy race as they sought to assert their territorial claims and protect their interests in the Mediterranean (Tanchum 2020a). Greece, Egypt, and Cyprus have acted against Türkiye due to the dispute in the usage of offshore waters within the Mediterranean Sea (Bardakçı 2022). In January 2020, a significant development occurred in the geopolitical landscape of the Eastern Mediterranean region, as Greece, Cyprus, and Israel came together to formalise their commitment to the East Med pipeline project (Nellas 2019). The primary objective of this project is to establish a linkage between the energy sources in the East Mediterranean region and Europe but excluding Türkiye and North Cyprus, to secure their offshore pipeline (Koutantou 2020).

In response to its perceived strategic isolation in the Eastern Mediterranean, Ankara has strategically chosen to pursue a breakout strategy. This approach involves the formation of an official alliance with the internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) (Tanchum 2020b). In November 2019, Türkiye and the GNA signed two memorandums of understanding (MoU). One focused on military cooperation, while the other dealt with maritime boundaries in the Eastern Mediterranean (Aljazeera 2019). Türkiye's achievement in preventing Haftar's coup against the GNA would significantly advance its efforts to safeguard its interests in the eastern Mediterranean (Polat 2020).

Political Engagement and Approach to Factions

A distinguishing feature of Türkiye's Libya policy is its ability to engage with both sides of Libya's divisions eastern and western factions. Initially, Türkiye's intervention was aligned predominantly with the Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli. However, Ankara has since recalibrated its approach to reach out to power brokers in eastern Libya as well. This dual engagement is a calculated effort to ensure that Turkish interests remain safeguarded regardless of political shifts in Libya's fractured landscape.

Ankara seeks to stabilise Libya by engaging both western and eastern factions and promoting security consolidation. However, Türkiye is concerned about persistent political and military tensions, fragile alliances, and unpredictable shifts in Libyan leadership. Ankara's outreach to eastern Libya represents not a withdrawal from Tripoli but a calculated strategy a means to safeguard and expand Türkiye's influence across Libya's divided political terrain while seeking nationwide legitimacy for its enduring presence.

The process of political normalisation with the east accelerated after the end of Haftar failed offensive (Reuters 2020) on the capital Tripoli in 2020, marked by high-level visits to Ankara from prominent eastern figures, including House of Representatives Speaker Aqila Saleh and the sons of General Khalifa Haftar, Saddam Haftar (Khaled 2025). Turkish President Erdoğan's meetings with Aguila Saleh, the Tobruk-based parliament speaker and a Haftar supporter, in August 2022 (Faruk 2022) and December 2023 (Calli and Guldogan 2022) signify Türkiye's willingness to engage with the country's eastern region. These exchanges helped to improve diplomatic relations between both sides, lessen existing imbalances, and lay the groundwork for pragmatic cooperation on parallel tracks.

Türkiye's approach is not free from challenges. While it has succeeded in carving out a significant strategic foothold, it faces persistent political and security concerns. The security

situation in Libya remains fragile, with the ceasefire between rival forces sustained only tentatively, often through Ankara's coordination with Moscow and some extend with Egypt. Ankara also recognizes the limitations of unilateral action and is increasingly seeking to "burden-share" with other actors a governing principle in its recent foreign policy.

Interaction with International and Regional Actors

Türkiye's engagement in Libya is profoundly shaped by its interactions with other external stakeholders. Coordination with Egypt has become a focal point, evolving from a relationship defined by rivalry to one marked by pragmatic cooperation. Both Ankara and Cairo share a fundamental interest in preventing large-scale conflict in Libya and enabling reconstruction, although important differences remain especially in the east, where control over strategic assets and energy corridors overlaps with broader Mediterranean disputes.

Similarly, Türkiye seeks partnership with Italy, primarily around migration management and energy cooperation, while managing tensions with other European actors over maritime boundaries.

Russia's role adds another layer of complexity. The managed rivalry between Ankara and Moscow in Libya echoes patterns seen in Syria and the Caucasus, where tactical cooperation overlays deeper structural competition. Recent Russian manoeuvres in Libya, including the repositioning of air defence systems, have altered the military balance, prompting Türkiye to further diversify its partnerships within Libya and refine its calculations.

UN-Led Process and Strategic Concerns

While Türkiye officially supports the UN-led political process in Libya, seeing it as a legitimising avenue for its presence and engagements, it remains wary. Past international initiatives particularly those involving the UAE, France, and Egypt have often marginalised Ankara. Since Gaddafi was toppled in 2011, Türkiye has demonstrated its endorsement of the United Nations-led political process in Libya, as it aligns with its overall regional interests. Türkiye's support for the United Nations-led political process in Libya is driven by its aim to maintain stability in the region and protect its economic investments.

Conclusion

Türkiye's policy in Libya is dynamic and reflects broader shifts in its foreign policy orientation towards greater autonomy, regional assertiveness, and economic ambition. By balancing security, economic, and diplomatic interests, Ankara aims to cement itself as a primary external actor in Libya's future. Yet, the sustainability of its engagement depends on its ability to adapt to internal Libyan dynamics, manage ambivalent partnerships, and navigate the evolving Mediterranean security environment.

Ferhat Polat, senior researcher and analyst specialising in North African geopolitics and security

References

Aljazeera. 2019. ‘Libya, Turkey Sign Deals on Security and Maritime Jurisdictions’. November 28. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/11/28/libya-turkey-sign-deals-on-security-and-maritime-jurisdictions.

Bardakçı, Mehmet. 2022. ‘Turkey and the Major Powers in the Eastern Mediterranean Crisis from the 2010s to the 2020s’. *Comparative Southeast European Studies* 70 (3): 516–39. https://doi.org/10.1515/soeu-2021-0071.

Calli, Muhammed Enes, and Diyar Guldogan, 2022. ‘Turkish President Meets Speaker of Libyan House of Representatives’. December 13. https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/turkish-president-meets-speaker-of-libyan-house-of-representatives/3081489.

Faruk, Zorlu. 2022. ‘Turkish President Receives Senior Libyan Officials in Ankara’. August 3. https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkiye/turkish-president-receives-senior-libyan-officials-in-ankara/2652415.

Kachiar, Yatharth. 2020. ‘How Turkey Uses Libya to Achieve Its Foreign Policy Objectives’. Article. *National Security* (New Delhi, India) 3 (3): 344–67.

Khadduri, Walid. 2012. ‘East Mediterranean Gas: Opportunities and Challenges’. *Mediterranean Politics* 17 (1): 111–17. https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2012.655049.

Khaled, Mahmoud. 2025. ‘Saddam Haftar Begins Role as LNA Deputy with Turkish Military Talks’. August 25. https://english.aawsat.com/node/5178829.

Kim, Taehwan, and Sang Yoon Shin. 2021. ‘Competition or Cooperation? The Geopolitics of Gas Discovery in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea’. *Energy Research & Social Science* 74 (April): 101983. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2021.101983.

Koçak, Muhammet, and Musa Akgül. 2022. ‘Quest for Regional Power Status: Explaining Turkey’s Assertive Foreign Policy’. *International Journal* 77 (2): 292–312. https://doi.org/10.1177/00207020221130310.

Koloğlu, Orhan. 2007. *500 years in Turkish-Libyan relations*. SAM.

Koutantou, Angeliki. 2020. ‘Greece, Israel, Cyprus Sign EastMed Gas Pipeline Deal | Reuters’. News. Greece, Israel, Cyprus Sign EastMed Gas Pipeline Deal, January 2. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-greece-cyprus-israel-pipeline-idUSKBN1Z10R5.

Kutlay, Mustafa, and Ziya Öniş. 2021. ‘Turkish Foreign Policy in a Post-Western Order: Strategic Autonomy or New Forms of Dependence?’ *International Affairs* 97 (4): 1085–104. https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiab094.

Nellas, Demetris. 2019. ‘Cyprus, Greece, Israel to Sign Pipeline Deal on Jan. 2’. News. AP News, December 23. https://apnews.com/article/b1d346b8e360f9ab85e08e460c8bb089.

Polat, Ferhat. 2020. *Turkey’s Strategy in Libya: Rationale and Challenges*. https://researchcentre.trtworld.com/policy-outlooks/turkeys-strategy-in-libya-rationale-and-challenges/.

Reuters. 2020. ‘Libya’s Haftar Pulls Back East as Tripoli Offensive Crumbles’. World. *Reuters*, June 6. https://www.reuters.com/article/world/libyas-haftar-pulls-back-east-as-tripoli-offensive-crumbles-idUSKBN23C11Q/.

Tanchum, Michaël. 2020a. ‘How Did the Eastern Mediterranean Become the Eye of a Geopolitical Storm?’ *Foreign Policy*, August 18. https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/08/18/eastern-mediterranean-greece-turkey-warship-geopolitical-showdown/.

Tanchum, Michaël. 2020b. ‘Libya, Energy, and the Mediterranean’s New “Great Game”’. Elcano Royal Institute, September 23. https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/analyses/libya-energy-and-the-mediterraneans-new-great-game/.