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New Conflict Area of Turkey and Russia: Libya

Determining the presence of energy resources in the Eastern Mediterranean brought with it a new era for the region. The conflict steadily expanded and became more complicated with the entrance of regional states such as Turkey, Greece, Egypt, Israel, Libya, Cyprus; and non-regional states as well like United Arab Emirates, France and Russia into the equation.

In Libya, as the hot spot of the Eastern Mediterranean nowadays, there are two effective powers: Turkey and Russia. Russia's relations with Turkey in the region are multi-dimensional. These two states, which may be in conflict on another issue while agreeing on one issue in Syria or in other region, are historical rivals. The biggest threat perceived by the state in the

last two centuries of the Ottoman Empire has always come from Russia. The Republic of Turkey is also taking inherited from the Ottoman Empire in continuing balance policy has always been the focus of Russia. While determining its place in the international system, spending and foreign borrowing, except for the period between the wars, Turkey's focus was always formed and developed within the frame of Russia. Since Turkey is situated in the Russia's way to Mediterranean which is very important for Russia's geopolitic interests and security, the relation of these countries were shaped as Russia's offensive, Turkey's defensive stances. However, the Libya issue appears as one of the rare examples where the items in this equation are displaced. Because here, (at least for now) Turkey seems to be in

“offensive” side within the frame of its rights and with initiative of the legitimate government, while Russia seems to be in “defensive” side with its relatively limited influence and tactical moves like blockage . In this sense, Turkey has to follow a new strategy which is unusual for him historically.

Before analyzing the relations and disputes of Turkey with Russia in Libya, it will be better to put forth the goals of both countries in this area. Turkey’s strategy in Libya, at first glance, seems focused on energy. However, there is a very deep geopolitical issue behind the scenes. Turkey defends the rights of its sovereignty within the framework of its geopolitical interests. Turkey is almost performing a sortie by its regional influence with the treaty on restricting maritime jurisdiction areas signed with Libya. Similar moves can be seen in Syria, such as the Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch Operations, which were carried out with strong will. Turkey is trying to play a widened regional role and this trend shows itself in both Syria and Libya. Turkey continues to use its hard power despite the danger and the risk of serious moves it performs. It seems taking this risks is essential in terms of Turkey’s regional and global position in the coming years. However, despite all these risks to be taken, this move seems essential in terms of Turkey’s regional and global position in the coming years. In case of a surround by Russia in the North, which Turkey faces conflicts in Syria and the Black Sea as well, Iran in the east as another historical rival, Syria in the South which has terrorist forces and illegitimate administration and Egypt-France-Greece block in the Mediterranean, Turkey will be grabbed and will be

geopolitically caught by the short hairs in its region.

The goals of Russia in Libya are different issues. First of all, Russia aims to build a base on the Libyan coast tactically and to establish air defense systems on this base.. Thus, Russia will have a serious depth of field in Libya and the Eastern Mediterranean, increasing its influence and military capacity. Second, although Russia is an energy producing country, it still has a serious gap in this regard. Therefore, having a voice on Libya’s energy resources is among the goals of Russia. Thirdly, to be active on Libya, which is one of the areas where terrorism is nested, located on the international migration routes and the soft belly of Europe with all these reasons, will give the opportunity to Russia to surround Europe and the southern wing of NATO. This is among Russia’s main targets on Libya. As it is seen, energy is only one of the reasons for the conflict in Libya. Both Turkey and Russia have geostrategic objectives and much deeper dilemmas in terms of Libya in the Eastern Mediterranean.

In line with these objectives, it said that Turkey and Russia experience a clash of interests in Libya. While Turkey is moving with the Libyan National Reconciliation Government who he have made the treaty maritime jurisdiction areas agreement, Russia is moving with General Haftar with Egypt, France, Greece.

The last situation of both states in Libya gives us clues for the next moves. First of all, from Russia’s point of view, Russia exists in Libya, where it is primarily involved with Wagner, and with more concrete moves recently with Wagner’s

withdrawal. After the Russian Mig-29 aircrafts are painted in Syria and the traces of Russia on it are removed and moved to Jufra airport, it is analyzed that Russia provides aircraft assistance to the Haftar forces in Libya. However, we know that Mig-29 aircraft are 4th generation aircraft and these aircrafts have advanced technology that cannot be used by any fighter pilot. Therefore, it is clear that, as the pilots will take a long time to train, -and in this time Turkey may continue to expand its lands in Libya- the Russians will use the planes themselves, and not Haftar pilots. This situation is seen as the danger of Russian direct intervention in Libya. It is known that there are currently 14 Russian-owned Mig-29s in Libya. However, it can easily be said that this will not be limited to this. Because it is obvious that Russians did not throw Mig-29s to trash in Libya, so this armament will probably continue.

This flight move of the Russians, that is, the introduction of their planes into Jufra Airport, is read as a move to stop Turkish progress in Libya rather than a direct conflict. While Turkey's successful progress of the last weeks can be continued and repulse of Haftar forces can be much more effectively, Russia stopped all by cutting like a set in front of this progress, and has put Turkey in a difficult position now. Currently, while both direct conflict with the regime forces and terrorist organizations and the diplomatic conflict with Russia continue in Syria, Turkey may be caught in a more difficult position in any case of another conflict with Russia.

The recent situation of Turkey in Libya contains more challenges. Turkey made serious investments in unmanned aerial vehicles and showed significant

improvements in recent years in this area. These vehicles became one of the most tactically important vehicles in Libya. Turkey made a military build up with UAV's in Libya and the response capacity has increased a lot in this sense. And with all these, there are currently about 10 thousand militiamen to move with Turkey in Libya. Turkey may deploy reinforcements to the region in short&mid term in order to maintain its successful furtherance and to preserve depth of field

With repelling Haftar forces, Turkey now has another task in Libya: to balance Russia. After Russia's very important warplane move, Turkey taking steps to balance this move of Russia. In this context, Turkey's sending F-16s to Libya seems to be one of the possibilities in order to balance the Russians and expand its influence. Of course, it is necessary to ensure the security that the F-16s can be deployed at the Watiya airport first. However, these moves were never made for a conflict with Russia. This is the move to create a total balancing power and to increase morale power in Libya.

Turkey's next target in Libya after Watiya base and Tripoli airport is Sirte. With these moves, Turkey intends to proceed eastward and to expand the domain in Libya. Even though Turkey's move towards Sirte is important due to energy fields and Sirte's position as a door of Oil Crescent of Libya, it stands out as a tactical move within Turkey's strategy towards the region. Because Turkey's influence is relatively limited. Accordingly, Turkey's moves towards Sirte, is a move towards Russia rather than Haftar. Because, after deploying on Jufra airport, the Russians have the goal of establishing a base on the

Libyan coastline and creating a serious build up on this base. Here, Russia's goal to create both air and sea defense center, pushes Turkey to progress through the coastline as quickly as possible in front of Russia to block him.

On the other hand, the hardening of Russia's intervention and the strengthening of the position of Haftar in the field may also bring forward the split of Libya into two. If Libya splits in two on the current situation, the marine jurisdiction treaty which Turkey signed with Libya Government of National Accord will be void. Because the leg of this authorization restriction agreement in Libya is the Eastern Libyan coast. Therefore Turkey taking many risks in order to reach the Eastern Libyan coast to add to this area Libya GNA. If the agenda in the near future will be the division of Libya, Turkey will struggle to guarantee the maritime jurisdiction treaty between Libya and Turkey which is much more important for Turkey than oil and natural gas facilities in Libya.

Turkey-Russia struggle in Libya at the moment is based on the field as quickly as possible to restrict the movement spread to more areas on the opposite side. Because neither Turkey and nor Russia are willing to be in a direct confrontation with each other. The power deployed earlier in an area in Libya attracts a set in front of the other side. Thus one of the most important issues for Turkey on Libya is to block possible moves of the Russians by spreading the Turkish move and invading especially the coastline. Turkey's biggest problem in this rapid progress is to provide defense in depth tactical sense and to protect the security of the supply center.

Then, after the successful progress of Sirte, as Turkey's next move, it is seen as the only way to seize the airport Jufra. However, the possibility of the Russians increasing their concrete presence in Jufra in the future may cause changes in the plan.

Turkey's possible agreement with Russia in Libya case may be reacted by the US and Europe as a support of a NATO member to Russia with its plans of surrounding NATO's southern wing. On the other hand, absence of the US' concrete support to Turkey who is playing a chess with Russia over Libya and Turkey's unwilling stance for a conflict with Russia in Libya strengthens the possibility of Turkey-Russia agreement. Although separate opinions about Libya among government agencies in the US reduce the possibility of this concrete support, it is not a very remote possibility that the Trump administration will take the initiative and take a step towards Libya. Because a strong Russian influence on Libya will put NATO in a much more difficult position which is already alarming.



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