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TURKEY'S ROLE IN LIBYA: A RESET FOR THE US-TURKEY TIES?

In January, Turkey has started sending military troops to Libya to support the UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA). Since April 2019, the UN-recognized regime has been under attack by forces led by Khalifa Haftar, known as the Libyan warlord whose aim is to topple down the GNA.

The formal request of Turkish military support of "air, ground and sea" was made by the GNA in late 2019, Turkey's

parliament approved the security and military deal with Libya's GNA a month before finally went on effect also in late 2019. The deal allows Turkey to provide military training and equipment at the request of the Libyan government, which controls the capital, Tripoli, and some of the country's west.

The request made to fight off the self-proclaimed military leader Haftar, reportedly backed by the UAE, Egypt,

France and Russia. The UN-recognized Government was found in 2015 headed by al-Sarraj as the country's legitimate authority. Last fall, Ankara and Tripoli signed the landmark pacts on military cooperation, as well as boundaries in the Mediterranean. Ankara has also sent military advisers to assist the Libyan Army. Turkey has been Libya's strategic ally and supporting the UN-recognized government.

Military intervention from Turkey in Libya managed to prevent Haftar from seizing control of Tripoli. With Russia's presence supporting Haftar had contributed to the escalating tension.

Although Russia officially denies offering military equipment to Haftar, the UN report in May showed otherwise, it stated approximately 1,200 Russian mercenaries with the Wagner Group were backing the Libyan warlord.

The conflict has put NATO alliance against one another, as Turkey's involvement strains its relations with France. However, the conflict appears to open the possibility of further cooperation between the US and Turkey. Statement from the Vice President of Turkey, Fuat Oktay at the beginning of June, expressing optimism of cooperation between the two and stating that the US and Turkey have deepened the cooperation.

In mid-July, President Erdogan and President Trump agreed on the phone to work closely in Libya. Turkish Presidency said in a statement, "Erdogan and Trump agreed upon closer efforts between two allies, to ensure the trade target of \$100 billion is reached and permanent stability is assured in Libya," it also stated that both Presidents "agreed to cooperate

more closely, as allies, to promote lasting stability in Libya."

US Ambassador to Libya, Richard Norland, who held a talk with Turkish Officials in Ankara recently, explained in an interview with *Hürriyet Daily Mail*, "The atmosphere in Tripoli was transformed when the bombardment, the artillery, and the shelling stopped; the siege was lifted and Libyans in the West really never want to go through that again. To the extent that the Turkish presence can help ensure that there is not going to be another attack on Tripoli, that's a positive development." Ambassador Norland added, "I think the fundamental tenet of the American policy is to try to help Libyans regain control of their sovereignty and their own fate," he also underlined that Washington is trying to play a facilitator role in Libya by not picking sides.

The talk between Ambassador Norland and Turkish officials have focused on exploring some of the possibilities for tangible, specific steps towards the de-escalation, Norland underlined, specifying two primary issues to this end as the situation around Sirte and the resumption of oil production.

Turkey's position as a crucial member of NATO may boost Washington's position since GNA expects Washington to send a clear message to those countries who backed Haftar. With the US being on the same page with Turkey in terms of de-escalation, and the US is seemingly praising the role of Turkey in Libya, it may raise a question on whether this could be a reset for the relations between the two.

The relations between the US and Turkey have been strained due to policy differences. Turkey's acquisition of the S

— 400 air defence system from Russia remains a concern for the US and one of the factors contributed to the strained relations. As a response to the S — 400 delivery, in July 2019 it was announced by Trump administration that Turkey was being removed from the F — 35 Joint Strike Fighter participation. Although recently, the indefinite delay of activation of S-400 missile system may be seen as a sign of Ankara's return Washington.

Additionally, there is also tension between the two in Syria mainly focused on Kurdish-led militias that have partnered with the US against the Islamic State over Ankara's strong objections because of these groups' ties with terrorism.

A reset for the relations between the two may also be affected by other factor, the development in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea. The rights over exploration of potential hydrocarbon resources have put the two NATO allies, Turkey and Greece at odds. The escalating tension in the eastern Mediterranean has started last month after Ankara dispatched Oruc Reis Seismic Vessels in a disputed area following the pact between Athens and Cairo which overlaps the maritime zone Turkey agreed with Libya last year, disputed by Greece. The disputes followed by France stating that it would join the military exercise conducted by Greece, Cyprus and Italy.

Before the escalating tension, Turkey's position on the dispute was that it objected to Greece's drilling activities in Eastern Mediterranean. Turkey stated that Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) has the same rights over the resources. Its rivalry with the neighbours that are America's strategic allies has posed a challenge for US-Turkey relations.

Whilst the conflict in Libya has certainly deepened the cooperation between the two, a reset for the US-Turkey ties may still be affected by how the US responds to the dispute in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea.

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