

Turkey's Escalation in Libya: Implications and U.S. Policy Options



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Executive Summary

Turkey's recent intervention in Libya's civil war has intensified the involvement of rival foreign powers in the strategically situated, energy-rich country, and threatens vital U.S. interests in the Eastern Mediterranean even as Washington mostly observes from the sidelines.

Turkey became significantly more involved in Libya in November 2019, when it signed two momentous agreements with the Tripoli-based, U.N.-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA), which is strongly influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist elements. In exchange for crucial military support for the Tripoli government against its rival Tobruk-based Libyan National Army (LNA) – led by Khalifa Hiftar and supported by UAE, Egypt, Russia and France – Ankara secured a bilateral pact ostensibly legitimizing its vast offshore territorial claims in the increasingly energy-rich Eastern Mediterranean.

The military agreement has emboldened both sides of Libya's conflict to ratchet up their fighting, seek greater foreign assistance and forswear negotiations, despite a U.N. arms embargo and despite coronavirus sweeping through the country. Beyond escalating and prolonging the civil war, this threatens to revive Islamic State in the country and send additional waves of refugees to Europe. Turkey's maritime agreement with Tripoli purposely contradicts overlapping Greek and Cypriot claims with much stronger standing under international law, threatening to stymie efforts by these countries, Israel and others to further develop undersea energy resources and supply them to Europe via pipeline. This in turn directly imperils U.S. interests in promoting peaceful regional energy development and reducing Europe's dependence on Russian natural gas.

Yet, even as the Eastern Mediterranean becomes a cauldron of security and energy competition akin to the South China Sea, America has remained detached from the Libyan civil war in particular and the region in general.

Indeed, it is perhaps fitting that "leading from behind" was first voiced in the context of Libya under President Obama, given that American leadership there remains conspicuously absent, even as the conflict escalates. The United States is formally committed to the GNA-led government, though it reaches out sporadically to the LNA – including President Trump's publicly endorsing Hiftar's major offensive last year against Tripoli. The Islamist-dominated GNA has little chance of uniting the country or serving as a bulwark against extremism and mass migration. At the same time, the United States has not articulated or pursued a clear or consistent policy toward the rival LNA. Nor, unlike the Europeans, has it sought to foster a ceasefire or negotiated settlement, other than to call for a "humanitarian ceasefire" as the coronavirus now spreads through the war-ravaged country.

This U.S. distance from the problem invited Turkish intervention in the first place, which in turn further destabilized the situation, and is emblematic of a larger lack of American focus on the Eastern Mediterranean's increasing strategic importance to U.S. national security.

Stiffened by ample resupply from their foreign backers, both sides of the Libya conflict now believe they have a military advantage that must be pressed while the United States and Europe deal with public health-related challenges at home. Hiftar vowed at the end of April

2020 to continue his offensive “until the end,” and a month later the leader of GNA declared his intention to “liberate all cities and regions” in Libya.¹

Now is the time for the United States finally to assume a much-needed and long overdue leadership role in ending or mitigating the spiraling proxy conflict in Libya, especially amid a spreading pandemic in the country. Fundamentally, the Eastern Mediterranean must once again become a critical focus for U.S. grand strategy after being largely neglected since the end of the Cold War.

One tangible way the United States can demonstrate its commitment to regional stability, undergird its claim to a leadership role in addressing the Libyan conflict, and check Turkish power projection, is to enhance the U.S. naval presence in the region writ large – including through stronger U.S. defense cooperation with Greece.

Further, the United States should appoint a Special Envoy for the Eastern Mediterranean to devise a negotiated solution to the Libya conflict and address related regional security concerns. Specifically, the envoy should pursue three concrete goals:

- Work with the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum to promote the collaborative exploitation of regional energy resources, and to create a clear counterweight to Turkey’s efforts to disrupt peaceful energy development.
- End the Libyan civil war with respect for the will of the Libyan people, including by curtailing the foreign drivers of instability in the country.
- Address the growing humanitarian consequences of COVID-19 in the region.

Libya Conflict Background

The ongoing civil war in Libya, which is in practice a failed state, involves a bewildering number of political and military actors, both Libyan and foreign. The conflict at present pits the western Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA) led by Fayeze al-Sarraj against the eastern Tobruk-based Libyan National Army (LNA) led by strongman Khalifa Hiftar – reflecting in part the country’s historical divide between eastern and western halves. The specter of coronavirus has done little to stem the fighting, even as it threatens to exacerbate the destruction wrought by the escalating conflict.

Understanding Turkey’s role in Libya requires a brief overview of these forces. The Libyan civil war emerged from the failure of the diverse factions that opposed the Gaddafi regime to share power and stabilize the country after the former dictator’s overthrow in 2011. A General National Congress (GNC), elected to power the following year, was dominated by Islamist militias as well as the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood. The GNC failed to establish security, however, and various militias consequently became de facto rulers in many parts of Libya – including the capital Tripoli. When non-Islamist forces won the 2014 elections, the GNC refused to accept the new parliament’s legitimacy and Islamist forces quickly took over Tripoli. The new parliament, which maintained international recognition, relocated to Tobruk in eastern Libya, where it effectively formed an alternative government and named Hiftar its military commander.

A December 2015 power-sharing agreement between Tripoli and Tobruk formed an interim U.N.-backed unity Government of National Accord (GNA), headed by Sarraj as a compromise candidate who commanded no loyalty among the country’s various militias, which effectively came to dominate the new government.² Reflecting its hopes that a unity government could best address terrorism and economic problems, in May 2016 the United States signed onto a U.N.- and E.U.-backed communique affirming the GNA “as the sole legitimate government of Libya.”³

Even as the GNA worked with the U.S. military to combat Islamic State in the country, Islamist forces, including elements of the Muslim Brotherhood, capitalized on the fundamental weakness of Sarraj’s government to strengthen their hold over the Tripoli-based administration. In early 2017 the GNA began receiving Italian financial and military backing in exchange for stemming the flow of refugees and migrants into Sicily.⁴ Around the same time Turkey became the second country, after Italy, to reopen its embassy in Tripoli. Shortly thereafter Erdogan’s and Sarraj’s governments started trading visits by high-level officials, and in 2018 Turkey began covertly shipping weapons to Tripoli in contravention of a U.N. arms embargo.⁵

Meanwhile Hiftar, a former high-level officer under Gaddafi who portrays himself as the leader of Libya’s anti-Islamist forces, was building his own army in Tobruk in response to the Tripoli regime’s failure to stabilize the country. Around this time he began receiving military aid from the UAE, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and France, all of which saw him as a bulwark against the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist groups affiliated with Sarraj’s government.⁶ This encouraged the Libyan National Army (LNA) to seize the eastern port city of Benghazi from Islamic State, and to set its sights ultimately on Tripoli and overthrowing the GNA.⁷

In April 2019 the LNA launched a major offensive to capture the capital. Swelled by covert Emirati and Egyptian air support, including hundreds of airstrikes and – beginning last autumn

– several thousand Russian and African mercenaries, Hiftar’s forces pushed to the capital’s outskirts, effectively laying siege to the city and blockading GNA oil exports. Fearing the GNA’s collapse, the following month Turkey began sending additional weapons, drones and military advisers to defend Tripoli.⁸ During this time Islamic State took advantage of the fighting to start reasserting itself and conducting attacks in Libya.⁹

Then in November 2019 Turkey and the GNA signed agreements to supply Turkish arms to the Tripoli government in exchange for delimiting a section of the Eastern Mediterranean between them, despite the agreement having no legitimacy under the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). As a result, Turkey became the only outside power to formally acknowledge its intervention in Libya. Partly in exchange for recognizing Ankara’s maximalist claims, Tripoli began receiving an influx of weapons, hundreds of Turkish troops and thousands of Syrian proxy fighters to turn the tide on the ground; Turkish naval vessels now patrol Libya’s coast as well. Relying in particular on advanced Turkish drones, in March 2020 GNA-affiliated forces began reversing LNA gains around Tripoli, which in turn emboldened Sarraj to rule out any accommodation with Hiftar.¹⁰ Rather than back down, however, Hiftar declared the U.N.-backed power-sharing agreement with Tripoli a dead letter. Now he is trying to counter Turkey’s military escalation with more firepower and a renewed offensive of his own, helped by his foreign backers pouring military equipment and militiamen into the LNA.¹¹

The growing conflict has spurred unsuccessful European efforts at de-escalation, with the United States largely on the sidelines. Reflecting his own country’s growing presence in the region, including on the ground in Libya, in February 2020 President Putin hosted Sarraj and Hiftar in Moscow in an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to secure a ceasefire.¹² That same month an international conference in Berlin sought to negotiate at least a pause in the bloodshed and halt outside intervention. While this remains unrealized, in February the European Union agreed to enforce the U.N. arms embargo at sea, though the LNA continues receiving military supplies via air and overland from Egypt.¹³

Though American officials attended the Berlin conference, U.S. policy remains unclear and confusing. The United States’ formal position, inherited from the Obama Administration, is that it supports the U.N.-recognized GNA despite its Islamist inclinations and the fact it controls only a rump of Libyan territory. President Trump, however, publicly endorsed Hiftar just days after the LNA launched its April 2019 offensive. Around the same time, the United States blocked a U.N. resolution demanding an end to Hiftar’s offensive.¹⁴

U.S. interest in Hiftar then appeared to cool as his offensive ground down.¹⁵ In May 2019 a bipartisan group of Members of Congress raised possible war crimes charges against Hiftar, who is an American citizen, while the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations formally asked the president to call for a ceasefire and support U.N.-backed negotiations.¹⁶ Then in February of this year the top American diplomat for the Middle East, David Schenker, stated explicitly “we must take actions to end the violence and flow of arms. [...] I can say unequivocally: we do not support the Hiftar offensive.”¹⁷ State Department officials reiterated this opposition in May 2020, and for the first time also publicly criticized Russia for intervening to support the LNA.¹⁸ That same month, as Turkey’s military intervention scored additional gains on the ground for the GNA, the U.S. Embassy in Libya urged both sides to recognize that “there is no military solution to the crisis in Libya.”¹⁹

Amid escalation by both sides, the coronavirus outbreak generated calls from the United States, United Nations and others in March and April for a “humanitarian pause” to the conflict. The fighting shows no signs of abating, however, even as Libya’s critical infrastructure crumbles, oil revenue dries up and the internal dislocations caused by the war threaten to deepen the virus’ spread inside the country. Stiffened by ample resupply from their foreign backers, the GNA and LNA each believe they have a military advantage that must be pressed while the United States and much of Europe remain distracted by public health challenges at home.

Libya, and those affected by its instability, now confront the prospect of a conflict intensified by external intervention, political stalemate and, increasingly, pandemic.²⁰

Turkish Business Interests

Its ongoing involvement in the country aside, Turkish foreign policy has not traditionally focused on Libya. However, the two countries have important and longstanding economic relationships which formed the initial basis for Ankara's interests in Libya as Gaddafi's rule crumbled. Historically Turkey imported large quantities of Libyan oil, and Libya had been a key market – second only to Russia – for Turkey's sizable construction industry; tens of thousands of Turkish construction workers have worked in Libya.²¹

Turkish contracts with the Gaddafi regime led to significant concern in Ankara after uprisings began in early 2011.²² At that time, Libya represented a 12 percent share of Turkey's total international construction business; these projects, now on hold, represent a backlog of Turkish contracts worth \$15-20 billion.²³ Additionally, 25,000 Turkish laborers in Libya were evacuated by Ankara as the fighting worsened.²⁴

In the early days of the Libya crisis, these business interests were important factors in Turkish decision-making. Initially, Erdoğan opposed the NATO operation in Libya, asking "what business does NATO have in Libya? Turkey oppose[s] this [no-fly zone proposal]."²⁵ But Erdoğan gradually realized Gaddafi was a lost cause and threw Turkey's weight behind the opposition as most likely to inherit or honor pre-existing debts. In January 2020, shortly after their bilateral maritime and military cooperation deals, Turkey reached a preliminary \$2.7 billion compensation deal with Tripoli for contracts begun prior to Gaddafi's ouster.²⁶ Several months later, in May, Turkey's state-run energy company applied to begin exploratory drilling in the EEZ claimed by Tripoli under their November 2019 maritime boundary agreement.²⁷

The Brotherhood and Geopolitics

While business considerations were important, narrow economic interests alone cannot explain Turkey's policies toward Libya. Instead, they follow the pattern of Turkey's broader regional approach in the wake of the 2011 Arab upheavals, namely a continuous effort to install the Muslim Brotherhood in power. This cuts at the heart of the Sunni Muslim world, pitting conservative status quo-oriented, anti-Muslim Brotherhood regimes like Egypt, Saudi Arabia, UAE and Jordan against Turkey and Qatar, which support the Brotherhood in its various guises around the region and, at times, other Islamists as well.

Turkey's policy was visible in the Syrian civil war, where it tried and failed to build the Brotherhood into a serious battlefield contender. Similarly in Egypt, Turkey lent its weight to the short-lived Brotherhood regime of Muhammad Morsi, providing political and financial support before its overthrow in 2013.²⁸ Ankara also has sought to bolster forces it considered part of the broader Brotherhood network in Sudan, Tunisia and Gaza, where Hamas (effectively the Palestinian branch of the Brotherhood) remains in power with Turkish backing. After Morsi's overthrow, however, the Brotherhood faced a regionwide clampdown that placed Turkey and Qatar increasingly on the defensive.

Though this policy failed to yield results anywhere, and in fact merely compounded Ankara's isolation, Libya increasingly has become an extension of the evolving regional rivalry between Turkey and the status quo Sunni Muslim countries.

As far back as 2012, the Libyan Brotherhood created a political party called *Hizb Al-Adala Wal-Bina*, which is often translated as "Justice and Construction Party" (JCP). This likely is intended to evoke an association with Erdoğan's "Justice and Development Party" (AKP) in Turkey. From the outset Ankara embraced the party but, as in Syria, the Libyan Brotherhood proved unable to take control of government in the chaotic post-Gaddafi environment.

In June 2012, the JCP secured 10 percent of the vote on the party list, as well as a further 17 independent candidates affiliated with the Brotherhood.²⁹ That paled in comparison to the non-Islamist National Forces Alliance, but as elsewhere the Brotherhood's strength was its discipline and organizational capacity, leading it to wield a stronger role than official numbers would suggest.³⁰ Partly this power came from aligning with the extremist Libya Dawn coalition beginning in 2014. The Brotherhood, therefore, benefited from the Islamist coalition's taking control of Tripoli in summer 2014, and it formed the backbone of the GNC after the country's legitimate government and newly elected parliament relocated to Tobruk that August and named Hiftar their military commander.³¹

Crucially, at this time Ankara's policies diverged diametrically from the Western approach, which was to continue supporting the legitimate parliament exiled in Tobruk (prior to the December 2015 power-sharing agreement). By contrast Turkey, while not formally recognizing the GNC, sent the first foreign dignitary to meet its leader in late 2014.³² In this way Ankara legitimized and supported the Muslim Brotherhood-dominated GNC, which in turn caused Turkey's relations with Tobruk to deteriorate to the point all Turkish firms were expelled from eastern Libya in February 2015.³³

After Sarraj assumed power in December 2015, Brotherhood-affiliated political factions supported, served in, and fought for the new GNA government based in Tripoli. Around the same time, Turkey initiated close contacts with top officials from the GNA, including multiple Libyan state visits to Ankara and trips by Turkey’s foreign and defense ministers to Tripoli. Starting in 2018, Turkey also began discreetly shipping small arms and ammunition to Tripoli in violation of a U.N. embargo.

Turkey’s support for Sarraj’s government is consistent with Erdoğan’s ideological agenda in the Middle East writ large. In effect, it suggests Ankara has drawn few, if any, conclusions from the failure of its efforts to install the Brotherhood in Syria and the failure of the Brotherhood to hold onto power in Egypt. Instead, it is doubling down on its Brotherhood-first approach in Libya.



Eastern Mediterranean Woes

In addition to business connections and ideological affinities, Turkey's decision to up the ante in Libya likely is intimately linked to major energy developments in the Eastern Mediterranean and Ankara's conspicuous exclusion from, and hostility toward, these developments.

Turkey has found itself on the outside looking in as some of the world's biggest recent natural gas discoveries occur in waters that, under international law, form part of the exclusive economic zones (EEZ) of Egypt, Israel and Cyprus (see map). Along with Greece, these countries are considering a pipeline connecting their gas fields to European markets. In this light Ankara's offshore demarcation deal with the GNA is incredibly provocative, as it purposely cuts across existing Greek and Cypriot EEZs and any proposed pipeline route from the Eastern Mediterranean to Italy and the rest of Europe.

Turkey already was at loggerheads with all four countries, mostly for reasons unrelated to energy exploration. It does not even recognize the Greek Cypriot-dominated Republic of Cyprus, having invaded the island in 1974 following a coup by Greek Cypriot officers favoring union with Greece. The coupist government fell within days, but Turkish troops stayed and vastly expanded their presence to cover the northern third of the island. Since that time, Turkey has kept a large military presence in the island's north, where it created a Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus in 1983 that only Ankara recognizes.³⁴ Turkey's relationship with Israel, once the most positive in the Eastern Mediterranean, has deteriorated dramatically under Erdoğan, as Turkey embraced Hamas and took increasingly hostile steps toward the Jewish state. Turkey's once-cordial relations with Egypt nose-dived after the Egyptian military intervened to topple President Muhammad Morsi in 2013. Strained relations with Greece – including over Cyprus – long pre-date Erdoğan, but nevertheless have worsened in the latter years of his tenure as Turkey persistently challenges Greek sovereignty in the Aegean and threatens to again flood its western neighbor with refugees.

In fact, shared concerns about Turkey are now helping drive new diplomatic, energy and military cooperation among Greece, Cyprus, Israel and Egypt, as detailed in a previous report from this JINSA policy project.³⁵ These four countries also spearheaded the establishment of an Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) in early 2019. This grouping, which includes Italy, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority as well, pointedly does not include Turkey, and its creation apparently blindsided and disturbed Ankara.

This in turn led Turkey to feel increasingly isolated, and to begin acting unilaterally. In 2018, Turkish warships physically blocked a drill ship operated by Italy's ENI in waters claimed by Cyprus as part of its EEZ, ultimately forcing ENI to suspend drilling there. In 2019, it threatened international energy firms exploring Cypriot waters with military action and dispatched two drilling ships to conduct its own exploration in waters that are broadly considered part of Cyprus's EEZ, including by the European Union and United States.³⁶

These moves led France, whose Total energy company is involved in natural gas projects offshore Cyprus, to strike an agreement to use and expand Cyprus' Florakis naval base and conduct joint patrols with the Cypriot navy.³⁷ The European Union introduced mild sanctions against Turkey for its actions, while the United States also condemned them, and the U.S. Congress voted to end Washington's longstanding embargo on arms sales to Cyprus.

Washington also lent support to the cooperation budding among Israel, Cyprus and Greece, with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo joining a meeting of the group in March 2019.

Ankara felt cornered by these developments, and by international concerns regarding its unorthodox approach to determining EEZs. In contradiction to UNCLOS, Turkey argues its continental shelf should be the basis for dividing waters and subsoil resources in the Mediterranean, and that islands should not bear any consideration in delimiting EEZs. There are self-interested reasons for Turkey's position: its coastline is dotted with Greek islands that dramatically reduce its EEZ in the Aegean and in waters between Cyprus and Crete.

Thus, under Ankara's agreement with the Sarraj government, Turkey's continental shelf forms the basis for its claims to control the waters and subsoil rights all the way to the coast of Crete. In announcing the deal, Erdoğan noted:

we have taken a rightful step within the framework of international law against the approaches tried to be imposed by Greece and the Greek Cypriot administration [i.e. Cyprus] and the claims of maritime jurisdictions aiming to confine our country to the Gulf of Antalya.... Other international actors cannot conduct exploration activities in the areas marked in the [Turkish-Libyan] memorandum. Greek Cypriots, Egypt, Greece and Israel cannot establish a natural gas transmission line without Turkey's consent.... In case of such an invitation, Turkey will decide itself about what kind of initiative to undertake.³⁸

International reaction to Turkey's blatant provocation was swift. European Council President Charles Michel in January commented that the agreement "infringes upon the sovereign rights of third states and does not comply with the [United Nations] Law of the Sea."³⁹ A U.S. State Department spokesman issued a statement calling Turkey's deal "unhelpful and provocative," noting:

"Greece has overlapping maritime claims in the area addressed by the Turkey-Libya memorandum. Contrary to what Turkey has suggested, under international law islands are generally entitled to EEZ-continental shelf to the same extent as any land territory.... Countries that purport to support Libya's stability should immediately withdraw their forces, including Russian mercenaries and Turkish-sponsored Syrian fighters."⁴⁰

Greece responded by threatening to expel Sarraj's ambassador and by inviting Khalifa Hiftar to Athens for talks, indicating it is moving toward throwing its weight behind Tobruk. At the E.U. level, Athens has also declared it will block any peace initiatives involving the Sarraj government unless the GNA scraps the maritime agreement with Ankara. In May 2020 France, Egypt, Cyprus and UAE joined Greece in denouncing Turkey's maritime deal with Libya and its continued exploration in Cypriot waters.⁴¹

The fact remains, however, that Turkey has effectively issued a serious challenge to other countries in the region. It expanded this challenge in May 2020, conducting naval and air exercises in the Eastern Mediterranean and issuing exploration licenses for Turkish energy companies in the Turkish EEZ spelled out in the maritime boundary agreement with Libya.⁴²

If the past is any guide, international energy multinationals are reluctant to explore – and insurance companies are reluctant to insure explorations and extractions – in contested areas. It thus remains unclear whether Greece or Cyprus will proceed with natural gas exploration plans in waters now claimed by Turkey. Last year, ENI suspended operations in a Cypriot area threatened by Turkish gunboat diplomacy, and Turkey could escalate the situation further by sending one of its own drill ships into the zone, as it already has in Cypriot waters. In addition to Greece and Cyprus, the Turkey-Libya agreement also throws down the gauntlet for Israel, Egypt and Italy, since the route of their envisioned natural gas pipeline would have to traverse waters Turkey – and now Libya – considers to be in Turkey’s own EEZ. Ankara’s challenges to energy exploration are also being compounded by the effects of COVID-19, as Western energy companies are reducing capital expenditures and delaying new appraisal drilling in the Eastern Mediterranean by at least a year. Meanwhile, Turkish drill ships continue operating in the same waters under the protection of the Turkish navy.

Recommendations

The United States has failed to articulate a clear policy amid these rapidly shifting geopolitics in the Eastern Mediterranean. It is perhaps fitting that the notion of “leading from behind” was first voiced as U.S. policy in the context of Libya under the Obama Administration. The absence of American leadership is now increasingly evident in the deteriorating security vacuum in Libya, its devolution into a complex regional proxy war and the heightened prospects of competition and even conflict over undersea resources.

American officials must now try to mitigate this spiraling conflict with a sense of urgency, especially amid the growing specters of a civil war that is devolving into a proxy war and a spreading pandemic in the country. As this task force laid out in its initial report last summer, the rising potential for conflict in the Eastern Mediterranean means the region must once again become a critical focus for U.S. grand strategy, after being largely neglected since the end of the Cold War.⁴³ The effects of this absence are glaringly evident in Libya, where the security vacuum progressively worsened as the United States confined itself to the background, doing little more than rhetorically supporting U.N. and European initiatives to secure ceasefires or uphold the U.N. arms embargo on the country.

The time has come for the United States to assert a crucial leadership role in addressing the Libyan conflict and forestalling the expansion of negative outside influence – primarily Turkish and Russian – over this strategically-located, energy-rich country on Europe’s southern doorstep.

One tangible way the United States can demonstrate its commitment to regional stability, undergird its claim to a leadership role in addressing the Libyan conflict and check destabilizing Turkish power projection, is to enhance the U.S. diplomatic and naval presence in the Eastern Mediterranean writ large. As this task force laid out in a report earlier this year, the United States should articulate greater, and more concrete, support for Greece’s and Cyprus’ warming relationships with Israel and Egypt. The United States also should strengthen bilateral military ties with Athens, including by bolstering U.S. forward deployments in Greece and viewing that country (and potentially Cyprus) as a viable and reliable alternative for relocating U.S. military assets currently deployed in Turkey.

In tandem with a more robust strategic focus and force posture in the region, the United States also should appoint a Special Envoy for the Eastern Mediterranean to devise a negotiated solution to the Libya conflict and address related regional security concerns. Specifically, the envoy should pursue three concrete goals:

1. Promote the collaborative exploitation of regional energy resources.

Turkey’s intervention in Libya underscores Ankara’s destabilizing ambitions to disrupt peaceful energy development by U.S. partners like Egypt, Israel, Greece and Cyprus. Its maritime agreement with Tripoli also threatens future efforts to deliver these resources to Europe and reduce the continent’s dependence on Russian energy imports – a shared goal of the United States and European Union. Meanwhile Libya’s once-sizable energy exports have plummeted amid the country’s civil strife.

Working with the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) – Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority – and potentially France as well, the new American envoy should try to foster circumstances for cooperative development of the region's major recent energy discoveries and its potential for significant additional finds.

For the United States, the EMGF offers the advantage of working with pro-U.S. countries that already share the overarching goal of turning the region into a major energy hub and that have taken concrete steps to coordinate among themselves toward that end. Equally important, by creating a clear counterweight to Turkey's growing efforts to thwart peaceful energy development across the Eastern Mediterranean, U.S. coordination with the EMGF would help reduce the rising risks of conflict in the region. This role becomes more important, if also more difficult, amid the coronavirus pandemic as falling energy prices are discouraging EMGF members – but not Turkey – from further exploration of undersea resources.

2. End the Libyan civil war with respect for the will of the Libyan people.

The absence of U.S. diplomatic leadership has been a permissive cause of both the deepening of Libya's internal conflict and its widening into a regional proxy war. Reinforced by Turkey's military intervention, fighting has escalated in recent months despite a flurry of European and U.N. diplomatic initiatives. This underscores other actors' limitations – and America's indispensability – in trying to mitigate or end the worsening violence. Indeed, the United States is uniquely positioned as a credible arbiter, given both its diplomatic resources and its general non-involvement in post-Gaddafi Libyan internal matters to date, other than verbally endorsing the existing U.N. peace process and warning both sides against a military solution to the conflict.⁴⁴

Therefore, the new American envoy should lead diplomatic efforts toward a negotiated settlement to end or mitigate the Libyan conflict and establish a non-Islamist regime that serves Libyan national interests. Such an agreement could be based on U.S. support for the existing U.N. framework of intra-Libyan talks on domestic security, financial and political arrangements followed by elections. It also should be made clear to both sides that any regime achieving victory in Libya by military means would be denied international recognition.

This would require limiting foreign influence in the country and persuading the GNA to renounce its EEZ agreement with Turkey and other economic arrangements that privilege Turkish interests, pending formation of a new, unified Libyan government. Pursuing such a settlement certainly also would require tackling the military drivers of Libyan instability, particularly external interventions that have intensified the fighting over the past year – focusing on but not limited to Turkey's interference. A negotiated settlement must limit Turkey's support for the Islamist-dominated GNA, including by leveraging the possible redeployment of U.S. military assets out of Turkey. It also must address the military supply lines from Russia, Arab states, Egypt and France to Hiftar's Tobruk-based forces, and the profusion of mercenaries from Russia, Syria and Africa into the LNA's ranks.

The new American envoy should publicly engage all relevant parties, including Erdoğan and Sarraj, in trying to secure a settlement, while also warning that they will isolate themselves diplomatically by dismissing negotiations. Rejection by Turkey also would place it at odds with the rest of NATO, which officially opposes a military solution to the conflict.

3. Address the humanitarian consequences of COVID-19 in the region.

War and pestilence have gone hand in hand for millennia, and regional battlefields like Libya and Syria are no exceptions. The incipient spread of COVID-19 in Libya, made worse by the conflict's destruction of basic health infrastructure, threatens to amplify the human toll of fighting inside the country, and the basic risks to Libyans of remaining there. This in turn could drive up the likelihood of renewed refugee waves across the Mediterranean, just as some of the hardest-hit countries in Europe begin recovering from the pandemic.

The new American envoy should pursue several efforts in tandem to attempt to stanch the impact of COVID-19 inside Libya. An American diplomat in a pivotal position would have more credibility than prior U.S. calls from the back bench for a humanitarian ceasefire. In addition to creating space for disease mitigation efforts, successful pauses in the fighting also could generate momentum for more sustained U.S.-led efforts to negotiate an end to the Libya conflict.

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