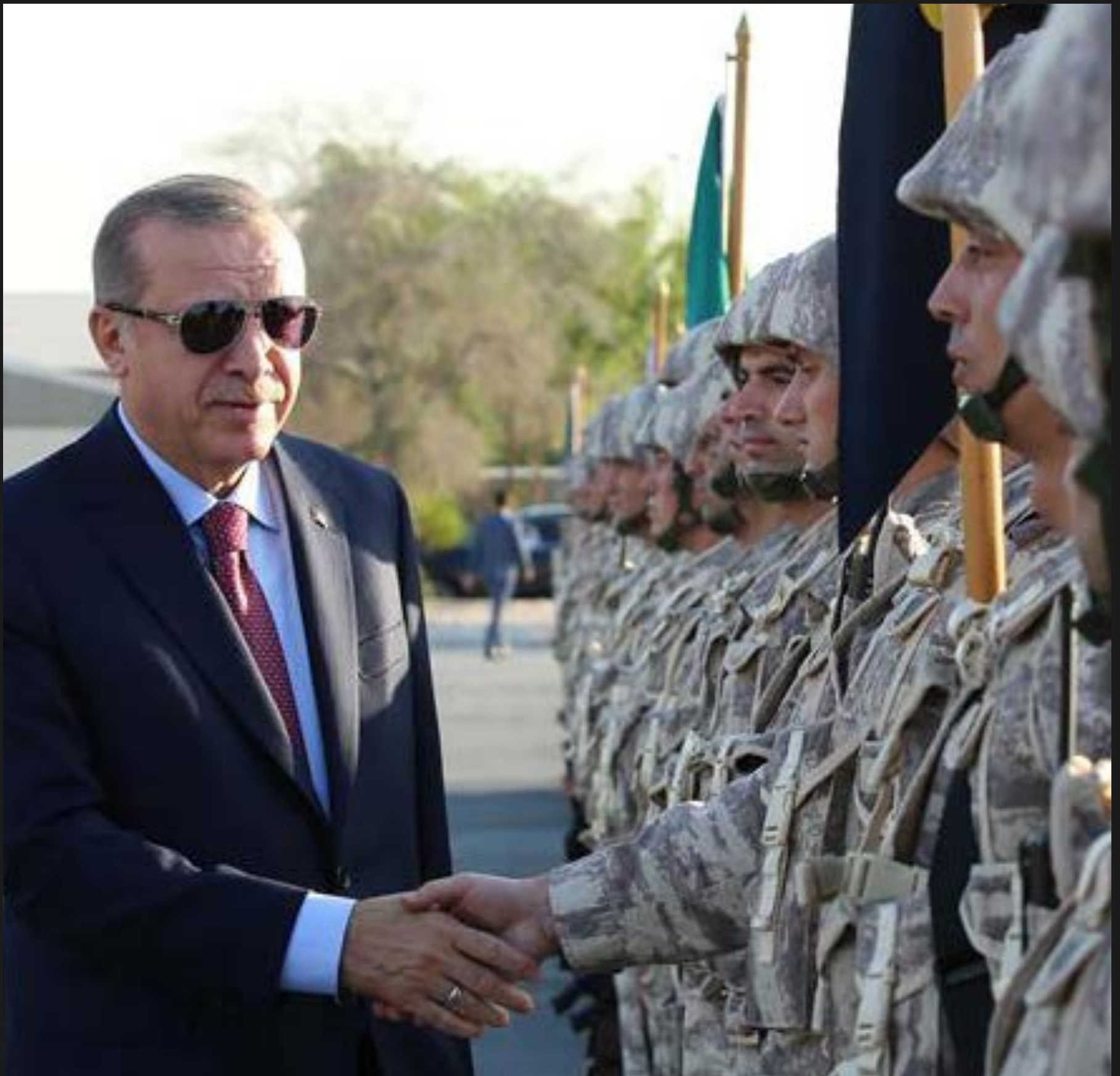


# Turkey: The Geo Political Knot

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# Turkey: The Geo Political Knot

by Bilgehan Öztürk

**T**he dramatic changes to Libya over the past decade since it underwent revolutionary change in 2011 have not only changed its own domestic politics and society, but has also been a critical chapter in the transformation of Turkish foreign policy towards the country. There are a multitude of differences between respective Turkish foreign policies of the past under the Gaddafi era and the foreign policy of the last decade in the post-revolution climate, resulting in a major shift in Libya's strategic importance to Turkey.

It is challenging to reduce or define over four decades of foreign relations to a distinct policy or a certain mode of bilateral relations between Turkey and Libya during the Gaddafi regime for two reasons. Firstly, Gaddafi himself was an unpredictable figure with whom it was difficult to maintain a consistent and stable diplomatic or even personal relationship with; secondly, Gaddafi ruled for 42 years, which is a long life span that was bound to experience fluctuations in any engagement. This was also the case for Turkish-Libyan relations, which ranged from Gaddafi's solidarity with Turkey against the U.S.-imposed embargo after Turkey's military intervention in Cyprus in 1974, to intermittent harbouring of members of designated terrorist organisations such as the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) and ASALA (Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia) in Libya. Besides from the political turbulence, the most discernible and consistent hallmark of Turkish-Libyan relations during the Gaddafi era were primarily economic in nature with bilateral trade and investments being most notable. Libya served as one of the most profitable foreign construction destinations for Turkey following Gaddafi's rapprochement with the West in 2003. By 2010, around 200 Turkish construction firms operating in Libya had secured contracts for over 300 construction projects worth 20 billion U.S. Dollars.<sup>1</sup> While the economic and commercial aspect of bilateral relations was robust, the political aspect of bilateral relations was only peripheral to the former.

## The Revolution

When popular uprisings erupted in Libya at the beginning of 2011, it was an 'either/or' moment for decision-makers in Turkey. By the time Libyans had started to demonstrate against the regime on the 17th of February 2011, their neighbours in Tunisia and Egypt had already demonstrated proof of concept, and it became clear that this was a region-wide phenomenon, not a local one endemic to Libya. With revolutions toppling neighbouring regimes in a matter of weeks, a sense of urgency

<sup>1</sup> "Info Note on Turkish-Libyan Economic and Commercial Relations", Tripoli Embassy of the Republic of Turkey, 4 July 2012, <http://trablus.be.mfa.gov.tr/ShowInfoNotes.aspx?ID=157183>.

began to build over Libya that required rapid decision making in Ankara. Decision makers were under significant pressure to reshape their foreign policy, not only in Libya across the region. Turkey declared its support for the National Transitional Council in July 2011 concerned that they would miss the opportunity of cultivating fruitful relations with the future political actors and decision makers of Libya if they waited any longer. Turkey participated in the NATO led operation that eventually toppled the Gaddafi regime, and with it felt that despite their initial hesitance, the NTC would look favourably on Turkey's policy position.

This was not only a pragmatic 'investment' by Turkish decision-makers but also became a moment of introspection between the foreign ministry and the executive, as Turkey began to reshape its regional foreign policy position towards the new post Arab Spring order. This new foreign policy would be based on a position to be maintained on normative grounds such as support for democracy, the reflection of national or popular will in government, the rule of law and a peaceful transition of power. In short, a new foreign policy to reflect the new era and realities of the region.

In terms of Turkey's preferences and goals in post-revolution Libya, there has been continuity and consistency in its foreign policy position over the past decade. Turkey aims at ensuring the presence and viability of an amicable administration in Libya, a position which has become the hallmark of its foreign policy towards post revolution Libya. This position has matured as a result of the regressions to the post Arab Spring order. A sense of urgency has underpinned this goal following the 2013 coup d'état in Egypt and Haftar's attempted coup in 2014. In political terms, Ankara did not want to see a replica of the 'al-Sisi Regime' in Libya. Turkey had begun to lose considerable influence in the wider Middle East and North Africa as a result of the Egyptian coup. Before the Egyptian coup, Turkey enjoyed positive political and economic relations with all MENA countries that were experiencing the Arab Spring and particularly those that had produced democratic and amicable governments to Turkey. So much so that the so-called 'Turkish model' had become a catchphrase of the time.<sup>2</sup> The region was dominated by like-minded governments and actors, which shared at least the common vision of a region free of dictatorships or military rulers with Turkey. Once Egypt was eliminated as the most influential heavyweight in the Arab World among the ranks of the revolutionary actors through the 2013 military coup, Turkey not only lost its main partner in consolidating a new regional order but also faced a powerful foe that embodied and exported a counter-revolutionary vision. As Al-Nahda fell from prominence in Tunisia and Haftar arrived soon after in Libya, Turkey's short-lived gains in the post-Arab Spring period were effectively rolled back.

### Geopolitics of Foreign Policy

However, what made Libya indispensable to Turkey in this respect, were the resulting adverse energy security and geopolitical dynamics in the Eastern Mediterranean which resulted in the encirclement of Turkey by its regional competitors in the years

<sup>2</sup> See Kemal Kirişçi, "The Rise and Fall of Turkey as a Model for the Arab World", Brookings, 15 August 2013, [The Rise and Fall of Turkey as a Model for the Arab World \(brookings.edu\)](http://www.brookings.edu); See also Akin Unver, "The Forgotten Secular Turkish Model", *Middle East Quarterly*, Winter 2013, pp. 57-64.





*East Mediterranean Gas Forum Meeting, 2019*

following the arrival of the military to power in Egypt. The years following the coup saw increasing exploration and drilling activities for oil and gas resources in the Eastern Mediterranean by especially Israel, Egypt and the Greek Cypriot Administration (GCA).

The latter's activities were especially worrisome for Turkey since they involved disputed maritime zones between the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) and the GCA surrounding the island of Cyprus, which added a sovereignty dimension to the issue beyond the regional scramble for natural resources. Strategic alignment between Israel, Egypt, Greece and the GCA, which culminated in the form of the EastMed Gas Forum (EMGF) aimed at exporting natural gas to Europe via a pipeline under the Mediterranean Sea only compounded Turkey's concerns of being doomed to geopolitical irrelevance and exclusion. Greece's maritime claims, granting islands continental shelves as much as mainlands convinced Ankara that Turkey was being boxed in its shores by an aggressive regional alliance. What's at stake was not only a share of natural resources in the Eastern Mediterranean but also Turkey's freedom of navigation. The only way out of this encirclement was a common position with Libya.

These geo-political dynamics have been in play since 2013, but had not dramatically changed until Libya's second civil war. Haftar's assault on Tripoli in April 2019 was the parting shot of this geopolitical encirclement, triggering Turkey's military assistance in order to preserve the existence of the GNA, viewed as an amicable alternative to Haftar by Ankara. In this sense, the military dimension of Turkey's intervention to preserve the GNA was a tool for Turkey to achieve its strategic goals in the Eastern Mediterranean such as securing its maritime zones through bilateral agreements with Egypt, Israel and Lebanon based on the terms of the Memorandum of Understanding

(MoU) between Ankara and the GNA; and taking part in any energy project that would export oil and gas from the region to Europe. Turkish decision-makers believe that a stable and politically amicable Libya that is not under military rule backed by its regional adversaries would serve Turkey's interests in the best way.

### Determinants of Foreign Policy

Turkey's foreign policy towards post Gaddafi Libya has been largely determined by three key phenomena, namely; Turkey's own political experiences, the opportunities and threats present in Libya, and finally the emerging geopolitical realities in the region. These determinants have combined to transform Libya into a key strategic theatre for Turkey's foreign policy. Between 2011 and 2014 Libya remained interesting but peripheral to Turkey. Ankara's foreign policy engagement was economically driven and focused on supporting the reconstruction process in Libya and in turn strengthen bilateral economic ties, but as the conditions on the ground began to radically change these policies would be short-lived. Following Haftar's emergence and the civil war in 2014, Turkey shifted to the periphery, avoiding becoming a party to the conflict in the way regional powers had and called for a solution based on dialogue and national consensus.<sup>3</sup> Turkey's early calls for dialogue were in line with the subsequent UN brokered efforts to convene the rival parties to the conflict and produce a Government of National Accord (GNA) in Skhirat, Morocco in 2015.<sup>4</sup> Following the rejection of the GNA by Haftar in 2016, Turkey maintained a reluctant belief in subsequent diplomatic efforts to overcome the crisis through a second separate UN backed process that began in 2017. However, Haftar's rhetoric growing anti-Turkey rhetoric and attempts to marginalise Turkey's role in the diplomatic process at the UN brokered Palermo talks alerted Ankara to the new realities in Libya.<sup>5</sup> Haftar's subsequent unilateral withdrawal from diplomatic talks in favour of overthrowing the GNA in Tripoli on the 4th of April 2019 was a game changer and provoked a major shift in determining Turkey's foreign engagement policy towards Libya.

For Ankara, Libya's second civil war was a perfect storm. Haftar's war had the backing of an international alliance of actors in Egypt, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and France perceived in Ankara as a hostile geopolitical 'anti Turkish camp'. Their military backing to Haftar's assault on Tripoli transformed Ankara's perception of Libya into a dangerous geo-political knot, that if tied would threaten Turkey's relevance and survival as a power in the MENA region and in particular the Eastern Mediterranean. The diplomatic landscape had also radically changed for Ankara.

<sup>3</sup> Personal Account of Emrullah İşler, Turkey's Former Special Envoy to Libya, in "Türkiye-Libya İlişkileri: Tarihsel Perspektif, Güncel Analiz" in Libya Krizi (eds.) Burhanettin Duran and Muhittin Ataman, 2020, SETA: İstanbul, pp. 51-69.

<sup>4</sup> In his first visit to Libya, Emrullah İşler, Turkey's Former Special Envoy to Libya met HoR officials and HoR appointed prime minister Abdullah al-Thinni as well as GNC appointed prime minister Omar al-Hasi, See "Türkiye, Libya'da El Hasi ile görüşen ilk ülke oldu", BBC Türkçe, 22 October 2014, Türkiye, Libya'da El Hasi ile görüşen ilk ülke oldu - BBC News Türkçe; Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu stated that Turkey was not a party [between two rival governments] in Libya, that it strived for a political solution and that it supported Bernardino Leon's efforts, See "Çavuşoğlu: 'Türkiye'nin Tutumu Baştan Sona Nettir'", Haberler, 13 January 2015, Çavuşoğlu: "Türkiye'nin Tutumu Baştan Sona Nettir" - Son Dakika Haberleri; Turkey became the first actor to take initiative in the negotiation process between parties and supported the peace talks initiated by Leon, See Emrullah İşler's personal account.

<sup>5</sup> "Turkey pulls out of Libya conference in Italy with 'deep disappointment', VP Oktay says", 13 November 2018, <https://www.dailysabah.com/diplomacy/2018/11/13/turkey-pulls-out-of-libya-conference-in-italy-with-deep-disappointment-vp-oktay-says>.

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The fact the UN Security Council and European Union had failed to sanction or deter Haftar and his international backers and thus failed to fulfil their promise to support to the GNA and uphold the peace talks made it clear that Turkey could not maintain its existing mode of foreign policy engagement and would be forced to reassess its approach to Libya.

This dramatic change in foreign policy is exemplified through the establishment of a Maritime and Security Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed between Turkey and the GNA in late 2019. Turkey was able to repel Haftar and his backers' advance on Tripoli through its deployment of troops, military advisors and sophisticated weaponry in support of the GNA. Moreover it was able to explore new ways and means to counter a key strategic threat in the Eastern Mediterranean through its new alliance.

Turkey's cooperation with the GNA has also been determined by the range of actors present in Libya, with whom it shares a common strategic vision. Turkey's criteria has been shaped by its own domestic experiences with military interference in political life, and it has neither chosen to cooperate with nor cultivate a military strongman to rival Haftar's backers. Ankara's engagement with the GNA was based on the desire to find partners who sought to build a civic and democratic Libya and precisely those who would resist an authoritarian model of military rule that Haftar has come to represent. Turkey's diplomatic engagement to these actors and their predecessors predates the April 4th conflict, though Haftar's war offered a platform to strengthen these ties through the maritime and security MoU and offer it's military support in exchange. Turkey's military support materialised in the form of limited troop deployment, officers of the Turkish Army that served as military advisors especially during the assault on Tripoli and continues in the form of training of the GNA's armed forces as a way of realising both its strategic vision and it's strategic interests in Libya with its partners.

### Conclusion

A decade on from the revolution, and despite the major shifts in Libya's transition and the emerging geo political dynamics, Turkish foreign policy towards Libya has remained consistent with regards to its goals, vision, and relationships with Libyan partners who share the same vision. The military instruments of Turkish foreign policy are the only conspicuous change over the past a decade, and Ankara's MoU with Tripoli reflects the strength of its relationships with important players on the ground in post-revolution Libya.

Given recent domestic political opposition to Turkey's military engagement in Libya and an attempt to orchestrate parliamentary opposition at a recent vote, Turkey's current policy towards Libya is primarily led by President Erdogan and its main ally MHP (Nationalist Movement Party).

In the event of a change in government in Turkey, which would require President Erdogan's defeat in the next presidential elections in 2023, Turkey's foreign policy

towards Libya could change. Alternatively, external geo-political realities such as the Biden presidency in the U.S. could also impact Turkey's engagement in Libya, if not change it altogether. The Biden administration is perceived by Ankara to have a pro Greek position regarding the Eastern Mediterranean dispute, and his administration could put pressure on the new Government of National Unity (GNU) in Libya to rescind the MoU between Libya and Turkey, and pressure Tripoli to eject Turkish military assets and presence in Libya. Such policies would have deep implications for how Turkey employs its foreign policy instruments, but would not reshape its perception of Libya and the essence of its foreign policy which has matured over the past decade.

Albeit difficult, Turkey's foreign policy engagement in Libya could go through a shift in the form of a rapprochement with Egypt, if Turkey's presence and interests are conceded. This possibility could only materialise based on another memorandum of understanding between Turkey and Egypt: delimitation of maritime zones between the two in the Eastern Mediterranean. However, the respective irreconcilable political visions of Turkey and Egypt over Libya's renders this scenario a remote possibility. Turkey will likely stand firm to maintain its presence and protect its interests in Libya, even if it entails serious confrontations with the Biden administration as well as other international players.

Finally, as Turkey has been a vocal supporter of a political solution for years, it has welcomed the results of the UN brokered political process in Libya with the hope that it will generate a satisfying interim government under Abdulhamid Dbeibah and under a Mohamed Menfi presidency to carry the country towards democratic elections on the 24th of December 2021. Turkey is conscious that a considerable part of the country, in particular the east, remains under de-facto military rule by the LAAF and Haftar. For Ankara, holding free and fair elections under such conditions seems unlikely, a matter it perceives would undermine the legitimacy and integrity of the results. However, Ankara perceives that if free and fair national elections were to at least take place in Tripolitania, where the majority of Libya's inhabitants are situated, based on these demographics and projections alone, Turkey would see its interests served well in many respects in the future.





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