Conflict in Libya Intensifies

Despite international community’s efforts to resolve the Libyan conflict via peaceful means, it is intensifying and new participants are becoming embroiled in it.

On June 21, while inspecting Egyptian Armed Forces of Western Military Region stationed in the Sidi Barrani air base, located near the border with Libya, President of Egypt Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi told the troops to “be prepared to carry out any mission” either inside or if necessary, outside the country’s borders. Hence, he issued a de facto ultimatum to the Government of National Accord (GNA) and its active supporter Ankara by openly talking about the possibility of Egypt becoming involved in the Libyan conflict. The Egyptian leader stated that any attempts by GNA forces to take control of the coastal city of Sirte or the al-Jufra airbase would be a red line for Egypt, which would then be forced to intervene. According to President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, Cairo was prepared “to provide Libyan tribes with training and arms to fight” the terrorist militias and defend their country. He also said that “if Egypt were to intervene, its forces would advance with tribal leaders at the vanguard.” He added that Cairo “did not covet any Libyan territory”, as its objective was to “support security and stability inside Libya”, and that any direct intervention from the Egyptian state had “now acquired international legitimacy.” In addition, the Egyptian leader pointed out that the main aims of any involvement in the conflict would include protecting Egypt’s “western border, helping achieve a ceasefire, and restoring stability and peace in Libya.” He called on forces from each of Libya’s rival governments to “stop the bloodshed” in the east and the west, “to observe a cease-fire and begin negotiations toward a political settlement.”

On June 24, pan-Arabic TV news channel Al Arabiya reported that Aguila Saleh Issa, the President of the eastern-based Libyan House of Representatives, said “the Libyan people would formally request Egypt’s military intervention” if it became necessary. In an interview with the Middle East News Agency (MENA) he stated his side would ask the Egyptian armed forces to support the Libyan army if Sirte was captured, adding the “Egyptian intervention would be legitimate under the Libyan people's mandate.”

On June 22, Babak Taghvaee tweeted that “several Egyptian Air Force's F-16C/D fighter jets” had left the Sidi-Barrani air base and were headed toward Misrata, a city that the air corridor from Turkey to Libya passes through. It is worth noting that the aircraft were supported by “UAE Air Force's Airbus A330-243MRTT”.

The United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia expressed their support for the stance taken by the President of Egypt. The official news agency of Saudi Arabia (the Saudi Press Agency) reported the Kingdom backed Egypt in its right to defend its borders and people against acts of aggression. UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation also said “it stood in solidarity with Egypt in all measures taken to safeguard its security.”

In addition to the aforementioned developments, member states of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), such as France, Italy and Greece, are becoming increasingly involved in the conflict between Fayez al-Sarraj’s GNA and Khalifa Belqasim Haftar’s LNA (the Libyan National Army). On June 10, France’s frigate Courbet, a part of NATO’s “non-Article 5 maritime security operation” in the Mediterranean, Sea Guardian, “tried to approach a Turkish civilian ship suspected of involvement in arms trafficking” to Libya. According to a French defense official, the vessel, which was being escorted by three Turkish warships, refused to comply with instructions from the NATO frigate, and Courbet was subsequently even targeted by naval fire-control radar. France claimed that “under the alliance’s rules of engagement such conduct” was considered a hostile act, while Turkey “denied harassing” the frigate. On June 22, President Emmanuel Macron accused Ankara of “playing a dangerous game” and stated that
France would not tolerate Turkey’s actions in Libya. He also said that Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi’s concerns about the situation near his country’s border were legitimate.

After the French Defense Minister “was reported to have made her condemnation” of Ankara’s conduct in the Mediterranean Sea clear to NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg in a video conference meeting, NATO launched an investigation into the incident. According to France’s Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, Turkey’s support of GNA’s offensive was “aggravated by the hostile and unacceptable actions of Turkish naval forces toward NATO allies”, which was “aimed at undermining efforts taking place to uphold the UN arms embargo”. In addition, the ministry said Turkey’s actions in Libya went “directly against the efforts to secure a ceasefire”, which the French government backed. It also warned Turkey that such “conduct, like all foreign interference in the Libyan conflict,” had to cease.

The situation in Libya was one of the issues discussed by Emmanuel Macron and President of Tunisia, during the latter’s two-day visit to Paris (June 22-23, 2020). And although earlier, Tunisian leader Kais Saied told his French counterpart that his country was “committed to its sovereignty as well as the sovereignty of Libya”, and would “never be a rear base for any party to the conflict”, he rejected any foreign interventions along with France’s President more recently. In fact, French politicians surely remember that Turkey helped the new leadership of Tunisia financially after the Jasmine Revolution, probably, in the hopes of expanding Ankara’s influence in North Africa, which, in the past, had been a part of Ottoman Empire, via, for instance, Islamist parties that benefited from the regime change in Tunisia. After all, their ideology is close to that of the Muslim Brotherhood (an organization banned in the Russian Federation), which Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan supports. It was also reported that “Tunisia allowed a Turkish plane carrying medical aid for Libyans” to land in Djerba-Zarzis Airport. The cargo was subsequently delivered across the border to Libya by local Tunisian authorities.

Recently, tensions between Turkey and Israel have increased as reported by Turkish correspondent Ragıp Soylu, who tweeted on June 24 that Israeli authorities had destroyed a plate commemorating Ankara’s contribution to “a restoration project at a cemetery in East Jerusalem.”

In addition, the anti-Turkey propaganda campaign has seemingly intensified. On June 21, daily online newspaper Libya Review reported that leaked documents showed “the GNA Minister of Interior” asked Libya’s Central Bank Governor to transfer “approximately 169 million euros” to a Turkish company named SSTEK (Defense Industry Technologies Inc.), purportedly for the support provided by Ankara to the Government of National Accord armed forces in their fight against Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar’s LNA. This suggests that the GNA is entirely dependent on foreign aid. According to Atalayar magazine, Fayez al-Sarraj’s government paid Ankara “some $12 billion to stay in power” by depositing “$4 billion in the Central Bank of Turkey, along with another $8 billion to pay for the cost of the Turkish military intervention”. On June 18, GNA leader received “a high-level Turkish delegation led by Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu in Tripoli to discuss ways to enhance bilateral cooperation between the two countries.”

On June 9, media outlet Al-Araby Al-Jadeed reported that Turkey “had applied for licenses for oil exploration and production in Libya, as part of a bilateral agreement”, reached “with the Libyan Government of National Accord, which would allow it to receive oil exploration permits in seven spots”. Apparently, Ibrahim Jadhran, a rebel and the former head of Petroleum Facilities Guard (PFG), has already been selected to help with these efforts. The PFG is an organization that “took control of the main oil export terminals in eastern Libya” seven years ago. In 2014, U.S. Ambassador to Libya Deborah K. Jones declared Ibrahim Jadhran’s attempts “to sell oil excluding the central government” a “theft from the Libyan people.”

All the aforementioned developments point to the fact that the conflict in Libya continues to intensify, and the international community ought to become more involved in its resolution via diplomatic means.

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