Changing Balance of Power in Libya

Recently, there has been an increasing number of reports on the changing balance of power in Libya not only concerning the opposing sides in the Libyan conflict but also external forces, particularly Turkey, that are a part of it.

Since Turkey’s yet undiminished involvement in the war in Libya, in many ways, still remains a decisive factor in the conflict, at present, the anti-Turkey alliance in Libya continues to grow and unite supporters of Muammar al-Gaddafi (who form the backbone of Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar’s Libyan National Army (LNA)) that include Egyptians, the French, the Greeks, Saudis and citizens of the UAE.

France’s stance on the situation in and around Libya, and Turkey’s intervention has become more pronounced as tensions between Paris and Ankara flared up over an incident at sea on June 17, involving ships belonging to both the nations near the Libyan coast.

During a virtual session of Saudi Arabia’s cabinet, chaired by King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud on June 23, the Kingdom expressed its support for Egypt’s right to protect its borders from “extremism and terrorist militias”. The assumption is that Cairo should also be able to oppose Ankara’s increasingly active involvement in Libya.

In an interview with newspaper La Stampa at the end of June, Minister of Foreign Affairs Luigi Di Maio said that “Syrianization” of Libya (i.e. its division into spheres of influence among Turkey and other foreign players) was unlikely. The Italian politician also stated that external interference in Libya had to cease, and that the UN process had to be given impetus. “Libya is not Syria. For geographical reasons, it is necessarily our strategic interlocutor, and we are as strategic to them as the European Union is,” he added.

Although there is no reliable information about the current balance of power in Libya, a number of reports state that Ankara sent approximately 15,000 pro-Turkish fighters from Idlib to the environs of the city of Sirte over some months. And at the end of June, 200 more mercenaries were recruited from Yemen. More than half of these fighters are currently concentrated at the Sirte-Jufra frontline. Hence, for now, Turkey appears to enjoy a numerical advantage and so does the Government of National Accord (GNA), led by Fayez al-Sarraj, that Ankara supports. Aside from approximately 3,000 to 5,000 Turkish servicemen, there are 15,000 fighters from Syria and several thousand mercenaries from Yemen fighting in Libya. There are around 20,000 to 25,000 of such individuals altogether in the North African nation.

Ankara’s active involvement in the Libyan civil war has saved the GNA from defeat and helped push Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar’s army away from the capital. Vast swathes of land east of Tripoli are now under Turkey’s de facto control. At the moment, the main aim of the Ankara-supported GNA forces is to seize the city of Sirte and the Al Jufra Airbase. Both are strategically important locations from where an offensive against any target in Libya, including Tripoli, can be easily launched. During Muammar al-Gaddafi’s rule, core units of the Libyan Air Force were stationed at the Al Jufra Airbase. After the cowardly NATO-led attack on the Great Socialist People’s Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, runways at the facility were left practically undamaged. Hence, the base can open the way for an attack on Benghazi and the entire eastern part of Libya by GNA and pro-Turkish fighters in the future. This is why Ankara has urged Khalifa Haftar’s LNA troops to surrender the city of Sirte and the Al Jufra Airbase to the GNA before peace talks could begin.

Since GNA forces comprise various factions, differences among them are seemingly growing, and this can lead to
discord. According to reports in Arab media outlets, forces loyal to Khalifa Haftar “launched an attack on an area south of the capital Tripoli” (the al-Hadba region). Rockets fired by LNA fighters killed and injured a number of people and caused damage to property.

On July 1, Commander of the Turkish Naval Forces Admiral Adnan Özbal met with GNA’s military leadership in Tripoli. The visit followed “a high-level Turkish delegation’s talks in Tripoli” where Ankara and Tripoli agreed “to deepen the ongoing military and security cooperation” in line with a deal signed by the two sides in November 2019. News channel Al Hadath reported that Turkish Minister of Defense Hulusi Akar and Yaşar Güler, the Chief of the General Staff of the Turkish Armed Forces, “signed a military agreement with the battalions fighting on behalf of the GNA” allowing for Ankara’s direct intervention in the country. According to the deal, Turkey can establish a military base in Libya. In line with privileges granted to US servicemen operating abroad, the agreement also “provides immunity for Turkish forces in Libya against any prosecution and gives Turkish officers in Libya a diplomatic status to ensure their immunity”. The deal also allows Ankara to defend the GNA and the capital; train and equip Libyan police forces; assist in establishing an intelligence agency, and create a security force to protect Turkish companies in Libya. In the current climate, Turkey is planning to expand its military operations in Libya in the nearest future.

At the beginning of July, “unknown” warplanes bombed a “Libyan airbase that was recently recaptured by the Government of National Accord (GNA) and its Turkish backers”. Turkey “withdrew a substantial number of” its troops from the base “after suffering material losses” in the airstrike.

Tensions are expected to rise in the nearest future along the Sirte-Jufra frontline. In addition to GNA and pro-Turkish forces concentrated in the region, Al-Masdar News (founded by Leith Abou Fadel) reported that the Libyan National Army, led by Khalifa Haftar, had also deployed troops and equipment to the environs of Sirte. According to defenseworld.net, missile systems were also transferred to LNA’s Al Jufra airbase. With their aid, Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar can try and push GNA forces away from the Sirte-Jufra frontline if the latter attempt to cross it. Earlier, President of Egypt Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi issued a direct warning to the GNA. “If some people think that they can cross the Sirte-Jufra frontline, this is a red line for us,” he said.

Turkey’s recently increased activity in Libya and near its shores as well as in the Eastern Mediterranean has forced Egypt, a powerful opponent of Ankara in the region, to take urgent additional measures to strengthen its military might. At the beginning of July, there were reports that Cairo requested that Moscow speed up deliveries of its K-300P Bastion-P, a mobile coastal defense missile system, with the view of protecting its coastal regions and gas fields in the Mediterranean Sea from Turkey. K-300P Bastion-P is capable of destroying “both sea and ground targets at a distance of 350 kilometers at sea and almost 450 kilometers over land”. In addition, “missiles can be readied for firing within five minutes”. After conservative Turkish newspaper Yeni Safak, known for its hardline support of the ruling Justice and Development Party, reported, in the middle of June, that Turkey was planning to set up a permanent navy military base in Misrata (Libya), Egypt began to strengthen its naval forces. Retired Egyptian Army General and professor of national security at Cairo-based Nasser Supreme Military Academy Mohamed Kashkoush, has apparently stated that Turkey aimed to control all the main military bases in Libya. Ankara has already established de-facto control over Mitiga and Al-Watiya air bases, and military facilities in the port city of Misrata in northwestern Libya, which have become key to transferring fighters from Syria and military equipment to the Libyan frontlines.

At present, to intervene in the Libyan conflict, Egypt only needs an official request to do so from Aguila Saleh Issa, the President of Tobruk-based House of Representatives. Any subsequent deployment of Egyptian troops to Libya will then be legitimate. For now, all sides are seemingly taking a break.

It is vital to highlight that Aguila Saleh’s political influence has grown in light of LNA’s recent defeat. He serves as the President of Tobruk-based House of Representatives, which was “Libya’s internationally recognized government prior to the creation of the GNA”. Hence, some view Aguila Saleh’s role as equivalent to that of Fayez al-Sarraj, the leader of the GNA. It is important to remember that Aguila Saleh enjoys a certain degree of support in the east of the nation. Hence, under certain circumstances, he could even oppose Khalifa Haftar. Still, the President has reportedly stressed that the Field Marshal is not his rival at present.

At this crucial time, Aguila Saleh arrived in Moscow some days ago. He met with officials of various ranks with the aim of finding a peaceful resolution to the civil war in Libya. By meeting with the President of Tobruk-based House of Representatives, the Russian leadership has shown its willingness to work with all parties to the conflict in order to convince them that the only means of avoiding any further escalation of tensions is, undoubtedly, for the opposing
sides, the GNA and LNA, to engage in peace talks.

Valery Kulikov, expert political scientist, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”. 