

Libya: Geopolitics of protracted civil war in the western Mediterranean

SUMMARY

Libya's third civil war in a decade began when Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA) launched an offensive on Tripoli in April 2019. Fayeze al-Sarraj, leader of the UN-recognised Government of National Accord (GNA) turned to Turkey for military help in an effort to remain in power. Libya has been divided since 2014 into rival military and political camps, based respectively in the capital Tripoli and in the east. The renewed armed conflict risks not only dismantling the fragile *modus vivendi* of these two administrations but also enhancing the interference of regional players that are using this conflict for their own geostrategic interests.

A growing number of countries and international organisations, among the latter the United Nations and the European Union, have intervened ever more decisively in the conflict. Taking into account that warring Libyan factions, broadly aligned with either the GNA or the LNA, are vying for foreign support and arms supplies, the critical point for a peaceful solution is to enforce the UN arms embargo. To this end, following the January 2020 Berlin conference on Libya, the EU launched, on 31 March 2020, a new common security and defence policy mission: Operation EU Active Surveillance (Operation Irini), that has as its goal the implementation of the arms embargo imposed by the United Nations Security Council.

The European Union remains a supporter of the UN-led efforts to bring about a lasting solution to the political and security crisis in the country. According to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), Libya hosts around 45 000 refugees and asylum-seekers from troubled areas in the region. In addition, hundreds of thousands of Libyans have been internally displaced due to ongoing military conflicts. Following the 90 % decrease in the number of Libyan migrants heading for Europe in recent years, compared to the peak in 2014-2016, the main efforts of the international community are focused on securing a ceasefire and bringing about a lasting political solution to the internal conflict, while honouring the 2015 Libyan Political Agreement.



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Berlin conference on Libya (2020)

On 19 January 2020, the Berlin conference on Libya took place under the auspices of the United Nations in the German capital. The conference brought together all key outside players in the Libyan conflict: the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Russia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Algeria and the African Union. The European Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the European Commission (HR/VP), Josep Borrell, represented the European Union. Fayez al-Sarraj, leader of the UN-recognised Government of National Accord (GNA) based in Tripoli, and his rival, military commander Khalifa Haftar, leader of the Libyan National Army (LNA) based around Tobruk, both attended the conference, but did not participate in it.

The participants in the conference committed to the 55-point [conference conclusions](#), including to 'unequivocally and fully respect and implement the arms embargo established by [United Nations Security Council Resolution 1970 \(2011\)](#) and the Council's subsequent Resolutions'. The Berlin communiqué thus reaffirmed the existing UN resolutions, revealing their basic problem: that, so far, neither the UN, nor the EU, has been able to effectively enforce the arms embargo. In the past, countries such as Egypt and Greece [intercepted](#) illicit Turkish arms deliveries to the Libyan GNA, but there had been a clear call for a coordinated international effort at the time. In their [joint statement](#), the Commission President and the High Representative committed to 're-launch a political process' in Libya, and also indicated that the EU is considering ways to make a meaningful contribution to the enforcement of the arms embargo: 'We will reflect on how to best contribute to the monitoring of the ceasefire and the respect of the arms embargo'.

Operation EU Active Surveillance (Operation Iринi)

On 20 January, the [Foreign Affairs Council](#) acquainted itself with the outcome of the Berlin conference and discussed the possible steps that could be taken to implement the agreed ceasefire and enforce the arms embargo. The High Representative suggested that Operation Sophia – launched in 2015 under the formal title, '[European Union Naval Force Mediterranean](#)' – could have its remit extended to also include monitoring compliance with the arms embargo. However, on 17 February, following the adoption of [UN Security Council Resolution 2509 \(2020\)](#) extending the arms embargo on Libya (voted on 11 February by 14-0, with Russia abstaining), the EU foreign ministers decided to discontinue Operation Sophia and to [launch](#) Operation EU Active Surveillance. There was consensus that the EU wants a full-fledged military operation, not a humanitarian mission.

With regard to the new operation, several Member States, led by [Austria and Italy](#), have voiced fears that if its focus is rescuing people (as was the case with its predecessor, Operation Sophia), it might create new incentives for illegal migrants and smugglers on the Libyan coast. They have argued that the number of migrants leaving Libya to reach Europe [has fallen](#) by 90 %, compared to the peak in 2014-2016, and that the Libyan Coast Guard is now able to fulfil its functions in its area of jurisdiction, intercepting 50 % of illegal migrants. According to statistics kept by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), [1 340](#) undocumented migrants arrived from Libya in the EU in January and [3 348](#) in February this year (by comparison, more than 20 000 undocumented migrants arrived in the EU each month between 2014 and 2016, totalling over 150 000 for the entire period). By the end of 2019, their number had decreased to 11 471 (according to figures from the [UN Refugee Agency](#), UNHCR; See Figure 1).

Under the new Operation EU Active Surveillance, officially launched on 31 March, ships will patrol in international waters about 100 km off the coast of Libya. This is an area of the Mediterranean Sea that has been identified as the main route for weapons into the country. The operation will have as

its goal the implementation of the arms embargo imposed by the United Nations Security Council, and will not be involved in rescuing people, as the distance from the coast concerned represents an area where chances to conduct rescue operations are low. The EU's decision to monitor arms trafficking seems to favour LNA commander Khalifa Haftar, who has been complaining that Turkey is smuggling both military personnel and arms into Libya to support the UN-backed GNA. On 2 January 2020, the Turkish Parliament [approved](#) the deployment of its army to Libya in support of the GNA. The international community, including the UN, the EU, the US, Russia and the Arab League, [condemned](#) the move and warned against 'foreign interference'. On 3 March 2020, Ghassan Salamé, the UN Envoy to Libya appointed in 2017, resigned, citing 'health reasons'. Ceasefire and peaceful settlement are even more urgent today, when Libya is facing the coronavirus pandemic. The [World Health Organization](#) (WHO) has [classified](#) Libya among the high-risk countries in the region.

Foreign interference

Turkey's move to intervene came after the Tripoli-based government of al-Sarraj made a formal request for military support, as his forces had been weakened by the offensive launched by Khalifa Haftar on 4 April 2019. However, the Tobruk-based and pro-Haftar House of Representatives [voted](#) unanimously to cut relations with Turkey and referred al-Sarraj for prosecution on charges of 'high treason', stemming from the fact that he had sought a foreign power's military help. The April 2019 offensive against Tripoli triggered the largest military mobilisation since the revolutionary war of February 2011 against Muammar Qaddafi.

The divisions that date back to 2011 are central to structuring the GNA and LNA alliances today. Turkey, together with Qatar, supports the GNA, and some observers, including the authors of official reports such as the [French 2018 Senate report on Libya](#), have noted the [presence](#) of Islamic State fighters, after they had been transferred to the country by Turkey from Syria. Political Islam forms only a negligible element among the GNA fighters. On the other hand, Haftar's forces, mainly Salafist, are supported by the US, Russia, France, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Turkish-Libyan Memorandum of Understanding (2019)

Turkish military support for the GNA-led government in Libya is part of a larger geopolitical strategy that aims to reinforce Turkey's presence in the Mediterranean. These geopolitical considerations led Turkey to sign a [Memorandum of Understanding](#) (MoU) with the GNA on 27 November 2019, demarcating new maritime jurisdictions between the two countries. If applied, the agreement would effectively draw a dividing line between the eastern and the western part of the Mediterranean and threaten maritime security in the central part. The MoU was criticised by the international community, as it violates international maritime law, the principle of good neighbourly relations and the sovereignty of the neighbouring coastal states with regard to maritime zones. On 12 December 2019, the [European Council](#) adopted conclusions stating that the MoU infringes upon the sovereign rights of third states, does not comply with the Law of the Sea and cannot produce any legal consequences for third states. Even though Turkey does not recognise the [UN Convention on the Law of the Sea](#), maritime law prescribes rights to Cyprus in its exclusive economic zone. In addition, the MoU, concluded by the GNA without the endorsement of the pro-LNA House of Representatives, has also breached the December 2015 [Libyan Political Agreement](#), mainly its

Figure 1 – Refugee arrivals from Libya: 2020, up to 27 April



Article 8 §2, which stipulates that the Presidency Council can 'conclude international agreements and conventions provided that they are endorsed by the House of Representatives'.

European Union support

The EU is the biggest donor of humanitarian aid to Libya; it also provides bilateral assistance to the country, with measures tailored to the needs of the Libyan people. Under the [Trust Fund in Libya](#), the EU has allocated €363 million to help protect and assist migrants, refugees and internally displaced people, to support municipalities and to strengthen integrated border management. In addition, the EU is engaged in providing focussed support to Libya through its common security and defence policy (CSDP) missions and operations: EUNAVFOR Operation Sophia, mentioned above, and the new Operation EU Active Surveillance (Operation Iridi). The mandate of the EU Integrated Border Assistance Mission in Libya ([EUBAM Libya](#)) has been prolonged until June 2020 and the EU Liaison and Planning Cell ([EULPC](#)), established in April 2015, is still embedded within the EU Delegation to Libya. CSDP operations are coordinated with those ongoing in the [Sahel](#).

European Parliament position

The European Parliament President, David Sassoli, met with Fayed al-Sarraj on 8 January 2020. On 14 January 2020, Parliament discussed the situation in Libya, with a particular focus on the Turkish interference, the LNA offensive against Tripoli and the situation of migrants. On 9 March 2020, Parliament discussed the new CSDP operation in the Mediterranean and the implementation of the arms embargo in Libya. In its 24 October 2019 [resolution](#) on the Turkish military operation in north-east Syria and its consequences, Parliament appealed to the EU Member States to 'institute a ban on the export to Turkey of all weapons, ammunition, military material and goods of any kind that can be used to wage war'. Earlier, on 30 May 2018, Parliament adopted a [recommendation](#) on Libya, which recalled that 'there can be no military solution to the Libyan crisis', and reaffirmed the need for all parties and armed groups in Libya to commit to the 2015 Libyan Political Agreement.

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