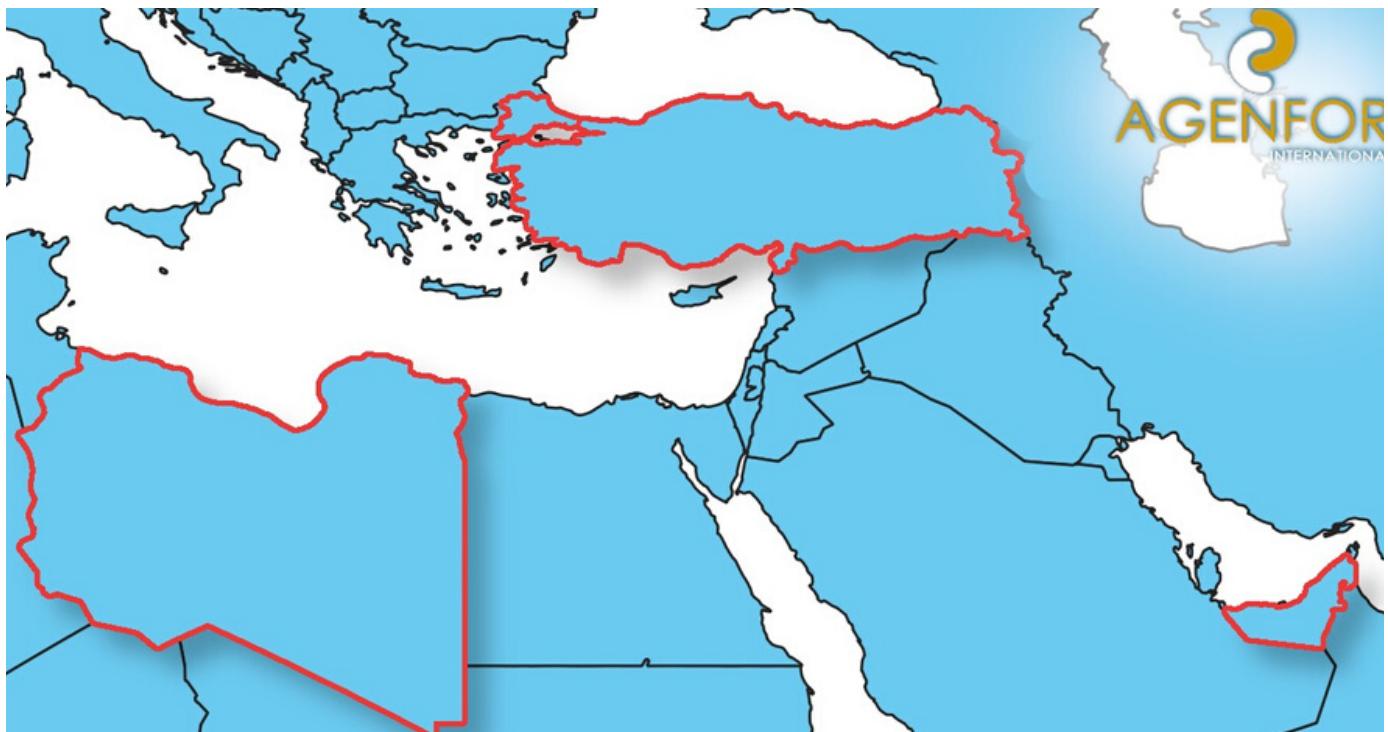


EQUAL IS MORE: 5 LIBYA, TURKEY AND THE MED

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How Turkey crushed UAE's gambit in Libya

Article by Mohammad Pervez Bilgrami

Turkish drones in early April this year successfully carried out strikes on an Antonov military cargo aircraft from the UAE at an airstrip north of Tarhuna city in Libya. The hit was aimed at disrupting the UAE's regular supply of weapons to the warlord Khalifa Haftar's forces attacking the southern Tripoli front line. Since the fall of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, Libya is virtually divided into two seats of power: The Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli, which enjoys UN and international recognition but seriously backed only by Turkey, and the other group led by Khalifa Haftar, a renegade general, in eastern Libya backed by United Arab Emirates (UAE) sheikhs, the Egyptian military regime, Russian mercenaries and French leader Emmanuel Macron.

After suspending peace talks with Haftar in February, the GNA successfully launched Peace Storm Operation in response to aggression by Haftar's forces in and around Tripoli. The UAE has been dumping thousands of tonnes in military supplies to support Haftar in violation of a UN Security Council resolution, which bans arms exports to the war-torn country. But these military supplies of heavy and sophisticated equipment, including the Chinese Wing Loong armed drones and Russian Pantsir air defence systems could not win the war for the UAE.

The GNA with Turkey's support has launched a counter offensive dubbed, operation Volcano of Rage by killing many of Haftar's fighters, including senior commanders, and destroying the enemy's logistics and weapons supplies. Western Libya has become a graveyard of Pantsir-S1 air defence systems as Turkish drones have destroyed several Russian-made units in Al Watiya and Tarhuna operations.

UAE's lack of war fighting capacity

One of the main reasons why Abu Dhabi has failed in Libya is its heavy reliance on foreign weapons and mercenaries from Sudan, Chad and Nigeria to fight its war in Libya. The UAE, an amalgamation of seven emirates of around 10 million people of whom more than 90 per cent are foreigners, heavily relies on imported men and machines to play its ego-driven power games. Forget the foreigners, even the UAE's own citizens do not want to die for their sheikhs.

Secondly, Libya is far away from the UAE. Even in Yemen, located so close to them, the UAE and its partner Saudi Arabia have been unable to win the war against Houthi forces. The UAE can burn its petrol money but it can't win long wars because they lack what constitutes national power. The mercenaries it hires are only good for creating terror. They are poorly trained and least motivated to fight a war of attrition. Captured Sudanese mercenaries accused the UAE for recruiting them to work as security guards in the Emirates but deployed them on the Libyan war front.

The fall of strategically important Al Watiya air base and imminent fall of strategic city of Tarhuna has further displayed the lack of war fighting capacity of the UAE at the western Libyan front. To win Libya, the UAE needs the full military commitment from the countries with real national power. The three countries Russia, France and Egypt who are UAE's partners in Libya have the national power and military capacity to fight a long sustained war for Haftar. But why would Russia or France put sophisticated military assets and ground troops in a direct confrontation with Turkey and internationally recognised government of Libya? Egypt, the only East Med basin country seems more content with projecting power close to its land border in Eastern Libya than winning Tripoli for Haftar. Like Pantsirs, a few Soviet-era Mig and Sukhoi fighter jets will not be able to change the course of military advancement of the GNA government in western Libya.

The UAE's ability of creating a chaos, orchestrating coups, bribing politicians, trapping unprincipled government leaders in various traps, is well known but winning wars is different ball game. The long wars cannot be won with the mercenaries whose only motivation is to get monthly wages. But that is not strange in the UAE's case as its own armed forces are full of foreign contractors and mercenaries from the US, Britain, Australia and Latin America. In reality, the UAE is pawn of western war profiteers and mercenary suppliers to grab oil and resources of Arab countries.

Advantage Turkey

Modern wars are being fought with the armed and reconnaissance drones, electronic jammers, and decoy radars in the battle field. To sustain such wars, Turkey has developed an advanced infrastructure to meet the demand of modern warfare. Turkey also has its own highly trained military personnel to plan and strategize the Libyan war who are also providing training and consultation to the GNA forces.

In addition, Turkey has now used some of its Syrian allies under its command structure in the Libyan war theatre. These officers and soldiers have been officially commissioned after rigorous training process.

Turkey has key technological advantage over UAE. Turkey's Medium Altitude Long Endurance (MALE) armed drones TB-2, Anka-B and Anka-S have hit Haftar's forces hard and shifted the balance in favour of GNA. The Anka-S, which is capable of satellite-controlled attack, has proved to be effective in Syrian and Libyan war theatre. Adding to the punch, will be advanced and heavy payload carrying High Altitude Long Endurance (HALE) drones Akinci and Aksungur. In addition to MIM-23 improved Hawk medium-range air defence and Korkut low altitude/very short range air defence systems already deployed to safeguard Tripoli airspace. After successfully operating in Syria, the KORAL radar jammers, the electronic warfare systems that Turkey transferred to Libya in early February, were used to jam Haftar's Pantsir air defence systems. Turkey is also in the process of mass producing Hisar-A short range and Hisar-O medium range air defence system. When ready, they are also expected to be deployed in Libya to further improve the air defence cover over Tripoli and other major cities and enforce a safe fly zone.

Turkey has also deployed the Gabya class Navy frigates to provide air and naval protection support to GNA forces off the coastline between Tripoli and Sabrata since early February. On April 1 for the first time in the Libyan conflict, Turkish frigates fired surface-to-air missiles on LNA drones. Turkey has also deployed Turkish Air Force's Boeing E-7T, flying off the coast to provide signal intelligence to Turkish forces on the ground.

Diplomatic Manoeuvring

On the diplomatic front, Turkey has roped in Algeria into the Libyan conflict. Turkey and Algeria have already conducted high level meetings focussing on Libyan situation including President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's January visit to Algiers and Erdogan's meeting with his Algerian counterpart on the side-lines of the Berlin conference on Libya.



Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune has stated that Tripoli is the redline not be crossed while receiving GNA head Fayez Al Sarraj in Algiers. Algeria has maintained good relations with both sides of the conflict in neighbouring Libya and can also prove to be a counterweight to al-Sissi's Egypt. Erdogan also made a surprise visit to Tunisia in late December 2019 to discuss developments in Libya. Tunisian President Kais Said has already announced his support to the GNA government in mid-April after GNA forces took control the border crossings with Tunisia.

Turkey's military assistance to the successful GNA military operations will further enhance Turkey's diplomatic outreach to Libya's to key neighbours Algeria and Tunisia. The other major plus for Turkey in the medium and long term is its acceptability in the masses of Libya in general and other Arab streets in particular. Turkish military operation has turned the tables in Libya, Haftar and his foreign backers are now the ones calling for a ceasefire and desperately want to see de-escalation in military activities, while Turkey and GNA are confident and want to clear all of Western Libya from Haftar mercenaries.

Haftar appears to control most of Libya's key oil infrastructure. However, now that his attempts to capture Tripoli have been thwarted by the Libyan government forces, he will look for ways to sabotage oil facilities or hold on to those located near Benghazi and in other eastern parts of Libya, where his militias operate more freely.

Losing oil by Haftar means Abu Dhabi will have to share a portion of UAE oil income to sustain the warlord and his militias. The warlord's foreign backers would not mind the country's territorial division as long as they have control over Libya's vast oil resource. Turkey's next move will be directed at stopping the partitioning of the country and prevent Libya becoming a "new Somalia" in the Mediterranean. In the meantime, the countries that did not heed to Turkey and UN-backed Libyan government's call in January's Berlin conference for dialogue to stop Haftar's offensive on Tripoli are now asking for negotiation to end the conflict.

**The opinions expressed in the articles are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of Agenfor, however they are important insights for the public debate.*

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