

THE LIBYAN IMBROGLIO

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The Turkish onslaught to the Mediterranean and its Libyan apogee did not come exactly as a surprise. It was brewing for some time. Turkish navy notables, since the time of the late admiral Guven Erkaya (1996) had not concealed their disaffection with the consequences of the Treaty of Lausanne (1923) , birth certificate of the Turkish Republic , which , inter alia, constituted post-ottoman Turkey as a continental power guarding the Straits, and Greece as a maritime / naval country congruent to its geographical constellation.

Turkish naval aspirations assumed new dimensions when admiral Yayci publicized his concept of “Mavi Vatan” (Blue Fatherland) which by the year 2018, had become official policy of Turkey, crystallized most recently in the letter of UNPermRep of Turkey to the UN Secretary General (March 17, 2020).

Turkey was not among the instigators of Libya’s Col. Gadaffi overthrow in 2011, nor for that matter was Greece. Both countries entertain historical relations of a different nature with Libya, Greece mainly with Cyrenaica, an area where once Hellenic civilization and culture thrived. Turkey is occasionally blamed by the Libyans for in its ottoman incarnation did not put effective resistance to the invading Italians in 1911. Nevertheless, Turkish construction companies were favourably treated in the Jamahiriya before the collapse of Gaddafi’s rule. The post- Gaddafi era was marked by drastic plunge in oil production (down from 1,3-1,6 mil. barrels per day) , falling living standards, Islamic agitation and terrorism, fragmentation, exacerbation of tribal rivalries and above all by small and medium arms proliferation all over the vast expanses of the country. The force that can take the arms back, this force will be able to reunite Libya.

Gradually two camps emerged: GNA (the Government of National Accord) in Tripoli, under PM Sarraj, enjoying international legitimacy and supported mainly by Turkey and Islamic militias entrenched around the port city of Misrata, guarding the western approaches to the Gulf of Sidra. On the other side, major figure has emerged general Khalifa Haftar, at the head of the Libyan National Army (LNA), drawing his part of legitimacy from the Libyan National Parliament, sitting in Tobruk.

The country is effectively divided. LNA, after dislodging Islamic/Moslem Brotherhood forces from their bastions in Derna and Benghazi, controls the oil rich historic Cyrenaica, including the oil terminals east of the town of Sirte (Sidra, Ras Lanouf, Zuetina, Marsha el Brega, Marsha el Hariga/ Tobruk). He is backed by Egypt, UAE, Russia, while other forces sympathetic to LNA and the Parliament include France and neighbouring Greece.

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Libya, increasingly since the beginning of the year looks like a condominium of Turkey and Russia under construction, the difference being that, unlike Egypt and Russia in the east, Ankara exerts unlimited influence upon the GNA government looking more and more as a puppet. Russia instead, pursues its interests of coming back, taking advantage of the post - Gaddafi power vacuum, while Egypt strives to contain turco-GNA rush to Sirte, for her own reasons of political survival.

Turkey's (ad)venture to western Libya is admittedly a foolhardy and risky undertaking, an exercise in overextension. Libya was a part of the Ottoman Empire, lost to the Italians in 1911/12, after a brief resistance, but Turkey continued to entertain close relations with the country; Turkish companies made hefty profits participating in the construction programs of Col. Gaddafi.

These are the antecedents of the current destabilizing onslaught in central Mediterranean by continental power Turkey, in the backyard of the quintessentially maritime country that is Greece.

The diligent efforts of Germany, via the Berlin process, represent the only available framework for a diplomatic solution and a constitutional revamp of Libya. The Berlin Libya conference of January 19, 2020, in absence of Greece at the behest of Turkey to the organizers, ordered a cease-fire among the warring factions, suspension of arm shipments and departure of foreign fighters. To no avail; Turkey in particular, continued its massive transfer of military equipment, mercenaries from Syria, as well as advisers from the ranks of her own army. The European Union, in the light of worsening situation in the field, proclaimed the naval Operation Irini, which in the face of Turkish reinforcements by sea, as French and Greek navy vessels experienced, proved ineffective. A last-ditch effort was made by Egypt, when the Cairo declaration ,6th June 2020, was issued in an effort to revive the Berlin process and stem advances of Turkey backed GNA forces, to central Libya. Military developments have overshadowed efforts to a political solution.

Turkey has been instrumental in assisting her protege PM Sarraj to push back LNA forces to the outskirts of symbolic and materially important town of Sirte.

This Erdogan's undertaking is conditioned by Turkey's faltering economy, the suspicions of the locals and, generally, of the Arab world, the opposition of France and the watch of Russia, in spite of the delicate understanding after July 2016 coup was thwarted.

In fact, Libya, without its oil revenues and after the rapid exhaustion of foreign exchange injections from the deposits of Gaddafi era controlled by GNA, turns out to be a huge trap for Turkey, a monument of President Erdogan's ambitions. The concern about midterm continued logistical support of Turkish forces in Tripolitania and the choreography of the day after, had led to a visit of a high-powered delegation, of FM Cavusoglu, Finance Minister Albayrak and intelligence chief Hakan Fidan to Tripoli, June 17, 2020.

For Turkey, from the military point of view, two alternatives exist in Libya: either she honourably departs, or against all odds she dashes to the east pursuing the conquest of Cyrenaica, along the Sirte - al Juffra axis. A third alternative allowing for a way out of Libya, would be the convocation of a follow up Berlin conference which providing for the deployment of a multilateral force, would offer a face-saving formula to Ankara.

There remains a question mark : was it appetite for neo ottoman expansion and control over energy resources that drove Turkey to Libya, or a determination to undercut Greece's rights on the maritime spaces btw Crete and Cyrenaica/Egypt compelled her to sign the two Ankara memoranda of last November ?

In any case , Turkey is now at an impasse : she cannot move on eastwards faced with red flags by Egypt and Russia, she cannot stay idle in the west as she encroaches on fundamental French interests in Sahel, and touches upon Italian economic sphere of influence in Tripolitania.

Turkey lies btw a rock and a hard place. This implies that Ankara, empty of viable alternatives, more than anybody else emerges now as demandeur for the resumption of the Berlin process. A process, where demilitarization might cover the area from Misrata to Sirte and the adjacent hinterland.

In anticipation of a new "Berlin Round", intense horse trading and behind the scene bargaining for a new constitutional set up within and without Libya, will be intense.

The future state of Libya will be federal. Sirte is well placed to host the federal government, while the Parliament, composed of two chambers, could gather in Benghazi. The Central Bank could carry on its business in Tripoli, along with some ministries, including the MFA, but the National Oil Corporation should move to Sirte, reflecting the shifting domestic equilibria.

It is plausible to assume that the role of Egypt in this will be reinforced, while Cyrenaica is poised to gain broader administrative autonomy and a fairer share in resources allocation.