

With foothold in Libya, Erdogan's Turkey eyes influence and energy riches

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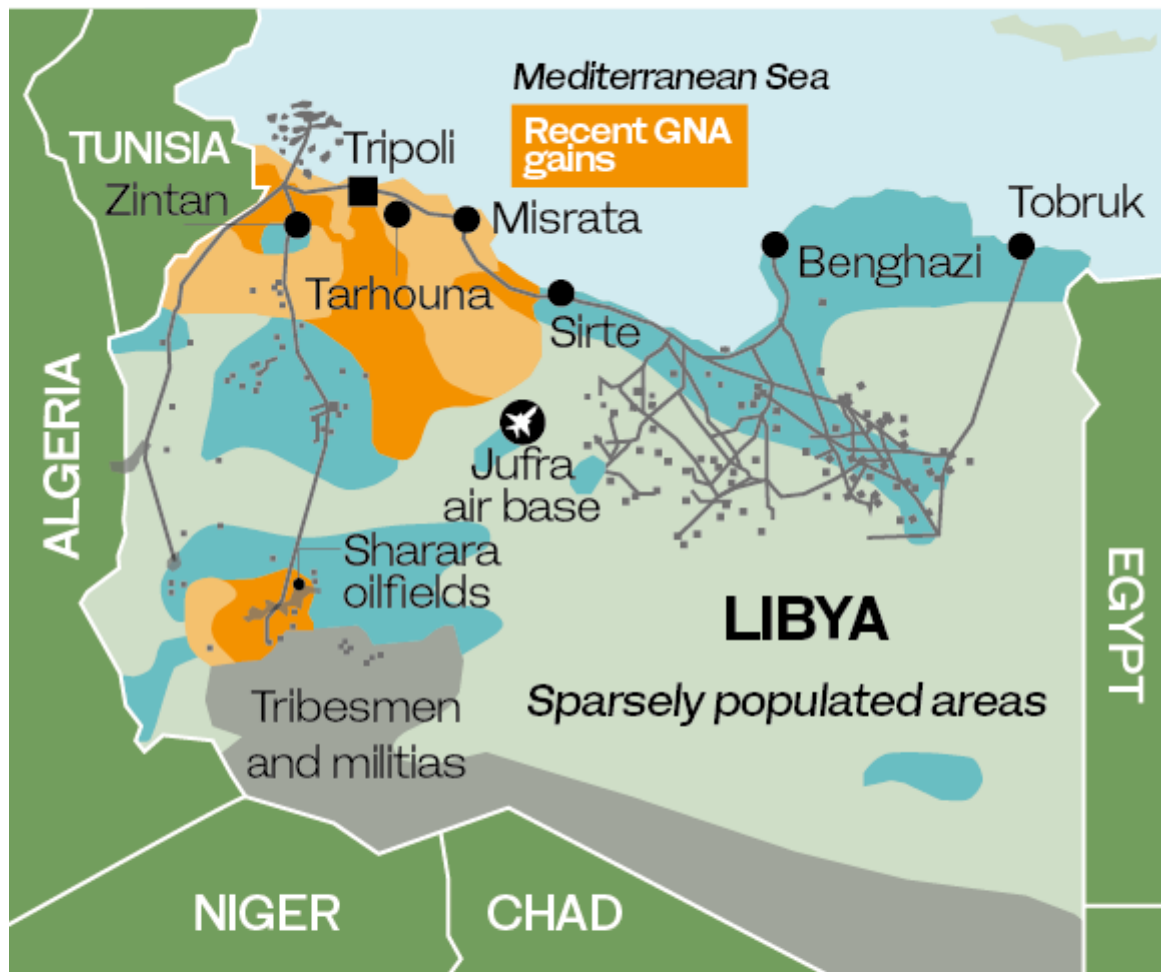
MISSOURI: The Libyan imbroglio remains at least as complicated as the mess in Syria. In both civil wars, one factor seems to remain constant: Turkey's decisive support to Islamist forces.

In the Libyan case, the Islamist camp is the UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli. The GNA's main backers, Turkey and Qatar, always emphasize the "UN-recognized" aspect when justifying their support and condemning the backers of the rival Libyan National Army (LNA), led by Khalifa Haftar and based in the country's east.




LNA supporters – mainly Egypt, Russia and the UAE – retort that the GNA is controlled by extremist Islamist militias. Why would the UN recognize a GNA that is run by extremist militias and is in control of less Libyan territory than the LNA?

WHO CONTROLS LIBYA?

The Tripoli-based GNA has been shored up by Turkey's expanded military presence and import of Syrian fighters



Areas of control as of June 2020

-  Government of National Accord (GNA) and militias
-  National Army led by Khalifa Haftar
-  Oil and gas fields/pipelines

Sources: The Economist, OCHA, Liveuamap



UN recognition stemmed from a 2015 peace deal and attempt at forming a unity government in Libya. After the peace deal, however, the GNA quickly incorporated extremist elements into its apparatus and reneged on key promises regarding power sharing and other matters.

The GNA is not, in fact, the recognized government of Libya since the Tobruk-based House of Representatives (HoR) reacted to these breaches by voting not to recognize the GNA in 2016. Efforts at reconciling the GNA and the HoR government and the LNA, including promised elections in 2018, repeatedly failed.

This summer, things were finally heading toward another kind of resolution when Haftar's LNA advanced on Tripoli and some of the last pieces of territory controlled by the GNA. Backed by Russian mercenaries and armaments from Arab allies, Haftar's forces occupied the suburbs of Tripoli until just a few weeks ago.



Turkish deminers search and clear landmines in the Salah al-Din area, south of the Libyan capital Tripoli, on June 15, 2020. (AFP)

Turkey's decisive intervention on behalf of the GNA reversed the situation. Turkey sent in its own soldiers, some 2,000 of its Syrian rebel proxy forces, weaponry and money. The GNA repaid Ankara for its support by signing, among other things, maritime agreements that buttress Turkish claims to much of the Mediterranean.

Turkey and Qatar would like to see the Muslim Brotherhood-style parties of the GNA, and other Sunni Islamist groups within its fold, cement their power in oil-rich Libya. Egypt, the UAE, Saudi Arabia and most other Arab states, in contrast, remain quite averse to a takeover of Libya by Islamist forces.

Egypt may even prove willing to intervene with its own troops should Haftar's LNA suffer too many setbacks in the next few weeks.



Supporters of Libyan military strongman Khalifa Haftar carry placards as they take part in a demonstration in the coastal city of Benghazi in eastern Libya, against Turkish intervention in the country's affairs on February 14, 2020. (AFP/File Photo)

At the moment, it looks like Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has succeeded once again in getting his way through the deployment of military force. Libya offers him a route to influence in much of energy-rich North Africa, and Turkish forces may remain there for quite some time.

If the 1974 Turkish occupation of northern Cyprus serves as an example, occupied parts of northern Syria may likewise be using the Turkish lira for a long time to come. Even northern Iraq now appears vulnerable to Turkish military occupation of indeterminate duration.

Although France in particular appears quite alarmed by the Turkish moves in the region, Ankara's other NATO allies have stayed inexplicably quiet about these developments. As for the US, important voices in the White House and State Department still seem to think Turkey could prove useful for containing Iran and various Islamist extremists in the region.



A fighter loyal to Libya's UN-recognised Government of National Accord (GNA), poses for a group picture while celebrating in the town of Tarhuna, about 65 kilometres southeast of the capital Tripoli on June 5, 2020, after the area was taken over by pro-GNA forces from rival forces loyal to strongman Khalifa Haftar. (AFP/File Photo)

For Washington's non-Qatari Gulf Arab allies and Egypt, however, Ankara's region-wide muscle-flexing is extremely worrisome. Turkish support for various Sunni Islamist currents threatens regional stability just when the Arab world seemed to finally be getting a lid on the problem.

Ankara has even recently increased its activity in Yemen, perhaps seeking to gain a strategic foothold there as well. With both Turkey and Iran projecting power and cultivating proxies all over the Middle East, and cooperating as often as not in the process, leaders in many Arab capitals worry that both countries have renewed their imperialist appetites of the not-so-distant past.

Both Turkey and Iran may lack the wherewithal to sustain their ambitions, however. Iran's economic problems and sanctions have caused significant domestic unrest and severely limit its ability to support proxies and allies abroad. Turkey's economy, although much stronger than Iran's, also appears on the brink.



Members of the self-proclaimed eastern Libyan National Army (LNA) special forces gather in the city of Benghazi, on their way to reportedly back up fellow LNA fighters on the frontline west of the city of Sirte, facing forces loyal to the UN-recognised Government of National Accord (GNA), on June 18, 2020. (AFP)

One of Turkey's vulnerabilities thus probably resides in Europe. If European states grow sufficiently alarmed by Ankara's growing military bravado over gas in the Mediterranean and its cultivation of Islamist proxies across the region, they could push Turkey's economy over the edge with even minor sanctions. Turkey would in turn threaten to flood Europe with migrants, of course, which will give pause to decision-makers in Brussels.

New leadership in Washington might also offer a promising tool to constrain Turkish ambitions and military adventurism in the region. While US President Donald Trump seems to care little about Turkish designs on the Mediterranean and the Arab world, and to enjoy a good personal relationship with Erdogan, the same cannot be said for Democratic candidate Joe Biden.

Biden's Senate voting record on Turkey was mostly negative for Ankara. He refers to Erdogan as "an autocrat." Biden has also spoken on the record about supporting opposition parties in Turkey in an effort to effect democratic change there.



People wave flags of Libya (R) and Turkey (L) during a demonstration in the Martyrs' Square in the centre of the Libyan capital Tripoli, currently held by the UN-recognised Government of National Accord (GNA), on June 21, 2020. (AFP)

Perhaps most alarmingly for leaders in Ankara, Biden even recently said the Turks must “understand that we’re not going to continue to play with them the way we have.” With regard to the eastern Mediterranean, he said the US should “get together with our allies in the region and deal with how we isolate his (Erdogan’s) actions in the region, particularly in the eastern Mediterranean in relating to oil and a whole range of other things.”

If a Biden-led US were to pressure Ankara economically, the resultant pain in an over-extended Turkey could prove severe, possibly even severe enough to constrain what for the moment looks like unrestrained ambition in the region.

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France freezes role in NATO Libya force amid Turkey tensionsTurkey slams France's 'destructive' approach to Libya conflict

[UAE-based company plans to triple face-mask production](#)

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Wed, 2020-07-01 20:35

DUBAI: ViroMasks is producing half a million of its reusable face masks each month to guard against COVID-19, the UAE-based company said. It plans to increase production to 1.5 million masks by August by automating

some of the production process, partner Usman Khalid told Arab News. The company's masks combine various technologies that "neutralize COVID-19 within 30 minutes of exposure, whereas in regular fabric (the virus) can last from 48 hours to a week or so," Khalid added. The masks are produced in the UAE by AMCO, which also manufactures uniforms for other sectors, such as military and security. The venture so far is "self-funded," Khalid said.



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Japan shoppers crash website for face masks
Coronavirus-hit Iran to make masks compulsory from next week

[The billionaire who rose from humble roots in Syria to conquer the business world in France](#)

Wed, 2020-07-01 20:03

PARIS: Syrian-born French billionaire Mohed Altrad was in the news recently for having stood for the office of mayor in Montpellier, a southern French

city popular with artists and tourists. Though he lost the election, his story is literally one of rags to riches. He emerged from the most humble, and distressing, of origins to achieve levels of success most people only dream of.

He made the bulk of his fortune while living in Montpellier. The tale of how a former Syrian became involved in the local politics of Montpellier is a genuine success story.

Despite his wealth and success in business, this 72-year-old self-made man – the founder and owner of the Altrad Group, who was named World Entrepreneur in 2015 by Ernst and Young – continues to walk among the citizens of the city with no bodyguards.

Altrad was born in 1948 into a Bedouin tribe in the desert area of Raqqa in Syria. His mother was very young, only about 14 years old. He describes the tragic circumstances of his birth in a matter-of-fact way.

“My mother, who was about 13, was raped twice by my father, who was much older and the chief of the tribe,” he said. “The first rape resulted in my brother, Mayouf, who died very young because of mistreatment by my father. I was the result of the second rape.

“My father was the chief of a bedouin tribe and he had all the power. The tribe used to move from place to place with its herds of goats and camels so I was unable to go to school.”

Fortune nonetheless smiled on the youngster when a distant cousin of his father’s, who lived a less nomadic lifestyle in a village but had no children of his own, offered to take him in and send him to elementary school.

“My father did not want me to go to school but I went anyway, without the means to buy pencils, books or clothes,” said Altrad. “I loved school and was a good student.”

The fates were once again in his favor and he was able to remain in education through high school, from which he graduated with a baccalaureate, with the help of another man of limited means.

“I stayed in his house for three years and passed all my exams,” he said. “That year the Syrian government decided to give a scholarship to the best student in each region to study abroad and I was first in Raqqa.

“That is how I arrived in Montpellier in France in 1970, where I studied French at university. Then I earned a degree at the Scientific University of Montpellier, and from there I went on to Paris where I obtained a Ph.D. in Information Technology.”

While studying for his doctorate in 1975, Altrad worked at Thompson-CSF which specialized in military electronics. Then he joined the telecoms company Alcatel, before moving to the UAE where he spent four years working for the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company.

"I left (Abu Dhabi) because my wife, who is French, wanted our son to be educated in France so we came back in 1980," said Altrad. "I founded a company which made one of the first portable computers. I sold that business very quickly because it was growing rapidly and I wanted money."

At that time, he owned a country house in a village called Florensac, between Montpellier and Beziers, and while staying there, one of his neighbors asked if he would be interested in buying his scaffolding company.

"That was the first time I had heard of scaffolding but I bought the company and liked the work very much," said Altrad. "It was very different from IT, and I enjoyed the construction business and public works."

"The company was in deficit but I managed to correct that and began making profits, which enabled me to buy other companies. At present I have 200 subsidiaries all over the world, with 42,000 employees and a turnover of 400 million euros."

"Only a quarter of the companies are in France because I wanted to build an international group and I have plenty of business in Abu Dhabi and Saudi Arabia in the oil and gas construction sector."

He has written three books on management and three novels. His first novel, "Badawi," published in 1994, was well received and chosen by the French Ministry of Education to be studied in schools. It is largely based on his life story, with a hero named Mayouf after the brother he lost. There are many messages and life lessons in the pages of the book, but perhaps the main one is the notion that time passes all-too quickly and so it is important to do good for other people and one's country.

Altrad is immensely grateful to France, and Montpellier in particular, for enabling him "to achieve all that I, regretfully, could not have achieved in my country."

As for how he feels about the current situation in Syria, he said he has only distant memories of the country and no longer feels connected to it. His mother died at a young age and he no longer has any family or other links to the land of his birth. Instead, he focuses on showing his gratitude to his adopted country by donating to a number of charitable and medical associations in France.







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Syria donors gather as virus, economic chaos deepen crisis
With little aid, Syria's Raqqa struggles to revive schools

West Bank under lockdown as virus numbers soar

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Wed, 2020-07-01 15:31

RAMALLAH: The Palestinian Authority on Wednesday announced a five-day lockdown across the West Bank after total confirmed coronavirus infections in the territory more than doubled following the easing of previous restrictions.

"Starting from Friday morning, all governorates of the West Bank... will be closed for a period of five days," government spokesman Ibrahim Melhem said, adding that pharmacies, bakeries and supermarkets were exempt.

The latest data from the Palestinian ministry of health said that as of Wednesday morning, a total of 2,636 people had tested positive for COVID-19 since the illness was first recorded in the West Bank, compared with just 1,256 a week ago.

Last week, after the easing of a previous coronavirus lockdown in late May, Palestinian health minister Mai Al-Kaila said the territory had entered a second wave of infections "more dangerous than the first".

Most infections were traceable to Palestinians working in Israel or Arab Israeli visitors to the West Bank, Kaila said.

There have been seven deaths from the virus in the territory.

Israel has also recorded a surge, with 25,547 confirmed cases on Wednesday morning, up around 15 percent from a week earlier.

The Palestinian Authority imposed a full West Bank lockdown after the first coronavirus cases were identified on 5 March, lifting it at the end of May. A public health state of emergency was reimposed for 30 days from early June. Bethlehem was closed from Monday morning after a major spike in COVID-19 infections.

The cities of Hebron and Nablus were also already under lockdown.

Tens of thousands of West Bank Palestinians travel to work in Israel as day labourers and Palestinian prime minister Mohammed Shtayyeh has urged them to self-isolate for 14 days.

Those who are temporarily staying in Israel have been asked not to return home for the time being.

Arab Israelis – descendants of Palestinians who remained on their land after the creation of Israel in 1948 – have also been asked to avoid visiting.



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UK PM Johnson tells Israel: do not annex parts of the occupied West Bank
Israeli defense chief says West Bank annexation 'will wait'

[Egypt court sentences one monk to death, another to life for abbot's killing](#)

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CAIRO: An Egyptian court upheld a death sentence for one Coptic monk and life in prison for another over the killing of the abbot of a desert monastery in 2018, a judicial source said.

In a case that shocked the Middle East's largest religious minority, Bishop Epiphanius was found with a bleeding head wound after being bludgeoned to death in July 2018.

Epiphanius was the abbot of the Saint Macarius monastery in the plains of Wadi Al-Natrun, northwest of the capital Cairo.

Prosecutors said one of the monks, Isaiah, confessed to beating the cleric with a metal bar as the second monk, Philotheos, kept watch.

Authorities blamed the killing on unspecified "differences" between the bishop and the two monks.

Isaiah, whose original name is Wael Saad Tawadros, was later defrocked.

An earlier sentence passed down in April 2019 condemned them both to death.

It was later referred to Egypt's Grand Mufti, the country's top theological authority, who is required by law to give his legally non-binding opinion in cases of capital punishment.

Wednesday's verdict, which cannot be appealed after the Cassation Court upheld it, reduced the sentence for Philotheos to life in prison.

The court said in last year's ruling the defendants had carried out "one of the greatest crimes," according to a court official.

"(Their) status as monks did not stop them from carrying out this crime, the place of the crime did not deter them, and they did not care about the advanced age of the victim or his religious status," it said.

In the wake of the bishop's killing, Egypt's Coptic Church placed a one-year moratorium on accepting new monks.

It also banned monks from social media, tightened financial controls and refocused attention on spiritual life.

Coptic Christians make up about 10-15 percent of Egypt's predominantly Sunni Muslim population of over 100 million.

The country's vast desert are home to some of Christianity's oldest monasteries.



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