



December 2019

ASSESSING TURKEY'S MILITARY OPTIONS IN LIBYA

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Context

Amidst fierce clashes in Libya and advances by General Haftar's forces, Turkey and the Government of National Accord have signed a defense cooperation deal. On Thursday, December 19, the GNA announced that it ratified the deal. The Turkish Parliament ratified the agreement on

Saturday, December 21. This paper offers a brief open-source intelligence based assessment as to Ankara's options and caveats related to its military engagement in Libya.

Key Judgements

➤ The Turkish government has prepared the ground for an upscaling of its military support to the Government of National Accord by passing a bill in the Turkish Parliament.

➤ Presumably, Turkey will dispatch an elite joint contingent to Libya soon. The forward-deployed group of forces could include Special Forces elements and highly combat capable personnel across the spectrum (urban warfare specialization units, marine commandos, special operations units), along with military intelligence and liaison officers. The contingent would enjoy flexible rules of engagement in their military advisory mission. Since 2016, the Turkish Armed Forces have gained a considerable level of experience in such efforts thanks to the Syrian campaigns.

➤ In coming months, Ankara can also seek to legislate for regulating private military companies. Ankara could then delegate some of the military advisory and combat roles in Libya to PMCs.

➤ Turkey does not have adequate naval aviation capacity to intervene in the Libyan conflict. The Turkish Navy's forthcoming amphibious assault vessel, TCG Anadolu, has not entered into service yet. Besides, given the geographical limitations, the Turkish Air Force cannot generate the required

sortie rates in the Libyan skies if needed. As the GNA's airbases cannot accommodate large numbers of F-16s, which form the backbone of the Turkish airpower, forward-deployment is not an option. Furthermore, although the Turkish defense sector produces state-of-the-art unmanned aerial systems in tactical and MALE (medium altitude – long endurance) classes, more advanced platforms with heavier payloads will enter into service by the early 2020s. All in all, Turkey has limited options in the Libyan airspace except for deploying overwhelming numbers of tactical and MALE drones.

➤ In all likelihood, Turkey is to boost its drone signature in Libya. In return, the United Arab Emirates, along with other sponsors of General Haftar's forces, could respond by sending in more air defenses.

➤ The risk of mission creep and protracted hybrid warfare remains high. However, if unchecked, the ongoing progress of Haftar's forces can significantly threaten the GNA, jeopardizing Ankara's strategic interests in Libya and, in a broader geopolitical sense, in the Mediterranean. Thus, Ankara's present calculus favors an aspirant military policy over the risks of mission creep.

A. Closer Look into Turkey's Military Options in Libya

1) Boosting Drone Capabilities in the Battleground

The Turkish defense technological and industrial base (DTIB) has long fostered its drone design and production capacity. Currently, Turkey enjoys a large unmanned aerial systems (UAS) arsenal with notable combat record. Drone warfare has already become a key pillar of the Turkish security apparatus' strategic culture. Entire branches of the military, along with the gendarmerie, the national intelligence agency, and the police forces, utilize unmanned platforms.

Within the Turkish UAS inventory, Bayraktar TB-2 deserves attention. One of the best in its class around the globe, the system has more than 110,000 operational flight hours. It can fly for some 24 hours uninterruptedly, carrying 55 kilograms payload¹. Back in 2018, during Operation Olive Branch, Bayraktar TB-2 scored around 11% of the direct kills and 17% of overall target acquisitions². Roketsan-produced smart munitions equip the unmanned platform with high-

precision solutions against stationary and time-sensitive targets³. Open-source evidence have already shown Bayraktar TB-2 activity over the Libyan skies⁴.

For Turkey, a viable way-forward could be boosting the unmanned aerial signature in Libya. In a broader context, helping the GNA establish several drone operating bases through the recent military support deal is highly likely.

In fact, the 'dronization' of Ankara's current military policy is not limited to Libya. At the time of writing, the Turkish Armed Forces have deployed Bayraktar TB-2s to the Geçitkale Airport in Northern Cyprus against the background of a potential escalation in the Eastern Mediterranean. Thus, pursuing an ambitious drone warfare program in Libya would not mark an exception for Turkey.



Bayraktar TB-2 tactical UAS with Roketsan-manufactured smart munitions.

¹ Baykar Savunma, <https://www.baykarsavunma.com/iha-15.html>, Accessed on: December 17, 2019.

² Can Kasapoglu and Banş Kirdemir, *The Rising Drone Power: Turkey on the Eve of Its Military Breakthrough*, EDAM, 2018.

³ Roketsan, <http://www.roketsan.com.tr/en/product/mam-l-smart-micro-munition/>, Accessed on: December 17, 2019.

⁴ IHS Jane's, <https://www.janes.com/article/90739/turkish-uav-seen-in-libya>, Accessed on: December 17, 2019.

2) Establishing an Elite Military Advisory Contingent with Broader Operational Roles and Boosting Advanced Equipment Transfers

Turkey can establish an elite contingent in Libya. To address the pressing threat posed to the GNA, Turkey's military advisory teams should enjoy flexible rules of engagement, such as accompanying the GNA's indigenous combat formations in action zones and calling-in close air-support when necessary.

Such a forward-deployed contingent would incorporate elements from various battle-hardened units within the Turkish doctrinal order of battle, including the Special Forces, the marine commandos (the SAT and SAS units in the Turkish military lexicon), and possibly, special operations units with vast urban warfare experience. Military intelligence and liaison officers would also take part in the Libyan expedition. In tandem, the recent defense cooperation agreement between Ankara and the GNA covers a broad array of issues, ranging from training activities to intelligence sharing.

3) Sending in PMCs and 'Unconventional Elements'

Recently, when addressing a question as to the prospects of sending troops to Libya, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan told that Turkey could dispatch expeditionary units in case the GNA demands assistance. More importantly, Turkey's President referred to the Russian Private Military Company Wagner's activities in Libya⁵. Indeed, Wagner's 'not so covert' activities have long been raising eyebrows among the Western strategic community⁶.

Notably, at the time of writing, press sources have speculated that Turkey could opt for establishing PMCs for future missions in Libya⁷. Given the large human resources pool that Turkey could enjoy – both in terms of retired military

So far, Turkey has transferred large amounts of land warfare equipment to the GNA forces, including Kirpi Mine Resistant & Ambush Protected (MRAP) tactical vehicles. Notwithstanding the relevant UNSC resolutions, Ankara could opt for transferring more advanced arms to the GNA forces, as the backers of Hafter's forces do not refrain from doing the same.

Finally, if the Turkish government was to send an elite military advisory contingent with operational roles, then the Turkish arms transfers should extend to more sophisticated weaponry to ensure better protection (i.e. Korkut short-range air defense system, counter drone arms). In the absence of adequate organic air defenses and counter-UAS capabilities, Turkey's servicemen will be exposed to grave risks.

personnel as well as other 'unconventional' elements in Syria – such an option is well within the realm of possibilities.

Turkey is likely to consider the PMC option in the long run. Lessons-learned from the Syrian expedition, as well as Ankara's growing tendency to use proxies as a part of its regional military policy, remain the underlying reasons in this respect. However, the present Turkish legal acquis with regards to private security companies does not cover PMC regulations. Thus, any amendments in the related legislations would mark a telltale indicator, suggesting Ankara's move to go for its own 'Wagner option'.

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XhdwnW7YABY>, Accessed on: December 17, 2019.

⁶ For a detailed assessment, see: Nathaniel Reynolds, Putin's Not-So-Secret Mercenaries: Patronage Geopolitics and the Wagner Group, Carnegie, 2019.

⁷ Aksam, <https://www.aksam.com.tr/guncel/turkiye-libya-icin-ozel-askeri-sirket-mi-kuracak/haber-1030647>, Accessed on: December 17, 2019.

B. Military-Strategic and Operational Caveats

1) Air Defenses and the UAS Survivability

Open-source intelligence evidence reveals Pantsir S1 (SA-22 in NATO designation) short-to-mid range air defense deployments in Libya. In the Western writings, the system is known as a capable drone killer. Notably, during January 2018 swarming attacks to the Russian bases in Tartous and Latakia, the referred SAM system intercepted 7 UAVs out of 13 (the remaining 6 were grounded by electronic warfare assets)⁸. The Pantsir presence can pose a grave threat to the Turkish Bayraktar TB-2s in the area of operations.

More importantly, the variant spotted in Libya, mounted on a MAN SX45 8X8 Truck, is exclusive to the United Arab Emirates, as standard Pantsir variants use KAMAZ 6560 8X8 trucks⁹. In other words, we have tangible evidence highlighting the Emirati Pantsir transfers to General Hafter's forces. If Turkey were to boost its drone warfare efforts in support of the GNA, the Emiratis could counterpunch by fostering their SAM transfers to General Hafter's air defense units.

The Pantsir line offers robust air defense solutions with two 30mm automatic anti-aircraft guns and 57E6 or 9M335 surface-to-air missiles. The missile & anti-aircraft gun combination used in the Pantsir line, being an important design philosophy feature of the Soviet and Russian short-range SAM tradition, enables the system to engage

its targets through the depth of different interceptors in one platform. Latest upgrades to the system have made it capable of path-tracking up to some 40 targets, and more importantly, equips it with autonomous sector observation when target detection assets are undermined by jamming or other stressing factors¹⁰.

From a military standpoint, so far, the Israeli Defense Forces have performed the best practices to address the Pantsir threat. The Israeli solution in eliminating the Syrian Arab Air Defense Force's Pantsir SAMs is centered on 'kamikaze drones', namely, loitering munitions with anti-radiation capabilities. In many incidents, the Israeli Harop drones proved to be successful in tracing and homing in onto radar emissions with full autonomy¹¹.

Although Turkey retains Harop's predecessor, the Israeli-manufactured Harpy, in its arsenal, transferring an Israeli-made (and outdated) drone to the GNA would be problematic. The Turkish defense sector have been working on developing Harop-like capabilities for sometime. However, Turkey's indigenous anti-radiation kamikaze drone would not be ready for combat duty soon. Vestel's forthcoming UAS, Kargı, is expected to be ready by the 2020s. Thus, Hafter's Emirati-transferred SAM systems will keep being a concern for Ankara and its ally, the GNA.



OSINT piece of evidence showcasing the Pantsir deployment in Libya. The picture was harvested from social media. The system is mounted on a MAN SX45 8X8 truck which remains a unique configuration of the UAE

⁸ David Axe, "Danger: Is Russia a Threat to US Drones?", The National Interest, November 2019, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/danger-russia-threat-us-drones-93161>, Accessed on: December 18, 2019.

⁹ IHS Jane's, Pantsyr Family, November 2016.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Sebastien Roblin, "Israel's Kamikaze Drones are Causing Problems for Syria", The National Interest, November 2019, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/israels-kamikaze-drones-are-causing-problems-syria-95051>, Accessed on: December 18, 2019.

2) Mission Creep Factor and Protracted Hybrid Warfare

The Libyan conflict does not hint at a decisive end in sight. At present, the most likely scenario remains a protracted hybrid war and a consuming stalemate for the stakeholders. In order to tip the balance, one would have to deploy a decisive, game-changer military power in the battleground. Yet, all the outsider parties tend to rely on proxies and limited engagement strategies.

Although EDAM's assessments suggest a more robust Turkish involvement in Libya, we do not expect bulky conventional formations of the Turkish Armed Forces operating in the Libyan territory, nor do we foresee the Turkish Air Force operating from the GNA bases. In all likelihood, as mentioned

earlier, Ankara will opt for dispatching a small elite contingent alongside the GNA forces and boosting arms transfers to its Libyan ally.

In case the conflict escalates, such a limited force posture will be exposed to various threats. Especially, any Turkish personnel getting captured by hostile factions could lead to political crises. The Emirati, Egyptian, and the Saudi efforts – even the Russian Wagner's efforts – will seek to undermine Turkey's military position in Libya. These actors and General Haftar's forces can even attempt deliberately targeting the Turkish military advisors on the ground.

3) Limited Airpower Options and Limited Naval Aviation Capacity

In case of an escalation, the air force would have limited capabilities. The F-16s form the backbone of Turkey's airpower. Being tactical military aviation assets, these aircraft have limited combat radius which means they would need multiple times aerial refueling when flying from the Turkish principal to Libya. Such a demanding concept of operations would severely reduce the sortie rates. Under ideal conditions, forward basing could have been an option. However, the airbases under the GNA control cannot support intensive operations of NATO-standards aircraft. Besides, unlike Russia, Turkey does not have heavy bombers which can deliver overwhelming firepower at a time.

With the air force facing logistical setbacks, naval aviation could have been a panacea to address the abovementioned

issues. However, Turkey's forthcoming amphibious assault vessels, TCG Anadolu (based on the Spanish Juan Carlos-1 class LHD), will not be ready until the early 2020s. Even when it comes to longer term planning, the fact that Turkey is now out of the F-35 project leaves the nation's forthcoming flagship without an air-wing¹², reducing its naval aviation capabilities into rotary-winged platforms. In brief, Turkey's navy cannot compensate for the air force.

Finally, while unmanned aerial options can tip the balance at tactical level, the assets that can make a bigger difference, namely, Turkey's advanced UAS with higher payloads and strategic mission capabilities, such as Akinci and Aksungur, will be combat-ready by the early 2020s.

4) Logistics and Sustainability of the Expeditionary Posture

In order to sustain its forward-deployed assets and personnel in Libya, Turkey needs to establish a continuous air and naval bridge to the GNA-controlled territory. Maintaining the sea lines of communications and contemporary cargo flights

under wartime conditions is difficult. In terms of defense economics, and especially when combined with the risk of mission creep and the protracted character of the conflict, the Libya campaign could turn into a costly endeavor.

¹² Turkey had planned to embark an F-35B air-wing on TCG Anadolu for the navy in addition to the air force's planned F-35A procurements.

Conclusion

Recently signed military support deal gives the required freedom of movement to the Turkish government in executing its Libya policy. Our assessments conclude that Ankara is likely to pursue a dual-track roadmap in Libya. In the short run, Turkey is to dispatch a capable military advisory mission and to boost arms transfers to the GNA. In the long run, Ankara would probably encourage PMCs for expeditionary roles in high-risk territories and training activities for friendly forces. Meanwhile, Turkey – Russia bilateral relations, and especially President Vladimir Putin's Ankara visit in mid-January 2020 remain key factors to monitor. Finally, one should keep in mind that adopting an ambitious military posture would motivate Ankara's rivals to bleed Turkey in a protracted hybrid war hundreds of kilometers away from the Turkish mainland.

Nevertheless, we anticipate Turkey's growing military commitment in Libya in near future.

A potential Libyan expedition would bring about certain drawbacks. The risk of facing spiraling escalation with other proxy war belligerents remains high. In such case, Ankara would have to adopt a more aspirant posture in the Libyan conflict. Unlike Syrian campaigns, the Turkish Military cannot enjoy force generation superiority in the Libyan battleground. Likewise, the Turkish Air Force's high sortie rates or the army's land-based fire-support assets cannot be relied on in Libya. Overall, although defending the GNA serves Ankara's strategic interests, doing so in an open-ended conflict could lead to an unfavorable trajectory.



EDAM Defense Intelligence Sentinel 2019/05

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