

Turkey's policy towards Libya: a year of major shifts

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In 2025, Turkey reoriented its policy towards Libya, drawing both politically and militarily closer to its former rival, Khalifa Haftar – the leader of the Libyan National Army, which controls the eastern part of the country. The clearest indication of this policy shift came in August, when the head of Turkish intelligence visited Benghazi and met with Haftar, signalling a major change in bilateral relations.

Ankara's rapprochement with Haftar's Libya is intended to secure the ratification of a 2019 bilateral agreement on the delimitation of Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) by the pro-Haftar parliament in Tobruk. Such a move could heighten tensions between Turkey and Greece, already exacerbated by long-standing border disputes, including those concerning energy resource exploration in the Mediterranean. In a bid to de-escalate, Athens proposed including Turkey in a new regional dialogue format that would, among other issues, address maritime boundaries involving Greece, Cyprus, Egypt, and Libya. Ankara, however, declined to support the proposal. Should the Tobruk parliament ultimately ratify the 2019 agreement, it would not only deepen the Greek–Turkish rift but also strain Turkey's relations with the European Union and weaken cohesion along NATO's southern flank.

Turkey's political interests in Libya

Since the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, Libya has remained a divided state, with rival centres of power competing for control. On one side stands the Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli – recognised under a 2015 UN Security Council resolution as the legitimate authority – which controls north-western Libya and is supported by Qatar and Turkey. On the other is the Libyan National Army (LNA), led by Haftar, which dominates the eastern part of the country, with Benghazi as its capital, and is backed by Egypt, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, France, and Russia. The GNA–LNA conflict stems from political, regional, and tribal divisions, as well as competition for control over natural resources, particularly oil, and gas reserves.

Turkey became directly involved in the conflict in April 2019, when Haftar's forces, supported by the Wagner Group, launched an offensive against Tripoli. Ankara seized the opportunity by supplying the GNA with drones, air defence systems, military advisers, and approximately 3,500 paid Syrian fighters (according to the US Department of Defence). This enabled Tripoli to repel the assault, regain key areas, and ultimately led to a ceasefire in October 2020.

Turkey's decision to back the GNA was closely linked to its regional interests. Firstly, the Tripoli government was an ideological ally of Turkey, associated with the Muslim

Brotherhood – an organisation Ankara supported across the region, putting it at odds with Egypt and the UAE, which viewed the Brotherhood as a threat to their political systems. Secondly, and perhaps more critically, Ankara regarded its support for the GNA as an investment in safeguarding its interests in the Mediterranean basin.

A key element of this strategy was the signing of an agreement with the GNA in November 2019 on the delimitation of Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs). Under its provisions, the maritime zones of Turkey and Libya were connected (see map), granting Ankara the right to explore and extract Libyan offshore oil and gas resources. The agreement also aimed to hinder the construction of the EastMed gas pipeline, promoted by Greece, Cyprus, Egypt, and Israel, which excluded Turkey despite Ankara's interpretation of maritime law indicating that the pipeline's route crossed almost entirely its EEZ. The agreement between Ankara and Tripoli, which infringed upon the EEZs of Greek islands such as Crete and Kastellorizo and partially that of Egypt, provoked opposition from Athens and Cairo, who deemed it incompatible with international law.

The Turkish–Libyan agreement thus became an extension of the Turkish–Greek dispute over maritime boundaries, rooted in differing interpretations of maritime law. Turkey has not signed the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and consequently rejects the notion that Greek islands are entitled to full EEZs. From Ankara's viewpoint, islands such as Crete and Kastellorizo confer only limited maritime rights, if any. On this basis, the agreement with Libya served not only as a means for Turkey to strengthen its political and energy position in the region – which required keeping the GNA in power – but also as another opportunity to challenge the Greek vision of maritime boundaries.

A fresh start with Haftar

In 2025, Turkey adjusted its policy towards Libya, moving away from exclusive support for the GNA in Tripoli and initiating dialogue with Haftar and the LNA. In April 2025, Haftar's son, Saddam – newly appointed deputy commander of the previously hostile LNA – visited Ankara to discuss military cooperation. Another clear indication of this policy change came in August 2025, when the head of Turkish intelligence, İbrahim Kalın, visited Benghazi for the first time since the fall of Gaddafi. There, he met with Haftar and the LNA to discuss bilateral relations, regional security, combating illegal migration, and cooperation on intelligence and military matters.

This shift in relations between the LNA and Ankara appears to be driven by Haftar himself, who, at the age of 81, is seeking to ensure dynastic succession. To this end, he has promoted his sons to key positions: alongside Saddam, Khaled has become chief of staff, while Belqasem has been appointed head of reconstruction funds. Establishing ties with Turkey is intended to enhance the international legitimacy of this succession. At the same time, these moves aim to broaden the family's alliances beyond traditional patrons such as Russia – a particularly important step given the Kremlin's military weakening as a result of the ongoing war in Ukraine, which has diminished its capacity to act as Haftar's principal military partner.

From Turkey's perspective, this fresh start in relations with the LNA brings multiple benefits. In exchange for re-establishing ties and providing military support to Benghazi – including potential arms deliveries and military training – Ankara has received preliminary assurances

regarding the ratification of the 2019 agreement by the pro-Haftar parliament in Tobruk. Should this occur, the deal would gain the missing endorsement of the LNA, which had previously contested Tripoli's decision and firmly opposed Turkish involvement in its EEZ. This would grant Ankara full and legal access to oil and gas exploration and extraction operations in Libya's eastern waters, reinforcing its claims in maritime delimitation disputes with Greece.

At the same time, Turkey could consolidate its position in Libya as a key mediator and a stabilising force committed to the country's unification in accordance with the UN's objective, thereby legitimising its military presence. In such a scenario, Ankara would not only assume a dominant role in shaping the trajectory of the Libyan conflict – weakening, for example, Russia's political ties with Haftar – but would also strengthen its military position in the Mediterranean through cooperation with both Libyan administrations. The GNA likewise views Ankara's rapprochement with Benghazi as an opportunity to ease tensions with the LNA and resume political dialogue.

Greece – is escalation inevitable?

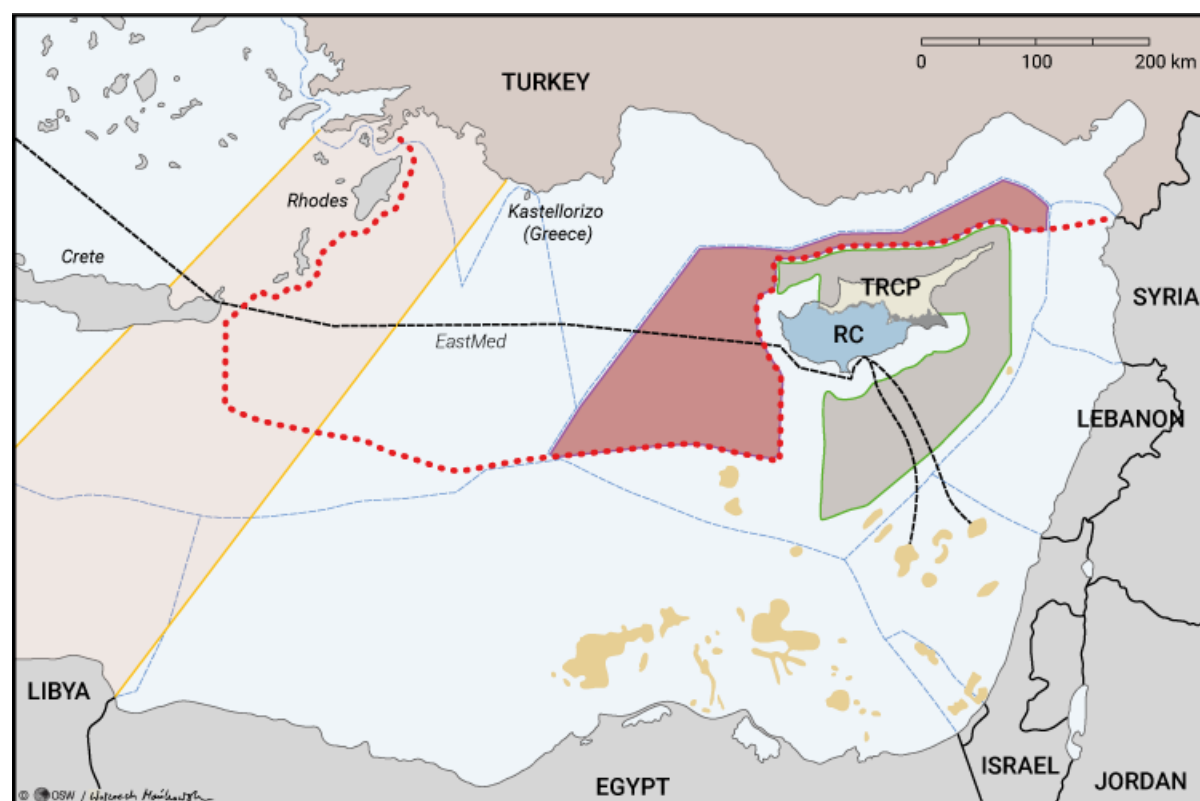
The potential ratification of the Turkey–Libya EEZ agreement by the Tobruk-based parliament would heighten tensions between Turkey and Greece and could jeopardise the dialogue initiated in 2023 (see '[A thaw in Turkish-Greek relations](#)'). The situation is further aggravated by intensifying competition over energy resources. In May 2025, Athens launched a tender for hydrocarbon exploration across four maritime blocks, prompting strong protests from both Tripoli and Benghazi, which claimed that some of the deposits lay within Libya's maritime zone. In July, the Libyan National Oil Corporation (NOC) and the Turkish Petroleum Corporation (TPAO) signed a memorandum of understanding on geological surveys in offshore areas. Athens deemed the move illegal and raised the issue at the European Council summit (26–27 June), which subsequently issued a strongly critical statement.

These developments, along with Turkey's growing influence in Libya, have likely forced Athens to recalibrate its policy towards Ankara [in order to](#) avoid further escalation in the Eastern Mediterranean. In October 2025, the Greek Prime Minister proposed establishing a multilateral dialogue format involving Greece, the Republic of Cyprus, Egypt, Turkey, and Libya. The initiative is intended to focus on issues such as maritime zone delimitation, marine environmental protection, economic cooperation, and challenges related to illegal migration. Above all, it signals Athens' desire to de-escalate tensions and a potential readiness to move away from its earlier strategy, under which Greece sought to exclude Turkey from all political and energy cooperation frameworks in the Eastern Mediterranean.

However, the risk of political escalation between Turkey and Greece remains high. Although Ankara has not explicitly rejected the Greek proposal to join the new dialogue format, it has criticised the initiative on the grounds that the Republic of Cyprus does not represent the entire island and that the so-called Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus should also participate. Greece has not supported this proposal. In the current circumstances, and in the absence of further international mediation – for example from the United States or the European Union – the dispute over energy resources and EEZ demarcation could lead to a further rise in tensions between Ankara and Athens. This, in turn, could result in military

provocations similar to those seen in 2022, including shows of force at sea and airspace violations between Turkey and Greece. Such developments would complicate the EU's efforts to normalise relations with Ankara (see '[The difficult task of rebuilding EU-Turkey relations](#)'). A renewed escalation would also threaten the cohesion of NATO's southern flank, particularly in the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine, where Turkey plays a key role as a Western partner in the Black Sea. By controlling the strategic Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits, Turkey not only regulates access to the Black Sea but also acts as a vital counterweight to Russia's military influence in the region.

Map. Dispute over Exclusive Economic Zones in the Mediterranean



- **Boundaries of Exclusive Economic Zones**
(as defined by international law – Article 57 of the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea*)
- **Disputed maritime border of Turkey**
(Turkey does not accept the method of maritime border/EEZ delimitation for islands as set out in Article 121(2) of the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. Consequently, it does not recognise maritime borders around islands such as Kastellorizo, Rhodes, or Crete. The border reflects the Mavi Vatan doctrine, an alternative vision of Turkey's maritime ambitions.)
- Other maritime border disputes**
(arising from Turkey and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) not recognising Article 121(2) of the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea):
- dispute between Turkey and the Republic of Cyprus
- dispute between the TRNC and the Republic of Cyprus
- Turkey-Libya agreement on the delimitation of Exclusive Economic Zones**
(This agreement is not governed by international law but constitutes a bilateral arrangement. It infringes upon the maritime borders of Greece and Egypt, with whom Ankara has never reached a consensus on the deal.)
- Gas fields**
- **Planned EastMed Gas Pipeline (suspended)**

* *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea*, ONZ, 10.12.1982, un.org.

Source: *A row between Turkey and Greece over gas is raising tension in the eastern Mediterranean*, The Economist, 20 August 2020, economist.com; B. Stanicek, *Turkey: Remodelling the eastern Mediterranean*, European Parliament, September 2020, europarl.europa.eu.