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Deciphering Iran's declaration of support for Turkey in Libya

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*By Agha Hussain**

Iran's recent [statement of support](#) to the Turkish-backed Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA) may come as a surprise to many. The two's geopolitical divergences have always often been stark, making Iran's choice to now adopt a clear position on Libya – a country it has little involvement or prior interests of its own – which constitutes a pro-Turkish initiative a very prominent development.

In numerous ways, it marks Iran recognizing cooperation with Turkey in Libya as a possible springboard toward opening a new front against its major rival states in previously uncharted areas – and reminding Turkey of the importance of Iranian interests in Syria.

Challenging Israel in Africa

Iran's Middle East foreign policy has been tailored around countering Israel. Naturally, this has led to Iranian investment in arming Palestinian resistance groups in Gaza and the much more powerful Hezbollah in Lebanon to Israel's north, successfully preventing Israel's expansion attempts in these areas. Syria to Israel's west has been a conduit and base for this Iranian strategy and despite the turmoil in Syria Iran's presence there is yet strong.

Africa is another geographical zone of major economic, military and strategic interest to Israel where Iran currently lacks the means to truly pursue the Zionist state.

The progression into the public realm of Israel's ties with Gulf Arab states (GCC) has reinvigorated a [much older](#) Israeli quest for diplomatic acceptance in and access to the markets of Africa. With Saudi Arabia and the UAE acting as [advocates and middlemen for Israel](#) to what are usually authoritarian African leaders to restore or establish diplomatic ties with Israel, the Zionist state is progressing visibly on this front.

This initiative also dovetails and overlaps with Israel's goal for acceptance in the Muslim world, also facilitated by the GCC. Overall, this diplomatic 'expansion' into Africa has been proudly owned as a feather in his cap by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, himself - the point-man for Israel-GCC ties -, in line with his slogan "Israel is coming back to Africa and Africa is coming back to Israel."

The most vital African state shaping the outcome of Israel's quest for acceptance in Africa is also arguably the same one which sparked Israel's currently-accelerated scramble for Africa in the first place: Libya.

When Libyan President Muammar Gaddafi was toppled by NATO-supported insurgents in 2011, a [major obstacle to Israel's Africa ambitions](#) was removed. Gaddafi since taking power in 1969 had bestowed Libyan financial investment and development assistance upon African states to reward opposition to Israel. With his abrupt demise, his extensive plans for intra-African economic integration, free trade and mutual security went up in flames and Africa was left open and susceptible to ['charm offensives'](#) by Israel.

Today, however, the ongoing war for Libya's future is not only subject to active Israeli participation through backing its preferred faction, but also providing Iran a unique opportunity to begin developing a counter-Israel strategy in Africa.

Opposing the Turkish-backed GNA in Tripoli is the warlord General Khalifa Haftar. Haftar's 'Libyan National Army' (LNA) is supported by Israel, which supplies it weapons flown to it [via the UAE](#) after crossing [Israel and aligned Arab states](#) Egypt and Jordan.



Helping the GNA counter Haftar is consistent with Iran's thus far Levant-centric policy of containing Israeli expansion. Moreover, the urgency of preventing a Haftar victory in Libya to block Israel's advance through Africa is greater now for Iran as of Israel's recent success in achieving diplomatic normalization - and the groundwork for strategic ties - with Libya's large southern neighbours [Sudan](#) and [Chad](#).

Haftar-controlled territory thus now bears the luxury of three states within the Israeli-GCC orbit bordering it, with Egypt the most important to date. A Haftar-ruled Libya would form a pro-Israeli Libya-Egypt-Sudan-Chad acting in powerful unison to persuade or coerce African states yet opposed to Israel to normalize relations with it.



Preventing this scenario makes Iranian entry into the uncharted territory of the Libyan crisis for opposing the Israeli-favoured Haftar a prudent move.

A warning and an olive branch: Inducing Turkish compromise with Iran's allies in Syria

In Syria, recent escalation between Turkey and the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) over control of the Idlib governorate was grave enough to merit a strong reaction from Iran. As the clashes worsened in February and March and Turkey also came to blows with Hezbollah, Iran took the occasion to issue an [unprecedented warning](#) to Ankara on 1st March of potential direct Iran-Turkey clashes via the previously-unknown Iranian 'advisory centre in northern Syria'.

Fortunately for Iran, however, the progression of the Ankara-Damascus clash soon created a situation which enhanced Turkey's susceptibility to a manner of 'carrot and stick' approach by Iran pushing it toward compromise with Damascus in Idlib. Moreover, support for Turkey's Libya policy as of the escalation in Idlib becomes a prime venue for implementing the 'carrot' part of this approach.

It was Turkey's [abrupt volte-face](#) from previously [positively-progressing](#) diplomacy with Damascus mediated by Russia, which led to the escalation in Idlib. Thus, Turkey, as per Iran's perspective, had made the choice to not allow its issues with Damascus to be peacefully resolved – a development which would make it easier for the Syrians to focus on the western front against Israel.

The fighting in Idlib, however, did not go well for Turkey. By the time President Tayyip Erdogan managed to secure a ceasefire deal with his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin following a visit to Moscow on 5th March, Turkey had lost ground in Idlib to the Syrian Arab Army (SAA). Russia was far less generous in terms of protecting Turkey's presence in Idlib than it had proven when Putin and Erdogan first inked a deal extending Turkey's stay in Idlib with the September

2018 Sochi Agreement, disregarding the fate of [Turkish troops stranded behind SAA lines](#) at the time of ceasefire and acknowledging the SAA's gains.

Turkey received no practical support from the US and thus appeared highly isolated. Putin had rejected Erdogan's request to visit Turkey for the quick ceasefire and compelled him to come to Moscow, [emphasizing Turkey's weak bargaining position](#). Indeed, Erdogan had sought Russia's mediation knowing it was deference to Putin and not Turkish military might that would stop the SAA's advance.

Amidst the unprecedented coldness from Russia and lack of tangible US or NATO support, the Iranian advisory centre's warning to Turkey carried more weight. However, as Turkey edged dangerously toward strategic and diplomatic isolation in Syria, the scope for an olive branch to Ankara from the state most irritated with [Erdogan's Idlib misadventure](#) to make a serious impression on Turkish policymakers rose considerably.

By initiating a pro-Turkish Libya policy at this juncture, Iran showed Turkey its capacity and will to back it in a tough situation despite recent tensions over Idlib. Concurrently, the case for meaningful investment in closer ties with Iran would strengthen in Ankara and temper the dominant NATO or Israel-leaning actors sceptical toward Iran. Reciprocity for Iran's Libya olive branch would become seen as prudent for Turkish interests.

This reciprocity, as Iran has made fairly obvious, would take the shape of compromise with Damascus and Turkey's exit from Idlib. Sustaining support by Iran for Turkey's GNA client government in Libya is a gain larger than any loss Turkey would incur by withdrawing from Idlib. In fact, given the liability Idlib has proven to be, 'trading' it for continued Iranian backing in Libya would be a fair deal for Turkey.

Overall, Iran's Libya olive branch stands its ground as a well-thought out overture which may yield significant returns for itself in Syria and Turkey in Syria and Libya.

Keeping Turkey's 'pro-US' and 'pro-Israeli' camp at bay

In Turkey, keeping ties with Iran cold has often been seen as necessary collateral damage by the dominant in Turkey's halls of power who favour the US and Israel. Whatever room Islamists or the more powerful Eurasianists in Turkey have afforded to Iran has tended to be overshadowed by pro-US, pro-Israeli-induced cold shouldering of Tehran.

One recalls the outrage of Turkey's pro-US and pro-Israeli secularist military in the 1990s at religiously-inclined Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan's [August 1996 deal with Iran](#) for gas sales to Turkey via a pipeline. The military forced Erbakan to step down a year later and ensured

Turkey's part of the pipeline was not built – even though Turkey still had to pay for whatever gas was being sent by Iran and burning off into the open air.

Iran could not for the foreseeable future change this tendency in Turkey or downsize the pro-US, pro-Israel slant of its 'establishment'. However, similar to its utility in the case of the Idlib conflict in Syria, Iran's pro-Turkish Libya initiative possesses certain shrewdness if placed in the context of keeping at bay such anti-Iranian interventions by the Turkish establishment as was seen with the backlash against Erdogan in the 90s.

This is because Turkey's Libya intervention [is fully supported](#) by all its power brokers and is not subject to polarization between 'secularists versus Islamists' or 'pro-West versus pro-Eurasianists' divides.

Turkey's Libya intervention is motivated by geo-economics and derives from Turkey's long-time goal to be the [dominant transit hub](#) for energy supplies to Europe. Turkey needs Libyan ally for this stratagem due to an initiative launched by Turkish rivals in the Mediterranean region in 2018 to build a gas pipeline from newly-discovered gas fields utilized by Israel to Europe via Cyprus and Greece – while cutting Turkey out entirely.

Thus, Turkey signed a [memorandum of understanding with the GNA](#) in November 2019 demarcating a maritime boundary between their exclusive economic zones. It overlaps with the rival pipeline's route, raising the stakes vis a vis Turkish opposition to the project by essentially declaring the project a violation of Turkey's sovereignty.

Thus, since the Libyan intervention is not a specifically Islamist or anti-US, anti-Israeli Turkish foreign policy venture, the pro-US and pro-Israeli establishment cannot portray Iran's supportive stance as a nefarious attempt to prop up Iran-sympathizers in Turkey.

That bloc, therefore, will have trouble in pressurizing Erdogan to scuttle the brewing entente with Iran in Libya the way it scuttled the 1996 gas deal in the Erdogan era. Moreover, that this 'protection' Iran's Libya initiative provides against the Turkish establishment still stands despite the reality that Iran's Libya policy is part of its counter-Israeli geostrategy lends it additional bonus for Tehran.

Pragmatism, subtlety and new geopolitical horizons

Iran's entry into the Libyan crisis is a significant new chapter in its geopolitical journey since the Islamic Revolution in 1979. It provides new impetus to initiatives which otherwise found little hope of progress, such as creating room for pro-Iranian advocates within Turkey's policymaking circles, promoting Turkish compromise toward Iran's Syrian allies and enabling Iran to challenge Israel's African ambitions.

It is yet possible that Iran will not get out of Turkey what it seeks in exchange for support in Libya, but Iran has already made a major impact with its new Libya initiative.

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