

# Doubling-Down on Haftar:

## Examining France's Position in Libya

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(Sinan Gül - Anadolu Agency)

**Libya's civil war is fueled by internal contradictions underlying the rivalry of various political-military forces as well as external interferences of regional and international actors pursuing their own economic and geo-strategic interests. This policy outlook explores France's foreign policy in Libya, examining the mixture of strategic, geopolitical, economic, and ideological factors driving French interests in Libya. As such, it appears that France's intervention in Libya is primarily driven by the preservation of French economic benefits and in line with its desire to maintain and expand French influence in North Africa.**

## Introduction

On 19 March 2011, NATO members served as the air force of the revolution that toppled long-time Libyan ruler Muammar Qaddafi. The roles of former French President Nicolas Sarkozy and former British Prime Minister David Cameron were substantial in his removal from power. However, the Europeans proved unable to prevent the country's descent into a civil conflict which has recently intensified, maintaining Libya's status as an extremely fractured source of regional instability.

The [overthrow of Qaddafi's regime](#) failed to create stable political structures. The country steadily plunged into conflict fueled both by internal contradictions underlying the rivalry of various political-military forces and external interferences of regional and international actors pursuing their own economic and political-strategic interests.

Libyan Warlord Khalifa Haftar and his self-declared 'Libyan National' Army (LNA) announced in December 2019 that a ["decisive battle"](#) had been launched to capture the capital Tripoli from the internationally recognised government, the Government of National Accord (GNA). This latest offensive comes ten months after he launched an earlier military attack to seize the capital.

The conflicting parties in Libya, as well as international stakeholders, recently [met in Berlin for a one-day summit](#) to persuade Libya's warring sides, as well as their main international backers, to agree to a ceasefire, to respect a UN arms embargo, and pave the way for a political dialogue to negotiate a long-term political settlement. However, in the eyes of many observers, the conference represented an abject failure as [some countries continue to provide military assistance to Haftar](#). International involvement from the UAE, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, and France is exacerbating the conflict, making the process of national reconciliation elusive.

"France is pursuing a mixture of strategic, geopolitical, and ideological interests in Libya. It clearly believes that Haftar is a viable partner for its counter-terrorism work, but perhaps more than that, they believe he can be a lynchpin of the Sahel security architecture that they're attempting to build whereby he can support French clients such as Chad's President Idris Deby and Niger's President Mahamadou Issoufou to maintain their regimes and combat jihadist or oppositional movements. Haftar is also important to them as a means of strengthening the long-standing relationship with the UAE, whom they have tight security cooperation with and view as their main regional partner. Finally, much like the Emirates, the French have a particular view of the region whereby they have a deep-seated paranoia of political Islam in any guise and a strong preference for authoritarian governing structures in African and Middle Eastern states," Policy Fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), Tarek Megerisi, told TRT World Research Centre

## What drives France's policies in Libya?

### *The battle over the control of Libya's oil resources*

According to the 2019 BP [Statistical Review](#) of World Energy, Libya has the largest proven crude oil reserves in Africa at 48.4 billion barrels. When Gaddafi was in power, Libya produced some 1.6 million barrels per day, exported mostly to Italy, France, Spain and Germany. However, the Libyan economy has experienced a significant decline because of political unrest and fighting over the control of oil fields, resulting in a concomitant decline in production

When Qaddafi was in power, Libya produced some 1.6 million barrels per day (BPD), and exported mostly to Italy, France, Spain and Germany. Libyan oil is cheap to extract and easy to export to Europe. Hence, Paris seeks to achieve significant commercial benefits by securing and promoting the interest of the French oil giant, [Total](#).

However, the Libyan economy has experienced a significant decline because of political unrest and fighting over the control of oil fields, resulting in a concomitant decline in production.

Libya until recently has been producing about 1.2 million BPD of oil and all major fields lie in areas controlled by Haftar's eastern-based so-called Libyan National Army (LNA). Whereas, the country's largest oilfield, and a second major one in the southwest, began [shutting down last month](#) after forces loyal to Haftar closed a pipeline connecting them to the coast.

If the blockade continues, Libya is highly likely to face a financial crisis and budget deficit in 2020. The continuation of the shutdowns will result in a catastrophic financial crisis. Al-Sarraj UN-backed Prime Minister [stated that](#) Tripoli losses from the oil shutdowns had exceeded \$1.4bn.

The struggle over the control of Libya's oil resources is a major driver in the ongoing conflict. Haftar has enjoyed political and logistical support from France, UAE, Egypt and Russia. Libya's fragmentation at the political and security level has effectively invited open competition for the country's energy resources. Oil revenues have been, and remain, at the heart of the conflict.

### *Economic interests and security concerns*

France's intervention in Libya is driven largely by the preservation of French economic interests and in line with its desire to strengthen French influence in North Africa. Security considerations also factor significantly into France's decision making in the region.

Security concerns in the Sahel-Sahara region and strategic geopolitical stances are surely impacts on French approaches to Libya.

Southwest Libya rests at the crossroads of Algeria, Niger and Chad. The region links southern Libya to the Sahel and sub-Saharan migrant routes to northern Libya and onto Europe. The region is also known as [a hub for arms traffickers](#), warlords and even terrorist groups such as Daesh, Al-Qaeda. Therefore, securing the region is considered vital for France in order to preserve its political influence and economic interests. Therefore, Paris has heavily invested in the Sahel and Sahara regions. For example, France has a [military base N'Djamena in Chad](#) that supports its operations in the Sahel. In this regard, Paris sees Haftar as a strong man who could potentially stop militias from Chad and Niger from using southern Libya as a safe haven.

"France is pushing for regional military support in the Sahel, but the proposed force risks are causing more harm than good, the U.S. Special Forces are doing the heavy lifting in terms of Intelligence, sharing their information's with Algeria a pivotal state in the Sahel and North Africa with Egypt and Morocco," Abdennour Toumi, Researcher at Ankara ORSAM think tank Centre, told TRT World Research Centre.

France seems to have [a highly militarised approach to counter-terrorism in Africa's Sahel](#) that has come at the cost of supporting military regimes instead of supporting the democratic process in the region.

"From France's point of view, Libya is considered as an important oil producer, a key territory for controlling North-South migration flows toward Europe as well as the situation in the strategic Saharan conflict. France in Libya is acting along with its allies, the Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, in the frame of a ["counter-revolutionary"](#) front which - under the pretext of "fighting political Islam"- unites Arab autocrats and right-wing European leaders." François Burgat, Academic and Senior Research Fellow (Emeritus) at the French National Centre for Scientific Research, told TRT World Research Centre.

Paris supported the National Transitional Council (NTC) during the revolution. In return, French companies would gain rights to more than [a third of Libya's oil production](#). Since Qaddafi was toppled in 2011, French energy giant Total substantially increased its presence in Libya. In March 2018, Total managed to [purchase a 16.33 per cent stake in Libya's Waha Concessions](#), worth \$450 million. The Waha Concessions, which are located in the southeast of Sirte, has the potential of producing 600 thousand BPD. Total is a significant oil player in Libya which [pumps more than 1million BPD](#) and aiming to reach 2.1 million BPD by 2023.

Therefore, there is no doubt that Paris seeks to achieve significant commercial benefits from securing its in-

terests in Libya, especially within the energy sector. Some observers have also argued that potential [reconstruction contracts](#) and increased interest for oil business are France's main foreign policy drivers in Libya.



French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian (L) and Foreign minister of Libya Mohamed Taher Siala (R) hold a press conference after their meeting in the capital Tripoli, Libya on July 23, 2018. (Hazem Turkia - Anadolu Agency)

### Personal ties with Haftar

French support for Haftar, which is primarily based upon furthering its economic interests and political influence, is also using the mantra of counter-terrorism to justify its position. As such, France's Libya policy completely ignores human-rights concerns and democratic ideals. In fact, by backing Haftar, who is seeking to return Libya to one-man military rule and dictatorship, France is in direct contradiction with the democratic principles Paris says it stands for.

Jean-Yves Le Drian, who served as a Defence Minister under Francois Hollande's Presidency and is now the Foreign Minister in Macron's government, is the architect of France's support for Haftar. It is under Hollande's presidency that [Paris began](#) to support Haftar; a policy that has continued full steam since. It is believed that Le Drian has a good relationship with Haftar, according to [some reports](#), he visited Haftar in Benghazi in March 2019, when Haftar asked why he had not seen Le Drian in so long, Le Drian responded that France was simply "waiting for your victories".

[France-Afrique](#), is the well-known term used to describe the approach taken by France to keep its former colonies under its influence. More often than not, France has struck deals that which are not always in the best interest of the African people.

Although most former French colonies gained their independence throughout 1960s, Paris has continued to [maintain](#) its influence through political, [security, economic and cultural](#) connections over areas it has deemed to be strategically important. The [maintenance of corrupt leaders](#) seems to have become a condition for continued business for colonial powers in Africa. Thus, French officials have [developed](#) personal relationships with unpopular African politicians and military dictators to protect its economic interests in the region.

Several governments with traditionally close ties to France have a [poor record](#) of governance at home, in terms of human rights, corruption and the concentration of pow-

er among a tiny ruling circle. For instance, Gnassingbé Eyadema, former President of Togo, came to power in a military coup and ruled over an oppressive regime, despite the fact that, he enjoyed the support of Paris. Eyadema was [described](#) by French President Jacques Chirac as being “a close personal friend of mine and of France.”

France continues to do everything in its power, including providing political and military assistance to protect its political allies in Africa regardless of corruption and practices that contradict France’s supposed promotion of democracy. In this respect, Paris sees Haftar as the best bet to secure its economic interests and the strengthening of its political influence in Libya.

### *A hypocritical and ill-conceived strategy*

According to Tarek Megerisi, “France is relying on the, at least, medium-term success of a 78-year-old man with serious health issues and a wider movement that is held together solely by him. Moreover, the Libyan Arab Armed Forces that Haftar heads is not a formal army or security institution which suggests that even if they were to win it would not create a situation any different to Libya’s current security situation, with multiple armed groups competing for riches and influence. This lack of a real security institution means that he couldn’t be of much help to other Sahel allies in the region. Moreover, even this outcome looks highly unlikely. For Haftar to conquer Tripoli, it will require significant military assistance and a long campaign that will destroy the city. Moreover, the nature of Haftar and the significant resistance to him would mean that further military campaigns in the likes of Zintan and Misrata would then be necessary.”

Up until now, France’s position towards the two main factions within Libya has been one of extreme oscillation. While giving lip service to the UN-backed government, the French government has closely collaborated with Haftar and the military authorities in Tobruk.

Haftar has indicated his [opposition to civilian rule](#) in Libya on a number of occasions and has repeatedly [stated](#) that he does not believe in democracy or freedom. The United Nations has been encouraging diplomatic efforts, while given the failure of previous initiatives, the arms build-up, and Haftar’s history of undermining political solutions makes it harder for any credible diplomatic efforts to end the conflict in Libya to take hold.

Militias loyal to Haftar [blocked oil exports](#) from the country’s main ports on the eve of the Berlin summit. Oil is the lifeblood of the Libyan economy and the country’s primary source of revenue. Haftar has been trying to use it as a trump card.

In 2014, Haftar launched “Operation Dignity” against terrorist groups such as [Ansar al-Sharia](#) (Salafist Islamist militia group) in Benghazi in which his forces benefited from international support. For instance, France provided [significant assistance](#) and diplomatic support for Haftar’s operation. Paris appears to have maintained this support unconditionally, despite allegations [of war crimes](#), an increasingly [prominent Salafist core](#) in the LNA, attempts to sell oil in breach of UN Security Council resolutions, and Haftar’s part in prolonging Libya’s conflict and undermining the UN-sponsored political process that France publicly backs.

Despite the allegations, France has never officially acknowledged providing weapons, training, [intelligence](#), and Special Forces assistance to Haftar, though evidence suggests that Paris has been involved in [training](#) and setting up Haftar’s military forces since 2015. The death of three [French soldiers](#) in a helicopter crash in Libya in 2016 while conducting an operation against militia groups publicly revealed France’s presence and involvement.

“Haftar made no secret of the ties with France nor about the modern weaponry he had received from Paris despite a U.N. arms embargo on Libya.” Abdennour Toumi told TRT World Research Centre.

France’s military forces are largely operating covertly in Libya. [Media organisations reported](#) that armed French intelligence officers were arrested in April while crossing the Tunisian-Libyan border. Furthermore, France’s admission that it owned the US [Javelin anti-tank missiles](#) uncovered when government forces retook Gharyan from Haftar in late June poses significant questions about France’s role in Libya.

For François Burgat, “Paris seems to give Haftar more political legitimacy and military clout in the current scenario, protecting Haftar’s position both diplomatically and militarily, sending its special forces to help the April campaign against Tripoli.”

### **Paris Summit on Libya**

In May 2018, the French President hosted the Libyan rivals in Paris. France also [invited](#) many countries involved in Libya’s conflict, including the other four permanent members of the UN Security Council, as well as Italy, Germany, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and all of Libya’s six neighbours. During the summit, they crucially agreed to hold elections in December 2018. However, this window of opportunity lapsed with no election taking place. The efforts of France were poorly coordinated with the UN and seemed to contradict the efforts of the UN envoy Ghassan Salame, who wanted the Libyans to hold a national conference and draft a new constitution before holding elections.

The ostensible purpose of the conference was to bring together rival groups and promote a political solution.

However, it seems that Paris's main intention has been to [legitimise](#) Haftar within Libya and abroad. For instance, [recently](#), French President Emmanuel Macron sent an official invitation to Haftar to visit France. The Invitation by France boosts Haftar's image as a key player and lends him legitimacy, consequently undermining Al Sarraj's credibility and role as Prime Minister as well as his negotiating leverage during any potential conference that may take place in the near future.

When Haftar began his offensive against internationally recognised government, EU decided to move and condemn the assault in April last year, but France [blocked](#) the resolution which allows Haftar to act with impunity.

"It is a paradigm that has persisted and shaped the UN political process that followed and helped create the situation of today. Although there is no evidence suggesting French military support for Haftar, other than French-owned Javelin missiles found amongst Haftar's equipment in Gharyan, France has played a strong diplomatic role protecting Haftar from any accountability and tried to ensure that any internationally advanced de-escalation measures or future political process are shaped around him and securing his interests. This may not provide him with military clout but enables him to act with impunity." Tarek Megerisi told TRT World Research Centre.

France attempted to present itself as a mediator in the Libyan crisis, and at the same time, gave strong political legitimacy to Haftar. Things did not go as planned by Macron's government. According to Megerisi, "Macron was badly advised in thinking that Libya could be an easy victory to achieve through his charisma. He underestimated the complexity of the country. It was a little naivety, a bit opportunism. He tried to rely on the military to solve a political problem."

Paris's Libyan summit was poorly coordinated with Brussels and Rome as well as none of the regional powers involved in the Libyan conflict were present. French President Macron seems to believe he can do everything on his own. It may work in his country whereas on the international stage he must work with other actors who are present in Libyan civil war otherwise his unilateral approach is highly likely to fail to bring any long-term solution to the ongoing war.

## EU Divisions on Libya

The EU claims to be the strongest supporter of the UN-led peace process. However, in practical terms, only a few countries have provided tangible assistance to the internationally recognised government. There is a great division among two member states, France and Italy, over Libya. The clash between Italy and France over Libya has contributed to the failure of international efforts to develop a political solution for the ongoing conflict.

French support for Haftar's offensive in the capital damages European interests; Italy has addressed this issue numerous times. For instance, [Matteo Salvini, former Deputy Prime Minister of Italy](#), said that France "has no interest in stabilising the situation in Libya, probably because it has oil interests that are opposed to those of Italy".

The EU [officially supports the UN-backed](#) Government of National Accord led by Fayeze Al Sarraj. Despite the EU's position, Paris has developed strong ties with Haftar, which weakens the EU's influence on Libya. According to Tarek Megerisi, "The EU is unable to take a strong position on Libya or advance significant policies for de-escalation given France's antithetical position to the majority of other European states. This certainly impacts the EU's policy options given that it employs consensus-based policy-making procedures and as such has limited the options at Europe's disposal to remain influential or impact the worsening situation in Libya."

Recently the EU agreed to [launch a new naval and mission](#) to stop more arms reaching the warring factions in Libya. The new mission will be limited to stopping the flow of weapons to Libya, there were already so many arms, to begin with, and when considering Libya's coastline is more than 1,700 km which makes virtually impossible to implement a monitoring mechanism.

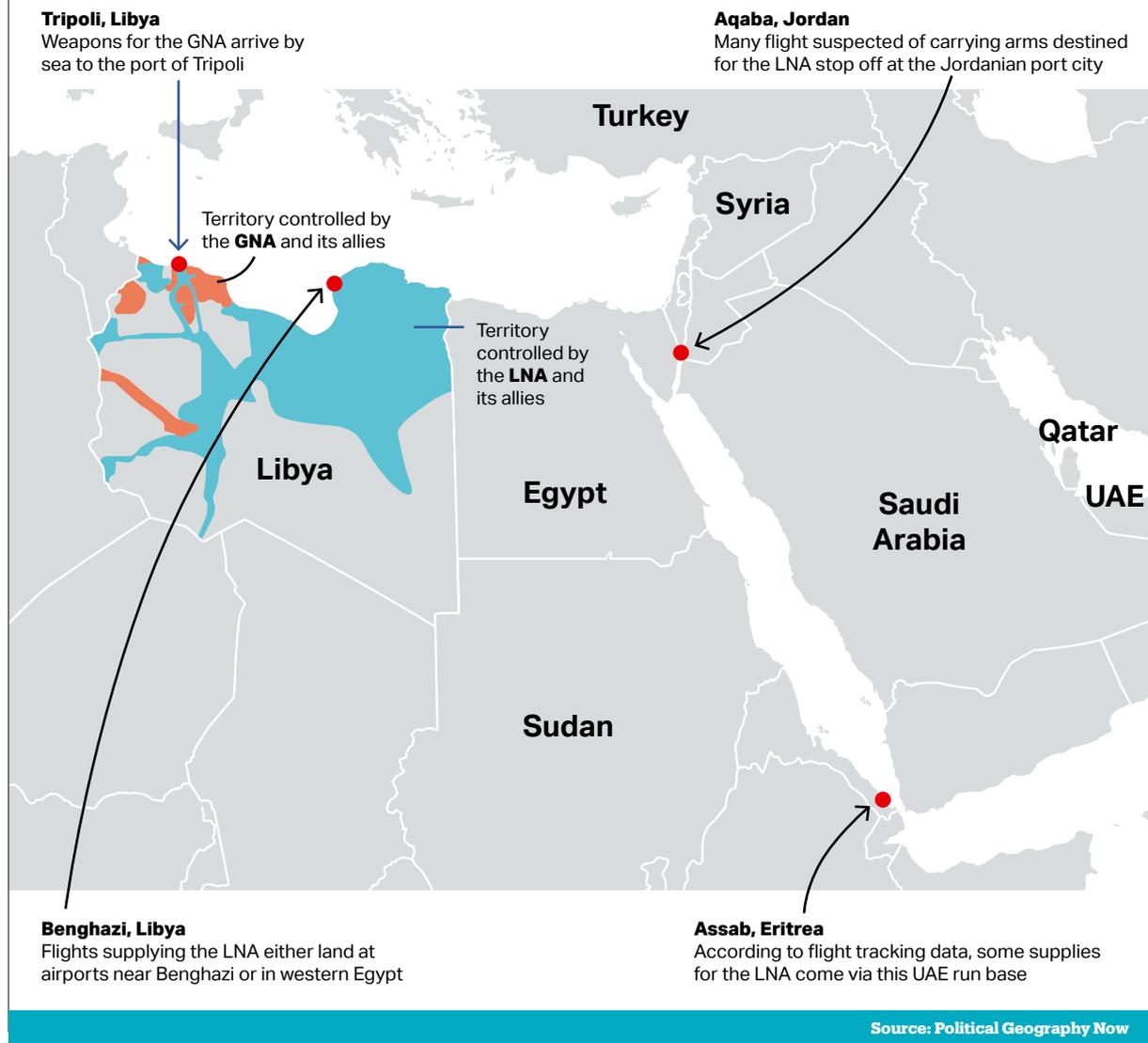
The EU has been trying to implement the arms embargo, but these efforts have failed miserably as some countries including [France](#), the United Arab Emirates, Russia and Egypt have been increasing their support for Haftar, despite [the UN's arms embargo](#).

At the recent Munich Security Conference, a top U.N. official on Libya, Stephanie Williams, [stated that](#) the arms embargo in Libya had become 'a joke'. Having warships in the Eastern Mediterranean could prevent some of the flow of arms to Libya however, such patrols would not stop the weapons the [UAE has reportedly been supplying](#) to Haftar by air over Saudi and Egyptian airspace. In order to prevent arms deliveries via air cargo, a no-fly zone would have to be enforced. However, there is no such perceptible political will to take such a measure.

The panel of experts which reports on violations of the U.N.-mandated arms embargo on Libya reported that Haftar's forces have received [aircraft as well as military vehicles from the UAE](#) and had even established an airbase [at Al Khadim](#) near the north-eastern Libyan city of Marj and Haftar's headquarters at el Rajma that is capable of hosting advanced jets, such as the F-16, Mirage-2000 and Rafale. Furthermore, it has also been [reported](#) that since January this year, dozens of flights from the UAE believed to be carrying hundreds of tons of weapons to support Haftar's offensive against the internationally recognised government have been undertaken.

## Military equipment reaches Libya by air, land and sea

### There are various entry points for suspected arms supplies in Libya



The Munich meeting follows one in Berlin last month hosted by Germany in its own attempt to stem the conflict, building on UN efforts to reach a ceasefire, disarm militias and launch new economic development measures. However, progress depends on preventing weapon flows into Libya, and that has not happened yet. Launching a new maritime effort focused on enforcing the UN arms embargo around Libya may not prevent reaching arms to Libya, as some countries including France, the United Arab Emirates, Russia and Egypt have been providing significant military assistance to Haftar by air over Saudi and Egyptian airspace, despite the UN's arms embargo.

As it stands, it appears that there is no practical, low cost, and promising option for the EU to implement the current arms embargo in Libya. All possibilities require significant political, financial and military commitments.

## Conclusion

The stabilisation of Libya must be the primary goal of any international engagement. However, many governments are only concerned with their narrow interests. Such self-serving actions led to greater uncertainty and impeded a timely resolution to the crisis.

In this regard, France has been trying to preserve its economic interests and the strengthening of its political influence in North Africa. By providing military assistance and intelligence services to warlord Haftar, France only brings even more conflicts, instability and division in the country rather than the "democracy" that France had promised to the Libyan people in 2011.

For Tarek Megerisi, "continuing to support Haftar is a strategy that cannot lead to stability or security within Libya in

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the short-term, and that is something that has the potential to upset neighbouring allies (Tunisia and Algeria) and destabilise Sahel countries through weapons proliferation.”

As long as, the international community’s response to Haftar remains as ineffective as it has been so far, Haftar most likely will see more room to continue his military offensive. Libya could even disintegrate in an uncontrolled way, which would make it even easier for various radical militia groups to use parts of the country to expand their influence well beyond Libya’s borders.

Paris still sees Haftar as the best bet to fight against terrorism because of his anti-terrorism narrative. However, France must take into account the fact that his forces are a ragtag of different militias, mercenary and radical groups including [Salafi Madkhali movements](#), as these Salafis form a [vital component of Haftar’s forces](#). As a consequence, Haftar’s military approach is unlikely to bring long-lasting peace and stability.

Therefore, the stabilisation process must be conducted under close UN supervision. Although the UN-led process is moving slower than many had hoped, it is still the best hope for ending the civil war in Libya.

As a permanent member of the UN Security Council, France claims to uphold international law and to protector state legitimacy. Hence, at face value, France supports the

UN-backed government GNA as Libya’s legitimate government. On the other hand, it backs Haftar politically and militarily. Paris also legitimises Haftar via its media, conveying the image of the latter as a stabiliser and institution builder, which is terribly misleading. Haftar’s military offensives and counter-terrorism narrative is an attempt to install his own Gaddafi style military dictatorship.

As a consequence, Haftar’s offensive is most likely to fuel renewed fighting, bring more radical groups and refugees, increase oil prices, and aggravate the geopolitical tensions already raging in the region.

Thus, Paris should rethink its support to Haftar and throw its weight along with European Union, Italy and Turkey to consolidate the UN peace process, which is the only way forward. Many observers concur that there is [no military solution](#) for this conflict.

Despite this, France still believes that Haftar is a viable partner for its counter-terrorism work. But he is also important to them as a means of securing French economic interest, as Haftar controls much of the oil fields in the east of Libya. Besides, France has a strong preference for authoritarian governing structures in African and Middle Eastern states. As a result, France is very likely to continue to support Haftar in the Libyan conflict and has shown very little interest in reversing course.



(Hazem Turkia - Anadolu Agency)