

From Tripoli to Benghazi: Is Türkiye, America's Proxy, Redrawing the Map of Libya?

(Translated)

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Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan's visit to Libya on August 11–12, 2026, was not merely another diplomatic tour in a country that foreign capitals have long been accustomed to entering via Tripoli. In the capital, Fidan met with Abdul Hamid Dbeibah, Mohamed al-Menfi, and Mohamed Takala, before traveling to Benghazi to meet with Khalifa Haftar, Saddam Haftar, Aguila Saleh, and Belqasim Haftar. Most importantly, he announced that Türkiye intends to leverage its ties with both the East and the West to help unify them and build a "unified, sovereign, and independent Libya."

This picture alone illustrates the shift in Türkiye's policy. Türkiye—which entered the Libyan conflict in 2019 to defend the Tripoli government, and whose forces and military support proved decisive in securing that government's position after repelling Haftar's offensive on the capital—no longer views eastern Libya merely as an adversary's camp; instead, it now seeks to hold the keys to influence with both sides. The objective is no longer for Tripoli to triumph over Benghazi, but instead for Türkiye to maintain a presence in Libya regardless of the form the eventual settlement takes.

Therefore, Fidan's visit should not be viewed in isolation from the events that preceded it. On July 24, 2026, Fidan hosted Saddam Haftar in Ankara—a meeting that clearly reflected Ankara's growing openness toward eastern Libya. Prior to this, Saddam had visited Washington on June 29, where he met with U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio in the presence of Massad Boulos—a senior advisor to U.S. President Donald Trump on Arab and African Affairs, tasked with overseeing several regional dossiers, most notably the U.S.-led initiative to restructure the Libyan landscape. He continued his meetings over the following two days with U.S. officials handling the Libya file, discussing the unification of Libya's military and state institutions, the establishment of a unified government, and the holding of elections. The timing of these contacts was significant; it appeared that Washington was opening a direct channel with one of the key power centers in the East, precisely as Ankara was simultaneously establishing its own channel with the same figure. Crucially, this Turkish outreach coincided with a growing U.S. openness toward that same camp—with Saddam Haftar at its core—as part of the process led by Massad Boulos to reorganize power and institutions in Libya.

This is where the broader geopolitical significance comes into play. Washington and Ankara are working in parallel on the same file, each in its own way; during his visit, Fidan emphasized Ankara's commitment to supporting efforts to unify Libya's institutions. He highlighted Türkiye's aspiration to play a key role in consolidating international efforts and backing the U.S. initiative aimed at institutional unification as a path toward lasting stability (Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, August 13, 2026). Thus, a stable Libya cannot be built from Tripoli alone, nor can the power represented by the country's east be ignored.

At its core, Massad Boulos's initiative appears geared toward unifying political, military, and financial institutions prior to holding elections. This process has been accompanied by the approval of a unified budget, the establishment of joint security arrangements, and the conduct of military maneuvers in Sirte under the supervision of U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) (Al Jazeera, July 2, 2026). In this context, U.S.-Libyan security and military cooperation transcends mere training; it represents an attempt to lay the groundwork for a unified Libyan military institution.

This explains the convergence of Turkish and U.S. interests. Türkiye maintains a deep military and security presence in the west while simultaneously opening channels with the east, whereas the United States possesses the capacity to bring the various parties together and restructure military and financial institutions. If this path leads to a settlement in which the east and west share power, the emergence of the Haftar family within the future governance structure

becomes a possibility that cannot be overlooked. Indeed, the current balance of power makes the inclusion of Saddam Haftar in any future arrangement a factor that cannot be bypassed.

Notably, Turkish-Libyan cooperation extends beyond the political realm. While security and defense top the list of strategic relations, they pave the way for cooperation in energy, infrastructure, reconstruction, and trade. Turkish companies have expanded into eastern Libya itself, undertaking projects in Benghazi, Al-Bayda, Shahat, and Tobruk. Thus, military power transforms into economic influence, and the economy, in turn, becomes a tool to consolidate political influence.

Perhaps the most telling illustration of the symbolic dimension of Türkiye's strategy is Fidan standing before the tomb of Omar Mukhtar in Benghazi. The choice of the mausoleum was no mere matter of protocol; Fidan chose to appeal to Libya's national memory through one of its most deeply rooted icons, invoking the resistance leader executed by colonial Italy in 1931.

In doing so, Türkiye seeks to present itself to Libyans not merely as a Mediterranean power pursuing its own interests, but as a nation bound to the region by shared historical and emotional ties—in contrast to Europe, whose history in Libya is associated with colonialism. It is a symbolic policy that complements "hard" influence: weapons, training, and investment on one hand, and memory and identity on the other.

Consequently, Libya appears to have shifted from being primarily a European dossier to an arena where Turkish and American influence is growing—an influence seeking to displace the remnants of European sway, which relies on economic, security, and energy interests that no longer suffice to sustain the "Old Continent." As the rules of the game change, the powers operating militarily and economically within Libya now possess a greater capacity to shape its future across both its eastern and western regions.

This is where the issue emerges from the perspective of Libya's Arab Maghreb regional neighbors. If the United States is pushing to unify East and West, Türkiye is building parallel relations with both, and Benghazi itself is transforming into an increasingly attractive urban and economic hub, then Tunisia, Algeria, and Egypt cannot view this as a purely Libyan affair. In practical terms, reshaping Libya means reshaping the balance of power in North Africa.

Consequently, the most critical question is not merely "Who will rule a unified Libya?" but instead "Who will craft the framework within which this unity emerges?" If Libyan unity is achieved under a US-Turkish umbrella, it might succeed in ending the division, yet it could simultaneously entrench a new form of dependency on external power centers. However, if Libyans can turn this intersection of international interests into an opportunity to build an independent state, Libya could face a radically different historical moment.

The broader and more pressing question remains: Why cannot the Arab Maghreb region—bound by shared geography, history, culture, and civilizational identity—shift from being a recipient of initiatives to an architect of them? Libya's future should not be the exclusive domain of Washington, Ankara, and Europe; nor should the revival of Tunisia, Algeria, Libya, Morocco, and even Mauritania remain held hostage to the power dynamics of major powers that have made a habit of manipulating the destinies of peoples. Perhaps the profoundest lesson to be drawn from the image of Fidan standing before the tomb of Omar Al-Mukhtar is that the region requires not merely the unification of Libya, but the restoration of its capacity to unify its strategic will—a unity that transcends artificial, illusory, nationalistic borders. This unification would empower the region—which once cradled the First Khilafah Rashidah (Rightly Guided Caliphate)—to build its own security, economy, and renaissance through its own independent decisions. It would transform the bonds of shared history, civilization, and Islam from a collective memory into the foundation for a future that realizes the Prophet's (saw) glad tidings of a Second Khilafah Rashidah on the Method of the Prophethood; ensuring that the Arab Maghreb region—after a century of resisting colonialism—does not remain merely a territory over which foreign powers vie to reshape its future.