

In Libya, Fayez al-Sarraj Announces He Will Quit, Upsetting Erdogan

by Hugh Fitzgerald



In Libya, Turkish troops and more than 20,000 Syrian mercenaries brought in by Turkey have turned the tide in favor of the Government of National Accord (GNA), ending the 14-month siege of Tripoli by the LNA and pushing General Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA) forces eastward, all the way to Sirte. The two sides – the LNA and GNA – have after lengthy negotiations finally agreed to hold national elections in 18 months.

In the midst of this movement, Fayez al-Sarraj, the Prime Minister of the GNA, has announced he will resign in October. President Erdogan declares this news is “most upsetting for us.” [Here](#) is the story:

President Tayyip Erdogan said on September 18 that Turkey was upset that Libya's internationally recognized Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj, an ally, wants to quit next month and Ankara may hold talks with his government on the issue in the coming week

Sarraj announced on September 16 his intention to step down by the end of October. The move could feed political tensions in Tripoli amid new efforts to find a political solution to the country's conflict.

"A development like this, hearing such news, has been upsetting for us," Erdogan told reporters in Istanbul, adding that Turkish delegations may hold talks with Sarraj's government in the coming week...

Sarraj is head of the Government of National Accord (GNA), based in Tripoli, while eastern Libya and much of the south is controlled by Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA). His departure could lead to infighting among senior GNA figures...

"We would prefer for Sarraj to remain in his post because under his leadership a united Libya that has resolved its issues could emerge," the [Turkish] official said...

Al-Sarraj explained his own departure as coming at the end of United Nations-brokered talks between the country's rival factions that have led to a "new preparatory phase" to unify Libyan institutions and prepare for parliamentary and presidential elections. He may have believed that he had completed his task, having successfully concluded an agreement with the LNA on a preliminary deal that aims to guide the country towards elections within 18 months and to demilitarise the city of Sirte, and he could now leave.

But there are also other reasons why he chose this moment.

Many cities in Libya – mainly though not exclusively in the GNA territories – have been convulsed for a solid month of popular protests over the state of the economy. These protests have been a mounting source of frustration for Al-Sarraj, who could do very little to improve things since the main source of revenue in Libya, the oilfields, remain firmly under the

control of General Khaftar's LNA. This frustration of being unable to deal with the economic distress must have taken its toll on Al-Sarraj.

Another reason for Al-Sarraj to quit is simple exhaustion. After five grueling years of presiding over the fractious GNA, and in recent times seeing decisions for the GNA being made not in Tripoli but in Ankara, Al-Sarraj was worn out by all the fighting both against the LNA, and within the GNA. He surely knows that his departure will lead to new infighting among other senior GNA figures and, especially, between the armed groups from Tripoli and those from the Interior Minister's coastal city of Misrata that wield control on the ground. But he's had enough.

President Erdogan is upset with Al-Sarraj's decision for several reasons. First, he doesn't want infighting among potential successors to Al-Sarraj that could possibly bring about a rupture within the GNA. He is especially concerned that the Interior Minister with whom Al-Sarraj recently quarreled, Fathi Bashagha, might mobilize his own militia in Misrata to press his claim as the successor to Al-Sarraj, leading to other contenders based in Tripoli to respond in kind, letting loose their own militias, thereby dangerously dividing the GNA.

Second, Erdogan was able to obtain certain tentative concessions from Al-Sarraj that the Libyans may claim are no longer valid. Al-Sarraj had apparently given Erdogan tentative permission to create a Turkish naval military base inside the port of Misrata, a city where two-thirds of the population consists of "Libyan Turks" (Turks have been settling in Libya over the last two centuries), as well as promising to give Turkey control of the airbase at al-Watiya, near the border with Tunisia. Now those agreements will have to be re-negotiated with his successor.

Moreover, Turkish officials have already confirmed that there

were talks with the Libyan authorities about starting oil and gas exploration operations in onshore and offshore fields, in addition to talks about other energy-related fields such as electricity production. Al-Sarraj was apparently more amenable to Turkish demands than his likely successors will be, especially since the Libyan national government will soon include representatives from General Haftar's anti-Turkish LNA.

Erdogan has invested a lot in his Libyan venture. He has sent thousands of his own troops, and more than 20,000 Syrian mercenaries, too, to break General Haftar's 14-month siege of Tripoli and to push the LNA forces back to Sirte. It worked, and now the GNA forces, and their Turkish and Syrian allies, are poised on the outskirts of Sirte. Erdogan has always expected to be paid back for his support of the GNA. He wants a new military naval base for Turkish ships to be built inside the port of Misrata. He also wants Turkey to be given control of the existing airbase at al-Watiya. Finally, he wants to be given oil-and-gas concessions on Libyan land and in Libya's territorial waters. Now that Al-Sarraj is stepping down before Ankara could secure final guarantees for the Misrata naval base, the Al-Watiya airbase, and the implementation of its future energy projects, Turkey will be forced to start negotiations all over again with the next government. No wonder the sulphurous Erdogan is "upset." And perhaps Al-Sarraj's successor, with the LNA forces having retreated so far eastward, will not feel quite so desperately the need for Turkish military support as Al-Sarraj did when Tripoli was about to fall to its LNA besiegers. And if, as is hoped, the Libyan elections that are to be held within 18 months lead to a government of national unity, and a merging of the GNA and LNA forces, there will be even less need for the Libyans to call upon the Turkish military. It would be reasonable at that point, when there is a unified Libyan government, to ask the Turks to leave. But will they? Or are they there, as seems to be the case with Turkish troops now in Syria, to stay?

At that point, if and when the Turks are asked to leave, Erdogan is certain to play hardball, reminding the Libyans that he has done their state some service; they are in debt to him for lifting the siege of Tripoli, pushing the LNA forces much farther east, and making possible the conditions on the ground that have led to the present ceasefire and the plans for national elections. Erdogan makes very clear that he wants that debt to be paid, by Turkey being given possession of both a military naval base and an airbase, as well as being provided with oil-and-gas concessions. He is likely to keep his own troops, and the Syrian mercenaries he sent to Libya with them, at what he plans to become his naval base in Misrata (which he tellingly calls a "Turkish city" because of its large population of "Libyan Turks"), and at the existing airbase in al-Watiya, which he intends to make a base for Turkish planes alone, pending a Libyan agreement to formalize the Turkish possession of both. The Turkish troops will remain, too, until an agreement on oil-and-gas concessions in Libyan territorial waters and on Libyan land, that Erdogan believed he was on the verge of completing with Al-Sarraj at the time of his departure, are re-negotiated and ratified by the Libyans. Erdogan is "upset" now over Fayaz Al-Sarraj's resignation, but he'll get over it, as he pockets his prizes – those bases, those oil-and-gas concessions – from the Libyans. As for Fayeze Al-Sarraj, he will surely be enjoying his well-deserved rest, after five years of riding herd on the fractious Libyans in the GNA, while simultaneously fighting the LNA. And above all, he will take great pleasure in being spared the need to placate that difficult, demanding, and dangerous man, Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

First published in