

# Recep Tayyip Erdogan Spirals Downward

by Hugh Fitzgerald



**Recep Tayyip Erdogan** has been making trouble again for his supposed allies in Europe and America. Most important of these disagreements is the colossal contretemps over Turkey's purchase of the S-400 missile defense system from Russia. Prior to that purchase, Turkey had contracted to buy 100 F-35 planes from the Americans, and as have other members of NATO, was even allowed to participate in their manufacture by supplying 900 parts for the plane. But when Erdogan subsequently decided to buy the S-400 missile defense system, the Pentagon became alarmed, fearing a likely security breach if the Russian technicians who would naturally be in Turkey to help to set up and run the defense system were able to study

the capabilities of the F-35s in evading S-400 missiles. Defense officials worry that having an F-35 customer also operate the S-400 could reveal the stealth fighter's vulnerabilities to Russia, which could then use the S-400 to figure out what the F-35 looks like in a radar picture. After all, the S-400 was designed specifically to shoot down the F-35s. Despite repeated entreaties from Washington for Turkey not to take delivery of the S-400, Erdogan ignored the Pentagon. The first delivery of an S-400 system has been completed; it is now at a base outside Ankara. And by way of response, no F-35s have been sent to Turkey.

Many American politicians and high-ranking officers made it clear in recent months that "Turkey can have the S-400 or it can have the F-35, but it can't have both." Erdogan did not heed that warning. He appears to have believed that the Americans wouldn't dare to cut off F-35 sales to a NATO ally. He may also have assumed that the sale of 100 F-35s would go through because Lockheed Martin, with its lobbyists and powerful friends in Congress, would fight to keep a contract worth \$16 billion over the 10-year life of the contract. But Lockheed Martin has many other potential customers for the F-35 waiting in the wings. Erdogan may also believe that the Americans wouldn't in the end cancel the sale of F-35s because the Turks might close down Incirlik, the air base in Turkey used by the Americans. In fact, over the past year Turkish officials have suddenly, without warning, temporarily shut down the runways at Incirlik. One high-ranking Turkish official has warned that Incirlik itself might be permanently shut down to further Turkish policies, an attempt at blackmail that the Americans shrugged off.

The Turks overlook the fact that there are other possible airbases in the eastern Mediterranean that the Americans could use. In the northeastern Sinai, there is Eitam, the air base built by the Israelis when they controlled the Sinai. Both Israel and Egypt would welcome an American presence there, to

help in the ongoing campaigns against the Islamic State and the Muslim Brotherhood in the Sinai; Egypt would also welcome the rent the Americans would pay for use of the base. And Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the Emirates would see such an American base as a clear warning to Iran not to carry out further aggression against its neighbors.

It's not possible for Erdogan to back down; no, having taken delivery of the S-400, he can't send it back to the Russians. That would be an intolerable humiliation. And Erdogan wants to retain both the respect and the friendship of Vladimir Putin. So he won't be getting the F-35s, just as the Americans has repeatedly warned. And if he tries one last tactic, to threaten to shut down Incirlik unless the F-35s are released for delivery, the Americans can promptly start letting it be known that they have an alternative base, Eitam, in the Sinai; that they've already been in negotiations with General El-Sisi, and it looks like a better alternative to Incirlik, one that – surrounded by desert – is easier to defend, and that puts American airpower closer both to Iran and to the terrorist encampments in the Sinai.

Not content with infuriating the Americans in his insistence on receiving the S-400 missile defense system, Erdogan has also infuriated the Europeans by his pressing forward with Turkish drilling for oil and natural gas in the territorial waters of the Republic of Cyprus. As is well known, the island of Cyprus is divided between the Greek-populated Republic of Cyprus and the Turkish Republic of northern Cyprus. Cyprus became divided after a coup d'état in 1974, performed as part of an attempt at "enosis" – that is, to annex the island to Greece – which prompted the Turkish invasion of Cyprus. This resulted in the eviction of much of the north's Greek Cypriot population, the flight of Turkish Cypriots from the south, and the partitioning of the island, leading to a unilateral declaration of independence by the north in 1983. Due to its lack of recognition, Northern Cyprus is heavily dependent on

Turkey for economic, political and military support.

The oil and gas bonanza in the Eastern Mediterranean was set off by the discovery, in Israeli waters, first of the huge Tamar natural gas field in 2009, and then in 2010, of the truly colossal natural gas field called Leviathan. Since then, there have been other offshore discoveries of natural gas fields, in Israeli, Egyptian, Greek, and Greek Cypriot waters. Turkey has interfered with the drilling by ENI, the Italian company, for natural gas in the waters off the Republic of Cyprus. Still worse, Turkey has illegally drilled in Greek Cypriot waters; when the E.U. threatened Turkey with sanctions, the Turks brushed off the complaints and instead started drilling at another site, also in the territorial waters belonging to the Republic of Cyprus.

As the [New York Times reported](#), the E.U. has already started to impose financial and other sanctions in response to Turkey's drilling:

*Turkey's relationship with the West suffered a fresh blow on Monday [July 18] when the European Union decided to suspend contacts between high-level officials, as well as to pull financial aid, in response to Turkey's gas exploration in Cypriot national waters.*

*European Union foreign ministers meeting in Brussels said they would suspend about \$164 million in aid to Turkey and shelve talks on an aviation accord. They also asked the European Investment Bank to review its lending to the country, which amounted to nearly \$434 million in 2018.*

*Turkey has been benefiting from European Union funding as part of its now-stalled bid to join the bloc, while the aviation agreement that was under negotiation would have led to more passengers using Turkish airports, in particular the main international airport in Istanbul, as a transit hub.*

*The European Union measures came just days after the*

*country's relationship with the United States took a hit, with the first shipment of a Russian-made surface-to-air missile system to Turkey, a NATO member. Washington had warned that it would penalize Turkey for the purchase, but President Recep Tayyip Erdogan went ahead with it anyway.*

*The measures announced on Monday by European foreign ministers stopped short of all-out sanctions against Turkish companies involved in drilling in the eastern Mediterranean, one of the bloc's most strategically sensitive corners and a flash point in relations between European and Middle Eastern powers.*

*But they come as Turkey's economy is struggling and could face painful, protracted economic sanctions from the European Union and the United States.*

*Cyprus has been partitioned between the ethnically Greek south and ethnically Turkish north since Turkey invaded in 1974. The administration of northern Cyprus is recognized only by Ankara.*

*Turkey said that Cyprus, a European Union member, and the internationally recognized government that controls most of the island, does not have rights to unilaterally explore for gas.*

*Cyprus must follow a plan proposed by the Turkish Cypriot leader to share gas revenue, and it claims to have the right to carry out exploratory missions itself, without approval from the government in the capital, Nicosia.*

As a matter of international law, Cyprus has an absolute right to explore for natural gas in its own territorial waters; it is other nations, including Turkey, that do not.

The Northern (Turkish) Republic of Cyprus has not been recognized by any state except Turkey itself. But even if it

had been, the Turkish Cypriots still would have had no right to drill for gas in the territorial waters of the Republic of Cyprus. The E.U. has begun sanctions on Turkey. First, it has ended \$164 million in aid money. Second, it has asked the European Investment Bank to review its lending to Turkey, which amounted to nearly \$434 million in 2018, obviously with an eye to cutting that investment way back, or eliminating it altogether. Erdogan's unstable ways, his sudden outbursts, his authoritarian personality, his regime's mismanagement of the Turkish economy, should in any case scare potential investors, such as the European Investment Bank, away. With its economy now sputtering, Turkey can ill afford to see European investment in the country decrease.

And what if the Turkish drillers were to find deposits of natural gas in Cypriot national waters? How would they bring it to market? What other countries would be willing to help Turkey violate international law? And even if Turkey could on its own somehow lift the gas, how would it deliver the oil, with what pipelines, constructed to move the gas through Cypriot territorial waters to what would almost certainly be its only customer, that is, Turkey itself? Wouldn't there be fury over Turkey essentially taking oil that belonged rightfully to Cyprus? Might not Greece, under its new conservative premier Kyriakos Mitsotakis (who happens to be very pro-Israel), make common cause with Israel to physically prevent that pipeline from ever being built? Turkey has no defenders of its illegal actions in the waters of Cyprus. Economic pressure would continue to ratchet up, with individual members of the E.U., and not just the E.U. itself, ending their aid to Turkey. Investment, too, could suffer, in an attempt to get Turkey to halt its drilling in the waters of the Republic of Cyprus. So far, Erdogan has been denying the gravity of his country's economic problems; he still refuses to go to the I.M.F. But thanks to Turkish drilling in Cypriot waters, when he does finally approach the I.M.F., hat in hand, for aid, he may find that the I.M.F. will be in no mood to

help, given Turkish misdeeds in Cypriot waters.

Erdogan recently has misjudged on every front. His acceptance of the S-400 missile defense system from Russia has infuriated the Americans and has led Washington to put the F-35 sale to Turkey on hold – in other words, to cancel it. He doesn't seem to care that the Russians would be able, with their access to Turkish F-35s, to determine the weaknesses both of the F-35 and of the S-400 that the Russians designed specifically to defend against that plane. Other members of NATO, too, that have ordered the F-35, are angered that Erdogan chose to ignore the security problem arising from Russian knowledge of the effectiveness of the F-35 in evading S-400 missiles. He will not receive the F-35; what's more, there are many [articles](#) now appearing in Europe and America urging that Turkey be booted out of NATO. It may come to pass.

Economically, Turkey has gone from bad to worse. The country now has a negative growth rate. Both aid to, and investment in, Turkey have been cut, a direct result of Erdogan's disregard of international law in drilling for gas in Cyprus's territorial waters. Even if the Turks were to discover a profitable field, they will be opposed every step of the way in their efforts to lift and transport such gas – in the first place, by the countries in the immediate neighborhood (the Republic of Cyprus, Greece, and Israel), and then by those many nations who have ratified the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and wish it to be upheld.

Erdogan's party, the AKP, recently lost elections in the three largest cities in Turkey – Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir. It was a tremendous loss, made even more humiliating in Istanbul because that was where Erdogan got his start, and had his base, as mayor. His authoritarian ways, his lust for power and wealth (he can count his \$58 million dollar fortune in the 1,100 room palace, or Ak Saray, that he has had built for himself), have been abundantly manifest in his arrogance in dealing with Turkey's American ally, whether demanding that

Fethulleh Gulen be extradited from Pennsylvania, or imprisoning Pastor Andrew Brunson on trumped-up charges in order to use him in a possible swap for Gulen, or ignoring Washington's entreaty not to take delivery of the S-400.

Erdogan appears to be in a downward spiral, politically and economically, from which he is unlikely to extricate himself. He will not be sadly missed.

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