

Turkey Drives a Hard Bargain in Libya (Part 1)

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Turkish President Erdogan has come to the rescue in Libya of the GNA (Government of National Accord). Just as the forces of the LNA (Libyan National Army) under General Haftar were besieging – as they had been doing for 14 months – the GNA in Tripoli, and on the point of success, the Turkish troops arrived, together with 3,800 Syrian mercenaries, and with such useful weaponry as armed drones, to help the GNA. Not only did the Turks lift the siege, but they helped the GNA push the LNA forces all the way eastward to Sirte. That's where things now stand: the Turks, and the Syrian mercenaries they brought with them, remain in place together with GNA forces, during a lull in the fighting, while General Haftar continues to receive money and weapons from the UAE, and General El-Sisi readies his own intervention, with Egyptian troops that “may” be sent,

as needed, to support General Haftar.

The story of how Turkey has managed to drive a hard bargain with the GNA for his aid is discussed [here](#).

Revelations by Libyan officials to the Associated Press have lifted the lid on more than six months of questions about how Turkey was able to push Tripoli to accept thousands of extremist Syrian mercenaries in exchange for Ankara getting energy rights – leaving Libya with little gains except being saddled with extremists.

This is not quite accurate. Libya, or rather the GNA, was helped by those Syrian “extremists” – the 3,800 Syrian mercenaries brought in by Turkey – when it was itself was *in extremis*, with the LNA about to conquer Tripoli after a 14-month siege. Those Syrian mercenaries, fighting alongside the GNA fighters and Turkish troops, broke the LNA siege of Tripoli, and sent Haftar’s forces fleeing eastward to Sirte, where they remain. Libya was not “being saddled with extremists,” because the GNA forces were *already riddled with Islamists*, including members of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Last November, Libya’s embattled Government of the National Accord was under siege in Tripoli by the Egyptian-backed Khalifa Haftar. Haftar, with a rival government based in Benghazi, appeared to be on the verge of ousting the dysfunctional GNA.

Suddenly Ankara, which along with Qatar had backed the GNA with limited weapons and financing, swept in to offer a deal.

Turkey would get energy rights off the coast which would let it threaten Greece and potentially harm Israel’s interests in an East Mediterranean pipeline, and Ankara would aid Tripoli with some drones and Syrian rebels.

Turkey drove a hard bargain – those offshore energy rights, in

Libya's territorial waters, might be very valuable, judging by the natural gas finds further east, off the coasts of Egypt and Israel. But the GNA was in no condition to haggle: it was on the verge of losing Tripoli to the LNA, and with the capital, Tripoli, conquered, the LNA would be well-positioned to take over virtually all of Libya. The Turkish troops, with their armed drones, and Syrian mercenaries, saved the day, and ended the LNA's siege. It is now the LNA, headquartered in Benghazi, that is in danger of losing the war. The Syrian mercenaries hired by Turkey to help in the Libyan war are Islamists, opposed to the secular General Haftar, while being in natural harmony with the Islamic fundamentalists, including Muslim Brotherhood members, who form part of the GNA coalition.

At the time it seemed farcical. Why would Turkey, which backs the Syrian opposition, send Syrians to fight and die in Libya?

There is nothing farcical about it. It makes perfect sense. Why wouldn't Turkey prefer to keep its own troops in Libya to a minimum, lest Turkish casualties be used by Erdogan's political opponents to undermine his Libyan policy of intervention? The mercenaries were willing to "fight and possibly die" if the price was right, and the amounts they are being paid could be considered as coming proleptically from the vast sums Erdogan is hoping to earn in the future from natural gas finds in Libyan territorial waters, which the GNA has agreed to open to Turkish exploration and exploitation. Furthermore, the GNA also agreed to pay back the debts owed by Libyans to Turkish contractors. The mercenaries reduce the need for Turkish troops to an absolute minimum (there are only several hundred now in Libya); what's more, they are fighters who became battle-hardened during the nine-year civil war in Syria.

Wasn't sending mercenaries and weapons to Libya an illegal

involvement against UN sanctions there?

Imagine the sardonic laughter, even from that dour agelast Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his just as dour entourage, echoing down the halls of his 1,500-room Ak Saray (White Palace), at such a question. Of course UN rules have been flouted. And so what? Since when has Erdogan cared about legality? What gave him the right to invade Syria or Iraq, to fight the Kurds, including civilians, in both countries? What was legal about his attempt to flood Greece with hundreds of thousands of Muslim migrants? Who gave him the right to search for natural gas in the territorial waters of Cyprus and Greece, or to attempt to chase Greek ships away from those same waters?

But Turkey's ruling party has a long track record of ignoring international laws and invading its neighbors, bombing civilians in northern Iraq and ethnically cleansing Afrin in Syria in 2018 – so recruiting vulnerable Syrians to fight in Libya was just one more violation of international norms.

Why should Turkey's behavior in Libya be any different from what it was in Syria and Iraq? The recruitment and deployment of foreign mercenaries violate the U.N. rules for the Libyan conflict. Hasn't Turkey already committed war crimes by deliberately bombing Kurdish civilians in northern Iraq, and engaging in the "ethnic cleansing" of Kurds from Afrin in Syria? Turkey chooses to ignore international laws whenever it sees fit, even as it rails against Israel for its non-existent "violations of international law."

Turkey could count on support or silence from the European Union, NATO and the United Nations because it was threatening to force hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees into Europe in the winter of 2019.

He couldn't count on active "support" from the E.U., or NATO –

that's going too far – but certainly Erdogan's behavior has been mostly met with a telling "silence," save for France, which has consistently criticized Erdogan for his activities both in the Eastern Mediterranean, where Turkish research vessels have been found in Greek and Cypriot waters, and Turkish warships have been scaring off Greek and Cypriot ships in their own waters. Nor could France, again alone, remain silent about his murderous campaigns against Kurds, including civilians, in both Syria and Iraq, nor ignore his intervention in the Libyan civil war. But it is true that other members of NATO, as well as of the E.U., have been silent about Erdogan's behavior because of the ever-present threat that Turkey might send hundreds of thousands of Syrians (and other Muslims), both refugees and economic migrants, into Europe. Until now the Greek military has prevented those migrants from entering their country, but Erdogan could deploy his own much more powerful military to overwhelm the Greek security forces, and help those Muslims – not all of whom are Syrians – to burst through Greek security fences and checkpoints, and swarm into Europe. That, the Europeans – including even a chastened Angela Merkel – know must not happen.

The message was clear to the European Union: Let Turkey claim a huge swath of the Mediterranean as part of its territorial waters, and do not oppose its invasion of Libya, which also brought in Syrian mercenaries to help fight the LNA. Otherwise, the Syrians now in Turkey, some of whom are "extremists" – i.e., devout Muslims ready to follow the Qur'anic commands to engage in violent Jihad – would be forcibly pushed into Greece and become Europe's problem. With Germany and other European countries already paying Ankara billions to keep Syrians in Turkey, there wasn't much choice. They had to remain silent.

The E.U. will not be transformed by what happens in Libya. But it could be severely damaged – changed in its essence – by a further huge influx of Muslims, in this case consisting of the

millions of Syrians now living in Turkey, and millions more Muslims, not only from Syria, who might follow the same route into Europe, through Turkey and then Greece, if the first large contingent of Muslim migrants from Turkey manages to get through. That's why the Europeans – save for the French – are not about to anger Erdogan. They want him to keep his border with Greece sealed. They bite their tongues and keep quiet about his bellicose behavior. What else can they do?

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