

Turkey Drives a Hard Bargain in Libya (Part 2)

by Hugh Fitzgerald



The Turkish entry into Libya's civil war on the side of the GNA has provoked other foreign powers to either threaten to join in, or actually to do so, on the side of Haftar's LNA.

Now the Libyan side of the story can be told in more details. We know that since Turkey has escalated the conflict in Libya, which previously was a ramshackle civil war with limited backing from a plethora of foreign powers, the Russians have sent warplanes, and Egypt has threatened to intervene.

In short, Turkey's involvement has made Libya a much larger conflict with stakes that now link to all of Europe and the Middle East. It has become a testing ground for Turkish drones, Russian air defense and Chinese armed drones, and has brought Egypt, the UAE, Greece and France closer together to complain about Turkey's role.

Yes, it's true, Turkey's intervention in Libya has made the civil war a wider conflict. Turkey's intervention provoked Russia, beginning in May, to send warplanes to help General Haftar's LNA stop the GNA in its Turkish-aided push eastward to Sirte and beyond. Egypt's General el-Sisi, who had already been supplying war materiel to the LNA, announced that if the GNA forces took Sirte – a “red line” for Cairo – then Egypt would send in its own troops to help the LNA. But as yet Egypt has not sent a single fighter. The UAE's role has not changed: before Turkish forces arrived, the UAE had already been supplying the LNA with money and weapons and continues to do

so. Greece and France have not entered the conflict themselves, but both have complained loudly about Erdogan's intervention in Libya's civil war.

The AP reports assert that Turkey sent up to 3,800 mercenaries and some troops to support Libya's GNA, which is run by Prime Minister Fayed Sarraj.

"They took advantage of our weakness at the time," the Libyan officials now say.

This has shocked and angered the pro-Ankara media in Turkey which is all pro-government and which has been sold a populist, militarist, religious narrative by the government of Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

The Turks are "shocked and angered" at what they see as the ungrateful attitude of the Libyans of the GNA, who were rescued from defeat in Tripoli by the Turkish troops, Syrian mercenaries, and Turkish armed drones. The Turkish public had previously been told by Erdogan's tame press that the Libyan people were delighted to have the Turks in their country; when their true attitude was found to be quite otherwise, the Turks were furious. In fact, the GNA was not at all delighted with the hard bargain Libya struck for its military intervention but, with Haftar's men about to take Tripoli, felt it had no choice but to accept his terms.

For the pro-government media in Turkey, the adventure in Libya was part of Ottoman-era rights, and Turkish media claims there are "Turks" in Libya that need defending.

This neo-Ottoman dream of reasserting Turkish influence in former Ottoman lands in North Africa and the Middle East makes the Arabs, who have a historic memory of their mistreatment at the hands of the Ottoman Turks, very anxious. The Ottoman Caliphate, which the Turks look back on as a glorious time –

as for them it was – is remembered by the Arabs as centuries of humiliation.

As for the Turkish claim about there still being “Turks” in Libya who needed defending, this is an exaggeration. About 1.4 million “Turks” – the descendants of Turks who over the centuries settled in Libya but retained the Turkish language, culture, and self-identification – live in the country; their center is Misrata, where 270,000 of the 400,000 Misratis consider themselves “Turks.” Until the Turkish government raised the matter, Libyan “Turks” were not known to need the protection of the Turkish military. Though clashes along ethnic lines – Arabs versus Turks – have been very occasionally reported in the past, no evidence of widespread anti-Turk persecution exists. But the claim by Turkish officials about imperiled Turks in Libya needing assistance helped to solidify popular support in Turkey for Erdogan’s North African adventure.

The Muslim Brotherhood, which is linked to Hamas and Qatar which Ankara supports, also wants Turkey in Libya

Of course the MB wants Turkey in Libya. Erdogan is a stout defender of the MB, whose views he shares. The MB has been a part of the GNA coalition since it began. General Haftar, on the other hand, is well-known for his secular stance – why, he’s even been in secret talks with Israel, which has supplied him with military supplies, including night vision equipment and sniper rifles – and for his ferocious opposition to the MB. That’s a main reason for the support General Haftar receives from Egypt, which rightly regards the MB as a mortal enemy of the regime. Haftar is also a friend to the United States. In his exile, let’s remember, he lived in the U.S. for twenty years, just outside Langley, Virginia, and was employed by the C.I.A. as a consultant on Libyan and North African affairs. He’s the most pro-American leader modern Libya has ever had. His secularism, his outreach to Israel, his alliance

with the moderate UAE, his pro-American stance, are all reasons for Erdogan to dislike him, and for the American government to support him, though so far it unaccountably refuses to do.

So Turkey's media called the Libyan war a "revolution" like the Arab Spring, fighting against "warlords."

If the Turkish-backed GNA wins in Libya, it won't be a forward-looking "revolution," but a going backwards, an overturning of whatever secularism had been attained in Libya, and a return to a much more Islamic society, promoted by the Islamists who have already burrowed deep within the GNA. Haftar is indeed a warlord, by temperament a strongman. In that respect, the Turks might be dismayed to realize, he's very much in the authoritarian mold of Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who, if he only had had a military background, would himself be described as a "warlord."

But it now turns out that Ankara was pressuring Sarraj for a year for the energy and maritime deal. Turkey was the only country really ready to give support.

"Islamists inside Sarraj's administration" also supported the deal.

The Islamists inside the GNA of course were delighted to deal with a fellow supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood, President Erdogan. And being less Libyan nationalists than they are pan-Islamists, the deal struck between Erdogan and the GNA, so favorable financially to Islamist Turkey, would not bother them.

First published in