

Turkey Drives a Hard Bargain in Libya (Part 3)

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Erdogan has been systematically jailing his enemies, especially those secularists who have remained loyal to the ideals of Ataturk. It is unsurprising that this supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamists would not be concerned about ISIS members finding refuge in Turkey, or using the country as a way-station between Europe and continuing campaigns by ISIS in the Middle East.

TURKEY'S CURRENT regime, which has increasingly jailed tens of thousands of dissidents and suppressed Kurdish civil rights in recent years, has been accused of working with extremists in northern Syria...

Not only has Turkey been accused of “working with extremists,” but it’s guilty as charged. Erdogan does not fear Muslim extremists; he’s one of them, and has been for decades. He’s the man who famously quoted that bellicose line of a Turkish poem: **“The mosques are our barracks, the minarets our bayonets, the domes our helmets and the faithful our soldiers.”** Once in office, he worked steadily to undo the reforms of Kemal Ataturk. Women are no longer forbidden to wear hijabs in universities and in government offices. Army officers who are openly and deeply devout, and in the past would, as a result, have been cashiered, instead are now being kept in the military and promoted. Secularist academics are often not hired or, if hired, not promoted, or even fired, all because of their continued loyalty to Kemalism. Nearly ten thousand new mosques have been built in Turkey during Erdogan’s tenure, as well as mosques built abroad – mainly in

Germany – to serve Turkish migrants. When Erdogan entered office, there were only 450 Imam Hatip religious schools; now there are 5,400, with close to 1.5 million students.. The attempted coup of 2016 gave Erdogan the excuse he needed to jail tens of thousands of his “secular” opponents, as well as supporters of Fethulleh Gulen. Academics, lawyers, judges, journalists, army officers all lost their jobs, if perceived as secularists loyal to the ideals of Ataturk. There are today still more journalists jailed in Turkey than in any other country in the world.

It now appears that Turkey will milk Libya economically. The AP report says Ankara has given Tripoli a bill of \$1.7 billion for money owed to Turkish companies.

In this instance, Turkey is not “milking Libya economically” but merely seeing to it that private Turkish companies are paid what they have long been owed by the Libyans. In the many years of chaos and confusion that followed Qaddafi’s death, Turkish contractors were not paid what they were owed either by the Libyan government or by Libyan companies. Now those bills will be paid. This does not amount to an attempt to “milk Libya economically.” Here, Ankara is justified in its demands.

A role in oil and offshore energy and then military bases will likely come next. Tripoli appears to be concerned that it is becoming another colony of Ankara, similar to the instability Turkey unleashed in northern Syria, where local voices become subservient to its whims but have little control over their own destiny.

Turkey already has an assured role in “oil and offshore energy.” The GNA has joined in a maritime deal with Turkey, whereby both Libya and Turkey extend their territorial waters until they meet in the middle of the eastern Mediterranean. The GNA has also promised Turkey – a major goal of Ankara –

that it will be allowed to search for and exploit undersea natural gas deposits in Libyan waters.

As for military bases, Turkey is already building a naval base as part of Misrata's port and a base at the al-Waitya air base in the desert southwest of Tripoli.

This is possibly, for the West, the most worrisome charge to be made against Turkey in Libya: in exchange for helping the GNA fight General Haftar, Ankara has exacted from the GNA the promise that Ankara can build two permanent military bases, a naval and an air base. Misrata was a clever choice for a naval base: 270,000 of its 400,000 citizens are Libyan "Turks," the descendants of Turks who settled in Libya over centuries. These military bases will allow for the projection of Turkish air power over land extending from Egypt to Algeria, and of Turkish naval power across the central and southeastern Mediterranean.

It's unclear if Turkey's growing involvement will result in a deal with Russia now to divide Libya, the way Turkey has partitioned Syria.

Turkey has not exactly "partitioned" Syria; it took over Idlib Province, that Assad's forces had not yet reconquered, but that is all. It does not lay claim to the permanent possession of Idlib governorate, but insists it will leave when "Syria is free." That may take a very long time. Idlib is only one of the 14 Syrian governorates, with a land area about 1/30th that of the whole country. "Partition" of a country does not require division of its area into equal parts. Nor does it signify, however, a division of the country into two such unequal parts – 1/30th and 29/30th of the whole.

Turkey has gained much from Erdogan's intervention in Libya. There is the repayment of \$1.7 billion to Turkish contractors by Libyan clients. And the GNA's promise that Turkey may

search for natural gas deposits under Libyan waters and lay claim to a significant amount of what it finds. And the GNA's permission for Turkey to establish both a permanent air base and a permanent naval base on Libyan soil. Despite all this, there is also the possibility of an ultimate fiasco. Turkey may find that after its initial success against General Haftar, the GNA's offensive could well stall, especially if Egyptian ground troops appear once the "red line" of Sirte has been crossed by GNA troops, and Russian bombers continue to attack GNA fighters with the same success as they have recently been having. Libya could become one more of those Tar Babies, with Erdogan's forces now bogged down somewhere in eastern Libya, just beyond Sirte, fleeing from Russian bombardments, and fighting an LNA force now vastly enlarged by an influx of Egyptian troops. His early success in Libya may yet prove to have been illusory, but at this point, he can't pull out, and leave Libya to General Haftar. That would be an insufferable humiliation. Erdogan may even find himself compelled to send more Turkish troops to Libya, which will damage him at home, where everyone had been led to believe the Turkish triumph would be swift and practically painless. If Turkish forces become stuck east of Sirte, will the Turkish people still believe the Libyan adventure is worth it? The placards of protesters in Taksim Square will no doubt then read Libya = Vietnam. That's not something the scowling Padishah, Erdogan The Conqueror, sitting in his Ak Saray, will want to see.

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