

# Erdogan vows to send Turkish troops into Libya

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President Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced Thursday that Ankara will deploy Turkish troops to Libya, claiming that the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA) has requested military support.

The dispatch of Turkish military units to the war-torn north African country threatens to exacerbate increasingly complex and escalating tensions between Ankara, Moscow and Washington.

The GNA, headed by Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj, is under siege by General Khalifa Haftar's so-called Libyan National Army, which is linked to a rival government based in the eastern Libyan port city of Tobruk. Turkey and the GNA signed agreements last month covering military assistance and a delineation of maritime boundaries that the Erdogan government is invoking to lay exclusive claim to vast gas and oil reserves under the eastern Mediterranean.

"Since there is an invitation [from Libya] right now, we will accept it," Erdogan said at a meeting of his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). "Based on our memorandum of understanding on the security and military cooperation, we will submit a motion for the deployment of the troops to parliament as the first item after it re-opens."

The "invitation" from Libya had yet to be made public as Erdogan promised that the Turkish troop deployment would be approved by the time the Turkish parliament returns on January 8.

The plan to send Turkish troops into Libya threatens to escalate a conflict that has far-reaching implications. While the GNA is recognized as Libya's "legitimate" government by the United Nations, it controls little territory outside of the capital of Tripoli, which is now under siege. It is dependent upon a collection of Islamist and regional militias for its defense.

Haftar, a former general under the Libyan

government of Muammar Gaddafi, who defected to the US and became a longtime "asset" of the Central Intelligence Agency, has the backing of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Russia and France. And, while Washington is formally backing the GNA, US President Donald Trump praised Haftar last April for his "significant role in fighting terrorism and securing Libya's oil resources."

The fracturing of Libya's government into two rival factions at war with each other is the end product of the 2011 US-NATO war of aggression which employed massive aerial bombardment and the use of Islamist militias as proxy ground troops, ending in the toppling and murder of Gaddafi. The imperialist intervention, which shattered Libya's infrastructure and claimed the lives of tens of thousands, turned what had been the wealthiest nation in Africa into a so-called failed state that has since endured eight years of uninterrupted civil war.

Erdogan's threat to send troops to Libya is part of an increasingly bellicose policy through which Ankara has sought to advance the interests of the Turkish bourgeoisie while stoking nationalism as a means of deflecting outward Turkey's growing class tensions.

Turkey's relations to Libya date back to the Ottoman Empire, which ruled the territory from the 16th century through to the Italian war of colonial conquest of 1911-12, in which Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, who would go on to found the Republic of Turkey a decade later, served as a volunteer fighting against the Italians. The present GNA regime in Tripoli is reportedly politically aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood, which wins it political sympathy from Turkey but makes it anathema to the regimes in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Haftar's Libyan National Army has charged that Turkish intelligence is funneling fighters of the former

Syrian affiliate of Al Qaeda, the al-Nusra Front, into Libya via Tunisia to support the GNA. Erdogan made a visit to Tunisia on Wednesday, cementing an alliance in support of the government in Tripoli, while issuing a joint statement in support of a cease-fire.

The deployment of Turkish troops to Libya has the potential of triggering a confrontation with Russia, which is backing Haftar. The Erdogan government has charged that mercenaries of the Kremlin-linked Wagner security contractor are on the ground backing Haftar's forces, a charge that Moscow has denied.

A meeting between Erdogan and Russian President Vladimir Putin is scheduled in Ankara during the first week of the new year, in which Libya will be one of the first points on the agenda. The conflict in the North African country is being framed by both countries in light of their tense agreement in Syria, where they have organized joint patrols on the border between Turkey and northeastern Syria.

Meanwhile, there is still the threat of a conflict over the Russian-backed offensive by the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad to retake the northwestern province of Idlib, where Turkey has troops deployed and has provided support to Islamist militias.

The Erdogan government sent a delegation to Moscow this week in an attempt to negotiate a cease-fire in Idlib. Turkey fears that a continuation of the offensive will send another wave of refugees across its borders, under conditions in which some 3.6 million Syrians have already sought refuge there from the carnage unleashed by the US-orchestrated war for regime change.

The tensions between Ankara and Moscow are only exceeded by those between the Erdogan government and Washington.

Erdogan threatened in a recent television interview that Turkey "may close Incirlik and Kurecik," two air bases that have played a major role in the US military operations in the Middle East, and where the US stores nuclear weapons and maintains critical radar facilities.

The statement came in response to the growing threat of sweeping US sanctions against Turkey over its purchase of a Russian S-400 missile system. Washington has already barred Turkey from participation in the development and deployment of its F-35 Joint Strike Fighter plane on the grounds that Russia could use the S-400 system's radar to

compromise the aircraft's capabilities. Ankara has in turn threatened to buy Russian fighter planes instead.

US Defense Secretary Mark Esper responded to these threats by saying that Turkey's decision not to host NATO bases called into question its "commitment to the alliance." Earlier, he had repeatedly stated that Ankara was moving out of the "NATO orbit."

Tensions between Ankara and the US-led NATO alliance have only deepened since Washington and Berlin backed an abortive 2016 military coup to topple and murder Erdogan because of his ties with Russia.

The deal between the Erdogan government and the GNA regime in Tripoli also has far-reaching implications for an increasingly sharp crisis in the eastern Mediterranean, where the devastation wrought by decades of US military interventions in the Middle East threatens to spill over into a conflict involving all of the major powers.

The memorandum signed between Ankara and the Libyan GNA lays claim to vast stretches of the eastern Mediterranean as an exclusive economic zone (EEZ), including waters off Cyprus, the Greek island of Crete and Egypt, along with off-shore reserves of oil and natural gas whose worth is estimated in the hundreds of billions of dollars.

Washington has responded to Turkey's claims by a decided shift in support of Greece and Cyprus, where it has lifted a decades-old arms embargo.

The wars in Syria and Libya, combined with the struggle for control over the energy reserves of the eastern Mediterranean, are creating an increasingly unstable situation that threatens to ignite a region-wide and even global military conflict.



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