

US assassination of Suleimani staggers Turkish government

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Washington's cold-blooded murder of Iranian General Qassem Suleimani, who led forces fighting US-backed Al Qaeda-linked militias in Syria and ISIS in Iraq, has staggered the Turkish government.

Ankara took 10 hours to react to this illegal act of war carried out by its decades-long NATO ally, specifically by President Donald Trump, whom Erdoğan has described as a "friend of mine." Turkish Presidential spokesman İbrahim Kalın said on Friday that "Turkey once again calls on all parties to act with common sense and avoid steps that will further escalate tensions."

Later the same day, the Turkish Foreign Ministry declared its "deep anxiety about the escalating US-Iranian tensions in the region." It added, "Turkey has always been opposed to foreign intervention, assassinations and sectarian conflict in the region."

This statement came from a government that supported the illegal US invasion of Iraq in 2003, backed violent Islamist sectarian forces in the war for regime-change against the government of President Bashar al-Assad in Syria, and has waged a decades-long war against Turkey's Kurdish population. Nonetheless, it reflects Ankara's fear of a possible US war against Iran that would engulf Turkey, as well as of the outrage among workers across the Middle East at Suleimani's murder.

President Erdoğan's first reaction to the killing was cited by Iran's IRNA news agency after a phone call between Erdoğan and Iranian President Hassan Rouhani on Saturday. Rouhani reportedly said, "[W]e expect that all our friends and neighbors should explicitly condemn this crime," adding that "if we remain silent against the US, it will become bolder and more aggressive." He reportedly thanked the "Turkish president for his sympathizing with the Iranian

government and nation on the sad occasion of the loss of the top Iranian general."

Erdoğan replied: "Foreign interference and fighting in the region prevent the region from attaining calm and stability, and we should not allow such measures to endanger regional peace and stability."

He gave a televised interview Sunday night to repeat his position, saying that "Turkey always stands against foreign intervention and regards the recent US attack in Baghdad with this same understanding."

Erdoğan said he had a phone conversation with Trump only a few hours before the assassination of Suleimani, adding, "So the matter was planned. We were shocked to hear the news. I specifically advised him not to increase tensions with Iran."

Significantly, Turkey's Islamist proxy force in Syria, the Syrian National Army (SNA, formerly the Free Syrian Army), a militia consisting largely of former members of Al Qaeda and other Islamist groups recruited by the CIA and Saudi Arabia to fight in Syria, congratulated Trump for assassinating Suleimani, whom they slandered as a "terrorist and murderer" in a statement Friday.

On his Twitter account, pro-government *Yeni Şafak* columnist İbrahim Karagül echoed them, calling Suleimani a "war criminal" and adding, "He did in Syria what the United States did in Iraq."

Despite the repulsive joy of its proxies and media attack dogs at a murder that could easily trigger a regional and even global war involving nuclear-armed powers, Ankara has appealed for calm between the US and Iran and tried to maintain its fragile relations with both states.

While supporting the SNA in its war to drive the US-backed Kurdish nationalist People's Protection Units (YPG) from the Turkish-Syrian border, Ankara is still

in a shaky alliance not only with Moscow but also with Tehran, based on limiting US power in Syria. On the other hand, despite objecting to US sanctions on Iran, Turkey halted all oil purchases from Iran last May.

The assassination of Suleimani will only weaken the already fragile position of Ankara in the Middle East and eastern Mediterranean. Erdoğan is in a more fraught situation than ever. None of the major conflicts between Ankara and its Western allies, which culminated in a Washington- and Berlin-backed coup attempt against Erdoğan in 2016, have been resolved in the intervening years. On the contrary, they have intensified.

Despite the objections of Washington, Ankara has purchased and deployed Russian S-400 missile systems. Because of this, Washington has barred Turkey from participation in the development and deployment of its F-35 fighter jets and imposed sanctions on the TurkStream pipeline, which runs from southern Russia across the Black Sea to Turkey. At the beginning of the new year, Moscow reportedly began European gas deliveries through the new pipeline.

In December, Erdoğan reacted to the actions of the Trump administration with threats to close Incirlik and Kürecik, two air bases that have played a major role in US military operations in the Middle East. Washington stores nuclear weapons and maintains critical radar facilities at the bases.

With the US having effectively launched an undeclared war with Iran through the assassination of Suleimani, it is unclear how Ankara would respond if Washington tried to use these bases to attack Iran, or, conversely, if Iran bombed the bases in an attempt to prevent further US attacks.

In the same television interview on Sunday, Erdoğan announced that Turkish troops were being dispatched to Libya to back Fayeze el-Sarraj's Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli. This followed a vote in the Turkish parliament last Thursday in favor of armed intervention in Libya, giving Erdoğan full powers to decide on the scope of the deployment. "Our soldiers' duty there is coordination," Erdoğan said. "They will develop the operation centre there. Our soldiers are gradually going right now." He did not give any precise information on the number of troops to be deployed.

Turkey and the GNA signed agreements at the end of

November covering military assistance and a delineation of maritime boundaries. These are being invoked by the Erdoğan government to lay exclusive claim to vast gas and oil reserves under the eastern Mediterranean. The US, the European Union and a number of states in the region have condemned these moves.

On Thursday, Israel, the Greek Cypriot regime and Greece signed a rival eastern Mediterranean energy deal, opposed by Turkey, for a pipeline to transport natural gas from waters off of Israel and Cyprus to Greece, Italy and beyond.

Turkey appears to be fairly isolated in actively backing the GNA, and its military intervention threatens to escalate a conflict with 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, Tripoli, which is now under siege.

The deployment of Turkish troops to Libya could trigger a confrontation with Russia, which is backing General Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army, which is linked to a rival government based in Libya's eastern port city of Tobruk. Last week, Haftar reacted to Turkey's imminent military deployment by declaring, "We accept the challenge and declare jihad and a call to arms."

In advance of a visit by Russian President Vladimir Putin to Turkey on Wednesday, the UN Security Council, at Russia's request, will meet behind closed doors on Monday to discuss the situation in Libya. Erdoğan has charged that mercenaries from the Kremlin-linked Wagner security firm are on the ground backing Haftar's forces, which Moscow has denied.



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