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TURKEY'S SUPPORT TO LIBYA'S OUTLAW MILITIAS AND THE THREAT TO EUROPE'S SOUTHERN FLANK*

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On May 6, 2019, Turkey announced its plans to begin drilling activities in the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) of Cyprus, prompting the US State Department to warn the Turkish regime that: “This step is highly provocative and risks raising tensions in the region. We urge Turkish authorities to halt these operations and encourage all parties to act with restraint.”¹ Despite warnings from the United States and the European Union, on June 20, Turkey sent a second drilling vessel to the territorial waters and offshore energy reserves of Cyprus. On the same day, EU countries took an unprecedented stand towards Turkey, promising sanctions against Erdogan’s regime if it continues with its drilling activities in Cyprus’s economic zone. The EU asked the 28-member bloc’s executive to “submit options for appropriate measures without delay, including targeted measures,” while one senior official estimated that sanctions would be in place by the summer.² Turkey, which already faces threats of US sanctions over its purchase of a Russian missile-defense system, now also risks facing simultaneous measures both by Europe and the US that would powerfully isolate Turkey, a North Atlantic Treaty Organization member that has gone rogue over the years under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdogan.³

Indeed, the Eastern Mediterranean is not the only region in which the Turkish state has established dangerous patterns that threaten Europe, the Middle East and North Africa. On the same day as the EU threatened sanctions against Turkey for the violation of Cypriot waters, on June 20, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the president of Turkey openly admitted that his government violated the UN arms embargo on Libya by sending weapons to the Islamist militias fighting the Libyan National Army. He told journalists: “We have a military cooperation agreement with Libya. We are providing to them if they come up with a request, and if they pay for it. They really had a problem in terms of defence needs, equipments.” Erdogan elaborated that this assistance was coordinated through the Turkish intelligence agencies and the Turkish Defence Minister Hulusi Akar.⁴

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Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, Commander of the Libyan National Army

Erdogan’s statement confirms what commentators had pointed out last month when photos on social media showed dozens of Turkish “Kirpi” armoured vehicles being delivered to ecstatic militias in Misrata, who count among their leadership internationally sanctioned war criminals such as Salah Badi, terrorist organizations such as Ansar al Sharia and human traffickers. In fact, Badi boasted on video about the lethal power of the Turkish armoured vehicles, claiming that “The Beast is here. The battle of Tripoli will be reversed in our favour in two weeks.” Badi also said that the shipment from Turkey included anti-tank missiles, anti-air missiles, assault rifles and ammunition.⁵ Incidentally, it was only last November that the U.N Security Council and the US Treasury sanctioned Badi, accusing him of undermining Libyan security by attacking groups aligned with the UN-backed government in Tripoli.⁶

However, this was not the first incident of Turkish arms trafficking to Libya’s militias, who are regarded as Turkey and Qatar’s Islamist proxies in North Africa. Contributing directly to Libya’s instability, the EU’s human trafficking problem and the perpetuation of the conflict, the present schism in Libya can be directly traced to Turkish and Qatari support of Libya’s Islamist militias who occupy the capital, hold the central bank hostage, and are heavily involved in human trafficking in cooperation with figures from the GNA.⁷

The current conflict in Libya can be traced to 2014, when a coalition of Islamist forces



Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte with Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar and Fayeze al-Sarra the conference in Palermo.

from Misrata violently took over Tripoli after Islamists resoundingly lost the democratic elections. Following their loss, they proceeded to violently remove the elected parliament of Libya from Tripoli, in an operation known as Fajr Libya (Operation Dawn), forcing it to relocate to Tobruk in the east.⁸ Leading the violent coup against the democratically elected parliament was Salah Badi, the same recipient of the Turkish armed vehicle last month and internationally sanctioned as a war criminal for his destruction of the Tripoli airport twice and for the use of Grad missiles against civilians.⁹

The House of Representatives remained in Tobruk since then, as the capital of the country and the Western region became occupied by militias. On March 2015, the elected Libyan parliament and the only internationally recognized parliament of Libya appointed Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar to head the Libyan National Army (LNA)¹⁰ and combat terrorism, militias, and to restore Libyan sovereignty from the ISIS strongholds that established in the country. Supporting this violent removal of the elected parliament was Turkey and Qatar, which supplied the militias with arms and logistical support and who continue to resist elections and fight the national army to this day.

It is also important to note that such arms trafficking efforts to Libya's outlaw militias have continued since 2014. On September 2, 2015, Greek authorities raided a vessel loaded with weapons and destined to Misrata and Tobruk, 20 nautical miles northeast of Crete. The vessel, the Haddad I, was carrying a cargo of almost 500,000 rounds of

ammunition and 5,000 rifles. This is not the first time or last time the Greek coastguard patrol intercepted a Turkish vessel engaged in arms smuggling to Islamist militias. On January 7, 2018, Greek authorities impounded a cargo vessel loaded with arms and explosives from Turkey and headed to the Libyan port city of Misrata, also a hotbed of Islamists. The vessel was stacked with 29 containers full of explosives and detonators and were intercepted off the Cretan port of Iraklio. The cargo also included a large quantity of the explosive agent ammonium nitrate and 11 empty liquefied petroleum gas tanks. In December 18, 2018, weapons shipment from Turkey was seized by Libyan customs in the port of Khoms, approximately 100km east of Tripoli. The cargo contained 3,000 Turkish-made pistols. On the day before, on December 17, 2018, a cargo of 2.5 million Turkish-made bullets was seized at the same port, prompting the UN mission to Libya to condemn the arms smuggling as “extremely disconcerting.”¹¹

Indeed, Qatar and Turkey have a long history of smuggling arms and jihadists both from Libya and to Libya that preceded the pivotal events of 2014. To this end, they established a close cooperation to smuggle arms out of Libya and to their other terrorist proxies in Syria. According to *The New York Times*, as far back as 2013,

“Evidence gathered in Syria, along with flight-control data and interviews with militia members, smugglers, rebels, analysts and officials in several countries, offers a profile of a complex and active multinational effort, financed largely by Qatar, to transport arms from Libya to Syria’s opposition fighters. Libya’s own former fighters, who sympathize with Syria’s rebels, have been eager collaborators ... Those weapons, which slipped from state custody as Colonel Qaddafi’s people rose against him in 2011, are sent on ships or Qatar Emiri Air Force flights to a network of intelligence agencies and Syrian opposition leaders in Turkey. From there, Syrians distribute the arms according to their own formulas and preferences to particular fighting groups, which in turn issue them to their fighters on the ground, rebels and activists said.”¹²

At the same time, as early as 2013, *Jane’s Intelligence* had already established that nearly half of the Syrian rebels were jihadis affiliated with al-Qaeda, Jabhat al Nusra and ISIS.¹³ As Charles Lister observed, “The insurgency is now dominated by groups which have at least an Islamist viewpoint on the conflict. The idea that it is mostly secular groups leading the opposition is just not borne out.” In retrospect, the “Free Syrian Army” was nothing more than “a Qatari myth.”¹⁴ Regardless, on September 18, the Senate passed a bill supporting Obama’s plan to fund, train and arm the mysterious and “moderate” Syrian rebels—ostensibly to battle the Islamic State.¹⁵

Furthering the threat to Europe’s southern flank, in October 2017, Qatar has also been accused of redirecting ISIS fighters fleeing from Syria and Iraq to the Libyan fron-

tier. Christopher Davidson argued that following the defeat of ISIS in Iraq and Syria, Qatar is now involved in facilitating the reverse flow of fighters: “Its usefulness has significantly declined in that theater of operations, and the weapons and presumably the men—at least the foreign fighters—are being moved to where they’re needed most. And I believe that one of those locations at the moment is the Libyan conflict.”¹⁶ Two years later, in May 2019, the Libyan government would inform the United Nations that Turkey was not only smuggling weapons to Libya, but also jihadists from Idlib, Syria, to Libya.

For its part, “the Government of National Accord” is in fact, an unelected and expired entity which was never ratified by the Libyan House of Representatives, as the Libyan Political Agreement which created it in 2015 stipulated. Its mandate also expired two years ago, removing all legitimacy from the dysfunctional entity. As Francesca Mannocchi described in December 2018 in an exposé for *The Guardian*, “The UN proclaimed three years ago that the hell [Hmeed el-] Mahdi describes would end with the creation of the government of national accord, parachuted into Tripoli to rid it of gangsterism. But far from expunging the militias, the government is beholden to them.” Today, “Seven years after Muammar Gaddafi was deposed and killed in the Arab spring revolution, Libya has gone full circle from dictatorship through revolution, democracy, chaos and back to a new kind of tyranny. Except this time there is not one dictator but dozens, in the form of the very militias who defeated him” where “Tripoli’s warlords are on the state payroll, through the simple expedient of gunmen threatening the bankers with kidnapping or worse. Similar pressure resulted in the government handing its all-important intelligence and surveillance portfolio to an Islamist militia.”¹⁷

To further illustrate the dangerous nexus of criminality and the GNA which entrenched itself in Tripoli, the US State department published a special report on Libya and human trafficking on June 20, 2019 further pointing out how:



Images of armored vehicles supplied by Turkey to Islamist militias aligned with the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord in May 2019



“International observers reported rampant complicity of government officials involved in human trafficking and migrant smuggling operations, including Libyan Coast Guard officials, immigration officers, security officials, Ministry of Defense (MOD) officials, members of armed groups formally integrated into state institutions, as well as officials from the MOI and MOI’s Department to Combat Irregular Migration (DCIM)”¹⁸

When the Libyan National Army declared its offensive to liberate Tripoli from its occupation by Turkey’s proxies on April 4, 2019, the GNA, in an attempt to consolidate its undemocratic power, openly co-opted these criminal militias. According to an interview with Field Marshal Haftar, Fayeze Sarraj reneged on his agreement at Abu Dhabi where it was agreed that the Libyan National Army would enter Tripoli to remove the militias so the country can proceed with a transitional phase towards elections. The Field Marshal said in a May 26 interview how “Sarraj has agreed to proposals in the UAE, Paris and Rome but had constantly added that he had to consult his advisors ... We never got a clear response from him ... After the last negotiations, I understood that it was not he who decided. As head of the Libyan National Army, I had to act.”¹⁹

The GNA has lost all international legitimacy and credibility and is no longer a partner for peace in Libya. It is defending a criminal status quo in Tripoli and fighting the LNA through a coalition of militias which include several UN-sanctioned leaders, extremists, human traffickers and mafia leaders such as Salah Badi, Ibrahim Jadhran, Abd Al-Rahman Milad (al-Bija), Mohamed Kaschlaf, Khalifa Ghweil—in addition to terrorists from the Shura Council of Mujahideen in Derna (SCMD) and the Shura Council of Benghazi Revolutionaries (SCBR). Libyan Islamists under the GNA are looking to Turkey to help them defeat the Libyan National Army and maintain their control on the Libyan capital and perpetuate instability in the country.

It has become more and more apparent that the expired GNA and the militias of Tripoli answer not to the interests of the Libyan people and peacebuilding efforts but to their self-interests and the interests of their benefactors in Ankara and Doha. Without strong and long over due measures by the international community, Turkey’s foreign policy will continue to create instability in the Mediterranean and empower regressive Islamists forces, threatening the security and development of both natives and Europeans.

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