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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

By Bill Van Auken
13.12.2019

Turkey's Erdoğan threatens to send troops into Libya

Turkey is prepared to send troops into Libya should the war-ravaged north African nation's besieged government in Tripoli ask for Ankara's aid, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan warned Tuesday.

The threat of intervention came as the Libyan capital, a metropolitan area comprising some two million inhabitants, appeared to be on the brink of an all-out battle between the collection of militias supporting the Tripoli-based, UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) of Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj and the so-called Libyan National Army (LNA), which is aligned with a rival government based upon the Libyan House of Representatives in the eastern port city of Tobruk.

Libya, once the wealthiest country in Africa, boasting the continent's largest oil reserves, was transformed into a so-called failed state and plunged into a permanent state of chaos and bloodshed by the 2011 US-NATO war for regime change. A seven-month-long bombing campaign was launched in support of CIA-backed Islamist militias to destroy Libya's security forces and vital infrastructure and overthrow the government of Muammar Gaddafi, who was tortured and murdered by an Islamist lynch mob.



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan [Credit: State Department]

Turkey is the sole power providing significant material support to the GNA of Prime Minister al-Sarraj in Tripoli. The Tobruk government and the LNA, which is commanded by the 76-year-old “Field Marshal” Khalifa Haftar, has won backing from Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, France and Russia.

Washington’s attitude toward the conflict has been ambiguous. While the US formally recognizes the GNA in Tripoli and has called for a ceasefire, President Donald Trump spoke personally to Haftar last April as his forces were mounting a previous siege of Tripoli and, afterwards, praised him for playing a “significant role in fighting terrorism and securing Libya’s oil resources.”

A former Gaddafi general turned CIA asset, Haftar spent two decades living near the CIA’s headquarters in Langley, Virginia, collaborating in US plots against the Gaddafi government, before returning to Libya shortly after the NATO war began in 2011 to lead NATO-backed “rebels.”

Haftar’s forces have appeared to gain the upper hand amid reports of Russian aid in the form of military contractors as well as warplanes and air defense systems that have given them control of Libyan airspace.

Washington’s standpoint has appeared to shift in opposition to the increased Russian role. Last month, the chief of the US military’s Africa Command (AFRICOM), Gen. Stephen Townsend, said that a Russian air defense battery had shot down a US military surveillance drone near Tripoli. He acknowledged that the US drone may have been mistaken for one of the Turkish drones used by the GNA militias to attack Haftar’s forces. He added, “But they certainly know who it belongs to now and they are refusing to return it. They say they don’t know where it is, but I am not buying it.” US officials also suggested that Russia was “exploiting” the crisis created by US imperialism’s destruction of Libya’s government and society eight years ago.

On Wednesday, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said that he had discussed Libya the day before with his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, in Washington, and had insisted that there was “no military solution.” He also reiterated US support for an arms embargo imposed against Libya in 2011, an embargo that was blatantly violated by the CIA in supplying arms to the Islamist militias in the country, weapons that later found their way to Al Qaeda-linked forces in Syria and elsewhere.

Whether such negotiations will take place is far from clear. Haftar and his cohorts have declared that they will take Tripoli before the end of the year. The LNA forces are reportedly just two miles from the Libyan capital, having taken control of most of the Salah el-Deen district just south of Tripoli. The LNA's entry into the city would almost certainly trigger bloody street fighting and the displacement of a population that already includes large numbers of both internal and external refugees.

Erdoğan's suggestion that Turkish soldiers could be sent to prop up the GNA came on the heels of the signing of an agreement between the Turkish government and the regime in Tripoli providing not only for security assistance, including the right to build Turkish bases in Libya, but also a Memorandum of Understanding delineating a supposed diagonal maritime boundary between the two countries.

The agreement lays claim to a vast stretch of the eastern Mediterranean separating Libya from Turkey, including waters off the Greek island of Crete, Cyprus and Egypt, along with off-shore reserves of oil and natural gas whose worth is estimated in the hundreds of billions of dollars.

Greece expelled the ambassador of the Tripoli government after the signing of the deal and went to the United Nations to challenge the agreement as a violation of international law. The government of Cyprus said it was launching a legal action at the International Court of Justice at the Hague against what it said was Turkey's violations of its sovereign rights.

Turkey's deal with a regime that appears to be on its last legs in Libya is aimed at bolstering its claims over drilling rights in the area.

"With this new agreement between Turkey and Libya, we can hold joint exploration operations in these exclusive economic zones that we determined. There is no problem," Erdoğan said Tuesday.

"Other international actors cannot carry out exploration operations in these areas Turkey drew [up] this accord without getting permission. Greek Cyprus, Egypt, Greece and Israel cannot establish a gas transmission line without first getting permission from Turkey," he added.

Turkey's Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu told the pro-government A Haber news network Wednesday that Ankara "has the right to prevent" any unauthorized drilling in the

waters that it has claimed. Asked if Turkey would resort to military force to prevent such drilling, he replied, “Of course.”

Cyprus has struck deals with France’s Total and Italy’s ENI energy conglomerates to carry out joint drilling operations in waters that are now claimed by Turkey. Last July, Turkey sent drilling vessels escorted by Turkish warships to carry out exploratory drilling in what Cyprus regards as its exclusive economic zone. Last year, Turkish warships blocked a drill ship leased by ENI from entering waters southeast of Cyprus. Turkey does not recognize the country, claiming a large part of its economic zone as its own based on what it says is its protection of Turkish Cypriots in a breakaway statelet in the island’s north.

The conflict over energy reserves in the eastern Mediterranean and the bloody war in Libya are part of an increasingly unstable situation throughout the region that poses the threat of a region-wide and even global military conflagration.

12 December 2019