

# Turkey and the War on Libya: Defusing another UN Time Bomb

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*Turkey's decision to take the lead in the NATO mission against Libya is a bold example of its determination to play the leading role in the region – and within NATO itself...*

Turkey continues its struggle to rein in the trigger-happy Franco-Anglo-American coalition intent on invading Libya. From the start, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan dismissed the idea of a no-fly-zone as “such nonsense. What does NATO have to do with Libya?” But his NATO colleagues pushed ahead and achieved UN Security Council Resolution 1973 on 17 March, authorising “all necessary measures” against Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi and the establishment of a no-fly zone.

While Turkey did not condemn the resolution outright, it has sharply condemned French airstrikes on Colonel Muammar Gaddafi's forces, initially vetoing the proposal that NATO take over the no-fly-zone operation. On Thursday, 24 March, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu met with NATO's top military commander US Admiral James Stavridis in Ankara and finally acceded to US pressure to support the NATO no-fly-zone on the condition that “the rules of engagement in Libya must be restricted to protecting civilians, enforcing the arms embargo and no-fly zone, and the provision of humanitarian aid,” excluding any further air strikes against Gaddafi's ground forces.

Erdogan has an unlikely ally in United States President Barack Obama. More cautious than gung-ho Franco-Anglo leaders, Obama does not want a repeat of the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, preferring to share the blame for the future fallout with its NATO colleagues. After Davutoglu's meeting with Stavridis last week, US Ambassador to Turkey Francis Ricciardone said the US and Turkey share almost the same views on military action in Libya, agreeing that the most important thing was to protect the people of Libya, and that Turkey had a unique role in the region and a special expertise because of historical and cultural reasons.

But NATO Secretary General Anders Rasmussen insisted the day after Davutoglu met Stavridis that there will still be a “coalition operation and a NATO operation”, and air strikes targetting Gaddafi forces continued over angry Turkish protests, showing the disarray among the NATO members. The death toll from the air strikes is already over 100. “Davut” is fighting Goliath, so to speak, and the world is now routing for the plucky NATO David.

In an interview with the *Guardian* Sunday, Erdogan fought back against his nemesis French President Nicolas Sarkozy, saying Turkey was ready to act as a mediator to broker an early ceasefire in Libya within the framework of NATO, the Arab League and African Union. He warned that a drawn-out conflict risked turning the country into a “second Iraq” or “another

Afghanistan” with devastating repercussions both for Libya and the NATO states leading the intervention.

He was clearly referring to both 9/11 and the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. Iraq was “still paying a price” 20 years after the Gulf war of 1991. “When western forces entered Afghanistan nearly 10 years ago, people were talking of it being over in days, and people said the same in Iraq. But a million have died and a civilisation has as good as collapsed. We don’t want to see a similar picture in Libya. There is a civil war in Libya and we have to bring that to an end.”

Turkey is the only NATO member that still has both an embassy in the Libyan capital Tripoli and a consul functioning in Benghazi. Erdogan is in personal contact with Gaddafi, and has now publicly called on him to step down and allow for meaningful negotiations with the Benghazi-based opposition Transitional National Council. Turkey is about to take over the running of the Benghazi harbour and airport to facilitate humanitarian aid, in agreement with NATO, pre-empting any Franco-Anglo-American plan to use it as a base to launch a ground-force invasion. Erdogan said in reference to the emerging “no-drive zone” policy: “Turkey’s role will be to withdraw from Libya as soon as possible” and “restore the unity and integrity of the country based on the democratic demands of the people.” Mincing no words, Erdogan said that “this deployment should not be carried out for Libya’s oil.”

Turkey’s remarkable ability to resist the Western drive to invade Libya is the fruit of the past decade of growing Turkish assertiveness both in the Middle East, in relations with the US, and further afield. Throughout the Cold War, Turkey was a close ally of the US and Western Europe. When the Soviet Union collapsed, Russia quickly became its largest trading partner and Turkey lost its *faux* strategic importance as a NATO outpost. But this was in fact a plus – it was now able to forge its own rational relations with its neighbours and the world at large, “the renewal of the natural flow of history” as Davutoglu explained at the Leaders of Change Summit earlier this month in Istanbul.

After the Justice and Development (AK) Party came to power in 2002, Turkey’s foreign policies became more self-assertive, more sympathetic to the Muslim world. Despite well-grounded fears of a military coup, the new Prime Minister Erdogan refused to allow the US to launch its invasion of Iraq from NATO bases in Turkey, to the fury of the Pentagon. Turkey had unwillingly hosted the Iraqi no-fly-zone after the 1991 Gulf War which in fact aided Turkey’s Kurdish separatists, making the arrival of the AK and a new role for Turkey within NATO inevitable.

In Afghanistan, while Turkey never recognised the Taliban as the official government in the late 1990s, it did not participate in the US invasion in 2001, and afterwards positioned itself as a low-key but vital ally in the “war against terrorism” there, providing 1800 troops in strictly noncombat roles, such as providing security around Kabul and training troops, “not with paternalism or the imperial arrogance of an occupying power,” according to Aydemir Erman, Turkey’s coordinator for Afghanistan from 1991-2003, writing in the *Christian Science Monitor* last year.

In 2007 it began a trilateral programme of cooperation with Afghan and Pakistan political, military and intelligence organisations, and has just finished a training programme this week with Afghan and Pakistani soldiers in urban warfare. According to Turkish Parliamentary Deputy Burhan Kayatürk, Turkey, which has the goodwill of the Afghani people, “can help

win the hearts and minds of the Afghani people, who like the Turkish soldiers” and can “steer them away from militancy by strengthening the infrastructure in education, health and industry”.

“As a historically trusted friend of the Afghan people, Turkey, alone among members of the NATO alliance, has a ‘soft power’ ingredient in its arsenal that is key to winning the hearts and minds of the population. No Afghan was ever killed by a Turkish bullet” and “no Afghan trained by Turks has ever betrayed his country,” claims Erman.

Just as Turkey is pulling its weight in Afghanistan in its own way, it is not standing on the sidelines in the Libya crisis today, providing the NATO operation with five ships and one submarine to enforce an arms embargo and a squadron of fighter jets to enforce a narrowly defined no-fly-zone, the most significant contribution of all NATO members, but on the condition that no Libyans are killed, whoever they support.

A holier-than-thou approach at this point would merely compound the disaster that imperial bungling is heading for, leaving the West in control when the inevitable end comes, and Turkey out in the political (and economic) cold. Much more sensible to shoulder some of the responsibility, come to some kind of agreement – however flawed – with the US, Britain and France, and make sure that the Turkish position is at least taken into account in the conduct of the operation and the aftermath.

The latest Turkish move is a gamble, but politics is not for the faint-of-heart. “The enemies of the Arabs are banking on always being a step or two ahead of Arabs in their plans and operations,” writes Libyan American writer Husayn Al-Kurdi. Turkey’s move to position itself as a mediator in the current Western onslaught against Libya is a valiant attempt to keep one step ahead of the “enemies of the Arabs”.

When the dust finally settles on Gaddafi’s quixotic socialist Jumhuriya, it is the Turks who are the only conceivable power to help usher in a legitimate post-Gaddafi regime. As in the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the West has groomed its chosen successor to Gaddafi, self-proclaimed Prime Minister Mahmoud Jibril, already issuing directives from Benghazi. Assuming the Western invasion succeeds and he is declared the new Libyan leader, he and his cohorts will still have to gain credibility among Libyans.

This will not be any easy strategy to pull off. French *faux pas* abound. Sarkozy’s interior minister, Claude Guéant, praised the French president for “leading a Crusade” against Gaddafi. Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin correctly damned the invasion using the very same “C” word, compounding the *roi’s* nakedness. Jibril is the darling of the French potentate, but considering Sarkozy’s own abysmal standing in France (the far right National Front Party’s Marine Le Pen outpolls him) Jibril would be wise to make Ankara his first stop if he prevails.

So what is the fate of UNSC Resolution 1973? Will Turkey prevail, bring an end to the violent Western-backed attempt to overthrow Gaddafi and mediate a peaceful transition to democracy, or will the NATO big guns prevail and bring the unending horrors unleashed by Bush junior in Afghanistan and Iraq? NATO schemers drunk on military power are creating a

new source of terror. Erdogan and Davutoglu are trying to pull their irons out of the fire.

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Canadian Eric Walberg is known worldwide as a journalist specializing in the Middle East, Central Asia and Russia. A graduate of University of Toronto and Cambridge in economics, he has been writing on East-West relations since the 1980s. He has lived in both the Soviet Union and Russia, and then Uzbekistan, as a UN adviser, writer, translator and lecturer. Presently a writer for the foremost Cairo newspaper, Al Ahram, he is also a regular contributor to Counterpunch, Dissident Voice, Global Research, Al-Jazeera and Turkish Weekly, and is a commentator on Voice of the Cape radio. Eric Walberg was a moderator and speaker at the Leaders for Change Summit in Istanbul in 2011.

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