

Video: Turkish Invasion of Libya? Erdogan Sends Troops

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In early 2020, Libya became one of the main hot points in the Greater Middle East with stakes raised by Turkey's decision to launch a military operation there.

On January 5, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced that Turkey had sent troops to Libya to support the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA). No Turkish soldiers will reportedly participate in direct fighting. Instead, they will create an operation center and coordinate operations. Erdogan pointed that “right now”, there will be “different units serving as a combatant force.” He didn’t say who exactly these troops would be, but it is apparent that these are members of Turkish-backed Syrian militant groups and Turkey-linked private military contractors.

Ankara started an active deployment of members of pro-Turkish Syrian militant groups in Libya in December 2019. So far, over 600 Turkish-backed Syrian fighters have arrived. According to media reports, the officially dispatched Turkish troops included military advisers, technicians, electronic warfare and air defense specialists. Their total number is estimated at around 40-60 personnel.

https://southfront.org/wp-content/uploads/video/FPD_Turkey-Libya_16_01_2020.mp4

A day after the Erdogan announcement, on January 6, the defense of the GNA collapsed in Sirte and the GNA’s rival, the Libyan National Army (LNA), took control of the town. Several pro-GNA units from Sirte publicly defected to the LNA with weapons and military equipment, including at least 6 armoured vehicles. With the loss of Sirte, only two large cities – Tripoli and Misrata – formally remained in the hands of the GNA. Misrata and its Brigades in fact remain a semi-independent actor operating under the GNA banner.

From January 7 to January 12, when the sides agreed on a temporary ceasefire proposed in a joint statement of the Turkish and Russian presidents, the LNA continued offensive operations against GNA forces near Tripoli and west of Sirte capturing several positions there. The GNA once again demonstrated that it is unable to take an upper hand in the battle against forces of Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar.

The GNA formally requested “air, ground and sea” military support from Turkey on December 26th, 2019, in the framework of the military cooperation deal signed by the sides in November. On January 2, 2020, the Turkish Parliament approved the bill allowing troop deployment in Libya. This move did not change the situation strategically. Even before the formal approval, Ankara already was engaged in the conflict. It sent large quantities of weapons and military equipment, including “BMC Kirpi” armoured vehicles, deployed

Bayraktar TB2 unmanned combat aerial vehicles at airfields near Tripoli and Misrata, and sent operators and trainers in order to assist GNA forces.

Turkey could increase military supplies, deploy additional private military contractors, military advisers and special forces units, but it has no safe place to deploy own air group to provide the GNA with a direct air support like Russia did for pro-Assad forces in Syria. Approximately 90% of Libya is under the LNA control. Tripoli and Misrata airports are in a strike distance for the LNA. Tunisia, Algeria, Niger, Chad and Sudan refuse to play any direct role in the conflict, while the self-proclaimed Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus is still too far away. Egypt, alongside with the UAE and Russia, is a supporter of the LNA. Therefore, deployment there is out of question.

Turkey operates no aircraft carriers. Its TCG Anadolu amphibious assault ship can be configured as a light aircraft carrier, but the warship isn't in service yet. It is unclear how Ankara will be able to provide the GNA with an extensive air support without endangering its own aircraft by deploying them close to the combat zone.

Turkey could deploy a naval task force to support the GNA. Nonetheless, this move is risky, if one takes into account the hostile political environment, with Egypt, Cyprus, the UAE and Greece are strictly against any such actions. Additionally, this deployment will go against the interests of other NATO member states such as France and Italy that see the expansion of the Turkish influence as a direct threat to their vital economic interests, especially in the oil business. Warships near the Libyan coast will be put in jeopardy from modern anti-ship measures. Yemen's Houthis repeatedly proved that missiles could be quite an effective tool to combat a technologically advanced enemy. In the worst-case scenario, the Turkish Navy can suffer notable losses, and the risk of this is too real to tangible to overlook.

Another unlikely option is a large-scale ground operation that will require an amphibious landing. Turkey has several landing ships, the biggest of which are the two Bayraktar-class amphibious warfare ships (displacement - 7,254 tons). There are also the Osman Gazi-class landing ship (3,700 tons), two Sarucabey-class landing ships (2,600 tons). Other landing ships, albeit active, are outdated. With 5 modern landing ships, any landing operation will endanger Turkish forces involved, keeping in mind the complex diplomatic environment and the LNA that will use all means and measures that it has to prevent such a scenario.

In these conditions, the most likely scenario of Turkey's military operation was the following:

- Deployment of a limited number of specialists;
- Public employment of private military contractors'
- Redeployment of members of pro-Turkish proxy groups from Syria to Libya;
- Diplomatic and media campaign to secure Ankara's vital interests and find a political solution that would prevent the LNA's final push to capture Tripoli. Turkey sees the Libyan foothold and the memorandum on maritime boundaries signed with the GNA as the core factors needed to secure own national interests in the Eastern Mediterranean.

This is exactly what Ankara did. On January 8, Turkish and Russian Presidents released a joint statement in which they called for reaching cease-fire in Libya by midnight of January 12. The joint statement emphasized the worsening situation in Libya and its negative impact on "the security and stability of Libya's wider neighborhood, the entire Mediterranean

region, as well as the African continent, triggering irregular migration, further spread of weapons, terrorism and other criminal activities including illicit trafficking,” and called for the resumption of a political dialogue to settle the conflict. The LNA initially rejected the ceasefire initiative, but then accepted it. This signals that key LNA supporters agreed on the format proposed by the Turkish and Russian leaders. On January 13, the delegations of the GNA, the LNA, and Turkey arrived in Moscow for talks on a wider ceasefire deal. The deal was not reached and clashes near Tripoli resumed on January 14.

Russian and Turkish interests are deeply implicated. Some experts speculated the contradictions within the Libyan conflict could become a stone that will destroy the glass friendship between Ankara and Moscow. However, the joint Russian-Turkish diplomatic efforts demonstrate that the sides found a kind of understanding and possibly agreed on the division of spheres of influence. If the Moscow negotiations format allows de-escalating the situation and putting an end to the terrorism threat and violence in Libya, it will become another success of the practical approach employed by the both powers in their cooperation regarding the Middle East questions.

The 2011 NATO intervention led by France, Italy and the United States destroyed the Libyan statehood in order to get control of the country’s energy resources. Now, Egypt, the UAE, Russia and Turkey are driving France, Italy and the US out of Libya in order to put an end to the created chaos and secure own interests.

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