Deployment to the Slaughterhouse: The Turkish Route

‘Turkey Deploys Mercenaries to Libya’, ‘Mercenary Pilgrimage Season in Tripoli’, ‘Erdogan in Libya, learned a lesson from Iran.’ These and similar headlines reflect the Middle East media’s heightened attention to the situation in Libya, and in particular, to the actions of Turkey in the country. The media are concerned by how Turkey is increasing the recruitment and deployment of Syrian mercenaries to take part in the war in Libya on the side of the Government of National Accord (GNA).

This is happening against the backdrop of the confrontation between the two poles of power centered in Tripoli and in Tobruk that began in 2014. It escalated quickly when the Tobruk power bloc, the Libyan National Army (LNA) led by K. Haftar, drew close to and deployed forces near Tripoli in April of last year. The battles to banish ‘terrorists and mercenaries’ from the capital’s police force took on a protracted nature.

According to the Arab web-portal Al-Ain, at least 1,600 soldiers from Turkish units fighting in Syria have arrived to training camps under the auspices of Turkey. These collaborators have opened 4 bureaus in the Ankara-controlled territories for the ‘registration of sentinels’ who wish to fight in Libya. One operates under the aegis of the Al-Hamza division, the other is led by the Syrian Front, and the rest are backed by the Al-Mu’tasim and Shamil Corps.

These bureaus recruit men for fighting in Libya, promising them large sums of money. On top of that, they promise various benefits for the fighters. They are deployed secretly, on civilian liners.

The Libyan National Army has reported the capture of 13 militants from hostile militias near Tripoli, among them mercenaries sent by Turkey (). It also identified the Syrian officers in charge of these units. Most of them are those who deserted from the government army and went to serve under their Turkish overseers. According to the latest
LNA data, the number of Syrian mercenaries in Libya sent by Ankara has reached about 6,000. Some of them have already fallen in battle. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights has announced that the number of mercenaries killed in early February this year reached 72.

In this context, political analysts and experts in Libya are concerned about how those who were killed in combat or escaped from bomb strikes in Syria or Iraq will be transported to Libya. Ankara is throwing ‘new firewood’ into the furnace of internal turbulence, postponing any political decision indefinitely.

The emergence of unsolicited ‘seconded’ persons from Turkey has damaged the Libyan’s national pride. They were offended by the Turkish leaders’ statements that for them Libya is, in their words, ‘the land of their grandfathers’ and the like.

Anti-Turkish sentiments are still present in the memory of the country’s population due to the long rule of the Ottomans on the territory of present-day Libya. The above statements from Turkey gave rise to a wave of criticism from both ruling circles and in general public. The people are irritated by the attempts of external forces to divide the people of Libya.

After all, the consolidation of the population into a single nation has not yet been completed and inter-tribal and interregional contradictions remain strong.

Among the mercenaries sent from Syria, there may exist sleeping cells of Syrian terrorists who hope to lay low and lick their wounds only to spread their wings again, this time on Libyan soil. Large enclaves of the terrorist group DAESH (banned in Russia) are still present in the country, said Libyan lawyer and human rights activist Essam Al-Tajouri.

The future holds a risk that they will expand from Libya all over North Africa and move their ranks across the sea to Europe. In its survey published in late 2017, the CTC Sentinel (Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, USA) provided evidence of links between perpetrators of terrorist attacks in Belgium, France, Germany, the UK and Tunisia and the Libyan underground.

Libyan jihadists arrived to Syria at an early stage of the crisis and joined terrorist groups banned in Russia, including Katiba al-Bittar al-Libi (Brigade of the Sharp Libyan Sword - KBL). The KBL has recruited many Libyan and Tunisian citizens.

In 2014, the KBL swore allegiance to the ‘Caliph’ - Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi. Many members of the Brigade then participated in the establishment of the DAESH Vilayet in Derna (Eastern Libya), as well as training camps, one of them near Sabratha, west of Tripoli. The camp served as a harbor to gather and train militants involved in a number of terrorist attacks in Europe and North Africa. According to the magazine, the recruits, especially those from neighboring Tunisia, travelled to or from Syria via Libya.

There may now be more work for researchers at the West Point Center. Those sent from Syria have a rich practice of warfare, raiding, bombings, hostage-taking.

“The world was silent when Ankara invaded Syria and now it’s turned to Libya?” asks the Voice of Kurdistan radio. Discontent with Ankara is growing amidst the media and expert groups in the region, and this, in turn, spurs internal strife in the country, challenging not only Libya, but also other Arabic and African nations.

The 6,000 km border isn’t controlled by any state. It is perceived as a ‘gateway’ for illicit firearms smuggling, a ‘magnet’ for attracting destructive Islamist forces and a threat to close-lying states.

A number of Arab experts have called on Libya’s neighbors to join forces, put aside their differences and prevent foreign (above all Turkish) military intervention into Libya’s affairs.

Yury Zinin, Leading Research Fellow at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO), exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook.”