



Turkey's "Defense Line": An Ideological Front

by Irina Tsukerman

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,448, February 14, 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Turkey's latest moves in Libya and the eastern Mediterranean should be viewed in the context of the recent Kuala Lumpur Summit, which announced the emergence of a new ideological bloc to counter Saudi Arabia consisting of Iran, Turkey, Qatar, and Malaysia. Turkey's new geopolitical strategy is as much ideological as it is "defensive."

Shortly before passing laws that allow Turkey to send troops and proxies to Libya, and before sending the first group of troops to back the Tripoli government, Turkey's state-run Anadolu Agency published a document, written by foreign policy analyst Mehmet A. Kancı, that amounts to the announcement of an official new geopolitical strategy cum justification for its interference in the eastern Mediterranean and Libya.

That strategy, according to the Anadolu document as cited in *Ahval News*, hearkens back to the words of Kemal Atatürk, who said in 1921 in the midst of the Battle of Sakarya (one of the deadliest battles in history between Greek and Turkish forces), "There is no defense line, but defense area. This area is the whole of the motherland."

Turkey's plans for the region, as defined in the Andolu document and cited in *Ahval*, run as follows:

Turkey's new defense territory covers on the one end the west and south of the Greek island of Crete and the headquarters of the Turkey-Qatar Combined Joint Force Command overlooking the Strait of Hormuz in the Persian Gulf and the Somali Turkish Task Force Command in Mogadishu, the capital of Somalia, on the Indian Ocean coast on the other....Turkey now wants to strengthen its defense line with a new link in Libya.

For anyone looking to interpret Turkey's moves in that region, this commentariat should be the beacon. Aside from asserting political, military, and economic interests on the basis of Ottoman-era borders, and laying claim to vast maritime territory from Cyprus to Somalia, Ankara is asserting an ideological supremacy that reflects steps it has been taking elsewhere.

Turkey has been building up an ideological grand strategy for its advances for some time. For instance, it has been engaging the [Touareg tribes](#) proliferating in the Sahel and North Africa and once used as a militant vanguard by Qaddafi. Turkey is not only seeking to engage indigenous local forces but is making away with national borders in the process.

Further evidence of this supranational project is evident in Turkey's engagement with Tunisia, where Turkish proxies and Ukrainian planes carrying equipment landed shortly after Erdoğan's announcement about the upcoming deployment to Libya. Tunisia's Islamist government is [closely aligned](#) with Ankara, and in recent years has repeated jingoistic Jew-hating lines that reflect xenophobic rhetoric emanating from Turkey.

In an effort to achieve regional post-national unity, Erdoğan has also [reached out](#) to Algeria in an effort to bring it into the war effort to back the Tripoli government. Following that effort, Erdoğan has accepted an invitation to make a [state visit](#) to Algeria. The overarching justification for this involvement on Erdoğan's side is Turkey's economic interest in finding viable sources of oil for a country almost completely dependent on imports. But more interestingly, Erdoğan has claimed that over a million Libyans are of Ottoman origin and that Turkey is there to defend them, echoing a long-rejected Russian trope for the annexation of Crimea (which Turkey considers illegal). In reality, only about 100,000 Libyans are of Turkish descent and most are affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood.

These developments put pro-Western Morocco in a bind. Up to this point, Morocco has been cautiously backing Tripoli due to its dependency on Libyan oil—but Turkish aggression and its close alliance with Algeria and Tunisia are not winning much support in Rabat. Furthermore, Morocco and Turkey are undergoing [trade tensions](#), which hardly makes Turkey a close ally worth risking Morocco's relationships with the countries backing Khalifa Haftar: Egypt, the US, the UAE, and even Russia. Morocco, which has, in recent years, identified along African rather than Middle Eastern lines, is now seeing a Middle Eastern conflict being imported next door after its entire foreign policy was realigned to avoid entanglements in Gulf conflicts.

If Turkey continues weaponizing the Touaregs at the risk of increasing non-state threats on Morocco's borders, and if it continues to grow close to Algeria, Morocco may be forced to choose sides more decisively. Unlike Algeria and Tunisia, Morocco

is a monarchy that ultimately sees the Ottoman project and the rise of Islamism as a potential threat, despite having a PJD (Islamist-lite) party in power.

For Turkey, Morocco's national interests are irrelevant. It is thinking in supranational terms, defining itself as a global power to rival Saudi Arabia. A recent MEMRI report [details](#) Turkey's and Qatar's efforts to present a contrasting alliance to the anti-terrorism quartet led by the Kingdom. The group of states initially included Pakistan, but ended up consisting of Iran, Turkey, Qatar, and Malaysia.

The alliance appears to have no real positive vision to present to the Muslim majority states to contrast with Saudi Arabia's financial infusion and recent leadership through reform. Instead, it is mobilizing its base by instigating against Israel, Jews, the US, and supposed Saudi moral corruption (in the form of Westernization in the Land of the Two Holy Mosques).

Turkey and Qatar are openly aligning themselves with Iran at a time when tensions between Iran and the US are at an all-time high. Relations are at their worst since the takeover of the US embassy in Tehran in 1979, spiking with the recent liquidation of Quds Force mastermind and chief strategist Qassem Soleimani.

The Kuala Lumpur Summit conducted by the anti-Saudi alliance should be seen not as separate from other events but as the opening of the final act in what Turkey sees as its moment to shine—a moment when the US is distracted by the necessity to develop a strategy to counter Iran-backed militias in Iraq and prevent a further escalation of tensions.

Turkey's claims to the eastern Mediterranean and to Libya in the manifesto of its naval and geopolitical strategy follow from this "ideological defense line" against the Saudi presence and influence in the Levant and in Africa, where Ankara seeks to displace Riyadh-led Islam with its own religious and humanitarian leadership.

That means, however, that Turkey is not only putting aside its ideological rivalries with Shiite Khomeinist Iran, which is known for its backing of Shiite militias in the Sahel and even for attempts to spread Shiite Islam in North Africa (attempts that met particularly fierce resistance in Morocco), but is in fact willing to work with Iranian Shiite Islamists to build theological bridges that will make it easier for the two countries to operate as one ideological front despite their vastly different ideologies and long-term interests. Indeed, at the Kuala Lumpur Summit, Turkey and Iran signed an unprecedented 18-point [religious cooperation manifesto](#), which only a few years ago would have been unthinkable despite the growing cooperation between Ankara and Tehran in other areas. This means the two states will now jointly target huge swaths of Muslims, whether they be in Africa, the Levant, or Europe.

Not to be forgotten as the financier of these adventures at home and abroad is Qatar. It was at the forefront of the Kuala Lumpur Summit, during which its state mouthpiece Al Jazeera and assorted echo chamber channels antagonized Saudi Arabia day and night.

Close observers of the Gulf Crisis may be puzzled by Qatar's apparent recent outreach to Saudi Arabia at the expense of the UAE, which Qatar had accused of standing in the way of rapprochement among the GCC states. For a few weeks, Western and Gulf media were abuzz with rumors of direct and separate negotiations between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, even as all four members of the Anti-Terrorism Quartet [demanded](#) that its 13 original demands be met. Qatar continued to attack Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman in Arabic and otherwise badmouth the kingdom behind its back. What was all that about? (The Qatari emir ultimately [skipped](#) the GCC summit at which the question of reconciliation was supposed to be addressed, rendering the issue largely moot despite all the heated speculation.)

There are several explanations for Qatar's role in this odd comedy drama. First, it is rumored to have suffered financial losses in the two years following the imposition of the blockade and was hoping to recoup some of them by a limited return of Saudi companies to its market. Second, Qatar was looking to instigate a rift between the UAE and Saudi Arabia by playing them against each other and exploiting any miscommunications with respect to their priorities in light of Iran. Third and most important, Qatar was acting as Turkey's wingman, diverting international attention from the Kuala Lumpur Summit and Turkey's big move in the eastern Mediterranean.

Speculation over Qatar's reconciliation with Saudi Arabia led many to believe there was a split between Qatar and Turkey and that Doha was looking for an exit from that relationship. In reality, nothing could be further from the truth, as their recent moves have cemented the alliance. Qatar and its Islamist allies are closer than ever and on the move, and they are now declaring a united ideological, political, and economic front. Western security services and analysts should pay close attention to this newly emerged bloc.

Irina Tsukerman is a human rights and national security attorney based in New York. She has written extensively on geopolitics and US foreign policy for a variety of American, Israeli, and other international publications.