IS TURKEY PLANNING TO RECRUIT SYRIANS TO FIGHT ARMENIA?

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Category: Opinions

- **Turkey has upped its rhetoric against Armenia in recent days, threatening the country and claiming Armenia is "playing with fire" and alleging Armenia has recruited "terrorists."**
- **There is no evidence of the "PKK" in Armenia, but Turkey invented this claim to justify its own transfer of militias.**

By Seth J. Frantzman, The Jerusalem Post, 26 September 2020

Several hundred Syrian refugees have been recruited by Turkey to fight against Armenia in the disputed Karabagh region, according to claims by Syrian commentators, activists and other reports. The claims were posted on social media this week and circulated among Syrian refugees, dissidents and others who monitor Syria

Turkish and Greek media also helped fuel the rumors. Turkey has upped its rhetoric against Armenia in recent days, threatening the country, claiming that it is "playing with fire" and alleging that Armenia has recruited "terrorists." The new rhetoric appears to be a way for Ankara to justify a new crisis and involvement in the Caucasus, potentially recruiting Syrians as it has done to fight its recent war in Libya.

Turkey has been recruiting Syrian rebels for years as a way to co-opt the Syrian rebellion and turn it into an instrument of Turkish foreign policy. Initially under the banner of Turkish-backed groups such as Faylaq al-Sham and later as the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army and Syrian National Army, Turkey cobbled together thousands of poor Syrians to fight in Jarabulus in 2016. Later Turkey sent tens of thousands of Syrians to fight against Kurdish Syrians in Afrin as a way to divide and conquer northern Syria.

Ankara encouraged extremism among its mostly Arab and Turkmen recruits to target Kurdish, Yazidi and Christian minorities in northern Syria between 2018 and 2019. Then Turkey took the Syrians and sent them to fight in Libya as Ankara's leading party signed a deal with the embattled Tripoli-based government to acquire energy and military base rights.

Now Turkey's ruling party, which thrives on creating a new international crisis every month, may be targeting Armenia. Turkey created other crises this year: in Idlib in February and March and then in Libya in April and May, then bombing Iraq in June and July and shifting to threaten Greece in the Eastern Mediterranean in August and September. Meanwhile Ankara has pledged to support Azerbaijan in recent clashes with Armenia.

A Syrian source provided photos and video of buses allegedly with Syrian mercenaries recruited by Turkey being sent towards Armenia on Wednesday, September 23. Majd Helobi, a Kurdish reporter provided photos and information detailing the allegations. Allegations include assertions that these Syrians recruited by Ankara are linked to those who carried out crimes in Turkish-occupied Afrin and Tel Abyad. The UN recently accused Turkey and Turkish-backed groups of rape and looting in

occupied areas of northern Syria. A US Lead Inspector General Report also accused Turkish-backed groups in Libya of similar crimes. “They are brainwashed and making war crimes,” the Syrian source says. According to the report, there was a group of cars and buses with 200 “mercenaries” linked to the Sultan Murad group. A recording posted online included Syrian recruits alleging they were sent to a base near the border with Armenia.

The report alleges that the men who join will be paid 500 dollars a month, more for officers. This appears similar to arrangements made to pay thousands of poverty-stricken Syrians who Turkey recruited and illegally sent to Libya. The Guardian claimed 2,000 Syrians were already fighting in Libya in January. Some later claimed they were not paid on time and sought to find a way to leave.

Recruiting Syrians to fight Kurds and then to fight in Libya and now perhaps to fight Armenia may be a way for Turkey to distract them from the fact that it is working with Iran and Russia, who support the Assad regime that the Syrian rebels wanted to fight.

Turkey’s regime has posed as a protector of Muslims and used terminology to make it appears it is fighting an “Islamic” cause against Greece, Israel and also in Libya and Syria. For instance, the fanfare of turning Hagia Sophia into a mosque in July was part of this motif.

Alongside the use of the mercenaries, Turkey’s paramilitary contractor Sadat has gained more prominence. This appears to be Ankara’s way of replicating what Russia did with groups such as Wagner or what Iran has done with the Quds force of the IRGC, creating a way to export Ankara’s revolution by recruiting others to do the fighting rather than the Turkey's own military.

Ankara has kept the Turkish military busy since an attempted 2016 coup. That is also part of the reason for the monthly crises. The invasion of Jarabulus and then Idlib, Afrin and Tel Abyad, and new tensions at sea and then on the Greece border, as well as the Libya deployment of drones and special forces, was all part of this.

In late July Turkey’s defense minister vowed to “avenge” Azeri soldiers killed in clashes with Armenia. This was part of the rising rhetoric of Ankara about possible involvement in Armenia.

Like talk of Turkey taking over areas of northern Iraq and Idlib, this appears to be about reviving claims from the Ottoman era. Turkey has often made historical claims to back its involvement. For instance it claimed that there are “Turks” in Libya to justify involvement. This is a multi-layered approach then: with history, religion, mercenaries, government-connected contractors, the need to keep the army occupied, the need for crises to distract from economic failure at home, and the need to distract Syrians from Turkey’s sellout to Russia and Iran - all combined into a policy sandwich.

Has that sandwich now begun to contemplate involvement in Armenia and other conflicts? Turkey’s foreign minister Mevlut Cavusoglu told Armenia to stop its “aggression” against Azerbaijan on September 22. He said Ankara was standing side-by-side with Azerbaijan and “wished Allah’s mercy” on recently fallen soldiers.

This is part of Ankara's language to make the conflict into a religious issue, just as it did to convince Syrians to fight Kurds under the banner of "Islam" against "atheists" and "kuffar." Turkey's Defense Ministry has said Armenia is "playing with fire" and that it was "unlawfully occupying Nagorno-Karabakh."

This lays the groundwork for a potential Turkish military involvement Ankara's ruling party has operationalized its pro-government media. Ankara has imprisoned almost all critical journalists in Turkey and continued to arrest critics daily so as to totally control the media and use it to telegraph its plans.

On September 25, Daily Sabah wrote that "Armenia transfers YPG/PKK terrorists to occupied area to train militias against Azerbaijan." This headline was meant to create the justification for Turkey to claim its "security" is being threatened by the "PKK" and that it can invade. Turkey has used this excuse to bomb and invade northern Iraq and Syria, always claiming there are "terrorists" that it is "neutralizing."

Turkey has presented no evidence of any terror attacks from Syria to justify its invasion and illegal occupation. However it got NATO, of which it is a member, to claim it has a right to protect its security. There is no evidence of the "PKK" in Armenia, but Turkey invented this claim to justify its own transfer of militias.

More evidence that Turkey is trying to use Syrians for a new mission emerged on Friday as sources provided names and images of "FSA soldiers" being trained to be sent to fight Armenia. Social media users who follow Syria also tweeted about the "confirmed information about the first group from the Syrian opposition fighters" who had arrived on Wednesday. It was unclear where they had arrived.

There was pushback on the tweets, with some claiming the stories are "Russia propaganda" and that there is little evidence of the transfers. However others pointed to a photo of a Syrian rebel flag being flown in a mountainous area as "evidence" that the men were being sent to the east, away from Syria and toward the Caucasus.

The rumors of increased Turkish involvement in Armenia-Azerbaijan tensions may be a way for Turkey to distract from economic problems at home and a way to recruit more impoverished Syrian refugees under the banner of a religious conflict against "terrorists" to stoke the flames of nationalism and extremism that Turkey's ruling party thrives on.

One issue for Turkey is that the more countries it bombs, threatens and invades, the more it creates a bloc that is stepping up to oppose the endless aggression, crises and threats. For instance, in the Mediterranean the threats from Ankara drove Greece, Cyprus, Israel, Egypt, France and the UAE to work more closely together. Invasion and ethnic cleansing in Afrin led some to assert that Ankara was as great a threat as Assad and has bolstered the Russia and Iranian-backed Assad regime. It's unclear if an Ankara decision to become involved in the Caucasus would similarly fuel new alliances.

Photo from The Jerusalem Post: A view shows a house damaged by a recent shelling in armed clashes on the border between Azerbaijan and Armenia. (photo credit: REUTERS)

Comments



Jerry Papikian – 2020-09-28 08:40:38
If Turkey wants Nagorna Karabakh be given to Azerbaijan. I am sure Armenia would do so gladly if Turkey gave back all the Eastern part of Turkey back to Armenia. i.e. one third of Turkey!