

# MEMDUH KARAKULLUKÇU

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**Steven Erlanger, Chief Diplomatic Correspondent, Europe, for *The New York Times***

Memduh Karakullukçu, who I pronounced terribly, as you might tell is a Turk and he is the founding Board member of the Global Relations Forum and a founding partner of Kanunum, and also Chairman of Kroton Consulting.

**Memduh Karakullukçu**

Actually, I am a Turk with probably more of an Egyptian name, Memduh is more common in Egypt than it is in Turkey as I understand. It is good to be here, great to be in Abu Dhabi and a guest again of the World Policy Conference, so I thank the organizers, Thierry, and of course, Abu Dhabi for hosting us. Whenever I am invited to speak on a Middle East panel, I feel both anxiety and intrigue. Anxiety because my usual life during the year is focused on issues like digital currencies, the global energy situation, so more the geoeconomics part of the world or geotechnology. I have prepared remarks for so many things but not for the Middle East, so that is the anxiety.

**Steven Erlanger**

Maybe that is best.

**Memduh Karakullukçu**

Maybe that is better, that is the intrigue, which is that I know so much happens in this part of the world that when I take a distance and look at the region for a full year, very unusual patterns emerge and then I am intrigued. The expectation that I will get something at the end induces dopamine. I think I am the only one from my panel of last year and again, I was here on the Middle East panel, and we ended saying that there was something good in the air, tensions were receding and there was a sense of de-escalation. I think that proved to be reasonably accurate. This year we did get quite a few of the main tensions calming down. Turkey was at the center of quite a few of them, the Turkey-UAE, Turkey-Saudi, Turkey-Egypt, and then within the GCC there has been improvement on the Qatari Saudi front. Many of these tensions that burdened us seemed to have softened at least and that was the expectation, so I think we got that right. The Libya situation is again tenuous but at least we are not in an active war situation. The Syria situation is still complicated but I think it is fair to say, thankfully, that it is not an active civil war. This year, looking forward my concerns are related to the Iranian situation and to the situation in Iraq and Lebanon.

Let me go back to the synopsis of ‘there is something in the air’. I think it was accurate, but it was incomplete because what I did not realize at the time is that the ‘something good in the air’ was predicated on pragmatism on the part of many of the regional actors. It was not wise long-termism that drove the softening, it was basic pragmatism. After looking at this past year I think I can argue that pragmatism has been transformed into ‘hyper-pragmatism’. It is unanchored pragmatism and that worries me because I think that kind of pragmatism is ineffective for dealing with long-term issues, it corrodes institutions, and it makes us unable to deal with these long-term challenges collectively. Before I explain myself, let me just give you the punchline because this year more than before, I felt that Thierry wants us to be precise, concise, open, get to the point; so, let me get to the point.

I think we are now at a stage where Middle Eastern players including my country, Saudi Arabia, and GCC, are empowered for different reasons and have taken a hyper-pragmatic approach to regional challenges. That means swift maneuvers, deals, bargains have become the currency of the moment. My observation is that the West, but especially Europe, feels left out of this high-paced policy making. That, I think, is a structural inevitability as hyper-pragmatism is not the European forte or the comparative advantage, at least in recent history. This rather unusual distancing from long-held ideological, religious, cultural redlines towards pragmatism is probably a phase in some parts of the region. European institutions and long-term structures should resist this phase. I do not think that Europe should compromise what it is good at, we will need those structures to bring the Middle East players to the table for long term problems, from youth unemployment to the Iranian nuclear issue, from climate crises to the Israel-Palestine situation.

That is the punchline, that is my main theme.

Basically, we are in a phase of multiple transitions, what some call an era of polycrisis. In an ideal world, this is a time when we would benefit from predictable national policies and some coordination among key players to collectively address those challenges. However, instead we get anxiety and helplessness across the world about pressing problems like the energy and food crises. That forces national pragmatism everywhere and feeds a climate of mutual unpredictability and eventual mistrust. Such hyperpragmatism can and has been constructive at times, as in the Turkey-mediated grain deal. Ascending pragmatism may well be the best response to the intensifying uncertainty and the transitions in some cases. The downside is norms, balances and alliances that have given some structure and predictability to the region and the world are eroding before our eyes. The global energy market is a very good example of this dynamic because I think the main axes of that structure have been broken and all nations are after pragmatic paths to resilient supply and national supply-security which undermines and fragments the whole structure of global energy markets. I will not elaborate on that further but it is a good microcosm of how uncertainty and shifting power dynamics pave the way for national reflexes and pragmatism which erodes standing structures and more importantly the trust that underlies them.

Is there a better way to deal with increasing uncertainty and polycrisis in the Middle East? One can go for Cartesian rationality and try to figure out the future and take strategic positions. I think that is what Thierry was hinting at earlier, but I do not think our mental tools or state machineries are cut out for that. We can hope for a big power to absorb the rising uncertainty



in the region. That was mostly the US role in the region for many decades but the US has distanced itself from that role so we can't count on that. You can have a group of big powers in the region who can share some of the uncertainty that stems from rising transitions. Arguably, US, Russia, China engagement in the region is a reflection of this possibility but unfortunately big power tensions add more complexity to the region than they deduct. So that basically leaves high-paced pragmatism of regional actors to address pressing challenges and the postponement of long-term unresolved structural problems.

There was indeed something positive in the air this past year that improved relations among some key regional players. But the positivity in the air mostly flowed from a shift in politics of the region towards pragmatism rather than the wisdom of long-termism. It is hard to predict whether we can bootstrap long-term stability around such pragmatism or this is simply making matters more intractable for the future. That question will preoccupy me and probably most of us over the coming years.

**Steven Erlanger**

Let me ask you a much more specific question. You have Erdogan who is going to have an election soon and seems very shaken by this prospect. He is balancing many, many powers and annoying a lot of people, NATO, America, Russia too. He is playing footsie with Russia and not doing sanctions. Can he keep going like this with a tanking economy or is he going to start another war in northern Syria or with Greece? What do you think?

**Memduh Karakullukçu**

Very simply, I do not think that President Erdogan or Turkey will start a war. I think the problems and tensions with Syria and Greece are manageable under the rising mode of pragmatism I alluded to.

Turkey has enough room for maneuver with most of the critical actors to ensure security on its southern border. The problems with Greece have a long history and have their own dynamics. Two NATO allies will not go to war with each other. So, I think both of these challenges can and will be managed without a war.

**Steven Erlanger**

Do you think he will allow himself to lose the election?

**Memduh Karakullukçu**

Well, it is a democratic system, it is an election. So if he loses, he loses. If he wins, he wins.

**Steven Erlanger**

*On verra*, as they say in France, we will see.