

SYRIA

Renaud Girard, Senior Reporter and International Columnist at *Le Figaro*

The first very quick question, Mohammed. We have a new situation in Syria, how do the Emirates and the other countries of the GCC, which you know very well, see the situation? Are they a bit upset? We understand it is a bit win by Türkiye but are they upset or not at all?

Mohammed Baharoon, Director General of the Dubai Public Policy Research Center (b'huth)

Good afternoon, everyone and thank you very much for having me here again. We look at the world as risk or opportunity and the difference between the two is risk comes to you while you have to go to opportunity. I think in Syria, this is a moment where we all need to work towards an opportunity, and it would be our fault if we let differences get in the way as they did after the Arab Spring. I think this is how the UAE sees it, that there is an opportunity for a risk, there is a possible opportunity for something much better and maybe this is the time we need to work together towards investing in Syria's statehood. Regardless of who is there, we need a Syrian state. I do not think there is dismay at Türkiye or Iran, there is a major opportunity that we might change the needle away from conflicts. We have very positive signs, but we are also considering their history, and I would say that we should keep the historical trajectory in the back of our minds. However, we should also realize that many things have changed, including for us in the UAE, we are not pursuing policy in the same way we did 20 years ago, and I am sure that is true in other places, including Türkiye and Iran, so maybe that is the opportunity we need to work for.

Renaud Girard

Volker, you come from a country that has welcomed so many Syrian refugees, which was Merkel's policy in 2015. How do you see the role that your country, Germany, first and then Europe, could have in helping the situation to stabilize in Syria?

Volker Perthes, Non-Resident Senior Fellow and Senior Advisor to the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP)

Thanks a lot Renaud, and thanks to Thierry and his wonderful team for having us here again. Indeed, Syria has been my preoccupation for a long part of my academic life. And as you said, the Germans have got to know many Syrians. I am quite astonished at how my own country and other European countries, only a few days after the fall of the Assad regime, started discussions about how they could get rid of the Syrians and send them back. I know that the large majority of the Syrians came to Germany and other European countries for good reason because their towns and been bombed and chemical weapons had been used against them.

The large majority of them have integrated rather well so it is an insane and stupid discussion and if we were to send the majority of them home, we would miss a lot of people in the services industry, we would lose researchers, medical doctors, architects, engineers, construction workers, etc. I do not really know what we would do without them. However, of course, once Syrians decide of their own free will to go back, we need to support them. They will be a real resource for establishing solid people-to-people links between Syrian society and European society. Therefore, it will be to our benefit that in 2015/2016 we opened our doors despite the domestic discussion we had after that.

On Syria, I think we Europeans do actually have a role. Unfortunately, our role is very limited on Palestine-Israel, not because there is nothing to do but because we Europeans do not have a common agenda. We know what we want, we want a two-state solution and peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians, but we cannot even agree as members of the European Union to cast the same vote in the United Nations General Assembly. That means we are neutralizing one another rather than actually bringing our forces, strengths and resources together. I think it is different on Syria, particularly since President-elect Trump has already tweeted in his very special way that they have no dog in that fight, are not interested in Syria and that it is an unfriendly country in the first place. I think the responsibility to support Syria does actually fall to its Arab neighborhood and to the Europeans together.

I see five points here if we want to devise an agenda or a strategy, besides getting to know the new guys in Damascus. We know some of them through the humanitarian organizations that have been working in Idlib. Most of the humanitarians who have been working with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham in Idlib have been astonished at how professional these guys were. You have two million original inhabitants in Idlib and two million refugees, to which you have to give identity cards, make sure that support gets to the right people and all that, and they have been very efficient. Maybe that is one good sign. The other is that Ahmed al-Sharaa and the people around him are from the cities of Syria and if you have ever lived in a Syrian city and want to rule Syria, you know that you cannot have a very narrow ideological agenda. Syria is so much of a societal mosaic that if you want to rule Syria you have to respect and accept the societal realities, that is you have Sunni Muslims, Sunni Kurds, Alawites, Druses, Ismailis and of course, Christians, and I think they know that.

Aside from getting to know these people, I think the first thing for Europe, the Arabs and everybody else who wants to help, is to support a UN-supported but Syrian-owned political process to get an all-encompassing, inclusive political governance setup in Syria, including a constitutional discussion. In addition to that, and I think it is sometimes overlooked, I think that the new people in Syria do need help in a transitional justice process in order to avoid bloody revenge. Here the United Nations, some European countries, and some countries from Africa, actually have a lot of experience that should be channeled into Syria. Then there is reconstruction. This country has been let down and it is down, and I guess as Europeans, together with American friends and others in the international community, we have to start by lifting the sanctions. That is sometimes legally more difficult than slapping sanctions on a country, but these sanctions are still there, and they would be an obstacle to reconstruction. We have to work on the reconstruction part: there will be European money and expertise, Arab money and expertise, and there are Syrians experts, so we need to make use of the diaspora community. But first we have to lift or at least suspend the sanctions. And that is legal work the



Europeans have to do. Then we have to work on and with our NATO partner, Türkiye, which again is a European task. We understand what Türkiye's strategic interests are, they may be a bit at odds with one another. On the one hand they want stability in Syria in order to allow Syrian refugees to return, but on the other they have a conflict with Kurdish organizations, and they want their allies in Syria to fight the Syrian Kurds. European powers should weigh in and lean on our Turkish NATO partners to settle on the stability part, not on fighting the Kurds. My last point, and that is actually where I started and what you asked me, is: We need to make sure that the enormous capacities that exist in Syria's expat community are used to rebuild that country. That would be a strong case but also a resource, as I said, for Syrian-European cooperation.