

THE ROLE OF TÜRKİYE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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

The Americans also did a lot of bombing of ISIS the other day, just like the Israelis did bombing Syria's chemical weapons, etc. There is a lot of anxiety, and Anwar Gargash spoke about it in his gentle way, but there is the possibility of a fragmented Syria where Türkiye has a lot of influence, with its light political Islam. Türkiye is not the UAE, it has a different notion, Türkiye is not Egypt. Before we go back to Israel-Palestine, I am curious what you both think about the role of Türkiye and if it is containable, helpful, or does it create other problems for other Arab nations?

Nabil Fahmy, Dean Emeritus of the American University in Cairo, former Foreign Minister of Egypt

Personally, I do not support any material engagement from one state versus another across borders, and I mean in the negative sense, not in term of support and, of course, that applies to Türkiye, to the bombings that occurred on Syrian territories and so on. That being said, they will pursue their interests and do that in a multifaceted way, with some of which we will agree and some with which we will differ. My approach and my suggestion, even to my own colleagues is, complain all you want, that is part of the game, but you have to be proactive and balance the playing field. To Itamar's point, if you leave the playing field open, others will fill it. My point to my Arab colleagues, including my own country is to be out there in the playing field, make your suggestions, engage the Turks, the Syrians and whoever is on the ground because otherwise it will be the result of an internal balance of force. The real concern now, and this is always on the mind of Egyptians, is that if we move away from the nation state concept to non-state parties, it is very dangerous and, I do not want to take you back to Sykes-Picot, but that whole area has families and different sects across borders. If you start pulling those strings you never know what you are going to pull in other countries as well.

Itamar Rabinovich, Vice Chairman of the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) in Tel Aviv, Distinguished Fellow at the Brookings Institution

Let me spend a minute describing the four major camps in Middle Eastern politics. There was the Iranian resistance axis; the moderate Sunni Arab states; the Islamist bloc, basically supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood brand of political Islam, which is Qatar, Türkiye and Hamas; and fourth, the jihadi organizations, ISIS, etc.

Türkiye belongs to that group, and they were big supporters of Hamas, including hosting a Hamas office in Istanbul from which some of its activities in the region were conducted.

Türkiye has two major interests, and let us remember that in practice, Türkiye annexed 8% of Syria, the strip along the border. First, it wants to send back 3.5 million Syrian refugees and second, they want to decimate if not eliminate Kurdish autonomy because they regard it as a danger to the Turkish state. They are also interested in being Iran's rival for regional hegemony, now Iran is weakened, in its own eyes, Türkiye can play a bigger role. Therefore, it is playing two games in Syria, the immediate issues and then the quest to use the Syrian arena to enhance its own regional position.

Steven Erlanger

I am not sure that Arab states will be very happy about this and that is part of the question. I think you are right, Nabil, when you say that in this way this is a defeat for what we have been through, which is Iran exercising lots of regional power through non-state actors. What is the prospect, even in Lebanon as well as in Syria, of rebuilding a nation-state? Not just to stick with Türkiye, but it would be interesting if Türkiye actually gives up the land that it occupies. It is also busily trying to attack the American-backed Kurds, so it is hardly quiet.

Nabil Fahmy

Definitely, and it is not going to be quiet. I am not making this point theoretically, when practitioners like us, particularly in my case, emphasize international law and sovereignty, if we were all chummy then borders would not make a difference but since we are not, ultimately there has to be a controlling order here. Whether they are artificial or not artificial they have been around for 60 or 70 years, so it is important to keep respect for the borders. The Syrian regime imploded for many different reasons, but you cannot have a situation and stability where you have four different formal states with forces on their territory and dozens of non-state parties. If we do not go back to state order, you will have all these cross-boundary issues, and it will not be easy to stop the Turks and others from being engaged. I would actually argue that strategically, Turkish-Arab cooperation is much more important than the Idlib issue and I think that the Turks would come around on this, although for reasons you know, they are hypersensitive in terms of the Kurdish issue.