

Erdogan Calls Arab States “Treasonous” For Not Denouncing Trump’s Peace Initiative

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Recep Tayyip Erdogan fancies himself, not quite accurately I’m afraid, as the leader of the Muslim world – a kind of successor to the Ottoman sultan or parishah. He sees Turkey not as just one more member of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (O.I.C.), but rather, given the centuries of Ottoman rule over so much of that Islamic world, as its natural leader. When he published in 2018 his plan for a pan-Islamic army that would be capable of destroying Israel, it was clear that he envisaged Turkey as leading such an effort, and that he, as Turkey’s ruler, would be the leader of such an

effort. That plan was greeted not with enthusiasm but with telling silence, for the Arab states of the Middle East and North Africa have historic memories of their mistreatment at the hands of their Ottoman overlords. They were not about to enroll in any effort headed by Turkey and its headstrong leader President Erdogan. And Erdogan, in presenting his plan, showed his miscomprehension of how the Arabs viewed the Ottomans, and modern Turkey, and himself.

Other examples of Erdogan's muscular interventionism have further fed the dislike for Turkey among Arabs. When he sent Turkish troops into northern Syria, he did so for two reasons. First, he wanted to suppress the local Kurds, driving them out of the area and further south away from the Syrian border with Turkey. He regards the Syrian Kurds as a threat, for he sees them as linked to the PKK, the Kurdish group inside Turkey fighting for greater autonomy. Second, once having cleared northern Syria of those Kurds, Erdogan made plans to send several hundred thousand Syrian Arabs now in Turkey back to a secure area of northern Syria. But the spectacle of Turkish troops seizing part of an Arab land, and then making plans to flood it with Syrian refugees now in Turkey, whether they will or not, has not gone over well among the Arabs, not even among those who oppose the regime of Bashar al-Assad.

Another example of Erdogan's interventionism is in Libya, where he has sent troops to support the Tripoli-based regime of Fawez al-Sarraj against the forces of General Khalifa Haftar. Erdogan's timing was wrong; he took the side of Al-Sarraj just as General Haftar's forces were conquering the city of Sirte; with a small Turkish contingent in Tripoli to lend unspecified kinds of support that apparently does not include fighters, Haftar's forces are now in control of two-thirds of the country and are trying to take Misrata, the country's second largest city, and a gateway to Tripoli. In siding with the GNA (Government of National Accord), Erdogan has put Turkey squarely against not only General Haftar, but

against those Arab states that support Haftar, especially Egypt and the UAE, with Saudi Arabia involved to a lesser extent. Turkey is seen by Egypt, UAE, and Saudi Arabia as interfering in Libya, in what they regard as an intra-Arab affair. Erdogan still is unable to understand how deeply felt is the Arab resentment of the Turks. He remembers the putative Ottoman glories, but not how the Ottomans mistreated their subject peoples.

With the Trump peace initiative, Erdogan has found yet another way to antagonize Arab states. While Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, Qatar, and Bahrain gave cautious approval to the deal – the media accounts described their responses as “muted” or “mild” – Erdogan was busy denouncing it, in his usual over-the-top fashion, as doing Israel’s bidding. The Turkish leader overlooked the major concession made by Israel under the plan: recognition of a State of Palestine, with its capital in East Jerusalem. He further ignored Israel’s commitment to build no new settlements for four years, while negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians were going on. But he did more than criticize the plan. He also criticized those Arab states that in his opinion had been unwilling to denounce it. He described the mild responses of Saudi Arabia, the UAE (which he described as “Abu Dhabi,” which is only one of the seven emirates in the UAE, the one whose Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Erdogan particularly detests), Oman, and Bahrain to the Trump Plan as “treason.”

“Some Arab countries that support such a plan commit treason against Jerusalem, as well as against their own people, and more importantly against all humanity,” Erdogan told his party’s provincial heads in Ankara.

Here is the obstinate neo-Ottoman, who thinks he has a right to tell the Arabs how to think, how to behave. He singled out Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Oman for their mild response to Trump’s plan. Those countries, in turn,

see Erdogan as a presumptuous interloper in their affairs, who has no right to tell the Arabs how they should behave in what is quintessentially an Arab matter.

Erdogan was addressing a party conference in Ankara when he made his charge of "treason" against all those Arab countries that did not denounce Trump's plan:

"Shame on you! Shame on you! How will those hands that applaud [the plan] give an account of this treasonous step?"

"Saudi Arabia in particular, you are silent. When will you break your silence? You look at Oman, Bahrain and Abu Dhabi is [sic] the same," said the Turkish president.

As usual, Erdogan has everything wrong. Saudi Arabia was not "silent" on the Trump peace initiative. The day before Erdogan made his statement, the Saudis had responded to the peace plan:

"The Kingdom reiterates its support for all efforts aimed at reaching a just and comprehensive resolution to the Palestinian cause," said the Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

"The kingdom appreciates the efforts of President Trump's administration to develop a comprehensive peace plan between the Palestinian and the Israeli sides, and encourages the start of direct peace negotiations between the Palestinian and Israeli sides, under the auspices of the United States," the statement reads. It also called to resolve any disagreements with aspects of the plan through negotiations, "to move forward the peace process to reach an agreement that achieves legitimate rights of the Palestinian people."

The UAE Ambassador to the U.S., Yousef Al Otaiba, similarly wrote that his country "appreciates continued US efforts to reach a Palestine-Israel peace agreement. This plan is a

serious initiative that addresses many issues raised over the years The plan announced today [January 29] offers an important starting point for a return to negotiations within a US-led international framework”

Bahrain, whose ambassador had been present at the White House launch of the plan, was similarly positive: “The Ministry of Foreign Affairs commends the United States of America for its determined efforts to advance the peace process.”

Qatar, the Arab state most closely linked to Turkey, nonetheless parted company with Erdogan in its view of the Trump plan. The Qatari News Agency released a statement, saying that “the State welcomes all efforts aiming towards a longstanding and just peace in the occupied Palestinian territories. It also appreciates the endeavors of President Trump and the current US administration to find solutions for the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. All solutions should be consistent with international law and the relevant UN resolutions.” No doubt because of Qatar’s support for Turkey in other matters, Erdogan did not include Qatar in his list of Arab states guilty of “treasonous” behavior in not attacking, but instead appearing to accept, Trump’s plan.

Oman was one of the three Arab countries, along with the UAE and Bahrain, to attend the launch of Trump’s peace initiative, and the presence of the Omani ambassador at the launch was widely understood as an endorsement of the plan.

As for Egypt, which Erdogan carefully did not list as among the “treasonous” Arab states, it was the first Arab state to provide the clearest expression of support for the plan, which **Cairo characterized as an effort to advance “the stability and security of the Middle East.”** Egypt expressed its view of the peace plan in terms similar to Saudi Arabia. The Foreign Ministry issued a statement: **“The Arab Republic of Egypt appreciates the continuous efforts exerted by the US administration to achieve a comprehensive and just settlement**

of the Palestinian issue, thereby contributing to the stability and security of the Middle East, ending the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.”

Erdogan’s failure to mention Egypt as among the “treasonous” Arab states was likely prompted by his thinking it best not to get into an open fight with the Arab world’s most populous and most important country. He knows El-Sisi depends on American aid and political support, as well as on security assistance from Israel in the Sinai, and therefore would have a muted response to Trump’s peace initiative.

Had he called Egypt “treasonous,” that would not have gone over well in teeming Cairo, and it would be easy to inflame the Egyptian street against the interfering and insulting Turkish leader, depicted as the “neo-Ottoman” Erdogan. The Egyptians could remind Erdogan that Egypt has fought three wars on behalf of the “Palestinians,” losing men and spending billions, while Turkey, on the other hand, has done nothing of value for those same Palestinians except launch a little flotilla of small craft to try to break an Israeli sea blockade of Gaza; that attempt ended in fiasco, when Israeli commandos rappelled down from helicopters onto the deck of the Mavi Marmara, and seized the craft.

The Egyptians could further respond to Erdogan that the Arab Republic of Egypt needs no lessons from Turks on what they must do on behalf of the Palestinian Arabs, with words like these: “We have done a good deal for the Palestinians, our fellow Arabs, ever since 1948. Our military efforts are well known. But our patience, and generosity, toward the Palestinians are not unlimited. They cannot continue to refuse to negotiate. And we do not take kindly to President Erdogan’s hysterical charge that those Arabs who don’t denounce the American plan are somehow ‘treasonous.’”

No Arab state will be won over to Erdogan’s side by his charge of “treasonous” behavior. The outrageousness of the claim will

only lead to further tensions between Turkey and the Arabs. If Ankara wants to be the Defender of the Palestinians, so be it. The Saudis, the Emiratis, the Kuwaitis, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman, and Egypt too, have many other worries. There is Iran, and its proxies – Houthis in Yemen, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Shi'a militias in Iraq. There are civil wars in Yemen, Libya, Syria. There are popular upheavals in Iraq and Lebanon. There are the Shia. In Egypt and the Gulf, there remains the threat of a constantly metamorphosing Muslim Brotherhood. Egypt now has the looming problem of the new \$5 billion Ethiopian dam that will drastically decrease the waters of the Nile for Egyptian farmers. All the Arab OPEC countries, too, have to worry about the steady downward pressure on world demand for oil, as renewable sources, especially solar power, continue to decline in price, and as advances in technology, including longer-lasting batteries, make electric cars increasingly cost-effective. Furthermore, more countries are not merely promoting, but requiring the use of alternative energy sources. Non-OPEC sources of oil, such as shale oil, continue to replace OPEC oil. Natural gas finds in the eastern Mediterranean also replace some OPEC oil.

Erdogan's refusal to understand that Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar, and Oman have their own good and sufficient reasons for not criticizing Trump's peace initiative, and his maligning almost all of these iArab countries, as "treasonous" for refusing to denounce the American plan, will only increase the antipathy – the hostility – that so many Arabs feel for the Turks, based on a historical memory of their Ottoman rulers, and a growing hatred for Turkey's current ruler, who constantly refers fondly to the Ottoman, imperial period of Turkey's existence, the excitable, rebarbative, self-defeating President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

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