

Erdogan's Neo-Ottoman Dreams Are Not Working Out

by Hugh Fitzgerald



An interview with the head of the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army on Turkish television reminds the Arab states why they so mistrust President Erdogan. The story is [here](#). The Executive Summary, and then a partial transcript of the interview, follow.

Ahmad Shihabi, a commander in the Turkey-backed Free Syrian Army (FSA) was interviewed on the Turkish Akit TV. In the interview, he was asked whether the FSA would send men to Libya, and answered that they would go “wherever there is Jihad” as soon as the FSA is “finished with the injustice” of Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad. He added that they would go to help their brothers in Turkestan (China). Shihabi said that the FSA is grateful to Turkish President Recep Tayyip

Erdogan for “what he has done for the Syrian people, on the humanitarian, military, and political levels”. Shihabi concluded that the FSA fighters are willing to sacrifice their lives, their children, and their elderly for the sake of their country and for the sake of the Ottoman caliphate. The interview was aired on January 17, 2020.

Interviewer: Will the Free Syrian Army send men to Libya?

Ahmad Shihabi: Inshallah, we will go wherever there is Jihad. We won't stop. As soon as we finish with the injustice of Bashar, we will be among the first to go wherever there is injustice. Inshallah, just like we will crush the injustice of Bashar, we will crush the injustice suffered by our brothers in [East] Turkestan.

Ahmad Shihabi declares the willingness of the Free Syrian Army to go wherever they are needed to fight Jihad. But only, he says, after “we finish with the injustice of Bashar.” Since, after nine years of civil war, a half-million dead, five million outside the country and six million displaced inside the country, Bashar Assad has taken back almost all of Syria, it will be a very long wait indeed for Shihabi's fighters to enroll in any other Jihad.

And Shihabi's second claim is palpably absurd: “we will crush the injustice suffered by our brothers in [East] Turkestan,” meaning China. How exactly will the Free Syrian Army, which currently has, at most, 25,000 men under arms, “crush” the two-million-man People's Liberation Army, with its planes, tanks, drones – the second most powerful army in the world?

The vivid oriental imagination of Ahmad Shihabi is at work; it's so much more fun than reality. And so many Arab and Iranian clerics and leaders have expressed the same wild fantasies, promising their followers that “next year” they will conquer Jerusalem, or that they will wipe out the Great Satan, or take over Europe within a few decades.

“We thank the Turkish government and the great Turkish people. We are grateful to President Recep Erdogan for what he has done for the Syrian people, on the humanitarian, military, and political levels. We have not been treated as Syrians but as brothers. In the words of President Erdogan: We are the ansar [those Medinans who helped Muhammad and his followers] and you are the muhajireen [the earliest Muslims] .We are willing to sacrifice our lives, our children, and our elderly for the sake of our country... for the sake of the Ottoman Caliphate.”

Notice how Shihabi, in his peroration, mentions the sacrifices he and his men are willing to make – their lives, their children, their elderly, at first “for the sake of our country,” and then, at the end, “for the sake of the Ottoman Caliphate.” That will please Erdogan, who has repeatedly shown his neo-Ottoman inclinations. Erdogan fantasized in 2018 about creating a pan-Islamic military force – clearly he thought that it naturally would be directed by the Turks, with himself in the role of padishah – that would be able to crush Israel. Erdogan is now interfering militarily in Libya, once part of the Ottoman Empire and a place where, Erdogan insists, many Turks still live; he hopes to ensure the rule by Fayeze al-Sarraj, leader of the Government of National Accord (GNA) that is Islamist in orientation, which pleases Erdogan, who dislikes the secular General Khalifa Haftar. Erdogan has not hesitated to send Turkish troops into both Syria and Iraq, at different times, to fight the Kurds; he did not seek the permission of the Arabs; he appears to see the Arabs as still subservient to Turkish authority. Erdogan is fond of evoking the Ottoman Empire; in February 2018 he threatened to deliver an “Ottoman slap” (which was often fatal) to the American forces in northern Syria if they tried to prevent the Turkish army from entering to fight the Kurds.

And now we have the head of the Free Syria Army declaring that he and his men are ready to sacrifice themselves “for the sake

of the Ottoman Caliphate.” It’s an astonishing statement, one that must have enraged Arabs throughout the Gulf and in North Africa. For they do not remember the Ottoman period of their existence as a happy one; their historical memories are quite different from those of Recep Tayyip Erdogan. While the Arabs remember the savage rule of their Turkish masters, Erdogan remembers a glorious Caliphate, with Turks wisely discharging the responsibilities of rule over so many Muslim peoples.

Erdogan’s biggest mistake so far in his dealings with the Arabs was his backing of Mohamed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood. His support for the Brotherhood continued even after Morsi’s imprisonment and death. He has thereby enraged General El-Sisi, as well as Crown Prince Mohammad of Saudi Arabia and Crown Prince Mohammad bin Nayaf of the UAE, all of whom regard the Muslim Brotherhood as threats to their rule. His interference in Egypt’s politics is seen as neo-Ottoman meddling by a Turkish ruler who still thinks, a century after the end of the Ottoman Empire, that he has a legitimate role to play in Egypt, in Libya, in Syria and in Iraq.

If the Turkish intervention in Libya goes well, and Fayed al-Sarraj’s forces, with Turkish support, defeat General Haftar’s fighters, Erdogan may request that a grateful Libyan government pay Turkey for the cost of its intervention and the continued presence, should it prove necessary, of Turkish troops. And that will further enrage other Arabs, seeing that sum as akin to the moneys the Ottoman Turks demanded when they taxed those they ruled over. And they would not be pleased, either, with a long-term presence of Turkish troops in a fellow Arab state, which they would interpret as “neo-Ottoman” – a word that is now much in evidence in postings about Erdogan.

Should Fawaz al-Sarraj lose, despite support from Erdogan, a victorious General Haftar will promptly expel Turkish forces, a humiliation for Erdogan that could have consequences for his popularity at home. And the Turkish armed forces, too, would

share in that humiliation, and unsurprisingly, would blame Erdogan for the fiasco, for deciding to intervene in the first place. Though the army has been purged of Erdogan's perceived enemies, those whom he deemed too secular or supposedly were supporters of Fethulleh Gulen, there are those now in the military, seeming loyalists, who would nonetheless be angered by a loss in Libya that was entirely avoidable if Erdogan had not been so dead set on interfering in the Libyan civil war.

For the West, and especially for America and Israel, the weakening of Erdogan would be welcome – his removal from office even more so. It could be the result of a coup by those generals who would blame him for a loss in Libya; it could be through an electoral loss in 2023. He has only one friend left in the Middle East, Qatar, and Qatar is now a pariah state in its own neighborhood, where Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait, and Bahrain have all instituted land, sea, and air blockades.

This summer he renamed two formerly Greek-owned drillships that Turkey had bought. He changed the name of the first to "Fatih" ("Conqueror" in Turkish) after Muhammad II, the conqueror of Constantinople known as "Muhammad Fatih" (Muhammad the Conqueror), and changed the second drillship's name to "Yavuz" (meaning "Resolute," the epithet given to Yavuz Sultan Selim, "the resolute Sultan Selim," the first Ottoman sultan, who gave himself the title of caliph, and thus the ruler to be regarded by his subjects as the successor of Muhammad and the protector of all Sunni Muslim states. Use of these two names was correctly taken as a sign of Erdogan's deep affection for these celebrated Ottoman conquerors, and his interest in resurrecting an umma to be united under the rule of Turkey and, of course, himself.

Erdogan's interventions in four Arab states – Egypt (to support Morsi and the Brotherhood), Syria and Iraq (to suppress the Kurds), and Libya (to support the Islamists of the NGA), his delusions-of-grandeur plans to head a pan-Islamic army against Israel, his braggart-warrior talk of

delivering “Ottoman slaps” to the Americans, and his fond memories of the Ottoman Empire expressed through his naval nomenclature, do not win over the Arabs, but fill them with understandable dread. Were he a wiser man, he would be doing his best to reassure them that he has no neo-Ottoman schemes. He would pull back Turkish troops from Arab lands, keep Turkish ships from any further adventurism in laying claim to the eastern Mediterranean, stop talking about a possible war “between the crescent and the cross,” and refrain from expressing pride in an Ottoman past that others remember quite differently.

But we are not talking here about a restrained and thoughtful ruler, a profound practitioner of statecraft. We are talking about Recep Tayyip Erdogan. So expect more of the same, from this Padishah in his palace – the 1150 room Ak Saray (White Palace) – as he promotes what he sees as a past of Ottoman greatness but that other Muslims, outside of Turkey, would much rather forget.

First published in