

CONFERENCE REPORT

Closing Session: Pursuit of Justice in a Fragmented World



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PUBLISHER

TRT WORLD RESEARCH CENTRE
DECEMBER 2018

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Closing Session:

Pursuit of Justice in a Fragmented World

This is a report on a public session titled “**Closing Session: In Pursuit of Justice in a Fragmented World**”, held as part of the TRT World Forum 2018. The views, themes and discussion points expressed in this conference report are those of participants and speakers present at the TRT World Forum 2018, and do not reflect the official view of TRT World Research Centre

Summary

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan opened his speech by recalling the importance of learning lessons from history, and reiterated that if only people were to take heed, history would not repeat itself. He criticised the UN for its inability to provide solutions to global issues. He pointed to the ineffectiveness of the global system in resolving conflicts such as Afghanistan, Syria and Yemen and asserted that the current international system has effectively collapsed. President Erdoğan repeated his famous slogan that the “The World is bigger than five” and added that the current world system reflects conditions of the aftermath of WWI and WWII and that we are no longer bound by these circumstances. He suggested a number of different possible schema for reforming the UN system, and stressed that if the system remains unrepresentative of today’s realities, establishing peace and justice in the world will be all but impossible.

Commenting on the Idlib deal brokered by Turkey and Russia, President Erdoğan said that the country’s aim is to create a de-escalation zone in order to prepare for the full return of refugees. When free and fair elections are held in Syria, Turkey will leave the country and hand it over to its real owners; otherwise, unless stability and peace are established, Turkey’s troops will remain in Syria. On the issue of Turkey’s purchase of the S400 missile system from Russia, while the US expressed its disapproval, arguing that a NATO member cannot buy S400’s from a non-NATO member, President Erdoğan explained that NATO’s Secretary General issued a statement giving Turkey freedom of preference. He also added that the US did not object to Greece buying S300’s from Russia but is objecting to Turkey buying S400’s. President Erdoğan rejected the US philosophy of “I am strong, therefore I am right” and stressed that Turkey’s philosophy is “I am right, therefore I am strong”. President Erdoğan added that Turkey is moving forward with new projects and initiatives, such as the nuclear energy plans with Russia, China and Japan. The fact that the US refused to sell Turkey drones has forced Turkish entrepreneurs to produce their own, which have already been used successfully in Jarablus and Afrin. This is a sign that Turkey is no longer dependent and is slowly but firmly moving towards attaining its goals.



Recep Tayyip Erdoğan

President of the Republic of Turkey



Introduction

Although there are 193 theoretically equal member states of the United Nations, some are more equal than others. Following the end of the Second World War, the victorious Allied Powers established the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) as the primary body of the UN system responsible for maintaining peace and order in the world. Today, the UNSC is failing to fulfil its most important duties. President Erdoğan expressed that what is needed is reform, particularly of the UNSC, in order to make it a more representative and effective body. Summed up by his mantra that “the world is bigger than five”, President Erdoğan added that reforms, if properly executed, would inhibit the increasing trend of fragmentation in the world.

According to President Erdoğan, Turkey has been left to deal with the bloodshed in Syria alone. He emphasised how Turkey has supported the Syrian people in their drive for democracy in their country. However, their democratic revolution has been stolen and the country has turned into a battlefield for proxies of foreign powers. Despite this state of affairs, Turkey has been consistent in its efforts to mitigate the humanitarian disaster in its southern neighbour. The recent deal hashed out between Turkey and Russia regarding Idlib exemplifies Turkey’s determination on this issue. Collaboration between Ankara and Moscow has enabled them to prevent a humanitarian disaster in the last opposition stronghold in the country. Moreover, this cooperation between Turkey and Russia indicates what can be achieved when cooperation is preferred over fragmentation.

The World is Bigger than Five

The United Nations Security Council is one of the six main organs established by the United Nations charter in 1945. The UNSC is the most powerful body of the UN and all members are obliged to abide by its decisions. The council is composed of five permanent and ten non-permanent members who are elected for a two-year term on a rotating basis. Although the permanent members have the right to veto, non-permanent members do not have such power.

The Council was formed in the aftermath of the bitter experiences of the World War II with its permanent members consisting of members of the Allied Powers. The UN Charter defines the UNSC's purpose as the maintenance of international peace and security, to develop friendly relations among nations, to cooperate in solving international problems, promoting respect for human rights, and to be a centre for harmonising the actions of nations. After more than seven decades since its establishment, today's conflicts clearly illustrate that the UNSC has largely failed to fulfil its mandate. Rather than using their positions for the good of all humanity, permanent members abuse their veto power for their national interests. The council failed to prevent humanitarian disasters on many occasions such as in Rwanda, Bosnia and Herzegovina and the current crises in Syria and Yemen.

As the world enters into a new multipolar era amid a growing trend of isolationism, international institutions such as the UNSC are arguably more important than ever. There have been many reform proposals to change the flawed structure of the council to increase its effectiveness. While some countries claimed enlargement of permanent member seats would be sufficient, others have opposed such an idea and demand more fundamental reforms. Their reform proposals include increasing of non-permanent members, extending the duration of terms and limiting the veto power of the permanent members.

Turkey has been one of the most affected countries from the reshaping of world politics following the end of the Cold War. Its geopolitical location has made Ankara a central player



Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, President of the Republic of Turkey, expressing that what is needed is reform, particularly of the UNSC, in order to make it a more representative and effective body.

in many events from the Yugoslav Crisis to the secession of Turkic republics from the Soviet Union and the Gulf Wars to the Arab uprisings. Turkey has used this advantageous position to mediate between disputing parties. Examples of this include the trilateral meetings between Afghanistan-Pakistan-Turkey and Bosnia and Herzegovina-Serbia-Turkey. Developments in world politics following the end of the Cold War also led Turkey to take more initiative on global issues. During its non-permanent term in the Security Council, Turkey reached a nuclear deal with Iran along together with Brazil. However, this opportunity to bring Iran into the international community was missed because of hard-line positions adopted by certain permanent members of the Security Council.

All these developments led Turkey to pursue reform in international institutions, with a particular emphasis on the Security Council. President Erdoğan illustrated the ineffectiveness and the flawed structure of the UN by highlighting the case of Israel and the Palestinians. Israel routinely disregards UN General Assembly resolutions condemning it for its violations of Palestinian rights, and does so because of the lack of accountability with the UNSC. The United States regularly uses its veto power against resolutions targeting Israel violations brought to the UNSC, thereby shielding Israel from being taken to account. Since the establishment of Israel in 1948, the United States used its veto power more than 70 times in favour of Israel.

President Erdoğan further argued that the current structure of the Security Council was not reflective of today's international reality. He insisted that all continents should be equally represented in the Council. Thereupon, Erdoğan called upon world leaders to bring the issue of Security Council reform to the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA).

Idlib Deal

Since the beginning of the Assad regime's violent crackdown in 2011 and Syria's subsequent descent into civil war, Turkey firmly took the side of the Syrian people and supported their demands for more democracy, human rights and rule of law. Turkey put enormous efforts into achieving a political solution by actively partaking in diplomatic process, repeatedly reiterating that a military solution is not viable. Turkey's active and effective involvement in the political settlement process culminated in the Astana Talks, launched in 2017 by Turkey, Russia and Iran. The initiative aimed at achieving a stable ceasefire that would constitute the basis for political negotiations. As part of the Astana Process, a series of summits in Tehran, Ankara and Sochi have contributed to laying the groundwork for a political solution. The Idlib deal that was brokered by Russia and Turkey to prevent a potential regime offensive against the enclave was struck against this backdrop.

By taking swift and determined action, Turkey and Russia brokered a 10-item Memorandum of Understanding, which included the creation of a 15-20 km demilitarised buffer zone between the regime and the opposition, the withdrawal of heavy weaponry from all conflicting parties, joint patrols by Russian and Turkish forces on either side of the demilitarised zone and commitment to fighting terrorist groups in Syria.

Regarding the Idlib deal, President Erdoğan pointed out that Russia's determination to take necessary measures to protect the de-escalation zone in Idlib facilitated the process. As part of the Astana Agreement, Turkey has established 12 observation points in Idlib, while Russia has 10 and Iran has six. By highlighting the importance of these observation points, Erdoğan stated how ensuring the security of the 15 to 20 km corridor is of utmost importance because the corridor is what guarantees the security of Idlib. As these observation points have continued to be fortified, so has the confidence of the people of Idlib. According to the terms of the agreement, Turkey would have to ensure that radical groups would not operate in the zone in question. President Erdoğan added that Turkey had successfully managed to conduct talks with the radical elements in Idlib in order to preserve the terms of the deal.

Improvement of the humanitarian situation in Idlib was the other point of discussion. The Idlib deal has given a measure of assurance against additional civilian suffering and a new flow of refugees into neighbouring countries as well as Europe. President Erdoğan stated that



President Erdoğan, pointing to a paradox wherein the US and Russia consistently speak of maintaining Syria's territorial integrity, they continue to operate from these bases and expand their respective spheres of influence.

as the region becomes more stable, safe and free from radical groups, people will prefer to return home, as illustrated by the return of 250,000 people to Afrin and al-Bab after Turkey cleared the area from terrorist elements. President Erdoğan further stated that the safe return of refugees is the ultimate goal. While the number of refugees who have returned thus far represents a small frack of the estimated 4 million refugees in Turkey, in it nonetheless a positive development.

President Erdoğan questioned the effectiveness and reliability of the so-called "Small Group on Syria", a group that consists of Egypt, France, Germany, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom and the United States, arguing that none of them are currently major players on the ground in Syria. President Erdoğan also spoke about the potential of the Quadrilateral Syria Summit that was held in Istanbul on October 27th, 2018 to achieve positive results. As such, the summit resulted in a very important reaffirmation of the four countries' (Turkey, Russia, Germany and France) determination to achieve a political solution in Syria and establishment of Constitutional Committee by the end of this year.

Foreign Involvement in Syria

As the conflict in Syria escalated, foreign and regional powers engaged in what can be best characterised as proxy warfare, exacerbating the conflict and prolonging the fighting. Foreign powers, with no border with Syria, and therefore, less direct security concerns, have been seeking to establish zones of influence via direct military as well as proxy engagement, thereby increasing disorder in the country.

Russia's intervention in the Syrian war dramatically changed the trajectory of events. Russia declared its support for the Assad regime in the early days of the war, and followed up rhetorical and political support with financial and diplomatic support as well as direct military intervention in 2015. Russian military intervention turned the tide of the war in favour of the Syrian regime, bringing it back from near brink of collapse. Coupled with the support of the Iranian backed Shia militias on the ground, the regime began retaking control of territories from opposition groups.

The ambivalent and largely indecisive approach of the US towards the war in Syria changed with the emergence of Daesh, and its takeover of Mosul in June 2014. As a result, the US focused almost all of its efforts on the fight against the terrorist group in Iraq and Syria. The US took a decision early on in its intervention to partner with the YPG, the Syrian branch of the PKK terrorist organisation, in spite of vocal concerns from Turkey. Even following the effective defeat of Daesh in Syria and Iraq, the US has persisted in its support of the YPG in the name of preventing a resurgence of the terrorist group.

Against this backdrop, President Erdoğan stated that 19 thousand trailers of weapons, and ammunition equipment have been supplied to the YPG by the US. This is in addition to the 3000 cargo planes carrying weaponry, ammunition and other equipment, which are currently being used in the north of Syria. The US also currently has 22 bases in Syria, which have consolidated heavy weaponry and other military equipment. In addition to the 5 large Russian military bases in the country, President Erdoğan questioned the ultimate purpose of these bases. He pointed to a paradox wherein the US and Russia consistently speak of maintaining Syria's territorial integrity, they continue to operate from these bases and expand their respective spheres of influence. Additionally, the extent that these powers take advantage

of the energy resources in the region including oil and natural gas raises deeper questions regarding the intentions of these powers in their involvement in the region.

President Erdoğan warned that while foreign powers seek to maximise their gains and further their interests, Syrians continue to suffer from instability, violence and poverty. The President noted:

You refer to this poverty and then you turn to us and tell us to leave this piece of land? No, we are not going to leave. Not until the people of Syria have free and fair elections. Once this takes place we will hand the country over to the real owners and leave.

Referring to Turkey's recent military operations in northern Syria, namely operation Euphrates Shield and Operation Olive Branch, jointly conducted with the Free Syrian Army, Erdoğan stated that "this was the case in Afrin and in Idlib. We were invited and that is why we were there. Because wherever and whenever there are people in need, we do our best to go and help."

Conclusion

Current developments across the world demonstrate that the UN is falling short of providing solutions to global issues. As elaborately put forward by President Erdoğan, the current international system reflects the realities of the period after of the WWI and WWII, however, the world has changed immensely since then and requires adopting a new system that is more compatible with the requisite needs of an emerging multipolar world.

The Idlib deal served a very significant function in preventing another humanitarian disaster in Syria that would have resulted from a regime offensive against the enclave. Along with assistance from the international community, the determination of both Turkey and Russia has enabled the realisation of this deal and has furthered the prospects of a lasting peace in Syria. Additionally, Turkey's presence in Northern Syria has allowed for the safe return of refugees to Afrin and Jarablus, which could serve as models for Idlib should the deal hold and stability prevails.

