



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

US Isolationism Leads to Globalization of Conflicts and Endless Wars

by Irina Tsukerman

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,718, August 30, 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: In recent years, the common refrain that US involvement in Middle Eastern conflicts is costly, counterproductive, and morally and practically indefensible has taken hold in foreign policy circles and reflects the popular mindset that brought Donald Trump to power. However, closer examination of three of the sprawling conflicts plaguing the Middle East region today—Syria, Libya, and Yemen—shows that by abdicating regional responsibilities, the US has contributed to the globalization and perpetuation of “endless wars.”

Localized conflicts are being globalized following a similar pattern of weakened or divided central government, factionalism, and proliferation of security and humanitarian issues. This trend may have started with Syria, where foreign fighters and terrorist recruits flowed in from all over the world before Iran, Russia, and then Turkey intervened, adding to the ongoing sectarianism. Syria, which is still smoldering, has been joined by two other local-turned-international conflicts in Libya and Yemen, and there is increasing cross-pollination among other Middle Eastern conflicts.

Turkey is now [importing](#) approximately 200 al-Islah (Muslim Brotherhood) fighters from Yemen to Libya, where they will join forces with the internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA), Syrian and other mercenaries, local urban militias, and terrorists. Turkey also established al-Islah training camps in Taiz and other strategic areas that are increasingly falling under Islamist control.

The [best known](#) such camp hosts approximately 400 fighters, most of whom are to remain in Yemen and assist Turkey-backed forces, not so much against Tehran’s proxy Houthi militia (despite al-Islah’s having joined the Arab Coalition in that

battle and being nominally part of the Hadi government) as against the [effort to liberate areas](#) under Islamist control by the UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council (STC). Reportedly, this camp is partially financed by Qatar. Lesser known camps are popping up on the outskirts of Taiz; some are former schools that have been [converted](#) into training facilities by al-Islah fighters.

Why would Erdoğan need to import such a small number of Yemeni fighters to Libya? He has no shortage of Syrian and other mercenaries; the many thousands of foreign fighters flocking to Libya either directly from Turkey or through Tunisia in recent months completely overwhelmed Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA). After all, bringing these fighters splits the forces available for Turkish-backed operations in Yemen, rendering the task much more difficult, and attracts unwanted attention from the international community.

There are several reasons for this action. First, Erdoğan is showing the legitimacy of his own international Islamist leadership spurred by the neo-Ottoman dreams of grandeur he is selling to his base around the world. Even a symbolic show of diversity points to Turkey as a force to be reckoned with that will not be easily dislodged from any of its mushrooming international fronts and combat zones.

Second, international experience in an active combat zone is for the benefit of the fighters themselves, as it gives them an opportunity to cut their teeth, network with other fighters, and receive a global perspective that they can share with their brothers in arms.

Third, this is laying the foundations for the creation of an integrated and globalized network of proxies, where mercenaries of different backgrounds are interchangeable and can facilitate each other's operations anywhere in the world with equal ease.

If al-Islah fighters can join the fight in Libya, then maybe one day Libyans, who have benefited from Erdoğan's assistance, can reciprocate by going to Yemen. In other words, Erdoğan is building a version of the [Iranian model](#). However, rather than create permanent militias and organized proxy groups that may be expensive to maintain, at least at the outset, Erdoğan is focusing on the integration of the fighters themselves. For that reason, in Libya, he is creating brigades where mercenaries of different backgrounds have some level of exposure to others.

Finally, this move is a message to Erdoğan's opponents that he can operate with impunity and can import whomever he wants wherever he wants at any time. This is yet another step toward his vision of [restoring Ottoman borders](#) and building an Islamic caliphate.

Just as important is an informal announcement, one of many in recent weeks, that the next operation for Turkey is going to be in Yemen, where for now, its role is

limited to training, ideological outreach, and humanitarian aid. Shortly after that announcement, Erdoğan declared the conversion into a mosque of the former church Hagia Sophia, one of the wonders of the Christian world and a museum under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.

The first services held at the mosque were Islamist in form and substance, and featured a sword-wielding imam. While most of the international community was busy debating and expressing outrage, a related event passed under the radar: the publication of a Turkish magazine [calling for](#) the establishment of an Islamic caliphate, a supra-nationalist concept, most recently associated with ISIS.

Erdoğan has been accused of welcoming fleeing ISIS fighters and recruiting them for some of his militias in Syria and elsewhere. He was previously accused of engaging in oil trading with ISIS while the terrorist organization still had territorial control in Iraq and Syria. The flow of international mercenaries to Libya and elsewhere is not only a great way to save money and avoid the humiliation of a defeat of Turkish troops by the Egyptian military, but a step toward establishing the caliphate, an ideological premise that unites Islamists of all backgrounds.

There is a reason why ISIS's reemergence in Libya has become so closely associated with local Turkey-backed militias. ISIS is neither a contradiction nor a challenge to Erdoğan's vision. Indeed, there is no ideological or constructive daylight between ISIS's idea of the caliphate and Erdoğan's.

Erdoğan has co-opted the remnants of the organization to serve as the vanguard of some of Turkey's more brazen operations to weaken and undermine the very idea of statehood in the countries bordering Libya. His goal is a free flow of mercenaries from all directions who are prepared to disrupt, overwhelm, and interfere with a symmetrical Egyptian response in asymmetrical and unpredictable ways. Erdoğan spent years cultivating loyalties around Africa through humanitarian investments, political involvement, and ideological outreach. Now, the chickens are coming home to roost as [thousands](#) of Somalis are joining Tunisians, Sudanese, and other Islamists in Libya, all bankrolled by Qatar.

What of the Russian mercenaries? They are not in Libya for ideological reasons and may end up playing both sides (if they are not doing so already) depending on which way the wind blows. There are already signs that Moscow is flexible in another globalized theater of war, Syria, where it has accommodated some level of Turkish involvement and demonstrated its ability to maneuver among different factions, tribes, and jihadists, not to mention the long-going Israeli-Iranian confrontation. In Yemen, too, there is a visible shift in Russian priorities, where it went from playing both sides of the conflict in an attempt to be seen as a neutral and respectable power broker to visibly supporting the Houthis through [propaganda and information warfare](#) tactics meant to demoralize the Arab Coalition. Moscow

made that shift because it perceives the Coalition as having either lost or largely given up, and as the international community increasingly sees the Houthis as a legitimate governing authority in the absence of the Hadi government on the ground.

The Arab Coalition, in response to these developments, has concluded the negotiations that would fully implement a unifying Riyadh agreement, integrate the STC into the Hadi government, and finally reappoint a governor of Aden, which means the STC is [putting aside separatism](#) for the sake of combating the Houthis. The legitimate government is finally seen as making a physical claim to dominion and control in Yemen as a first step toward retaking military and political control of the country.

Despite these positive moves, it will be an uphill battle for the Hadi government and the Coalition to regain full legitimacy. None of these conflicts is likely to be resolved anytime soon, and they will all become costlier, more messy, and more lethal.

A significant reason for that is the belated, limited, or passive role of the United States in line with President Trump's promises to his isolationist base of bringing an end to US involvement in "endless wars" abroad. The absence of the US as the "global policeman" or at least a powerbroker that is willing and able to put pressure on aggressors and wrongdoers to negotiate is taking its toll. Far from making the world a less dangerous place, America's withdrawal from the international scene has given a green light to Turkey, Qatar, Iran, Russia, and their proxies and fellow travelers to expand and intensify conflicts.

Irina Tsukerman is a human rights and national security attorney based in New York. She has written extensively on geopolitics and US foreign policy for a variety of American, Israeli, and other international publications.