

Regional responsibility: Turkey's vision for the Middle East

Karol Wasilewski

During the Antalya Diplomacy Forum (17–19 April), Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan held talks with his counterparts from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Pakistan at the third consultative meeting this year. He stated that the aim of this format is “for these four countries to address regional issues with a realistic and implementable agenda”. This remark aligns with Fidan’s earlier calls for Middle Eastern countries to form a regional security pact following the end of the war in Iran.

Ankara’s position is rooted in the Turkish vision of order in the Middle East, based on the conviction that states in the region should resolve their problems independently in order to limit the destabilising influence of external actors. Despite the disruption caused by the war in Iran, implementing Turkey’s proposals remains a distant prospect, as it would require a reorientation of the foreign and security policies of both regional states (including Israel) and the United States.

Commentary

- **From Turkey’s perspective, the war in Iran represents another example of the destabilising impact of the United States and Israel on security in the Gulf region.** Since the start of the US–Israeli military operation, Turkish politicians have consistently advanced three arguments: (1) the regime in Tehran cannot be overthrown by air strikes alone; (2) the conflict may spill over into the wider region; and (3) it could ultimately create a security vacuum that terrorist organisations will exploit (see: *‘Diplomacy under strain: Turkey’s stance on Iran’*). The course of the war thus far – particularly Iran’s retaliatory strikes against its Arab neighbours and its blockade of the Strait of Hormuz – has reinforced Turkey’s conviction that its position is correct.
- **Turkish officials have yet to specify what a regional security system would look like.** They have only offered a broad vision, rhetorically anchored in the principle of ‘regional responsibility’. They argue that closer political, economic, and military ties among Middle Eastern states – for example in the form of joint organisations – would help to build trust and reduce rivalry. A key element of this concept is the assumption that the inability of Middle Eastern actors to resolve problems independently is the primary cause of external interventions that destabilise the region. It remains unclear how Turkey intends to bring about the formation of such a new order.
- **The format involving Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Pakistan serves as a platform for Turkey to present itself as a predictable actor committed to stabilising the region and advancing its economic interests.** Fidan stated that the talks between the four countries

are not aimed at forming a military alliance, but rather at ending conflicts, enhancing stability, and fostering economic development. Turkey expects the war in Iran to strengthen its position and prompt a reassessment of the costs and benefits of regional economic and energy initiatives. It anticipates that the crisis in the Strait of Hormuz will increase Turkey's investment appeal, boost its revenues from transporting goods that cannot be shipped by sea or air, and further enhance the attractiveness of oil and gas pipelines and energy interconnectors running through its territory. Ankara also hopes that the negative consequences of the US–Israeli attack on Iran will create an opportunity for Turkey to secure a larger share of the regional arms market.

- **The 'regional responsibility' vision promoted by Turkey appears unlikely to succeed.** It remains unclear what stance it would adopt towards two key regional actors – Iran and Israel. The latter poses a particular challenge, as it holds a different vision of the region, viewing its destabilisation as beneficial and perceiving Turkey and its efforts to build regional consensus as a threat. A further constraint is Turkey's limited economic potential and the related fact that the Gulf states do not regard it as a partner capable of leading efforts to shape the regional order. Another constraint is that some issues, such as Iran's nuclear programme, extend beyond the regional dimension. The role of the United States constitutes a separate issue. The Turkish concept rests on the assumption that the US will seek to scale back its security commitments in the Middle East, with Turkey partially filling the gap, including as a supplier of air defence systems developed by its defence industry. While Washington might be interested in reducing its contribution to regional security – which could be possible if US pressure on Iran succeeds in ending its nuclear programme – the US–Israel alliance and American economic interests, such as the sale of weapons and military equipment to the Gulf states, will remain significant constraints on Turkey's aspirations.