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TRANSATLANTIC SECURITY COOPERATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Recommendations for the New Administration

Ben Fishman and Erik Brattberg

About the Authors



BEN FISHMAN is the editor of *North Africa in Transition: The Struggle for Democracies and Institutions* (2015). He served as Director for North Africa and Jordan on the National Security Council (NSC) staff from 2011–2013 and worked on broader Middle East issues at the State

Department and NSC from 2009–2011. Fishman is an adjunct international security and defense policy analyst at the Rand Corporation and was previously a consulting senior fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies.



ERIK BRATTBERG serves as Director for Special Projects and Senior Fellow at The McCain Institute for International Leadership. He is also the 2014 recipient of the Ronald D. Asmus Policy Entrepreneur Fellowship at the German Marshall Fund. Previously, Brattberg served as Senior

Fellow at the Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security at the Atlantic Council, Visiting Fellow at the Center for Transatlantic Relations at the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) at Johns Hopkins University, and as an associated researcher at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs in Stockholm.

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The Papers for the Next President series is designed to assist the next president and his team in crafting a strong, pragmatic, and principled national security agenda. The series explores the most critical regions and topics that the president will need to address early in his tenure and includes actionable recommendations designed to be implemented during the first few months of 2017.

TRANSATLANTIC SECURITY COOPERATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Recommendations for the New Administration

Introduction¹

The Middle East presents a wide array of challenges that raise fundamental questions about how the transatlantic community should calibrate its approach to promote stability in a volatile region. These include: the rise of the Islamic State (ISIL), which was fueled in part by the brutal Syrian civil war and the limitations of the state authority in Iraq; the migration and humanitarian crises resulting from the wars in Syria, and to a lesser extent, Libya; the aftershocks of the 2011 Arab uprisings that have brought on an authoritarian restoration to Egypt, a fragile democracy in Tunisia, and a civil war in Libya; balancing the enforcement of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran while contesting Iran's continued support for terrorist groups in the region and the Houthi rebels in Yemen; and the continued stalemate in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Traditional and reliable allies are either under increased domestic and security pressures (Saudi Arabia), have changed their postures as a result of regime change (Egypt), or are more dependent on Western assistance than ever (Jordan).

Given this daunting environment, the key question for the Trump administration regarding transatlantic security cooperation in the Middle East is how to utilize limited resources to maximize stability in a region that is undergoing a generational trauma. On both sides of the Atlantic, there are voices that call for a variety of differing approaches to this region. Some would like to see deeper engagement in the Middle East, especially some form of intervention in Syria; others want to step back from

intense political engagements to focus on containing terrorist threats. Still others, especially nationalist voices in the United States and increasingly in Europe, advocate for withdrawing from the region altogether.

Each of these strategic options has advantages and drawbacks, elaborated below. The task for the new U.S. administration will be to identify a set of common objectives with an increasingly fragmented Europe, to work in tandem where those objectives align, and to divide responsibilities, where possible, based on resource constraints and comparative advantages. It will also require focused diplomatic efforts by the United States in Europe to amplify voices in favor of a more proactive transatlantic policy in the Middle East. A strong example of how this worked during the Obama administration was Europe's cooperation with the United States and other partners in constructing a global sanctions regime that eventually persuaded Iran to negotiate significant caps to its nuclear program in the JCPOA. NATO's 2011 military intervention in Libya offers another instructive case of the value and limitations of transatlantic security cooperation. While NATO achieved its goal of protecting the Libyan people from the Qaddafi regime, the operation exposed significant gaps in NATO's capabilities, in addition to the West's inability or unwillingness to conduct a post-conflict stabilization operation that might have limited the chaos in Libya today.

Engaging with an internally focused Europe on the Middle East will be an uphill battle, but one the Trump administration must undertake to keep the transatlantic relationship relevant on Middle East policy.

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The Obama Administration's Middle East Policy

President Obama assumed office intent on ending the Iraq War, mending relations with the Muslim world (and rebuilding traditional alliances in Europe), and taking on the threat of Iran's burgeoning nuclear program. Obama also sought to reduce how much the Middle East dominated the United States' strategic attention by rebalancing to the Asia Pacific. In another departure from his predecessors, Obama visited Saudi Arabia and Egypt, pointedly avoiding Israel, on his first trip to the region, believing that it would symbolize that the United States would be a more even-handed player in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Europeans in particular appreciated the changing dynamics on Iran and the Middle East peace process.

Iran

Obama's offer to engage Iran centered on a strategy that meaningful international pressure could not be built and coordinated with reluctant partners (in Europe and the U.N. Security Council) without active and direct engagement with Iran. Iran failed to respond to initial efforts of U.S. outreach. Its 2009 presidential election featured mass crackdowns on protestors, and President Ahmadinejad demonstrated an unwillingness to concede anything on Iran's nuclear program. Combined, these actions justified imposing the toughest-ever sanctions regime by the United States and the EU, which required near constant engagement between the United States and Europe at the highest levels. United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1929 of June 2010 froze assets of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard and shipping companies suspected of participating in proliferation activities, as well as challenged Iran's ability to finance suspected proliferation activities. Coordinated U.S.-EU sanctions left Iran without valuable oil export markets in Europe, and more importantly, without access to the international banking system. This was a major diplomatic victory for the transatlantic community.

After President Hassan Rouhani took office in 2013, the prospects for negotiations re-emerged, in part because of the impact of the sanctions regime on Iran's economy. Rouhani delegated the negotiations to his foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, who met regularly with his counterparts from the P5+1, or the E3+3, which were prefaced by then-secret bilateral talks between U.S. and Iran negotiators.

The deal known as the JCPOA emerged after many fits and starts. It lays out the basis for the gradual relief of sanctions based on caps or the dismantlement of all aspects of Iran's nuclear program and the imposition of an inspection and verification regime by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Critics of the JCPOA point to the time limits built into the caps on Iran's enrichment program and argue that the deal will allow Iran to build an industrial-scale nuclear program in 10–15 years. Proponents of the JCPOA note that there will still be caps on the program that apply for up to 25 years, that Iran's regime may have different priorities in a decade, and that there will be significant warnings of a weapons program due to the strict inspection regime.

If Iran's nuclear program started as an imminent challenge in 2009, as a result of the JCPOA it has shifted to a secondary priority that requires close monitoring. Where Iran still poses a great threat to the West is in its activities throughout the region, including its support for the Syrian regime, Hezbollah, Shia militias in Iraq, and the Houthis in Yemen. Throughout the Iran negotiations, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in particular pointed to these issues—more so than the nuclear program—as reasons not to alleviate sanctions on Iran. Further, while some voices in Israel supported the JCPOA as a better alternative to a military strike against Iranian nuclear facilities (especially a unilateral strike by Israel), Prime Minister Netanyahu actively campaigned against the JCPOA, even taking his case to a joint session of Congress, which incensed the Obama administration.

On the campaign trail, Donald Trump made several promises to unravel the Iran deal, which will make Iran a focus on both sides of the Atlantic in the coming months.



Seen here is the silhouette of U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry in Vienna, Austria, on November 24, 2014, following P5+1 and European Union-nation negotiations with Iran. (U.S. State Department/Flickr)

Israeli-Palestinian Peace

In contrast to Iran, the Obama administration's efforts to restart the moribund Middle East peace process failed to meet similar success. Obama appointed former Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell as his special envoy for Middle East peace in the first days of the administration. To incentivize the Palestinians to come to the negotiating table, Mitchell's team negotiated a freeze on construction of West Bank settlements. However, given the complexities of the various stages of authorizations before construction could begin, the process immediately bogged down—every time a tender was announced, the Palestinians cried foul and the Israelis sought to justify how the particular approval was not covered by the settlement freeze. Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Abbas met just once during the period of the 2010–2011 settlement freeze, and an effort to extend the freeze failed to materialize.

In 2013, Secretary of State John Kerry made a renewed push to resume talks based on an Israeli promise to release three tranches of Palestinian prisoners over the period of negotiations, and a Palestinian commitment not to pursue unilateral initiatives to join international organizations. The talks aimed to produce an agreement of principles that would guide further negotiations of a final status peace treaty. While the negotiators made progress on several of the core issues, talks broke down in early 2014 as a result of a disagreement on the scope and timing of the last prisoner release—a sensitive issue in both societies. Attempts to restart the negotiations failed. Since then, several European

states are increasingly in favor of allowing Palestinian accession to international organizations, or of imposing pressure on Israel through boycotts or restricting their bilateral or regional collaboration on a range of issues, from trade to science.

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The U.N. Security Council Resolution passed on December 23, 2016, that declared Israeli settlement construction illegal highlighted the growing divisions between Europe and the United States on the Israeli-Palestinian issue. Then President-elect Trump harshly criticized the Obama administration's vote to abstain on the resolution, which passed 14-0, and he promised a new relationship with Israel and the United Nations under his leadership. Moreover, his choice for the next U.S. ambassador to Israel is an ardent supporter of the settler movement, suggesting Netanyahu will face minimal pressure from Washington on Israel's policies in the West Bank. More than likely, that will compel Europeans to take such actions as recognizing Palestine as a state or allowing accession into international bodies.



In 2014, relations between Israel and Palestine hit a long-time low, prompting worldwide reactions. Here, a pro-Gaza demonstration takes place in Dublin. (Eoin O'Mahony/Wikipedia)

Revolutions and Their Aftermath

The Arab uprisings in 2011 led to tremendous upheaval across the region, which no one in Europe or Washington—or the region itself—predicted. In the span of a few months, long-time dictators Zennedine ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak (himself a symbol of regional stasis) were ousted from power; Muammar Qaddafi was in a fight for survival against Libyan rebels, supported by a NATO-backed air campaign; long-time Yemeni President Saleh faced internal opposition and the rebellion of Houthis in the north; and the Syrian regime led by Bashar Assad was losing territorial control in the north and south of the country. From a policy perspective, the Obama administration did not want to put the United States at the center of what it viewed as the regional consequences of long-standing corrupt regimes that had bulging youth populations with little prospects for employment or “dignity”—a calling card of the protests that began to define the popular convulsions.

To summarize the key developments across the region:²

TUNISIA

Of all the Arab Spring countries, Tunisia has experienced the most democratic progress, holding a series of elections, experiencing a peaceful transition of power, and approving a new constitution in 2015—a landmark for the region. Still, the country faces several long-term challenges, primarily in the economic sphere and in defending against terrorism. Little progress has been made since the revolution to improve the economy and make more jobs available for youth. At the same time, Tunisia has become the leading source for exporting ISIL fighters. When those fighters return, the country will face an even greater terrorism challenge than it has endured in 2015–2016, exacerbated by instability next door in Libya.

Currently, the United States, the EU, and several EU member states all have assistance programs to support Tunisia’s democratic transitions through a variety of

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The self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia ushered in the beginning of the Arab Spring. In this photo, a French protest in support of Mr. Bouazizi, the “Hero of Tunisia,” takes place in Paris. (Antoine Walter/Wikipedia)

means, ranging from loan guarantees to train and equip programs on anti-terrorism and border security issues. The United States sees it in its interest to support Tunisia given its fragile democracy and its proximity to Libya, but given the many other U.S. priorities in the region, Tunisia will never be at the top of the list. In contrast, Europe has more direct interest in Tunisia’s stability given its proximity, cultural and economic connections, and potential security risks. Therefore, Tunisia represents an opportunity for the United States to engage Europe and encourage our partners to increase their support to the fragile democracy, with the caveat that assistance must be carefully coordinated by the EU and its member states or it risks overwhelming Tunisia’s ability to properly absorb aid.

LIBYA

The outbreak of protests in Libya in February 2011 and the brutal response from the Qaddafi regime threatened a humanitarian crisis in the city of Benghazi. In response, NATO signed on to a civilian protection mission in Libya authorized by UNSCR 1973. Even after blunting the regime’s initial assault of Benghazi, Qaddafi’s forces still posed a significant threat to the population. The United States and its allies took Qaddafi at his word when he continued to threaten civilians. Moreover, he rebuffed numerous attempts at negotiation with a range of envoys. Without the NATO intervention, a bloody civil war would likely have broken out, empowering jihadists on one side and a vengeful Qaddafi on the other—a situation much like Syria today.

Although the international community has received significant criticism for not creating a post-conflict security force to stabilize Libya, the reality was that the Libyans did not want a foreign ground presence and no one in the international community was looking to lead such a force, particularly if local leaders opposed it.³ President Obama has said he expected more from the Europeans, particularly the British and French, who were the primary backers for the intervention.⁴ (Germany pointedly abstained from the vote on UNSCR 1973 and did not contribute to the NATO operation.) What is clear is that a “light footprint” operation, such as the one pursued by NATO, has a limited chance of success without a local partner committed to post-conflict cooperation with the international community.

The current fragile Libyan unity government (GNA) is backed by the international community but continues to struggle to broaden support across the country. The previous government, the House of Representatives, still has not endorsed the GNA or its Presidency Council. And the two dominant military coalitions—the Libyan National Army, headed by the Eastern General Khalifa Hefatar, and the militia coalition from Misrata—threaten to renew the civil war that plagued the country in 2014-2015.

Libya is another area where Europeans, especially the U.K., France, Italy, and Germany, could contribute more resources to help the unity government build stability and legitimacy. The United States can and should help in that regard, but will likely continue its counterterrorism efforts against Sirte as part of its larger counter-ISIL campaign, which principally emphasizes targeted strikes and U.S. airpower. From August-December of 2016, the United States conducted over 500 strikes in and around Sirte in coordination with the GNA and the militias fighting IS. The tide of refugees who have traveled to Europe from Libya, and the associated threat of terrorism, should continue to make efforts to stabilize Libya a priority for Europe.

EGYPT

Egypt remains a dilemma for U.S. policy, where the conflict between promoting values and preserving interests has been continuously challenged since the Tahrir Square protests in January 2011. Egypt has served as a longstanding ally that has received billions of dollars in military aid since the Camp David peace treaty. But the forces unleashed at Tahrir buffeted U.S.-Egypt relations and put the United States in the uncomfortable position



Fourteen nations partnered to enforce United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973, which authorized all necessary measures to protect civilians under attack by Muammar Qaddafi's forces. Here, the guided missile destroyer USS Barry (DDG-52) launches cruise missiles on March 29, 2011, in support of Operation Odyssey Dawn. (Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Jonathan Sunderman, U.S. Navy/DoD Flickr)

of siding with the demands of the protesters for a democratic transition away from Mubarak. When the Muslim Brotherhood—a party long suppressed in Egypt—won the first series of elections, the United States acknowledged the victory, however averse to U.S. policy an empowered Muslim Brotherhood would become. Later, when General Sisi overthrew the Muslim Brotherhood-elected president Mohammed Morsi, perpetrating a massacre of Islamist protesters in the process, the United States was forced to try to build a relationship with Sisi while labeling his actions as a coup and cutting military assistance as a result of U.S. law against supporting coups.

It is important to reiterate that a guiding principle for the Obama administration was to avoid making the United States the focus of the region. But by entering the zero-sum world of Egyptian politics, the United States became the target of each side's condemnations. The generals, the so-called “deep state,” and Egypt's supporters in the Gulf believe we abandoned our long-standing friend Mubarak, a sin from which the Obama administration could never recover. Islamists and civil society activists feel we similarly reneged on our support for the revolution in favor of the generals. At the end of the Obama administration, the United States was left with a policy of trying to influence Sisi's government on the margins by assisting Egypt's counter-terrorism and economic problems where possible while criticizing (too gently, according to some critics) the regime's crack-downs on civil society and the media, including against American citizens.⁵ In another departure, Trump has signaled his admiration for Sisi and likely will forge a closer relationship with him based on his anti-Islamist strongman persona. Dissidents and Egyptian civil society will have much less of a sympathetic ear than they had under the last two U.S. administrations. Egypt is one area where Europe has far less influence than the United States or Egypt's backers in the Gulf, so it cannot be expected to play a major role in these debates.

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On February 11, 2011, over 2 million Egyptians gathered in Tahrir Square to protest and force the resignation of President Hosni Mubarak during the Arab Spring. (Jonathan Rashad/Wikipedia)

Iraq, Syria, and the Rise of ISIL

The Obama administration entered office committed to ending the combat mission in Iraq while maintaining U.S. security assistance. Despite what its critics subsequently argued, the pace of the withdrawal was determined by the Status of Forces Agreement negotiated by the Bush administration. Some voices continue to argue that a modest American force should have remained in Iraq and could have prevented the political and security vacuum that eventually led to the 2014 ISIL offensive. However, this argument ignores the reality that the United States never deploys forces without a strict guarantee of privileges and immunities from the host government, which Iraqi officials proved unwilling to provide. It also assumes that a token U.S. force would have mitigated Prime Minister Maliki's efforts to marginalize Sunni leaders and appoint loyalist commanders to the army, thereby counteracting U.S. training. ISIL took advantage of these weaknesses as well as the Sunni population's growing disaffection to Maliki's rule. It blitzed across a vast range of Iraqi territory in mid-2014, bringing the United States back to the fight in Iraq in ways the administration never imagined. In light of the number of foreign fighters traveling from Europe to Syria and Iraq, countering ISIL's rise became a priority for Europe, too.

The rise of ISIL is well documented, from its emergence out of al Qaeda in Iraq to its declaration of a caliphate in Syria to its rampage across Iraq, which corresponded to the collapse of the Iraqi army.⁶ Before the United States committed military forces, it helped negotiate Maliki's departure, recognizing that there would be no hope of recruiting Sunni partners in a counterattack against ISIL with him remaining as prime minister. The



President Obama and U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry talk with reporters at a meeting with the Anti-ISIL Coalition on the sidelines of the U.N. General Assembly in New York City on September 23, 2014. (U.S. State Department/Flickr)

United States then built a counter-ISIL coalition (that has grown to 67 members) with key members from Europe and the region committed to a variety of steps to degrade and ultimately destroy the Islamic State.

The strategy includes five lines of effort: military action in support of partners on the ground (including hundreds of airstrikes, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) missions, and limited direct ground training support provided by special operation forces [SOF]); impeding the flow of foreign fighters; cutting off the source of ISIL funding, including by targeting oil depots and halting illegal oil sales; providing humanitarian assistance and relief to affected populations; and “exposing IS’s true nature” by highlighting its brutal rule and developing counter-radicalization programs that target potential recruits.⁷ As of January 2017, ISIL had been rolled back from much of Iraq, and the battle to retake Mosul, Iraq’s third-largest city, was well underway, led by retrained and equipped Iraqi forces with the support of U.S. advisors and coalition air strikes. The United States has carried out the bulk of the coalition strikes against ISIL in Syria and Iraq (as of late October 2016, around 78 percent of the nearly 16,000 airstrikes).⁸

Syria certainly was the most vexing challenge for the Obama administration, which the former president said “haunts [him] constantly.”⁹ Despite the hundreds of thousands of deaths and the millions of displaced people as a result of the Syrian uprising and subsequent civil war, as president, Obama remained adamant that no realistic outside solution to the tragedy was viable without an extensive commitment of U.S. forces, which he—and, he believed, the American public—would not support.

According to the administration’s arguments, military solutions would require significant resources due to Syria’s air defense system and could provoke Russian retaliation, especially once Russia deployed its own troops to defend Assad in 2015. Obama questioned the utility and effectiveness of “safe zones,” “no-fly zones,” or “humanitarian corridors” for similar reasons, especially because of the potential for escalation, the need for extensive ground troop commitments, and the limited prospects for success. Most controversially, he asked the intelligence community to identify examples in history where arming rebels helped defeat regimes. When the CIA concluded the strategy rarely worked, Obama approved only a minimal covert program along with a DoD-funded effort to arm and train so-called moderate rebels, which famously failed in its first stages.¹⁰ Notably, former Secretaries Hillary Clinton and Leon Panetta and CIA Director David Petraeus all have said they favored a more robust train and equip effort. Much like in Libya, it is impossible to prove whether such an alternative would have improved the situation on the ground.

Obama also fiercely defended the decision to cooperate with Russia to collect and destroy Syria’s vast chemical weapons stockpile instead of bombing Syria after it crossed the famous “red line” he warned against if the Assad regime used chemical weapons. Although the collection and destruction of the chemical weapons process succeeded in ridding much of the large stockpile, many in the region (and in the United States) believe that it irrevocably damaged the United States’ credibility, particularly when the regime continued to use chlorine gas in Aleppo. In the meantime, repeated efforts to reach a ceasefire brokered with the Russians failed in the run-up to the regime’s capture of Aleppo. The latest iteration of a ceasefire has been negotiated between Russia and Turkey, and the United States is not a party.

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On January 27, 2012, Syrian soldiers who defected to join the Free Syrian Army hold up their rifles as they secure a street in Saqba, a suburb of Damascus, Syria. (Freedom House/Flickr)

What could have been done differently on Syria since 2011 is a question that will continue to be debated for years. Should Obama have called for Assad to step down as early as he did? Should he have taken a more aggressive stance toward arming the opposition or followed through with military action after drawing the red line? Or should he have created safe zones similar to the post-Gulf War missions in Iraq? Many former Obama officials argue in favor of these alternatives and excoriate the inaction that would have benefited the so-called moderate opposition.¹¹ The reality is that the Trump administration will be confronted immediately with the Syrian conundrum and must adopt a comprehensive strategy that takes into account the war against ISIL; Russia's interests in protecting Assad; Turkey's desire to protect its southern border without strengthening the Syrian or Iraqi Kurds; Jordan's and Lebanon's struggles to cope with refugees; and Europe's own struggles to manage the refugee crisis.

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European Efforts in the Middle East

Despite its interest in the Middle East, internal challenges—the euro crisis, the migration crisis, Brexit, and a resurgent Russia—have made Europe more introverted and arguably less able to address problems elsewhere in the world, even in its own neighborhood. Furthermore, Moscow's annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and the subsequent deterioration in Russian-Western relations have helped redirect strategic focus away from the Middle East. As a result, Europe's engagement in the Middle East has been unable to match its stated strategic ambitions in the region, even at a time when the Middle East has a greater impact on Europe's own stability than it has in over a generation.¹²

Supporting a Stable Neighborhood

Europe has pursued multiple political initiatives over the past several years, most of which have not born fruit. Notably, the Union for the Mediterranean, created in July 2008 to replace the pre-existing Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, promoted regional economic integration between Europe and 15 Mediterranean countries. Five southern EU member states also have encouraged greater regional integration of the countries in the Maghreb through the 5+5 Dialogue. Moreover, the EU's own European Neighborhood policy, revised shortly after the Arab uprisings, sought to forge stronger economic, political, and security ties with countries in the Middle East and North Africa with the goal of creating a “ring of well-governed countries.”¹³ In reality, however, these and other initiatives met with limited success,¹⁴ and today the southern Mediterranean area is less stable than it was in the 1990s and 2000s.

After the Arab uprisings, Europe called for ambitious steps to engage the newly transitioning governments—in effect, a European Marshall Plan. Initial EU assistance for the region—including €1.4 billion in financial assistance and increased loans from European Investment Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development—was never going to meet the EU's ambitious rhetoric. Furthermore, the EU has not adequately delivered on the promises of greater market access and increased mobility for regional states¹⁵—although Brussels has launched negotiations on comprehensive free trade agreements with countries such as Tunisia and Morocco.

In Syria, the EU's role has been largely humanitarian. Total EU and bilateral member states assistance to Syria amounts to over \$9.2 billion. On top of this, over \$3.4 billion was pledged at the London donors conference in



The instability in the Middle East has caused a historic migration crisis for Europe. Here, a member of the Greek Red Cross helps a Middle Eastern refugee who just arrived by inflatable boat to Lesbos, Greece. (Wikipedia)

2016.¹⁶ However, the effectiveness of EU assistance in Syria has suffered from coordination problems, especially since the member states have different views of Syria and strategies toward it.¹⁷ What is needed going forward is a European vision for its southern neighborhood. By leveraging political assistance, investment and trade, and people-to-people ties, including tapping into Arab communities in Europe, the EU can contribute to regional stability.

The Syrian civil war and ongoing instability in the Middle East also have unleashed a migration crisis in Europe. EU member states received over 1 million asylum applications in 2015 and hundreds of thousands more in 2016. The crisis is a historically unprecedented humanitarian disaster, leaving thousands of migrants dead on sea routes, straining the resources of already struggling EU member states, such as Greece, and producing significant security challenges. Of significance for the EU is the political backlash that has accompanied the migration crisis, leading to the rise and growth of far-right parties and contributing to the weakening of the EU's popularity and credibility.

Diplomatic Engagement

The diplomatic priorities of the United States and the EU in the Middle East overlap to an extent, but not always. With a longstanding commitment to Israeli-Palestinian negotiations and as a leading donor to the Palestinian Authority,¹⁸ the EU views the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a source of deeper regional turmoil and domestic political pressure given growing Arab populations in Europe. As long as the United States led active Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, much of the EU remained satisfied with deferring the issue to American leadership. However, that dynamic will almost certainly change under the Trump administration. For example, in 2015, EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini called for the EU to play a more active role in the Middle East peace process, utilizing the EU's economic leverage to put more pressure on Israel to make concessions over the settlements issue.¹⁹ More recently, France initiated an international conference on Middle East peace held in Paris in June 2016 and followed up in January 2017 that the Israelis boycotted. Future European initiative will be contingent on the Trump administration's approach to Israeli-Palestinian issue and to what degree the U.S. allows Prime Minister Netanyahu a free hand to solidify Israeli control of East Jerusalem and the West Bank.



EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs Federica Mogherini and Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif speak to reporters following negotiations between the P5+1 members and Iran on the future of Iran's nuclear program. (U.S. State Department/Flickr)

As previously noted, the most successful example of a distinct EU diplomatic role in support of broader U.S. efforts in the region is the Iran nuclear negotiations. During these negotiations, the U.K., France, and Germany, together with EU High Representative Catherine Ashton, played crucial roles as part of the P5+1 format. In Syria, however, Europe has largely failed to play a significant diplomatic role due in part to weak EU-level foreign policy institutions and strong differences in opinion among member states about what Europe's role in Syria should be.²⁰ From the beginning, European leaders have been divided on the political and military tools Europe could and should apply to bring about peace in Syria.

A Reluctant Military Role

After sizable European contributions in Afghanistan and Iraq, there was little appetite remaining in most European capitals for further military entanglements in the Middle East by the time of the Arab uprisings. Several European nations nevertheless have made important contributions to regional security efforts—including the 2011 Libya operation and the ongoing counter-ISIL campaign in Syria-Iraq.

In Libya, President Obama was skeptical that a no-fly zone could accomplish what French President Sarkozy and U.K. Prime Minister Cameron proposed—protecting the people of Libya—since Qaddafi's main threats came from his ground forces. Obama therefore pushed for a broader UNSCR, which authorized a no-fly zone and an arms embargo and called upon the international community to take “all necessary measures” to protect civilians. The United States conducted the majority of the initial

strikes in a two-week operation, Odyssey Dawn, that drove back Qaddafi's forces from Benghazi and disabled his air force and air defenses to enable a transition to NATO-led operation Unified Protector. Obama's pre-condition for participating in the Libya intervention was that after the initial phase of operations, the United States would turn over the strike mission to NATO and regional partners while continuing to contribute unique capabilities, including ISR assets, aerial refueling, and air control resources.

Non-American aircraft carried out 75 percent of the sorties and non-American warships conducted all the weapons embargo missions during the campaign.²¹ Yet some notable European NATO allies, such as Germany and Poland, abstained from participating. The duration of the operation also stressed NATO's contributing members; they ran out of munitions, some participating strike countries pulled out of the operation as a result of a change in governments, and NATO depended heavily on the United States for specialized assets, such as ISR and air-to-air refueling. Further, by the time Unified Protector limped toward its conclusion, there was little political will among NATO members for the alliance to play a significant role in the post-conflict stabilization process, especially if the Libyans did not request it. Europe much preferred turning the Libya problem over to the U.N.²²

In terms of current and potential military contributions to Libya's stabilization, the Europeans did not contribute aircraft to the anti-ISIL campaign in Sirte. Limited U.K. and Italian SOF reportedly were working with militias on the ground during the campaign and the French DGSE forces had been operating in southern Libya and in Benghazi, reportedly supporting General Heftar, until three soldiers died in helicopter crash in July.²³ Italy is now engaged in training future Libyan security forces.

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Several European partners have actively contributed to the counter-ISIL campaign in Syria and Iraq. To date,

five European nations have carried out airstrikes against IS targets in Iraq and Syria: the U.K., France, Belgium, Denmark, and the Netherlands. Several more have also helped train and advise Iraqi security forces. France, which has experienced IS-inspired attacks, has been the most active European contributor to the U.S.-led military campaign.²⁴ While NATO itself is not directly in the counter-ISIL coalition, at the June 2016 NATO summit in Warsaw the alliance decided to launch a training and support mission in Iraq and to deploy AWACS surveillance aircraft to provide direct support to counter-ISIL coalition forces. Public support for contributions to the counter-ISIL campaign remains strong in Europe, with an average 69 percent of Europeans expressing support.²⁵

Beyond Libya and the counter-ISIL campaign, there are more limited European security contributions to the region. In response to the refugee crisis, on October 7, 2015, the EU launched the naval mission EUNAVFOR Med Sophia to counter human trafficking of migrants over the Mediterranean. NATO also has operated a naval mission on the Mediterranean called Operation Active Endeavour since September 2011, triggering criticism from EU leaders about unnecessary duplication of efforts.²⁶ At the Warsaw NATO summit, Active Endeavour was transferred into the broader maritime security Operation Sea Guardian, which will allow the alliance to focus on security priorities other than terrorism, including upholding freedom of navigation, conducting maritime interdictions, contributing to maritime security capacity building, and supporting maritime situation awareness. Moreover, the EU has provided police training and assistance in the Palestinian Authority and contributes to UNIFIL in Lebanon.

Both the EU and individual member states provide security and counterterrorism assistance to regional states. France, for example, has maintained a military base in the United Arab Emirates since 1999 that includes naval, air, and land components, while Italy maintains a task force in the United Arab Emirates and a base in Djibouti. France also has carried out its own counterterrorism and conflict stabilization campaigns in the Maghreb and Sahel for several years.²⁷ Furthermore, the U.K. maintains a Royal Air Force base in Qatar and recently opened a Royal Navy base in Bahrain—the first permanent British base in the region in 40 years.

Finally, several European nations maintain significant defense industrial relations with countries in the Gulf. France has recently completed several high-profile deals, such as selling the Rafale fighter jet to Qatar. In the wake of the Yemen war, the export of defense equipment to Saudi Arabia has come under more scrutiny. The U.K. parliament is, for example, reviewing the U.K.'s arms sales in the region.

The Way Forward: Recommendations for Transatlantic Policy in the Middle East

Structural factors will always challenge transatlantic security cooperation, especially the vast capabilities gap between the United States and Europe and the fact that the European Union requires consensus among member states to establish the bloc's external relations. The former impeded operations in Libya. The latter has prevented the EU from reaching consensus on how to contend with Syria given divergent interests on the continent and differing opinions on how to handle the crisis. Nevertheless, there are important arenas where the United States and its European partners must collaborate to impact stability in the Middle East.

Syria

Of all the crises in the Middle East outlined here, Syria is most likely to take center stage in early 2017. Once the Trump administration develops its own policy preferences toward Syria, it will have an opportunity to actively solicit the Europeans to contribute to what could be a more active role than what the Obama administration was prepared to pursue. President Trump made a point of soliciting support for establishing safe zones in Syria during his initial calls with the leaders of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.²⁸ Given President Trump's attitude toward Russia and Putin, Syrian policy under the new administration may focus less on Assad and more on ISIL, with Putin getting his way on support for the regime. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson should also take the pulse of key European allies on Syria during his first transatlantic trips, but most likely the major policy initiatives will be set in Washington.

A key component of these discussions must include the humanitarian catastrophe that the Syria crisis has produced: estimates of over 400,000 deaths, some 6.6

Once the Trump administration develops its own policy preferences toward Syria, it will have an opportunity to actively solicit the Europeans to contribute to what could be a more active role than what the Obama administration was prepared to pursue.

million civilians currently internally displaced within Syria, and more than 4.7 million fleeing to neighboring countries Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan. Around 10 percent of these refugees have sought shelter in Europe, contributing to the migration crisis of 2015 when 1 million migrants from the Middle East, Africa, and Asia arrived on the continent. The large influx of migrants has given rise to new political, economic, and social fissures within Europe and fueled anti-immigrant sentiment across the continent, of which Brexit was only one example. The agreement between the EU and Turkey finalized on March 18, 2016, managed to sharply reduce the number of migrants arriving on the Greek islands in the Aegean Sea. But the July 15 Turkish coup attempt and President Erdogan's reaction has called into question the sustainability of the deal.

There are no good options to mitigate the humanitarian crisis, with a political solution to the crisis further away than ever. In the best of circumstances, safe zones and humanitarian corridors will help the internally displaced refugees, while the increasing pressure of the anti-ISIL coalition may reduce ISIL-held territory and create an additional safe zone in the process. The controversial executive order issued during the first week of the administration that would (if permitted by the courts) suspend the minimal refugee program and bar all visa holders from Syria, Iraq and five other Muslim countries has sent a clear signal to Europeans that President Trump vehemently disagrees with the European approach to refugees, championed by Chancellor Angela Merkel. In that regard, Europe can expect little help from the U.S. in coping with the refugee and migration crisis.

Countering Extremism and ISIL

Given the geographical proximity of its territory in Syria and Iraq as well as the large number of foreign fighters, ISIL constitutes a particularly serious threat to Europe. While the international counter-ISIL campaign has managed to weaken the organization, a potentially greater risk will be how ISIL evolves after it loses substantial territory. Already, ISIL-inspired lone wolf attacks, such as the truck attacks in July in Nice and in December in Berlin, are difficult to detect and prevent. More investment should be made in counter-radicalization efforts, bringing together lessons learned from successful programs from the United States, Europe, and within the region in places like Morocco, Tunisia, and the United Arab Emirates. (Since both the Nice and Berlin attackers were Tunisian, a particular emphasis should be made on intelligence



Following a spate of terrorist attacks throughout Europe, the United States and EU are working on ways to increase intelligence sharing. In this photo, John Kerry and Luxembourgian Foreign Minister Jean Asselborn lay flowers in memory of those killed in the terrorist attack in Nice, France. (U.S. State Department/Flickr)

cooperation with Tunisia.) The Europeans must take a hard look at towns and neighborhoods, such as the Molenbeek suburb of Brussels, that are known hotbeds for jihadism and networks for IS recruitment. Greater investment needs to be made in these neighborhoods in term of economic opportunity, social integration, intelligence cooperation, and counter-radicalization programming. This is an area in which the EU and the United States should increase their cooperation through increased intelligence sharing and more in-depth discussion of counterterrorism policy at U.S-EU meetings.

Engaging Turkey

An important pillar of any transatlantic policy aimed at promoting a stable regional security order must include encouraging Turkey to remain a reliable democratic partner. President Erdogan's recent heavy-handed response against dissidents, public servants, academics, and the media after the failed coup of July 2016 has exacerbated tensions between Turkey, the United States, and Europe, particularly the presence of alleged coup-organizer Fetullah Gulen in Pennsylvania. Turkey's contributions to NATO, including to the West's anti-ISIL campaign, are threatened by its internal instability, Erdogan's growing political authoritarianism, and the worrying prospect of Erdogan's closer relations with Russia. Turkey's unilateral steps against the Kurdish territories in Iraq and Syria also pose a challenge to broader anti-ISIL efforts.

Due to these issues, there will be tensions with Turkey for the foreseeable future. Traditional carrots such as visa-free travel and economic integration are unlikely to make an impact. Instead, the United States and EU might undertake a trilateral dialogue with Turkey on how each can support mutual objectives, such as humanitarian assistance toward refugees and intelligence sharing on the movement of ISIL members and foreign fighters. It is possible that the ISIL-claimed Istanbul nightclub attack could precipitate greater cooperation. The Trump administration has provided few clues on how it might handle Turkey. On the one hand, Trump and his advisors are less concerned about the anti-democratic tactics deployed by Erdogan than their predecessors. On the other hand, Erdogan is the most successful Sunni Islamist leader in the region—an ideology Trump and his team openly loathe. In this regard, European leaders may have more influence on policy toward Turkey than they may have on other issues.

Opportunities in North Africa

By virtue of its proximity and social, historical, and cultural ties, Europe should be playing a much greater role than the United States in North Africa. That proved not to be the case in the five years since the Arab Uprisings. If transatlantic security cooperation is going to be true to its name, that balance must shift. Tunisia in particular can use much greater economic support to stabilize its fragile government, particularly since so many of the aspirations that sparked their revolution have gone unmet. This economic stagnation threatens Tunisia's stability by fueling potential political unrest and attracting extremist recruits. Europe must play the leading role on providing such assistance, while the United States can focus on more specialized security assistance, such as counterterrorism assistance and border security.

Similarly, Libya will remain a challenge for the foreseeable future. As noted above, the United States has demonstrated a willingness and capacity to undertake targeted counterterrorism missions, not just with the campaign in Sirte, Operation Odyssey Lightning, but also with select targeted strikes and capture operations. Although many Libyans remain skeptical of any outside interference in their internal affairs (including regional players), the U.N., backed by the United States and key Europeans, must continue to play an active role in trying to bring some stability to Libya's political scene. Ideally, any future stabilization assistance and security training mission in Libya should be led by the Europeans, not the United States, particularly since there are countries like Italy that are willing to do so.

Conclusion

Ultimately, domestic politics will impose constraints on how both sides of the Atlantic engage in the Middle East. President Trump enjoys GOP control of both Houses of Congress, but already every domestic and foreign policy initiative is hotly contested, e.g. the judicial stay to his executive order on immigration. That fact only adds importance to transatlantic security cooperation and coordination regarding the Middle East, especially because the more the United States can focus on strategic priorities and not on addressing every issue, the more successful it will be.

For its part, Europe faces an even greater challenge with domestic politics, stemming from anti-immigrant right-wing parties, Brexit, and diminishing capabilities. This means engagements in the region must be more selective and coordinated within the EU and with the United States—which will impose a particular challenge to politicians selling skeptical constituents on the need for greater investment abroad, even if it is in Europe's own neighborhood. Victims of terrorist attacks, such as France, will have to play increasingly leading roles in making the case for greater investment in the Middle East.

Coordinating foreign policy even among allies is not easy in any circumstance. Given the array of simultaneous crises in the Middle East, transatlantic cooperation toward the region will undoubtedly be a challenge for the administration. On a bureaucratic level, the next administration should invest early in finding the most effective means of managing such coordination (e.g., regular video teleconferences between national security advisors or lower level officials as practiced by the Obama administration) and ask the major European allies to identify their leads as well. The two sides should also take part in a joint risk assessment to prevent more surprises, and to be better prepared when shocks do occur. Given the stakes and the complexity of the issues facing both sides of the Atlantic, the Trump administration should quickly leverage the transatlantic relationship to tackle common challenges in the Middle East.

Endnotes

1. This report is based on a workshop held at CNAS on April 15, 2016, with the support of the Saab Group. This paper focuses on transatlantic responses to security threats in the Middle East, especially ISIL, state fragility, and the collapsing regional security order. This is not a comprehensive overview of the Western policies in the region during the Obama administration.
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