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A NEW WEST IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Toward a Humbler, More Effective Model of Transatlantic Cooperation

In the Middle East and North Africa, the “West” is generally considered to refer to the United States and Europe. Starting with Napoleon Bonaparte’s 1798 expedition to Egypt and lasting all the way through the Cold War, the history of intervention in the region bears out this sense. But whereas the United States and Europe are grouped together and seen as systematic meddlers, a key paradox exists in the absence, in the classic sense, of any tradition of transatlantic cooperation in the Middle East. Indeed, U.S. and European policies have often diverged since the end of the Cold War, and cooperation has been the exception rather than the rule.



Given U.S. military superiority in the modern era, Washington has largely dominated discussions about the region, leading to unevenness in ad hoc partnerships. In recent decades, various U.S. administrations have sought political and financial backing rather than strategic dialogue with Europe. Divided and risk-averse for their part, many European nations have largely accepted U.S. leadership in this arena, offering contributions mostly to the extent they could strengthen their own bilateral ties with Washington.

The lack of an explicitly outlined Western framework for engaging in the Middle East and North Africa is not inherently problematic. The region has labored for many generations under the burden of European colonization and U.S. hegemony, and avoiding a so-called Western policy could mitigate the perception of a “clash of civilizations” or a stark East-West divide. But current dynamics call for greater clarity and cooperation, along with deeper reassessment. These dynamics center on a U.S. desire to reduce its regional footprint and on European concerns over diminished relevance in a region central to its stability. Analyzing drivers of past and present transatlantic cooperation in the region can therefore offer valuable insights.

As for the U.S. relationship with European countries, caricatures are common, with the analyst Robert Kagan memorably musing that Americans come from Mars and Europeans from Venus.¹ In a paraphrase of language attributed to Henry Kissinger, Europe once wished to speak with one voice but had no phone number. The very recent history of U.S. cooperation with European countries in the Middle East and North Africa, however, reveals a more complex reality. In many cases, Venus (Europe) has tried to convince a tired and undecided Mars (America) to remain committed. One might say that while Europe now has a phone number, today’s diplomatic communication occurs in more intense, fragmented form via something like WhatsApp groups.

The current U.S. bent for regional minimalism, paired with the quest for a more geopolitically involved Europe, offers an opportunity to reset the transatlantic discussion. No matter who wins the U.S. presidential vote on November 3, 2020, Europeans have a window of opportunity to make proposals to Washington that are more robust in both method and substance on certain specific priorities. These include the Iranian nuclear program and the regime’s regional adventurism; de-escalation of conflicts such as in Libya; and post-Covid 19 economic recovery and governance.

A MISSING TRANSATLANTIC FRAMEWORK DURING THE “UNIPOLAR MOMENT,” 1990–2011

After the Cold War, the United States relied on its military-superpower and regional partnerships with Israel, Turkey, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. Washington did not believe it needed a strong alliance with Europe in the Middle East and North Africa. Most European countries held the same view, since bilateral relations with Washington were more vital to many than the prevailing Middle East issues. Europeans sustained deep bilateral relations with countries in the region, but it was understood by all that relations with Washington were a higher priority.

Transatlantic cooperation was also limited by differing geographic and social links, creating gaps between European and U.S. interests. For instance, North Africa, thanks to colonial and economic ties, was a priority for Spain (specifically, Morocco and Algeria) and Italy (Libya) but not for the United States. Likewise, Turkey emerged as a vital NATO member for America, but persisted as a concrete military threat for Greece and Cyprus. Specifically, Turkey blocked efforts to develop NATO–European Union cooperation in the early 2000s.

U.S. MILITARY DELINEATION OF THE BROADER MIDDLE EAST; EU VISION OF ITS “NEIGHBORHOOD”



U.S. Central Command Area of Responsibility

EU States, Candidates, Potential Candidates, and ENP Members



The complex U.S. interagency process and limited EU foreign policy competencies have also hampered quick, meaningful joint action in response to crises. Moreover, in this dynamic, the lack of confidentiality of EU debates has exposed internal divisions and given Washington leverage to advance its preferred narratives and actions. The U.S.-European relationship has seen several episodes of serious tension, such as when Germany and France opposed the Iraq war in 2003, but Washington still managed to rally other European countries to support the intervention politically. The general result is that cooperation in the region has no set framework but has relied instead on the following four forms of engagement:

1. The key role of bilateral tracks during UN Security Council negotiations, such as when the United States and France coordinated efforts to expel Syrian troops from Lebanon following the 2005 assassination of former prime minister Rafiq Hariri.
2. The American use of bilateral tracks to assemble allies through ad hoc military coalitions not limited to Western nations during the 1990 and 2003 wars in the Gulf.
3. The resort by U.S. and European countries to ad hoc multilateralism in the context of the Middle East peace process, through the Quartet (i.e., UN secretary-general, EU, United States, and Russia), or in nuclear negotiations with Iran. On the latter count, this dynamic, as facilitated by the EU-3 (Britain, France, Germany), produced a diplomatic success for the Obama administration.
4. The more limited use of institutional cooperation through NATO or the EU, such as with training missions in Iraq.

A central issue in these instances of cooperation has been the European military contribution to regional

security. The U.S. military footprint, and Europe's limited "burden sharing," has often been described as the main reason behind American leadership in the region between 1990 and 2011. Indeed, the United States sent 500,000 troops to the Gulf in 1991,² had around 285,000 troops in Iraq and the broader region in 2003,³ and had 120,000 in the Middle East in 2009.⁴

The debate among NATO allies often focuses on commitments on specific thresholds (e.g., 2% of GDP for defense spending), but European hard security limitations in the Middle East and North Africa have more to do with a gap in relevant capabilities for foreign deployment or counterterrorism operations. To be sure, Europe is hardly just a "soft" power.⁵ European countries had around 90,000 troops deployed in more than twenty countries, including the Gulf, in 2003 and 23,490 in 2017.⁶ Britain, France, Germany, Spain, Sweden, and Italy also have strong military-commercial relations with Arab countries and are U.S. competitors in this respect. Nevertheless, European military capabilities are not always at a level sufficient to intervene in the region. For instance, the United States has increasingly used its 70,000-strong special forces personnel in Afghanistan and the Middle East since the September 11, 2001, attacks. European special forces number only 15,000, many of whom have been deployed abroad mostly thanks to U.S. enablers in places like Afghanistan or Iraq.

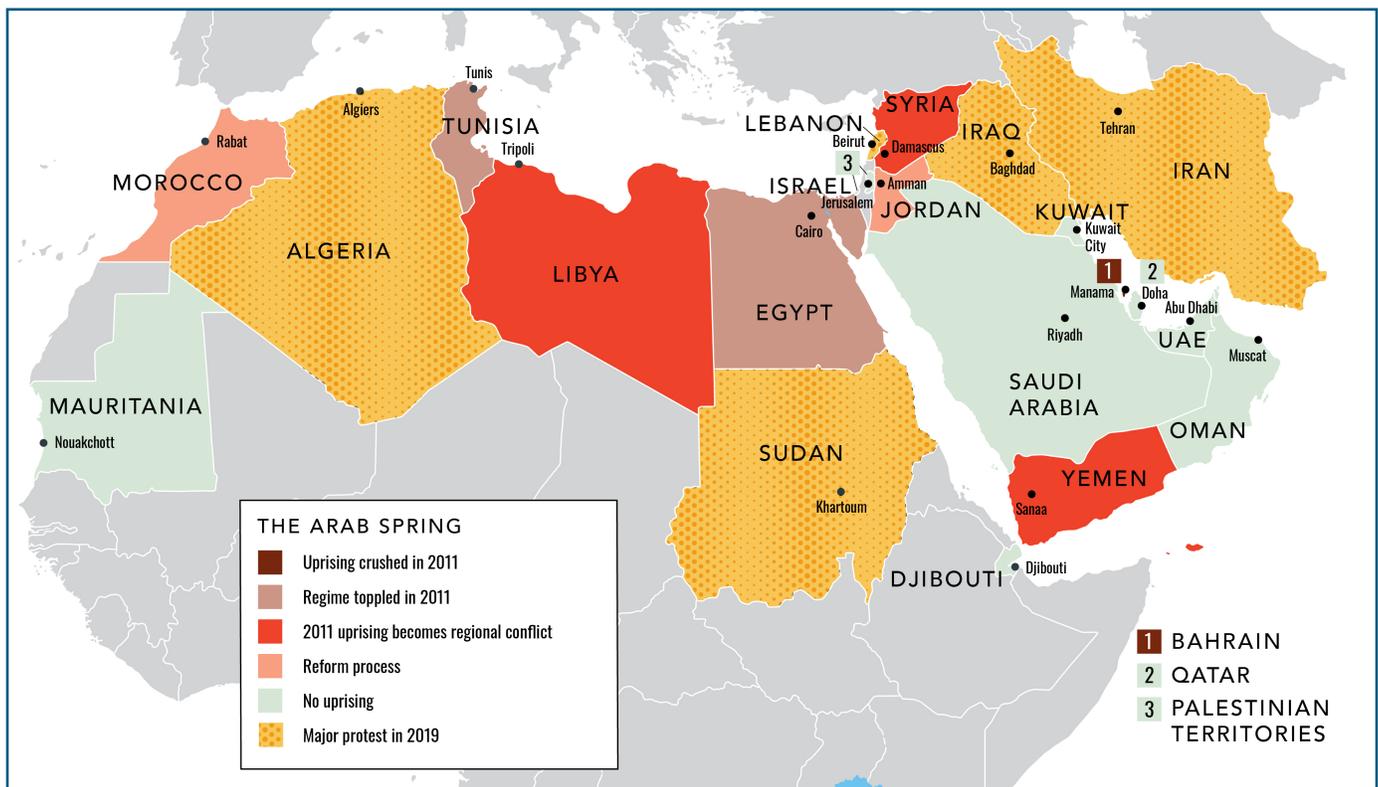
Europe's main limitations also stem from a lack of political alignment with the United States and entail a preference for UN-mandated peacekeeping missions instead of ad hoc coalitions. In that respect, demand for EU missions in the region has increased significantly since the 2000s, but even for civilian-only missions, just eight contributors provide 69 percent of all seconded mission staff, such as in Iraq or Libya.⁷

THE ARAB UPRISINGS, U.S. FATIGUE, AND THE VANISHING WEST, 2011–20

The year 2011 was pivotal for U.S. policy in the Middle East, marking the official withdrawal of American troops from Iraq, eight years after the military campaign began there. That campaign came to be regarded as the paradigm of U.S. overreach in the region. The year also marked the start of a decisive series of events triggered by the Arab uprisings that have reshaped local and regional politics until today. Interviews with some fifty experts and officials on the conflict in Libya since 2011, the fight against the Islamic State (IS) since 2014, and the negotiations to salvage the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), as the Iran deal is known, since 2017, when Donald Trump entered office as president, identified four trends in transatlantic relations regarding the Middle East and North Africa:

- 1. Different era, same issues.** Issues related to “U.S. leadership,” “burden sharing,” European division, and risk aversion continued to shape the transatlantic dialogue despite changes in the strategic environment impelled by the Arab Spring.
- 2. Strategic mismatch.** U.S. fatigue was poorly aligned with European willingness to support democratic transitions in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria while managing migration and terrorism-related risks. President Barack Obama did intervene in Libya and against the Islamic State, but the dynamics of coalitions of the willing were now reversed. After criticizing or reluctantly following Washington in 2003, Europeans found themselves urging the United States to lead and stay committed militarily in the region. President Trump called for more burden sharing with allies but disengaged from further political processes in the region. At both the military and diplomatic levels, Western countries collectively failed to

PROTESTS BY COUNTRY SINCE THE ARAB SPRING, 2011–20



create a sufficient ground presence to support the transition in Libya or push back against the Iranian and Russian intervention in Syria.

- 3. Insufficient tactical cooperation.** Even when they had strategic convergence (e.g., in counterproliferation and counterterrorism), European and American officials did not coordinate well enough to create sufficient collective leverage. After President Obama conducted secret negotiations with Iran, without European participation, he eventually concluded the JCPOA, aided by the other members of the P5+1 (Britain, China, France, Russia, and Germany). But President Trump withdrew the United States from the deal in 2018, despite several EU-3 proposals to address U.S. concerns.

Meanwhile, within the anti-IS coalition, early disagreements about the fight against Syria's President Bashar al-Assad and Turkish concerns about the People's Defense Units (YPG) have not been overcome. In Iraq, the United States and Europe did not push back early enough against the September 2017 Kurdish referendum, forfeiting post-IS momentum, and failed to forestall an increase in intra-Shia rivalry following Iraq's May 2018 elections. Western assistance since the 2011 fall of Libya's Muammar Qadhafi has been limited by security concerns as well as a lack of coordination. Despite the success in negotiating the Skhirat agreement in 2015, which sought to reunify Libyan institutions, clear tactical disagreements existed in each Western system, pitting diplomats against the security establishment on how best to combine counterterrorism operations with support for the UN process. Assuming Libyan National Army head Gen. Khalifa Haftar—who opposed the internationally backed government that emerged from Skhirat—could be put under civilian supervision, Paris and Washington both tried to include him in the political process. But Haftar's other supporters—Egypt, the UAE, and Russia—helped him avoid Western pressure.

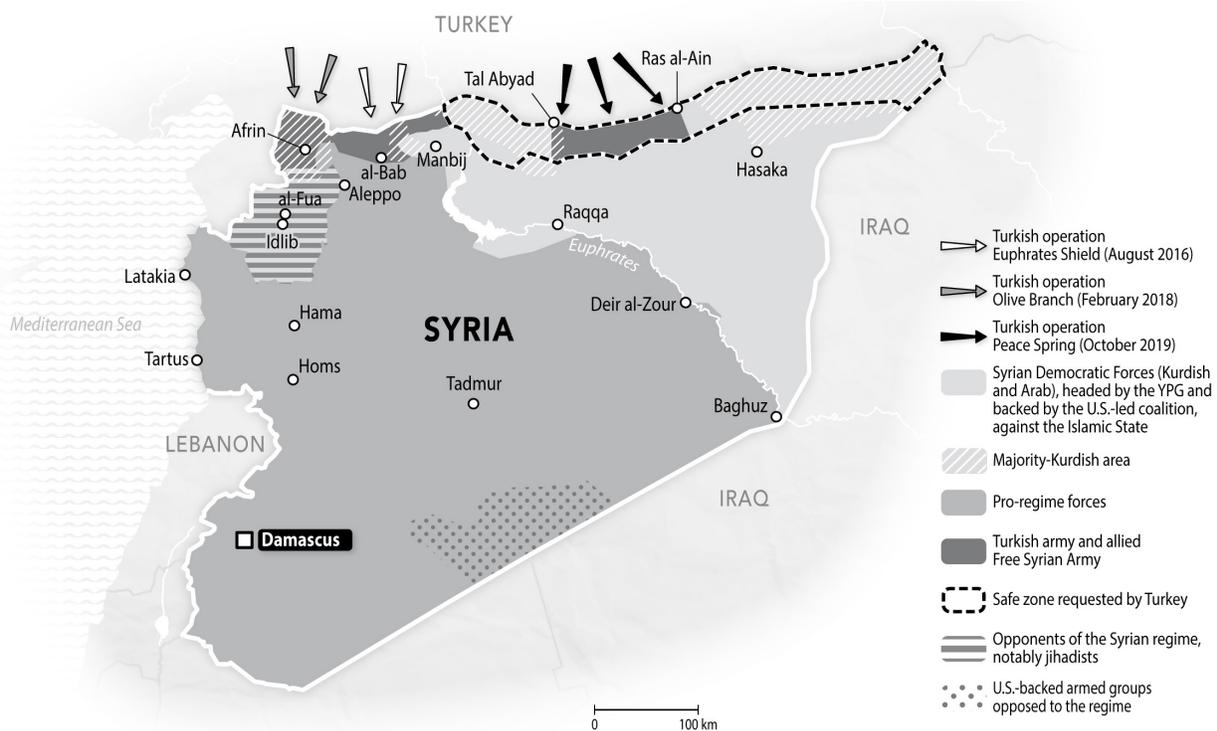
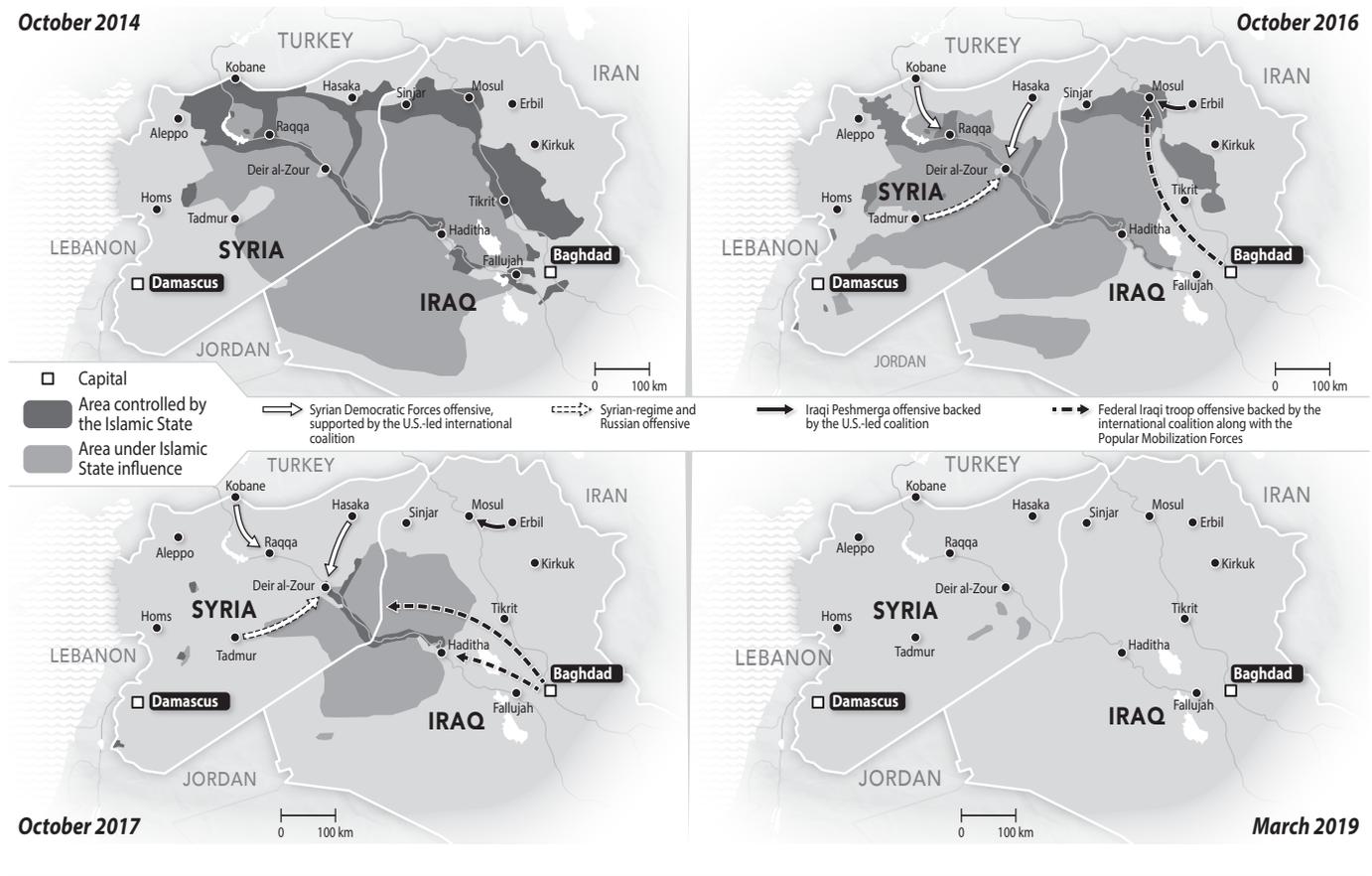
- 4. An increased but disorganized European contribution.** Under U.S. pressure, Europe did take more action through some of its member states or at the EU level: military contributions, kinetic and nonkinetic, to the fight against the Islamic State in Syria, Iraq, and Libya; maritime activities in Libya to monitor the arms embargo and disrupt human smuggling and trafficking (Operation IRINI) and European Military Awareness in the Strait of Hormuz (EMASOH) initiatives to protect trade routes;⁸ financial support to Tunisia; the provision of billions of dollars in humanitarian aid in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen; and multiple diplomatic initiatives on Iran, Syria, Libya, and Lebanon. European countries, however, failed to persuasively present these activities as means of coherent alternative burden sharing to Washington.

The outcome of transatlantic cooperation since 2011 is problematic for both European and U.S. interests. Operational cooperation between the United States and some European countries has improved in certain cases, but the political dialogue about tensions in the Middle East and North Africa has deteriorated significantly. One former European official pithily explained the trend: "Under Bush, Europeans agreed less with the U.S. but were more consulted. Under Obama, they agreed more but were less consulted. Under Trump, they disagree and are barely consulted."⁹

EFFECTS OF REGIONAL FRAGMENTATION ON WESTERN INVOLVEMENT

While Western shortcomings since 2011 have contributed to shifts in the Middle East strategic environment, endogenous changes within the region have also had a deep impact on transatlantic cooperation. Indeed, reflecting a longstanding practice, Western discussions about the region tend too often to deny local agency. These dynamics can be broken down as follows (see p. 8):

SYRIA AND IRAQ DURING THE FIGHT AGAINST THE ISLAMIC STATE



Source: Charles Thépat, *Le monde arabe en morceaux: des printemps arabes au recul américain* (Armand Colin, 2020).

- Political fragmentation and the collapse of state structures in several countries have made it more difficult for societies to address their ingrained social, economic, and environmental challenges and for external actors to find solid local institutional partners.
- Regional conflicts in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Yemen specifically have been compounded by the increasing role of paramilitary forces. Nonstate actors control a growing space and challenge state structures, even when they are supposed to protect the state, contributing to its continued crises and limiting the traditional model of Western state-to-state engagement. This is true even when Western countries themselves support local proxies.
- Regional actors, whether allied with the United States or not, run increasingly autonomous foreign policies, filling the vacuum left by Washington, often with zero-sum strategies. In particular, countries such as Russia, Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar jockey for influence. Religious, ethnic, and tribal divisions prevent a single country from monopolizing regional power, while the relationships between regional actors and their proxies risk deepening security fragmentation. Few external actors remain willing to incur the costs necessary to command influence, rendering crisis and resolution largely subject to local and regional arrangements.
- The Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated many structural crises already affecting the region. The widespread economic contraction precipitated by the crisis has heightened youth unemployment, weakened public health capacity, tanked oil prices, and exacerbated competition for resources. Despite societal resilience and the introduction of public health measures commensurate with global standards, political fragility has weakened government responses to the pandemic, limiting

the implementation of ambitious international assistance programs. IMF and World Bank programs, along with domestic stimulus packages, have delivered only temporary relief. These challenges show why the region must explore new drivers of growth and stability, especially given the likelihood of dwindling development assistance and further diminished Western political will to engage following the pandemic.

THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA AS A TEST CASE FOR A MORE EMPOWERED EUROPEAN FOREIGN POLICY

Washington DC remains the focal point in most Europeans' security thinking, including on the Middle East and North Africa. The deterioration of transatlantic relations as well as multiple crises around Europe, however, have triggered a messy but steady change in Europe's geopolitical mindset. On the one hand, an emphasis on the need for "strategic autonomy,"¹⁰ "European sovereignty," and "relearn[ing] the language of power" shows an increasing conceptual convergence between France, Germany, and European institutions on the need for a stronger EU foreign policy, starting in the continent's south.¹¹ On the other hand, silence often speaks louder than words in EU politics, suggesting skepticism. For Poland or the Baltic countries, Russia is a bigger priority than the Middle East. Countries such as Spain also remain cautious about expressing any initiatives perceived as hostile to the U.S. presence in Europe.¹² Historically, neutral states such as Austria or Ireland are wary of a more assertive European defense posture. Denmark opted out of the EU defense policy and gives priority to NATO's role in European defense.¹³ Other states, such as Italy and Portugal, are resistant for economic reasons.¹⁴

A growing consensus, however, holds that the status quo is unsustainable. Europe's lack of influence on issues like the Syrian conflict, according to a

northern European diplomat, “should trigger a wake-up call. Something needs to be done.”¹⁵ From Libya to Greek-Turkish tensions and migration flows, successive crises in southern Europe have compelled actors to improve their foreign policy cooperation. Even nations with strongly transatlanticist inclinations have been driven to invest more in European strategic features while seeking to preserve the potential for a U.S. reset should the administration change. Spain has been increasingly supportive of developing European defense, as have Estonia and Finland.¹⁶ Sweden has switched its position to seeking to shape the outcome of European defense rather than opposing it, adopting the view that it does not contradict close cooperation with the United States.¹⁷ Italy started investing more in European projects that could theoretically allow stronger actions in southern Europe, including Permanent Structured Cooperation,¹⁸ the European Defense Fund,¹⁹ and the French-led European Intervention Initiative,²⁰ which has a working group on Mediterranean security.²¹ Since 2014, Germany has increased its contributions and diplomatic initiatives in Libya, Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria. The fact that the German defense minister proposed a safe zone in northern Syria in 2020, drawing criticism from her colleague, the foreign minister, shows both the complexity of the military question in Berlin and the evolution of the national debate.²²

In the EU, process is often as important as substance. The idea of a smarter European division of labor therefore depends largely on a broader debate about the rules and formats of EU foreign policy making. In theory, EU foreign policy is still discussed on a consensual basis, but in practice it is carried out by multiple, often overlapping forums. Many frameworks, such as the “quint” (France, Germany, Italy, UK, U.S.), the “quad” (France, Germany, UK, U.S.), the EU-3, the Scandinavian countries, the Visegrad Group (Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia), and other ad hoc formats, are already in place for dialogue and consultation, including on matters of foreign policy. Permanent

and nonpermanent European members of the UN Security Council make joint statements related to the council’s agenda.

Relationships with the United States, China, and Russia are essential to all EU member states and can only be dealt with through unanimous votes. But a key gap in the European foreign policy toolkit is international crisis diplomatic management. Mechanisms exist to pool resources quickly once a European political position develops or to preemptively discuss military scenarios.²³ There is no mechanism, however, to reach this position quickly, especially during a foreign policy crisis with a hard security component. A natural division of labor based on a given member state’s history, geography, and capabilities never gets discussed at the EU level. As a result, debate about EU foreign policy is smothered in the confrontation between those who argue that countries acting unilaterally harm European unity and those who see no effective alternative to unilateral action because of inertia in the EU process. A growing number of experts make the case that “smaller, more flexible, coalitions should now become prominent vehicles for policy.”²⁴ Among other advantages, these coalitions could facilitate quick, effective initial reactions before the full slate of European actors could be assembled to cast a majority vote.²⁵

The challenge is, therefore, not only to mainstream the use of contact groups but also to make them agents of joint action, rather than merely discussion. The criteria of certain tools, such as European Permanent Structured Cooperation—created to allow “willing and capable” member states to work on joint defense projects—could be replicated in the crisis diplomacy arena. The logic of “European contact groups” that would, under the European External Action Service (EEAS), play a leading role in politically managing geopolitical crises, could be developed as a vanguard. Under this model, other EU member states would allow the contact groups to frame quick European geopolitical reactions before larger consultations involving all member states. A key

element in the success of such flexible formats is their ability to combine soft and hard power instruments. While the civil protection coordination mechanism allowed a quick European civilian response to the massive August 2020 Beirut port explosion, other tools, such as the EU Battlegroups or the European Intervention Initiative, could be activated through the contact groups.

Depending on member state dynamics as well as the evolution of Brexit negotiations, contact groups could be forged ad hoc—coordinated by the EEAS—or supported under more formal terms. One option could be the creation of a European Security Council (ESC), a concept mentioned by both German chancellor Angela Merkel and French president Emmanuel Macron. The ESC would be a smaller version of the EU’s Political and Security Committee and could convene on very short notice to react to international crises, generating responses beyond statements. While building consensus will remain the natural goal of EU institutions, their ability to assert themselves and show competence during crises, including in the Middle East, will guide a collective foreign policy approach based not only on rhetorical statements and mid-term financial assistance but on swift, effective reaction.

THE 2020 U.S. ELECTION AND THE TREND TOWARD MIDDLE EAST MINIMALISM

President Donald Trump and former vice president Joe Biden agree on little, but they do appear to agree on ending the “forever wars.” The current trend of reducing the U.S. military footprint in the Middle East and North Africa is therefore unlikely to change, regardless of who wins the upcoming American election. In a CNN op-ed in which he challenged the Trump administration’s maximum pressure policy on Iran, Biden did not question the need to bring troops home. He only claimed he would do it more effectively than Trump.²⁶

Biden’s long history of foreign policy decisionmaking suggests how he might try to transform U.S. engagement in the region. He, for instance, values leadership engagement on a personal level, as well as transatlantic relations broadly—“Biden, unlike Obama, is at his core a ‘transatlanticist,’” remarked one analyst²⁷—and may therefore have a greater interest in partnering with Europeans to support his foreign policy objectives. Another major factor could be Biden’s desire to work with Congress on foreign policy to a greater degree than has the Trump administration. As one advisor close to Biden’s campaign put it, “You cannot overemphasize how Biden is going to give primacy to bipartisanship. The way the White House runs its diplomacy will incorporate a huge premium on consultation with Congress.”²⁸ This approach would slow and reshape decisions with regard to the Middle East, such as those involving congressional frustrations about Saudi Arabia or Turkey.

This emphasis makes it important to understand internal Democratic Party trends, and specifically the divide between centrists and progressives. Notwithstanding, the primary debates appeared to show general agreement on transforming the U.S. presence in the Middle East and North Africa, despite some differences over process and parameters. Some issues received specific scrutiny. While Biden advisor Tony Blinken clearly rejected conditioning military aid to Israel,²⁹ primary candidates Pete Buttigieg (former mayor of South Bend, Indiana), Bernie Sanders (senator from Vermont), and Elizabeth Warren (senator from Massachusetts) all said they would be open to conditioning such aid. Meanwhile, Biden advisor Daniel Benaim described the Democratic debate on the U.S.-Saudi relationship as a contest between so-called reseters, advocating “tough love,” and rethinkers, seeking a more fundamental change.³⁰

These stances highlight the potential evolution of the Democratic Party, but they also reflect a growing national consensus regardless of party affiliation.

A number of distinguished U.S. experts, who have served Democrats as well as Republicans, have contended recently that the Middle East and North Africa are no longer key to American interests and that the United States should move beyond a post-9/11 foreign policy phase,³¹ entailing reduced military engagement and increased diplomacy. Martin Indyk, former U.S. special envoy for Israeli-Palestinian negotiations and former assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs, for one, cited the increased availability of U.S. natural gas and Israel's clear ability to defend itself without American assistance in arguing for a lower U.S. Middle East profile.³² Former peace negotiator Aaron David Miller and former State Department official Richard Sokolsky, both now fellows at the Carnegie Endowment, also argue that the United States can now ride out oil production shocks and that Middle East countries need price stability more than does America.³³ Mara Karlin and Tamara Cofman Wittes, currently scholars at the Brookings Institution, both note that the United States remains "in a kind of Middle Eastern purgatory" because it has not adjusted to its evolving interests.³⁴ Karlin and Wittes thus advocate for Washington to focus "on constraining geopolitical competition within the region, confronting Iranian behavior more effectively, and resolving proxy conflicts where possible" in order "to do less without threatening its regional dominance."³⁵

For many reasons, the world will be a different place in January 2021 than when Trump took office four years earlier. How the incoming administration will respond cannot be entirely predicted, and striking the right balance will be all the more difficult because of the need for a broad domestic recovery from the coronavirus pandemic. As regards a new "Middle East minimalism," the U.S. leadership and its foreign policy apparatus still appear to be assessing its potential contours, including with respect to the sustainability of the American deterrence system in place since the 1973 Israeli-Arab war.³⁶ Specific policies, such as the four-decade-old Carter Doctrine, which provides security for Gulf

oil-producing nations, will likely have to be updated or abrogated. All these shifts make clear that Washington and its regional allies must therefore renew their partnerships. On both sides of the U.S. political aisle, officials will have to decide whether it is in Washington's interest to restore, reset, or abandon its traditional system of regional alliances. The role of hard and soft power, relatedly, has elicited debate within and between the two parties in relation to a Middle East strategy with which Washington effectively wields influence.

RESETTING, NOT RESTORING, TRANSATLANTIC COOPERATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The U.S. election provides an opportunity to launch a more constructive transatlantic process that supports the American ambition to reduce its military footprint in the Middle East and North Africa, while also helping spur positive changes in EU foreign policy and dialogue between regional actors. The following principles can serve as guideposts:

Europeans must take the initiative. The tendency in Europe is often to wait for the United States to "clarify" a given policy. This passive position is problematic on multiple levels. First, it leaves space for other actors, such as Russia or Turkey, to act in theaters such as Syria before a potentially new administration takes office in January 2021. Second, a passive Europe would be of little use to a Biden-led government, while it would encourage a second Trump administration to continue its unilateral policy on issues like Iran. The ball is in the EU's court to organize itself and prepare proposals for dealing cohesively with the next U.S. administration. The best way to avoid the current American divide-and-conquer approach toward Europe is to organize small contact groups "willing and capable" of contributing meaningfully to specific Middle East issues and to present these groups as effective U.S. interlocutors.

Europe should prepare for Biden as well as Trump II. A deep, sustained sigh of relief by Europeans following a Democratic triumph could be as counterproductive as frustration over Trump's reelection. Despite mutual distrust, disagreements with the Trump administration could theoretically still allow for a division of labor on several issues, although requiring intensive communication and leadership on both sides. If Biden is elected, a shared willingness will emerge to "fix" transatlantic relations. This could, however, lure the European side into any of three traps: (1) Expecting Washington to simply restore the transatlantic relationship of the "unipolar moment," even though this moment has passed and the American focus on increased military spending and capabilities persists. (2) European engagement of an inward-looking U.S. administration with the same disunity as before, exacerbating the U.S. perception of European irrelevance in the Middle East and North Africa. (3) A European rush to accept a transatlantic reset in the region that is not entirely consonant with European interests.

Europe and the United States should enhance coordination. Of all international issues on which Europe and the United States coordinate, the risks are perhaps highest for the Middle East and North Africa because of the ad hoc nature of previous consultations. Even goodwill on both sides may be insufficient to produce a more constructive dynamic. In the words of one former U.S. official, "We tend to take the way we have these discussions with Europeans, and their support, for granted."³⁷ Under a new Democratic administration, the quick establishment of working groups would help develop practical cooperative initiatives and prevent miscommunication. Biden's personal emphasis on working with Congress may mean that part of his administration's messaging on international issues could be aimed at U.S. lawmakers more than at foreign partners.³⁸ He could empower or hide behind Congress more than previous administrations have done.³⁹ Also, differences between the NATO expert community and the U.S. Middle East expert community could

lead to gaps on issues such as Turkish policy in Syria or Libya, with NATO experts focusing on appeasing Ankara to keep it within the alliance and U.S. experts concerned about pushing back against Turkish military operations that are, in effect, opening up space for Russia.

Europe and the United States should define what Great Power competition means operationally in the Middle East. An early, honest, and straightforward discussion on the respective U.S. and European roles in the region will be decisive. In this respect, regardless of the presidential winner, U.S. foreign policy will likely shift further toward Great Power competition. Europeans should therefore address how their Middle East foreign policy fits into the American vision of the rivalry with China and Russia, and ask U.S. officials to clarify their plans for engaging in this competition in the region. A key issue is for this discussion to be specific on what assets the United States would like to withdraw from the Middle East and recommit to other tasks in Asia or elsewhere. The transatlantic relationship would benefit from an operational discussion on tradeoffs, capacities, and concrete timetables implied by the U.S. focus on China.

European-U.S. discussions should include hard security. A paradox here is that while Western engagement in the Middle East will likely become less militarized, Europe must still show it can act quickly when necessary. Specifically, the Syrian and Libyan conflicts have demonstrated how political outcomes are ultimately shaped by effective force projection at critical moments. EU credibility in the region, and in specific localities, rests on its ability to display targeted military power.⁴⁰

Europeans should work to prove their relevance in the Middle East. While a Trump or Biden administration would have very different views on transatlantic relations, the U.S. Middle East apparatus tends to see Europe as barely relevant, outside specific issues such as the JCPOA or Lebanon.⁴¹

Although a Biden presidency would in theory be more open to cooperation, this decades-old perception will still shape U.S. processes. Europeans will therefore need to address their own shortcomings before expecting the United States to address its own. While solving these problems will take time, presenting modest initial steps would be a good start for Europe. One broad step would be greater European goodwill toward burden sharing, with potential offers touching on the following areas:

- In Libya, a package encompassing a mix of French counterterrorism capabilities and European tools, such as a strengthened IRINI mandate to monitor the country's arms embargo
- In the Strait of Hormuz, options to better coordinate maritime missions
- In Syria, terms for renewed transatlantic support for the Syrian Democratic Forces
- In Iraq, increased European military investment through NATO to relieve U.S. commitments through the anti-Islamic State coalition and de-escalate with Shia militias

But burden sharing cuts both ways. If Washington wants Europe to share more of the military responsibility, it must cede a proportionate share of decision-making. A U.S. administration reluctant to commit increased resources to the region should be more open to European ideas. In related discussions, talks should aim for constructive outcomes centered on complementarities and potential swaps.

European-U.S. dialogue should define capabilities contoured to the region. Parallel to a potential review of the U.S. military footprint in the Middle East,⁴² a dialogue on burden sharing would be more effective in focusing on actual military capabilities (e.g., training missions, deployable troops, intelligence assets) versus vague targets such as GDP share dedicated to military spending. Biden has indicated he values the model of deploying small special forces contingents,⁴³ as was done in northeast Syria, and

Europeans should prepare to work on similar joint operations. Further, reviews of maritime security and the fight against the Islamic State could provide matches for allied capabilities. Relatedly, Europeans have cooperated at different levels on cyberattacks, hybrid warfare, crisis prevention, and diplomatic deterrence but need to be more efficient collectively in presenting their toolkit to Washington. As longtime negotiator and Washington Institute distinguished fellow Dennis Ross summarized the situation, "Hopefully, the U.S. will do a better job at listening and do a better job of defining what burden sharing is."⁴⁴

A stronger European defense pillar within NATO requires U.S. support. NATO provides both an effective operational framework and a natural forum for addressing hard security issues. NATO need not be the only framework, however; U.S. and NATO cooperation with the EU should also be strengthened.⁴⁵ A counterintuitive but central issue for the transatlantic relationship is thus for the United States to actively support the strengthening of European defense as a pillar of NATO, particularly when it comes to capabilities relevant for military deployment in the Middle East and North Africa (e.g., troop movements, peacekeeping missions, training missions, special forces, maritime missions). A number of European member states have been reluctant to support EU defense projects as well as the simple idea of a European defense based on the assumption that this support harms NATO. The United States remains the elephant in the room when it comes to European defense; Washington therefore has a role in stating its position in this regard.

Commitment must coexist with humility. An over-ambitious agenda would trigger legitimate criticism about Western pretensions to rule over the region and is unlikely to be met with success given the limited resources Europe and the United States will have in the post-Covid context. Still, a number of regional crises continue to involve Europe and America financially, geographically, and militarily.

A humbler but more stable commitment will be key to rebuilding U.S. and European influence.

A FOCUS ON SPECIFIC PRIORITIES

Areas for postelection cooperation and trust building between Europe and the United States can include the JCPOA, dialogues about regional conflicts, and postpandemic economic recovery.

The JCPOA as a Channel for Urgent Cooperation

With either a Trump or a Biden administration—and absent a counterproliferation framework—the crisis around the Iranian nuclear program is likely to grow soon. The EU-3 and the U.S. administration will have a unique window for negotiations with Iran between the U.S. presidential election and the June 2021 Iranian presidential election. Renewed negotiations with Iran could center on a return to the JCPOA as a baseline or else on a completely new framework.

In future talks, the JCPOA would undoubtedly be the floor, not the ceiling, with the fundamental difference being that nuclear de-escalation would be paired with a longer-term regional security architecture that includes the P5+1, the Islamic Republic, and key Gulf states. Discussions could touch on missiles, naval issues, militias, attacks on shipping, and other issues. The P5+1 would need to be in the room, given that Iran would object to U.S. participation—especially under a Trump-led team—while the Gulf states would demand it. The regional track could be either directly connected to the JCPOA or parallel to it. Experts such as Michel Duclos, a former French ambassador and now special advisor to the Paris-based Institut Montaigne, have suggested that European officials could reach out to their Gulf counterparts before January 2021 with the goal of designing a negotiation framework to be submitted to Washington and

Tehran. To be sure, the U.S. position will be strongest, but this should not prevent European actors from offering ideas, as the EU-3 did in the early stages of the nuclear talks.⁴⁶ From a transatlantic perspective, this would mark a real test of U.S.-European bilateral outreach to select Gulf countries.

A recent Center for a New American Security report, for its part, proposes three phases to reengage Iran, a process it refers to as “calm for calm.” It would entail consultation and dual-track negotiations on both the nuclear and regional stability issues.⁴⁷ Such a rationale provides room for a smart division of labor between the EU-3 and the United States. This division would allow them to discuss benchmarks for Tehran and Washington to return to the JCPOA, but also to agree to shuttle diplomacy allowing Europe to bring Iran—and the United States to bring Saudi Arabia, Israel, and potentially other players—into a discussion that could de-escalate regional tensions.

A key area of potential cooperation between the EU-3 and a Biden administration could be sanctions relief. One interesting possible avenue would be using the Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges (INSTEX)—a financial tool created in early 2019 to avoid U.S. sanctions against Iran—as a first signal indicating economic relief, before considering easing actual U.S. sanctions. Europeans furthermore could prepare a significant contribution to address Iran’s Covid crisis through the provision of medical equipment. They might also consider opening INSTEX for oil trade, which would make the offer much more attractive to Tehran while providing a “free carrot” to the U.S. administration; Washington would only have to issue limited-time waivers and could avoid a complex congressional process. Such a move could be accompanied by clear messaging support from Washington to the private sector. And it would signal to Tehran the effectiveness of European mechanisms to preserve the JCPOA. Washington, finally, would be justified in asking Tehran for another confidence-building measure in return.

Regional Dialogues on Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Elsewhere

On the Iran issue, Europeans would have to link their rationale for addressing the nuclear program to regional conflicts involving Iranian influence. Despite fading interest from Washington, the conflicts in Syria and Yemen are part of the Iranian policy puzzle, and resolving them is a key to regional stability. Together with Libya, these conflicts should remain central in the transatlantic dialogue and lead to an improved division of labor aimed at designing regional platforms for de-escalation. The goal, moreover, should be to engage and give incentives to regional actors to take responsibility for decisions aimed at ending their respective conflicts.

If Biden is elected, the challenge will be for Europe to help Washington reinvest in multilateral and regional formats more than in its bilateral tracks with Moscow or Ankara. The last decade has shown how difficult it can be for the United States to influence regional partners bilaterally, such as in the Syria and Yemen conflicts. This should create a renewed interest in transatlantic coordination to forge effective multilateral frameworks, but Europeans will have to be proactive. According to one U.S. diplomat, “The U.S. system has a bias for bilateral frameworks. There is a European bias in favor of multilateralism, because Europe is well represented and knows the rules well.”⁴⁸

No doubt, persuading the United States to choose European dialogue over bilateral relations will be a tough ask. But Europe will have space to present multilateral options at earlier stages in various negotiations. Ultimately, the goal is to provide strong transatlantic support and cooperation for regionally based dialogues, with ownership by local actors. Even though the United States is right to no longer wish to impose a master plan on the Middle East, it can still bring its convening power to bear, with help from its European partners. Small, incremental steps may be best suited for achieving this goal, rather than a large-scale formal framework.

In Iraq, Europe’s relatively equidistant position between Tehran and Washington—in addition to EU expertise regarding the central problem of strengthening governance and the rule of law—give European countries an opportunity to support the current government, led since May 2020 by Mustafa al-Kadhimi. This would require the United States to signal its support for efforts such as the agenda on Iraqi sovereignty presented by President Macron.⁴⁹

In Syria, the “small group” formed in 2016 by the United States, France, Germany, Britain, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan could be revived, and potentially linked to the Astana format, which was created among Russia, Turkey, and Iran in January 2017 in the Kazakh capital. Another easy step for a Biden or a second Trump administration would be to apply joint EU-U.S. pressure on the UN secretary-general, to address governance and aid diversion issues in Damascus-based UN agencies, with the goal of strengthening humanitarian assistance. The United States and the EU could also jointly increase funding for stabilization activities in northeast Syria. Meanwhile, according to a U.S. diplomat, “in Trump II, the U.S. approach to Syria won’t change, our allies will need to be prepared to tell us more openly what they want and be more prescriptive than critical.”⁵⁰

On Libya, European actors should prepare to be more assertive, instead of expecting the United States to have similar priorities. Europe should seek enhanced U.S. support for the Berlin process on Libya, in exchange for a stronger European stance on enforcing the arms embargo in the North African country. Turning briefly to Yemen, a possible French-German mediation effort could support U.S. policy to create a healthier regional dynamic in the Gulf.

In such regional engagement, correcting course with Turkey will be central. NATO remains, for the United States, a way to both keep Turkey out of Russia’s orbit and to defend EU security. These two goals appear contradictory, though, given Turkish military moves

in the eastern Mediterranean, Syria, Libya, and Iraq. For his part, Biden appears to believe he could find a new balance with Ankara.⁵¹ The Europeans could, in any case, make an offer to Washington along the lines of the last European Council, held October 1, 2020,⁵² with incentives for Turkey to reengage more constructively but with clear redlines about European borders and security concerns.

Ultimately, cooperation on all layers of these conflicts will be decisive in changing the balance of power at the UN Security Council and brokering better deals with Russia and China.

Economic Recovery, Governance, and Civil Society Engagement

Because military interventions have been a major feature of Western engagement in the Middle East and North Africa, the policy debate tends to be framed in excessively military terms. But the combination of plausible U.S. restraint and a European reluctance and lack of capability to intervene militarily implies the unlikelihood of extensive future Western operations. Thus, thinking about the renewal of Western engagement and cooperation in the region must be based on a different metric. One potentially revealing discussion could focus on the balance between security assistance and governance reform, given that the U.S. administration's \$5.46 billion proposal for security assistance in 2020 accounts for 83.4 percent of the total request for American funding in the region.⁵³

Indeed, the governance crisis almost certainly transcends military needs in the region. And governance is a field in which the EU can provide much technical assistance. The Middle East and North Africa could thus be a primary beneficiary of a transatlantic effort to reform multilateral organizations. Given the likelihood of Western countries reducing their external assistance funding in the Covid-19 aftermath, a dialogue on joint priorities to support

economic opportunities in regional countries would also be valuable in fortifying multilateral institutions active in the region.

This priority reflects a possible renewed U.S.-European discussion focused on investment in soft power and economic development. U.S. fatigue toward military action and the EU's priority of avoiding future migrant waves should bring transatlantic partners together to reassess their tools of humanitarian assistance, stabilization, and socioeconomic support. A renewed transatlantic consensus and roadmap on these issues would have a powerful effect on NGOs and international institutions funded by both sides.

This dynamic could be even more essential in a context of institutional crisis or state collapse. In such a scenario, Europe and the United States would both struggle with a lack of "traditional diplomatic partners" to sustain classic intergovernmental cooperation. In this absence, they should pool resources to vet nonstate actors and design financial channels that avoid excessive UN bureaucracies or predatory mechanisms employed by government officials.

CONCLUSION

In a broad sense, the Middle East and North Africa region embodies a clear case of U.S. reluctance to share decisionmaking with its European partners, while the Europeans have balked at sharing burdens. Given emerging changes in the region, as well as in the United States and Europe, the transatlantic dialogue should no longer be regarded as a polite exercise that fosters symbolic European acquiescence to Washington's policies. Instead, it should serve as grounds for a serious reconsideration of U.S. and EU foreign policy in the region. Amid the current soul-searching about U.S. Middle East policy, this should entail listening to European ideas and diplomatic initiatives and pressing Europeans to

accelerate the strengthening of their hard security capabilities. Ultimately, the Western alliance can renew the way it functions and rediscover the

potential of its partnership. In the process, it can make a necessary contribution to greater security, prosperity, and self-reliance in the region. ❖

NOTES

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