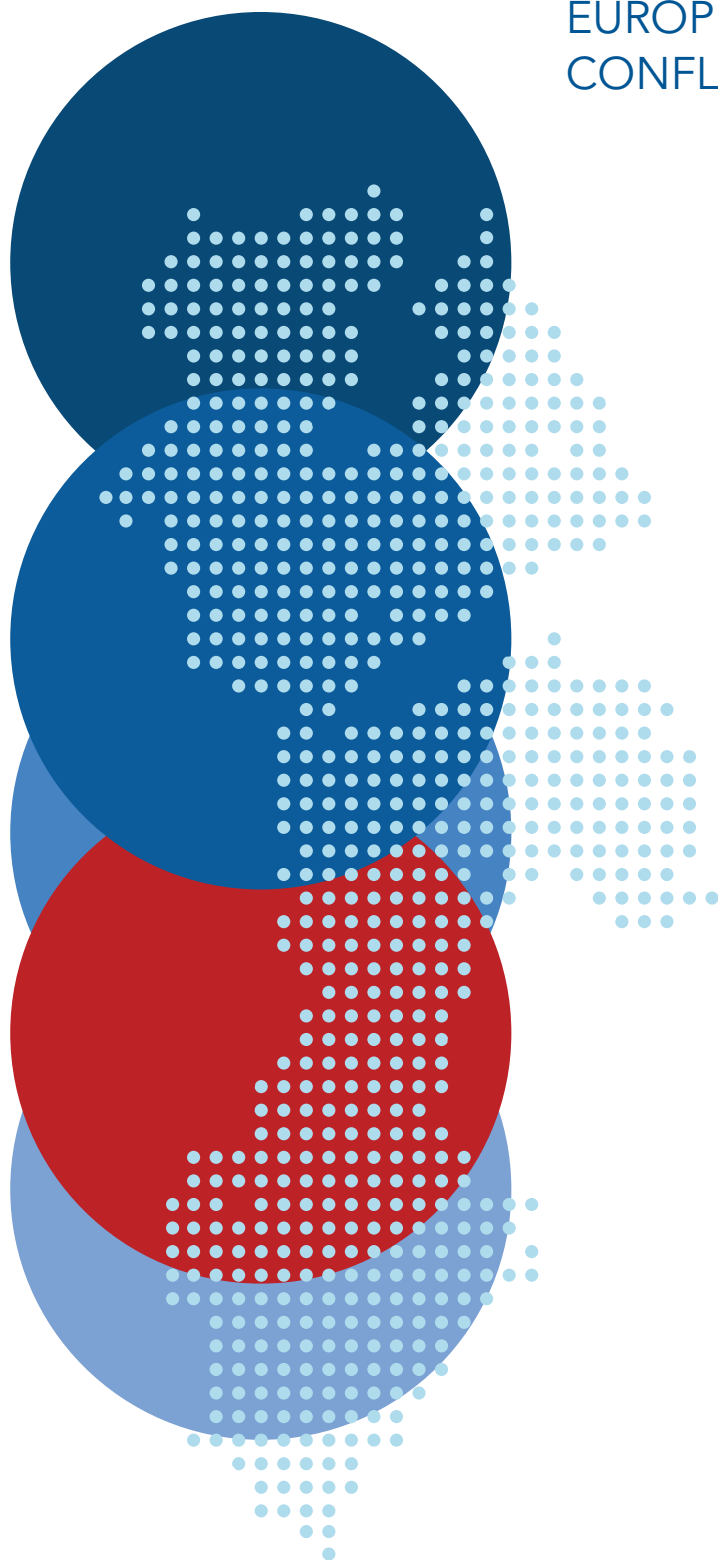




NAVIGATING THE REGIONAL CHESSBOARD

EUROPE'S OPTIONS TO ADDRESS
CONFLICTS IN THE MENA REGION



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INTRODUCTION

As the year 2020 draws to a close, the conflicts and tensions in Syria, Libya and Yemen have been ongoing for nearly a decade, while the conflict in Iraq has been ongoing almost continuously since 2003. During the same period, the region witnessed growing tensions between the Gulf States and Iran, the U.S. and Iran, a structural, though not political, U.S. military withdrawal from the region, and an increasing engagement of Turkish and Russian Forces. In contrast, the European Union and individual European actors have often been perceived as being too passive or divided in their approaches on how to solve the underlying conflicts of the region. This has resulted in a loss of credibility and missed windows of opportunity. Mechanisms of dialogue in the region are generally in very poor shape. International efforts have often failed to sustainably solve the conflicts. National and regional strategies for conflict solution and prevention as well as regional institutions to settle conflicts are widely missing. In addition, the prevailing discourse is mainly dominated by state leaders and security institutions, often marginalizing civilian experts and local civil society organizations as well as their interests and demands for conflict resolution – while their expertise and perspectives would bring an added value to the discourse.


With the exception of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and that of the Western Sahara, there has been no military conflict on territories in the region since the Kuwait war three decades ago. And yet, instability has grown massively in the Middle East and North Africa. Regimes are under threat and states are disintegrating or even failing. Current conflicts and wars take place within states – and regional actors are increasingly involved. The complexity of conflicts and political constellations has multiplied, both on the local and national as well as on the regional and international levels. They are not only complex, but intertwined and multi-layered.

This publication is titled „Navigating the Regional Chessboard“. In many ways, the local conflicts – Yemen, Libya, Iraq and Syria only being the most prominent and the most tragic – have in fact overlapped into a complex regional chess board. Of course, there are shortcomings to this metaphor: in Middle Eastern realities, there are more than two players involved and the complexities make for more gray than black and white. But to stay in the metaphor, the aim of this publication is to offer “Europe Options to Address Conflicts in the MENA Region” which would make Europe a far more convincing player, with a hopefully positive outcome for the conflicts of the region and especially the affected populations.

When academics and think tanks discuss a much-needed security architecture for the MENA region, they usually design it on a macro level. Western and Arab experts have debated the feasibility of a Westphalian Peace for the Middle East, as well as the Helsinki process or even an OSCE for the Middle East. On the other side of the spectrum, many scholars and INGOs working in the field of conflict resolution have strongly argued that peace must come from within, opting for a strictly bottom-up approach.

These approaches have a certain appeal, but they are often putting more emphasis on the national than on the regional level which should not be neglected. What roles do regional actors play, which interests – legitimate or not – do they articulate? And in a region where their interest and competition for power and regional dominance becomes more relevant by the day, which incentives could be provided in order to foster regional security cooperation?

It seems interesting to note here that the four regional powers – Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Israel (and the US as an international power, of course) – all justify their actions by claiming perceived threats to their national security. It is equally interesting that Russia and the United Arab Emirates are the two relevant outside actors who do not advance their positions along this line.



It can be argued that the policies implemented by regional and international actors with regard to the Middle East and North Africa have often resulted in rather less stability and security and are thus detrimental to their own proclaimed interests. But this argument alone is deficient. It does not take into consideration that those countries – which are the theatre of regional and international interventions – and even more importantly, their populations, are usually paying the price.

There is certainly no easy way out of this regional quagmire of multiple unresolved conflicts: international vs. regional actors, regional vs. regional, Shia vs. Sunni, state actors vs. non-state actors. In fact, there are other negative aspects further aggravating the situation. The region is characterized by a political mentality where competition for regional power, dominance and the prevalence of military solutions rule, coupled with a common feeling of mistrust and perceived threats. There is no meaningful framework for an inclusive security architecture or even a security dialogue, a situation which is further complicated by dysfunctional institutions like the Arab League or the Gulf Cooperation Council. Further, there is no meaningful mechanism in place to integrate the three powerful non-Arab states of the region nor to prevent simmering conflicts from erupting into open military confrontations. Finally, ad-hoc actions or reactions by the U.S., the European Union or individual European countries dominate, but no long-term strategy is in sight.

In January 2020, the Regional Project on Peace and Security in the Middle East and North Africa of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) brought together a group of regional and international experts for the first “Beirut Debates” workshop. It was meant to be a first step to take stock of regional actors’ attitudes towards local conflicts and the interplay between them and local actors in those four countries (Syria, Yemen, Iraq and Libya). Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, this first analysis had to be followed up by online workshops which concentrated on each of the conflicts. Finally, 13 papers were prepared, dealing with different aspects of regional involvements in these conflicts. At the end of each paper, the reader will find a number of regionally informed policy recommendations, mainly addressing the European community, on how to deal with regional actors in a constructive way and how to potentially mitigate and manage conflicts through a more concerted, active and coherent European involvement in the region. The obvious idea is that this approach will eventually lead to sustainable solutions for these conflicts in the long run.

Europe is a direct neighbor to this conflict-plagued region. It has many reasons and responsibilities to be involved. The past decade has proven that the conflicts of the Middle East and North Africa can easily cross the Mediterranean. Terrorism or the wider issue of security as well as (forced) migration have dominated the European discourse, followed by an emphasis on the multifold economic interests of Europe in its neighborhood. While this should be reason enough for Europe to invest heavily in conflict resolution in the region, there is also a responsibility to be involved. It originates from Europe’s strong historic ties to countries in the region, and it is equally linked to a questionable tradition of strong relations with authoritarian regimes. The European Union sees its identity as a value-based union which is founded on respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. In the reality of European approaches to the MENA region, stability and security have been a dominating interest in a rather narrow sense, while neglecting too often the fact that only an inclusive political system will lead to sustainable stability and to human security in the region, which in turn will guarantee a secure and stable neighborhood for Europe.

As a German institution which has been active in the MENA region for more than five decades and maintains projects in 14 countries of the region, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung is keen on developing ideas and recommendations together with experts from within the region and with international specialists on the region. FES strongly believes that voices from the region should be strongly considered when it comes to decision-making in Europe or the U.S.

We hope that this publication can provide some food for thought within European capitals and add a modest contribution to find ways out of the conflicts that have deprived the region from the prosperous future its people so deserve.



EUROPE'S OPTIONS TO ADDRESS THE CONFLICT IN
YEMEN

WHAT IS IN YEMEN FOR IRAN?

A REALISTIC ASSESSMENT OF TEHRAN'S STRATEGIC CALCULUS IN THE ARABIAN PENINSULA

Iran's relations with Shia Houthis, also known as Ansar Allah, came under the spotlight after the Yemeni insurgents seized the capital Sanaa in September 2014 and removed internationally recognized President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi from power (*BBC News* 2014). The Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen in March 2015 (Roberts and Shaheen 2015) to restore Hadi's rule was also partly meant to undermine marathon nuclear negotiations between Iran and world powers (Gause 2013), particularly the United States, in the run up to the conclusion of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), though neither the Obama administration nor the Iranian leadership took the bait (*Al Jazeera* 2015).


More than five years into the cataclysmic civil war in the poorest Arab nation (*UN News* 2020), Iran's involvement in Yemen cannot be detached from its geopolitical rivalry with Saudi Arabia, which severed diplomatic ties with Tehran around a year later in January 2016 (*BBC News* 2016). Ties were severed after a group of state-affiliated hardline protesters in Tehran set the Saudi embassy ablaze (Hubbard 2016) in protest against Riyadh's execution of dissident Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr on charges of harboring close ties with the Islamic Republic and promoting "terrorism" (Behravesht 2019a).

This involvement, or more specifically the political and military support for Houthi fighters, provided by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and its external operations unit, Quds Force (QF), is unlikely to disappear even after the civil war ends (*Al Jazeera* 2020). However, it can be tamed and channeled into efforts for diplomatic rapprochement and conflict de-escalation. Such an opening for peace requires a realistic and holistic approach to regional politics which recognizes long-term interests of all major conflicting parties — Iran-backed Houthis, Saudi Arabia, and more recently, Yemeni southern separatists allied with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) — and seeks to address the incentives and motives for the perpetuation of war or the "demand" side of the conflict, so to speak.

IRAN'S STRATEGIC INTERESTS AND MOTIVES IN YEMEN

From a "realist" perspective in international politics, Yemen is arguably a cost-effective source of leverage for the Islamic Republic and a pivotal node of regional balancing against the Sunni powerhouse, Saudi Arabia, and its allies, the United States and to some extent Israel (Behravesht 2018). Yemen is also part of Tehran's "strategic depth" policy in a rivalrous environment. As argued elsewhere, "strategic 'depth' (omgh), also called 'backup' or 'buttress' (agh-abeh) in the Iranian security literature, is understood as the capability to take the fight as close to enemy territory as possible and thus hold the defensive advantage to strike deep in the event of conflict" (Behravesht 2020a). The policy derives a good deal of its appeal from a pro-underdog religious ideology and identity, and is mainly used as a discursive and political tool to boost and back up what has gradually transformed into a security provision and power projection strategy.

Unlike Syria and particularly Iraq, where Iran increasingly pursues economic interests (Behravesht 2019b) — in part to alleviate the pressure of US sanctions — along with security and defense priorities, Yemen does not offer Tehran the kind of convenient trade and business opportunities as the former do (Behravesht 2020b). This is partly due to geopolitical circumstances characterized by its proximity to Saudi Arabia and its Sunni allies west of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden — from Somalia to Egypt. This is also partly due to a natural corollary, which is the fact that Yemen



is the most destitute country in the Arab world, with a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of less than \$28 billion in 2018 (Trading Economics), and where 24 million of its 29 million people are in need of “lifesaving aid,” (UN News 2020) according to the UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres. Additionally, Yemen does not geographically lie on the core “axis of resistance” (Behravesht 2020a) that begins in Tehran and goes through Iraq and Syria to Beirut. The Islamic Republic has cultivated this axis over several decades, and its leaders perceive it as critical to Iran’s national security needs and interests.

However, in the eyes of the Iranian leadership, Yemen holds enormous potential for functioning as a forward base, in terms of deterrence and retaliation, not only against Saudi Arabia, but also the United Arab Emirates and more significantly Israel. This may be plausible if Ansar Allah rebels manage to boost the reach and precision of their missiles with indispensable IRGC assistance, and if Ansar Allah take a political decision to target those territories from northern Yemen. In December 2019, Houthi Defense Minister Mohammed al-Atefi explicitly threatened that his forces had a “bank of military and maritime targets of the Zionist enemy” and that “we will not hesitate to attack them if the leadership decides to” (*The Times of Israel* 2019).

In the context of the Iranian-Saudi rivalry more specifically, Tehran has three intertwined concerns that have been exacerbated since the hawks’ rise to power in the American foreign policy establishment under President Trump. In such adverse circumstances, Yemen would unsurprisingly emerge as Iran’s first go-to source of leverage to address them and accordingly maintain a favorable balance of power in the region.

First, unlike Saudi King Abdullah’s reign, under King Salman and his son Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), Riyadh has played a reinvigorated role in the effective pursuit of American “maximum pressure” of economic sanctions against Iran, which features intense lobbying and financial intelligence-sharing and policy coordination (Hartung and Freeman 2018), partly through the Riyadh-based Terrorist Financing Targeting Center (TFTC) (Talley 2019). Saudi cooperation in the oil market and more specifically Riyadh’s willingness to fill the global crude supply gap — emanating from US efforts to zero out Iranian petroleum exports — has also been crucial to the success of the American maximum pressure campaign against the Islamic Republic. “We have managed to take almost 2.7 million barrels of crude oil off the market, denying Iran the wealth to create their terror campaign around the world, and we have managed to keep the oil markets fully supplied,” US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo told MSNBC in an interview in April 2019, almost a year after the Trump administration scrapped the Iran nuclear deal (*Reuters* 2019). This would have hardly been possible without Saudi support and collaboration.

Second, Saudi Arabia’s budding nuclear and missile programs — which it is developing with American and Chinese assistance, respectively — has added to concerns in Tehran about the changing security environment and balance of power across the Persian Gulf (Butler 2020). Driven by rapid population growth —

from 20 million in 2000 to almost 35 million in 2020 — and the expected rise in domestic demand for energy consumption, Saudis established King Abdullah City for Atomic and Renewable Energy (KA-CARE) in April 2010 to reduce their reliance on fossil fuel and produce desalinated water in the long haul. What is alarming about Saudi nuclear plans, however, is Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman’s confrontational regional strategy (*Al Jazeera* 2018), not least towards Iran, and the lack of adequate safeguards and surveillance by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) (Tirone 2020) to ensure the program remains solely civilian and does not inch towards military weaponization. In late March 2019, Reuters revealed the Trump administration’s secret approval of licenses for six American firms to sell nuclear power technology to Riyadh (Gardener 2019). In response, Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei warned in his Persian New Year Speech on March 21 that if Saudis build nuclear capability with American assistance, “it will fall into the hands of Islamic combatants in the not-so-distant era.” (*BBC Persian* 2019). Clearly, he was referring to Houthi rebels in Yemen.

Lastly, an emerging partnership facilitated by Washington, between Israel and the Saudi-led Sunni bloc of Arab states in the Middle East, has considerably helped undermine Iran’s security interests and made it more vulnerable to external pressure (Behravesht and Azizi 2020). In an unprecedented November 2018 inter-

view with Elaph, a popular Arabic news site, Israel's then army chief of staff General Gadi Eizenkot offered "to exchange experiences with moderate Arab countries and to exchange intelligence to confront Iran," adding that "in this matter there is complete agreement between us and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia." (*The Times of Israel* 2017) The degree of animosity between Tehran and its Arab and Israeli nemeses has only grown, while the Israeli-Arab political and security cooperation against the Islamic Republic have gained further traction.

Now with the Emirati-Israeli normalization of ties, there is deep apprehension in Tehran that the United Arab Emirates (UAE) will "allow Israel a foothold in the region" as top Iranian officials have warned. (*BBC Persian* 2020a) "The UAE both betrayed the world of Islam, and [it] betrayed Arab nations and regional countries, and [it] also betrayed Palestine," Ayatollah Khamenei railed in a speech on September 1, a day after the first-ever flight was made from Israel through Saudi airspace to the UAE capital Abu Dhabi, carrying top American and Israeli officials, including senior White House advisor Jared Kushner (about whom Iran's Supreme Leader referred as "that Jew in the Trump family" in his address). (*BBC Persian* 2020b) "[But] of course this betrayal will not last long," Khamenei added, echoing earlier warnings by the Revolutionary Guards that the Emirati-Israeli rapprochement will "bring about a dangerous future for the UAE leaders." (*Radio Farda* 2020) .

Given the entrenched presence of the UAE and its separatist allies in south Yemen, Emiratis' normalization of relations with Israel can add another layer of complexity to the Yemeni conflict from an Iranian perspective, particularly if the UAE facilitates Israel's intelligence and security engagement in the Gulf of Aden, Horn of Africa, and Arabian Sea. In fact, this is the wider region — including the porous Omani-Yemeni land border — used by the IRGC for transfer of military and technical resources to Yemeni Houthis; therefore, the development might lead to the opening of a new front between Iran and Israel south of the Arabian Peninsula, with adverse implications on the war in Yemen, even if the Saudi-led military intervention officially ends at some point in the future.


More specifically, the Revolutionary Guards might double down on their logistical support for the Houthi

insurgents, not only to keep undermining rival Saudi interests and plans, but also to counter Israeli operations in that specific region regardless of the Yemeni conflict. For one, according to media sources in Turkey — a major UAE rival and opponent of its rapprochement with Israel — Emiratis are helping Israel set up "spy bases" on the UAE-controlled island of Socotra, south of Yemen (Shahwan 2020). The UAE's facilitation of Israeli security engagement in the Gulf of Aden could fuel subterranean tensions between the competing parties even after the war potentially ends. This kind of covert Iranian-Israeli animosity (*The Economist* 2010) has already transpired in parts of Africa, with Sunni Arab states traditionally favoring Israel over Iran; and if recent history is any guidance, there is no reason to believe it will not in the Horn of Africa (Lefebvre 2011) and the surrounding region, which is of greater strategic significance to the Islamic Republic.

Most recently, the Trump administration's renewed plans to designate Ansar Allah a "foreign terrorist organization" (FTO) in an attempt to further delegitimize Houthis and isolate Iran will likely harden their confrontational stances. This will render humanitarian aid supply to Yemen more difficult and a sustainable settlement of the civil war even more elusive. If anything, the US blacklisting of the Revolutionary Guards as an FTO in April 2019 has arguably prompted the powerful Iranian group into more aggressive behavior, as if the designation has dampened its motivation to exercise restraint.

With these dynamics in mind, it is hardly astonishing that the Iranian establishment — reluctant to modify its revolutionary identity on the one hand and lacking the alliances and resources of its rivals on the other — relies on Yemen, a low-cost and high-yield asset, to push back against what is perceived in Tehran as a constantly mutating multidimensional menace.

The high-profile drone and missile strikes on Aramco oil facilities in eastern Saudi Arabia in September 2019 represented, above all, the multidimensionality and "intersectionality" of Iranian-Saudi confrontation, accentuating the need for a parallel, multi-pronged, and holistic approach to resolving regional tensions in general and the Yemeni civil war in particular. Carried out in the name of Houthi rebels — who falsely claimed responsibility for them — the attacks are believed to have come from Iranian and Iraqi territories and trigger-



ed by perceived Saudi complicity in earlier Israeli strikes, in August the same year, against Iran-backed Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) positions in Iraq. “The [five Israeli] drone attacks were launched from SDF [namely, Syrian Democratic Forces] areas [in northeastern Syria] with the financing and backing of the Saudis,” an Iraqi intelligence official claimed around the same time (Hearst 2019).

A MORE REALISTIC PATH TO PEACE IN YEMEN


European initiatives to deescalate and ultimately resolve the conflict in a sustainable fashion, or address Tehran’s role in it more specifically, need to take the aforementioned complexities seriously and be predicated upon a holistic understanding of the region’s politics and its significant bearing on the Yemeni civil war. In practice, this means that while the EU, à la UN, focuses on the “supply” side of the war and seeks to prevent the flow of weapons and fighters into the conflict zone — as per the UN Security Council Resolution 2216 passed in April 2015, for instance — it also needs to pay attention to the “demand” side, or those institutionalized interests and entrenched motives that keep feeding the war and have, to the disadvantage of achieving sustainable peace, solidified into complicated (geo)political structures over the past five years. The Yemen civil war, much like its Syrian peer in this particular respect, is a good example of how a domestic conflict, once perpetuated, can develop a life of its own and metastasize (geo)politically beyond its limited territorial space and constitutive scope — the conflict between the Saudi-backed Yemeni government of President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi and the UAE-sponsored separatist Southern Transitional Council (STC), dubbed as a “war within a war,” embodies this dynamic quite well (Walsh 2020).

Before elaborating on the specific practical steps that could contribute to conflict resolution in Yemen, it is worth noting that Europe can ill-afford the luxury of division or any “conflict of interest” between its members when it comes to dealing with Saudi Arabia over its military intervention in the Yemeni civil war. While Britain’s exit from the European Union might make it more economically dependent on its rewarding relationship with Saudi Arabia, thus perhaps even more attached to the Yemen conflict, Brexit seems to have facilitated the adoption of a unified EU stance on the war.

In the formidable case of Iran and its complicated involvement in Yemen, Europe can take a meaningful step towards reducing and ultimately settling the conflict by incentivizing Saudi Arabia to give rapprochement a chance and take Tehran’s overtures for dialogue and detente seriously.

Notably, restoration, or even mere improvement, of ties with Riyadh is a rare policy area on which both moderates in the Rouhani administration and hardliners close to the IRGC and Supreme Leader Khamenei converge. Unlike talks with the United States, which is hard for Iranian leaders to rationalize and sell under the unrelenting pressure of economic sanctions and in the wake of the US assassination of former Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani, a diplomatic opening with Saudis enjoys cross-factional support in the Iranian corridors of power. This is in part because Riyadh, as the de facto leader or patron of the Sunni bloc in the Arab world, holds the key to the improvement of Iran’s relations with other regional Arab states. These states have traditionally followed Saudi’s lead and can help relieve Tehran’s economic and security woes, such as in Iraq where Tehran seeks broader engagement to offset the pressure of American sanctions. The Islamic Republic’s cross-partisan openness to mending fences with Saudi Arabia is also driven by the perceived need to contain or manage the fallout for Tehran due to warming ties between Arabs and Israel. This enmity has so far functioned as an organic buffer or bulwark against anti-Iranian American and Israeli campaigns in the region, including the maximum pressure policy of economic asphyxiation and hostile security operations. And lastly, Iranian decision-makers view Riyadh as a weaker rival compared to, say, the United States. Tehran does not stand to lose much, domestically and internationally, as a result of fostering a modus vivendi with Saudis.

It is no secret that Tehran’s efforts to lobby with Houthi rebels and encourage a ceasefire around the Red Sea port city of Hodeidah were essential for the UN-brokered Stockholm Agreement between Ansar Allah and the Saudi-



backed Yemeni government to be clinched in December 2018. This marked the most promising breakthrough in the peace process after the failure of the Kuwait negotiations in August 2016 and Geneva talks in September 2018. However, the accord later faltered due to implementation hurdles and the continuation of hostilities in other areas.


In late June 2020, General Hossein Dehghan, Iran's former defense minister and current military advisor to Ayatollah Khamenei, once again categorically dismissed any negotiations with the US, while ironically insisting on Tehran's willingness to hold "talks without preconditions" with Riyadh if it agrees to "adopt a new policy" in Yemen (Mizaan 2020). Coupled with the ramifications of the coronavirus pandemic and slump in global oil prices — that has inflicted massive economic pain (Reidel 2020) on all conflicting parties and rendered the war even more unsustainable — this is a viable opportunity that can help halt the conflict in Yemen and may also pave the way for de-escalation in other regional hotspots involving this surrogate rivalry such as Syria, and to a lesser extent Iraq. The Emirati troop reduction and military drawdown, increased Saudi willingness for unilateral truce initiatives and changes in military command, and Riyadh's determination to prevent militarized rivalry within the ranks of its anti-Houthi coalition all suggest the emergence of a "ripeness" for peace negotiations and resolution to the conflict in Yemen.

Europe can also help curb Iranian appetite for escalatory engagement in Yemen by taking a reasonably firm stand against the US "maximum pressure" campaign on Tehran as well as adopt measures that would cushion its economy from the Saudi-backed hawkish campaign's provocative consequences. One such measure could be the full and concrete implementation of Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges (INSTEX) in defiance of American brinkmanship. While a detailed longitudinal study is required to explicate the exact relationship between the degree of US-led pressure on the Islamic Republic and escalation of Houthi offensives on Saudi targets, a relative positive correlation might be identified over the past five years in general and since the US withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal and the re-imposition of sanctions in 2018.

There are other significant "intervening variables" that warrant contemplation by European policymakers.

Contrary to such non-state allies of Iran such as the Lebanese Hezbollah and some groups within Iraq's PMF like Kataib Hezbollah that are to a great extent beholden to Tehran, Yemeni Houthis enjoy greater autonomy in making political decisions and formulating war and peace strategies. In other words, there are hawkish and dovish camps within the Ansar Allah movement whose fluctuating relevance affects the intensity and trajectory of the civil war. In this respect, realistic and reliable promises of enhanced European assistance to alleviate the unfolding humanitarian catastrophe and to rebuild the Yemeni economy in the event of a halt to the conflict might empower pro-diplomacy elements within the Houthi establishment and set the stage for substantive peace talks. This could feature aid packages for poverty reduction in Houthi-held areas, investment in rebuilding Yemen's critical infrastructure, and, since Ansar Allah is unlikely to cede power or territory after five years of a devastating war, political support for international recognition of Houthi rule in (parts of) Yemen if negotiations result in sustainable peace based on power-sharing.

Last but not least is the compounding impact of Saudi domestic politics on the Yemen war. The Saudi intervention in Yemen in early 2015 was partly motivated by then Crown Prince MbS's need to boost his statesmanship credentials and instigate a sense of nationalist pride around his leadership. While the prolonged attritional war has arguably demonstrated the "rational irrationality" of Saudi foreign and defense policies under Crown Prince bin Salman, the "Iran-led" crisis has been used domestically to enhance his popularity and legitimacy among the Saudi public, while the war continues to be portrayed as a necessary measure to defend the realm against the Iranian arch foe. With the aging and degenerating health of King Salman and uncertain chances of US President Donald Trump's reelection — as an all-weather supporter of MbS — the young crown prince might be tempted to keep alive the conflict and the nationalist rally-round-the-flag discourse associated with it to accelerate his ascension to the Saudi throne before an American leader unsympathetic to bin Salman's rule occupies the White House.



Yet, given its influential, albeit uneasy, relations with both Saudi Arabia and Iran, and the strong likelihood that MbS will ultimately succeed the throne as the next Saudi king no matter the extent of internal and external opposition to him, the European Union might be in a unique position to facilitate the succession process in the Saudi kingdom in return for concrete steps on Riyadh's part to stop military operations in Yemen on the one hand, and embrace Iranian diplomatic overtures on the other. Whether the EU likes it or not, MbS will ascend the Saudi throne sooner or later, and there is no evidence to suggest that his chances of assuming Saudi leadership will change for the worse in the foreseeable future. So, if the result is not going to vary anyway, why expend precious political capital on opposing it?

A rather smarter course of action would be for the EU to initiate back-channel negotiations with Saudi leaders and reassure them that Europe will at least refrain from publicly or privately opposing MbS enthronement — if not support or facilitate it. The EU can help Riyadh grow through rewarding economic and technological ties with EU states in the framework of Saudi's 2030 Vision, if Saudi Arabia takes concrete measures towards halting their military offensive and resolving the conflict in Yemen. The EU does not need, however, to compromise its normative foreign policy and "moral" stand by publicly throwing its weight behind and lending legitimacy to MbS's power grab, but it can help make the realization of that "fait accompli" less harmful to the Yemeni people as well as broader European interests in the region.

Over five years into the Yemeni civil war, the reality is that the conflict has outlived its core (geo)political purpose and laid bare the futility of a military solution. This is considering that the multidimensional war, exacerbated under the coronavirus pandemic circumstances, increasingly entails greater costs than benefits for its participants. This means, among other things, that the current regional climate is perhaps at its ripest moment for powerful external actors like the EU to make their diplomatic interventions and political investments for peace in Yemen count. The unprecedented agreement between Yemen's conflicting parties on 27 September to swap 1,081 inmates including 15 Saudi nationals is a promising sign of conflict maturity and proneness to resolution (Nebehay 2020). Indeed, all major parties seem to be tired of the stalemate attritional war and looking for a face-saving but beneficial way out.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Focus on the "demand" side (strategic motives, security interests, emotional drives etc.) as much as the "supply" side (arms inflow etc.)
- Make Iran's intervention in Yemen less necessary rather than more costly.
- Facilitate Iranian-Saudi rapprochement by urging Riyadh to embrace Iranian overtures.
- Curb Iran's appetite for escalation by easing its economic pain (INSTEX vs. "maximum pressure").
- Offer to help with the Saudi 2030 Vision in return for concrete steps towards conflict de-escalation and resolution in Yemen (halt to Saudi-led air campaign etc.).
- Offer plausible pledges of economic assistance and political recognition to Houthis in return for halt to fighting.
- Use the "fait accompli" of MbS's inevitable ascension to the Saudi throne to secure concessions on Yemen.

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AN UNEASY EXIT: UNDERSTANDING THE DEPTH OF SAUDI ARABIA'S INVOLVEMENT IN YEMEN

INTRODUCTION


Saudi Arabia's involvement in Yemen is often approached by beginning with its military intervention in 2015. This viewpoint provides a narrow perspective of the conflict and offers a one-dimensional analysis that is often limited to the "Houthi versus Saudi Arabia" divide. For this reason, a deeper understanding of the conflict is necessary in order to develop a better engagement with Saudi Arabia over the current crisis in Yemen. Multiple factors, including domestic, regional and geopolitical developments played key roles in the buildup to the war. This paper will examine Saudi Arabia's involvement in Yemen from 2003 to 2020, a period that will provide a broader overview of the reasons behind Saudi Arabia's military campaign and overall engagement. By looking at the pre-2015 period, as well as developments since 2015, a more comprehensive picture of what drives the Kingdom's continued intervention is offered to the reader. This will allow a better understanding of the obstacles and opportunities when addressing the conflict(s) in Yemen, complementing the Kingdom's efforts in being a mediator among the political factions and supporting its efforts on the ground, which over the past few years increasingly also focused on humanitarian assistance.

UNDERSTANDING THE REGIONAL AND DOMESTIC CONTEXT (2003 - 2014)

The Iraq war in 2003 created a vacuum that was quickly filled by Iran, affirming Saudi Arabia's worries leading up to the US intervention (MacLeod 2003). In 2005, then-Saudi foreign minister Saud Al Faisal had the following to say about the situation in Iraq: "We are handing the whole country over to Iran for no reason" (Reuters 2005). Saudi Arabia had to worryingly watch the growing Iranian influence in the region that did not only include Shia factions like Hezbollah in Lebanon, but also Sunni ones such as Hamas (Saudi Press Agency 2009). However, it was the immediate security situation on its southern borders that was mostly concerning. The Houthis were engaged in continuous fighting with Yemeni troops from 2004 to 2010, resulting in six wars and forcing Saudi Arabia to take part in the last round of fighting from 2009 to 2010.

The narrative that dominated the news leading up to the Saudi military operation in 2009 highlights the various security concerns Saudi Arabia had over its southern neighbor. On the one hand, some analysts argue that the continuous wars between the Houthi rebels and the Yemeni forces only made the Houthis stronger and more resilient (Al-Rashed 2008). On the other hand, commentators emphasize the ideological dimension by drawing comparisons between the Houthi rhetoric and Iran in their use of religious sentiments to gain influence (Jomaih 2010). Other Saudi columnists and writers repeatedly called for curtailing Iranian influence in the region by pushing for action against the Houthis. This narrative started in the late 2000s and continues until today. It illustrates how Riyadh sees the multifaceted nature of the Iranian threat. As a result, Iranian endeavors in neighboring countries, such as Iraq and Lebanon, contributed to the turbulent relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

The regional upheaval since 2003 has been balanced by a stable and solid status quo in internal Saudi politics. For example, Prince Sultan bin Abdulaziz was Saudi Arabia's defense minister from 1963 until 2011. Prince Sultan was also the person in charge of the Yemen portfolio, which he was deeply invested in (Al Riyadh 2006). The creation of the Saudi-Yemeni Coordination Council ensured constant contact between the two sides, including Saudi Arabia's continuous financial support (Al Jazirah 2001).



Prince Sultan's deteriorating health coincided with the spillover of the fighting between Yemeni troops and the Houthis across the Saudi border in 2009. This prompted Riyadh to militarily intervene in "defense of land and sovereignty," as phrased by the commanding officer Prince Khalid bin Sultan (at the time Assistant Minister of Defense under his father) (*Asharq Al-Awsat* 2010). The 2009 war was a test of Saudi Arabia's military capabilities against the rebels; it resulted in heavy losses among Saudi troops.

On the heels of the 6th Saada war in 2009 and its spillover into Saudi Arabia, the year 2011 brought drastic changes to both Saudi domestic politics and regional dynamics. The Arab uprisings forced the Saudi leadership to rethink its strategic responses and be more assertive in the region. On the domestic and Yemeni fronts, the death of the aforementioned Crown Prince Sultan moved the Yemen portfolio increasingly towards the Ministry of Interior. Long-serving Minister of Interior, and for a brief period Crown Prince, Naif bin Abdelaziz also passed away the following year, but the Yemen portfolio remained mostly in the hands of his son, Prince Mohammed bin Naif. Around this time, and as a result of the popular uprising in Yemen, Saudi Arabia managed to push Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh to sign the GCC Agreement for political transition in Yemen (Rashad 2011). Containing Saleh, however, would prove difficult as he eventually escaped back to Yemen after a medical procedure in Saudi Arabia.


Compounding Riyadh's challenges across its southern border was the fact that, in addition to dealing with a rocky post-Saleh transition, the Yemen portfolio was somewhat in flux in Riyadh after 40 years of a status quo under Prince Sultan and the Ministry of Defense. During these 40 years, priority was to minimize security risks, which proved to be increasingly difficult in light of the Arab uprisings. Smuggling of weapons, drugs, and illegal migrant workers (mostly from the Horn of Africa) continued to be a problem. This took on increased importance domestically in 2013 when Ethiopian migrants began civil unrest in the capital Riyadh, alarming Saudi authorities and population alike. Many undocumented migrants became domestic workers, making it harder for the Saudi government to keep track of them (Aldhyabi and Alkhattaf 2013). As a result, Saudi Arabia developed a plan to build a barrier along its southern borders (BBC 2013), a project it had originally abandoned in 2003 due to the controversy it stirred in Yemen (*The Guardian* 2004).

Another factor that pushed Saudi Arabia to take matters into its own hands was the feeling of abandonment by its partners, especially the United States (increasingly busy with its diplomatic track with Iran towards the nuclear agreement) who downplayed Iranian influence in Yemen (Al-Rashed 2009). European countries were also busy with the aftermath of the Arab uprisings. The conflicts in the Middle East arrived at Europe's doorsteps with the influx of refugees pushing Europeans to prioritize the Syrian crisis. Around the same time, Sanaa fell into the hands of Houthis in late 2014. The growing concern with developments in Yemen was not limited to Saudi officials, but it was also widespread among the Saudi public. A few months later, a new Saudi leadership would alter the regional order and gain widespread local support for taking a firm stance against developments across their southern border.

A NEW AND MORE ASSERTIVE SAUDI ARABIA (2015 - 2020)

Prior to 2015, the political structure in Saudi Arabia was predictable in the sense that ministries were distributed among princes to balance the power between royal family members. This allowed for "checks and balances" between the different ministries and minimized chances of impulsive actions due to the power-sharing among royals. This status quo changed in January 2015 when King Salman ascended to the throne. The appointment of his son, Prince Mohammed bin Salman, as Minister of Defense was the first step in a sequence of events that has profoundly altered domestic politics, as well as Saudi's foreign policy in terms of both process and execution. This change has greatly impacted Saudi involvement in regional politics over the last five years.

While the policies of the previous era were more concerned with minimizing security risks, the new leadership increasingly focused on establishing a new regional order – a strategy that has been the main characteristic of its domestic and foreign policies.



The Kingdom's assertiveness was a fundamental pillar in the construction of a "new" Saudi national identity, contributing to an emerging hyper-nationalism (Alhussein 2019). This phenomenon has helped bypass challenging shifts in domestic policies, most notably the transfer of power from the old horizontal system to a vertical one, exemplified by the promotion of Mohammed bin Salman to Crown Prince.

The military intervention in Yemen was launched just three months into the reign of the new king. Prominent Saudi thinkers and scholars considered the military campaign overdue and strongly supported it on social media and in the national media. As Minister of Defense, Mohammed bin Salman oversaw the operations, and images of him in the operations room demonstrated the assertiveness of the new leadership. However, the promises of a brief war ending within a few months were not met, gradually increasing concerns of a war that might drag on indefinitely. Moreover, the growing scale of Houthi attacks on Saudi Arabia, that were no longer only limited to the south but eventually reached Riyadh added to increased concerns related to the domestic security situation.


Against this backdrop, the Houthi-Iranian connection became even more problematic and entangled. When Saudi Arabia's oil infrastructure in Abqaiq and Khurais were attacked in September 2019, Houthi rebels claimed responsibility, even though later evidence showed a more likely Iranian connection (Pamuk 2019). In line with Saudi Arabia's prioritizing of its security concerns, renewed contacts with the Houthis to exit the conflict picked up pace after that attack. Around the same time, the UAE downsized its involvement in Yemen (Seche 2020). This move prompted Saudi Arabia to facilitate the settlement between Yemeni factions through the Riyadh Agreement in late 2019. The agreement aimed to resolve another of Yemen's many interlinked issues, namely the power struggle between the Southern Transitional Council (STC) and the Hadi government. However, this agreement has run into several obstacles, underlining the many pitfalls in Yemen even for a more assertive Saudi leadership.

In recent years, even with a more active Saudi foreign policy, unexpected events also presented sidetracks with regard to Yemen. For example, after the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018, some anticipated that Saudi Arabia would try to get out of Yemen to salvage its image. Similarly, with the onset of the coronavirus pandemic in early 2020, speculations arose again arguing that the crisis presents Saudi Arabia with a suitable moment to exit on humanitarian grounds. However, the aforementioned back channel talks with the Houthis that were widely discussed in late 2019, as well as the unilateral ceasefire that was declared due to the pandemic, were soon over when Saudi Arabia again began air strikes in July after the Houthis had targeted Riyadh with missiles. It is fair to conclude that Saudi Arabia is not waiting for the right moment to get out of the conflict, but rather it is waiting for the right conditions to exit. It is weighing its options and will likely exit the Yemeni conflict when it faces as few security repercussions as possible.

THE U.S. FACTOR

The election of President Donald Trump in 2016 provided Saudi Arabia with much needed support that it desperately missed during the Obama Administration. Having the United States on its side helped Saudi Arabia demonstrate its strong stance against interference in its domestic affairs. This resulted in a number of diplomatic disputes with western countries, most notably Germany in 2017 (for criticizing the military campaign in Yemen) and Canada in 2018 (for demanding the release of women's rights activists). The two incidents demonstrate that pressuring Saudi Arabia over its human rights record or war in Yemen does not only have little impact (especially when done unilaterally), but it can also unleash severe tensions.

The election of President Joe Biden would remind Saudi Arabia of the Obama era, a time when it felt betrayed by its closest partner. While no drastic changes in the relationship between Saudi Arabia and the US are expected with a Biden presidency, however, a push to end the Yemen war might be a likely scenario. Biden has expressed the desire



to end “forever wars” alluding to the ongoing military campaign in Yemen (Sky News 2019). Saudi Arabia will still have to factor in increasingly negative sentiments from the United States House of Representatives in the period ahead.

EUROPEAN ENGAGEMENT

In an effort to pressure Saudi Arabia to end its war in Yemen, some European countries have resorted to halting arms sales to the Kingdom. While this move is more symbolic than effective, it has only pushed Saudi Arabia to purchase more arms from the US and other countries, including Canada (*The Guardian* 2020). In July 2020, the UK also resumed arms sales to Saudi Arabia after they had been suspended in 2019 due to pressure from human rights campaigners. Saudi Arabia is aware that the EU is often unable to have a strong united stance on regional conflicts due to the differences among its members, and therefore tries to play individual states off each other when it comes to business dealings and arms contracts.

Certain EU member states, however, with a long-established interest in the situation in Yemen can play an important role in influencing the situation. For example, the E3 (France, Germany, UK) can potentially play a mediating role between Saudi Arabia and Iran that will ensure a wider understanding and compliance to security issues, building on already established mechanisms such as the format the E3+Italy has with Iran. This can potentially fit with Saudi Arabia’s own back channel with the Houthis and Riyadh’s long-expressed view that it will not accept “another Hezbollah in Yemen” (*Al Arabiya* 2018).

Notwithstanding the focus of international and European actors on the “Saudi vs. Houthis” conflict, various other fault lines in Yemen must also be taken into account – all interlinked, and some with deep historic roots. Previous agreements such as the GCC Agreement (2011), the Stockholm Agreement (2018), and the Riyadh Agreements (2019 and 2020) did little to overcome the conflict(s) in Yemen. A comprehensive solution in Yemen will require deeper engagements with and among different Yemeni factions and groups to agree on a roadmap moving forward. As a result, deeper insight into the issues and challenges facing Saudi Arabia is also of the essence for potential European involvement. In a complex situation like Yemen, such an endeavor can contribute to foster better communication channels and show an understanding of specific challenges facing Riyadh’s exit.

Saudi Arabia and the EU share a number of priorities in Yemen, including issues related to humanitarian aid and development assistance, to name but a few (European Union 2020). Saudi Arabia’s aid to Yemen has evolved over the decades from direct transfers to President Saleh and his cronies (which ended up stirring rivalries and patronage) to establishing the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center, which has been focusing on Yemen. Saudi Arabia has in recent years hosted the Riyadh International Humanitarian Forum (Government of Saudi Arabia 2020), addressing inter alia migration from the Horn of Africa to Yemen and Saudi Arabia (IOM 2020). In June 2020, the Kingdom and the UN co-hosted a high-level pledging event for the humanitarian crisis in Yemen (OCHA 2020). All these efforts have been crucial for Saudi Arabia as it attempts to salvage its global image and strike a balance between the damage of the war and extending a helping hand. Saudi Arabia will most likely shoulder some of the burden of the post-war reconstruction, which is also something that is of importance for Europe. This commonality of interests related to humanitarian aid and reconstruction can present a window of opportunity towards wider engagement with European governments that are also active on the humanitarian front.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Understanding the security dilemmas outlined in this paper is vital for recognizing the challenges facing Saudi Arabia's exit strategy from the Yemen conflict. In addressing these issues, Europe can be involved in a broader engagement with Saudi Arabia regarding potential security solutions as well as on issues related to humanitarian assistance and Yemen's post-war reconstruction. Some of the realities and recommendations that could help in carving out an exit strategy are the following:

- Halting arms sales to Saudi Arabia will do little to end the conflict in Yemen. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia's demand for the Houthis to disarm is unrealistic. A new way forward should take into account these two realities, and aim for pragmatic middle ground solutions.
- Saudi Arabia does not want to be seen strictly as a party to the conflict(s) in Yemen, but more of a mediator and facilitator (i.e. the Riyadh Agreement). This is also one of the reasons driving its humanitarian involvement in Yemen. Increased cooperation with Saudi Arabia on the humanitarian front can be a useful entry point for European actors.
- The GCC is more fragmented now than ever before. However, certain GCC member states have invested in finding solutions to the conflict. Kuwait's long history in mediation and the new Omani leadership can facilitate a way forward, especially in light of the UAE's downsized role and Saudi Arabia's abovementioned aspiration for a mediating role.
- Saudi Arabia is faced with many security dilemmas in Yemen, not limited to current threats from the Houthis, but also pertaining to longstanding border issues and smuggling. Finding an exit strategy should take into account these issues and how they can best be resolved.
- Saudi Arabia will likely shoulder some of the responsibility for post-conflict reconstruction in Yemen. Crafting a long-term plan, while simultaneously trying to find ways to exit the conflict, is necessary for addressing the post-conflict situation. European actors can assist the Saudi role and thinking in this regard.

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BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE

HOW EUROPE COULD ADDRESS REGIONAL INTERESTS IN YEMEN

According to the UN, the war in Yemen, a country with a population of over 30 million, has resulted in one of the worst humanitarian crises in modern history, primarily due to heightened tensions between regional powers, who are either directly or indirectly involved in the war.

However, what is most worrying about this war is the fact that there is no clear prospect or end to it in the foreseeable future. If this war continues, the humanitarian crisis it has caused will worsen considerably. Moreover, the south of the Arabian Peninsula will be faced with new risks if the geographic scope of the war expands and new parties become involved in it.

Due to the seriousness of the crisis, the EU, given its global standing, is obliged to take a stance and assume an active role. This role will be the main subject of this paper, which will discuss how the EU can develop its stance and role regarding the crisis in Yemen, in line with its global position and influence, and in particular how it can contribute to ending the crisis or mitigating its impact.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF YEMEN TO THE EU

The EU does not have major economic interests in Yemen given that the latter is a low income nation with a small GDP; the size of trade between Yemen and EU countries is minimal. In fact, according to the 2014 Yemeni Foreign Trade Report, trade between Yemen and the EU did not exceed USD 1.6 billion in value (USD 1.5 billion in exports to Yemen and less than USD 100 million of exports from Yemen). Moreover, EU countries do not hold major investments or interests in the country; European investments in Yemen do not exceed USD three billion in value, mainly investments by the French company Total in the natural gas liquidation station at Balhaf. However, work was suspended at the station in April 2015, and the situation is likely to remain unchanged in the foreseeable future.

Austria's OMV, a multinational integrated oil and gas company based in Vienna, also has minor oil investments in the country, and it resumed work in Yemen in 2018 at a maximum capacity up to 16,000 barrels per day.

Furthermore, the war in Yemen has not posed any direct risks to the EU so far, contrary to the Syrian and Libyan crises. Nevertheless, Europe could still face risks, should the war in Yemen intensify and draw in new parties, leading to a spill-over in neighboring countries. These risks include threatening maritime traffic, particularly oil and gas traffic, and undermining oil and gas production in the region, such as incidents similar to the drone and missile attack against Saudi Aramco in September 2019, an attack for which the Houthis claimed responsibility (Aljazeera 2019).

The Yemeni crisis could also stir up terrorist organizations in Yemen. Of particular concern is al-Qaeda, whose Yemeni branch is considered by the US to be the most dangerous branch of al-Qaeda in the world after carrying out several operations outside of Yemen. These include the attempt to detonate booby-trapped packages on cargo planes headed towards the US in October 2010 (Emarat Al Youm 2010); the attack against the Charlie Hebdo HQ in January 2015, in which 12 people were killed and the attempt to detonate a plane above Detroit Airport by the Nigerian national, Ahmed Farouk Abdel Matlab, in December 2019 (CNN Arabic 2018).



Given that Europe's economic interests in Yemen are negligible and that security threats have so far remained limited, the EU's main focus in the Yemeni War has revolved around the ensuing humanitarian catastrophe, as well as human rights violations and potential war crimes. These issues have largely drawn the attention of public opinion in EU countries, particularly among human rights organizations. This has led to tensions in relations between some European countries and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), which heads the military coalition of the war in Yemen, after EU countries criticized the Kingdom and imposed a partial embargo on arms exports to it (Arab Defense Forum 2019).

THE EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE ON THE WAR IN YEMEN

EU countries do not share a unified view on the Yemeni War; there are clear differences in opinion among them. The UK, which is no longer a member of the EU, took stances that differ from those adopted by other EU countries, primarily due to its indirect involvement in the war by supplying KSA and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) with weapons and providing technical, logistical, and intelligence support to both countries (*Almawqea Post* 2019). Hence, the UK adopted stances which sided with KSA, thus rejecting the sanctions that other EU countries had suggested, such as a partial embargo on arms exports imposed by Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Belgium.

The EU's general position leans towards putting an end to the war in Yemen, pressuring KSA to cease its aerial attacks, holding it accountable for its violations of international humanitarian law and seeking peaceful solutions to the war. Nevertheless, the EU has not yet collectively adopted any position that could genuinely influence the course of the war in Yemen. The EU's only action consisted of the European Parliament's non-binding requests to prohibit arms exports to KSA (*Al Khaleej Online* 2018).

EUROPE'S SCOPE OF INFLUENCE IN THE WAR

There are three main ways through which the EU can interfere in the Yemeni crisis. These include humanitarian and human rights, and on a political level. In the past few years, European intervention at the humanitarian and human rights levels has been more potent than its political interventions. At the humanitarian level, the EU, through its institutions or member states, has provided part of the funds requested by the UN to address the humanitarian crisis in Yemen. EU member states and the UK have pledged to grant USD 500 million in 2020, which amounts to 37% of the funds pledged by donor countries (USD 500 out of USD 1,350 million) (*Yemen Akhbar* 2020). These funds will support the relief programs implemented by UN bodies in Yemen.

On the human rights level, the EU, through its members in the UN Security Council, has been consistently calling for the formation of investigation committees to look into human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law in the Yemeni war. These efforts culminated in the issuance of a Security Council resolution on September 29, 2017, requesting the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to form a team of international and regional experts to monitor the human rights situation in Yemen (*Al Thawrah* 2019).

On the political level, EU member states have contributed to funding the Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen, as well as several peace programs implemented under the auspices of the Office of the Special Envoy, the UN, and select European institutions. Peace talks were also held in the Swedish capital, Stockholm, in December 2018, which resulted – among others – in the ceasefire agreement in Hudaydah.

EXPANDING THE EU'S ROLE IN THE YEMENI CRISIS

In light of the above, it appears that the role of the EU in the Yemeni crisis has been limited to mitigating the repercussions of the war. This role is expected to shrink further after Brexit, since the UK was one of the most influential EU member states in Yemen, due to its historical role in the region and its indirect involvement in the war, as well as the role it played in the Security Council where it would continually follow-up on the Yemeni crisis.

There is both a Yemeni and regional need for a more effective EU role in the crisis, given the EU's global standing and its "mature" approach in dealing with wars and humanitarian crises around the world, which is characterized by favoring peaceful solutions over the use of armed force.

In order to expand this role, EU officials concerned with Yemeni and regional affairs must hold sufficient knowledge about this complicated crisis and about the aims and behavior of all the parties involved. That would enable them to develop policies and plans that can impact the course of the crisis by influencing the positions of the countries involved in it. The major influential parties in the Yemeni crisis are KSA, Iran, and the UAE. However, KSA is considered to be the most influential player in the Yemeni War, since its direct involvement started in March 2015. Countries that took part in the war, under the banner of the "Arab Coalition," did so at the request of KSA. Currently, KSA is the only country that remains in this coalition, which was dissolved without an official statement following the UAE's withdrawal from the majority of areas in southern Yemen in November 2019 (Adens BQ 2019).


As a result, the course of the war in Yemen and its dynamics largely depend on KSA's policies and future plans for Yemen in general and for the current war more specifically. Therefore, any desire by the EU to influence the progression of the war in Yemen, particularly its efforts to end the war or alleviate its tragedies, hinges on the EU's ability to influence Saudi decision-makers in particular and, to a lesser extent, Iranian and Emirati decision-makers.

The following sections of this paper will describe and analyze Saudi-Yemeni relations and try to determine KSA's undeclared objectives in the war and in Yemen more generally, by looking at KSA's attitude toward Yemen before the war, during the war and in the present.

KSA AND YEMEN

For more than 50 years, and specifically since the establishment of what was formerly known as North Yemen, KSA has regarded Yemen as a threat. The Republic was established with the support of the Egyptian government, which, at the time, was in a state of conflict and competition with KSA. Egyptian forces directly took part in the civil war that broke out after the Republic was established, while KSA participated in the war indirectly by supporting the Royal Forces. Since then, KSA has regarded Yemen as its own area of influence and has given itself the right to intervene in Yemeni internal affairs, by designing Yemen's domestic and foreign policies in such a way as to prevent countries that are hostile to KSA – such as the USSR during the Cold War, Iraq under the rule of Saddam Hussein or Iran – from extending their influence over Yemen.

KSA was able to intervene in Yemeni internal affairs due to many factors, mainly the massive economic gap between KSA and Yemen (the Yemeni population amounts to 150% of the Saudi population, while KSA's GDP is more than 20 times that of Yemen) (World Bank 2020). Because of this gap, Yemen was in constant need of its wealthy neighbor. Moreover, internal conflicts and wars due to Yemen's fragile governance structures in both Yemeni states (North and South) before and after the unification enabled KSA to interfere, either by supporting one party at the expense of the other, or as an arbiter between the belligerent parties, such as in 2011 in what was known as the Gulf Initiative. That led to Yemen's economic and political dependence on KSA, which at times resembled a Saudi tutelage over Yemen.



KSA was left to interfere in Yemeni affairs with the approval or non-objection of influential global powers, such as the United States and Western countries, especially during the Cold War. These powers gave KSA the right to interfere in Yemen at the time, partly because this interference was in line with their interests, and partly because they needed to play up to KSA, as their interests in the Kingdom far exceeded those in Yemen.

This became clearer during the latest war, where influential countries around the world and most regional powers backed KSA or, at least, refrained from opposing it. UN Security Council Resolution 2216, issued a few weeks after the war broke out on March 2015 with a majority of 14 nations and a Russian abstention, shed light on this reality, since it gave KSA, or the so-called “Arab Coalition,” legitimacy to wage the war in Yemen.

KSA OBJECTIVES IN YEMEN

KSA's policy in Yemen has declared and undeclared objectives. For example, KSA has stated that its military intervention in Yemen aims to achieve the following:

- Aid the “legitimate Yemeni government” in regaining its control of the entire Yemeni territory, particularly the capital Sana’a, and end the Houthi coup, by virtue of UN Security Council Resolution 2216.
- Resuming the political settlement from the point where it had been broken off before the Houthis entered Sana’a in order to ensure Yemen’s security, stability, sovereignty, and territorial integrity.
- Protect its southern borders from the attacks of Iranian-backed Houthis.

However, by analyzing the reality on the ground, and by examining the history of Saudi-Yemeni relations, the true objectives of KSA's intervention in Yemen can be identified differently than set out, especially with regard to the unity and sovereignty of Yemen, which is called for in all Security Council resolutions, including Resolution 2216.

KSA's behavior, since the beginning of the war, proves that it has taken no practical steps to strengthen the legitimate government and enable it to manage Yemeni affairs from the interim capital of Aden. Since the Houthis lost control of Aden in July 2015, the two countries in the coalition (KSA and UAE) have not enabled the legitimate government to operate. On the contrary, the UAE, which was directly responsible for Aden, publicly supported the so-called “Southern Transitional Council” (STC), whose purpose is to divide Yemen and put an end to its unity.

Since May 2017, the UAE has supported STC forces in taking control of several regions in the south, particularly the city of Aden. In August 2019, all Yemeni government forces were expelled from the city, a move that practically ended the political presence of Yemen's legitimate government in the interim capital. Consequently, the Saudi capital, Riyadh, became the de-facto headquarters of President Hadi and most Yemeni officials.

Despite the fact that KSA has not publicly backed the Southern Transitional Council and the measures it has taken, its silence with regard to those measures, as the head of the coalition, indicates that it approves of them, and it also indicates that they do not contradict its true objectives in Yemen.

Furthermore, KSA has not made genuine efforts to form a powerful and united Yemeni military that can extend its control over the entire Yemeni territory, defeat the Houthis, and bring back the legitimate government to the capital Sana’a. The only practical step taken in this regard was the formation by KSA and the UAE of military forces, armed with light and medium weapons, and consisting of a large number of political parties, separatist movements, and regional forces that have conflicting agendas.

KSA is also attempting to form a government that represents the powers that control these forces, within the framework of the Riyadh Agreement, which was signed by the legitimate government and the Southern Trans-

ditional Council in the Saudi capital on November 5, 2019, and whose main points were drawn up by KSA and the UAE (Al-Muwadea 2019).

In light of the above, we can conclude that KSA does not trust the Yemeni government, and therefore it is refusing to grant it the necessary support to truly practice its powers in the regions that it controls, at least in principle. Rather than doing so, KSA chose to manage the Yemeni portfolio indirectly and to place the country under its virtual mandate, by forming a weak government that lacks harmony and establishing numerous authorities, each of which controls a certain region and all of whom are affiliated with KSA and are financially, militarily, and politically dependent on it. In practical terms, this means maintaining Yemen as a state with a flawed sovereignty and in a situation similar to that of Lebanon under Syrian tutelage between 1990-2005, a period that some Lebanese refer to as the Syrian occupation of Lebanon. This is also similar to the situation of North Yemen in the 1970s and 1980s, when KSA exercised a form of mandate over the state and generally controlled its domestic and foreign policies, including changes in the political leadership.¹

The remaining sections of this paper will address the roles and interests of the other regional actors involved in the Yemeni war. Shedding light on their positions will pave the way for more holistic recommendations towards the European Union on how to respond to the Yemeni crisis.

IRAN AND YEMEN

Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic, Iran has dealt with the Arab region in Asia as a threat to its regime, as well as to its scope of influence. Since then, KSA has been the major threat to Iran's ruling regime and the primary obstacle to its ambition of dominating the region. Given Yemen's proximity to KSA, Iran has attempted to secure a footing in Yemen from which to threaten KSA. To do so, it supported the Houthis in their fight against former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, and this support increased after they took control of Sanaa on September 21, 2014.

Given that KSA considers Yemen to be its own area of influence, as previously mentioned, the power grab by the Houthis, who are Iran's allies, was seen as a major threat by KSA. For this and several other reasons, KSA waged its war against Yemen to eliminate the Houthis, or at least to weaken them. As a result, Yemen became one of the battlegrounds between Iran and KSA.

On the other hand, Iran made sure that the Houthis would be able to resist the onslaught and enabled them to control as much of Yemen's regions as possible, in order to prevent KSA from regaining its exclusive influence in Yemen.

THE UAE AND YEMEN

Since the beginning of the war, the UAE has been the second largest supporter of the Arab Coalition after KSA. The UAE's political and military presence was centered in the southern governorates and the western coast of Yemen. It supported southern separatists, a number of Salafist factions and forces affiliated with the late president Ali Abdullah Saleh.

Based on the UAE's behavior, it is clear that it has its own agenda in Yemen, which consists of fighting the Muslim Brotherhood, weakening Iran's influence, encouraging the separation of South Yemen and establishing exclusive spheres of influence through local proxies, particularly in coastal regions and Socotra (the largest Yemeni island).

¹ Most historians writing on Yemen believe that KSA was behind all the major events in the country, including: the overthrow of President Al-Eryani in 1974 and President Al-Hamdi in 1977 and the election of Ali Abdullah Saleh as President in 1978.



It is not known for sure whether the UAE's policy in Yemen is fully coordinated with KSA or if the UAE follow their own agenda and plans. In some cases, it seemed that the UAE and KSA were competing for influence in certain areas, as in the case of Socotra before the Transitional Council took control of it. At the time, KSA protected the local authority from the Transitional Council's attempts to control the island, before finally giving it up.

Still, the UAE has its own interests and objectives in Yemen, which differ from those of KSA. In particular, the latter wants Yemen to remain under its influence, and it will not accept to share this influence with the UAE. In fact, KSA only allowed the UAE to expand its influence in Yemen because it needed the UAE's support in the war, but the Kingdom's position might change in the future if it no longer needs the UAE's support.

QATAR AND YEMEN

For more than 20 years, Qatar has adopted an active foreign policy. The small state's massive financial resources enabled it to play highly influential roles abroad. By analyzing Qatar's foreign policy, one can clearly notice that its primary motive is to weaken KSA, which is seen by the Qatari government as its main adversary. As such, Qatar has long been trying to weaken KSA's influence in Yemen, by supporting former president Saleh, the Yemeni Congregation for Reform and the Houthis.

Despite the fact that Qatar took part in the war alongside KSA, it was expelled from the coalition in 2017. Since then, Qatar has been accused by parties affiliated with KSA and the UAE of supporting the Houthis – an accusation dismissed by Qatar. Although there is no clear evidence of Qatar's support to the Houthis, political reasoning indicates that Qatar has an interest in foiling the plans of KSA and the UAE in Yemen. This can be seen by analyzing the media content disseminated by Qatar's state-owned Al-Jazeera Media Network.


OMAN AND YEMEN

The Sultanate of Oman did not take part in the Arab Coalition and took a neutral stance with regard to the war in Yemen. However, parties affiliated with KSA and the UAE accused Oman of siding with Iran and the Houthis and of facilitating the smuggling of arms to the Houthis through its lands and coasts, as well as of allowing Houthi leaders to reside and move freely on its territories. Despite the fact that Oman has dismissed these accusations, the general analysis of Oman's policy towards Yemen indicates that the Omani government does not want KSA or the UAE to take control of Yemen, particularly in the Al Mahrah Governorate, which is seen by Oman as one of its areas of influence in Yemen.

Therefore, the Sultanate of Oman unofficially supports groups that oppose Saudi presence and organize protests against KSA in Al Mahrah Governorate. Some of these groups have even been involved in limited armed clashes with Saudi forces or Yemeni forces affiliated with KSA.

OUTCOMES

Although KSA is the most influential player in Yemen, it has not been able to transform the situation in the country to its advantage, and it does not seem that the Kingdom will manage to achieve its objectives, given the manner in which it is managing the war and Yemeni affairs. The idea of imposing a mandate on Yemen is not realistic, given Yemen's large size and population, its extreme poverty, steep terrains and the complex issues between its local actors.



The main obstacle preventing KSA from imposing a mandate on Yemen is the presence of the Houthi movement, which KSA has not been able to defeat nor subdue. That is due to the fact that the Houthi movement is politically and ideologically opposed to KSA, is allied to Iran and intends to rule Yemen alone. These factors make the Houthi movement radically different from other Yemeni political forces, which accept Saudi tutelage.

Moreover, the Houthi movement has several sources of strength that enable it to reject Saudi tutelage, including its totalitarian structure, which provides it with a solid core of followers that are willing to die for it, its strict control of more than 70% of the Yemeni population and its entrenchment in mountainous regions that are hard to penetrate.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Although KSA appears to be the party that has caused the crisis in Yemen, it has a vested interest in ensuring stability in Yemen, given the geographical proximity of the two countries. Meanwhile, other interfering powers, especially Iran, have a real interest in destabilizing Yemen and keeping it in a fragile situation, as that would weaken KSA and enable those powers to constantly interfere in Yemeni affairs. Therefore, EU member states must be aware of this reality and further pressure Iran to change its destructive behavior in Yemen in any future negotiations on Iran's nuclear program after Joe Biden officially becomes the president of the United States.
- Given the fact that KSA has an interest in ensuring Yemen's stability, it is preferable for both Yemen and KSA to rectify the Saudi involvement, rather than end it as some are demanding, as Yemen needs Saudi economic support. Moreover, ending or reducing Saudi involvement in Yemen would increase the involvement of other powers, such as Iran, which seeks to place Yemen or parts of it under the control of the Houthi movement – a totalitarian and authoritarian organization similar to the Iranian regime – or to turn Yemen into a land of chaos in which KSA would drown.

In order to rectify its involvement in Yemen, KSA must abandon its plan to place Yemen under its mandate and to instead use its financial resources and influence to help Yemenis form a strong government that would extend its control over the entire nation.
- Changing the orientation of the countries involved in the Yemeni crisis will be no easy task if there is no international consensus between the EU and the United States, which is the foreign power that is most capable of changing KSA's strategy and countering Iranian policies in the region and in Yemen.
- Unifying the position of EU member states after Brexit is necessary because the EU's influence will be reduced to a great extent after the UK leaves.
- The financial allocations dedicated to Yemen must be increased and directed towards relief programs implemented by UN bodies to minimize the humanitarian crisis, which is expected to worsen.
- Work on human rights issues must continue, by forming international or EU investigation commissions to pressure local and external warring parties to respect human rights and to refrain from committing war crimes.
- The EU delegation and the embassies of EU member states in Yemen must be activated in order for them to communicate closely with warring parties and to supervise any relief or development programs in Yemen.
- European NGOs that have a history and experience of working in the field of research, fact-finding and data collection in Yemen must be supported. It is preferable that a European research center would be established to analyze the situation in Yemen and guide political decision-makers on Yemeni affairs.

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NO SECURITY WITHOUT DEVELOPMENT IN YEMEN

A COMMUNITY-BASED APPROACH TOWARDS LONG-TERM SUSTAINABLE PEACE

Europe's long record of development and political support to rural and urban Yemenis has created a positive perception of its involvement in Yemeni affairs. This gives the European Union (EU) and its member states¹ a significant advantage in initiating innovative approaches to help bring about a lasting solution to the crisis. This paper presents a medium to long-term strategy and is based on the assumption that the crisis is nowhere near a solution, a position accepted even by the International Crisis Group, and that any short term agreement imposed by external forces, whether from the coalition states or beyond, would achieve nothing more than temporary respite to the Yemeni people (ICG 2020).

The paper argues that only a strategy focused on economic, social and political development at the community level can establish the basic structures essential to give birth to a new polity enabling Yemenis to create sustainable and equitable political institutions. To achieve long-term stability, Yemenis must build an economy able to provide adequate income to households, and a society where everyone has equal access to basic services, while retaining Yemen's characteristic cultural features, including the many aspects of its social fabric. This strategy must be initiated by Yemenis, though there is both room and need for external support. This approach is the only one capable of avoiding the country's assets being, once again, captured by kleptocrats, regardless of the political label to which they may claim allegiance. They are the main initiators, perpetrators, and beneficiaries of the war in terms of power and wealth.


Regardless, given the long-term perspective presented in this paper and the desperation and suffering that millions of Yemenis are having to endure, this strategy must be complemented by other short-term, immediate interventions which, ideally, should also contribute to the long-term programme while producing immediate results. For too long the argument has been that no development is possible without first having security. In the absence of any prospects for security, it is now time to engage in development, following the slogan "no security without development."

The main problem with this approach concerns the role of the current power-holders in the sites where this strategy might be implemented. Organizations operating in Yemeni areas of different geographic and population size are currently focusing on military targets and enforcing their political control. They could perceive the vision presented here as a challenge to their rule, but the prospect of social and economic development can also be presented to them as a mechanism to increase their legitimacy and gain popular support, something which they all crave. Although it will be difficult to persuade some players to forgo financial benefits and direct authority, those with long-term perspectives should be willing to support interventions that will contribute to improved living conditions and governance. This should be a major determining factor in choosing where to initiate projects.

LESSONS FROM PREVIOUS EUROPEAN AID EXPERIENCES IN YEMEN

For two decades prior to the war, the EU and its member states' interventions in Yemen have broadly addressed many of the country's major long-term problems including security and health; in particular, two member states

¹This paper does not discuss the British role, which is significantly different, and after the UK's departure from the EU, irrelevant to EU and its member states' interventions in Yemen.



have been deeply involved as leading external investors in addressing the country's main challenge, namely its absolute water shortage. Germany supported projects for the provision of water and sanitation in medium-sized towns throughout the country, addressing the supply and sanitation aspects jointly, an approach essential to success. This comprehensive approach was unfortunately not followed by others, neither in large cities, nor in rural areas where the formation of stagnant water ponds has contributed, among other negative side effects, to the resurgence of water and mosquito-borne diseases, such as malaria, dengue, chikungunya, and cholera.

The Netherlands were the main investor in water supply for rural areas where more than 70% of Yemenis live in the 37,000 villages dispersed throughout the country's diverse terrains. Without going into detail about Yemeni development or even rural development policies in recent decades, the Netherlands' rural water assistance provides an excellent example to briefly examine some of the policy issues faced by all foreign development aid in Yemen, namely addressing the challenge of seeking short term results in contrast to long-term institution building. With the praiseworthy aim of supporting and strengthening local institutions, the Netherlands shifted from running rural water projects directly to providing pumps and other technology to the General Authority for Rural Water Supply Projects (GARWSP), the responsible parastatal institution. Despite the Netherlands' efforts to improve the governance of GARWSP, it remained incompetent, inefficient and corrupt. Field experience indicates that people thanked the Netherlands for providing the equipment, but also associate it with numerous failures, wrongly assuming that the Netherlands holds authority over GARWSP activities.


State funded development projects operate within bilateral agreements that constitutionally require them to work with existing national institutions. Their options are thus limited to either establishing parallel, "efficient" temporary project management units that by-pass national line ministries, or alternatively working with ministries despite their limited capacity. Most funders choose the former. The inherent problems to this approach are clear from the performance of the prominent and internationally praised Social Fund for Development (SFD) and the Public Works Program (PWP). Both provide rapid disbursement and apparent high levels of efficiency but simultaneously undermine national institutions by, among other methods, "bribing" good staff by offering them high salaries. These processes contribute to the weakening of the state institutions and, consequently, to the collapse of the state, which is visible today in the high level of fragmentation found at all levels in the country. Skewed selection of development investment has been an aggravating factor for the emergence of serious social and military struggles.

The war has resulted in the effective collapse of state institutions throughout Yemen. Even before that, the EU and others developed mechanisms to work directly at the governorate and more local levels. These are mechanisms which can be used to implement the strategy described below.

RESPONDING TO YEMEN'S DEVELOPMENT NEEDS

In an environment where the overwhelming majority of senior politicians throughout the Yemeni political spectrum are primarily motivated by personal interest, a "peace" agreement leaving them in power cannot solve the country's political, economic or social problems. To rebuild a united or federal Yemen, or even different smaller states within this geographic area, the emergence of a new leadership is essential, and it should come about as a result of the approach suggested below. This new leadership must be committed to the welfare of the population as a whole and to solving the country's multiple political (governance, decentralization, institutional); economic (limited natural resources, low skill level); climate (water shortage, global warming, rising sea levels etc.); and social (cultural fragmentation, inequity, regional population, density, diversity) problems. Throughout the country, there are people committed to these objectives, but they need to be given the opportunities to develop their potential.

The strategy proposed here is based on the belief that this can be achieved through integrated, comprehensive, foreign funded investments at a local community level (whether larger villages, nahiya, even possibly districts) providing the full spectrum of interventions normally expected from the state. This would operate through the creation



and strengthening of community organisations, creating a foundation for a future in democratic politics on the wider national stage. A number of internationally funded projects in the past used elements of this strategy, but they were unable to be fully comprehensive due to sectoral institutional constraints. Only when the concept is implemented in a holistic manner can it achieve its fundamental aim in laying out the foundation for a new society. In this respect, the current fragmentation is an asset insofar as sectoral institutions are largely inoperative. Priority attention should go to rural areas where 70% of the population still live and the majority of the poor are found.

Since the 1990s, almost everywhere in Yemen, urban and rural, community-based organisations (CBOs) have been established. There are thousands of them with a wide range and level of activism, competence and commitment. Many were originally set up in the 1990s when external financiers decided to support the private sector and fund non-government organisations, rather than work through state institutions. Internationally financed projects were often initiators working through the SFD and PWP as well as numerous regional projects such as the GTZ (predecessor of GIZ, German Development Corporation) funded Innovative Development in the Agricultural Sector (IDAS), International Fund for Agricultural Development that supported the Dhamar Participatory Rural Development Project (DPRDP), and Al Mahra Rural Development Project (AMRDP) to name but a few. All of these operated in different ways through community “participatory committees”.

Piecemeal approaches are unable to fulfil the comprehensive and integrated political, social and economic transformations essential to success. They have contributed elements useful to the proposed strategy by creating or strengthening the capacity of CBOs in planning, management and implementation of projects such as building or rehabilitation of tracks, schools, and medical centres. Among the short-term current humanitarian/development activities that can contribute to the long-term objective are the currently defined “cash for work” programmes. The current EU-funded “Supporting Resilient Livelihoods and Food Security in Yemen” (ERRY) has many elements that are part of this approach.

As is the case worldwide, some voluntary groups are run by individuals deeply committed to supporting their communities, while others are run by self-serving individuals. This is an inevitable consequence of a voluntary approach, which allows the full range of quality of performance from excellent to abysmal. Existing and new CBOs have to be the basis for the construction of a new Yemen. It will be impossible to avoid some “elite” or “political” capture, as factions present today will do their utmost to usurp benefits. However, supporting CBOs will produce communities which have the capacity not only to manage their local economy, but also to develop the skills necessary to engage in political debate at the governorate and national levels. This will assist the emergence of political organisations which both represent local interests and bring shared perspectives to the national level. These organisations will prioritize the welfare of the population as a whole. In addition to political development, local projects would provide a model for governance and employment as well as strengthen local productive capacity and ensure the availability of basic services.

Participating community units would receive a grant assessed on a per capita basis managed at the local level. Women and men would be equally eligible for participation in activities. Possible investments could include domestic water supply and sanitation, reconstruction/repair/rehabilitation of social and economic infrastructure, renewable energy for community services [water, schools, medical centre], training and start-up capital for services [e.g. internet, mobile phones, etc.], support for productive activities such as agriculture or small-scale manufacturing. It could include salaries for certain essential community services and grants for training. Investments would include environmental awareness campaigns and mitigation of climate change impacts, gender role awareness, sustainable development, and basic and essential training in community management and planning such as record keeping and financial management aspects. In effect, this means building a democracy at the grass roots level. The directly “political” elements of the strategy include conflict resolution and mediation methods as well as local policing and community management which would later form the basis for the creation of institutions at the district and governorate levels; they are steps towards building new national institutions.

THE ROLE OF EUROPE

The explicit objective of this paper is to argue for Europe to lead in the establishment of sustainable entities which, in the long run, will form the foundation for the emergence of a democratic and effective base for the country's larger scale institutions. Basic human empathy and solidarity are fundamental ethical reasons why Europeans should assist Yemen and its people; after years of war, Yemenis are desperate for some kind of peace and reconstruction. The EU and its member states have good reasons to increase their involvement in Yemen, one of the states which controls the Bab al Mandab, a major route from Asia to Europe. In the past decade, some terrorists trained in Yemen have been active in Europe, and it remains a base for jihadi organisations. Yemen is a long way from Europe and does not "benefit" from the advantage of threatening the arrival of millions of refugees into the European Union, but it remains an important country which the EU and its member states should take seriously. On a more positive note, Yemen could become the source of high quality coffee and marine produce from its wealthy fisheries resources, as well as a destination for cultural tourism, thereby providing the basis for reasonably balanced trade. In practical terms, the EU and its member states have the major advantage of being able to operate outside of the straitjacket imposed by UNSC 2216 or US and UK strategies, and thus can build on a record of credibility.

Since the war started, a number of "reconstruction" conferences have been held in Riyadh and other cities, listing gigantic sums needed to rebuild Yemen. Attended by the major international financial institutions, large consultancy and construction companies, they mainly propose expensive projects to be financed by GCC states and whose vision is far removed from the history and culture of Yemen. The assumption that the GCC states will provide billions in grants is delusional at a time when financial constraints are expected to last for years due to lower oil prices and the worldwide recession. More importantly, the priorities listed in these conferences are of debatable benefits for Yemenis. The reality is that foreign reconstruction funds will be very limited, and it is important that they are spent at a much higher cost/benefit ratio for Yemen.

A different, more inclusive, people-oriented approach, leaving less room for company overheads, but more

benefits to the population will achieve better and more sustainable results. This approach will reap benefits both in terms of actual practical infrastructure achievements on the ground and human development at a considerably lower cost. This would directly benefit Europe by protecting it and its member states from the aforementioned threats, while strengthening the capacity of Yemen and Yemenis to develop ethical policies closer to European core values.

Assuming that most funding would come from the GCC states, this approach would give them a far higher return per riyal/dirham than their current war expenditure. In addition, it would also reduce the pressure from potential Yemeni migrants since the unemployment rate in Yemen would be far lower. The GCC would also be able to recruit Yemenis with higher technical and managerial skills, thus filling important local gaps. The integration and inclusion of Yemen into the GCC, supported by some states, making it a Peninsula Cooperation Council, or even a regional cooperation council, would contribute to long-term peace and stability in the region. A Yemen, effectively governed in the interests of its people and with careful management of its limited resources, would also in the long run, reduce the "threat" of millions of climate change refugees moving into the GCC states within a generation. There are no easy or cheap solutions to the Yemeni crisis, but a long-term strategy centered on economic, social and political development at the community level is a strong and essential element for re-creating Yemen as a viable and possibly flourishing country that is well integrated into the Arabian Peninsula and with positive relations with Europe.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The search for an immediate negotiated solution should be complemented with a long-term strategy simultaneously addressing social, political and economic needs of people in districts or larger entities and contribute to the emergence of new political forces genuinely committed to social equity. This could be done by setting up comprehensive integrated projects including the full spectrum of community needs; in other words, they would implement good governance at the level of the entity concerned. The fundamental concept of these projects is that they should not be limited to any one sector, be it political governance, economic development, or social services; they should cover all of these and act as a local state. In the context of the ongoing war and the absence of effective national state structures, they would temporarily include responsibilities usually associated with national level administrations – for example, payment of civil servant salaries, which include medical, security, and education staff, as well as financing capital infrastructure investments. The ultimate objective would be to merge into the new national institutions as soon as a political settlement has been reached.
- Project duration should be sufficient to achieve the basic objectives, i.e. at least five years. During this period, sufficient funds should be provided by the external financing agency/ies. Cost calculations should provide for a gradual transfer of financing to beneficiary communities and individuals through the establishment of equitable taxation mechanisms, which would kick in when household incomes rise. Taxation should gradually take over from external financial support. On the one hand, initial design should be sufficiently flexible to cope with changes in the national, political and military situation, such as an end to the fighting and the re-establishment of a national administration. On the other hand, it should be adjusted to the pace of economic development in the project area that is seeking to reach self-sufficiency and independence from project financing as fast as possible. This can be done through annual budget reviews, and it is essential to prevent the expectation of permanent external support.
- Such projects could start with a few contiguous districts and gradually expand to other neighboring ones with the ultimate aim of covering a governorate. They should include the involvement and employment of existing personnel so long as they demonstrate their competence and commitment to their responsibilities. They should neither systematically exclude nor include existing staff. Given the multiplicity of current political ruling entities and the fact that most are ignoring the needs of the population at large, the difficulties of identifying suitable sites for such projects should not be underestimated. Devising the appropriate selection mechanisms is the easy part; implementing them will be difficult but is important. Community pressure from the thousands of committed individuals found throughout the country will be of great assistance in this process.
- Project financing and design should ensure a single management structure and avoid the complexities resulting from the involvement of a multiplicity of national and international institutions in supervisory and technical interventions. This is essential to avoid inter-agency competition, excessive overhead administrative costs, and should ensure the most effective use of available funds to the benefit of the Yemeni communities. A single in-country management entity should manage all project interventions and contract individuals or organisations. This entity would provide services or other input according to the needs identified at the design level and during implementation in collaboration with the beneficiary communities.
- Potential financiers must be willing to take on long-term commitments. Germany has an excellent record in this regard, and it would be a prime candidate to establish such projects. The EU would need to adapt its procedures to enable it to initially commit to a longer project period than its standard three years, a constraint which has affected the quality of its performance in Yemen and elsewhere. Any other state willing to give priority to the needs of the intended Yemeni beneficiaries would be welcome to participate. Co-financing would make a lot of sense, provided the concept of the single implementing management entity is maintained.



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EUROPE'S OPTIONS TO ADDRESS THE CONFLICT IN
SYRIA

MOVING BEYOND PALLIATIVE SOLUTIONS POSSIBILITIES OF TURKEY-EU COOPERATION ON SYRIA

TURKEY'S NEW SYRIA POLICY AND ITS OBJECTIVES

In the early years of the Syrian crisis, Turkey's main objective was toppling the Bashar al-Assad regime. To that end, Ankara engaged to organise and support a political and military opposition force. However, Turkey's strategic priorities and policies in Syria changed after 2016 when the Syrian Kurdish group, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), and its allies in northern Syria declared a "federal democratic system" called "Rojava" in March 2016 (BBC 2016). Turkey was already concerned about the consolidation of the PYD's control over the Kurdish population and wanted the elimination of its rival Kurdish groups in Syria. What made matters worse for Turkey was that the PYD and its armed group, the People's Protection Units (YPG), had become the main US and European ally in the war against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). As a result of this cooperation, the PYD/YPG had been able to expand its control beyond the three Kurdish enclaves in northern Syria bordering Turkey. Ankara, perceiving these developments as a direct threat to Turkey's national security, made preventing the PYD's aspirations in northern Syria its number one priority of its Syria policy (Sever 2020).


In order to achieve its objective, Turkey launched three military campaigns in Syria. Developing Turkish-Russian relations allowed Turkey to launch Operation Euphrates Shield in August 2016 and Operation Olive Branch in January 2018. Finally, in October 2019, after negotiations with Washington, Turkey launched Operation Peace Spring, in north-eastern Syria. All these military operations aimed to pre-empt the emergence of an autonomous Kurdish region in northern Syria. While Turkey's military operations could prevent a PYD-controlled contiguous area across its border, due to Russian and US objections, it could not achieve the full extent of its planned buffer zone.

In addition, the issue of Syrian refugees has continued to occupy a central position in Ankara's approach to the

Syrian crisis. Although Turkey has been relatively successful in dealing with the influx of Syrians, the problems remain. Thus, one of the objectives of the Turkish government is to provide safe returns of Syrian citizens to their country. Furthermore, there is a concern about another wave of refugees coming to Turkey particularly from Idlib province, where the population has reached a condensed three million.

Finally, another objective of Turkey seems to be participation in the political process toward the resolution of the Syrian crisis. Turkey's military presence in northern Syria is seen as a way to guarantee Turkey's major role in this process. Furthermore, Turkey is the only country that actively works with what is left of the opposition, including the so-called Syrian National Army in Syria. Thus, Ankara can claim to play the role of the "protector of the opposition" in any political process.

Although Turkey's political objectives are clear, there are some embedded conflicts in Turkey's overall strategy. Firstly, Turkey has been engaged in a constant balancing act between Russia and the United States. Secondly, there are tensions regarding the political process and the position of Syrian Kurds. Turkey is clearly against PYD for its ties with the PKK. However, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government should be able to come up with ideas regarding the inclusion of Syrian Kurds in general into the political transition process. Thirdly, there are challenges related to the safe zone controlled by Turkey. Here, Turkey is engaged in aid, education, health, and administrative functions. However, the financial burden is high, "likely to be a few billion dollars a year" (Aydintasbas 2020). The problems of administrative reform and economic challenges can lead to further destabilization and radicalization. Some European support in these areas can contribute to stabilization and development of these areas.



Turkey's policies in Syria as well as opportunities for Turkey-EU cooperation will be very much affected by the developments on the ground. For that reason, it is necessary to analyse recent developments in Syria and other actors' evolving positions. In the last two years, the Assad regime, with the help of Russia and Iran, has been able to re-take and control the vast majority of Syria. Yet, the regime still faces significant challenges in consolidating its rule over the country and faces severe economic crisis. Relatedly, the country faces a massive reconstruction problem.

On the other hand, despite the regime's successful efforts and brutal tactics to suppress any dissent and its successful efforts to frame all opposition as "jihadist" and "radical," Syrians seem to continue their opposition as witnessed in Dar'a and Suwayda in the summer of 2020. There are old and new intermediaries, such as elders, traders, Muslim and non-Muslim clergy, who keep their distance from the regime, yet at the same time are able to deal with the regime when necessary (Khaddur and Mazur, 2019). These actors may prove to be important if the EU chooses to be more involved in the Syrian political transition.


Furthermore, Turkey's control in the north and the US presence in the northeast force the Assad regime to a negotiated solution rather than imposing its control all over the country. In that context, the positions of two major external powers will be significant but not certain. The US seems to increase the pressure on the Assad regime with the Caesar Act. Washington's overall strategy is not clear although its policy could be as Spyer argued "the pressure of stalemate" (Spyer 2020). On the other hand, Russia has successfully positioned itself as the most significant actor in the Syrian crisis, but Russia's future plans are unclear as speculations stir that Moscow and Assad are at odds.

TURKEY AND THE EU: POSSIBILITIES OF COOPERATION IN SYRIA

Turkey's relations with the EU have not been at its best in recent years. Although officially Turkey is an EU candidate country, the accession negotiations have not been progressing since 2016. While the EU has been increasingly critical of Turkey's domestic and foreign policy, the AKP government ignores the EU and no longer considers the EU membership as one of its important goals. The EU-Turkey deal on the refugee issue has reframed the EU-Turkey relations in an increasingly transactional manner.

Nonetheless, in terms of the Syrian crisis, there are many points of convergences between Turkey and the EU. Like Turkey, the EU adopted an anti-Assad stance from the beginning, imposed sanctions on Syria, and supported the opposition. Furthermore, both Turkey and the EU have been supporting the territorial integrity and the independence of Syria. Finally, in terms of humanitarian aid, both have been quite forthcoming. Overall, the EU has been the biggest donor in humanitarian aid to Syria. Turkey hosts nearly 3.5 million Syrians within its borders and provides aid for Syrians living in dire conditions across the border in Idlib. Finally, both Turkey and the EU support a negotiated political solution in Syria, in contrast to the Assad regime, which aims at forcefully recapturing all of Syria and consolidating its control with the backing of its allies.

Yet there are nuances in Turkey's and the EU's policies towards the Syrian crisis. The EU considered some of the groups in the opposition that Turkey worked with as terrorist groups. There were also differences of opinion regarding PYD and Turkey's policy towards it. The EU criticized Turkey's exclusion of Kurdish elements from the negotiations and preventing trade between Kurdish controlled areas and the rest of Syria. Finally, the issues of refugees constituted an area where the two sides cooperated and yet ultimately became critical of each other's policies. The EU has no leverage in Syria while Turkey has significant influence in the areas under Turkish control as well as over the political transition process due to the multiple actors it has relations with, as well as its consistent support for the opposition. This is evident, for example, in the many ways Turkey has been able to prevent the PYD from accessing the international negotiation table.




Due to the aforementioned problems, a general reconstruction effort in Syria does not seem to be in the cards until an acceptable and inclusive political process is in place. Once that occurs, there could be areas of cooperation between some EU countries and Turkey. How that point can be reached is increasingly discussed in European and Turkish policy circles.

In addition to the EU, Turkey seems to be more open to issue-based cooperation with individual EU Member States, similarly to the case in Syria and Libya with Germany and Italy. Quadrilateral meetings that took place in 2018 and 2019 on the Syrian crisis, gave some signals that Germany might support Erdoğan's reconstruction plans in the safe zone, a "refugee city" where Turkey eventually hopes to re-settle the Syrian refugees residing today within Turkey (duvaR 2019). However, these are still vague plans hindered by an uncertain future political settlement and Assad's position within it. While some EU member states argue that any reconstruction efforts should only start after a political solution, others argue that delivering humanitarian aid is not enough to uphold EU principles in this civil war context (International Crisis Group 2019). As there is no EU support for reconstruction in sight, it does not provide any incentive for inclusive political negotiations.

A constructive step from the EU would be to take Turkish pleas on reconstruction seriously. Announcing a gradual approach to reconstruction as well as defining milestones while potential partners would create incentives for other external and internal actors to negotiate with EU representatives. This is compatible with the "society max" approach, suggested by Barnes-Dacey, calling upon the EU to turn its attention to the strengthening of local capacity, empowering social segments as opposed to triggering a social breakdown via combined sanctions with the US (Barnes-Dacey 2020).

If such an approach is embraced by the EU, it would increase the potential for collaboration with Turkey on the ground for a gradual and societal approach in Syria, especially in Turkish-controlled areas. This approach would mean that the EU can still adhere to its principles of democracy, yet would start applying those principles first at the societal level, including different local actors in the decision-making processes. While the immediate need is to start with Idlib as the humanitarian needs are urgent, only addressing those needs is clearly not enough. There are further needs of "recovery, resiliencies and self-reliance" as detailed by the EU itself (European Council 2020). In Idlib, Turkey can play mediator and facilitator roles while also keeping distance from Idlib's local administration whereas other areas are directly managed and financed by Turkey. Since December 2019, more than 200 refugee camps have been established along the Turkish border. Turkey is actively providing aid to these camps, together with Turkish and international NGOs. Russia's second veto of any extension of cross-border aid into these areas effectively undercuts any UN efforts in this regard. Thus, the EU is well-positioned to replace the UN in providing this assistance together with Turkey.

Another area of cooperation in the medium term is to facilitate a negotiated political process. A constructive step on the part of Turkey would be to commit to a pluralist political solution that will exclude radical Islamist elements, but include Kurdish elements that are not committed to the causes the Turkish state perceives as threats to Turkey's sovereignty. The way the political transition process is designed and implemented will have an impact on the leverage of the EU and on Turkey-EU collaboration. A more inclusive and pluralist transition process will give more manoeuvre room for external actors such as the EU and Turkey. If Turkey can secure the inclusion of Syrian Kurds in the political negotiations that would exclude the pro-PKK elements, Turkey can gain more leverage in the long run over the political and economic reconstruction of Syria and more opportunities to collaborate with the EU and/or some member states. The same is valid regarding the inclusion of Islamists. If the moderate Islamists are included in the political negotiations, thereby pre-emptively dealing with the resurfacing of entities such as ISIS, that will give more options for the EU or member states' involvement in Syria. As the US reframes its presence in Syria and practically and gradually withdraws from Syria, Germany and/or France might see an opportunity to engage with Russia. This would increase their leverage in Syria and will create new avenues of collaboration between them and Turkey.



A new Syria, rebuilt on decentralized local level units rather than primordial identities such as sect and ethnicity, which are prone to exacerbate conflicts, would allow for more cross-sectional alliances within and on Syria. This is in parallel with strengthening local societal elements as prevention against authoritarianism. This would mean replacing the current strategy of waiting until the current regime is changed with an elected government. In the meantime, Transitional Justice is an area of strength for the EU and is a domain that Turkey might be willing to collaborate with or support the EU's role regarding transitional justice in the political transition process.

Turkey's priorities are suppressing the pro-PKK elements in Northern Syria, supporting the opposition to the regime, and providing humanitarian needs of displaced Syrians inside and outside Syria. European priorities are to decrease the refugee flows, while providing humanitarian relief, ensuring the de-radicalisation among the Islamists in Syria, and supporting a viable political solution that does not involve the Assad regime. There are convergences and divergences between these priorities, as there are disagreements and united fronts among the EU member states. The more inclusive and pluralist the political solution can be, the more room there will be for Turkey and the EU to collaborate and move beyond humanitarian relief into supporting the reconstruction of Syria.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- The humanitarian needs in Idlib require immediate action on the part of the EU and Turkey. The urgency of the situation provides a context in which the two actors can collaborate even further on the humanitarian front.
- The way the war is ending creates a reality in which the EU and Turkey alike have to accept that a clear-cut political settlement will not emerge any time soon. The Assad regime has not been toppled, and yet it also does not hold complete military, political or administrative control of Syria. After accepting these facts, the policymakers on both sides need to create flexible offers rather than maximalist positions that will facilitate a negotiated political process.
- In that negotiated political process, the EU can take advantage of the fact that some regions of Syria are for now under Turkey's control. The EU can develop a pragmatic principled approach in those regions, flexing its political conditions as tied to reconstruction efforts. Turkey can reposition itself via some elements of the Kurdish community. Both parties may gear up their efforts towards a pluralist solution that takes advantage of the creativity of the localities and the resilience they have shown.
- On the refugee front, the EU will have to accept that humanitarian aid, as applaudable as it has been, is only palliative in the face of the current situation. Efforts of reconstruction and the political solution will be the ultimate route towards the ceasing of the refugee flows and the safe return of refugees to Syria. This holds true for Turkey as well. Moving beyond palliative solutions should increase the collaboration potential for the two actors.

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UNDERSTANDING IRANIAN INTERESTS IN SYRIA CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR EUROPE

Nine years after the start of the Syrian civil war, Iran, a major supporter of Bashar al-Assad's government, has managed to consolidate its position in Syria. Iran's growing role and influence in Syria has always been an important topic for discussion in the global think-tank community. However, discussions on this issue have often been focused solely on the Islamic Republic's military and security role, while Iran's view on the future of Syria's political and economic structures has been widely ignored or under-discussed. This paper will briefly explain how certain military and security developments in Syria have shaped and reshaped Iran's approach toward the Syrian conflict. It will then provide the necessary background to understanding Iran's perception of stability and its prerequisites in Syria, as well as its priorities when it comes to political transition and economic reconstruction. Given Iran's undeniable influence in Syria, recognizing its viewpoints towards essential issues, such as the political and economic transition, could help European decision-makers devise more realistic policies on how to deal with Iran in Syria.

THE EVOLUTION OF IRAN'S APPROACH TOWARD THE SYRIAN WAR

Iran's approach toward the Syrian crisis has gone through three different phases. In the first period, which started with the outbreak of the Syrian civil war and lasted until 2017, security and military considerations played the most crucial role in Iran's Syria strategy. Iran was concerned that the fall of Bashar al-Assad's government would lead to Tehran's regional rivals' expansion of influence, specifically Turkey and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf. When the popular uprising in Syria turned into a civil war between the Assad regime and the rebel groups, Iran decided to intervene directly in the crisis via the external arm of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), i.e., the Quds Force (Uskowi 2018). The rise of terrorist groups, especially the Islamic State (IS) in Syria and Iraq, contributed to the expansion of Iran's military role in Syria. Iran appeared determined to fight terrorist groups in Syria and Iraq to prevent the expansion of territories under their control which were close to its borders (Moradi et al. 2017).

In December 2016, the Syrian regime and its allies, Iran and Russia, succeeded in recapturing Aleppo, Syria's second-largest city, from armed opposition groups (Marcus 2016). This development effectively eased Iran's concerns over the possible fall of the Assad regime. Then, the formation of the Astana peace process in 2017 provided Iran with the opportunity to play a political and diplomatic role in Syria alongside Russia and Turkey (*France 24* 2018). The fall of the self-proclaimed IS Caliphate in 2017 was another factor that paved the way for Iran to develop its role beyond the military sphere in Syria (Burke 2017). While supporting the Russian initiative to hold the Syrian National Dialogue Congress in Sochi in January 2018, Iran showed interest in playing a role in the political transition process in Syria, especially the role in drafting a new constitution for the country (Naumkin 2018).

The assassination of General Qassem Soleimani, commander of Iran's Quds Force, by the United States in Iraq on January 3, 2020, marked a new turning point in Iran's strategy, not only for Syria but for the region as a whole (*BBC News* 2020). Following the incident, Iran announced "the expulsion of US troops" from the Middle East as its main regional goal (*Reuters* 2020). However, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a halt of major military conflicts in Syria (Asseburg et al 2020). The pandemic also contributed to the economic crisis in Iran, limiting its resources to finance large-scale military adventures in Syria. Nonetheless, while Iran has also been experiencing increased Israeli attacks on its positions in Syria, there is no sign of a change in Iran's strategy (Azizi 2020). Thus, recent developments have effectively marginalized the political and economic elements of Iran's approach and re-prioritized the military and security aspects.


STABILITY, POLITICAL TRANSITION, AND ECONOMIC RECONSTRUCTION IN SYRIA

From Iranian leaders' perspective, ensuring Syria's territorial integrity and restoring the central government's sovereignty over the entire Syrian territory is the main precondition for guaranteeing stability in the country (Azizi 2018). The second precondition, which is closely connected to the first one, is the complete defeat or surrender of all armed groups fighting against the Assad government. Iranian officials have suggested now and again that any meaningful process of political transition in Syria could start only after the complete cessation of armed conflicts (*Tasnim News* 2017). From the Iranian perspective, fighting against terrorism, especially preventing the revival of terrorist groups such as IS, is also directly related to this issue (Sedghian 2020). Meanwhile, when it comes to Syria's economic reconstruction, Iran favors starting the process as soon as possible without conditioning it on the success of the political transition process. This position is based on the argument that political transition is a controversial and lengthy process, which requires consensus among conflicting parties, while economic recovery is an urgent need for the war-torn country and its people (*IRNA* 2020). This is, in fact, the third aspect of Iran's perception of stability in Syria.

The fourth aspect, which has gradually attained more importance in Iran's Syria strategy, is the necessity of the withdrawal of all foreign forces "illegally" present in the country, i.e., without the Syrian government's consent (*Mashregh News* 2020). In this respect, Iran's focus is above all on the need for the United States and, to a lesser extent Turkey, to withdraw from Syria. From Tehran's point of view, the continuation of diplomatic pressure on Ankara – within the Astana format – could eventually convince Turkey to leave Syria (Xia 2019). At the same time, the restoration of the Assad government's legitimacy as a result of the consolidation of its power all over the country would eventually compel the United States to withdraw from the country.

The combination of these elements, in turn, determines Iran's view of political transition – specifically the drafting of a new constitution – and economic reconstruction in Syria. From Iran's point of view, the new Syrian constitution must preserve not only the territorial integrity of Syria but also the unitary nature of the Syrian state (Ashouri Moghaddam 2019). In this vein, Iran has always opposed the idea of establishing a federal system of government in Syria. However, Iran's approach to the rights of ethnic minorities, especially the Kurds, is more flexible than that of Turkey as it seems that Tehran would be comfortable with granting a limited level of autonomy to the Kurds (Shabestan 2019). Nonetheless, given the increasing hostility between Iran and the United States, the continuing alliance between the Syrian Kurds and Washington could gradually push Iran toward adopting a stricter position, bringing Ankara and Tehran closer. Besides, Iran opposes Assad's ouster from power as a precondition for a political transition in Syria, and it believes that Assad's right to run for the presidency again should be preserved. In general, it could be said that what Iran is looking for is not to draft a whole new constitution for Syria, but to make changes and amendments to the existing one, such as more ethnic minority rights or granting more authority to local administrations – while not compromising the ultimate authority of the central government. However, the fact is that when it comes to presenting a framework for political transition in Syria, the Islamic Republic continues to express an ambiguous position – that the fate of Syria should be decided by the Syrian people without any foreign interference. In a situation where the Syrian regime's military victories have given Assad the upper hand over his opposition, Iran's stance effectively means supporting Assad's vision for the future of Syria, which lacks necessary elements for a meaningful transition toward a more inclusive and democratic state.

Regarding economic reconstruction, Iran is facing a contradictory situation. On the one hand, Iran has stressed the need not to condition international participation in Syria's economic reconstruction with the start of political transition in the country. Iran's primary goal in emphasizing this condition is restoring the Assad government's international legitimacy by attracting international cooperation, especially from Europe, which has been reluctant to play an economic role in Syria in the absence of meaningful political reforms. On the other hand, in a situation where



Iran's financial resources have been severely reduced due to the US policy of maximum pressure, the presence of other countries in the process of Syria's reconstruction could automatically reduce Iran's role. Iran has been working on two solutions to this issue.

The first solution is to try to define a role for itself in China's grand economic initiatives, linking it to the Syrian reconstruction process. In this vein, Iran's most important economic plan in Syria is establishing a transit corridor from Iran to Iraq, Syria, and eventually, the Mediterranean, to be defined within the framework of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Tehran and Beijing have been working on a 25-year strategic cooperation agreement that could also lead to the development of their cooperation in the regional arena. The second solution is to use the capacity of Iran's private sector to participate in Syria's reconstruction. By doing so, the Islamic Republic could strengthen its economic influence in Syria with no direct cost, while finding a way to reduce the pressure from sanctions. However, this might be easier said than done, given the fact that over the past two years, Iran's private sector has been under increasing pressure from US sanctions, which has negatively impacted its capacity to be active abroad. In addition, the implementation of the US Caesar Act in June 2020, which imposes sanctions on individuals and countries dealing with the Assad regime, appears to provide Iran with more room for maneuvering in Syria's economy. Since Iran is already under severe US sanctions, it now has virtually nothing to lose and could move towards consolidating its economic position in Syria amid its potential rivals' fear of entering the Syrian market. However, the same issue of declining financial resources – to make considerable investments in Syria – on the one hand, and Russia's role as a potential economic competitor on the other, may still pose serious challenges to Iran. Russia has already secured a series of economic agreements with the Assad regime that grants Moscow an extensive role in profitable areas such as hydrocarbon resources and phosphate mines. This has given rise to discussions in Iran that the Islamic Republic is losing the competition for economic influence in Syria to the Russians.

IRAN AND EUROPE IN SYRIA: AREAS OF DIVERGENCE AND CONVERGENCE OF INTERESTS

There is little doubt that Iran's full-fledged and unconditional support for the Assad regime has been the most important obstacle to any real convergence between Iran and the European countries in Syria. Iran's continued military support for the Syrian government, which has encouraged Assad to continue military operations until recapturing every inch of Syrian territory, makes it very difficult, if not impossible, to start any significant political process with the participation of all parties involved in Syria. The development of Iran's proxy network in Syria will continue to fuel political and security turmoil in the country. In addition, Iran's efforts to consolidate its influence in southern Syria could not be accepted by Europe due to the potential threat it poses to Israel.

Despite being active on the diplomatic front, Europe's absence from major military and security developments in Syria and its continuing reluctance to engage in the economic reconstruction process have limited the European countries to playing a marginal role in Iranian

calculations so far. As a result, Europe has not been an effective factor in shaping Iran's overall approach toward the Syrian issue. In other words, from the Iranian viewpoint, Europe as an individual actor has been rather irrelevant in Syria, whose role has never gone beyond multilateral diplomatic formats such as the Geneva process. This comes in contrast to the role of Russia, the United States, Turkey, and Israel, each of which is playing a decisive role in Iran's calculations regarding Syria.

However, there are at least three reasons that justify – and even necessitate – a European move to reach out to Iran over the Syrian situation. First, Iran's growing role in Syria since the start of the civil war has made it too influential to be ignored in any diplomatic process aimed at seriously addressing the conflict. If it is left feeling excluded, Tehran has the potential to use the various levers it has in Syria to play the spoiler in any European-led diplomatic process. Second, diplomatic outreach to Tehran could be defined within the wider framework of European efforts to keep the window of

diplomatic ties with Iran open despite Washington's maximalist approach. Establishing diplomatic channels between Iran and Europe on Syria could also provide the European side with an opportunity to directly raise its concerns regarding the worrisome aspects of the Islamic Republic's activities in Syria. Third, Europe could prevent a potential war between Iran and Israel in Syria by trying to take into consideration both sides' interests and concerns and working toward a possible compromise.

There are a number of areas where a European-Iranian diplomatic interaction regarding Syria could take place:

- Given the sharp differences between the Iranian and European views toward political transition, Europe cannot count on Iran as a partner in trying to establish a democratic state in Syria. However, Europe can still try to use Iran's influence on Assad to convince him of carrying out some political and economic reforms. In the political sphere, respecting the rights of ethnic minorities can be addressed. For example, when it comes to the Syrian Kurds, Iran has a more flexible stance compared to Assad and Turkey. Moreover, given that the resurgence of local protest movements in Syria could once again seriously threaten the central government's power, Iran is likely to favor a limited decentralization of power in Syria, in the form of supporting the role of local administrations (*Syrian Observer* 2019). Although limited, such steps could be considered as a starting point for wider reforms in Syria in the future.
- In the economic sphere, although Iran wants to use the process of Syria's economic reconstruction to buy legitimacy for Assad, Europe's insistence on conditioning its participation in the process to the realization of political transition bears its own challenges. On the one hand, Europe's absence could lead to the domination of the Syrian economy by rival powers such as China and Russia. On the other hand, as Iran's real private sector is seriously damaged by US sanctions, quasi-private companies affiliated with or owned by the IRGC are expected to operate in Syria. This will further strengthen Iran's influence in the country. For this reason, Europe should take a step-by-step approach to participating in the economic reconstruction of Syria; in exchange for a certain series of reforms, Europe would get involved in certain aspects of the reconstruction process.
- Iran and Europe's mutual interest in fighting against terrorism and preventing the revival of terrorist groups is the most important area for possible cooperation between Iran and Europe.
- Any possible conflict between Iran and Israel in Syria could threaten the interests of all the actors involved, including Europe. Europe should use its diplomatic relations with both countries to prevent any escalation.
- Any political, economic, or security coordination between Iran and Europe requires the establishment of a viable diplomatic channel between the two sides. Such a channel could either be in the form of a bilateral dialogue framework or a more solid multilateral one. The latter may include the three European powers (Germany, France, and Britain) and the three Astana partners (Iran, Russia, and Turkey) to form a new diplomatic initiative for Syria.

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A TIME FOR PRINCIPLED PRAGMATISM? EXPLORING OPTIONS FOR RUSSIAN-EUROPEAN INITIATIVES IN SYRIA

Since its 2015 intervention in the Syrian Civil War, Russian military action has shifted the course of the conflict in President Bashar al-Assad's favor (Lund 2019). Although Moscow established air superiority in northwestern Syria through the deployment of a high-end expeditionary force (Kaim and Tamminga 2015), the northwest and northeast of the country remain largely out of reach of President Assad and his allies because these areas enjoy protection from the Turkish and the U.S. military. Diplomatic disagreement at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) has prevented a meaningful resolution to the conflict along the lines of United Nations Resolution (UNRES) 2254 (2015).

The European Union (EU)¹ has largely reacted to the horrors of the Syrian Civil War with a mix of humanitarian aid, sanctions, support for the "moderate" Syrian opposition, and initiatives to hold Syrian government perpetrators of war crimes accountable. It has also been unable and/or unwilling to counter the brutal warfighting by the Syrian government, its allies, and a number of radical armed groups, except for the Islamic State (IS) given that several European countries joined the Global Coalition to Defeat Daesh/ISIS. Furthermore, through its "Brussels I–IV conferences," the EU raised around EUR 20 billion in humanitarian aid, (Council of the European Union 2020; Hanelt 2020) accommodated slightly over a million Syrian refugees, and cut a deal with Turkey to limit a further influx of Syrian refugees. Today, the EU advocates a "meaningful political transition" – diplomatic parlance for a desire to see Assad go and/or a more pluralistic and rights-based Syria to emerge – while maintaining its sanctions and refusing to engage in any talk of reconstruction (van Veen and Macharis 2020).

CHALLENGES AHEAD FOR RUSSIA AND THE EU

Although the military stage of the conflict is taking a backseat, a number of security matters remain unresolved. Protests in Daraa, the status of Idlib, Turkish-occupied areas in northern Syria, Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) held areas in northeast Syria, the US military presence in the same area, the resurgence of the Islamic State, as well as the abiding presence of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham² and Hurras al-Din³ are among the key issues. At the same time, Syria's socio-economic fabric has been destroyed with the recovery bill running in the hundreds of billions of dollars. To address the dire socio-economic situation, Damascus and its partners (Russia and Iran) are faced with the need to find a way to re-engage the EU and regional Arab states.

Projecting ahead, it seems that Russia will likely face a scenario in which its ally-cum-client is militarily victorious but bankrupt. The reconquest of Syria can no longer be completed by military means. It requires a political solution that is, however, deadlocked by resistance in Damascus against even minor political compromises, unwillingness of the EU/US to re-engage with President Assad, and Turkey being stuck in its Idlib conundrum (Hauch 2020). In turn, the EU will face a scenario in which President Assad and his government remain in power but have inadequate control over its different factions and territory. The current sanctions regime – especially the Caesar Act – is unlikely to bring about radical political change in Syria in line with Western preferences, and it also risks creating more instability in Syria, for example by exacerbating factionalism. This will inevitably result in more negative externalities such as

¹ We use the term EU to refer to the EU institutions as well as EU Member States.

² Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra (Nusra Front), is a UN-designated terrorist group affiliated with al-Qaeda. It has been active in Syria since 2011.

³ Hurras al-Din is an armed group active in Syria that is a U.S.- designated terrorist group affiliated with al-Qaeda.

organized crime (e.g. the recent captagon capture in Italy)⁴, extremism, regional instability affecting NATO-member Turkey, already hard-pressed Lebanon, Israel, as well as more refugees (Batrawi 2020). Syria has already become a source of regional instability and negative consequences of the conflict are likely to get worse.

MAPPING RUSSIAN AND EU INTERESTS IN SYRIA

Neither scenario is attractive from a geopolitical perspective and hence there is value in deconstructing the current political stalemate between Russia and the EU on Syria. We aim to identify the least controversial issues and explore whether they can be addressed through joint initiatives that can in turn lay a foundation for further dialogue. Undoubtedly, such an endeavor will be met with international skepticism as well as resistance within both the EU and Russia, but the current stalemate and misery in Syria do make it worthwhile to explore whether mutual mistrust can be toned down as a prelude to building a common geopolitical view on the future of Syria. The alternative is ongoing confrontation. However, in Syria the reality is that the EU has little appetite to confront Russia in ways that can directly change its cost-benefit analysis, such as through a joint Turkish-European military and/or humanitarian intervention in Idlib (Hauch 2020). While Russia and the EU find themselves at opposing ends of the Syrian conflict, they do share a desire to prevent further regional instability and to reduce extremism. In Table 1 below we map Russian and EU interests in Syria and assess their compatibility.

Russian Interests in Syria		Russian and EU Compatibility	EU Interests in Syria	
...that are not at present compatible with EU interests	...that could at present be made compatible with EU interests	Essential conditions for making Russian and EU interests compatible	...that could at present be made compatible with Russian interests	...that are not at present compatible with Russian interests
HUMANITARIAN				
	Have more humanitarian aid flow via Damascus to all areas	Humanitarian operating constraints in Assad-held Syria are relaxed	Have less humanitarian aid captured by Damascus in regime-held areas	
	Stop all UNSC- sanctioned aid flows that go directly to non-regime held areas	A joint mechanism is established that directs and monitors all aid distribution via Damascus		Increase UNSC- sanctioned aid flows that go directly to non-regime held areas
	Prevent new refugee flows from Syria to Turkey (to prevent Turkish military action)	The Russian-Turkish ceasefire agreement is made to endure	Prevent new refugee flows from Syria to Turkey (to prevent journey to Europe)	

⁴ In July 2020 Italian police seized the largest cargo of amphetamine ever (estimated worth EUR 1 billion) as it was being shipped from Syria via Europe to its final destination.

POLITICAL		Make some concessions in the Constitutional Committee to start a political transition	<i>Assad engages and compromises in the Constitutional Committee</i>	Meaningful concessions in the Constitutional Committee to start a political transition	
		Rebuild the Syrian state with limited decentralization (incl. greater rights for Kurds and local municipalities)	<i>The Constitutional Committee is unblocked, and a deal is struck between the PYD-led Kurds and Damascus</i>	Create a pluralistic Syrian state with adequate minority and human rights	
	Have existing sanctions lifted (especially the Caesar Act, which draws the US into the picture)		<i>A complete political compromise package can be agreed that satisfies Assad, Russia, EU, and Turkey</i>		See a meaningful political transition initiated that results in Assad's departure
	Favors reconstruction without a real political transition		<i>Constitutional Committee dynamics become more productive and Western sanctions are lifted</i>		Refuses to engage in reconstruction without a real political transition
SECURITY	Recentralize control over security forces during conflict (Iran's footprint down, Kurds reintegrated)		<i>A mutually acceptable political solution to the conflict is implemented</i>		Deep governance and capability reform of the security forces takes place in the context of a more pluralistic state
		Destruction of HTS, HaD etc.	<i>Implementation of a targeted military approach that does not create (too much) collateral damage and establishment of a joint verification mechanism</i>	Dismantlement of HTS, HaD etc.	

ACCOUNTABILITY	Avoid meaningful pursuit of regime war crimes	All war crimes are investigated, including the US and Turkey as well as Syrian regime, Russia, and IS etc.		Ensure meaningful pursuit of all war crimes
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Table 1: Assessment of the Conceptual Compatibility of Russian versus EU Interests in Syria

Note: The colors in the middle column ("essential conditions") indicate how likely we feel it is that these conditions can be met. Red denotes it is unrealistic for now, orange that it is potentially realistic, and yellow that it is realistic.

We arrive at the unsurprising conclusion that Russian-EU interest compatibility in Syria is low at the moment, although the potential for engagement still exists. It is, however, further constrained by two broader strategic factors. First, the overall relationship between Russia and the EU is negative and geared towards non-military confrontation due to the tensions caused by the conflict in Ukraine, the disputed status of the Crimea, the downing of the MH17 flight, and the assertive posture of Russian forces in Kaliningrad. In addition, tension between the two parties exists due to Russian navy and air patrols across the Baltics and North Sea, which were triggered in part by NATO's (US) missile-defense system deployment in Europe. Deeper factors that play a role in maintaining the tension between the EU and Russia are NATO and EU enlargement, as well as the fall of Russia's global standing in light of the USSR's implosion (Lo 2015). As long as these issues remain alive, EU sanctions on Russia regarding the conflict in Ukraine will remain in place and the overall relationship will continue in a state of mutual suspicion and recrimination (Council of the European Union 2020).

Second, the EU is not prepared to re-engage with a Syrian leadership that committed massive atrocities towards its own population without either a measure of meaningful accountability or a change of leadership. An international war crimes tribunal, or anything of the sort, is a non-starter for Russia unless it pursues accountability beyond the Syrian regime and includes US, Turkish, and European forces that have played a role in the conflict. The scope of such a broader accountability initiative might be the subject of discussion, but the difference in speed and scope of leadership change desired by the EU and Russia is likely to be difficult to surmount. While Syrian presidential elections due in 2021 could offer a starting point for conversation, the EU has yet to clearly spell out what its minimum requirements are beyond the departure of Assad and what it can offer in exchange once they are met.

Despite these background factors, it is worth noting that EU and Russian views on future governance and security in Syria do share some similarities. Particularly, both are looking for a measure of decentralization, which would better serve and represent Syria's religious diversity. Both are willing to work to restore unified control and improved governance of Syria's security forces (types and degrees of accountability might not be compatible, however). All caveats being made, Table 1 does suggest there is modest potential for a sequenced two-step joint Russian-EU initiative that could realize positive benefits for both sides.

HUMANITARIAN AID DIPLOMACY

Russia and the EU could work together to ease conditions for humanitarian aid delivery and distribution across Syria in territories both under and outside of Damascus' control. At the moment, such aid is subject to many Damascus-imposed conditions and to indirect as well as partial appropriation by the regime (Leenders and Mansour 2018; The Syria Campaign 2016). Lack of transparency in the aid delivery process, as well as ineffective use/distribution

of the aid, prevents it from being the minimal social safety net it should be, which puts its durability at risk. Easing such conditions is likely to increase aid effectiveness and reach, which could provide the Syrian population with more reliable support (a mutual interest). In addition, it can be gradually expanded into “humanitarian plus” type assistance tilting towards reconstruction (a Russian interest) and prevent further displacement and human flight (an EU interest).

It requires the removal of the obstacles to the humanitarian aid flow that Damascus created, an end to the appropriation of aid, and the use of aid as a manipulation tool. It also requires enabling safer (less corrupt) passage throughout the country (Thepaut 2020, Haid 2019). Given the failure of previous attempts and given Russia’s stance on the UN cross-border aid delivery mechanism in the UNSC, a meaningful goodwill gesture by Damascus/Moscow – that is subsequently recognized by the EU – is needed to get such an initiative off the ground. To go beyond gestures, a newly established joint humanitarian committee, which should include Russia, the EU, representatives of the UN, ICRC, and the Syrian government can play a constructive role. The idea is that the committee could create a joint monitoring mechanism that can ensure a transparent aid delivery and distribution process. Such a setup could help Russia and the EU exercise joint pressure on the Syrian government that is in an extremely vulnerable economic position today and might acquiesce more readily. Since humanitarian aid is the least sensitive issue (see Table 1), it will be an easier testing ground to build confidence between the EU and Russia.

FIGHTING EXTREMISM

UN-designated terrorist group Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and the radical extremist group Hurras al-Din remain problematic despite HTS’s attempted re-orientation (International Crisis Group 2020). Russia, the EU, the US, and Turkey could combine their efforts to pressure both groups, especially Hurras al-Din⁵, by inviting defections and/or by exploring possibilities for co-optation by negotiating more extensive cease-fires, separating fighters from the civilian population, cutting the flow of arms, and facilitating the outflow of displaced Syrians in Idlib into Turkey or Europe.

Neither initiative, however, would bring a political solution to the Syrian war any closer. This requires overcoming the deadlock of the Constitutional Committee and agreeing on a set of measures close enough to UNRES 2254 to enable a political compromise all parties can work towards. At present, the different parameters that need to be reconciled for such a compromise to be achievable, remain too far apart. Nevertheless, ongoing dialogue within the Constitutional Committee and especially the deteriorating socio-economic situation in Syria might push Damascus towards compromise.⁶

What these Russian-EU initiatives could achieve is more limited, namely the creation of fora, a functional working relationship, and slightly more trust. These would test the seriousness of the willingness to make short-term compromises and explore the possibility of long-term gains. Admittedly, this may be considered farfetched, but today not even a minimum basis of trust and exchange is in place. This lack of trust and exchange will doom any future ambitious initiatives before they can even commence. Knowing that the EU is not separated by the Transatlantic Ocean from either Syria or Russia (and vice versa), it has an interest in at least maintaining a working relationship that can capitalize on opportunities that pave way for a more durable resolution to the conflict if they arise. A working relationship, however, requires something tangible to work on.

⁵ Given that existing Turkish ties with the more “moderate” elements of HTS make a joint initiative against this group unlikely. See for instance: Yüksel, Engin (2019): Strategies of Turkish Proxy Warfare in Northern Syria: Back with a Vengeance, in: *Clingendael: Netherlands Institute of International Relations* (11.2019); available at: <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/pandoras-box-syria> (last accessed 13.10.2020).

⁶ Although President Assad has never indicated even the slightest willingness to compromise and Russia is not about to drop its support for him. See for instance: Rudolf, Inna (2020): The Spring of Russia’s Discontent, in: *Zenith* (30.6.2020); available at: <https://magazine.zenith.me/en/press-review/russian-media-syria-and-bashar-al-assad> (last accessed on 13.10.2020).

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Revive EU-Russia discussions on the humanitarian aid deliveries to Syria in three steps: a) a goodwill gesture from Damascus/Moscow; b) setting up a joint aid management committee; and c) have the committee create a joint monitoring mechanism that can ensure a transparent aid delivery and distribution process. Key parties involved are Russia, the EU, the Syrian government, the UN, and the ICRC. The aim is to improve aid delivery across Syria in both regime and non-regime held areas, and to build a modicum of confidence. Practically, such an initiative could start from a track II and EU-Russia expert level discussion to produce a plan that creates a joint Russia-EU-Syria-UN-ICRC mechanism to manage and observe UN humanitarian aid delivery and distribution throughout Syria. Down the road, EU-Russia ministerial level discussions could be held, including representatives of the UN, ICRC, the Syrian Red Crescent, and the Syrian government to tackle major organizational/operational obstacles.
- Revive EU-Russia anti-terrorism consultations to explore whether a joint strategy can be developed against remaining radical extremist groups in Idlib that includes a detailed mapping and an incremental action plan mixing positive with negative incentives. If an outline can be agreed on, Turkey and the US must also be brought on board.

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EUROPE'S OPTIONS TO ADDRESS THE CONFLICT IN
IRAQ

DIVERGING EUROPEAN AND AMERICAN INTERESTS IN IRAQ – HOW GERMANY COULD STEP IN

INTRODUCTION

Iraq is an energy hub which occupies an important geopolitical location and is of interest to regional and international powers. The diplomatic scene in Iraq, and in the region in general, has been dominated by the US for decades, with a weaker but significant presence for the UK and France. In addition, Russian and Chinese strategic interests also compete in the region. Local regional powers at play include Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia. Economic strong countries like Germany have always had a minimal presence in the region as Germany's role oftentimes is part of a wider collective such as the European Union (EU) or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). While interests overlap, there seem to be some lost opportunities for Germany, especially when it comes to Iraq. This is evident with the limited number of German companies operating there, despite the need for German economic development, technology, and expertise.

Operating within a collective, especially in the context of the UN, E3 (Germany, France, UK), or any other alliance lead by the US, often means a backseat role for Germany. The nature of Germany's foreign policy approach differs from the US in that it tends to be less aggressive. For example, the US was directly involved in both Gulf Wars as well as pulled out of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which has been seen by the international community as instrumental in reducing conflict in the MENA region. On the other hand, Germany abstained from directly being involved in these wars and strived to preserve the JCPOA. In addition, France's and the UK's approach towards the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region differs from Germany's since they are two European powers who have a colonial past and their focus tends to be political in nature with an emphasis on security and the general state of the economy. By contrast, Germany mainly focuses on economic cooperation and development, with a relatively small military presence in the region.

In light of Iraq's geopolitical reality, it makes sense to look at Germany's approach, which may serve as a model for the rest of the EU in its efforts of stabilization and rebuilding given its prominent political role in Europe, its vast economic resources, and its dominantly peaceful approach to the MENA crises.

US INTERESTS IN IRAQ

US policy in Iraq has varied between administrations, and has a blurry national interest, making it difficult to pinpoint its specific goals in Iraq. However, it is possible to review major milestones, significant developments, and broader discourses in the recent history between the two countries. This process clarifies the overall nature of the US-Iraq relationship and the main interests involved. The following analyzes these through three main lenses: political, security, and economic.

POLITICAL ASPECT

It is quite difficult to summarize the political dimensions of the US foreign policy towards Iraq in a few lines. However, an important aspect of the mentioned policy has also been the 'Iran Dimension'. In many cases, the US policy towards Iraq often has a sharp Iran angle to it. For instance, during the Iraq-Iran war, the US strongly supported Iraq military in the war, as the adversary between the US and Iran was at its peak, allowing Iraq to get away with the use of chemical weapons (Harris and Aid 2013). Another instance is after Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in 1990 and the Shia uprising ensued in the South of Iraq by March 1991 against his brutal regime. While the US successfully repelled the Iraqi troops out of Kuwait it watched how Saddam brutally, even using air power, subdued the rebellion in the South and only by June, 1991 imposed a No-Fly zone, refusing to further intervene militarily. The reason mentioned by US officials was the fear from the establishment of a state similar to the Islamic Republic in Iran, if it would help with the collapse of Saddam's regime and 'radical' Shia would come to power (Byman 2000). The same angle persisted in the aftermath of the 2003 invasion. Apart from the official US political stance that supports a sovereign, democratic Iraq, one of its main priorities is to counter Iranian influence in Iraq. This has led to the polarization of internal Iraqi politics into a pro-US camp versus a pro-Iran camp. The US provides special support to its internal allies, most notably the semi-autonomous Kurdistan Region of Iraq. This often takes its toll on national unity and complicates matters, including the government formation process. It has also made Iraq an arena for US-Iranian confrontation, often at the expense of Iraq's interests (Al-Waeli 2020a).

SECURITY ASPECT

The security approach has been dominant in US policy towards Iraq for many decades. This approach took a new dimension with the invasion in 2003, which overthrew Saddam Hussein's regime. US officials argue that the 2003 war placed Iraq in the "forefront of fighting against terrorism," (Byman 2007) when in reality the country became a boiling pot for terrorists to wage their war against America on Iraqi soil. In addition, prolonged American presence was also aimed at containing Iran.

After almost two decades of US-Iranian tensions playing out in Iraq, the crisis escalated when Iraqi paramilitary forces pushed back against a prolonged US presence since the official end of the war against ISIS in 2017, which culminated in the US assassination of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani on Iraqi soil. In response, Iran used long-range missiles to bomb the Ain Al-Asad military base where US troops are housed. Since then, there has been political pressure from Iran and its Iraqi allies for the US to withdraw from Iraq, where both sides are currently officially engaged in a "strategic dialogue" that is negotiating security arrangements in Iraq (Al-Khafaji 2020). However, this recent escalation transformed Iraq from a theater of political contests into a battlefield.

ECONOMIC ASPECT

While the Iraqi people and the international community were optimistic after the 2003 US invasion, Iraq's economic situation remains dire (Youssif, Morrar, and Al-Joumayle 2020). The standard of living improved in Iraq gradually after 2003 largely due to the lifting of sanctions on oil exports (World Bank Group 2017). This had the unintended consequence of making the country dependent on its oil resources. Nevertheless, Iraqis were eager to sign the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) in 2008 where the US committed to cooperating with Iraq on development, economic, and cultural issues (Mason 2009). In reality, not much has materialized from the agreement, and Iraq has been left to suffer from a dysfunctional economy and administrative system, which has fueled conflict and instability.

There is a limited number of US companies operating in Iraq who play an important role in the energy sector. Nevertheless, Iraq still suffers from a chronic lack of electricity supply and from a high dependence on fossil fuels to generate energy that is insufficient in meeting the ever-growing demand due to population growth (IEA 2019). Trade between Iraq and the US is also arguably small and lacks diversity compared to the potential opportunities (USTR 2017). In addition, there is a lack of cultural and educational opportunities for Iraqi students, something which the SOFA agreement had promised.

EVALUATION OF THE US APPROACH TOWARDS IRAQ

The US policy approach towards Iraq is predominantly political and security-based. When it comes to the economy and trade, US involvement seems surprisingly limited. After pulling out of Iraq in 2011, the US also accused the former Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki of leaning towards Iran and marginalizing US allies in Iraq, which they used as a pretext to withhold economic support (Strobel et al 2014). Even security support based on the agreement between the US and Iraq was delayed in 2014 during the early stages of the ISIS invasion for the aforementioned reason, allowing ISIS to gain a foothold in the region (Brands and Feaver 2017). US escalation against Iran on Iraqi soil shows that the US policy does not shy away from conflict, regardless of the costs it brings to Iraq and the region, and even to Europe, which is often the first to deal with the humanitarian and security repercussions of conflict in the MENA region.

From an economic perspective, US foreign investment in Iraq is dwarfed by Chinese foreign investment, for example (Samet 2019). Iraq's largest trading partners today are China, India, Iran, and Turkey. Furthermore, aid and support from the US have been linked to corruption and waste. For instance, various official US reports document how the US used sub-contracting projects to buy off local leaders rather than focusing on actual implementation (US Committee on Foreign Affairs 2013).

Furthermore, many consider that corruption, mismanagement, poverty, and climate change in Iraq contributed to the rise of ISIS (ICG 2013). The turmoil in Iraq might have been mitigated if more effort was put by the US and the international community in spurring economic, administrative, and environmental reforms in the country. Instead, the short-sighted US policy approach contributed to the instability of Iraq, with consequently negative repercussions on the region (Cordesman 2020).

EUROPEAN INTERESTS IN IRAQ

Contrasting the US and European approaches in Iraq offers potential recommendations for improving the latter. Furthermore, given the geopolitical reality of Iraq

and Europe, there are some vital areas in which Europe, especially Germany, could engage.

POLITICAL ASPECT

Similar to the US, Europe's official stance is its interest in a stable, prosperous, and democratic Iraq (European External Action Service 2019). Therefore, any foreign policy that leads to more tension, polarization, and imbalance in a sensitive region like the Middle East does not serve European interests. For one, Europe is dependent on energy markets, and secondly, refugee crises pose economic and social challenges for Europe. In this light, a stronger democratic system that can provide prosperity to the citizens in Iraq certainly leads to stability. Therefore, it is in Europe's interest to avoid any new wars and to avoid the transformation of Iraq into an American-Iranian battlefield, and hence actively engage in de-escalating the tension between Iran and the US (Jiyad 2020).

SECURITY ASPECT

Europe and the US are concerned about global terrorism, although the actual erosion in security due to terrorism primarily impacts the Middle East and Europe. For instance, while ISIS poses a global threat, data shows that European countries, amongst them Germany, were mostly affected by the Levant region's developments. Europe has been witnessing a series of Jihadi terrorist attacks since 2015, often related to ISIS (European Parliament 2020). Countries in the EU witnessed around 3,290 terror offenses between 2014 and 2019 (Statista 2020). In contrast, the threat of ISIS to the US remained smaller than compared to Europe (Jones, Dooxsee, and Harrington 2020). ISIS has been able to inspire, but not plan and direct any attacks on US soil (Bergen, Sterman, and Salyk-Virk 2019). Furthermore, the so-called "Foreign Jihadis" were increasingly more present in Europe than in the US. The number of foreign fighters from Western Europe joining ISIS was estimated to be 5,904 as of 2018, with 1,765 returning from Iraq and Syria. In contrast, 753 were from the Americas, Australia, and New Zealand for the same period, where

a mere 97 returned from Iraq and Syria (ICSR 2018). This becomes particularly worrisome when taking into consideration the free movement agreements that exist in Europe.

HUMANITARIAN ASPECT

Europe took on the most responsibility when it came to the humanitarian crisis that ensued due to the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham (ISIS). Today, Germany is hosting one of the highest numbers of refugees worldwide, amongst them many Iraqis (MacGregor 2019). While Europe played a major role in mitigating the crisis modeled by the German response to receive and support refugees, the massive wave of refugees posed immense economic and social challenges to Europe (European Commission 2017). Furthermore, it was difficult for Europe to ensure that no individuals amongst the refugees would pose a security threat, given that most of them came from ISIS-impacted territories. In contrast, the US is geographically distant and not directly affected by any humanitarian crisis in the MENA region.

ECONOMIC ASPECT

From an economic perspective, the interests also differ between the US and Europe. European industries depend largely on Iraqi fossil fuels as Iraq is the third-largest exporter of petroleum oil in 2019, covering about 8.5% of its needs (Eurostat 2020). Compared to the US, Europe is relatively more dependent on Iraqi energy as Iraq doesn't make it to the first 5 top petroleum exporters to the US in 2019 (EIA 2020). Furthermore, Iraq holds vast potential gas reserves that could be transferred in the form of Liquefied Natural Gas, a suitable alternative that allows the EU to diversify away from Russian gas resources, which are politically costly for Europe. Iraq also represents a strategic trade route between Europe and East Asia, which provides an attractive alternative to the current routes when there is security and stability in the country. Even from a telecommunications perspective, Iraq can serve as an essential data-hub to improve connectivity. Given Iraq's attractive geographical location, a global Internet backbone could be developed in Iraq to improve connectivity between Europe, the Persian Gulf, and East Asian countries.

ENVIRONMENTAL ASPECT

Many studies regard the drought in the Levant region as one of the main reasons for the formation of ISIS. The poverty that resulted from the drought led to high rates of unemployment in rural areas, which posed a suitable ecosystem for terrorist organizations to recruit new members (Schwartzstein 2017). Furthermore, the escalating disputes over water resources between Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran should concern Europe given that this could create conflict over water resources. The Turkish dam projects deny Iraq and Syria important water resources (Ali 2018) which encourages confrontation and could lead to another humanitarian and refugee crisis that Europe will be hard-pressed to manage.

PUBLIC HEALTH ASPECT

The COVID-19 pandemic has proven particularly catastrophic in Iraq, given the country's ailing healthcare system. The number of infections is rapidly rising and the infection rate is difficult to control given limited government capacity, depleted state coffers, and lack of public health awareness (OECD 2020). Unwillingness to support countries like Iraq in suppressing a large-scale outbreak can put Europe at risk since it is possible for the disease to spread to European territory even after the monumental efforts that have been made to contain it (Vera 2020).

A NEW EUROPEAN APPROACH TO IRAQ – HOW GERMANY COULD BECOME A MORE IMPORTANT ACTOR

For the aforementioned reasons, Europe should provide Iraq with the necessary support to face these imminent crises. Unfortunately, European foreign policy does not prioritize involvement in Iraq. Germany, for instance, has only begun to gradually develop its ties with Iraq since 2014 (Al-Mawlawi 2018). But the development of this bilateral relationship has been limited and disproportionate to the challenges in Iraq. This is perhaps due to Germany's approach being economic in nature and further exacerbated by the difficulties that German companies face legally and administratively in the Iraqi

context. It is recommended for Europe, and particularly Germany, to follow an approach that focuses on three main areas: political stability, sustainable development, and strategic support in reforming Iraq's different economic sectors.

POLITICAL STABILITY

Although the US and Germany are allies, America's approach towards Iraq is more direct and aggressive. Therefore, it is not in European nor German interest to follow the American example in the region, especially that of the Trump administration. Germany should maintain neutrality in the US-Iran conflict, and focus on supporting the Iraqi state in serving its citizens in a safe and stable environment.

Without a doubt, Germany's relationship with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) is essential but oftentimes appears separate from a uniform Iraq policy (Al-Mawlawi 2018). Whether it is in the form of military training, diplomatic presence, or development programs, it is essential for Germany to engage with all the regions in Iraq. Germany also has the advantage of lacking a colonial past, which gives it a higher degree of credibility. This perception may be short-lived if Germany does not distinguish its policy approach toward Iraq from that of the US.

The German private sector's expertise can also help implement electronic government applications, develop advanced data collection centers that improve decision-making, and improve governance infrastructure. This will allow for a more effective and efficient state with a vital impact on political stability.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Before engaging in any development efforts in Iraq, it is important for Germany to better understand the Iraqi environment. This approach can take many forms. However, the most important form is direct engagement with Iraqis in a long-term strategic dialogue to understand their concerns, needs, and expectations and work on developing the requirements necessary for German companies and organizations to operate in Iraq so that Germany can help more constructively. It is

equally important to focus on the primary concerns of Iraqi citizens. While global media seems to focus on a particular narrative in Iraq – on sectarianism and Iranian influence – Iraqis are more concerned with service provisions and employment, which is where Germany should direct its efforts.

Currently, Iraq is engaged in reforming its economy, which is suffering due to decreased oil prices (Al-Waeli 2020b). These reforms include austerity measures, more efficient governance, and conservation of resources. Germany should urge the Iraqi government to prioritize environmental reform as well, which is often neglected in Iraq. The destruction of Iraq's environment has had ramifications on society and the economy. Long-term support should include public awareness and sustainable solutions for Iraq's water supply, carbon reduction, and recycling.

STRATEGIC SUPPORT FOR REFORMING IRAQ'S PRIVATE SECTOR

For Germany to be impactful in the long-term, it should focus on efforts with strategic impacts. For instance, projects in which the German Corporation for International Cooperation (GIZ) is engaged in are useful, because they focus on development of the private sector and capacity building of the public sector. However, Germany should support Iraq in establishing self-governed small and medium projects in the long-term, such as building facilities that provide vocational training for the Iraqi workforce. An excellent example of strategic support with lasting effects could be energy projects similar to the one Siemens provided to Egypt, which enabled the country to increase its energy production capacity in record time (Siemens).

CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper is to make a case for Europe, and specifically Germany, to distinguish its approach towards Iraq from the US approach. It attempts to showcase in a broad sense how European interests differ from the US based on the importance Iraq poses to both powers as well as differences in opportunities and threats. It also argues that Germany should take a lead in the efforts aimed at stabilizing the situation in Iraq and deescalating the regional tension between the US and Iran. Increased conflict in the region, especially if it takes place on Iraqi soil, will have dire consequences on Europe and the world.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

- Germany's interests in the MENA region, and more specifically Iraq, differ from the interests of the US and European powers such as France and the UK, notwithstanding the presence of an overlap. This stipulates that Germany's policy towards the MENA region should also be different, especially since any developments will have a more direct impact on Europe, consequently changing the composition of threats and opportunities present in the region. Nevertheless, thus far Germany has preferred to play a supporting role to the US in the region.
- The limited number of German companies, as well as development projects in Iraq, indicate lost opportunities for both Iraq and Germany. This is especially true given that the latter lacks a colonial past in the region, in addition to being known for its expertise in technology and economic development, which combined gives it credibility and a good reputation amongst decision makers and the public in the region which can translate to better cooperation and coordination on economic and developmental issues.
- In the political arena, Germany can play an important de-escalating role in the MENA region. This is possible if Germany remains neutral and engages in mediation between the US and Iran in order to avoid a wider conflict between the two powers from taking place on Iraqi soil and the region. Any wide scale US-Iranian conflict will impact Europe and the rest of the world negatively.
- Germany should assist Iraq in changing its approach towards its finite resources and reforming its under-developed economic institutions. When it comes to existential problems such as Iraq's water supply and the climate crisis, Germany can provide important advice, technological support, and comprehensive solutions. For these efforts to bear fruit, Germany needs to develop a better understanding of the Iraqi economic and administrative environment so that any support it provides is more targeted and strategic. This support should provide long-term solutions to Iraq's chronic issues, most notably its electricity crisis.

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EUROPE'S OPTIONS TO POSITIVELY IMPACT IRAN'S POLICIES TOWARDS IRAQ

For any European policy initiative on Iraq to succeed, it must from its very inception consider how to also approach Iraq's neighbors and their interests. But before engaging in a debate on the latter, it is important to grasp why Iraq warrants comprehensive European engagement in the first place.

Iraq holds major geo-strategic significance in a troubled region at Europe's doorstep. Iraq is key to any policy initiative geared towards positively impacting the future of West Asia, particularly given its present role in a zone of competition between regional powers as well as global powers. Additionally, recent history has shown that the absence of good governance in Iraq provides fertile breeding grounds for violent extremism, which knows no borders and has caused unprecedented security and political challenges for Europe – directly impacting domestic politics, including in Germany. Lastly, beyond the challenges related to security, stability, migration, and extremism, Iraq's potential as a leading and growing energy exporter should not be overlooked.

Mindful of these considerations, European policy and decision makers ought to be clear-eyed that for any initiative on Iraq to be successful, it requires a buy-in from other actors – and particularly key neighbors such as Iran. In this regard, Europe should engage with Iran to positively impact its policies towards Iraq. In doing so, Europe's approach should be guided by a clear understanding of the drivers and aims of Iran's policies – and how they have changed since the Trump administration took office in January 2017.

WHAT DOES IRAN WANT IN IRAQ?

Iran's broader objectives in Iraq today can be divided under three primary parameters: safeguarding Iraqi territorial integrity, maintaining "qualified stability," and protecting market access.

The Islamic Republic's strident emphasis on the status quo with reference to national borders, whether in Syria or Iraq, and regardless of their colonial-era origins, is rooted in the assumption that secessionism will open a Pandora's box with unpredictable consequences both at home and abroad. In particular, Kurdish secession in northern Iraq is a seeming "red line" for the Islamic Republic – as exhibited in Tehran's rapid, firm, and coordinated response to the Kurdistan Regional Government's independence referendum in September 2017. Iran promptly joined forces with Turkey and the Iraqi central government to seal off the Kurdistan region's borders, while also reversing territorial gains the KRG had made in the so-called "disputed areas" during the course of the war with the Islamic State.

With reference to "qualified stability," one way of defining the concept is to explain what Iran wishes to not see in Iraq. Here, it is imperative to grasp how deeply the Islamic Republic has been shaped by Iran's bloody 1980-88 war with Iraq under Saddam Hussein. For obvious reasons, Iran has a strong interest in ensuring that there will be no repetition of history, meaning the emergence of an aggressive Iraqi state that is intractably hostile to Iran and Iranian interests. Against this backdrop, it ought to be noted that while the idea of transnational sectarian amity dominates mainstream analysis of Iran-Iraq relations, it must not be overlooked that Iranian-Shiite soldiers were battling Iraqi-Shiite soldiers for most of the 1980s. Having said this, Iran has no interest in a perennially weak Iraqi state that produces vacuums that pave the way for the proliferation of militant groups such as the Islamic State.



As for market access, Iraq has increased in importance for the Iranian economy as a direct consequence of the Trump administration's re-imposition of extraterritorial sanctions on Iran following its unilateral withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in May 2018. Since the economic dividends promised to Iran under the deal have vanished, both Iranian goodwill towards Europe and indeed compliance with restrictions under the accord have dissipated. Having been cut off from international trade, banking, energy markets, and logistical networks, Iran has turned its focus to its immediate neighbors, including the one with which it shares its longest border: Iraq. As a result, relations with Iraq has increased in importance. In other words, if Iraq was previously a national security priority, it is now also a vital economic imperative. This trend notably runs diametrically counter to the stated aim of the Trump administration's sanctions on Iran, namely to deprive the Islamic Republic of resources to exert influence in the region. This paradoxical dynamic holds important lessons for Europe and European policy and decision makers.

Indeed, one fundamental reason why US sanctions have not altered Iranian regional influence appears to be misunderstanding of Iran's motives and methods. To reiterate, a key aspect of Iran's regional policies pertains to the creation and protection of markets. Mindful of this dynamic, the tightening of US sanctions has only increased the imperative of protecting market access. Today, Iraq holds significance as the second ranking destination of Iranian non-oil exports – only slightly behind China – and crucially functions as an important source of accessible foreign exchange for Iran. This is not to mention that Iraq is a key market as well as trans-shipment point for Iranian crude oil, gasoline, natural gas, and electricity. Iraq is also central to several trans-regional initiatives envisioned by the Islamic Republic, including the "Friendship Pipeline," which aims to carry natural gas from Iran to Europe through Iraq and Syria.


To better understand Iran's approach to Iraq, there is also a need for Europe to look beyond US characterizations of Iranian spending in its western neighbor. While the Trump administration alleges that Iran is spending billions of dollars on propping up its allies in the region, the reported details of this claim offers some insights on its likely scale. Indeed, the contention over the allegedly major Iranian funding for the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) is a case in point in this clash between perceptions and reality.

The PMU is an umbrella Iraqi force, parts of which are often described by Western media and think tanks as "pro-Iran" in their ideological affinities. In 2016, the PMU was formally incorporated as an arm of the Iraqi armed forces by then Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi. Today, the PMU is funded by the Iraqi central government with over \$2 billion a year. While reliable data on the scale of Iranian funding for allied groups in Iraq is scant – including how such support has been impacted by US sanctions – some insights can be gleaned from available reporting. For instance, in July 2020, Iraqi paramilitary group commanders told Reuters that it was the impact of the corona virus and not the re-imposition of US sanctions which ultimately cut Iranian funding for Iraqi groups in past months (*Reuters* 2020). And when it did, "monthly payments to each of the four top militia groups in Iraq [were reduced] to between \$2 million and \$3 million from \$4.5 million to \$5 million." Assuming that these figures are accurate, this amounts to roughly one-tenth of the budget allocated to the PMU by the Iraqi central government. In other words, the scale of Iran's financial support for its Iraqi allies appears to be far more limited than commonly assumed and reported. The picture is more complicated when considering that one key additional layer to Iranian thinking on Iraq pertains to securing leverage ahead of a potential future dialogue with the United States.

Lastly, in the grander scheme of things, Iran also perceives its influence in Iraq as an important element of its strategy to prevent its exclusion from any possible future regional security arrangements.

IRAQ AS A KEY BATTLEGROUND

In the US-Iran contest for regional influence, and in the shadow of the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" campaign to compel the Islamic Republic to renegotiate the JCPOA, Iraq has emerged as a key battleground. These



tensions have so far culminated in the January 2020 US assassination of Iranian Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani and PMU Deputy Chief Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis along with their respective entourages at Baghdad International Airport. The incident provoked retaliatory Iranian missile attacks on US bases in Iraq in ensuing days – a clear shift away from the Islamic Republic’s apparent preferred use of allied local partners to target US assets.

More broadly, Iran’s reaction to the assassination has been the declaration of an end to the US military presence in Iraq as the “blood money” for Soleimani. To achieve this aim, Iran’s emphasis has been to rely on the Iraqi political process. For example, in the aftermath of the assassination, the Iraqi parliament passed a non-binding resolution calling for the expulsion of American forces. In parallel, a series of shadow militant groups have claimed responsibility for rocket attacks on military bases and attacks on supply convoys to US forces. Simultaneously, there is no diplomatic off-ramp as US-Iran tensions continue unabated.

EUROPE’S ROLE IN DE-ESCALATING US-IRAN TENSIONS

Since the US withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018, the Trump administration has put pressure on Europe to join it in reneging on the accord in order to compel Iran to come to the negotiating table, while also depriving Iran of the resources to conduct its regional policy (and thus diminishing its regional influence). While this appears straightforward on paper, the reality has been the exact opposite. US extraterritorial sanctions have paradoxically forced Iran to expand into places like Iraq in order to survive its shortage of access to more distant international markets. In this equation, Europe’s failure to uphold the promised economic dividends of the JCPOA has had multiple and severe consequences that have damaged the perception of European actors as credible counterparts that are able to exercise strategic autonomy.

To break the negative cycle that has pushed the JCPOA to the brink while raising tensions across the region, European actors have no choice but to muster the political will to adopt a policy towards the region that puts European interests at the forefront. These interests include preempting the emergence of breeding grounds in Iraq and the re-emergence of violent extremism at Europe’s doorstep; long-term engagement with Iraq as an emerging energy superpower; and utilizing outreach to Iraq as a platform to also engage in a new multilateral setting with Iraq’s neighbors, away from the shadow of the United States.

Any undermining of the US “maximum pressure” campaign against Iran will undoubtedly trigger a reaction. Here, one may argue that no European actor will sacrifice ties with the United States and access to the US economy for the sake of compliance with the JCPOA.

Indeed, as the experience of the past three years has shown, this argument certainly holds weight. And yet, it has little to do with what is at stake for Europe and regional states alike and indeed what Europe can realistically achieve. A similar dynamic is evident in Iraq too, where Europe is far from among the heavyweights in the battle for influence despite the size of its economy.

The argument here is not a simplistic recommendation for naive European assertiveness that undermines other important European objectives including maintaining constructive Transatlantic relations. Rather, the challenge is how Europe can realize its potential as a more constructive actor in Iraq, and in that process, also positively impact Iranian policies towards Iraq as well as uphold its commitments under the JCPOA – all with the least direct exposure to confrontation with the US.

A REALISTIC PATH TOWARDS EUROPEAN ASSERTIVENESS

- If Europe wishes to be a truly relevant actor in Iran and Iraq, it has no option but to adopt a far more assertive voice and approach – one premised on internal European consensus and a commitment to constructive engagement on the basis of mutual respect and equal standing.
- To get out of the complex conundrum that it faces, Europe should adopt a multilateral approach that entails a parallel engagement with both Iran and Iraq.



- Europe should make broader and better use of the Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges (INSTEX). Over a year after its launch, INSTEX has by and large failed to facilitate meaningful trade with Iran in the shadow of US sanctions, leading to its open derision by top Iranian officials – including Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.
- Europe should address INSTEX's failure to facilitate the use of Iranian assets that are frozen due to US sanctions in order to settle lawful trade with Iran. This is where Iraq could come in. While the details remain ambiguous, Iraq has been faced with challenges in paying for imports from Iran. In the electricity sector alone, Iraq reportedly owes Iran up to \$2 billion due to US banking sanctions. If political will can be found to identify and establish a mechanism to channel such Iranian assets – whether into INSTEX or a custom special purpose vehicle – it would help Iraq's stability.
- By opening INSTEX to Iraq, Iraqi authorities could secure a reliable mechanism to pay for Iranian electricity imports, thus allowing them to focus on longer-term solutions to avoid this dependence, rather than successive prime ministers expending domestic political capital on patches to chronic blackouts. These solutions could entail more European investment including in the power sector and regional connectivity. So far, such investment has been mainly the focus of the US government, which has promoted the involvement of US companies at the expense of European companies.
- Europe could also exhibit goodwill in Iran should it proceed to open a path for frozen Iranian assets and export revenues to be channeled to a Europe-based special purpose vehicle. Apart from exercising strategic autonomy in upholding its commitments under the JCPOA, this type of arrangement will be accompanied with greater transparency and accountability and can crucially guarantee that the funds in question will exclusively be used for legal trade that is non-sanctionable under European laws. This kind of initiative would disarm much of US criticism, while giving Iran a greater stake in a stable Iraq.
- Europe should be proactive and engage with institutions such as the International Monetary Fund to secure fair treatment of Iran and perhaps even chan-

nel special credit facilities to Iraq. At present, the Iranian authorities are unable to access IMF loans that are specifically earmarked for countries grappling with the Covid-19 pandemic. Tehran has made it clear on repeated occasions that it seeks a \$5 billion emergency loan from the IMF to fight the corona virus. However, the United States has reportedly imposed political pressure that has in effect paralyzed the IMF decision-making on the matter.

In conclusion, in order for Europe to incentivize Iran to adopt more constructive policies towards Iraq, the underlying motives behind the Islamic Republic's current approach must first be understood and addressed. To reiterate, by providing Iran with an alternative means of engaging in legal trade that is not sanctionable under European laws, Europe would live up to its commitments under the JCPOA; regain clout lost in Tehran in the aftermath of the US withdrawal from the nuclear deal; reduce Iranian pressure on the Iraqi economy; and, ultimately, aid in the cause toward stability in Iraq through the diversification of Iraq's trade and investment partners.

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EUROPE'S OPTIONS TO ADDRESS THE CONFLICT IN
LIBYA

REDISCOVERING THE POLITICAL MEDITERRANEAN: THE EU AND THE LIBYAN WAKE-UP CALL

February 17, 2021 marks the tenth anniversary of the revolution that toppled the regime of Muammar Gaddafi, whereas the country is as divided as ever. European countries played a crucial role in bringing Gaddafi's regime to an end. Yet the past ten years have witnessed a steady erosion of the European capacity for shaping dynamics in Libya, as visibly shown by the outcomes of the Berlin conference (Christiani 2020a). France played a crucial role in pushing the EU and NATO to act against Gaddafi while Italy was essential in enabling Fayed al-Sarraj and his government to operate from Tripoli. However, this capacity for influencing events has vanished. Now, non-European actors, such as the UAE and Egypt, and quasi-European countries, such as Turkey and Russia, have gradually become more and more relevant. Ultimately, Ankara and Moscow look more and more like the actual kingmakers in the current Libyan context.

European countries became more active and started coordinating their Libyan strategies more thoroughly only when Turkey became more relevant to the conflict's dynamics. However, this reactive approach can hardly produce a real shift and allow European actors to retake the initiative and regain the capacity for influencing Libyan dynamics and actors. This paper will explore several options that can help European countries develop a more consistent, coherent and genuinely European approach to the region, by focusing on three elements: first, rediscovering high politics when dealing with the Mediterranean and reversing the technocratic trend which has characterised the EU approach over the past decade; second, approaching the North Africa region from a more comprehensive perspective, including a security complex in which Sahelian and Maghrebi dynamics are intimately connected and mutually dependent. This shift can allow for more fruitful cooperation – especially if France moves toward a more European-focused approach on Libya and other European countries support French efforts in the Sahel; third, becoming a more assertive power by adding the military option to its playbook. Developing, and eventually using, military capacities does not imply that the EU must play pure power politics, nor does it imply that European countries must act as colonial powers. On the contrary, the military option should represent a tool to allow the EU not only its physical security, but also its ontological security.

TIME TO REDISCOVER HIGH POLITICS

In the post-Cold War era, the Mediterranean soon emerged as a significant area of concern for the EU to envision a new approach to an area characterised by years of economic crisis; problems associated with terrorism; the developments in the Arab-Israeli conflict after the Intifada; the outbreak of the Algerian civil war; the Mediterranean impact of the first *post-bipolar* war, the Iraq war. During the 1980s, after accepting Greece, Spain and Portugal within its structure, the European community became more *Mediterranean*. As such, these developments were increasingly significant in shaping European security perceptions. Historically, France had dominated the European communitarian approach toward the Mediterranean and the Arab world. However, as France was increasingly focused on – and worried about – the German reunification, Spanish activism proved essential in making Mediterranean issues a priority for the EU. Indeed, Spain managed to promote the view that the problems of North Africa, and more broadly the Mediterranean, were not merely problems of southern European countries, but for the entire community.

This push culminated in the so-called Barcelona Process, the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) (European Union External Action Service 2016). A grand project, aimed at establishing a free-trade area based on shared prosperity and peace by 2010, the EMP was clearly the most ambitious plan ever produced by Europe to deal with



its southern neighbourhood. The project was flawed in many of its fundamentals, being based on an overly optimistic teleological vision of economic reforms as drivers of political reforms and democratisation and, ultimately, political stability. Indeed, it did not produce the intended outcomes. Instead, 2010 marked the beginning of a process of greater fragmentation, as protests in Tunisia triggered the Arab Spring. However, why is it important to mention the EMP in this context? Because the EMP was the last, and only, occasion in which the EU showed ambition in dealing with the Mediterranean from a political perspective. Even regional actors, despite the problems, recognised this ambition. Speaking in 2020, criticising the current European role in the area, the Secretary-General of the Arab Maghreb Union and former Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Tunisia, Taieb Baccouche, candidly admitted that “we are far from the spirit of the Barcelona process” (Christiani 2020b). The intentions were indeed positive, but this plan was nevertheless flawed and ultimately weak in its foundations, and even more so in the way in which it was actually implemented. It was overly ambitious, and there was a significant and structural inconsistency between the stated goals and the actual practices. For example, six months before the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia, the EU was considering granting Tunisia the “advanced partnership status” to reward Ben Ali’s regime for its “improvements” regarding reforms and democratisation. Indeed, in March 2010, Stefan Füle, then EU’s Commissioner for Enlargement and the European Neighbourhood Policy, declared that Tunisia was “in many respects, an example for the region” (*African Manager* 2010). One year later, he openly admitted that “Europe was not vocal enough in defending human rights and local democratic forces in the region” – the ultimate, declared ambition of the EMP – and he called for a display of humility for past mistakes (Füle 2011). The empirical outcomes were indeed clear proof of these weaknesses. That being said, the intention of shaping political developments given the activism of the EU in those years in the region was there¹. It is this ambition to shape these dynamics, and the process of learning from past mistakes, that today should drive the EU in the Mediterranean.

Since the launch of the Barcelona Process, the EU has instead focused more and more on addressing technical issues, concentrating on low politics and functional cooperation, rather than addressing high political matters. This was obvious in the shift from the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership to the Union for the Mediterranean in 2008, but also in the evolution of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). The EU has become more and more focussed on single issues, for instance, migration. The securitisation of migration – treating this issue primarily as a security threat in need of a security response – represents a meaningful example. The EU promoted the externalisation of border control by using aid and economic benefits to persuade southern Mediterranean countries to carry out this control on behalf of the EU, halting the inflows of migrants before they could even approach the European borders.

This approach also created new ways for southern Mediterranean countries to exert influence on the EU, as the case of Turkey and the 2015 agreement clearly showed. For the past twenty years, Europe focused mostly on technical support rather than tackling political issues. If the EU wants to shape dynamics in the Mediterranean again, this approach must change. The political ambition that pushed the EU to launch the EMP should be used as a benchmark. The results were disappointing, but it was believed that the EU could produce an ambitious plan to shape its southern neighbourhood. The EU should find this “sacred geopolitical fire”² again. In order to do so, it needs a new geopolitical narrative, one that goes beyond mere national interests of its member states. Yet, more pragmatically, as shown by the role that Spain played in the early 1990s, member states should act as drivers of this process. Against this backdrop, southern European countries certainly bear more responsibilities. The Libyan conflict has shown that divisions and narrowly defined interests among them did little to help Europe as a whole.

¹ Between 1995 and 2002, the EU was very active in promoting (some) of the provisions of the EMP. Then came 9/11 and the terrorist attacks in Djerba (2002) and the picture changed, and there was a return to bilateralism, a focus on security cooperation, and a greater attention to technical issues and less on political issues. The ENP of 2004 and the transformation of the EMP into the UfM in 2008 were the products of this shift.

² “Fuoco sacro” is an Italian expression indicating an internal fire nurturing a sense of purpose

THE GREATER MAGHREB SECURITY COMPLEX AND OPTIONS FOR COOPERATION


The Berlin Conference in January 2020 blatantly showed the limits of European influence over Libyan players and their foreign backers. As analysed below, part of this weak influence is due to the impossibility of using hard power to support diplomacy. However, there is also another significant element of weakness: the flagrant divisions, and different priorities, of European countries in the Libyan conflict. To a certain extent, there was a sort of zero-sum mentality informing the approach of many European countries. This was already at play as soon as the Arab Spring started. For instance, the UK and France were immediately keen on supporting the revolt against Gaddafi. At the same time, Italy and other countries adopted a much more cautious approach in the early days of the rebellion. These divisions proved to be rather resilient, particularly between France and Italy. For years, Paris and Rome diverged on Libya, and Italy's support of the GNA and France's backing of Khalifa Haftar, the warlord leading the Libyan National Army in eastern Libya, clearly showed the existence of this division.

However, as the ceasefire in Libya is announced (*UN News* 2020) and the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum launched in Tunis in November 2020, (*UNSMIL* 2020) the time is right to promote another approach. Against this backdrop, and for several reasons, France – more than other European countries – should shift its current position on Libya. Italy already has, with the appalling result of losing influence over the GNA – leaving more significant room for Turkey to increase its control over the UN-backed government while acquiring no power over Haftar. This outcome was appalling as Italy spent significant diplomatic and economic resources to help the GNA get up and running, operating from Tripoli, but then this influence vanished due to Italy's unwise blind eye to the GNA's plea for help, pushing the GNA to search vital support elsewhere. This mounting isolation is crucial to understand why the GNA became so dependent on Turkey over the past two years.

One motivation behind Italy's shift, embodied by the Palermo Conference in 2018, was to get closer to France. However, this attempt at striking a balance that should change its course in Libya, abandoning Haftar once and for all and backing – actually, not only rhetor-

ically – the GNA for several reasons. Haftar's defeat in the west is visible proof of the limitations of his neo-Gaddafist ambition to control the entire country, which was already apparent when he launched his military offensive in April 2019. Then, although human rights violations have characterised both sides of the conflict, some of the developments that characterised the Haftar camp showed that their actions are utterly incompatible with the values that the EU claims it wants to defend. For instance, the lack of an outspoken European condemnation has been particularly shameful regarding the disappearance of Benghazi HoR MP Seham Sergiwa; the mass graves discovered in Tarhuna once the LNA and the Kanyat were dislodged; the reports of blatant violations of human rights and reduced freedoms in the east; the extremely violent actions taken by some LNA fighters, such as Mahmoud al-Werfalli, for whom the ICC issued a warrant of arrest for war crimes (International Criminal Court 2017). It is clear that supporting Haftar and its militias cannot be seen in any way through a normative lens.

Although the EU has often failed to live up to its own declarative normative goals, as shown by its handling of migrants, this remains an essential element of its self-perception and narrative: being committed to preserve and promote its liberal values; respecting international law; relying only on diplomacy in handling international issues. In addition, even looking at this support from a crude realpolitik perspective, it makes little sense. France had very little influence over Haftar, especially if compared to the influence of the UAE, Egypt, and Russia; Haftar did very little to advance French interests in Libya. As such, between continuing support of Haftar, because he is perceived as being functional to the French anti-Islamist and anti-Turkish agenda and Paris' relations with Abu Dhabi, and moving toward an approach more in line with international law, which supports the legitimate Libyan government, the latter would be preferable. In addition, this would also bring greater unity, and thus efficiency as all the major EU actors will work towards the same goal, to the EU approach.




For France, such a shift could have several advantages. First, by reducing its engagement with Haftar and supporting a more coherent pro-GNA EU policy, the EU could represent an opportunity for all those personalities in the GNA camp who want to avoid being too dependent on Turkey. Ankara is dominating the relationship with the legitimate Libyan government because it is the only actor that has shown a serious commitment to defend the GNA, not because it is the only country that can do so. This approach can be even more successful if the EU shows some willingness to engage militarily. Trying to completely isolate Turkey in the Mediterranean is likely to backfire, and Ankara's moves in many areas – Eastern Mediterranean, South Caucasus, North Africa – are linked to this strategic fear more than to an alleged neo-Ottoman desire for dominance, a concern existing more in the minds of many Europeans than in the strategic thinking of policymakers in Ankara. Against this backdrop, the ultimate aim for European countries should be to avoid having Ankara dictate the agenda, while finding ways to integrate it in the regional order. However, if France wants to really contain Turkey in the Mediterranean, doing so by pushing the EU to reduce the GNA strategic dependency on Ankara can be more successful than betting on Haftar, threatening military actions in the East Med and promoting a harsh anti-Turkish rhetoric. As shown by the development over the past few years, this approach only helped strengthen Turkey, while undermining a more coherent and structured EU approach on Libya based on true support for the GNA. The recent diplomatic shifts in Libya, with Russia strengthening its support for Aguila Saleh and Turkey, and Egypt trying to work their differences out, show that there is room for shifts, and Paris should seize the momentum to put Europe first.

Moreover, there is also significant room for more meaningful cooperation between France and other European countries on the broader region. The Maghreb and the Sahel regions are more and more connected, de-facto representing a *Security Complex* in its own right: This could be defined as the Greater Maghreb Security complex. Libya should be treated as a part of this complex, and not as an isolated issue. Broadening the horizon can increase chances for greater cooperation and a virtuous division of labour between the major European countries involved in the Mediterranean. For instance, France often has rushed to show its willingness to use military force and later has asked for European help. From this point of view, the more significant role that Italy and Germany are planning to play in the Sahel can come in handy for France to share the burden, without undermining the French role in the area. Italy's participation in the "Tabuka" task force by providing soldiers is an example of this approach. Crafting a more coherent pro-GNA EU approach in Libya by severing ties with the Haftar camp in return for support in the Sahel could be a win-win approach for Paris and Europe as a whole. In conclusion, a shifting approach on Libya can bring benefits to the broader Mediterranean agenda of France and at the same time promote a more coherent EU approach in Libya. This would constitute a real win-win solution.

ASSERTIVE POWER TO PRESERVE ONTOLOGICAL SECURITY

The Libyan conflict is not only highly internationalised, it has also become increasingly militarised over the past few years. All the actors that have managed to acquire a more considerable influence in shaping its dynamics on the ground were not timid in their willingness to use military forces. Libya is not the only country in which this dynamic is at play. The Syrian case also points at this emerging Mediterranean trend. In September 2015, Moscow decided to intervene openly following an official request from the Syrian regime. The Russian diplomatic and economic support had been significant since the outbreak of the revolutions. Yet, the open military intervention signalled a qualitative and quantitative shift in Russian engagement in the region. Moscow's military involvement in the conflict managed to shift the tide of the battle. Although Bashar al-Assad's stability in power remains structurally weak, particularly as the economic situation in Syria steadily deteriorates, the Russian intervention in Syria played a decisive role in propping up the Syria regime and avoiding its collapse. The same can be said for the Turkish intervention in Libya. Ankara actually started providing drones and military assistance after Haftar attacked Tripoli in April 2019.

This support then went through a number of phases. For instance, between September and November 2019, Turkey started de-escalating, frustrated with the GNA and more focused on its immediate neighbourhood (Syria). This trend reversed swiftly on November 27, when Ankara and Tripoli signed two MoUs, one specifically focused



on military cooperation, while the other defined maritime boundaries and Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) of the two countries in the eastern Mediterranean. These MoUs were signed when the military pressure on the GNA was becoming unsustainable, and the perception was that Tripoli could fall soon. Notably, Turkey was the first country openly admitting its military meddling in Libya. Its intervention proved to be extremely efficient in shifting the tide of the conflict. The arrival of Syrian Turkmen fighting alongside GNA-aligned militias proved to be essential, despite the inevitable tensions between Libyan and foreign fighters; the military hardware and logistical capacities that Turkey provided were crucial; and, last but not least, Ankara helped the GNA organise its local forces more effectively, reshuffling how GNA-aligned militias were organised on the ground.

These two dynamics are important from a European perspective because they point at a specific methodology being implemented by actors that are looking for ways to exert, and increase, their influence on Mediterranean geopolitical dynamics. The Russian intervention in Syria and the Turkish intervention in Libya point at a classic *Clausewitzian* use of military power, seen as a tool to continue playing politics with other means.

Libyan and Syrian dynamics are thus showing that without a capacity for projecting military power – and the relative willingness and readiness to use it – diplomacy is unlikely to bear any result. The EU must perceive this mounting militarisation of the Mediterranean as a direct threat to its values and community, more than only proof of a mere geopolitical competition. The conflict in Libya should thus serve as a wake-up call: An EU military capacity must not be seen as useful per se or as a potential tool of offence to be used in the future to impose European views. The shameful colonial past is long gone, and temptations of any sort to revive this logic should not reappear, in any form.


This awareness should instead be part of a new approach in which a stronger military capacity and readiness will allow the EU to defend its communities and liberal values from assertive powers that do not necessarily believe in these values; to give substance and credibility to its diplomatic stance; and protect those legitimate governments that are under attack by rogue internal and external actors, as in the case of the GNA and Haftar, for instance. Without this shift in mentality first, and then in capacities, the EU and more broadly, European countries will struggle more and more in shaping dynamics and controlling developments in an increasingly militarised Mediterranean. The EU must preserve its security, seen not only as physical and material security but also as the security of its values and liberal identity, in a more ontological way. This can be done successfully only if the EU is autonomous, and ready, in defending itself and support, not only rhetorically, its normative ambitions. Observers and scholars often suggested that these two aspects are in contradiction and cannot be pursued at the same time. This approach is wrong, and the militarisation of the Mediterranean shows that these two issues – material and ontological security – must always be seen as complementary.

CONCLUSIONS

Regaining a more effective role in Libya, and more broadly speaking in the Mediterranean, should not represent a chimera for the EU. There are ways to shift the tide. By focusing on three elements – rediscovering high politics, approaching the region from a more comprehensive perspective while prioritising European cohesion over other interests, and becoming more assertive to preserve the EU ontological security – the EU can return to being a relevant actor in shaping Mediterranean political dynamics.

In order to do so, European actors should:

- Focus on envisaging a new European vision for the Mediterranean, which takes a realistic approach to developments in the basin and acts accordingly. The focus should be on addressing political and strategic issues rather than just promoting technical cooperation.
- The impulse should be similar to that which pushed the EU to launch the Barcelona process in 1995, but should be more anchored in reality. The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership suffered from a number of intrinsic weaknesses: a teleological optimism regarding the nature of international politics after the Cold



War; the beliefs that economic cooperation was enough to influence dynamics and that economic liberalisation would necessarily translate into democratisation and thus peace. Twenty-five years later, the EU needs to launch a process similar in intention – addressing Mediterranean challenges – but less ideological and, to a certain extent, naïve.

- Against this backdrop, Libya is a fundamental element of the broader picture. In Libya, the EU struggled to craft a coherent and effective approach, and divisions between European countries should be blamed for this. Consequently, France should revise part of its approach on Libya, and align with other European countries in diplomatically, politically, and if needed militarily, supporting the UN-backed legitimate Libyan government.
- For France, this approach can be a win-win solution. It can serve its ambition in containing Turkey, an ambition that should serve the EU in preventing Ankara from dictating the strategic agenda in the Mediterranean. Meanwhile, the EU can integrate Ankara's agenda in the regional environment to address its fears of being isolated. France can push other European countries to step in and help, for instance by sharing the military burden in the Sahel.
- The EU must realise that given the current developments in the Mediterranean, its physical and ontological security are both at stake. If Brussels wants to live up to its rhetoric of being a normative power, it must do so by becoming a more complete power. On the one hand, avoiding securitising issues that are not security threats, like migration, and on the other developing a military capacity that can make it a more credible actor.
- This approach is even more needed given the economic fallout of the Covid-19 crisis. With less resources for defence, greater cooperation on defence issues can reduce the costs and improve the final results. Since the militarisation of the Mediterranean is more and more a reality, this approach must not be deferred.

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IDEOLOGICAL IMPETUS OF LIBYA'S FOREIGN MEDDLERS: ESSENTIAL DRIVER, TRIVIAL FACTOR OR SOMETHING IN BETWEEN?

INTRODUCTION

The Libyan protests in February 2011 were neither initiated nor controlled by Islamist groups, let alone the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). However, after the death of Qadhafi and the rapid move towards elections in 2012, Islamist parties featured prominently in the national discourse and ideological arguments found their way into post-Qadhafi Libya¹. Already during these early days and exacerbated followingly, was a sensitive issue pitting Libyans against each other, namely the attempt at dividing Libyan actors ideologically into Islamists and “anti-Islamists.” This sore and potentially simplistic divide has been markedly inflamed by Khalifa Haftar's launch of Operation Karama (Dignity) in May 2014. This military operation had the proclaimed goal to expel all Islamists from not only Benghazi but also Libya. When describing Islamists, Haftar applied a broad sweep including Jihadi groups like Ansar al-Sharia (responsible for the killing of US Ambassador Chris Stevens in 2012) as well as the Muslim Brotherhood (Mezran 2016). Of course, Haftar's rhetoric is not unique and resembles the discourse of other Arab leaders such as Egyptian president Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. Therefore, at a superficial level, the ideological divide in Libya seems to be between Islamists and “anti-Islamists.” This paper does not seek to determine who is Islamist or how blurred the lines are between Islamists and “anti-Islamist” forces. Instead, the question of the role of ideology and how it might drive or shape the actions of certain foreign meddlers in Libya will be tackled. In other words, is there an aspect obtruding the actions of two key meddlers in Libya that cannot be traced back to their geopolitical or geo-economic interests? And more importantly, what does the outcome of this analysis mean for European policy makers engaged in Libya?

Events that have so far unfolded during 2020 have reinforced the conviction that a unified Libyan state authority almost sounds like an unfathomable relic for many Libyans. Nine years after the start of revolts that toppled Muammar Qadhafi, the consensus however seems to be that Libya's trajectory in 2020 is driven by warlords and international meddlers each pursuing their tactical and strategic agendas based on their material interests (European Parliament 2020)². This paper questions this notion while critically assessing if ideology plays a role at all and if so, how relevant it is for some foreign actors in Libya in 2020. In line with this directive, the paper will assess the ideological underpinnings of two main foreign actors in Libya – Turkey and the UAE – and how these tie in with the local forces in the country. Furthermore, the paper will evaluate how far the ideological dimension should be factored in by policy makers while providing recommendations for European and German policy makers on how to engage with the complex civil war in Libya in an informed manner.

¹ For further reading: Ashour, Omar (2012): Libya's Muslim Brotherhood Faces the Future, in: *Brookings Institution* (9.3.2012); available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/libyas-muslim-brotherhood-faces-the-future/> (last accessed 05.11.2020). Hamid, Shadi (2011): The Rise of the Islamists: How Islamists Will Change Politics, and Vice Versa, in: *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 3: 40; available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/north-africa/2011-04-03/rise-islamists> (last accessed 05.11.2020). Pargeter, Alison (2016): *Return to the Shadows: The Muslim Brotherhood and the An-Nahda since the Arab Spring*; London: Saqi, 2016.

² For further reading: Gadzo, Mersiha (2020): The Unfolding Geopolitical Power Play in War-torn Libya, in: *Al Jazeera* (19.6.2020); available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/06/19/the-unfolding-geopolitical-power-play-in-war-torn-libya/> (last accessed on 29.10.2020).

IDEOLOGICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF TWO REGIONAL MEDDLERS, LOCAL LIBYAN ALLIES, AND THE SIGNIFICANCE FOR LIBYA OVERALL

TURKEY

Turkey's involvement in Libya – diplomatically and militarily – is mainly tied to the Turkish government. This sets Turkey apart from countries like Russia, for example, that rely on hybrid actors such as the Wagner Group, which is a private military contractor (that, however, has strong links to the state apparatus) to deflect from its alleged local alliances.³ The Turkish state is strongly tied to its president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan who is also founder and leader of the conservative Justice and Development Party (AKP) and has consolidated power in an authoritarian fashion, especially since 2016 (Peker 2016). The categorisation of the AKP and Erdoğan as Islamist can be based on Erdoğan and the AKP's international connections and political agenda. Erdoğan has also embraced, both at the level of discourse and in practice, a pan-Islamist agenda that superseded the historically Egypto-centric pan-Arabism (Soylu 2020). Turkey's pan-Islamism is not an end on its own, but it could rather be argued that it is a rhetorical and policy instrument for Erdoğan to advance the more Turkish-centric attempt of Neo-Ottomanism (Maziad and Sotiriadis 2020). Erdoğan's pan-Islamist rhetoric may help explain in part the seamlessness of Turkey's alliance with Qatar, a country that too has espoused a pan-Islamist foreign policy agenda (Gaub 2014). That alliance was further reinforced with Turkey's deployment of troops in Qatar (Khalidi 2017) in a clear signal to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which have instituted an aggressive blockade on Qatar since June 2017, that no further aggression would be tolerated. This ideological and strategic alliance between Turkey and Qatar could in turn help explain the overlap in their positions with regards to various warring parties in Libya.

To be more concrete, Turkey appears to have most imminent and direct interest in positioning itself on the side of the Government of National Accord (GNA), that is in power in Tripoli, at least nominally. The GNA, being the only UN-recognised Libyan government, signed Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) with Turkey in December 2019 delineating the two countries' maritime boundaries largely in favour of Turkey, to the dismay of EU Member Countries such as Cyprus and Greece (Butler and Gumrukcu 2019). In this regard, Turkey could be said to have an immediate material, geopolitical / geo-economic interest in maintaining the GNA in power (Turkey also has a whole list of running contracts in Libya, including in the electricity sector and plans to invest more – floating power plants e.g.) (Sezer 2020). It is therefore evident that Turkey has a clear-cut interest in propping structures in Libya with which they have made deals. However, the GNA is only nominally Libya's state authority and even in the Western part of Libya, including Tripoli, it holds little sovereign power with militias scantily loyal to the GNA dominating government offices and exhibiting criminal network structures (Lacher 2018).

This leads to a second level of analysis, namely partnerships and relations between Turkey and Libya that surpass current political arrangements (such as the GNA set-up). In short, Turkey has invested and harvests good relations with the economic powerhouse and coastal city, Misrata, as well as Islamist forces, amongst them elements of the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood and affiliated Hizb al-Adala wa'l-Tamiyya (commonly translated to Justice and Construction Party, JCP). Over the last year, Turkey has often evaded sending shipments to the capital Tripoli but instead sent them via Misrata, where Turkey has strong relations to local forces. With regard to the JCP, many members travel to Turkey, spend longer periods of time in the country (facilitated by the fact that Turkey is one of few countries Libyans can still easily travel to), and host events there as well as exchanges with the AKP. In an interview with the authors of this paper, the spokesperson of the JCP insisted on the JCP being called/translated to Justice and Development Party, which bears a rhetorical resemblance to Turkey's "AKP." In the same conversation, the spokesperson outlined a vision of the Libyan state that resembles "the Turkish model."

³ While Turkey also deployed foreign (mostly Syrian) mercenaries to Libya, the deniability the Russian government (still) employs regarding the Wagner Group is formidable.

To sum up and to answer the question if Turkey has an ideological aspect factoring into its relations with Libya: the short answer is yes, there is an ideological undercurrent that situates Turkey closer to certain Libyan factions than others and that impacts Turkish deliberations towards Libya. However, the material interests that guide Turkey's foreign policy in Libya are strong and evident. As it stands, the political structures the Turkish government relies on to further its interests (mainly the GNA) align at least broadly with the ideological backdrop of its government. Furthermore, the High Council of State, which is a high-level advisory body to the GNA and House of Representatives (HoR), has been headed by Khaled al-Mishri since 2018. Mishri has been a member of the JCP as well as MB and has close ties to Turkey.⁴ He is considered one of the main advocates of emboldened Turkish intervention in Libya, which ultimately led to Turkey stepping up their involvement in Libya in late 2019. While Mishri himself emphasised that he does not represent the JCP but the entire High Council of State regularly, interviews conducted by the authors of this paper found consensus amongst a sample of Libyan citizens who view Mishri's quoted statements with suspicion and believe his loyalty lies with the MB ultimately. For them, this also insinuates that national Libyan interests might be thwarted by an Islamist agenda. It is uncertain how the Turkish position might change if it would be forced to cooperate with forces like the proclaimed "anti-Islamist" forces of the LNA⁵.

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES (UAE)

The small but wealthy Gulf state of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and especially the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Mohammad bin Zayed (or MbZ), is seen by many Libya analysts as one of the most invested foreign actors in the country. Given the geographical remoteness and the vast amount of natural resources the UAE has itself, the question emerges why it is putting so much energy into impacting Libya's development and most importantly for this paper: Do ideological factors count into this?

The UAE's foreign policy is mostly steered by MbZ and generally speaking, the perspectives and personality of this leader are of crucial influence on UAE's state policy (Roberts 2017). Most importantly for this paper, MbZ is one of the most ardent detractors of Islamist movements like the Muslim Brotherhood – and has been especially since 2011. In line with this, the UAE is among the countries that have labelled the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organisation – together with Egypt and Saudi Arabia (Wintour 2017). Ideologically, this decision is not directed against the Islamic core of the Muslim Brotherhood but instead MbZ's inherent conviction that populist Islamist movements represent an existential threat to authoritarian, top-down governance. This is also why the UAE has been called one of the most influential "counterrevolutionary" forces in the MENA region. Given the mixed outcomes of the popular uprisings in 2011 and the international decline of formerly more assertive moral powers such as the United States, the UAE is also convinced it is filling a void by promoting a model of "authoritarian stability" as cure for the region (Krieg 2020). In doing so, the UAE seeks to quell Islamist fait accompli in Libya while putting a lid on any potential expansion eastward into Egypt, a significantly more strategic country in the region.

In view of this, the UAE's local alliances in Libya are guided by its judgement on which forces are most capable of curbing the alleged Islamist influence in the country and in installing a system along its prescribed guidelines. Therefore, the UAE has been propping and militarily supporting Khalifa Haftar, leader of the so-called Libyan National Army (LNA) and by some called "Libyan Sisi" – a label that is deeply flawed when factoring in the very different Libyan and Egyptian contexts. However, that is not the point for this paper; instead, what matters is that the UAE has decided that Haftar is that potential authoritarian leader that can push the UAE's vision of the Libyan state and wider outlook of the region. Haftar has been deliberately employing and pushing rhetoric that portrays him and his LNA as an "anti-Islamist" fighting force, rhetoric deliberately utilised to fall in line with the Emirati/

⁴ For example, on 28 August, Mishri visited Istanbul and met with the Turkish FM. After the meeting, the Turkish FM proclaimed that "our relationship with our brothers in Libya grows closer by the day." (Republic of Turkey 2020)

⁵ This scenario would play out in its most noticeable way if Haftar and his allied forces would win militarily in Sirte/Jufra. Various compromise solutions – based on negotiations and international diplomacy – might also lead to an increased political profile of Haftar and former regime people (who position themselves as "anti-Islamist").

Saudi-Arabian/Egyptian regional camp. It is also rhetoric internationally promoted by regional powers like the UAE to convince Western powers (such as the US or France) of the necessity to support a military leader like Haftar. In other words, the case of the UAE's backing of Haftar portrays a prime example of a mix of ideological conviction with a significant amount of political calculation.


To sum up, in addition to geopolitical objectives, ideological drivers have to an extent shaped the actions of the UAE in Libya. The UAE's Libya "adventure" can be said to be also driven by a long-term ideological agenda that aims to foster counter-Islamist forces in Libya and to erect the foundations of a "pro-stability" system centred around an authoritarian strongman – a role that (only) Haftar appears to currently (and maybe momentarily) fulfil.⁶

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EUROPE AND GERMANY

As stated above, the actions of certain foreign actors involved in the Libyan conflict are not only driven by geopolitical objectives, but they are also shaped by ideological prerogatives which are often less clear cut and hence predictable, but rather shaped in social interactions and theoretical discourse/ideas built over decades. Turkey's actions and positioning in Libya, for instance, appear to be in line with Erdoğan's stated pan-Islamist agenda, which in turn promotes more Turkish-centric Neo-Ottomanism. Similarly, the UAE, concerned with what they perceive as inherent instability caused by the proliferation of local populist groups with Islamist, trans-nationalist agendas/tendencies, enables and promotes presumably quasi-secularist, counterrevolutionary forces led by the likes of Haftar as a containment mechanism. In the meantime, European actors have sometimes pursued inconsistent if not contradictory policies that have opened space for the likes of Russia and Turkey to pursue bold objectives in Libya. Therefore, the following recommendations to European and German policymakers are laid forth:

- **Avoid reductive analysis:** Stated interests and positions are only the tip of the iceberg. It can be convenient to explain the actions of certain foreign meddlers in Libya based on the reductive view that these states are driven by clear-cut, unambiguous geopolitical objectives alone. While this may be a valid analysis, it is an incomplete one. States such as Turkey and the UAE can be said to have nurtured a specific worldview not only drawn from their respective histories and that of their leaders, but also one that is still developing in light of the diminished normative influence of the US-centric, liberal institutional, post-WWII order. In particular, Turkey's actions, for instance, while they could be mainly explained through the shrewd manoeuvring of its leader, are also shaped by his peculiar worldview, one that is influenced by aggrieved religious nationalism and nostalgia for a once dominant empire with Istanbul as its centre of gravity. It is therefore important for European policy makers to look beyond immediate interests in seeking to explain the behaviour of non-EU foreign meddlers in Libya.
- **Interests are dynamic, ideology less so:** When engaging with foreign actors in Libya, it is imperative for EU policy makers to internalise that while interests are more dynamic, therefore more amenable to a negotiated outcome, ideology is less so. An actor's expression of its ideology, if not purely rhetorical, is usually framed within a self-sealed, inflexible, normative discourse which can render it impermeable to standard negotiated processes. For an effective engagement of Turkey and the UAE on Libya, the EU in its Libyan policy could be better served by reconciling the framing of its objectives with elements of Turkish and Emirati expressions of their respective interests and ideologies.
- **Don't be more royalist than the king:** Value-based expressions of ideology should not be taken for their face value. Oftentimes, those expressions are used as rhetorical devices masking specific interests that are more amenable to a negotiated outcome. It is therefore important that EU policy makers not be more rigid than Turkish or Emirati authorities in inter-

⁶ Since the start of Haftar's offensive on Tripoli in April 2019, the UAE has conducted more than 850 drone and jet strikes to support his offensive. (UNSC 2020)



preting the contours of their ideological expressions. Both states have demonstratively taken actions that ran against their expressed values, speaking to a high level of pragmatism of their foreign policy.

- **Look beyond Libya:** Seeking to grasp the ideology and core interests of a foreign meddler in Libya, solely based on their statements and actions in Libya, is a futile endeavour. Both Turkey and the UAE have been actively involved in other conflicts and on critical issues both within and beyond the EU's immediate geopolitical space (Greece, Syria, the East Mediterranean, Yemen, etc.). Additionally, their behaviour does not take place in a vacuum; it is also informed by the structure of an international order that is under considerable stress due in part to the continued erosion of US influence. Therefore, to understand the actions of Turkey and the UAE in Libya requires looking not only beyond their Libyan footprint, but also at the challenges and opportunities created by shifting international power structures.

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TURKEY'S MULTIPLE ROLES IN THE LIBYAN CONFLICT MANOEUVRING REGIONAL AND DOMESTIC DYNAMICS

On November 27, 2019, Turkey and the UN-recognized government in Tripoli (the Government of National Accord, GNA) signed two separate memorandums of understanding (MoU): one on delimitation of maritime boundaries in the Eastern Mediterranean and the other on military cooperation (*Hurriyet* 2019). The implications of these MoUs have been observed rapidly in the ever-changing power dynamics and landscape in the Libyan armed conflict between the Sarraj's Government (GNA), based in the capital Tripoli, and General Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA) based in eastern Libya.

The MoU on the maritime border in the Eastern Mediterranean between Libya and Turkey was even supported by main opposition parties during the ratification of the agreement in the Turkish parliament on December 5, 2019 (*Anadolu* 2019). However, following the ratification of the security accord on December 19, 2019, by Sarraj's government, a debate among political parties ensued opposing President Erdoğan's strategy to use military force in the geopolitics of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The voting to ratify the security agreement in the Turkish parliament was starkly different compared to when major opposition parties supported the maritime border agreement with Libya (*Duvar* 2019). Political groups' division over Turkey's deployment of limited military support for Sarraj's GNA has reflected not only the disagreements in domestic politics, but also the dynamics of struggle over power and wealth among states, economic interest groups, multinational energy companies, and transnational political movements or radical groups across the region.

Focusing on Turkey's hydrocarbon resources policy in the Eastern Mediterranean, this paper highlights the ideational forces and material interests that have been shaping Ankara's motivation in Libya. It argues that the dispute over the maritime jurisdiction areas in the Eastern Mediterranean is the ultimate driving force for Turkey's cooperation with the GNA in Libya. In addition, Turkey's economic interests in the MENA region and the importance of material benefits for political Islam in domestic politics across the region have been influencing regional struggles over oil wealth and power.


TURKEY'S SOVEREIGN RIGHTS IN THE BOUNDARY DELIMITATION OF THE EAST MEDITERRANEAN SEA

Turkey's agreement with Libya is part of the delimitation of Turkey's western borders of maritime jurisdiction areas in the Eastern Mediterranean.² This diplomatic move complements Ankara's long-time foreign policy over its sovereign rights in its continental shelf (CS) and related acts to protect these rights. The major contestation over maritime borders in the Eastern Mediterranean stems from the littoral states' different legal interpretations regarding Cyprus and some other islands' (i.e. Kastellorizo) CS and exclusive economic zones (EEZ) in specific geographic circumstances – semi-enclosed seas.³

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² Turkey's eastern borders of maritime jurisdiction areas in the Eastern Mediterranean were concluded by a continental shelf delimitation agreement with the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) in September 2011. The TRNC is not recognized internationally except by Turkey.

³ There is no specific method indicated for the delimitation of either CS or EEZs in the UNCLOS.



Turkey is not a signatory state of the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) because it has reservations over the role of islands in maritime boundary delimitation. Turkey's official discourse regarding maritime borders underlines two arguments. First, delimitation of maritime jurisdiction areas should be based on the principle of equity in international law.⁴ Second, the islands in the Aegean and the East Mediterranean Seas should have no effect or a semi-effect during delimitation in light of international agreements or the International Court of Justice (ICJ) decisions about similar cases regarding islands in maritime border delimitation.⁵ Within this context, Turkey's position regarding the delimitation of the Eastern Mediterranean has two pillars: (i) Turkey's sovereign rights on its CS and related acts to protect these rights; (ii) the protection of the equal rights of Turkish Cypriots, who are co-owners of the Cyprus Island, over the hydrocarbon resources of the island (Republic of Turkey 2019).

According to Turkey's position, the so-called EEZ agreements by the Republic of Cyprus (SCGA)⁶ with Egypt (2003), Lebanon (2007) and Israel (2010) are unilateral acts violating the principle of equity for other littoral states in the Eastern Mediterranean. Turkey raises the view that special geographic circumstances and other factors about islands (i.e. proportionality and proximity) have to be taken into account during delimitation in order to reach an equitable settlement among all states with opposite or adjacent coasts in the Eastern Mediterranean. Thus, Turkey's diplomatic move to sign the agreement with the GNA in Libya should be considered against this background on the contested maritime borders in the Eastern Mediterranean. Moreover, the potential hydrocarbon resources that are covered in the agreed maritime borders between Turkey and Libya allow Turkey to reduce its energy import dependency.

TURKEY'S ECONOMIC INTERESTS IN LIBYA AND THE MENA REGION

The key statistics on Turkey's trade deficit and energy import dependency highlight two key policy challenges for the Turkish policy elite and have implications on Turkey's actions in Libya. One challenge is increasing the share of Turkish exports and decreasing the share of imported energy resources in Turkey's trade deficit. The second challenge is diversifying Turkey's energy supply sources by country to lessen any geopolitical risks stemming from Turkey's asymmetric interdependence with Russia in natural gas imports and growing uncertainty about Iran's role in proxy wars in the Middle East (Ipek 2019).

Libya holds the largest amount of proven crude oil reserves in Africa and mostly exports its crude oil and natural gas to European markets. At the end of 2014, Libya had proven crude oil reserves of 48 billion barrels, accounting for the ninth-largest amount in the world crude oil market. In the same year, Libya's proven natural gas reserves were 53 trillion cubic feet, making it the fifth-largest natural gas reserve holder in Africa. However, new discoveries are expected to increase Libya's proven natural gas reserves considerably, according to assessments that were made before 2011 (US Energy Information Administration 2015). In short, Libya's oil wealth has been an integral part of its bilateral economic relations in the MENA region.

Accordingly, Libya fits into President Erdoğan's regional economic policy that principally focuses on expanding Turkey's export markets in the MENA region. Although there is a significant shift in Turkey's foreign policy from one popularly known as "the zero problems policy" using conflict-resolution and peace building tools, Turkey's regional economic relations as "a trading state" is still important. While EU countries continue to be Turkey's major export

⁴ For example, Greece claims full entitlement for CS to Kastellorizo (Megisti) Island. This claim creates a distorted effect for Turkey's CS because it is the closest island to Turkish coast in the Eastern Mediterranean. The Kastellorizo Island is about 10 km², but Greece claims 42,000 km² of CS around the island. As a result, Turkey dismisses Greece's maximalist position against the principle of equity in delimitation of maritime areas.

⁵ The 1971 Agreement between Italy and Tunisia; the 1978 Agreement between Australia, Papua and New Guinea; the ICJ judgment in 1977-78 about the Channel Island – UK and France case; the ICJ judgment in 1985 about the Libya-Malta case; the ICJ judgment in 2012 about Nicaragua-Colombia case.

⁶ Turkey does not recognize the Republic of Cyprus as it has not been representing the Turkish Cypriots on the basis of political equality since 1963. Rather, Ankara officially calls it as the Southern Cyprus Greek Administration (SCGA).



market, Turkey has a large trade deficit with the EU and a trade surplus with the MENA region. While exports to the Middle East have slightly declined since 2013, Turkey's overall exports to the MENA region have been higher than its imports. The Maghreb countries remain smaller export markets at 6% compared to the Middle East countries' 19% share in Turkey's total exports in 2019 (Ministry of Trade 2019). Nevertheless, Turkey's growing interests in establishing its own regional trade network between the Eastern Mediterranean and North Africa regions have facilitated its diplomatic efforts to increase its investment in and exports to other Maghreb countries. For example, in January 2020, Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu and President Erdoğan visited Algeria right after each other, paving the way for Turkish firms to increase their presence through 3.5 billion dollars of investment, ranking Turkey as one of the country's top foreign investors (Republic of Turkey 2020a). Similar visits by Turkish President Erdoğan to Tunisia in December 2019 and by the Turkish Foreign Minister to Malta in August 2020 have demonstrated Ankara's regional strategy in seeking support not only for its military intervention on behalf of the GNA in Libya, but also for business cooperation, such as the return of Maltese and Turkish companies to Libya and resumption of air flights between Libya and Malta and Turkey (Republic of Turkey 2020b). In fact, Libya has been a key country for direct Turkish foreign investment when taking into consideration Turkish firms' contracts before 2011, which were roughly worth 15 billion USD.

The economic benefits of Turkey's relations with Libya are important at a time when Turkey's economy has been slowing down. GNA leader Sarraj has pledged to honour the contracts awarded to Turkish firms (*Anatolian* 2019). In addition, Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs Çavuşoğlu stated that "Turkish firms' business activities were cut short in Libya due to the war. There are projects and investments that need to be completed. We, therefore, also discussed the economic aspects of our relations," during the Turkish delegation visit on June 17, 2020 (*Anatolian* 2020). Furthermore, Turkish Energy and Natural Resources Minister Dönmez said that Ankara was planning on cooperating with the National Oil Corporation and international firms in Libya for oil and gas exploration in light of the cooperation agreement in the energy sector with the GNA. In fact, Turkey had determined seven licensed areas in the Eastern Mediterranean for oil exploration and drilling under this agreement and plans to start drilling in fall 2020 (*Daily Sabah* 2020). Consequently, Turkey's economic interests in Libya and in the broader MENA region are complementary to the strategic maritime border delimitation agreement between the two countries.

OIL WEALTH IN LIBYA AND THE IMPORTANCE OF MATERIAL BENEFITS FOR POLITICAL ISLAM IN DOMESTIC POLITICS

The "oil curse," the popular term given to structural constraints in democratization of oil-rich countries in the MENA region, emphasizes the significance of large oil revenues and oil-led development of these countries in creating rentier economies. Accordingly, the struggle for power and wealth exclusively focuses on the role of the political leadership that distributes selective benefits to certain political and social groups in exchange for political acquiescence. The dependence of prominent state bureaucrats, military officials, regional administrators or tribal leaders, and businessmen on the allocation of revenues and resources that are strictly controlled by the political leadership and its extended network of family/tribe members have been historically evident in maintaining Gaddafi's authoritarian rule in Libya. In fact, the power struggle to control Libya's oil wealth has continued to be a reason for the domestic turmoil since the fall of Libyan dictator Gaddafi in 2011.

Sarraj's GNA has been controlling the National Oil Company (NOC), the only marketer of Libyan crude oil abroad and the Central Bank of Libya in Tripoli, the only legal mechanism for oil revenues' flow into Libya and for accessing current reserves. In January 2020, however, Haftar-led armed forces forced a blockade, shutting down Libya's key oil and gas transport and production infrastructure in the east and in the south with the aim of cutting off vital funds to Sarraj's GNA (Fawthrop 2020).⁷ Additionally, in March 2020 when the Benghazi Central Bank (loyal to Haftar)

⁷ Before the blockades began in January 2020, oil production increased to 1.1 million barrels per day (bpd). The NOC confirmed that in early February, domestic crude output dropped to as low as 163,000 bpd.

announced that the Benghazi government should seek alternative sources of funding to finance its budget, making coercing Prime Minister Sarraj to cede control of the Central Bank of Libya an important goal for Haftar's military offense in April 2020 (Reuters 2020)⁸ (The World Bank 2020).⁹ As a result, Turkey's military intervention in defending the GNA and other legitimate Libyan institutions, along with the Libyan Political Agreement endorsed by the UN Security Council Resolution 2259, has been implicitly supporting Sarraj's control over oil revenues and existing reserves by the Central Bank of Libya in Tripoli. In other words, securing control over the Central Bank of Libya has been essential not only for the GNA's leader Sarraj's survival, but also for boosting financial means of oil wealth given mutual economic interests between the GNA in Libya and Turkey. In fact, a MoU was signed between the Central Bank of the Republic of Turkey and the Central Bank of Libya in Tripoli on August 31, 2020 that aimed to foster bilateral economic relations and strengthen financial cooperation between the two countries (Central Bank of the Republic of Turkey 2020).

On the other hand, the rise of political Islam in domestic politics across the MENA region has contributed to the power struggle over oil wealth or other state-controlled economic initiatives. The mobilization of urban poor in the region (i.e. Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Turkey) has been the key driving force for these political groups' march to popular electoral power (i.e. Muslim Brotherhood). For example, the AKP's repeated electoral success can be explained by establishing, maintaining, and developing a set of extensive networks of privileges, in addition to the dependency of allocating resources for private sector firms and voters (Gürakar and Burcan 2019, Buğra and Savaşkan 2014).¹⁰ Therefore, economic interests and/or oil wealth have been essential in the survival of political leaders as they sustain control over selective distribution of material benefits to their supporters. Similarly, regional trade and opportunities for investment to expand economic benefits for vested interests between political groups and dependent businesses have increased geopolitical rivalry for influence over the ongoing military conflict in Libya (Tanchum 2020).¹¹

Within this framework, it would be misleading to consider the AKP government's support to Sarraj's GNA strictly in terms of their common ideological background, the Muslim Brotherhood. On the contrary, Turkey's major motivations in Libya can be summarized in (i) protecting its sovereign rights in the boundary delimitation of the Eastern Mediterranean, (ii) diversifying its energy supplies, and (iii) increasing its trade and investment in the MENA region.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Turkey's assertive foreign policy over its sovereign rights in maritime jurisdiction areas in the Eastern Mediterranean is the immediate reason for Turkey's involvement in the Libyan conflict. While energy sources and economic interests also play an important role, territorial issues (including Turkey's CS) and related security threats in the broader MENA region, have predominantly taken over Ankara's foreign policy agenda. Furthermore, it should be noted that Turkey's trade relations and investment opportunities in the MENA region have been expanding despite political tensions particularly with Israel and Egypt. In other words, neither material interests nor ideological factors are enough to

⁸ The Benghazi Central Bank (BCB) was originally a branch of the Central Bank of Libya (CBL) and effectively broke away from the CBL in 2014. The BCB is not recognized by the CBL and was excluded by its accounting system, thus has no access to foreign currency and suffers from a severe liquidity crisis.

⁹ Despite the volatility of oil revenues (47% of GDP expected for 2020), public subsidies and budget deficit (10.6% and about 26% of GDP in 2018, respectively) have remained high and been financed through cash advances from the Tripoli Central Bank and the issuance of government bonds in the east of Libya.

¹⁰ The AKP's network of patronage relations has three main instruments: rent-creation via law-making, rent distribution employed to create AKP dependent private sector firms, and new forms of reallocating resources to voters. Such patronage facilitated by parties devoted to political Islam is specific to the distribution of mostly public resources to garner political support, which can be in different forms such as votes or financial aid to the party. For example, while the construction sector and large infrastructure investments during the AKP era in Turkey have been essential for re-distribution of public resources, public subsidies and state employment have been the major allocation mechanisms of oil revenues in state budget by the GNA in Libya.

¹¹ For example, Italy's approach to Turkey's role in Libya vs. France, United Arab Emirates, and Egypt partnership in opposing Turkey's military intervention has also been part of geo-economic rivalry in creating a new Europe-to-Africa commercial corridor.

determine Turkey's role in Libya. The overlap between material interests and political Islam has been evident in Turkey's distant diplomatic relations with Israel and Egypt given the dominant role of President Erdoğan in Turkey's regional policy and its subsequent isolation. Consequently, two issues stand out for policy recommendations regarding the Libyan conflict: Turkey's sovereign rights in boundary delimitation of the Eastern Mediterranean and Turkey's isolation in its regional policy.

The dispute over maritime borders in the Eastern Mediterranean is not a priority for the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt, and Russia who are supporting Haftar forces in the Libyan conflict. However, in addition to Libya's energy resources, Egypt's proven offshore fields, its existing LNG infrastructure, and potential hydrocarbon resources in the disputed CS between Libya, Egypt, Greece, and Turkey highlight conflicting economic interests and associated geopolitical tension in securing rights over maritime jurisdiction areas. Therefore, it is essential that regional dialogue be based on the principle of equity in international law when it comes to delimitation of maritime areas in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Moreover, the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF), which launched in January 2019 in Egypt, highlighted Turkey's isolation in the Eastern Mediterranean region. The forum includes seven members – Egypt, Israel, Greece, Republic of Cyprus (the SCGA), Jordan, Italy, and the Palestinian Authority. One year later, in January 2020, France officially requested to join the forum, and the United States has also expressed its desire to join the organization as a permanent observer. However, in May 2020, Italy shunned the joint declaration that supported the internationally recognized GNA in Libya. The declaration, made by the Republic of Cyprus, France, Greece, Egypt, and the UAE, condemned Turkey's policy actions regarding its CS claims and military interference. Therefore, the recent military escalation in the Eastern Mediterranean has exposed Turkey's isolation, which in turn increased the strategic importance of the GNA in Libya in defending Turkey's position on the demarcation of maritime borders in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Accordingly, major policy recommendations for taking initial steps towards conflict resolution in Libya are as follows:

- Turkey should have full diplomatic engagement in its relations with Israel and Egypt to help initiate a regional diplomatic dialogue for the contested maritime jurisdiction areas in the Eastern Mediterranean. Thus, a rapprochement between Turkey and Egypt could trigger common interests and cooperation to stabilize Libya.
- The EU members should not take sides when it comes to the dispute in maritime boundaries in the Eastern Mediterranean between Turkey and Greece in order to achieve EU members' common interests. For example, did the EU ask Italy to respect Malta's EEZ/CS rights or consider one party's off-shore activities illegal in the case of the CS dispute between Italy and Malta? In other words, EU members should isolate their political acts under the principle of solidarity for EU external affairs, thereby limiting the effects of the EU's incompetence in boundary delimitation of the Eastern Mediterranean.¹²
- Germany's recent efforts for mediation between Turkey and Greece should continue and should be supported by other European coastal states on the Mediterranean. Military exercises are a growing risk as there are risks in the so-called "unilateral acts" in defending CS rights in overlapping zones in the aftermath of bilateral agreements on maritime borders between Turkey and the internationally recognized GNA in Libya as well as between Greece and Egypt.

In this regard, before the Foreign Affairs Council's next meetings, briefings about international agreements or the ICJ decisions on similar cases about specific conditions of islands in maritime border delimitation should be made to the EU Council's relevant officers to provide more information about how specific considerations are applied according to the law of the sea.

¹² The EU legally has no competence in delimiting maritime areas given the European Court of Justice's decision stating that the Court is not competent to decide on the maritime border issue between Slovenia and Croatia.

- The ongoing glut in LNG markets and the recent decline in natural gas demand during the Covid-19 pandemic have resulted in lower LNG prices. As a result, major energy companies' exploration and production plans have been delayed for two years in the Eastern Mediterranean offshore hydrocarbon fields. Moreover, Turkey's recent discovery of natural gas resources in the Black Sea supports its efforts to reduce its energy import dependency.

Therefore, there is a window of opportunity to postpone the exploration and development of the offshore fields in the Eastern Mediterranean until diplomatic dialogue between Greece and Turkey starts. An economic incentive for postponing drilling activities in the disputed waters of the Eastern Mediterranean can be the existing oil and gas resources in Libya, Egypt, and Israel. Current multinational energy companies in these countries can have exploratory meetings with the GNA in Libya, Egypt, Israel, Turkey, and Greece about developing a regional gas market based on mutual economic interests in diversifying energy supplies and increasing trade and investment in the MENA region.

Turkey and Greece should focus on compartmentalizing their disagreements between the CS/EEZ in the Eastern Mediterranean and other issues in the Aegean Sea. If this compartmentalization is achieved through diplomatic negotiations, Turkey and Greece should take the dispute over the CS/EEZ to the ICJ or international arbitration based on the UN Charter, Article 33.

- If the recommendations above can be initiated and put on a diplomatic track, Turkey's limited military intervention would be helpful in strengthening the GNA's army and preventing the involvement of private contractors and mercenaries from Syria and other countries in Libya so that a political process based on the Berlin Conference conclusions can begin.

Furthermore, as stated by NATO Heads of State and Governments at the 2018 Brussels Summit and confirmed during a phone call between NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg and President Erdoğan in May 2020, NATO is prepared to help Libya in the sectors of defense and security institution building, in response to a request by the GNA Prime Minister to assist the GNA in strengthening its security institutions (NATO News 2020). In light of NATO's evolving energy security agenda, allies have vested interests in the MENA region where they can find a common ground to promote the 2015 Libyan Political Agreement reached in Skhirat, Morocco (Grubliauskas and Rühle 2018). Therefore, Turkey's ongoing efforts in supporting GNA defense and security can be handed over to a NATO mission that would enable Haftar's forces to withdraw from Sirte and Al-Jufra and the demilitarization of this strategic region, which is important for the economic viability of Libya's oil sector.

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CONVERGENCE AND DIVERGENCE BETWEEN RUSSIA AND EUROPE IN LIBYA: PROSPECTS FOR COOPERATION

Over the past ten years, Libya has increasingly become a target for Russia's growing ambitions to influence the Middle East, North Africa and the wider Mediterranean region.

In 2016, when Russia started increasing its involvement in Libya, the Kremlin's actions suggested that Moscow was either hedging its bets between competing political actors in Libya or that it had not yet settled on clear policy objectives. However, this changed in September 2019, when Wagner Group private military contractors (PMCs) affiliated with the Kremlin took on an active combat role on the frontlines in Tripoli — fighting in favour of the Libyan National Army (LNA) against the UN-recognised Government of National Accord (GNA). Today, Russia is increasing its military and diplomatic footprint in Libya in an attempt to position itself as a strategic partner for authorities in eastern Libya, mainly the President of the House of Representatives (HoR) Agilah Saleh and the General Commander of the Libyan National Army Khalifa Haftar.

In his 2016 article for *Russia in Global Affairs* titled "Russia's Foreign Policy in a Historical Perspective", Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov asserts that following the rule of Peter the Great, "Russia could no longer be ignored, and no serious European issue could be solved without it" (Lavrov 2016). In the same year, French President Emmanuel Macron remarked that Russia was an essential partner for Europe's security and argued that the European Union (EU) should create a security architecture that included Russia.

Today, Russia's growing involvement in Libya has become a pressing concern for the United States and some of its allies in NATO. Equally, Turkey's growing influence in western Libya has put the EU in a precarious position. While the United States and the United Kingdom have taken a hard-line position on Russia's involvement in Libya, many EU countries — France in particular — are adopting a softer and conciliatory position. By contrast, the policy perspectives of the same countries with respect to Turkey seem to be reversed, evidencing a greater dichotomy occurring within NATO. All the while, particularly in recent months, Turkey and Russia have demonstrated their ability to aptly manage their current rivalry without affecting their long-term strategic partnership.

Against this backdrop, Europe continues to struggle to find its place in the MENA region in general and Libya in particular. To be sure, only a unified European position could impact the nature of Russia's role in Libya. In this regard, Europe will need to adopt a sharp and realistic strategy towards Libya that goes beyond the boundaries set by the Libyan Political Agreement (LPA) signed in 2015, the so-called "Skhirat Agreement." The latter is the fundamental difference between the European and the Russian policy approaches to Libya (Russia choosing to engage with all Libyan actors). Additionally, Europe will also need to choose between cooperation on issues such as reconstruction and development of Libya's energy sector, migration and counter-terrorism or opt for open opposition to Putin's moves in Libya.

This paper explores the divergence and convergence between Europe and Russia in Libya. The argument that follows will focus on Russia's interests in the Mediterranean Sea in light of the Turkey-GNA maritime agreement; the instrumentalization of the Libyan case in Russia; Russia's relations with Europe and Turkey, and whether the case of Libya represents an opportunity for rapprochement between Russia and Europe.

THE BACKDROP TO RUSSIA'S OPERATIONS IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

Over the past decade, Russia's return to Arab affairs has raised speculation around the virtual enactment of Peter the Great's dream to access the warm waters of the Mediterranean. Russia's regained influence in the region (a policy that the former Soviet Union had already followed) is all the more impressive in that the Kremlin has put security concerns at the heart of bilateral ties whilst managing to sustain relations across the region's ideological spectrum. This means that Russian President Vladimir Putin is as welcome in Ankara as he is in Riyadh, and that his close military collaboration with Iran in Syria has not weakened his strong ties with Egypt or the United Arab Emirates (UAE). This impressive feat can be partly explained by the feeling of gradual abandonment felt by the Arab world towards the United States and Europe, and the growing need to find a counterbalancing force in the region. Nevertheless, the truth remains that Russia exercised considerable diplomatic efforts to perturb and even replace Western influence in the region. These gains have been achieved with far less resources but a decisively more pragmatic foreign policy that revolves around military cooperation, armament and narrow investments in energy or construction.

The pragmatic approach that Russia has displayed over the last decade should lead Europe to reassess its high investment—low return foreign policy approach that has thus far failed to deliver tangible results. If anything, such a splintered policy position by European states has created a suitable environment for Russia to insert itself as a more suitable alternative. A case in point is Moscow's and Ankara's ability to amass a level of influence in Libya that Europeans have failed to achieve throughout the last decade.

RUSSIA AND NATO'S "CYNICAL DECEPTION" IN LIBYA

Without a doubt, the 2011 intervention in Libya had a fundamental impact on Russian foreign policy. The direct military intervention in 2011 and the civil war that ensued had a deep imprint on the Russians and arguably led them to their early position on Syria. Russian officials have been very clear about their reservations towards the 2011 military intervention that led to the toppling of Muammar Gaddafi, despite not arguing against the fact that Libyans needed a change from

the 42-year autocracy. During the 2018 Palermo International Conference for Libya that was organized by Italy, Dmitry Medvedev, former President of Russia at the time of the Libyan revolution, went as far as describing the NATO-led and European sponsored intervention as a "cynical deception" that distorted and violated the decisions of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) (De Maio 2018).

FACING THE POST-2011 RESHUFFLING OF CARDS

The onset of the post-revolutionary era also meant that Russia had lost lucrative ties to a regime with which it had signed significant arms, energy and construction deals, valued around USD 4 billion. To this day, most weapons used in Libya are Soviet-era armaments — mementos of the close ties that Gaddafi had entertained with Moscow at the expense of the West. Regardless of the repeated incidents involving Russians in western Libya, the 2011 revolutionaries were quick to appeal to Moscow. Mahmoud Jibril, the leader of the National Forces Alliance, called for a "new page" in relations between the two countries in February 2013. Russia's decision not to veto UNSCR 1973 was received well throughout Libya and led militia commanders to believe they could receive training, modern weapons and technical cooperation from Moscow. Interestingly, in 2012, this newfound openness towards Russia led to USD 250 million in trade turnover between the two countries — the highest turnover Russia had recorded in Libya since 2000.

Gradually, however, as the second Libyan civil war approached in 2014, the Kremlin shifted its stance from critical to Western policy towards Libya to take up a more proactive role in Libya. The rise of Khalifa Haftar — a Gaddafi-era general — presented Russia with an opportunity for a comeback in Libya with Haftar as Moscow's main military interlocutor. This led Russia to see more common interests with the Tobruk-based HoR. Highlighting this growing support, Russia printed more than 10 billion Libyan Dinars from 2015 to 2018 for the Eastern-based Al Bayda Central Bank, which was facing liquidity shortages it blamed on the Central Bank of Libya (CBL) in Tripoli (International Crisis Group 2019). The Central Bank in Tripoli declared the Russian

printed banknotes as counterfeit, but that did not prevent their circulation throughout most of the country.

As Russia started to find its way through the complexities of the Libyan conflict, Europe lacked a common and coherent Libya policy. Italy and France were locked in a diplomatic feud that would last for years to come with the two countries supporting opposing factions in Libya. This divergence between the two European countries helped create an environment that incentivised more dangerous forms of intervention by other non-European actors.

RUSSIA AND LIBYA'S POST-SKHIRAT POLITICAL PROCESS

Similar to France and the Arab countries, Russia's cooperation with Khalifa Haftar and the Libyan National Army (LNA) started when the latter waged "Operation Dignity" to oust extremist groups from cities like Benghazi. For Moscow, Haftar's role in fighting ISIS, Al Qaeda-affiliated groups and militias linked to "Operation Libya Dawn" made him worthy of taking a central role in Libyan politics. When the Skhirat Agreement was signed in December 2015, recognising the GNA as the national unity government, Russia's Foreign Ministry was lukewarm about a political process it considered rushed and fragile. For Vitaly Churkin, Russia's ambassador to the UN, the reality on the ground was vastly different from the substance of political negotiations. In his view, the LPA failed to acknowledge that Libya was still reeling under fighting that was underpinned by foreign financing and competition for natural resources.

The sudden rise in popularity of the GNA among western countries was interpreted by Moscow as another sign of Western interference. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov did not fail to highlight the fragility of Libya's political compromise in June 2016, later claiming that the West only resorted to conflict management instead of conflict resolution. For him, the GNA's lack of recognition by the HoR meant that a crucial step of the political process had been skipped and that the international community had compromised on a solution in which the main Libyan actors could never be consolidated in power. Back then, Lavrov was concerned that the GNA's legitimacy was questionable and that it did not have an adequate security apparatus to comfort-

ably exert its power over Tripoli, let alone Libya. This led Russia to adopt a cautious approach towards the GNA. Moscow refrained from reopening its Embassy in Tripoli and did not appoint an Ambassador to Libya until 2020.

Russia has become significantly engaged in Libya post-2014 when the country's democratic transition came to a halt due to the disputed elections of the House of Representatives that resulted in the current institutional and political split. Since then, Russia saw Libya's political arena as non-representative of the country as a whole. This view pushed Russia to open its doors to anyone it deems to have a chance at temporarily ruling over parts of Libya. As such, Moscow established relationships with all possible interlocutors on the Libya scene such as the GNA, factions from the western coastal city of Misrata, the LNA, the HoR, the eastern-based Interim Government and former regime loyalists. This was starkly different to Europe's approach with the exception of France. The majority of EU member states saw Libya through the lens of the Skhirat Agreement. In this paradigm, the GNA was the only permissible UN-recognized interlocutor for Europe and the West. By contrast, Russia viewed the GNA as one part of a crowded political arena. This all-inclusive policy by Russia afforded Moscow flexibility in its approach to the crisis and provided Russia with a rounded view of the political and social dynamics while European inflexibility resulted in their being caught off guard by local developments.

However, given Libya's volatility, this has also meant that different groups within Russia's foreign policy establishment have been in discord regarding the most promising contender for the political throne in Libya. Some in Moscow called for more active support for Haftar as a way to replicate Russia's successful backing of Bashar Al Assad in Syria. Others have managed to rein in this support by stressing the need for neutrality and utilising their good ties with Misrata – primarily with Deputy Prime Minister Ahmed Mitiq – to seek contracts in Agriculture, Oil & Gas, and reactivate a dormant railway project signed during the Gaddafi era. Yet another set of hardliner policymakers in Moscow has rejected any support to Libyan actors — excluding Saif al-Islam Gaddafi's second oldest son who was considered Gaddafi's heir apparent, whom the Russians regard as too inimical to the West and therefore amenable to cooperate with Russia.

RUSSIA'S LIBYA POLICY IN FLUX

For Russia, Haftar has represented an asset in an uncertain Libyan environment. From 2015 onwards, Lavrov highlighted the commonalities of his country's approach to the Libyan crisis with Egypt and the UAE — two Arab countries that are amongst Haftar's staunchest supporters. These common approaches have undeniably involved some financial, diplomatic and military support to the LNA. In addition to having Russian backing for his capture of Southern oil fields in February 2019, Haftar benefitted from Moscow's equivocal position regarding his April 2019 offensive on Tripoli. In fact, Lavrov has consistently refused to "unilaterally" put the blame on Haftar for Libya's renewed crisis and even agreed to block a UNSC statement drafted by the UK in April 2019 denouncing Haftar's military campaign.

This is understandable when considering that Russian officials have invested considerably more effort in their relationship with Haftar and his eastern allies (who were invited several times to Moscow) than other Libyan interlocutors in western Libya, thus making the Russians reluctant to lose Haftar without a clear replacement. During one such visit to Russia in November 2018, Haftar even met with a key agent of Russian covert military operation abroad, namely Evgeny Prigozhin, who heads the private military company Wagner Group through which Moscow has benefitted from oligarch-funded military assistance throughout Africa and parts of the Middle East, thus gaining access to natural resources or strengthening diplomatic relations with struggling political regimes. According to several sources, the Russian private military company has increased its activities in Libya, mainly — but not exclusively — supporting Haftar militarily by providing mercenaries, and operating advanced weaponry systems against Turkish drones and advanced radar systems.

RUSSIA AND REGIONAL PLAYERS IN LIBYA

The Kremlin likes to present Russia as a natural player in the grand design of geopolitics in the region by not taking sides in regional conflicts such as the one between Saudi-UAE on one side and Iran on the other, or between Israel and Iran. However, apart from Syria, Moscow tries to play the role of a neutral mediator and ensures its engagement in conflict zones is in-line with its plausible deniability approach through use of Private Military Contractors and technological tools for the purpose of protecting Russia's own interests. As highlighted in the previous section, the Kremlin has shifted its position in Libya gradually in support of the eastern based authorities increasing Moscow's political and military footprints in Libya.

However, the eastern Libya theatre is already crowded with other foreign actors including Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and France. As Moscow deepens its engagement with eastern Libya it will have to contend with this crowded field and capitalise on overlapping interests and mitigate competition with those players. While Cairo would be nervous about growing Russian influence in eastern Libya and the potential for long-term Russian military presence on their western borders, the Emirates seem to have greater alignment with Russia and are helping facilitate some of Russia's involvement in Libya by bankrolling some of the Wagner PMC's activities in Libya. Greater Russian-Emirati cooperation is evident in other theatres including Syria and Yemen (Ramani 2019). Additionally, both Moscow and Abu Dhabi have helped facilitate the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Assad regime and the eastern authorities in Libya resulting in growing air traffic between Damascus and Benghazi. France on the other hand, is in a precarious position given its NATO membership and its strategic relationship with the United States.

RUSSIA AND EUROPE IN LIBYA

As briefly highlighted in previous sections, the European and Russian approaches in Libya are distinctly different. When discussing the European role in Libya, one should make a distinction between the role of the EU and that of its member states. The EU lacks a common and coherent Libya policy, which is further complicated by a short-sighted and largely contradictory foreign policy agenda adopted by France and Italy.

Moreover, the EU as a supranational organization has limited and largely ineffective foreign policy tools that it can employ on the Libya file. Europe's fundamental divergence from Russia is the way in which it perceives and interacts with the Libyan conflict. Europe has confined itself to the Skhirat Agreement, while Russia has since long abandoned that framework by engaging with Libyan stakeholders across the political spectrum. What the Skhirat Agreement did was impose a government that enjoys international recognition but lacks domestic legitimacy as it was never officially endorsed by the House of Representatives as per the requirements of the Libyan Political Agreement. This added another volatile dimension to an already complex and multi-faceted crisis. Indeed, the GNA has been a rump government since January 2017, with only five out of nine members of its Presidency Council being active — essentially foregoing the legal quorum and accord requirement for decision making within the GNA. However, due to a lack of alternatives, Europe and the west more broadly continue to recognize the GNA in accordance with UNSC Resolution 2259 despite the fact that this policy approach ignores that the Tripoli-based government is only one player in an extremely crowded conflict.

The reality above should demand that Europe develops a coherent policy for engagement in Libya that goes beyond the Skhirat Agreement and the dysfunctional political framework it put in place. This framework has so far been ignored by Russia when convenient, and utilized by Turkey for its overt intervention in Libya with huge ramifications for European security and economic interests in Libya and the wider Mediterranean region.

For Europe to have a chance of counterbalancing Turkey and Russia in Libya, it must first get its house in order by developing a much needed and long overdue common Libya policy. That policy should be supported with well developed, realistic and effective tools to protect Europe's interests that include but are not limited to ensuring stability in the EU's immediate neighbourhood; addressing the root causes of irregular immigration and security threats related to terrorism towards Europe; and the safeguarding of its energy security through the diversification of Europe's energy supplies. Only then can Europe stand a chance of meaningful engagement with Russia and Turkey in Libya. Such foreign policy tools could include the use of Europe's economic power to sanction and influence the behaviour of other players involved in Libya, as well as continue efforts to develop the common European security Operation IRINI to effectively implement the UN arms embargo. There is also the potential to monitor a ceasefire in Libya and play the role of a guarantor for future Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) and Security Sector Reform (SSR) processes in Libya.

The geostrategic rivalry between Russia and the EU as the two major powers in Europe primarily stems from the historical collision of their interests: Russia struggles to protect its sphere of influence whereas Europe continues its process of expansion eastwards with the possibility of countries like Ukraine and Armenia joining the EU – an unacceptable risk for Russia. This rivalry is reinforced by conflicting political values and ideological doctrine that guide and inform the foreign policies of both. However, cooperation with Russia on Libya should not mean that Europe needs to unconditionally rally around Russian strategies in Europe. There may be cooperation to combat instability and insecurity in Libya and the wider Mediterranean region without endorsing Russia's European agenda.

RUSSIA'S ENDGAME

Russia's key to success in the Middle East has been its consistency and assertiveness in its position, the best example of which can be seen in Syria where Moscow has supported its long-time ally Bashar al-Assad with broadly the same talking points since 2011. With a legitimate president (at least in the legalistic sense), Russia's game in Syria has been relatively easy in that it officially supported a state actor, thus strengthening its global position as a defender of state sovereignty. In Libya, however, where the state is not represented by a clear and unique actor, Russia's positioning is fluctuating and therefore more fragile. Unlike Syria, there is no clear-cut legitimate government whose sovereignty needs to be defended, hence leading Russia to adopt a plausible deniability approach in Libya. This is why our review of Russian involvement in the post-2011 Libya does not provide an assessment of a definite and localised strategy on the part of Moscow but rather an insight to a series of tactical moves that ensure Russia is not left behind in Libya's balance of power.

However, since September 2019, Moscow has demonstrated a more pronounced position in Libya, which is indicative of its long-term ambitions south of the Mediterranean. For example, Moscow has introduced more advanced weaponry into the Libyan conflict including S-300 air defense systems, Sukhoi SU-24, and MIG 29 fighter jets to al-Jufrah and Sirte (AP News 2020). Such development is indicative of Russia's potential ambitions and desire to set up long-term military presence in Libya. On the political level, Moscow has been engaging with the President of the House of Representatives Agilah Saleh as their preferred political interlocutor giving him political advice and supporting his political initiative that was announced in April 2020. In this regard, the Russians seem to understand the value of Agilah Saleh's international recognition as the head of the HoR in the east. The HoR is the only democratically elected body that exists in Libya today and part of the government set up by the Skhirat Agreement.

Russia sees in Libya a place where it can advance its brand as a balance to Western powers and an apt crisis manager who could diplomatically mediate between various sides of a conflict (except terror groups). In a way, in Russia's view, Libya is more important for its international repercussions than its local dynamics. The Libyan conflict allows Russia to advance its vision of a polycentric world order where Moscow prefers to deal with non-Western powers – such as Egypt, Turkey and the UAE – to resolve the negative effects of Western disregard of international law through unlawful military interventions.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **European Positionality:** As Russia increases its involvement in the Libya conflict in support of Libya's Eastern authorities, and with the United States tacitly approving Turkey's military intervention in Libya, the Europeans should refrain from adopting either of these two positions. Instead, the EU should aim to develop its own position to meet Europe's own needs and protect its interests in Libya and the Mediterranean region.
- **Militarily:** The EU's IRINI naval operation could serve as a legitimate security framework and platform for Europe to play an increasing role as a positive security actor as far as the Libyan conflict is concerned. Furthermore, the EU could help implement the proposed demilitarized zones around Sirte and al-Jufrah. Depending on the success of such a role, the EU can play the role of an outside guarantor for genuine DDR and SSR processes in Libya.
- **Diplomatically and Politically:** The EU must do more to utilise the Berlin process and the International Follow-up Committee on Libya (IFCL) platform that was created out of that process to salvage their waning political and diplomatic relevance in the Libya file. This would require sustainable and coordinated European diplomatic engagement with key Libyan and foreign stakeholders in the Libyan conflict. This would also entail that European states abandon the confines set by the Skhirat Agreement and pursue more inclusive dialogue that includes Libya's key political, social, economic and security stakeholders.



- **Geostrategic Rivalry vs. Tactical Alignment in Libya:**
While the Europeans should be ready for the prospects of having to deal with Russia's long-term political and military influence in Libya, they should find ways to manage their geostrategic rivalry with Russia against the potential for a temporary and tactical alignment on Libya. Short-term cooperation could involve topics such as ceasefire and arms embargo implementation, while the long-term engagement could focus on cooperation on reconstruction and development of Libya's energy sector, migration and counter-terrorism.

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SUMMARY OF KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

The authors of this edited volume have all concluded their chapters with policy recommendations on how European actors could constructively engage with regional actors and how generally a more concerted, active and coherent European involvement in the conflicts of the MENA region can look like. Beyond the specific recommendations for each conflict context, there are five key recommendations that can be summarized as follows:

UNIFY


European actors should aim at developing a unified position on the ongoing conflicts in the MENA region which do have, not only through their close geographic proximity, immediate effects on European countries. If Europe wants to be taken seriously as a positive actor with regard to these conflicts, it must speak with one voice and avoid disagreements as can be observed in the conflict in Libya. Some authors suggest that Brexit could be a chance for more unity of the remaining member states, especially with regard to the conflict in Yemen. A unified European vision seems crucial especially for the Mediterranean where currently a technical cooperation approach is dominating and a political vision for the region is missing. This could go hand in hand with a more realistic revival of the Barcelona process, just in time for its 25th anniversary.

HUMANITARIAN AID AND LONG-TERM DEVELOPMENT

European countries and the European Union (EU) are already active as donors and as major suppliers of humanitarian aid. Humanitarian aid is seen by many authors as an entry point, e.g. to cooperate with regional actors on the ground and to build relations with these actors who are mostly part of the conflict as such. Cooperation on issues related to the distribution of humanitarian aid could be the start for a trust-building process with these actors, paving the way for discussions of political issues in the future. In that sense, authors have also highlighted that it is necessary to improve the delivery of aid and to reduce the complexity of managing aid projects by working with few entities on the ground in order to reduce bureaucracy and overhead costs. However, humanitarian aid is only perceived as a palliative measure whereas the authors advocate for the engagement of European actors in the reconstruction of livelihoods in war-torn areas in order to create future perspectives for returning refugees. Short-term needs should at best be combined with long-term development strategies, ideally at the local level in order to support the emergence of future political elites. The authors urge European actors to participate in the economic reconstruction (especially in Syria) in order to prevent leaving this field to Russian and Chinese actors alone; however, it is crucial to make any European participation in economic reconstruction dependent on political reforms. Finally, economic cooperation projects especially in the field of water, climate and energy were highlighted as worthwhile endeavors to create real economic opportunities, for both sides.

DIPLOMATIC INITIATIVES

Apart from initiatives and support in the economic realm, European actors should also strengthen their diplomatic initiatives. As most of the papers discuss the interests and roles of other regional and international actors in the conflicts of the MENA region (e.g. Saudi Arabia in Yemen, Iran in Iraq and Turkey in Syria), most authors come to the conclusion that Europe should engage with these actors and try to influence them in order to work towards a resolution of the underlying conflicts. Especially Iran's economic burdens caused by the U.S. sanctions should be addressed by European actors (e.g. through INSTEX) in order to change Iran's perception that its destabilizing regional engagement is necessary for its own survival. Europe could also consider supporting the Saudi Vision 2030 in exchange for political concessions in the Yemen war. Engagement with Turkey in the framework of an East



Med diplomatic initiative could make its involvement in Libya less necessary. Apart from joint European mediation efforts, Germany has been specifically named as a potential mediator between the U.S. and Iran. Regional states that remain relatively neutral, like Kuwait and Oman, should be supported to act as regional mediators. And finally, any European initiative in the field of diplomacy should look beyond the respective conflict and take into consideration the actors' regional interests and positions, which are not only of geo-strategic and geo-economic nature but do also often have an ideological component.

MILITARY AND SECURITY COOPERATION

If Europe wants to be a credible actor, it must become so through enhancing its military capacities. This includes greater cooperation on defense issues, especially in the context of the Mediterranean. The IRINI naval operation on the Libyan coast could be an opportunity to play an increasing role as a positive security actor as far as the Libyan conflict is concerned. European actors could further play a positive role in Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) and Security Sector Reform (SSR) processes, once the immediate fighting has stopped. Finally, anti-terrorism campaigns, especially in Syria, have been mentioned as a way to engage with both Russia and Iran and at a later stage to bring also Turkey and the U.S. to the table. They could thus serve as a door-opener for more political talks.

TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE

Besides all sorts of diplomatic, economic and military initiatives, Europe should uphold its values and continue to address human rights issues by forming international or European investigation committees and thereby setting a strong sign against war crimes, atrocities and human rights violations and for the accountability and prosecution of such.

THE WAY FORWARD

The policy recommendations summarized here are a balancing act between "realpolitik" and a value-driven approach. If Europe wants to play a more active role in these conflicts in order to work towards a conflict resolution and directly influence the lives of millions in this war-torn region, Europe has to leave its comfort zone. The proposed initiatives will have a price and require unified action.

What should be highlighted is the focus on development initiatives that will require long-term commitment but that will pay off in the long-run by supporting the formation of new local political elites who would stand ready to take over once a political solution for the conflicts discussed becomes viable. The importance of this cannot be stressed enough.

Apart from these concrete policy recommendations, the need to invest in an inclusive security architecture for the region, where conflicts and disputes could be settled without the support and the interference of outside actors, should also be mentioned although the authors of this publication focused on more practical recommendations. In the current situation, this seems to be a far-fetched vision which only idealists propagate. However, examples from other regions like Sub-Saharan Africa and South-East Asia demonstrate that this must not be the case forever and European actors should, in addition to all short and medium-term measures, support initiatives that work towards an inclusive security forum for the MENA region.

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