

Transatlantic Strategy Group on the Future of US Global Leadership

Roundtable Two: Transatlantic Security Policy Towards a Changing Middle East

On 6 February 2015 GMF Paris, in association with the US Project at Chatham House, organized the second workshop of the **Transatlantic Strategy Group on the Future of US Global Leadership**. The event, entitled ‘Transatlantic Security Policy Towards a Changing Middle East’, took place at the residence of the British ambassador to France. It brought together 30 experts, scholars, officials, journalists and corporate representatives from Europe, the US and the Middle East. The discussions were held under the Chatham House Rule. The following summary sets out the key points made but does not reflect any consensus among the attendees.

Key points:

- **The Arab revolutions have been a missed opportunity for Arab countries and for America and Europe.** The political instability prevalent in the contemporary strategic environment in the Middle East stems from the inability of regional powers to cooperate, and from their failure to translate the energy of popular movements into political and economic development. Transatlantic powers, such as the US, the UK and France, that had hoped for political reform in the region have seen those hopes dashed.
- **Europe needs to build its capabilities and renew its strategic thinking to emerge as a credible actor in the Middle East.** European powers continue to rely on the US to defend transatlantic interests in the region. As the US increasingly focuses its efforts on Asia, this strategy will be difficult to sustain. Given the impact of crises in the Middle East on European security, there is a need for more active European engagement backed up by appropriate resources.
- **The Syrian crisis is the main issue on which transatlantic powers differ with respect to their strategies for the Middle East.** The US and European countries continue to disagree on how to deal with the conflict. This lack of consensus creates further division in the transatlantic powers’ responses to the threat from Islamic State (IS). Ongoing disagreements about acceptable levels of dialogue with the Assad regime, and of support to moderate rebels, reflect these divergences and affect other issues such as talks with Iran.
- **Fostering dialogue and cooperation between regional partners, and especially between Saudi Arabia and Iran, is of paramount importance.** Transatlantic powers must encourage the principal Middle Eastern powers to take more responsibility for stability and security in the region. Developing common strategic interests between Saudi Arabia and Iran is one of the most pressing priorities of transatlantic diplomatic work in the region.

Assessing recent changes in the Middle East

- **Instability and insecurity in the Middle East stem from the contestation of political regimes’ legitimacy.** The current crises can be characterized as Arab civil wars, as they are primarily rooted not in ideological or religious issues, but rather in the long historical process of defining the type of state that will prevail in the region. The transformation of regional political regimes through the emergence of constitutional governance would constitute the best answer to criticisms of their illegitimacy, inefficiency and inability to adapt to contemporary challenges and external influences.
- **The original message of the Arab revolutions should not be forgotten.** There is still hope that the democratic principles that defined these popular movements will influence the

This project is supported by the Fritz Thyssen Foundation, with support for this event provided by the Delegation of Strategic Affairs of the French Ministry of Defence and the British Embassy in Paris.

regional political landscape. Transatlantic strategists and policy-makers should not adopt a cynical view of the revolutions, especially if doing so implies a renewed choice between stability and reform.

- **Islamic State (IS) is better understood as a symptom, rather than as a cause, of instability.** By focusing on the rise of IS to the exclusion of fundamental issues, transatlantic powers not only obscure their understanding of the situation but imperil their ability to design relevant solutions.
- **The traditional regional order does not reflect today's geopolitical complexity.** The antagonism between Iran and the Sunni powers, balanced by the presence of the US, has been supplanted by a multitude of divisions and tensions. Conflicts between state and society, secularism and Islamism, and Saudi Arabia and Qatar, among others, define the contemporary strategic environment. What emerges from these conflicts will shape the future balance of power in the Middle East.
- **Despite internal weaknesses, some Middle Eastern regimes have proven surprisingly resilient to major crises.** Many states in the region can barely be considered formal regimes, and are more like family-based syndicates. Their consequent fragility has led many commentators to predict their future collapse. However, the aftermath of the Arab revolutions has highlighted not only the resilience of some oppressive regimes, but also the ability of authoritarian states to learn from previous experiences. The contrasting fates of the Gaddafi and Assad regimes in Libya and Syria respectively may influence how authoritarian leaders deal with popular uprisings in the future.
- **The evolution of the region in terms of educational, health and demographic indicators is fundamental to understanding its future security challenges.** Transatlantic powers need to see beyond current conflicts and focus on the longer-term trends that will define the strategic environment in the Middle East.
- **The future security challenges lie in the Gulf region rather than in the Levant.** Succession issues in Saudi Arabia and in other Gulf countries will have a significant influence on the future regional order, potentially creating security crises that will exceed those currently seen in the Levant region in scope and violence.

US policy in flux: withdrawal or reengagement?

- **The Obama administration has defined four objectives for its Middle East policy: preventing Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons, re-launching the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, fighting Islamist terrorism and keeping oil prices stable.** The first three goals have not been achieved thus far: the Iran deal's prospects are uncertain; the Israeli-Palestinian conflict escalated again in 2014; and the emergence of IS has overshadowed the death of Osama bin Laden in the fight against terrorism. The dramatic fall in oil prices since mid-2014 has largely beneficial implications for the US economy, but this is due mostly to circumstances beyond the US government's control rather than to the impact of US policy.
- **The Obama administration has adopted a minimalist approach to US leadership in the Middle East.** Barack Obama has been consistent in his foreign and security policy in the region, embracing a realist perspective and avoiding military adventures. Besides, isolationist trends exist among Republicans and Democrats alike. The Obama administration is reluctant to invest significant political or military capital to the region that is no longer a top strategic priority.
- **The rapid rise of IS may be a game-changer in the current American assessment of the cost of non-intervention.** With the recent evolution of the conflicts in Iraq and Syria, the minimalist US policy needs to be reconsidered, as the consequences of inaction potentially outweigh the costs of intervention.
- **The Obama administration has overreacted to the military interventions of the George W. Bush administration.** The legacy of the Bush years has shaped Obama's view that US military operations have done more harm than good in the region. However, it is uncertain whether the next administration will follow the Obama administration's caution, or whether it will again use military power more aggressively.

- **In both the Middle East and Europe, the US's current Middle East policy has largely been perceived as weak.** In its efforts to make a clean break from its predecessor's policies, the Obama administration prioritized withdrawal from Iraq over regional concerns about stability. The resulting power vacuum and violence, widely blamed on US withdrawal, have tarnished Obama's reputation in the eyes of America's Middle Eastern allies and the region's public.
- **US strategy is frustrated by regional powers' lack of willingness to cooperate with each other.** While the US is looking for willing and capable partners in the Middle East, regional powers have clearly failed the test that the Arab revolutions and their aftermath have presented in terms of cross-border cooperation. If governments in the region cannot decide to cooperate, they will be unable to manage crises.

The terms of the transatlantic partnership: defining Europe's strategic role in the Middle East

- **Transatlantic security cooperation in the Middle East is still stuck in the Iraq war paradigm.** The US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 still frames the transatlantic approach to Syria and Libya, as evident in divergent perspectives on military intervention in the region. Today, the challenge lies in striking the right balance between interventionism and retrenchment, and in moving beyond the lessons from past operations to preparing for future actions.
- **The strategic divergences across the Atlantic have their roots in the last decade.** After 9/11 the US focused on security and stopping the spread of Islamist terrorism, which led to the invasion of Iraq, while its European partners were more concerned with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. A decade later, the US priority in the region is to achieve an Iranian nuclear settlement, while European powers are more worried by the deterioration in the security situation in Syria.
- **However, there is considerable transatlantic agreement on the best strategies for dealing with Middle East security crises.** If their respective priorities sometimes differ, the US and Europe share similar goals with respect to Iran's nuclear programme and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Attitudes to the Syrian civil war are the main area of divergence, not only between the US and Europe, but also among European countries.
- **European powers' Middle East policy is constrained by limited defence budgets.** European countries cannot act as credible security providers in the region owing to capacity and budgetary constraints. As a result, despite having potentially divergent strategic perspectives, European governments find their foreign policy still framed by US actions and agendas.
- **Europe's lack of assertiveness in foreign and security policy leaves a strategic void.** European countries have significant responsibilities to the Middle East, the non-fulfilment of which cannot simply be compensated for by an increased US presence in the region. Europe is geographically contiguous with the Middle East. This supports linkages between the two regions, with the result that insecurity in the Middle East has a more direct impact on Europe.
- **While Western military intervention in Libya succeeded in an operational sense, the lack of follow-up has been very damaging for security.** Transatlantic powers did not correctly assess the investment that would be necessary to rebuild the country after intervention, and failed to provide security and stability after the collapse of the Gaddafi regime. Transatlantic powers do not refer to the 'responsibility to protect' (R2P) principle, touted as a justification for intervention in Libya, in their current Middle East strategy and policy. This is despite the similarities between the Libyan crisis and current crises in the Levant.

A true European ambition for the Middle East?

- **Europeans tend to underestimate their own normative power.** Europe remains a credible wielder of soft power. It can have an impact in the Middle East by example, and by the use of normative tools. Its market, economy and know-how in civil governance can provide efficient responses to crucial security issues, including the crisis of political Islam and

radicalization. At the same time, the potential European contribution to the region goes far beyond foreign policy. It includes the ability to offer credible long-term solutions to development challenges.

- **Strategic divergences between European countries are the first obstacle to a credible European foreign and security policy in the Middle East.** The goals and means of engagement in the region should be defined at the European level. However, European unity over the Middle East is weakening, and there is a risk that European nations will only agree on a strategy 'by default'.
- **European unity can be achieved if the main European powers show more leadership.** Smaller European powers are aware of the limits they face in designing a comprehensive approach to the Middle East. They are willing to let bigger powers such as France and the UK take the lead on defending common European interests in the region.
- **The European strategy on Syria is based on internal security interests, not on humanitarian concerns.** From a European perspective, keeping the conflict contained within Syrian borders is the priority. Helping any of the belligerents may foster radicalization and increase the risk of terrorist attacks in the Middle East and in Europe. European powers' ambitions with respect to Syria can extend no further than damage limitation, and helping regional powers to find a sustainable solution.
- **The Maghreb and Mashriq are the new frontiers of Europe.** Geography defines the different priorities of Europe and the US, and the Maghreb and Mashriq regions have a particular strategic significance to all European countries. The security and prosperity of Europe is inextricably linked to the political and economic situation in the Middle East.