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KONRAD
ADENAUER
STIFTUNG

SECURITY CHALLENGES IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN

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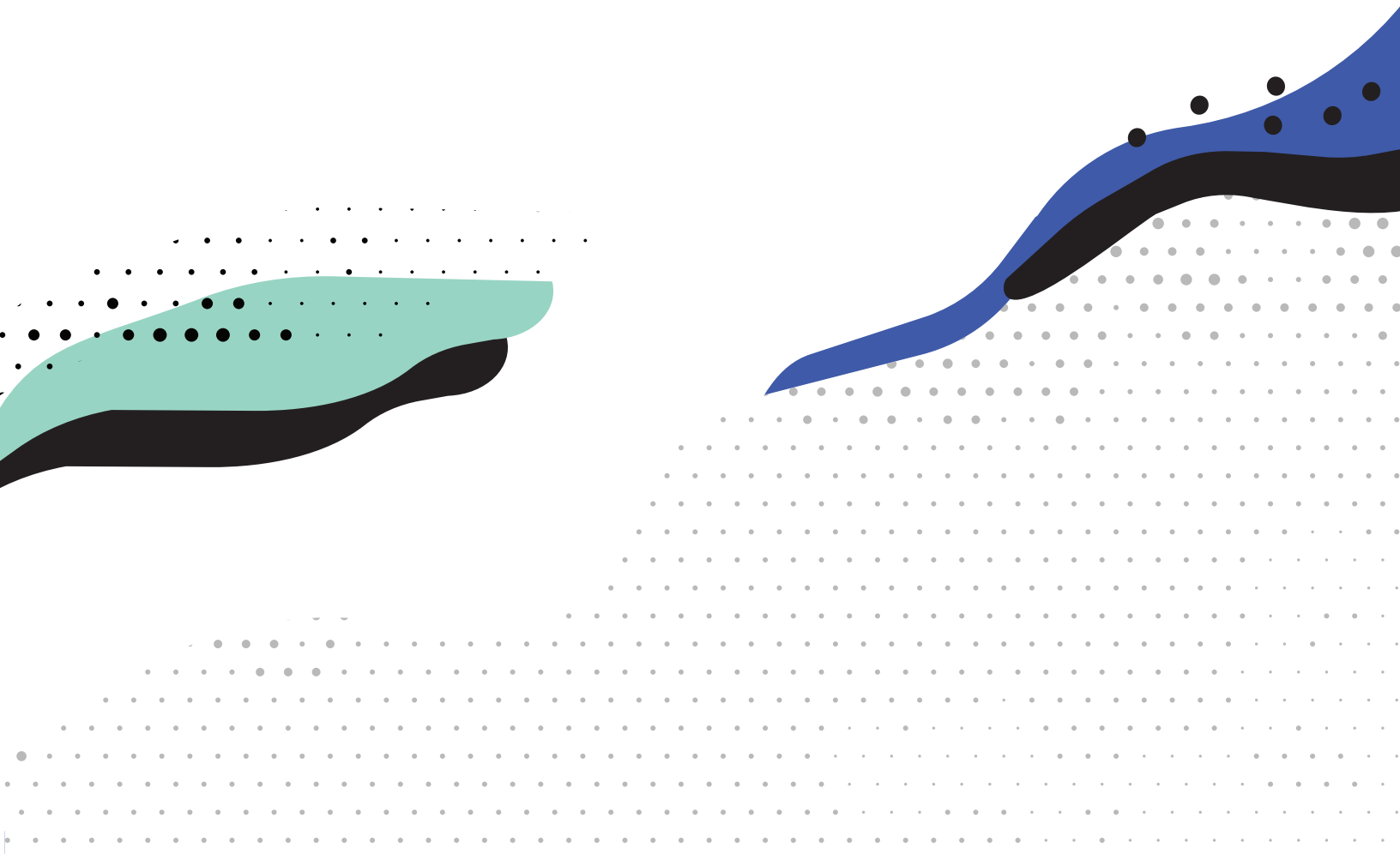


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Turkey's drillship YAVUZ. (muratart/Adobe Stock)

INTRODUCTION

On May 2–3 2022, the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Syria/Iraq Office and the Foreign Policy Research Institute convened a panel of foreign policy experts for a dialogue on security challenges present in the Eastern Mediterranean. The first day addressed state fragility in the region and how this phenomenon intersects with systemic security issues, including climate change, maritime issues, and migration. The second day of dialogue addressed military issues, including Russian naval modernization, US-Russian regional retrenchment, and how each country views the other’s long-term regional ambitions. Additionally, the conversations in the second day covered European regional security views and how the broader US-Russia rivalry impacts thinking on the continent amidst the current crisis landscape.

In each panel, two guest speakers shared their subject matter expertise on the focus topic and a dialogue followed brief presentations. The entirety of the event was conducted under Chatham House Rule, wherein the participants could share views and opinions freely. As a result, findings from these conversations can be more transparent than traditional formal dialogues in traditional diplomatic channels. In this report, we share the consensus highlights and points of contention which came from the discussions.

As the nature of Chatham House Rule protects the identity of our participants, below are a few areas of expertise found among those involved in the dialogue.

- Foreign Policy of the United States
- Climate Change and National Security for the United States
- Migration and Foreign Policy for the European Union
- Migration and Conflict
- Economic Investments into Clean and Alternative Energies
- European Geostrategy and Diplomacy
- Security and Migration in the Eastern Mediterranean
- German Economic and Foreign Policy

Key Topics of Discussion

- Impacts of Migration
- Intervention of Regional and Great-Power Actors
- Intersection of Maritime Disputes and Climate Change



SESSION 1:

REGIONAL CRISES AND IRREGULAR MIGRATION

Key Points:

- Turkey is facing internal tensions with economic and internal challenges.
- With upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections in Turkey, the topic of Syrian refugees will become more prevalent.
- The Russian invasion of Ukraine has the potential to destabilize humanitarian support to Syria and lead to new waves of migration.
- The West needs to take proactive policy measures in preparation for shifts in the migration balance and plan for addressing humanitarian concerns.

The Mediterranean region has been beset by crises, ranging from the on-going war in Syria to the simmering tensions in Libya. These tensions have spurred a series of secondary, political challenges that have impacted politics in the European Union and other regional states. The first panel sought to find linkages between regional crises and the migration crisis, and discuss the dual impact these issues have on regional politics.

The first discussion focused on the migration question in the Mediterranean region, with a focus on the secondary challenges the conflicts in Syria and Libya pose for regional states. As the first panelist noted, the migration issue is a particularly acute challenge for the Turkish government, ranging from systemic security challenges from the war in Syria to the domestic political challenges migration poses for the ruling Justice and Development Party. Ankara is facing three key challenges with Turkish elections coming up. These include their strained relations with NATO and the West, potentially souring bilateral ties with Russia because of Turkish weapons sales to Ukraine (particularly Turkey's Bayraktar TB2 drones), and tensions between the refugee and Turkish populations.¹

The first panelist discussed these three interrelated challenges. If the Russian government decides Turkey is being too friendly with Ukraine it could cause Russia to drive refugees across Turkish borders from Syria. This problem is two-fold for Turkey. The integration of refugees still poses great challenges, as Turkey attempted

to disperse refugees from refugee camps in 2015 unsuccessfully and the incorporation of migrants into the formal economy remains an issue. In 2019, estimates suggest that approximately 35 percent of Turkey's economy operates underground, with only 2 percent of all Syrian migrants working in the formal economy with a working permit.² This contributes heavily to the worsening problem Turkey faces: the politicization of migration and the refugee population.³ It is worth pointing out that the vast majority of refugees have lived in Turkey for nearly a decade, and most do not plan on going back to Syria.⁴ As in other countries, refugees are blamed for economic problems like high inflation rates. This has sowed more hate speech, violence, and discrimination against refugees from Syria and has the potential to worsen with Ukrainian refugees. The Turkish government states that it has spent more than \$100 billion (USD) on Syrian refugees since the beginning of the war and the sentiment from Ankara is that they have taken on a greater burden than their neighbors, fueling part of their hostility toward Greece and other Eastern Mediterranean neighbors and resentment towards the West.⁵ The EU policy to address migration and refugee crises should address the economic and cultural impact Turkey experienced throughout its tenure as the top host of refugees among member states.

Following the panelist's remarks, the floor opened for further dialogue on the migration question. There were concerns voiced by multiple participants on the security of Syrian humanitarian relief operations and funding stability if the war in Ukraine worsens, as well



Destroyed buildings next to a mosque in Aleppo, Syria. (Adobe Stock)

as pessimistic views on EU policy concerning Libya. The politicization of migration issues will only further manifest itself in domestic-level policymaking, as it's already been seen in the United States and Turkey. Beyond the politicization factor, Turkey and Greece were two East Mediterranean actors who consider migration-related decisions as violations of sovereignty.

in states heavily burdened by migrant populations, economic constraints, integration challenges, and long-term strategy. Additionally, finding a way to make the “unstable status quo” stable amidst the unfolding war in Ukraine and preventing funding diversion currently in place to support humanitarian aid to Syria is paramount.

The potential solutions focused on consensus-building in EU migration policy, indicative of a more unified goal addressing the root cause of tensions



SESSION 2:

RESOLVING REGIONAL CRISIS: THE ROLE OF REGIONAL AND GREAT POWERS

Key Points:

- The situation in Libya is deteriorating, heavily influenced by external actors in the region and great-power rivalry
- Regional actors, Russia, and the West can help by encouraging negotiations rather than pushing self-interests
- Attention has shifted heavily across foreign policy circles to Ukraine, at least for the moment

The crises in Libya and Syria continue, despite growing apathy in the international community about resolving these two conflicts. The second discussion focused on these two conflicts, the impact on Mediterranean security, the current state of each conflict, and potential pathways forward.

The second panel focused on the conflict in Libya and how that crisis impacts other regional states. The first panelist suggested that the situation in Libya is in a state of gridlock and the intervention by foreign powers—such as Egypt, Russia, and Western powers—have worsened political divisions. The first panelist clearly pointed out the importance of an election process in a post-conflict state, but noted that the current status quo is treating the vote like a proxy war for external supporters of different Libyan political factions. The influence of external actors as spoilers precludes any success of the government and incentivizing parties in Libya to negotiate is the only solution to alleviate the deteriorating situation.

The second panelist focused on the on-going crisis in Syria. The panelist noted that most regional actors share an interest in stabilizing Syria, but the Assad regime is uninterested in making concessions. The start of the war in Ukraine, the panelist noted, could seriously distract the West and lead to apathy about the region—and decrease pressure on Assad.

The ensuing conversation expanded the focus of the discussion and discussants examined the impact of the Ukrainian civil war on European and US-Russian foreign policy. As one discussant noted, European interests are now focused on addressing the migration and energy challenges posed by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. As a result, Brussels faces a “bandwidth issue,” given that managing the Ukraine war has “sucked all of the oxygen out of the room.”

As a second discussant said, changes in Turkish foreign policy could help ease the external tensions that contribute to regional instability. As a participant noted, Turkey has sought to normalize its relations with Middle Eastern and European states. This change in policy, the discussant noted, is motivated primarily by domestic politics ahead of elections. However, a second discussant suggested that these changes are still lacking in the substance needed to address the region’s myriad of challenges.



SESSIONS 3:

GREAT-POWER RIVALRY AND THE REGIONAL RESPONSE

Key Points:

- The Biden administration has not made Turkey a priority, and greater attention has been given to Greece and Cyprus than in previous years
- Congress has a large role in continuing the drawn out consideration of policy decisions with Turkey, and politicization of issues has created a polarized view of the bilateral relationship
- Europe will have to redefine its relationship with Russia after the war in Ukraine concludes, as part of a larger conversation of defining the EU neighborhood and adjusting strategy to accommodate new member states

The third panel focused on the return of great-power rivalry in the Eastern Mediterranean region and the role of external powers in the region.

This session discussed how external actors shape regional security, and how regional actors respond to these external forces.

The Biden administration came into office with the goal of reinvigorating US alliances with Indo-Pacific and European allies and improving relationships with the European Union and NATO. As the first panelist explained, the Biden administration's Syria policy is to retain US ground forces to combat Islamic State remnants and to provide stabilization assistance.⁶ The evolution of the US approach to Turkey, the second panelist noted, has moved from “giving them a big hug despite differences” to a policy of “tough love.” The challenge for the Biden administration, the panelist noted, is that Congress has also sought to play a role in US-Turkish relations. In parallel, US-Greek relations have flourished in recent years, at a time when the United States has sought to challenge enduring Russian interests in the region. These interests, the panelist noted, range from challenging Moscow’s influence on the divided island of Cyprus to checking the Russian military presence based in Syria. The panelist also noted the role that the Russian military in Syria played in the early days of the Ukraine crisis. As part of Moscow’s early signaling, the Russian military deployed bombers to its airbase in Syria, signaling that it could take action against American aircraft carriers if they were to seek to move through the Turkish Straits into the Black Sea to challenge the invasion.

As the second panelist noted, two key turning points for the European approach to the region were the election of Joe Biden as US president and the EU sanctions threat to Turkey over maritime boundary disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean. However, as the panelist noted, there appears to be limited EU motivation to develop a Mediterranean policy outside of Greece, Cyprus, Spain, and Portugal. The European Union is entering a new period where Brussels will be discussing borders, member states, and defining its neighbors and neighborhood. Ultimately, the Mediterranean conversation will be part of this larger discussion.

As the second panelist noted, EU policy on Russia will have to change when the war in Ukraine ends and decoupling energy is necessary as “Wandel durch Handel”—the German phrase and political maxim meaning “change through trade”—is viewed as ineffective, and sanctions packages to phase out Russian partnerships will coincide with redesigning Eastern partnerships in light of changing dynamics and new membership applications.⁷ The future of enlargement in the Western Balkans and Turkey are possibilities and the European Union will be looking at how it can better utilize its regulation power in trade, investment, technology, etc., cognizant of post-war politics and reducing asymmetric dependencies. Overall, the growth period the European Union is coming up on will define its position on Eastern Mediterranean policy and neighboring regions, with energy diversification heavily defining a huge block moving forward.



U.S. officials visit Libya in May of 2021 (ly.usembassy.gov).

When discussing the foreign policy decisions EU member states made individually, it became clear that an ironic disunion has challenged the group. African frustrations with France have opened a door for Russia, and the viewpoint is that more partners will work in the region.⁸ General consensus appears to be that the European Union will focus on working in the global gateway of development, aid, technology, and climate policy

to engage on the global stage more strategically. For now, it appears that the Turkey-Russia-United States triangle will remain as-is without any action from the European Union at least until the UN Security Council summit in June.



SESSION 4:

BOUNDARY DISPUTES: THE ENERGY QUESTION

Key Points:


- Eastern Mediterranean states have the potential to address some of European demand for energy but the fragility of domestic-level governments and regional agreements are concerning
- Funding toward renewable energy projects could serve as areas for potential cooperation in the region
- Future investments depend heavily on some form of maritime boundary consensus

The final panel examined on-going regional disputes, including maritime boundary disputes, and the role of energy. This discussion focused heavily on regional gas disputes and the future of Mediterranean energy, its links to climate policies, and how these intersect with regional politics.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has challenged Europe's energy policy, exposing a divergence between the long-term emphasis on renewables and the need to seek out new natural gas suppliers to wean away from Russian energy. Despite this, there is no indication that the Eastern Mediterranean states are willing to compromise positions on maritime disputes to satisfy the need for natural gas resources in the short-term. As a result, the European Union has decided to look at Algeria and other African countries, instead.

The Israeli government is not poised to take advantage of the near-term global demand for natural gas. As the second panelist noted, Israel is unlikely to develop renewable policies and natural gas policies because the ruling coalition is fragile. The further development of Israel's natural gas field is also subject to internal environmental pressures. Israeli society has environmental concerns, but there is also a strong contingent that is eager to take advantage of the economic opportunities afforded by increased natural gas demand. Beyond these environmental and governing challenges, the building of a LNG pipeline would require the regional states to resolve territorial disputes. Beyond this, the panelist noted that there are differing government opinions in the Middle East about the best way to

transport gas, with certain states keen on financing an undersea pipeline and others investing in LNG terminals.

The discussants suggested that renewable energy could incentivize regional cooperation. The European Union could play a role in this regard, if it were to be proactive and help to finance these projects.⁹ This approach, a discussant noted, could sidestep the ongoing territorial issues that prevent regional cooperation, and help jump-start regional energy cooperation. 

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr. Aaron Stein is the Director of Research at the Foreign Policy Research Institute. Previously, Dr. Stein was a resident senior fellow of the Atlantic Council, where he managed their Turkey-related research program, oversaw work on nonproliferation in the Middle East with a focus on Iran, and researched non-state actors in the Middle East, with a particular focus on Kurdish groups in Syria and Iraq. He also hosts the Arms Control Wonk and the Chain Reaction podcasts.

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The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) is a German political foundation whose civic education programs aim at promoting freedom, liberty, peace and justice. The KAS Syria/Iraq Office deals with the political and social situation in both countries, questions regarding the stability of the region, the refugee situation and security implications arising from the Syrian civil war, and the emergence of the Islamic State. In addition to strengthening political dialogue within the region and between Europe and the Middle East, KAS work focuses on reconciliation and civil society support, good governance and rule of law, as well as research and analysis.

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