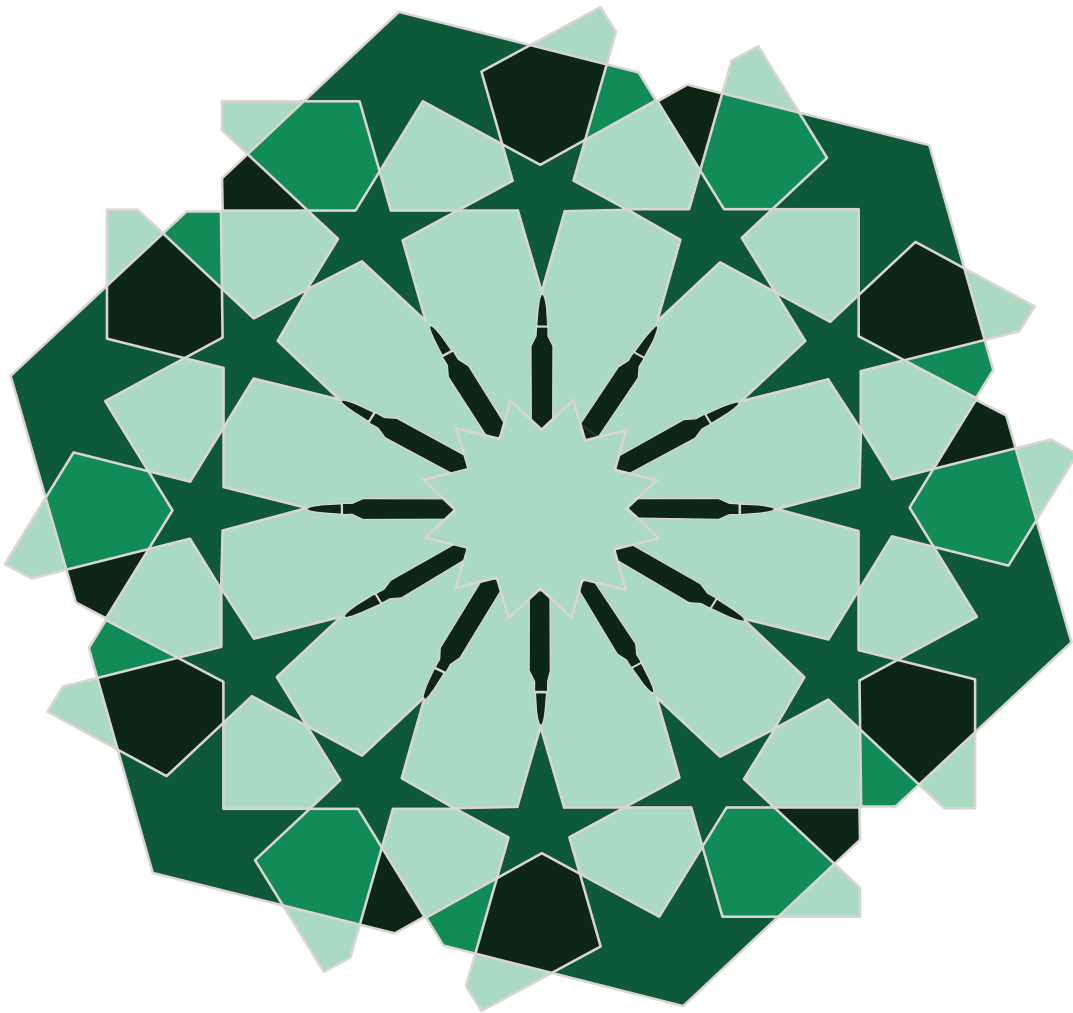


**INSTABILITY AND INTERRELATED CONFLICT:
EVOLVING SECURITY DYNAMICS
IN THE MIDDLE EAST**



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INSTABILITY AND INTERRELATED CONFLICT: EVOLVING SECURITY DYNAMICS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The Foreign Policy Research Institute and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Syria/Iraq office convened a two-day virtual dialogue that brought together experts and policymakers from the United States, European Union, and Middle East to discuss developments in the region. A follow-up to a 2019 conference held in Iraq, this dialogue focused on the challenges posed by the conflict in Syria, the role of the Russian Federation in the Middle East, and the future of Iranian-American tensions. Each half-day seminar featured two panels and a moderated discussion led by FPRI Director of Research Dr. Aaron Stein. What follows is a summary of the debates and actionable conclusions.

KEY CONCLUSIONS



America's regional adversaries use the U.S. military presence in the region to try to drive a wedge between Washington and its allies and undermine faith in the American security guarantee.



Cessation of the conflict in Syria is detrimental to the country's population. Achieving this will likely require bilateral talks between the United States and Russia, but Moscow remains committed to undermining Western interests in the Middle East.



The Biden administration has expressed clear interest in deprioritizing the Middle East, choosing instead to focus the brunt of U.S. resources on the Indo-Pacific and Europe. Policymakers must remain engaged in supporting post-conflict nation-building efforts to prevent the relapse of violence.



Great powers compete differently in the Middle East. Russia and China have differing interests in the Middle East, but each share an interest in decreasing regional trust in the United States as a trustworthy ally.



The Turkish-Russian relationship remains of great interest for the Trans-Atlantic alliance, and it remains to be seen how this cooperative and competitive relationship will impact U.S. and allied interests.



Iran remains a critical country for the United States, but disagreement continues about how to best approach managing U.S. relations with the Islamic Republic.

PANEL 1: ***The New Security Landscape in the Middle East: Trends and Challenges***

Following war against the Islamic State's territorial caliphate, new tensions have emerged in the Middle East. In Syria, Russia and Iran remain diplomatically and militarily committed to the success of the Bashar al Assad regime, all but ensuring that the regime will remain intact and be able to govern well into the 2020s. The concurrent deterioration in American-Iranian relations has raised questions about the viability of the ongoing, but narrowly defined, war against the Islamic State and whether the U.S. presence can be sustained. Iran, too, faces questions about its role in the region after years of isolation during the Trump administration and support for sub-national allies in Iraq and Yemen.

Presenters and participants convened to discuss regional trends and how they impact American and European interests. The first panelist addressed broader trends within the region, noting two major trends that have endured: governments have been unable to meet the needs of their people (often authoritarian, non-democratic regimes), and state-on-state competition has been fueled by competing Russian and American security interests. An initial requirement for permanently ceasing the conflict must

be to first stop the fighting. Considering the recent history of conflict in the region, there is significant evidence that intervention is not ideal for stopping war, with "Syria as the poster child." Rather than continuing the pursuit of military support and weapons sales to foreign militias, the panelist suggested a focus on economic assistance and nation-building is necessary, particularly as the foreign policy focus shifts to Asia.

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The Biden administration has frozen sanctions and has sought to tamp down tensions with Iran after four years of the Trump administration's pursuit of a "maximum pressure" policy of sanctions and military action. Progress on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) has remained stagnant, and the focus on reaching an agreement on a return to the nuclear deal will have to move quickly, lest otherwise risk the election of a hardline leader in Iran's upcoming presidential election.





U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III and Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken join NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg for a joint news conference in Brussels on April 14, 2020. (defense.gov)

The panelist concluded that it is likely that the United States will continue to seek to recalibrate its regional policy to better fit with the greater priority American leaders are placing on competition with China. This emphasis on great power competition may decrease U.S. appetite to play a large role in regional civil wars, given that such involvement risks distracting from more poignant threats to U.S. national security interests. These “internal civil wars,” the speaker argued, “turn to large-scale proxy wars,” and these conflicts are not synched up with the Biden administration’s priorities.

The second panelist began by noting that the local conflicts have continued to occur at the regional level, and Turkey and Russia are the key accelerators that integrated local conflicts into bilateral dynamics and split them into two spheres of influence. The U.S. campaign of maximum pressure on Iran, or “all means

short of war,” is being carried out as an attempt to stress the Iranian system and weaken alliances, with the goal of forcing capitulation or regime collapse in the country. Iran has withstood the campaign and imposed costs of its own on the United States for its economic sanctions. These sanctions, a panelist noted, have not led to a decrease in Iranian asymmetric action in the Persian Gulf, and Iran has worked through its regional clients to attack U.S. allies and partners. As one participant noted, the role non-state actors play in the region may continue in the near-to-medium term, even if Washington and Tehran agree to a detente. In Iraq, for example, non-state actors could continue to harass U.S. and NATO forces for their own parochial reasons. However, as other participants argued, Iran may be able to clamp down on many of its clients, and a modicum of stability could spread from the state-to-state level to the state-to-nonstate level.

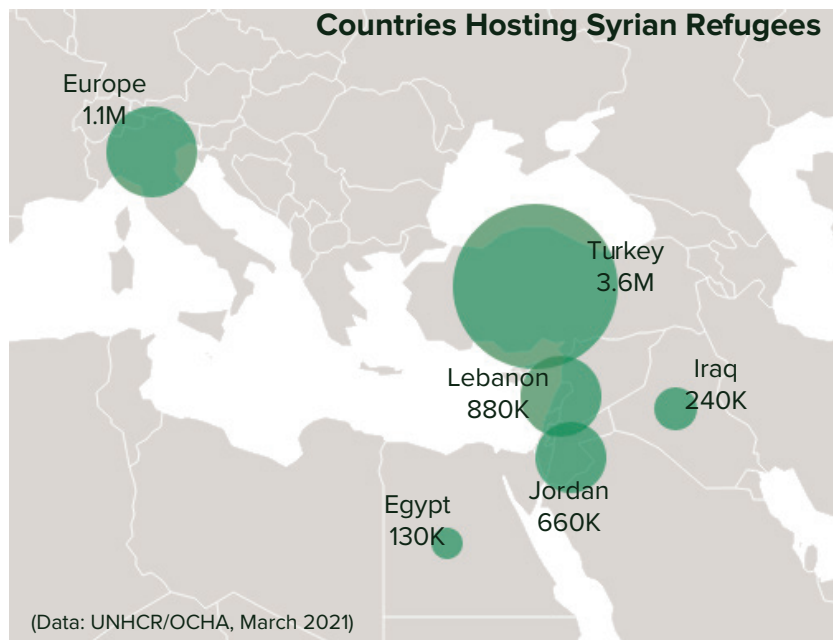


SYRIA IS A NEW KIND OF HUMANITARIAN SUFFERING AND DISSOLUTION NOT SEEN BEFORE, ONE WHOSE PROLONGED POVERTY AND PROFOUND HUNGER COULD LEAVE A DELETERIOUS IMPACT.

More broadly, other non-state actors in the greater Levant area have more closely aligned with state actors for support and political legitimacy. As a participant argued, in Syria, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are dependent on the United States for protection from hostile actors, including Turkey and the Russian Federation. Al Qaeda and its former affiliates, in contrast, have had more trouble working with regional states, and therefore its power has abated. The regional conditions, however, have continued to deteriorate, and the more fundamental concern is that the war in Syria and its convergence with the economic crisis brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic have negatively impacted the region. As a participant noted, “Syria is a new kind of humanitarian suffering and dissolution not seen before, one whose prolonged poverty and profound hunger could leave a deleterious impact.”

The discussion turned to the broader, positive trends in the Levant stemming from the Trump administration’s facilitation of the Abraham Accords and the normalization of relations between much of the Gulf Arab states and Israel. Though the Accords were seen as a step in the right direction, there are further steps necessary to move toward genuinely effective policies in the region, rather than “the same old habits with different language,” as one participant characterized the status quo policy approach in the Middle East. The remaining question with the Accords is the way to instrumentalize them. One member of the conversation pointed out that a locally driven approach to economic problems would likely be more effective than attempting to find one regional fix-all approach.

Most participants expressed some discontent with the amount of action taken by the Biden administration on addressing the situation in the Middle East, especially with Iran. Much of this conversation revolved around the JPCOA and American inaction. One panelist made the argument that the Biden administration has made an effort to show that the Middle East is no longer the top priority, and that message has materialized through inaction.



This early policy choice, this same panelist noted, has disappointed EU members because the bloc is waiting for the new administration to clarify its position on the Iran nuclear deal and expressed concern that the Biden administration was moving too slowly on formulating its Iran policy.

An American participant argued against this perception, suggesting that all signals from the Biden administration indicate that the administration is moving quickly to clarify its position on the JCPOA. Another panelist elaborated on the challenges facing current and past U.S. administrations; both the Obama and Trump administrations wanted to get out of the Middle East, and the Biden administration is trying to figure out how it can take necessary action rather than only make statements. The long-term, strategic approach for Asia has been effective, and its core difference from Middle East policy is the proactive moves taken instead of consistently reacting to new problems. In the closing remarks of the discussion, one participant

acknowledged similarities between Iran and the North Korea, in which aggression attracts its own “leverage” in dealing with the United States.

PANEL 2: Enduring Challenges: The Syrian Civil War

The Syrian civil war continues without end. The tenuous, country-wide decrease in violence could fall apart at any moment, leading to violence in Idlib and the mass displacement of innocent civilians. The United States is also balancing its broader, geostrategic effort to prioritize the threat from China as Washington grapples with the enduring challenges stemming from the war against the Islamic State. This war, too, has strained ties with Turkey and led to frictions with Russia and Iran. This panel discussed the Syrian civil war and options to manage the violence, as well as efforts to reach agreement to end the war.



A United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) trailer used in cross-border humanitarian operations to Syria. (unhcr.org)

The second panel began with an overview of the current situation in Syria. The first speakers noted that Idlib has not seen much violence recently, but the situation remains dire because of challenges stemming from delivering food across the shared border with Turkey. Food insecurity among the Syrian population is increasing, with sanctions and unstable humanitarian aid worsening the situation. The looming issue is that the United Nations Security Council will vote in July on extending the cross-border authorization to deliver aid via borders outside direct Syrian regime control. The panel agreed that Russia is expected to veto the resolution, as it did in 2020, arguing that any relief should be distributed via Damascus and not from points outside of the country. If the resolution does not pass, then it is unclear to what extent the Biden administration plans to engage diplomatically.

The panel also evaluated American foreign policy in Syria and identified potential outcomes. Identifying the overall policy goals in Syria continues to be a challenge for Washington. The presence of Russians and Iranians poses a question for political debates in Washington about U.S. policy and how it is formulated, given the emphasis on planning for war with a peer adversary: Is Syria a venue for challenging Russia in the Middle East, or is it a distraction? This question, a panelist noted, is accompanied by the underlying view that the Syrian state is failed and broken, and restitution would require significant investment, one not likely to be supported by the United States and its allies. For the current administration, a panelist argued that President Joseph Biden is averse to open-ended conflicts and is committing to focusing the bulk of U.S. resources on the Indo-Pacific and Europe. Both panelists noted that one enduring challenge the United States



United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism and Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe address current challenges with foreign terrorist fighters at a February, 2020 conference. (osce.usmission.gov)

faces in Syria is the continued presence of foreign detainees held in SDF detention camps. The United States has sought to pressure Middle Eastern and European governments to take back their fighters, but have failed to find a durable solution. The presence of these fighters is certain to influence U.S. deliberations about its options in Syria and hinder any effort to move forward. Another problem left behind by the previous administration concerns foreign fighters and repatriation. A panelist concluded by acknowledging the severity of the situation in Syria and the necessity for bilateral talks with Russia.

A large portion of the subsequent discussion evaluated the Russian presence in Syria. Now seen as “very much a player” in the Middle East, Russia’s prevalence in the region has changed significantly since 2015. Turkey’s discontent with the U.S.-backed SDF has only made a relationship with Russia more opportunistic, and Turkish-American relations are not likely to improve. The discussion reached a consensus that bilateral talks with Russia regarding the Syria conflict are becoming inevitable and

may require circumventing a NATO Ally to work with an adversary.

PANEL 3:

The Iran Question: To Engage or Not Engage?

The Biden administration has signaled a willingness to return to the JCPOA, a proposal that is certain to have support from the EU-2 (France and Germany) and Great Britain. The region’s reaction may differ, with Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the United Arab Emirates hesitant to fully endorse any rapprochement with the Islamic Republic. The American-Iranian relationship has considerable impact on broader regional security dynamics. This panel explored the broader Iranian question and the role that Washington and Europe should consider during any potential engagement with Tehran.

The first panelist addressed the maximum pressure campaign that the Trump administration pursued against Iran, arguing that the policy has had a negative impact on regional stability and security. In particular, Iran’s policy of exacting a



An attack on a Norwegian-owned oil tanker in June of 2019 is one of several in the Persian Gulf. ([share.america.gov](https://www.share.america.gov))

cost on the United States and its regional partners for the imposition of sanctions has led to a series of escalatory actions in the Strait of Hormuz, Iraq, and Yemen. The Gulf States have also sought to respond to Iranian actions, especially regarding the conflict in Yemen and deepening the U.S. military presence in the region.

The panelist argued that the Gulf States have internalized the shifts occurring in U.S. domestic politics and understand that Washington is likely to prioritize its interests in Asia in the near-to-medium term. This realization is driving some states to recalibrate their approach to Iran. This realization, the panelist argued, is in part driven by recognition in Gulf Arab capitals that their assertive policy in Yemen has led to pushback in Washington, leading to calls to decrease U.S. support for the war. The concern is that the maximum pressure policy has been deleterious for U.S. and Arab interests in the region. In particular, the concern now is that Iran has the upper hand and that a return to the JCPOA is

no longer the end goal, but the starting point for further negotiations. The second panelist began by noting that Iran is acting more aggressively than the historical norm and cautioned against treating the firing of missiles and the mining of ships as “normal acts.” The panelist underscored that Iran is pursuing such policies during a time of state-to-state peace—a fact that cannot be overlooked when outsiders judge Iran’s regional policies and national security decision-making. Iran’s intent, the panelist suggested, is to make the Arab states more apprehensive about supporting U.S. sanctions and to punish these states for close ties with Washington. Iran’s use of non-state actors drives down its costs because “those that are dying are not Iranian.” This policy also benefits Iran because it makes attribution more difficult, giving Iran the means to deny involvement and to obfuscate any collective response.



TEHRAN IS ALSO ATTUNED TO U.S. DOMESTIC DEBATES ABOUT ITS FUTURE PRESENCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST.

Tehran is also attuned to U.S. domestic debates about its future presence in the Middle East. Therefore, one prong of Iran’s regional strategy is to drive up the cost of the American presence, with the intent of pushing out the U.S. military. This policy, the panelist noted, is driven by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), which “has a firm hold on strategic policy for Iran.” The IRGC has also managed to keep the politics of the JCPOA at arm’s length inside Iran and has let the moderate, civilian-led wing of the government take the blame for the U.S. withdrawal, without offering a viable alternative to ease sanctions. According to the panelist, “The [IRGC] had no ownership in negotiating or ‘owning’ the diplomatic process. Furthermore, the IRGC is not in need of sanctions relief from a political standpoint: they are already applying pressure, and basically have free reign in the region in the meantime.” Both panelists believed that a return to the JCPOA would eventually “get done,” but only after the Supreme Leader is convinced of a need to return. A few participants noted that the United

States should act with more urgency because the JCPOA could ensure a return to a “cold detente” with Iran that lowers regional tensions and contributes to the broader American goal of ensuring Iran cannot develop nuclear weapons without being detected. The June 2021 Iranian presidential election could hamper talks, particularly if a hardliner is elected and the window for a return to the JCPOA closes.

A participant challenged the idea that Iran was committed to pushing the United States out of the region entirely, arguing that Iran derives some benefits from the continued U.S. presence. This participant suggested that the American presence has become a crutch for Iran to justify its foreign policy and its support of non-state actors. A complete U.S. withdrawal, a participant noted, could fracture Iranian-backed groups in Iraq and upset elements of Tehran’s foreign policy. The conversation then shifted to a broader discussion about the impact of a U.S. withdrawal for regional stability and, in particular, American interests in Iraq. A participant suggested the “IRGC and its proxies are ‘soul searching’ to reshape strategy in Iraq and Syria” and that not all aspects of Iranian foreign policy have been successful in the Middle East.



IRAN AND ITS NON-STATE ALLIES IN IRAQ HAVE SOUGHT TO CAPITALIZE ON U.S. ACTIONS TO PORTRAY AN IMAGE OF SUCCESS.

Iran and its non-state allies in Iraq have sought to capitalize on U.S. actions to portray an image of success. As one participant suggested, the withdrawal of some forces from Iraq allowed for the groups to suggest that their actions were the reason for Washington's withdrawal, portraying independent U.S. actions as a victory. This portrayal, a participant noted, stemmed from Iran's broader support for "causing havoc in Iraq with rocket fire." The participants disagreed about the extent to which Iran was directly responsible for all of the actions of the proxies it supports in Iraq, but there was a consensus that "Iraqi rocket attacks were coordinated with Iran and the Iranian leadership most probably gave these groups a green light." These actions, participants noted, give Iran a tool to further increase pressure on the United States, especially given the broader efforts to increase Iranian leverage before any talks with Washington about a return to the JCPOA. Any such return, a panelist argued, would likely also entail briefing America's Arab partners and the Israelis, both of which have expressed skepticism about the nuclear deal and the implied

tangential effort to reach detente.

PANEL 4: Great Power Competition: The Role of External Actors

The defeat of the Islamic State's territorial caliphate and the transfer of power in the United States has raised questions about American policy, along with those of its closest allies in Europe. The Syrian conflict has also led to Russia's return to the Middle East, prompting broader discussions about Moscow's visions for the region. Turkey, too, has expanded its regional footprint, using a coercive policy that mixes military intervention and aggressive rhetoric to carve out a regional role. This panel focused on the role of external actors in the Middle East and whether the region could become a venue for great power competition between rival states or return to a pre-Syrian civil war status quo.

This panel touched on the role of great power rivalry and its impact on the Middle East. The first panelist began by stating the obvious: Great power competition is focused on America's relationship with Russia and China and the competition for global influence. In the Middle East, the panelist suggested that Russia and China define interests differently. Russia, the panelist argued, was more security-focused, while China was more focused on its economic interests. Russia has been the "alternative weapons provider



Iranian President Rouhani discussing economic opportunities with members of the Chinese government in March and April of 2021. (president.ir)

to conflict in the Middle East,” and China has been the financial support for projects in the Gulf and Israel, in particular those which enhance port access. Both Russia and China, the panelist noted, seek to undermine elements of U.S. policy in the region and undermine regional trust in the American security commitment. The second panelist examined Turkey’s relationship with Russia and their engagement over shared interests in Syria. The panelist began by noting how much the Turkish-Russian relationship has changed over the past five years and that the conditions are now favorable for a cooperative relationship, given shared distrust of the West. This cooperative relationship does not, the panelist noted, mean that the two sides are perfectly aligned, but that they have prioritized cooperation over competition. The low point for the Turkish-Russian relationship came in November 2015, following the downing of Russian Su-24 by a Turkish

F-16. The panelist pointed out that following this incident, Ankara appealed to NATO for support. However, after a June 2016 rapprochement, Ankara and Moscow have sought to manage disputes on a bilateral basis without Western involvement. The two sides have also deepened military cooperation, the panelist noted, pointing to Turkey’s purchase of a Russian air and missile defense system. After the purchase, Turkey has resisted Western pressure to cancel the deal, repeatedly saying that the agreement with Russia is a “done deal.” In other regional conflicts, such as Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh, the two sides pursued a similar formula. While Russia and Turkey favored different actors, they negotiated directly to manage the conflict and to keep Western actors at arm’s length. This dynamic, the panelist argued in her final remarks, comports with each country’s domestic politics and the desire to have regional responses to regional problems.



RUSSIA IS MORE LIKELY TO ENGAGE WITH A COERCIVE TURKEY RATHER THAN A HOSTILE U.S.

A plurality of the participants expressed concerns about the Russian-Turkish relationship and whether Ankara's foreign policy decisions undermined American interests in the Middle East and broader Eastern Mediterranean region. Similarly, participants suggested that Moscow had modified its Soviet-era policy of trying to split NATO by pitting member states against one another. In this case, Turkey has emerged as a useful foil for collective burden-sharing precisely because it has run afoul of much of its traditional allies. For some of the Turkish participants, there was general agreement that the current cooperative relationship with Moscow has an "expiration date" and that tensions inherent in the bilateral relationship could re-emerge. One participant argued, "Russia is more likely to engage with a coercive Turkey rather than a hostile U.S." One participant pointed out, "the greatest challenge for the U.S. in the region which remains is the actions of allies in the region," as relationships with some regional actors have deteriorated and threatened the ability for Washington to "win" the great power competition.

As another participant noted, the geographic dynamics inherent to the Cold War have changed since 1991. Turkey, he argued, was no longer the lone U.S. allied state on the Black Sea and that Ankara's geography was not as valuable as it once was. This reality, he argued, should reframe how European and American policymakers view Turkey vis-à-vis its importance to Western security structures. A panelist contested this point, arguing that Ankara's location was important for elements of Operation Inherent Resolve. The two participants agreed that retaining basing access to Turkey was in the West's interests, but that Ankara had its own parallel interests that necessitates "planning around Turkey" for certain military contingencies in the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean.



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