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Drifting Apart? Transatlantic Relations in the Middle East

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The transatlantic relations are not going through a smooth period. There seem to be more divergences than convergences regarding a number of issues. One of the areas where deep disconnects plague current transatlantic cooperation is the Middle East policy. While there is a common transatlantic understanding of the main threats to peace and stability in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, differences mark the approaches towards issues such as the nuclear deal with Iran or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

During an international workshop organized by the Regional Program Political Dialogue South Mediterranean of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, a group of leading experts from the US, Europe and the MENA region discussed the US and European approaches towards the region, debated Middle Eastern controversies and fallacies in previous transatlantic relations and identified the key areas of diversion and agreement within the transatlantic alliance. The following report summarizes the findings of the workshop.

US Middle East Policy under President Trump

The first session of the workshop dealt with the question of how much the US Middle East policy under President Trump has actually changed beyond the headlines and tweets. Experts noted that although the US administration's approach towards the region appears to be coherent in its own logic, it proves to be highly insensitive to political realities on the

ground. Overall, the Trumpian Middle East approach was narrowed down to four key principles:

- › Reducing international relations to monetary transactions by treating foreign policy as a business deal in pursuit of the biggest profit rather than in the interest of US national security, including a change of vocabulary from the aspirations of stability, freedom, and human rights to the dollars created in the region;
- › Demonstrating political commitment based on the conviction that everything previous administrations achieved, especially that of President Obama, was to be considered “imbecile”;
- › Relying on a deep partnership with Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and putting all of the US president’s trust to achieve his goals in the region in one man and his promises: Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia.

Reversing the Obama legacy

According to the experts, Trump’s withdrawal from the Joint and Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the so-called Iran deal, in May and the re-imposition of sanctions after they were lifted two years earlier under President Obama came as a surprise to most of the US’ allies as well as many parts of the US government. The inclusion of the withdrawal of all Iranian commanded forces from the entirety of Syria in US policy similarly marked a shift from previous administrations. Discussants agreed that the MENA region is seen by the administration as a hopeless place full of troubles, which are—essentially—not the problem of the US. The Trump administration is seen to rely heavily on its allies to bear the burden in the region. However this let-them-deal-with-it mentality was not considered to be that different from the leading-from-behind approach of President Obama—with the main difference now being that autocratic regimes are standing head to head with NATO allies in the lines of US partners.

The renewed Israel promise

Another point of discussion was Jared Kushner’s plan to ‘bring peace to the Middle East’ by ‘solving’ the Israeli-Palestinian conflict which similarly emerged out of the inclination to try something new and different. According to the experts, this approach involved taking the gloves off towards the Palestinians, moving the US embassy to Jerusalem, and cutting funding for the Palestinian territories in order to force them to the negotiation table. It was further noted that Kushner’s efforts were the result of an exclusive relationship with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu which is embedded into an unusual partnership between Israel, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Crown Prince Muhammad bin Zayed of Abu Dhabi to fight Sunni jihadism in the region and push back Iranian influence.

Europe’s Middle East Policy

As the European Union goes through heavy difficulties, a number of key MENA policy dossiers—namely the wars in Syria and Libya as well as the migration question—weigh heavily on Europe’s internal cohesion. The second panel of the international workshop raised questions about Europe’s priorities and internal policy coherence towards its Southern periphery and the differences of member states’ and EU policies on key dossiers concerning the MENA region.

Migration

The discussions underscored that the developments that became known as the European migration crisis triggered a substantial shift in the perception of the MENA region by

European electorates and political leaders alike. Before 2015, European policy approaches aiming south mainly resolved around democracy promotion and were dominated by a handful of member states. Since security and stability in the Mediterranean has developed into a decisive electoral factor in Europe, arguably causing the greatest solidarity crisis within the Union and directly impacting European cohesion through growing anti-immigrant and Eurosceptic sentiments, this has significantly changed. Experts agreed that today, Europe is mostly concerned about de-escalating simmering conflicts along the Mediterranean coasts in light of the increased influx of both, migrants and militants.

Re-nationalization

With the EU in a crisis and the uncertain consequences of Brexit for European foreign policy and defense capacities, participants cautioned that the European MENA policy is experiencing a phase of detrimental re-nationalization. Libya was brought up as an example of this dynamic, since the quarrels of France and Italy prevent the emergence of a coherent European approach towards a stabilization of the war-torn country. In line with this trend is also the decision of French president Macron to renew his country's MENA policy and adjust the institutional framework by recentralizing political functions. This presidentialization of French diplomacy follows Macron's strategy to reaffirm France's power status in the region and increase its visibility. Overall, discussants observed that the MENA region is currently witnessing an accelerated reorganization of the hierarchies of power during which individual European states have re-entered a regional power competition that now includes external actors as well as their own allies.

Germany

Germany on the other hand remains rather on the sidelines of this competition, rallying around economic policies and international responses to migration issues and security challenges. Following the experts' statements, Germany as a middle power with limited means does not engage in geopolitics—also stemming from inexperience of the German policy elite with the MENA region itself. Wherever possible, Germans were seen to quickly promote a European approach and seeking to Europeanize the national policies of other member states such as France.

Where We Diverge

Looking at the approaches to the MENA region by both, the US and Europe, experts of the third panel identified a number of crucial divergences. While the basic US-European interests were found to still align, the assessments and choices of appropriate policy responses to the common challenges are seen to fundamentally drift apart—for instance on the two key issues of how to deal with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Iranian influence respectively. In addition to this, the strategic vision for the MENA region as well as the different policy making styles of the transatlantic partners were identified as major disagreements.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict

The US has not just adopted a very close alignment with the Netanyahu government, but also cut almost all aid to the Palestinians—to an extent that the Europeans decided to step in and close the gap. Experts noted that the political survival of the Palestinian Authority has disappeared from the American policy and, similar to the decision to move the US embassy, drove a wedge between the transatlantic partners. While the Europeans are still vivid about the two-state solution, president Trump has been coy about this and did not settle on a

distinct US position. Even Germany, a country whose foreign policy's *raison d'être* is arguable the security of Israel, was now seen to disagree with the US administration on the question of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The Question of Iran

The American withdrawal from the JCPOA—according to European discussants the single most important foreign policy victory of the EU—and the decision of the Trump administration to disregard an international agreement that its European allies had so heavily invested in resulted in a harsh setback for transatlantic relations. Experts agreed that as much as the US credibility had suffered from the withdrawal, so had the European integrity; and it had united Europe against the prospect of American economic warfare *vis-à-vis* Iran.

Disengagement from the MENA region

Discussions highlighted that the Trump administration does not see the tool of development aid and funding for international relief agencies as beneficial to US interest in the region. For European foreign policy, in contrast, this assistance was mentioned as one of the primary instruments of engagement by which Europe believes it can influence other states and contribute to regional stability. Experts emphasized that this US withdrawal from the international multilateral framework was partly due to a fatigue with engagement overseas and partly because of a shifting emphasis in US policy increasingly oriented towards Asia.

As Russia, Iran and Turkey are seen to be heavily engaged in the region, the recent decision by President Trump to withdraw US forces from Syria might require Europe to detach itself from its closest ally and step in to counterbalance the influence of Russia and Iran.

Shifting Styles of Policy Making and Diplomacy

Although the undiplomatic manner of President Trump is new, the issues he raised and the disagreements that materialized are not. Looking at Libya, for instance, the US frustration with the role of their European allies after the military intervention was voiced quite bluntly before Europe eventually failed to take the lead and later fragmented internally by EU member states' conflicting engagements. The now seen drift between US and European foreign policy styles was identified as originating in the disagreement about the idea that compromises and concessions can bring about sustainable solutions in international affairs. Experts noted, however, that the forces that gave rise to President Trump were deeply embedded in US and European politics and the political wave he was riding was accompanied by an emerging transatlantic popular alliance that has created impressive synergies from France and the UK to the US. Experts expressed their concern about this continuing transformation of the international liberal order and the current crisis of liberalism.

Choosing Partners in the Region

According to discussants, North Africa had never been a priority for Washington's policymakers and its relevance for the US was primarily due to its closeness to Europe and its vicinity to the Sahel. While President Trump practically pulled back from Tunisia—the success story of Obama's democracy promotion—and made al-Sisi's Egypt the jewel of his Africa strategy, Europe still invests heavily in the development of the Maghreb as part of its Mediterranean neighbourhood.

Where We (Should) Agree

In previous sessions, experts stressed that the growing malaise in the transatlantic relationship circled not only around no longer wanting the same but also actively trying to undermine each other. Nevertheless, the historical disagreements among the transatlantic partners—for instance over the Iraq war in 2003—were seen as far more serious and consequential than current divergences. The fourth panel of the international workshop found US and European cooperation to still work constructively on a number of crucial policy objectives, including countering terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, diminishing the influence of external actors in meddling with regional security and ensuring a free flow of commerce and energy.

Focus on Counterterrorism

With more militants in the Southern Mediterranean pledging allegiance to terrorist groups than the standing armies of some smaller European states and the deterritorialization of the Islamic State (IS) group remaining a flashpoint of Mediterranean security concerns, the US and Europe were found to agree on the necessity of counterterrorism as the main priority for the NATO alliance. Experts assessed the counter-IS campaign as a successful joint offensive and stressed that the overall grand strategic aims in Syria and Yemen were still mutually shared.

Civil War in Syria

In terms of Syria and the country's reconstruction, experts identified a US-European agreement on the necessity of President Assad to resign and his inability to be rehabilitated on the world stage. Similarly, the prevention of Syria to acquire chemical weapons was identified as a point of consensus. Given that the World Bank estimates the cost of Syria's reconstruction with USD 200-250 billion, experts saw this as a chance for a joint transatlantic project in the MENA region.

Iran (again) and the Stability of Oil Prices

Even on Iran where there is a clear disagreement about the JCPOA, both Europe and the US were assessed to agree on preventing the country from obtaining nuclear weapons and restraining its destructive regional activity to support terrorism. Although the close alliance of the US with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is seen with growing suspicion in many European capitals—not just following the murder of Jamal Khashoggi—experts observed a continuing reliance on stable relations with the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council. While the US might be increasingly self-sufficient with regards to the production of oil, their allies around the world are not. As this includes US allies in the new strategic focus area of Asia, namely Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea—all depending on Saudi Arabian and other Middle Eastern oil—the US, like Europe, was found to be concerned about the price of oil.

External Actors in the Region

Discussants noted that the US relationship with many Middle Eastern countries had its roots in the fear to lose out to external competitors. This has only increased since the return of Russia to the Mediterranean boosted the region's geopolitical significance. Discussions indicated that now could be the time for the transatlantic alliance to agree on countering the role of Russia in Libya, Syria, and other conflict theatres and to re-build their trust by working together.

Towards A Transatlantic Future

The main divergences between the US and Europe were seen to concern the different policy strategies of both partners, namely the European priority of engagement and the American focus on coercion. However, this parting in approaches can and should be used for the benefit of the transatlantic alliance in an effort to revive the US-European partnership. Experts agreed that while both partners should work together regarding above-mentioned policy dossiers in the Middle East, North Africa should remain a European responsibility as this can be the neighbourhood where Europe is able to prove itself as a foreign policy actor.

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