

Presence of Non-Euro-Mediterranean Actors in the Mediterranean

America and the Mediterranean: an Arena for Transnational Threat Management

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An overarching American strategy for the Mediterranean region may be desirable, but it is not on the radar screen for policymakers in Washington. This is not just a judgment about the current Administration, but has been a chronic reality in American foreign policy; the development and implementation of policies are more often than not organized by the geography of countries, rather than maritime space. As Ian Lesser explained in last year's volume, "the Mediterranean hardly figures as a unified geopolitical space in American foreign policy."¹

The Mediterranean region, from a US perspective, will continue to be a region of diverse relationships, challenges and institutions, with the US national security establishment very active in some sub-regions and nearly absent in others. NATO continues to be an anchor for American engagement, despite the President's skepticism about its value. Historically, the eastern Mediterranean has been more important to the US than other sub-regions, whether over the Greece-Turkey-Cyprus triangle, or Arab-Israeli issues. The Balkans and Maghreb have occasionally captured the attention of Washington, but have usually been viewed as a European priority more than an American one.

At present, the Mediterranean is viewed as a zone of turbulence and instability, from the flashing red lights of Syria and Libya, to sporadic terrorist inci-

dents in European capitals, to the continual human wave of migrants transiting the sea from Africa and the Maghreb in search of a better life in Europe. While the migration crisis appears to be waning and is not an immediate American concern, the secondary effects of such a large transfer of population have long-term economic, political and social consequences. These have added to the European Union's woes, managing Brexit and anti-immigration politics at the same time, creating the perception that the European side of the Mediterranean is inwardly focused and weakened. Fears of another Israeli war with Hezbollah or even with Iran directly are rising. Turkey is becoming a less reliable NATO ally. The net result is a perception of danger: the State Department has issued various levels of travel warnings for every Mediterranean country except Morocco, Cyprus and Greece.²

Looking to the future, two factors are likely to prevail in drawing US policymakers to the Mediterranean region. One is the cluster of interrelated transnational challenges, from terrorism to migration to climate change, which requires international cooperation and may provide opportunities for continued US engagement with European and Arab partners around the Mediterranean. The second is the prospect of a more confident and assertive Russia, seeking to reclaim an important role in the Middle East and looking for weaknesses to exploit, from American retrenchment to the internal preoccupations of the European Union. This potential threat could set the agenda for US-European cooperation in NATO, but it could also be a source of friction within the alliance and in key bilateral relationships.

¹ Ian LESSER, "The Trump Administration and the Mediterranean," in *IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook 2017*, www.iemed.org/IEMed_MedYearbook2017_trump_administration_mediterranean_Lesser.pdf

² <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/international-travel.html>

American Engagement and Retrenchment

The Trump Administration's foreign policy, now in its second year, continues to be plagued by uncertainty, even chaos. The March 2018 firing of Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, and the replacement of National Security Advisor McMaster with the more hawkish John Bolton, has the effect of concentrating power in the President, whose national security views are subject to frequent change and reversal. Many of the President's foreign policy positions derive from his business experience and his confidence that he is an effective dealmaker, rather than any deeply held convictions about international relations.

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Throughout 2017, the President expanded his knowledge of world leaders and problems through travel and official meetings, but usually failed to demonstrate any real mastery of the complexity of issues, the importance of diplomatic give and take, and the established procedures to consider threats and policy options. Instead, he has relied on his personal judgment of leaders, often with public put-downs to assert his primacy in key relationships. He has focused on bilateral channels to achieve his objectives, often eschewing existing multilateral forums and mechanisms to build consensus around crisis responses.

The President's America First agenda also leads him to view foreign policy as an instrument to achieve his domestic goals, not as a vital function of the federal government and a core responsibility of his position. He has no qualms about disrupting institutions and global norms, and arguments from Western leaders and his own advisors about the

value of stability and consistency in US policy have not been persuasive to him. He is uninterested in, if not disdainful of past American policies to promote democracy, human rights, and development, and his Administration is committed to reducing the workforce and budgets of many civilian international agencies and activities.

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Like his predecessor, Barack Obama, Trump believes his electoral success was due in part to his attention to the fatigue in the American public for wars and costly overseas entanglements. Yet the President is not consistently isolationist, and still promotes a strong American military posture to deter enemies and ensure peace. In sum, it is hard to imagine a new equilibrium in American foreign policy emerging soon. Greater volatility and unpredictability are more likely.

Tour d'Horizon

One can attempt, despite the uncertainties, a more systematic review of key policies related to the Mediterranean and likely approaches by the Trump Administration, drawing on formal documents and statements, and assessing the ongoing and emerging issues around the region as they affect US interests and the priorities of the US Administration.

The National Security Strategy

The National Security Strategy³ provides a window into the conceptual thinking of the Administration and how it might apply to Mediterranean issues. The

³ WHITE HOUSE, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, December 2017. www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905-2.pdf

report was drafted by political appointees in the White House and released in late 2017. Most notable are the new emphasis on geopolitical competition with China and Russia, and the purposeful downgrading of terrorism, which has been the organizing principle of national security since 9/11. The notion of competition as the prime driver of relations between states permeates the report. Diplomacy is one of the tools of this competition, and is intended to promote and defend American interests, rather than build a more cooperative and peaceful world. The document heralds the success of defeating the Islamic State, with the implication that the US can scale back its involvement in Syria and Iraq. Language on the importance of alliances and allies addresses the Administration's satisfaction that allies are contributing more to the common defense and have been put on notice that the US will "no longer tolerate economic aggression or unfair trading practices."

As for values and soft power, which have long been prominent in American and joint EU-US efforts in the southern Mediterranean, the Strategy report acknowledges that some other societies share the American aspiration for freedom and prosperity, but makes clear "we are not going to impose our values on others." It takes a cooler, private-sector driven approach to helping developing countries, by "mobilizing resources, capitalizing on new technologies and incentivizing reform."

In sum, this first formal document that captures the Administration's world view favours tough talk about American power in a competitive world. It privileges the military as the best means to create a favourable environment for American interests, primarily through deterrence and containment. It does not ignore entirely all the forms of civilian engagement and idealism that have long been associated with the US roles in Europe and the Middle East, from building educational and agricultural systems to the Marshall Plan.

Russia

The eastern Mediterranean region is a potential arena for renewed US-Russian rivalry. The sharp deterioration of US-Russian relations that began during

the Obama Administration has been continued, with new sanctions imposed by the Trump Administration in response to Russian interference in the 2016 US elections and other evidence of rampant Russian hacking into a wide range of American institutions and technologies.⁴ While the President has angrily dismissed allegations of collusion with any Russian entities during his presidential campaign, and continues to express personal regard for Vladimir Putin, virtually all other players in the US system have come to view Russia in darkly adversarial terms, leading to concerns about a new Cold War.

The Trump Administration was initially open to a productive partnership with Russia in Syria. But Russia's total support for the Assad regime and its brutal suppression of opposition forces, and its defiance of the UN process made it difficult for US officials to sustain any semblance of common goals. At most, the two governments have been able to communicate to avoid accidents in Syrian airspace, as Moscow and Washington use air power for distinctly different purposes.

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US officials have not publicly acknowledged deep concerns about Russia's inroads into other key Middle Eastern countries that have long been seen as part of the US camp. Turkey is a particularly provocative case: a NATO country is developing political and military cooperation with Russia, and defying the US by attacking Washington's Kurdish partners in the campaign against the Islamic State. A showdown looms in 2018, as Turkey ups the ante in occupying Kurdish towns in Syria, while the US invests

⁴ US DEPARTMENT OF THE TREASURY. "Treasury Sanctions Russian Cyber Actors for Interference with the 2016 U.S. Elections and Malicious Cyber-Attacks," *Press-Release*, 15 March 2018, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm0312>

in more self-sufficiency for northern Syrian areas not under regime control. Russia could well improve its ties to Egypt and the major Gulf states, further exposing the decline of American dominance and influence in the region.

For now, Arab officials and experts express only limited interest in a strong Russian role in the region, and are more interested in developing ties with Asia as an alternative to the West as partner of choice for economic and security matters.

Counterterrorism

Counterterrorism cooperation will continue to be an important feature of US relations with most of the countries around the Mediterranean rim. Kinetic operations against extremists and more strategic planning and training to prevent radical extremism are the primary focus of the Department of Defense's partnerships across North Africa, led by the African Command (AFRICOM). In Central Command (CENTCOM), counterterrorism sits alongside countering Iran as major missions.

The Obama-era theme "countering violent extremism" (CVE) was rebranded early in the Trump Administration to a less comprehensive campaign to defeat the Islamic State. The CVE framework addressed a wide array of civilian activities promoted at international conferences, on topics from investments in education and women's empowerment to programmes to strengthen legal institutions, and to build resilience in civil society. The Trump team decided to deconstruct the offices in the State Department that organized CVE work, and focus only on the military campaign, a time-limited stabilization period, and a media and communications effort to defeat the "digital caliphate."⁵ This approach envisions an endgame for US involvement, and a transfer of responsibility to the regional states to prevent any resurgence of the Islamic State. In addition, the scaling back of funding for the State Department, unless reversed by the US Congress, will further diminish US involvement in civilian programmes for youth, job creation, and governance reform, which are so badly needed in the southern Mediterranean and have been viewed as addressing the underlying causes of radicalization and terrorism.

Counterterrorism cooperation will remain an important arena in US-European relations, but has already been delegated to intelligence, law enforcement and aid officials. These activities are often mentioned in summit communiqués, but may not require high level attention or new decisions. But the Trump Administration is sure to focus on cost-sharing, and will measure its own success by signs that other countries are contributing more, financially in particular, to joint efforts.

Arab Israeli Conflict

The world is waiting, with weary resignation, for a promised peace initiative from the Trump Administration. Few experts expect presidential advisor and son-in-law Jared Kushner to succeed in generating meaningful progress in Israeli-Palestinian relations, although the White House promises to do so. The December 2017 decision to move the US Embassy to Jerusalem could well make it impossible for any Palestinian leader to agree to a US-led process, and recent public exchanges between US and Palestinian leaders conveys a sharp deterioration in mutual respect. Yet the Trump White House believes that important Sunni Arab leaders may be able to move a new initiative along, and the new generation of reform-minded Gulf Arab leaders have been consulted and want to be engaged.

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Other Mediterranean countries with a deep investment in Arab-Israeli peace, from key European countries to Morocco, Egypt, and Jordan, may still hope that the Administration, against all odds, will be able to accomplish something that keeps the

⁵ US DEPARTMENT OF STATE. *Remarks at the Ministerial Plenary for the Global Coalition Working to Defeat ISIS*, 22 March 2017, <https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2017/03/269039.htm>

possibility of a two-state solution alive. Whether they can add value to the process through their ties with the players remains to be seen. So long as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is in office and enjoys the full support of President Trump, it is hard to imagine a peace process in which Israel makes any meaningful concessions to Palestinians, a basic tenet of any negotiations process.

Iran

Iran casts a shadow over Mediterranean issues in several ways. First, is an alarming scenario where Iran's success in Syria emboldens it to extend its reach into Lebanon. Its ally, Hezbollah, which to varying degrees can determine the policies of the State of Lebanon, could provide Iran with access to the sea, and complete Iran's alleged strategic objective of creating a security corridor across Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. There is already an increase in Iranian ship traffic in the Mediterranean, whether for commercial or more nefarious purposes. Regional experts worry that Israel might feel compelled to reassert some redlines in the region, and that recent limited military exchanges over the Golan or over Lebanese territory could escalate into open conflict. A second way Iran casts a shadow is the very real prospect that President Trump will pull the plug on US participation in the nuclear agreement signed in 2015 between Iran and the six major powers (EU Three plus US, Russia and China). After a year of tactical moves that demonstrated the President's displeasure, short of formal repudiation, by May's internal milestone to recertify compliance and extend the waivers on certain sanctions against Iran, the game may be over. The new Secretary of State and National Security Advisor, Mike Pompeo and John Bolton, respectively, will make Trump less constrained and more inclined to follow his instincts to ratchet up tensions with Iran, including serious consideration of the use of military force.

Such a move would create a true crisis in US relations with its major European allies, all of whom believe, along with China and Russia, that the agreement has made a positive contribution to regional security and has reduced nuclear dangers for the Middle East and for Europe. In spring 2018, EU countries are hard at work to dissuade the US from abandoning the agreement. They realize it will be too

risky to reopen the actual agreement with revisions to extend its duration, for example. Instead, they are reportedly focused on sanctioning Iran on issues not technically part of the nuclear agreement: ballistic missile developments and policy in Syria.

Thinking More Holistically about the Med?

Policymakers have tried and usually failed to develop more comprehensive approaches to twilight regions, or maritime spaces that encompass more than one continent or geographic entity. In the late 1980s, Secretary of State Shultz asked his Policy Planning staff to do some fresh, big-picture thinking about the Mediterranean, and the authors failed entirely, breaking the region into familiar conflict zones or sub-regional clusters. The Obama Administration explored an Indian Ocean policy initiative, but found the set of issues too disparate to create a coherent whole.

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American analysts understand that NATO, with its NATO-MED dialogue, and the EU, with a succession of initiatives towards the southern rim, have long hoped for a more integrated and coordinated approach to the Mediterranean region. On the US side, it is often the maritime forces, the US Navy in particular, that embrace the idea. Such holistic approaches make sense to sailors, more than to land-based officials.

In Admiral James Stavridis' new book, *Sea Power: The History and Geopolitics of the World's Oceans*, he demonstrates an abiding interest in the Mediterranean, recognizing its historic significance as the

birthplace of naval warfare, and the importance of the sea as a zone of geopolitical contestation. His policy recommendations are narrowly cast. He focuses on Libya as the source of greatest instability and urges Italy to ask for more maritime assistance from NATO. A more complete appreciation of the naval contribution should include its role enabling civilian efforts to respond to natural or man-made disasters, and in facilitating military and civilian exchanges.

A recent think tank study⁶ also promoted a more integrated approach to the region, calling its geographic space a platform for a “broader and fluid community.” It looks at the Mediterranean out to the year 2030, and gives much needed attention to energy, resource stresses and climate as drivers of that future. It posits four scenarios: erosion (projecting out the migration trends to their darkest outcomes), drawbridge (European states act to stem the tide), power play (conflict brings in global powers) and Club Med (factors for cooperation prevail). Of course the most likely future will be some kind of mix of these scenarios. In any case, the authors dream big, calling for more US attention, presence, resources and role as a balancer for the region. They call on Europe to sustain economic growth, resolve its identity issues, support Arab political modernization, and strengthen its borders. And NATO could do more to build defence partnerships with Arab states, and use its resources and infrastructure more for crisis management in the region. These ambitious ideas do not align with the current thinking of the Trump Administration, but provide a useful contribution to a larger policy conversation. President Trump has been the dominant and disruptive figure in US foreign policy since his election in 2016. It has been hard for American analysts and journalists, not to mention allies and foreign interlocutors, to know whether his personal preferences will be reconciled with institutional practices and

long-standing international relationships. There is a magnetic pull to this unusual political figure that makes it hard to calibrate or predict important trends or changes in official US behaviour and action.

For the Mediterranean region, the President's views on NATO and Europe as collective institutions, his personal regard or disdain for individual leaders, and his convictions about alliance burden-sharing, fair trade, and the demonstration effects of US military power will be important pieces of the policy mosaic.

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Beneath the radar of presidential interest, much activity in bilateral and multilateral channels will proceed. Responding tactically to Russian assertiveness and coordinating actions on the myriad of transnational problems may be promising areas for continued cooperation. Many channels remain open, even as European and Arab partners worry about reduced American attention and resources to play a leadership role in the region. One cannot avoid the sober conclusion that we may be entering a long period of American retrenchment that is harmful to established patterns of free trade and collective security. This cannot be good news for the Mediterranean region, or, in the long run, for American interests either.

⁶ Peter ENGELKE, Lisa ARONSSON, and Magnus NORDENMAN. *Mediterranean Futures 2030 - Toward A Transatlantic Security Strategy*, Atlantic Council, 2017 www.atlanticcouncil.org/publications/reports/mediterranean-futures-2030