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# A Strained Alliance

## Transatlantic Views on the Middle East

*by Adnan Tabatabai*

In recent years, the various conflicts and transformation processes in the Middle East have led to further volatility, uncertainty and instability in an already fragile region. More clearly than ever, the transatlantic community has come to realize that the ensuing destabilization in the Middle East poses a direct threat. Europe has been most directly affected – be it through the influx of refugees, terrorist attacks, or the rise of radical Islamism. The influence of the United States is waning in the Middle East, and the vacuum left behind is partly filled by state and non-state actors hostile to the West. Given the unprecedented level of uncertainty the Middle East is facing, transatlantic approaches to reconcile, manage and prevent conflict need to

### **Executive Summary**

Transatlantic relations have entered a peculiar phase. With regards to Middle Eastern conflicts, in particular, strategic preferences of Europe and the United States seem to increasingly differ. The unilateral US withdrawal from the nuclear agreement with Iran has strikingly exposed the stark differences arising. A lack of contact between influential European and American Middle East policy experts will only lead to further mutual alienation. In order to foster transatlantic dialogue on the Middle East, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation and CARPO in 2018 convened Middle East experts from the think tank communities of Europe and the US in Bonn. Frank discussions were held on the respective viewpoints of Europe and the US on contexts such as Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Saudi Arabia and the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council.

While fundamental points of convergence remain, considerable differences exist in how geopolitical interests are prioritized over multilateral considerations; how Iran as a regional actor is believed to be most effectively dealt with; and how the regional power balance can be best managed. It became clear, however, that neither side would like to see the transatlantic bond endangered. Hence, the points of divergence laid out in this policy brief can lay a fundament for continued transatlantic dialogue on the Middle East.

be, at a minimum, coordinated and, ideally, consistent. While differences in assessments, strategies or goals are part and parcel of any healthy relationship, a transatlantic rift in the very essence of its policies threatens to weaken and ultimately undermine European and American leverage in the Middle East.

It is in such a context that perceptions of Middle Eastern conflicts and strategic preferences for mitigation and resolution seem to increasingly differ on both sides of the Atlantic. Since President Donald Trump took office in January 2017, transatlantic relations have entered a peculiar phase. This same divergence holds true for responses to Middle Eastern affairs. The unilateral US withdrawal from the nuclear agreement (JCPOA) with Iran has strikingly exposed the stark differences arising between Washington and European capitals. A lack of contact between influential European and American Middle East policy experts and consultants will only lead to further mutual alienation. As a consequence, transatlantic dialogue addressing the multifarious crises in the Middle East, as well as on joint efforts to develop a consistent and coordinated strategy to deal with these ongoing dilemmas, is needed more than ever. To this end, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (KAS) and CARPO organized a workshop in Bonn in 2018 and brought together policy experts from the think tank communities of both sides of the Atlantic. The focus of the discussions was on specific country contexts (Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Saudi Arabia), but also considered transnational areas of shared concern, such as the rise of non-state actors, violent extremism and state failure.

This policy brief provides the readers with a reflection of the discussions held under Chatham House Rule. Distinct points of convergence and divergence in transatlantic views on the Middle East will be highlighted and summarized.

## **Berlin's View on the Middle East**

A member of the German Bundestag attended the meeting to outline how Germany has positioned itself vis-à-vis the Middle East in the past. It was highlighted that until the so-called Arab Spring, Berlin viewed Middle Eastern affairs primarily through the lens of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Apart from prospects of trade relations and economic potentials, little attention was paid to the region. Hence, the events of the uprisings in 2011 constituted a wake-up call. The threat posed by 'foreign fighters' who traveled to Syria from Germany, as well as the 2015 'refugee crisis', brought the vivid realization that conflicts in the Middle East impact the European domestic scene. Germany, this participant argued, had deliberately avoided direct involvement in the conflicts of the region. An American colleague then jumped in and described Germany as "a payer, not a player". The German parliamentarian made clear that in Berlin there is the conviction that "gradual reform might be less attractive, but the only positive path forward" in the contexts of the Middle East. Furthermore, conflicts should first be managed before rushing into a lasting resolution attempt. This was also the primary rationale behind trying to seal the nuclear agreement – known as the *Joint*

*Comprehensive Plan of Action* (JCPOA) – between the E3/EU+3<sup>1</sup> and Iran. Germany believes the JCPOA constitutes a starting point in talks with Iran, which will eventually lead to talks on other issues with the Islamic Republic. Hence, Germany (as other European partners) “very much regret” the US withdrawal from the JCPOA. Furthermore, the move of the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem evoked much criticism from Berlin and other European capitals. For a longer perspective, it was also recalled that the unfulfilled “red line” warning to Syria by former US President Barack Obama also constituted a major point of criticism in some political camps across Europe.

In spite of these major differences, the German Bundestag member also stressed that “there is no alternative to the transatlantic bond”, but that it will require more intense communication between Europe and the US to develop “unified positions” with regards to challenges posed by the contexts of the Middle East. It was established by the group throughout the discussion that Europe needs to explicitly name its interests in the region, as the US does. Only then, a European participant argued, can Europe go beyond the role of the “fire fighter” who acts only when “things have already gone wrong”. Any joint strategy towards the Middle East must be based on “long-term thinking”, argued several participants, as fatigue over hasty military interventions has become rife. The need for a realistic assessment by Europe of current US viewpoints was also vocalized: President Donald Trump’s decisions must not be seen

merely as a “temporary thunderstorm”, but rather the onset of a US approach which differs considerably from the norm under the Obama administration. It was argued that differences between European and American positions in the Middle East have also occurred in the past – the invasion of Iraq being a prime example. However, the depth of the divergence goes deeper with the current US administration. In order to coordinate the respective positions in the future, transatlantic dialogue needs to be fostered continuously and on various levels, the German parliamentarian concluded.

## How to Develop Middle East Policy

A subsequent workshop session was dedicated to deliberations on how Middle East policy should be developed in policy-making circles. The first European speaker outlined the historical, geographical and geopolitical interconnectivity of the multiple conflicts in the region. Fragile and dysfunctional governance in almost all regional states can be traced back to the Sykes-Picot agreement. From the onset of state formation in the region, a “legitimacy deficit” is a key feature of most political systems. Fragile political orders have been repeatedly subject to regional and extra-regional interference, which, in many contexts, has only worsened already fragile state-society relations. All regional developments, be it only on a national level, have the potential to exert an effect on neighboring countries and the overall regional power balance. For instance, countries such as Saudi

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<sup>1</sup> The group of states subsumed as the E3/EU+3 (or P5+1) are Germany, France, United Kingdom (E3) plus China, Russia and the United States (+3), coordinated by the European Union (EU).

Arabia, Iran or Turkey, consider realities on the ground in Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq when developing strategies on Yemen. It was emphasized that policy approaches towards the Middle East will have to consider and integrate the potential implications that measures adopted in one context will have on other contexts. Nothing short of a “holistic approach” is needed, according to this European expert, in order to be able to manage and eventually resolve any conflict in the region. This may slow down the process of decision-making, but would ensure more enduring measures are adopted.

The urgency to act was underlined by an American participant, who raised the notion of “new interventionists” in the region; i.e. Russia, China, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia and Iran. Should Western states act too slowly, others will seize the opportunity to widen their spheres of influence. A second American participant added that timely intervention has made the US known as “the actor with a hammer and a nail”, whereas Europe was viewed as “the actor with paper and a pen”. These dissimilar approaches need to be reconciled. Europeans and American participants agreed that Russia would welcome the West’s failure in the Middle East and would not hesitate to fill any vacuum left by American or European powers. And yet, for any effective involvement in the Middle East, participants stressed that it is necessary to continually zoom back and forth between the micro level of the single context and the macro level of the entire region. Local agency must also be taken seriously in geopolitical strategic calculations. It was acknowledged that while such thinking may appear merely idealistic, this mindset

will be indispensable to develop the best possible approaches to effective and enduring policies.

## **Points of Divergence in Transatlantic Views on Singular Contexts**

The above discussions were followed by workshop sessions dedicated to singular country contexts, to explore the convergence and divergence of views between Europe and the US. While shared assessment was found in nearly all contexts, stark contrasts also became apparent.

### *Turkey*

All workshop participants agreed that Turkey has traditionally been discussed outside the fray of Middle East politics, and was usually seen as a European or Western-leaning state. It was only after the Arab Spring that Turkey developed a more assertive approach vis-à-vis the Middle East and sought to establish its “arch of Muslim Brotherhood friends”, as one European participant phrased it. Europe began to feel unease with this new approach and viewed the Turkish-Syrian border as the “jihadists route” through which foreign fighters from Europe would travel to Syria. As emphasized by a European participant, Turkey’s formidable relations to the Muslim Brotherhood, particularly in Egypt, was not a point of concern in Europe. Rather, it was Turkey’s links to militant jihadists in Syria, such as al-Nusrah, that stirred a lot of debate in European capitals. The US, however, was not bothered by such concerns. The European expert also criticized the lack of appreciation in Europe for Turkey’s security interests.

Another European participant pointed out that Germany generally tends to be more focused on Turkey's domestic scene and its effects on the life of the Turkish communities in Germany. The US, in contrast, primarily views Turkey as a NATO ally, and thus holds a more geopolitical view on the country. An American expert presented his conviction that regardless of the degree to which Turkey's ambitions in the Middle East may have grown, Ankara will never abandon the NATO alliance. European and American participants shared the assessment that Russia would like to drive a wedge between Turkey and NATO, which these experts see as the main reason why Moscow is encouraging Ankara to be more active in Middle Eastern contexts. It was further agreed, on all sides, that Turkey will play a significant role to help keep Iranian trade flowing, against the backdrop of US sanctions. Even as Europe may encourage Turkey to facilitate trade with Iran, the US will do the exact opposite.

### *Iran*

The Islamic Republic of Iran was seen as the country in which the transatlantic rift has become most apparent. European experts explained how Europe has sought to compartmentalize its relations to Iran, and see the JCPOA as a building block onto which other themes and issues would be added. It was furthermore made clear that Europe rejects the notion of 'exceptionalizing' Iran, and believes in a more balanced approach towards the regional powers of Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Turkey. Compared to the US, Europe pays a lot more attention to the human rights situation in Iran, while in Washington

(again) geopolitics matters most. An American expert on Iran explained that US President Trump has been told by his team that the Islamic Republic was in transition towards regime collapse; thus, the US president believes maximum pressure will speed up that process. A European participant countered that, while there were mutual concerns regarding Iran's geopolitical activities, the assessment of imminent state collapse was not shared; therefore, the Islamic Republic needs to be engaged rather than simply contained. She continued that Iran itself prefers to have dialogue with Europe rather than the US, a preference which places Europe in the more influential position. She also stressed that Europe does not believe siding with one of the regional actors (in this case, Saudi Arabia) while cornering another (Iran) will help lower tensions and conflict. This is the approach Europe will continue to follow, even though workshop discussions again highlighted Washington's strong opposition to Europe's stance on Iran.

### *Iraq*

Both Europe and the US share an interest in helping to stabilize Iraq, and in particular to support reconstruction and reconciliation efforts in the country after the militants of the so-called Islamic State have been defeated. A European expert emphasized that, alongside support for a more stable Iraqi security apparatus, the government in Baghdad needs help to develop an effective anti-corruption campaign; to plan and implement activities countering the imminent environmental challenges; and to champion reconstruction efforts that rebuild the shattered Iraqi social

fabric as well as the physical city infrastructure. Reference was again made to the notion of Europe as a “payer, not a player”, while highlighting that Iraq was the right context to show Europe can play a more significant role. As an American participant seconded, the “Iraq fatigue” in Washington and the current administration’s aim to decrease engagement is an opportunity for Europe. He went on to say that “Europe will have to balance pro-Iran/anti-US groups with anti-Iran/pro-US factions”. With the increased tension between Washington and Tehran, concerns grow that Iraq can become a proxy battlefield between the two, warned a European participant. For Europe to play an important role in de-escalation (between Iraqi factions and with external powers), it will have to prepare for a long-term engagement, the group concluded. It was also noted that the US does not seem to oppose a larger role for Europe in Iraq.

### ***Saudi Arabia and the GCC States***

The European workshop participants clearly outlined to their American counterparts how deeply critical Europe is as regards the US approach towards Saudi Arabia, the UAE and the Gulf Cooperation Council member states.<sup>2</sup> Apart from cornering Iran and taking sides in regional tensions, the Qatar spat “came as a shock”, as one European participant phrased it. This was countered by a US participant stating that the Qatar blockade has to date “served US interests”, as Qatar has increased arms purchases from the US, and has become more active in counterterrorism

efforts: Therefore, no one should expect the US to try and mediate between ‘the quartet’<sup>3</sup> and Qatar. European participants were also critical of the strong support the White House is giving to the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MbS). “We are worried about the pace and consequences of his measures”, one European participant noted, and referred to extrajudicial detentions (e.g. the Ritz Carlton arrests) and continued crackdown on dissidents. Furthermore, the one-sided US approach encourages Saudi Arabia to be more assertive, which has consequently created more tensions in the region. An American expert explained how these differing approaches highlight the divergence of European and American views of ‘multilateralism’. The US views its interests best served by forming a ‘coalition of the willing,’ that is, allies following the lead of the US. European participants categorically rejected this approach in its understanding of multilateralism. Both sides did agree, however, that the US has leverage with the GCC states, while Europe has the most influence with Iran. Although such a narrow area of agreement indicates limited potential for a future comprehensive transatlantic strategy in the Middle East, it can be used as a first step for future dialogue.

### ***Deliberations on Reconstruction in Yemen and Syria***

The complexities on the ground in Yemen and Syria require any foreign-led reconstruction effort to be multifaceted. As one European expert laid out, Europe and the US will

<sup>2</sup> Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait, Oman, Bahrain and Qatar.

<sup>3</sup> The four countries, referred to as ‘the quartet’, who decided to blockade Qatar, are Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt.

have to decide “what kind of political settlement they are going to seek with which political group in which part of the country”. It is unrealistic to assume there will be only one dominant political party through which reconstruction efforts can be coordinated and channeled. An American participant added that both Europe and the US will have to decide at what stage of the conflicts in Syria and Yemen they are willing to start their reconstruction efforts. Although concern that Syrian president Bashar al-Assad will profit from the rebuilding process is omnipresent in both European and American circles, development agencies continue to stress the need to help the suffering populations both in Syria and Yemen. An American participant warned about “spoilers in this process”, and was seconded by a European colleague who emphasized that “an exclusion-oriented race between stakeholders in the region needs to be avoided” as regards reconstruction efforts in Yemen and Syria. Europe and the US, it was concluded, will have to ensure that a cease-fire agreement in both contexts entails the potential of leading to peace. For that to be achieved, “local social contracts” have to either be renewed or newly established to ensure peaceful coexistence, a European expert posited as an important requirement.

### **Key Findings on Points of Divergence**

During the concluding session, five key points of divergence between European and US policy experts were highlighted:

- **Europe does not share the staunch support of the US for Saudi Arabia.**  
European capitals are considerably more skeptical about the economic and social reform processes being fostered by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. In contrast to Europe, Washington does not publically pay attention to human rights abuses in the kingdom, nor in their military operations in Yemen. The growing criticism in the US Congress over the war in Yemen might serve as the least common denominator in further talks to find a joint European-American approach towards Riyadh.
- **The US seeks to contain Iran, while Europe pursues engagement.**  
Iran remains the most difficult file to bring Washington and European capitals together. The US pressure campaign and trade sanctions against Iran make it nearly impossible for Europe to safeguard the JCPOA with Iran. Europe will need to convince its transatlantic partner that safeguarding the JCPOA serves European security interests, and that the US, the same power that has been protecting Europe for decades, should not undermine its ally now.
- **Europe and the US have diverging interpretations of ‘multilateralism’.**  
In Europe, multilateralism is seen as a network of states on equal footing with equally served benefits in the course of a shared policy decision; while the US view, fostered by the current administration, follows the logic of a ‘coalition of the willing’ in which partners are invited to

follow the US lead. Until Washington sees its key interests intertwined with Europe, it will be nearly impossible to convince US policymakers of the European variant of multilateralism.

- **Assessments on the root causes of terrorism differ.**

This difference in assessment is due to Europe witnessing a strand of terrorist groups that have grown from the heart of Europe (with jihadists and returnees travelling from Europe to Syria and back), while the US mainly views terrorism as a Middle Eastern phenomenon, which poses a threat to its homeland security. This difference should not prevent Europe and the US to closely coordinate of their respective counterterrorism programs and activities.

- **There are perceived differences in prioritizing geopolitics over human rights.**

In Washington, geopolitical considerations outweigh concerns over human rights abuse. Whereas Europeans do not have a consistent human rights policy, they do more prominently raise concerns over human rights abuses in all Middle Eastern contexts. To counterbalance, Europe may need to more explicitly articulate its immediate, non-negotiable geopolitical interests in the Middle East in order to coordinate better with the US. At the same time, Washington should realize that many threats to its interests in the Middle East can be traced back to human rights abuses that were never properly addressed.

KAS and CARPO are convinced that articulating the most notable points of divergence will serve the purpose of initiating more intensified dialogue between European capitals and Washington. This dialogue should be conducted on track 1.5 and track 2 levels, as well as among civil society organizations, public intellectuals and academics. A wide range of shared interests – regional stability, counterterrorism, prevention of anti-Western sentiments, among others – continue to be a solid fundament for transatlantic coordination and cooperation. KAS and CARPO therefore remain committed to further facilitating transatlantic dialogue on the Middle East.

## About the author

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## About CARPO

CARPO was founded in 2014 by Germany-based academics trained in the fields of Near and Middle Eastern Studies, Political Science and Social Anthropology. Its work is situated at the nexus of research, consultancy and exchange with a focus on implementing projects in close cooperation and partnership with stakeholders in the Orient. The researchers in CARPO's network believe that a prosperous and peaceful future for the region can best be achieved through inclusive policy making and economic investment that engages the creative and resourceful potential of all relevant actors. Therefore, CARPO opens enduring channels for interactive knowledge transfer between academics, citizens, entrepreneurs, and policy-makers.

## About KAS

The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) is a German political foundation. In addition to civic education and political consulting in Germany, we are active in more than 100 countries worldwide. In our cooperation efforts we support development and promote international dialogue. We thus make a contribution – underpinned by values of freedom, justice and solidarity – to helping Germany meet its growing responsibilities throughout the world. In the Middle East and North Africa, the Foundation runs country programmes in Morocco, Tunisia, Lebanon, Israel, Palestinian Territories, Jordan, Turkey, Syria/Iraq (based in Beirut) and the Gulf-States (based in Amman) as well as regional thematic programmes on the rule of law (Beirut), political dialogue (Tunis) and climate and energy (Rabat).

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