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European Action in Middle East Conflicts

The current situation in the Middle East presents a challenging set of security threats to the region as well as to Europe. This policy brief identifies six major challenges facing European governments and policymakers, and outlines policy implications and recommendations. It aims to offer a "toolkit" for policymakers by taking a step back and offer long-term strategies for dealing with the region's various conflicts.

Introduction

The Middle East presents numerous strategic challenges to the West and Europe in particular. The promise of the 2011 Arab uprisings is gone, and civil conflict wracks Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya. A military coup and subsequent crackdown in Egypt have shattered hopes of democracy there, while even bright spots like Tunisia see an increase in terrorism. New extremist groups like ISIS present a challenging set of security threats to the region and, importantly, Europe.

Despite these overwhelming challenges, the European Union and its international partners can take steps to prevent escalation and in some cases contribute to constructive reform and conflict resolution. This policy brief identifies six major challenges facing European governments and policymakers, examines past and ongoing efforts to address these challenges,[1] and outlines policy implications and recommendations for the European Union, the United States, and other international actors.

This brief aims to offer a "toolkit" for policymakers. As the EU formulates new policies, it is critical to think "regionally," by understanding how even seemingly unrelated crises can impact each other through spillover and proxy battles. Our goal here is to also take a step back and offer long-term strategies for dealing with the region's various conflicts. We also argue that very real governance deficits lie at the base of many problems in the Middle East. As we will see, governance deficits of one sort or another are either a proximate cause of conflicts or exacerbate them in destructive ways.

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1   Key challenges are analyzed in greater depth in: Shadi Hamid & Daniel Byman, *Adversity and Opportunity: Facing the Security and Policy Challenges in the Middle East*, Clingendael Institute, April 2015, http://www.clingendael.nl/publication/adversity-and-opportunity.

Challenge I: Civil Wars in the Middle East

Key Issues
The confluence of ethnic, religious, and ideological fissures along with a vast governance deficit has resulted in bloody civil conflicts that are fast spilling into neighbouring countries. In Syria and Iraq, the multi-party civil war between the Asad regime and a fractured opposition has led to over 200,000 deaths, massive internal displacement, and refugee flows into neighbouring countries. The political and power vacuum in Syria has provided a conducive environment for ISIS's rise as well as its rejuvenation in Iraq. Conflict spillover – including the economic and social burdens created by the refugee crisis and the spread of extremism – are destabilizing neighbouring countries, raising the risk of military intervention and reactive violence.

Policy Recommendations
1. Europe should increase state-building and security assistance to nations hosting large refugee populations such as Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey. This assistance should be embedded within a larger regional strategy. This includes the continued channelling of humanitarian funds through the European Commission's Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection department (ECHO) to participating organizations to support the basic needs of refugee populations. The proportion of aid appropriated to refugee populations should be balanced with economic assistance to host communities to support employment opportunities. It is critical that host communities do not feel left out of relief efforts, which exacerbates economically motivated prejudices towards refugees. In addition, providing security assistance is vital to ensure that the refugee camps do not become hotbeds of extremist recruitment. European and international funding agencies should ensure the use of baseline indicators and rigorous success metrics for humanitarian and state-building support, to be used to evaluate effectiveness of assistance and ensure funds are being maximized. Importantly, humanitarian and state-building support should be part of a larger, coordinated multi-national and multi-agency strategy to address instability in countries affected by civil conflict.

2. Europe and its Western allies should consider how to better and more seriously support mainstream actors – who are both anti-Assad and anti-ISIS – in the form of equipment and other material support. This includes the provision of lethal equipment where appropriate, as well as military training missions to increase the cohesion and capacity of these forces. Western partners should ensure that they are adequately compensated, to prevent attrition and defection to extremist groups that can offer higher material rewards. Here, ensuring that Western nations and Arab allies are supporting and strengthening the same forces through unified channels is absolutely critical.

Challenge II: Stagnation in the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process

Key Issues
Although both Palestinians and Israelis have largely expressed a preference for a two-state solution over continued conflict, both populations are sceptical that peace negotiations can deliver a satisfactory deal that addresses their own fundamental demands. In Israel, rising popular support for right-wing narratives and the increasing momentum of the settler movement erode hopes for a two-state solution. Meanwhile, Palestinian frustration with settlements, distrust of the government of Netanyahu who campaigned against the peace process, and persistent anti-Arab violence grows, lending strength to rejectionist narratives – such as those propagated by Hamas and other armed groups – particularly in the beleaguered Gaza Strip.

Divisions in Palestinian leadership and the weakened Palestinian Authority (PA) mean that leaders are unable to address the governance needs of the Palestinian population. Meanwhile, crises in Syria and

elsewhere have drawn the attention of policymakers away from Arab-Israeli conflict. Amidst this stagnation, it is unlikely that further peace negotiations – whether led by Europe or the United States – will bring about the desired results.

Policy Recommendations
1. Europe and the United States should work together to strengthen current pro-peace Palestinian leadership, such as Mahmoud Abbas. The international community should emphasize developing a new generation of leaders, given that Mahmoud Abbas and the old guard of the PA is aging and losing legitimacy with youthful populations.

2. Western nations should take steps to encourage the Palestinian Authority to gradually assume responsibility for Gaza by stepping up their administrative and security presence, such as manning border crossings and distributing international donations. As part of these efforts, the West can urge the PA to integrate Hamas unofficially, often using non-Hamas members but individuals believed sympathetic to the movement, in a set of commitments and institutions that will dissuade the movement from violence. The international community should also ensure that aid contributes to the on-the-ground legitimacy of the PA so that Palestinians associate the organization with governance. For example, European aid for reconstruction in Gaza should be tied to efforts to ensure the PA, not Hamas, is visibly responsible for the benefits targeting citizens.

Challenge III: Foreign Fighters from Europe and the Arab World

Key Issues
Over 20,000 fighters have travelled to Iraq and Syria to support a range of Sunni militant groups, including ISIS. Although European concerns have run high following recent attacks in Paris, the threat of violence carried out by foreign fighters to Europe is real but often exaggerated. Some fighters will die or stay abroad, and most returnees

are unlikely to carry out attacks. However, returning foreign fighters to Arab countries – which have supplied the bulk of foreign fighters in Syria – do present an acute risk to their nations, as fighters can recruit from vulnerable populations, or carry out attacks.

Policy Recommendations
1. European countries and the EU should avoid overstating the relatively limited terrorist threat posed by foreign fighters to European citizens, though inevitable terrorist attacks will draw attention to the foreign fighter problem. Governments should emphasize that violence remains limited even as they try to reassure frightened populations. Such efforts may, as a first step, help prevent exacerbation of already-existing prejudice and discrimination against minority and immigrant populations in Europe.

2. The allocation of EU and government funds to European security and intelligence services will help temper the risk of violence on European soil by interrupting the radicalization cycle. Keeping track of foreign fighters is personnel-intensive. Security apparatuses require ongoing resources so that they can identify recruits, track their behaviour abroad, and evaluate the risk they pose upon return.

3. European governments should avoid reactive or overly punitive policies. Some returnees must be jailed and others monitored, but systematic prosecution and imprisonment of returnees can expose them to hardened jihadists or radical ideologies in prison, depending on the prison conditions and regimes in the country in question. Similarly, indiscriminately punitive policies discourage repentant foreign fighters from returning home and reintegrating into society and make their families and communities less likely to cooperate with the government.

4. European governments should allocate resources into preventive and rehabilitative community programs. Such programs should engage credible community leaders to dissuade at-risk

individuals from traveling and help to deradicalize returnees. Psychological and social support is vital to returnees who have potentially been traumatized from their experience and may resort to violent outlets without proper treatment.

5. In Europe and the Arab world, governments should hinder the travel of foreign fighters and constrain their ability to organize. Turkey is a particularly important hub for Western fighters – particularly as Ankara has been slow to seal its borders – and Europe holds leverage in Turkey due to Turkey's EU and economic ambitions. Concerted European pressure, in conjunction with the United States and other partners, can encourage a revision of Turkey's policies. Western states should also exert more pressure on Turkey, including by publicly highlighting Turkey's inadequacies in this regard.

6. When working with Arab governments, European states should try to improve intelligence sharing and strengthen regime efforts to police their own countries while maintaining respect for the rule of law. Such assistance is particularly vital in countries like Tunisia, which is undergoing a difficult transition to democracy that terrorism threatens to disrupt.

Challenge IV: Foundational Divides in the Muslim World

Key Issues
Islam plays an instrumental role in Middle Eastern conflicts, and religion, identity, and ideology influence and shape regional trends in sometimes unexpected ways.
In contrast to Europe – which eventually secularized well after the Reformation – the ideas of Islam still hold a broad resonance among Muslim-majority populations. While the overwhelming majority of Muslims disagree with their interpretation of Islam, ISIS and other extremist groups derive part of their support and strength from deeply embedded Islamic notions, such as the idea of the caliphate, or the transnational community of Muslims.

Foundational divides on religious and ideological lines have deepened across the Middle East, which will continue to hinder prospects of democratization or stability, or both.

Policy Recommendations
While such divides, which are based on real fundamental differences, cannot be wished away, Europe and the international community can do more to help Middle Eastern populations mitigate ideological and religious cleavages through the ideas of "consociational democracy." In practice, this can mean:

1. Adopting a "pure" parliamentary system with a weak, mostly ceremonial president. Since a powerful president can easily become a lightning rod for the opposition, a parliamentary system should invest power in a prime minister, who can much more easily be removed if voters feel buyer's remorse. Parliaments require working strong, cohesive political parties, which are much better at aggregating and channelling the desires of supporters than individuals.

2. In the initial stages of a transition, Europe and the West can urge opposing parties to agree to "postpone" debates on divisive ideological issues – such as on Islamizing the legal or educational systems – for a set period of time. Such an interim period would regularize democratic competition to the extent that it becomes the "only game in town." At the conclusion of the period, the existing democratic process would be better equipped to withstand ideological polarization, including on perennial touchstones like restricting alcohol consumption and co-education, empowering religious scholars, or "Islamizing" educational curricula.

3. Europe and the West will need to respect democratic demands for Islamization, since foundational questions over the role of Islam and Islamic law cannot be placed gently to the side indefinitely. They will have to be addressed and democratic outcomes will have to be respected. In conservative societies – and even in less conservative ones

such as Turkey – a growing role for religion may be unavoidable. If there is enough of a demand for Islamization, then someone will have to supply it. And it is worth noting that Islamization does not necessarily require Islamists. Democratization not only pushes Islamists toward greater conservatism; it can skew the entire political spectrum rightwards. Ostensibly secular parties may feel compelled to adopt religious rhetoric and pass "Islamic" legislation to win over devout voters and outbid their Islamist competition, as is the cases of Malaysia and Pakistan.

Challenge V: "Regionalization" of Local Conflict

Key Issues
Since the Arab Spring, conflicts that were previously localized or contained have crossed national borders and have developed into regional proxy wars. Gulf support to the Egyptian military was instrumental in the 2013 overthrow of the democratically elected Morsi and the consolidation of the Sisi regime; Gulf countries view the Brotherhood and like-minded groups as an existential threat not just in Egypt but in several other crisis areas. Egypt's troubles, for example, have spilled over into Libya in the form of a more acute Islamist-secular divide and the rise of strongmen such as General Khalifa Haftar.

Policy Recommendations
1. Europe and its partners should consider recalibrating their relationships with traditional regional partners who contribute to this regionalization of conflict. Europe and the United States can shift from a strategic to a transactional relationship with Middle Eastern allies, where there is rapprochement on issues of convergence, but distancing on other issues that compromise Western security interests. The threat of Iran continues to loom large, marking the coming period as a hinge moment for US policy, but in a way that affirms American leverage. Instead of viewing the United States as dependent on the Gulf, the reverse

is more accurate: in the face of Iranian aggression, the Gulf states have never been more dependent on US security provisions, including advanced weaponry and efforts at coordinating regional missile defence, in addition to the ability to coordinate efforts to counter more subversive Iranian proxy activities. In other words, Iran may provide an opening for the United States as well as Europe to adopt a more comprehensive approach of linking what have until now been treated as discrete concerns – security and reform.

2. Europe and its Western partners should avoid politicizing counterterrorism efforts by lumping together all, even nonviolent ones, as terrorists. Counterterrorism depends on being able to identify and distinguish who the terrorists are, and who they are not.

Challenge VI: Renewed Authoritarianism

Key Issues
The Arab Spring has re-empowered "strongmen" leaders, who promise stability at the expense of democracy. A massive expectations gap in countries with initially successful autocratic ousters – such as Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya – contributed to perceptions of failing democracy, which served to increase the appeal of would-be autocrats. Meanwhile, the Justice and Development Party in Turkey has adopted increasingly illiberal and undemocratic practices. The resort to strongmen, while offering an illusion of stability, perpetuates a culture of privileging individuals over institutions and postpones addressing very real governance deficits that lie at the base of most Middle East conflicts.

With all of that said, democratization is no easy fix. There is a short-term / long-term trade-off. Democratizing countries may be more prone to instability, particularly where political openings deepen ideological cleavages. Policymakers – if they agree with the premise that more inclusive, pluralistic governments are preferable in the long run –

must be willing to accept that some short-term interests may be negatively affected. The focus then should not be on postponing the inevitable but rather on encouraging allies to engage in gradual reform, which is preferable to revolutionary shocks.

While Arab Spring efforts to recalibrate Western democracy support – such as the US MENA Incentive Fund and the EU's Support for Partnership Reform and Inclusive Growth (SPRING) programme – have fallen out of favour, the basic rationale of these programs remains sound. As one EU document explained it: "The more a country progresses in its democratic reforms and institutional building, the more support it can expect."[2] Yet, conditionality mechanisms and benchmarks were left vague and undefined.

Policy Recommendations

1. In supporting democratic reform, Europe and the United States should focus their efforts on "positive conditionality" – providing economic and political incentives for governments to meet explicit, measurable benchmarks on democratic reform. For example, while the lure of the EU has diminished somewhat, many in Turkey, both government and opposition, still express interest in eventual accession. Building greater support within the EU for a jumpstarted, serious accession process is as critical as ever, as Turkey enters into a delicate phase where a new constitution and new presidential system will be considered.

2. Through the accession process, the EU has the ability to "embed" countries within a thick regional order. No comparable mechanism exists in the Arab world. Yet the template is relevant for understanding how the international community might bind struggling democracies within a mutually beneficial regional order. One proposal to this effect is a Multilateral Endowment for Reform (MER) which would anchor basic relationships with Arab allies around a new framework for incentivizing reforms. The funding platform would start at $5 billion with the aim of reaching $20 billion in ten years. Its multilateral nature would be key to its success, both in terms of reducing the level of direct financial burden on the US as well as avoiding perceptions that Washington hopes to engineer political outcomes. Europe would be a major partner and contributor to the Endowment.

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2   European Commission, "EU response to the Arab Spring: the SPRING Programme," September 27, 2011, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-11-636_en.htm?locale=en.

About Clingendael

Clingendael is the Netherlands Institute of International Relations. We operate as a think-tank, as well as a diplomatic academy, and always maintain a strong international perspective. Our objective is to explore the continuously changing global environment in order to identify and analyse emerging political and social developments for the benefit of government and the general public.

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