



A Middle East in Flux: Four Transatlantic Risks

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In 2025, the Middle East is set to undergo a profound reconfiguration. Rockets between Israel and Iran, the wars in Gaza and Lebanon, and the fall of the Assad regime in Syria all set the stage for a year that will continue to essentially alter the geopolitical pillars of the region. Iran has not been this weak since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, while Türkiye has been propelled to the role of a regional game-changer. Israel's regional positioning is uncertain, but Netanyahu is bound to seize the momentum of a second Trump term to press his advantage. Leadership changes in the White House and European capitals create further uncertainty about the course and priorities of external players, and hedging looms large. For transatlantic allies in Europe, the United States, and Türkiye, key risks to watch for in 2025 include: the response of a weakened Iran; Syria at the crossroads post-Assad; the future of Gaza, Palestine, and Israel in the region; and the ways in which strategic rivals China and Russia may seek to exploit the fragility of regional reconfiguration.

Iran Under Maximum Pressure

Iran is likely to pose the main initial foreign policy challenge for the new administration. Donald Trump has consistently advocated a policy of maximum sanction pressure on Iran, so a return to this policy is likely. The dire state of the Iranian economy may increase the impact of sanctions as Iran is reeling under power shortages, failing infrastructure, and an investment deficit in key industries. Iran's leadership's response to this pressure is yet unknown, but the key question will revolve around Iran's nuclear program, which Trump has determined must end. Iran's new president has signaled a willingness to negotiate, but it is not clear whether Trump's team would present terms that the Iranian government would see as anything but unconditional surrender of their nuclear program, making agreement difficult. Trump will likely have to decide whether to take military action to strike Iran's nuclear facilities, an obviously risky step that would have unpredictable wider regional implications. Given his aversion to foreign wars, Trump could opt for encouraging Israeli strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities while tightening sanctions in the hopes that this will drive Iran to the negotiating table. The key question in this scenario would be whether the two parties are willing to compromise enough to make a deal possible.

In anticipation of a tougher, potentially escalatory course under Trump, Europeans have sought to strengthen diplomatic channels. In the wake of the prospective renewal of Trump's maximum-pressure approach, Europe's E3 powers (Germany, France, and the United Kingdom) held new rounds of talks with the Iranian leadership in November 2024 and January 2025, reportedly discussing the nuclear issue, sanctions relief, and regional security. Despite their otherwise negligible diplomatic weight in the region, the Europeans have been able to build on their relationship with the Iranian leadership developed in the context of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action nuclear agreement, from which Trump withdrew in 2018. Since then, a broad transatlantic consensus has taken hold that considers containing Iran's malign regional influence, alongside nuclear containment, an essential component of any future deal with Iran. Israel views this moment as its once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to destroy Iran's nuclear capabilities and ability to wreak regional havoc. How the Europeans will react if Trump does not follow the gradual diplomatic path and opts for direct economic and/or security escalation to force Iran to abolish its nuclear capabilities and regional ambitions, in particular if European support is needed (for example, for snapback sanctions) could lead to direct transatlantic confrontation.

While Türkiye and Iran are not outright rivals, they remain regional competitors. Recent setbacks for Iran, particularly in its proxy conflict with Israel, have indirectly benefited Türkiye, as evidenced by the Assad regime's fall. However, these developments also pose significant risks for Türkiye. Iran may respond to its eroding deterrence by accelerating its nuclear program, triggering a regional arms race. US or Israeli action to preempt Iran's nuclear ambitions

could spark a major conflict near Türkiye's borders, threatening security and stability. Another risk is potential regime collapse in Iran due to sanctions or military intervention. Though unlikely soon, such a scenario would force Türkiye to manage instability in a key neighbor with substantial Turkish and Kurdish populations. This could increase ethnic tensions, with Iranian Turks seeking greater autonomy and Iranian Kurds stirring separatist aspirations. Managing these risks demands proactive and careful diplomacy from Ankara.

Syria After Assad

In both his first term and in recent statements, Trump has made it clear that he does not want the United States involved in Syria. Withdrawal of US troops is likely unless his national security team (and potentially Israeli PM Netanyahu) can effectively argue that their presence is helping prevent Syria from turning into a terrorist base that threatens Israel. Even if US troops remain, Trump will likely expect European allies, regional actors including the Gulf Cooperation Council members, Türkiye, or Syrians themselves to fund any reconstruction efforts in Syria and to lead any efforts to persuade the current Syrian leadership to form a nationally inclusive government. If the situation in Syria devolves into further fighting or an Islamist state emerges, he is likely to adopt a hostile stance and support whatever actions the Israelis take on Syrian developments, including military strikes. It is improbable that the United States will lead any efforts on Syria in the near term.

For a Europe deeply engulfed in a domestic battle of political polarization, the fall of the Assad regime means first and foremost the return of refugees to Syria. In the weeks after the fall, EU member states and institutions, while remaining cautious, signaled readiness to re-establish relations with the Syrian interim leadership in Damascus. France, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom, and the EU held talks with members of the interim government to discuss the political process, sanctions relief, and economic and humanitarian aid. Though EU member states vary in the kinds of guarantees they demand to lift the sanctions regime in place since 2011, they aim to ensure that the new Syrian leadership will make good on its promises to establish a secular system that protects minorities, contains terrorism, and manages refugee flows. The prospect of returning Syrian refugees informs all European political forays, however, and may affect EU leaders' outlook on the new Syrian leadership.

The fall of the Assad regime was a geopolitical win for Ankara, yet the situation also presents significant risks. Syria's fragile political transition is a critical vulnerability; its collapse could trigger chaos, terrorism, and refugee flows, directly affecting Türkiye's security and economy. If the new Damascus regime fails to moderate, a radical Islamist government on Türkiye's southern border could pose severe threats. Syria's transformation might also spark fears of an Arab Spring revival in the region, prompting coordinated pushback against Türkiye similar to 2015–2020. Additionally, Türkiye's handling of the People's Defense Units (YPG) could heighten tensions with the United States and Europe, straining bilateral relations. With both Israel and Türkiye maintaining military presences in Syria, missteps by either could escalate tensions. Finally, if the new Damascus regime fails to convince the West and Gulf states of its commitment to moderation, reconstruction aid could be withheld; this would worsen Syria's instability.

Israel, Palestine, and the Legacy of Gaza

The Trump team will be eager to build on its first term's major foreign policy triumph, the Abraham Accords, but the Gaza war and the Israeli government's clear policy decision to rule out a Palestinian state will make this difficult. While Saudi Arabia is clearly willing to normalize relations with Israel, and using this willingness to extract concessions from the United States, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's (MbS) ambition to take up the mantle of Arab

leadership will depend on his ability to convince Trump and then the Israelis that some political progress on the Palestinian issue is a necessary precondition for any normalization. This is unlikely in the near term, but may be possible later in the Trump second term, when a new Israeli government may be in place and Trump will be anxious to cement his legacy. MbS can afford to wait, but what he cannot afford to do is fail. In the interim, steps taken by the Israeli government to annex parts of the West Bank or Syria, occupy Gaza, allow Jewish worship on the Haram al Sharif/ Temple Mount, or reestablish settlements inside Gaza will likely meet less resistance from the new US Administration than prior US governments, creating additional obstacles to normalization.

This tension between the administration's regional goals and its strong support for PM Netanyahu will require President Trump himself to decide which to prioritize. This poses a challenge to Palestinians to shore up Saudi support for their priorities and to MbS to determine what price he will ultimately insist on for normalization. On the international stage, almost unconditional American military assistance to Israel, and the EU's inability to effectively influence either side, has led other actors to take central roles—the most prominent being South Africa's leadership of the ICC case against Israel. Charges of Western double standards will be harder to refute given the US and EU responses and will likely decrease European and US moral influence and appeal throughout the world.

While Europe welcomed the Gaza ceasefire deal brought over the finish line by Trump's team in January 2025, it cautiously awaits a continuation or even scaling up of Trump's disruptive policies on the Israeli-Palestinian dossier during his first term. How Europeans will react to such policies will be key: a potential US nod to Israeli annexation of Palestinian or Syrian lands, bombing of Iran, or similarly escalating moves would put significant strain on EU-US relations, and could well be a key driver for a deeper foreign policy split in the EU. The utter loss of European soft power across the world that Europe has inflicted upon itself by its painful public display of long-standing rifts and selective application of international law remains a key European risk. Since the beginning of the Gaza war, Europeans have remained marginal to political negotiations, despite their role as main aid provider to Palestine, and despite some member states boldly recognizing Palestine. At the same time, skyrocketing arms sales from Germany, France, and Italy helped sustain the Israeli war in Gaza. Europe's trademark normative soft power has been one of its core assets on the international stage. Any future mention of it will bear the stain of Gaza.

While the ceasefire in Gaza is welcome news, a collapse of the ceasefire and the continuation of the Gaza conflict in 2025 would present significant risks for Türkiye, particularly in relations with the United States and Israel. The Trump administration's firm support for Israel contrasts with Ankara's strong backing of Palestinians and Hamas, setting the stage for tensions that could escalate into a diplomatic crisis. Türkiye views Israel's integration into the Middle East as contingent on a resolution of the Israel-Palestine conflict through either a two-state solution or equal citizenship rights for Palestinians—both increasingly unlikely given current Israeli politics. Furthermore, Türkiye's anti-Israel stance could influence regional dynamics. Through its strong rhetoric against Israel, Ankara can dissuade regimes that might otherwise accept Israel's integration into the broader Middle East, further straining Türkiye's ties with both Israel and the United States.

Opportunities for Strategic Rivals

Regional reconfiguration and disruptive policies by key players in the Middle East in the coming months and years could open up new opportunities and risks for US strategic rivals. Russia and China will maintain their willingness and ability to disrupt US priorities in the Middle East. Russia has been weakened by Assad's fall, and its military role in the Middle East remains tied to the future status of its bases in Syria. Whether and how this will affect Russia's position

in Ukraine remains unclear. For example, a Russian withdrawal from Syria could free up some additional military and intelligence capabilities for use in Ukraine. A loss of the bases would imply a loss in Russian hard power projection across Europe's Southern flank. It is far from certain, however, that the new Syrian government will choose to antagonize Russia by closing the bases, and Russia's friends and allies will still play a significant role in Syria's future—offering Russia a potential spoiler role. Russia also has a close relationship with many of the Gulf states based on the energy industry, and this could expand to other economic security issues such as sanctions evasion or grey-market transfers.

China's traditional role as a predominantly economic player will continue, particularly given its willingness and ability to ignore US sanctions regimes and fund large-scale infrastructure projects. Prior US reluctance to sell military technology or to provide security guarantees to Gulf states could increase the appeal of partnerships with Russia and China and will notably complicate any effort to impose strict sanctions on Iran. China's brokerage of Iran-Saudi reconciliation also provided evidence that China's engagement in the Middle East is not purely economic. China could well exploit the US's and EU's loss of normative soft power to tout its "unbiased" mediation efforts (for example, with Iran).

For Türkiye, the Assad regime's fall, driven by Ankara's support for Syrian rebels, increases the risk of escalation with Russia. Moscow's setbacks in Syria could prompt a more assertive Russian effort to reassert influence. Increased military activity or proxy confrontations in Syria or elsewhere could further strain the relationship. Moscow might also leverage economic dependencies such as Türkiye's reliance on Russian energy and trade to exert pressure. However, such an outcome is far from preordained. The Turkish-Russian relationship is marked by "competitive cooperation", balancing geopolitical competition with collaboration in trade, energy, and the economy. Historically, when their interests have clashed, Ankara and Moscow have managed to reach a mutual accommodation, as demonstrated in Libya in 2020 and through the Astana Process in Syria until the fall of the Assad regime. Despite recent setbacks for Russia in Syria, a similar accommodation remains plausible.

Conclusion

The Middle East presents the second Trump administration with tantalizing prospects for transforming the region along with corresponding risks of further destabilization and violence. Expanding on the Abraham Accords and forging peace with Iran would cement President Trump as a historic figure in the Middle East and secure the United States' leading role in the region, but risks abound. To achieve this remarkable result would require—aside from constructive leadership from regional counterparts—extraordinary firmness and a willingness on Trump's part to confront both Israel and his own hawkish Republican party.

In 2025, Europe's stakes in the dynamic reconfiguration of the Middle East are at peak, while its capacity for effective impact is at a historic low. Internal leadership transitions and the creeping translation of political polarization into extremist electoral majorities weaken the EU's ability to reach consensus or to lead and strengthens linkages between external threats (real or perceived) and domestic politics. Struggling to defend Europe against Russian aggression in the East, European capacities to deal with additional threats from the South are on life support. Europe has a meaningful role to play on the Iranian file, as well as in diverse reconstruction efforts. But for most of Europe's Southern flank, a rather helpless containment logic has taken over that is set to focus Europe's efforts on migration and energy in the coming years as European centrist leaders struggle to hold their societies together.

For Ankara, the fall of the Assad regime in late 2024, severing Iran's land bridge to the Levant and weakening Russia's influence in the eastern Mediterranean, marks a major geopolitical victory. This shift creates opportunities for Türkiye to advance its regional interests but also introduces significant risks that could materialize in 2025. Iran, having suffered a major loss of deterrence, will likely remain a central source of instability. Additionally, policy divergences in the Middle East could strain Türkiye's relations with both the United States and Russia. Tensions with Israel may escalate, and a failed political transition in Syria could lead to further chaos along Türkiye's southern border.

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