

Balancing Trumpism: Transatlantic Divergence in the Middle East

By Kristina Kausch

Is the Middle East the transatlantic alliance's Achilles' heel? Against the backdrop of global geopolitical shifts and a growing malaise in the relationship between the Europe and the United States, it appears that they no longer want the same things there. After the U.S. withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal, both sides are actively trying to undermine each other in this region of core geopolitical interest to both.

Although the basic U.S. and European interests there remain aligned and there is tangible cooperation in some areas, their assessments and policies are drifting apart. The transatlantic partners' clash on the two fundamental pillars of Middle Eastern geopolitics – Iran and Palestine – in practice means a diverging overall vision for the region. As the game in the Levant is increasingly negotiated between Russia, Iran, and Turkey, a transatlantic rivalry in the region will not only risk its further destabilization, but also hand Russia more opportunities to play Europe and the United States in other geopolitical arenas.

In the past 15 years, the transatlantic relationship has suffered as a result of the fallout from two major actions by the United States concerning the Middle East: its invasion of Iraq in 2003 and its withdrawal from the Joint and Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran in 2018. As it went to war in Iraq, the United States considered European participation in the military operation as desirable but dispensable, while the conflict also drove a deep wedge among European countries. In the case of the JCPOA, an interest-led, united European front in favor of the agreement is trying to prevent the United States from waging economic warfare against Iran to full effect. Is the Middle East the transatlantic alliance's Achilles' heel?

Against a background of global geopolitical shifts and a growing malaise in the transatlantic relationship, it appears that Europe and the United States no longer want the same things in the Middle East. For the first time since the 1956 Suez crisis,¹ they are actively trying to undermine each other in a region that is of core geopolitical interest to both. However, senior officials on both sides of the Atlantic routinely assert that there is more policy continuity and agreement than news stories would suggest.

The roles of United States, Europe, and the transatlantic alliance in the region need to be assessed against the background of an international

¹ During the 1956 Suez crisis, France and the United Kingdom joined Israel in invading Egypt in a bid to regain control over the Suez Canal. They withdrew under international pressure, including from the United States.



environment in transition. The transformation of the international liberal order and the crisis of domestic liberal politics condition and nurture each other, forming a crisis of liberalism across and between societies, of which the recent transatlantic malaise has been symptomatic. The politics of global transformation, the state of the transatlantic relationship, and key Middle Eastern topics are inextricably linked. The split between Europe and the United States over the Iranian nuclear issue thus reflects increasing divergence not only on key Middle Eastern matters, but also on the ways the emerging international system should be navigated.

If the main fault lines in the emerging international system are increasingly between liberal and non-liberal forces across and within countries,² foreign policy will be determined as much at home as abroad. The recent divergence between Europe and the United States on key Middle Eastern issues has been further fueled by the growing influence of domestic considerations in foreign policy on both sides of the Atlantic. In the United States, this was boosted by the ascent of Trump, whose foreign policy directly caters to his core constituencies. In Europe, the 2015-16 refugee crisis turned migration, and by extension the question of Middle Eastern security, into a major electoral factor and imminent threat to European cohesion, which shapes the way Middle Eastern instability is perceived by European citizens and politicians. The trend of ‘inside-out’ foreign policy is a security concern if short-term domestic political gain is pursued by leaders while they disregard competent foreign policy advice, core national interests, or destabilizing consequences abroad.

Arguably, there are marked differences between Trump and much of the U.S. security establishment in what is perceived as being in the U.S. national interest. At the same time, while the European consensus on the JCPOA appears solid, agreement among EU member states falters on many other

Middle Eastern issues. In this context, this brief assesses U.S. and European approaches to the Middle East, analyzing a situation that could be temporary or turn into a structural feature of transatlantic relations.

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The Two Pillars of

Middle Eastern Geopolitics

The wider Middle East remains a key region for the United States and Europe. The return of Russia has further boosted the region’s geopolitical significance by placing it at the conjunction of two arcs of crisis, one stretching from Morocco to Pakistan and the other from Eastern Europe to Russia.³

Two crucial issues form the backbone of current Middle Eastern geopolitics: the role of Iran in the region, and the position of Israel vis-à-vis its neighbors. They hold the key to the resolution of most conflicts in the region, from Syria to Yemen and from the crisis among the Gulf states to Gaza. It is precisely around these two pillars that European views and those of the United States under the Trump administration have most drifted apart. Their disagreeing on approaches to Iran and Israel/Palestine in practice means disagreeing on an overall vision for the region.

Today the situation assessment on both sides of the Atlantic shows a great deal of continuity, but also marked differences in how key challenges are addressed. In terms of broader vision, as Martin Indyk has argued, the Trump “doctrine” for the Middle East appears to consist of an assessment of

² G. John Ikenberry, ‘The Future of the Liberal World Order’, *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2011, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2011-05-01/future-liberal-world-order>.

³ Interview with Klaus Naumann, former Chairman of the NATO Military Committee. ‘Europa in den Turbulenzen der Weltpolitik [Europe in Turbulence of World Politics], Zentrum Liberale Moderne, July 19, 2018, <https://libmod.de/klaus-naumann-europa-in-den-turbulenzen-der-weltpolitik/>.

the region as a hopeless “troubled place” whose wars and crises are not the United States’, and of relying on allies to bear the burden of regional security, regardless of their political credentials.⁴ Critics argue that Trump’s let-them-deal-with-it approach is similar to the “leading from behind” of President Barack Obama, except that alongside NATO allies unfettered autocrats are expected to play the military role desired by the United States.

By contrast, the European perspective on the Middle East is informed by an interest in de-escalation to prevent conflicts from further spilling over into Europe in the form of refugees and jihadis. The 2015-16 refugee crisis has radically changed the way the region is perceived in Europe, turning Middle Eastern security into a decisive electoral factor that directly impacts the European Union’s internal cohesion by fueling the rise of an anti-immigrant and Eurosceptic political current. Added to the fact that multilateral engagement is part of the EU’s DNA, this means that most European countries will tend to prefer engagement to head-on containment, despite significant variation among EU member states on specific issues.

Although the core interests of the United States and Europe in the Middle East remain aligned, their respective assessments and policies are drifting apart. Both agree that Iran must be prevented from becoming a nuclear power and that its aggressive regional expansionism must be halted. They fundamentally disagree, however, on how to do so. They also share the priority of countering Islamic State (ISIS), and their cooperation in this field is good and tangible. Many within the Trump administration agree with European views on the need for a comprehensive, multi-layered approach to Syria, such as the one laid out by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson in January.⁵ But, at the same time, the Trump administration cites Iran’s aggressive expansionism as the lone cause

of regional destabilization. Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates are largely uncritically embraced by the administration as close allies in defending the region from an Iranian takeover.

European positions on the region are more nuanced than the Trump administration’s. France, Germany, and the United Kingdom are concerned by Iran’s behavior but they also stress the need for Israel, the Sunni Gulf states, and Russia to make concessions. A broad bipartisan belief in Washington holds that European countries either underestimate or disregard the degree and impact of Iran’s regional roguery.

Saving Ourselves Over Iran

While the European consensus on maintaining the JCPOA is solid, France and the United Kingdom, in particular, share the United States’ desire to put greater pressure on Iran regarding its regional behavior. From the predominant European perspective, Trump’s goal of encircling Iran diplomatically and economically with “maximum pressure” risks an escalation that will directly affect European security interests much more than U.S. ones. From the Trump administration’s point of view, Europe’s strategy of engagement and gradual confidence building indirectly enables Iran’s behavior by giving it more time and income.

Beyond the narrative of ripping apart a bad deal, no meaningful contingency plans regarding Iran have been put in place by the United States beyond economic sanctions. While the general deterrence course outlined by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in May 2018⁶ includes elements to contain Iran, it remains unclear what means will be employed to put them into practice. In addition, the Trump administration’s unambiguous alignment with Israel further fuels regional polarization by contributing to the buildup of a regional anti-Iran front. Seizing

⁴ Martin Indyk, ‘A Trump Doctrine for the Middle East’, *The Atlantic*, April 14, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/04/trump-syria-middle-east/558053/>.

⁵ U.S. State Department, ‘Remarks on the Way Forward for the United States Regarding Syria’, Remarks by Secretary of State Rex W. Tillerson, Stanford, January 17, 2018, <https://www.state.gov/secretary/20172018tillerson/remarks/2018/01/277493.htm>.

⁶ U.S. State Department, ‘After The Deal: A New Iran Strategy’, remarks by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Washington D.C., May 21, 2018, <https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2018/05/282301.htm>.

the momentum of greater backing by the United States and the Gulf states, Israel might even feel emboldened to escalate militarily with Iran.

European countries, by contrast, have a more tangible plan regarding Iran. While France, Germany, and the United Kingdom continue their efforts to hold up the JCPOA despite the withdrawal of the United States, they also seek to build on the relationship established with Tehran through the agreement. As High Representative Federica Mogherini has pointed out on many occasions, the EU hopes that continuous dialogue and confidence building with Iran will gradually open channels for rapprochement on missiles and other regional issues, including via the newly launched EU/E4 (the EU, France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom) dialogue with Iran on regional issues. Beyond a commitment to the JCPOA, however, the European side is not that united, with France and the United Kingdom pressing for a much tougher approach that contrasts with the EU institutions' fervent defense of the socialization approach of moderation-by-engagement.⁷

Unlike the handful of member states that dominate European policy in the Middle East and North Africa (France, Spain, Italy, Germany, and the United Kingdom), the EU as a whole is a largely reactive actor in the region; it is not a geopolitical player but exerts mainly economic power. The most notable exception to this has been on Iran, where the EU has been a true policy entrepreneur. It has been often stressed that the EU's defense of the JCPOA has been

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partially fueled by the need to safeguard its most important foreign policy success at a time when it is under unprecedented stress from within.

Europe's Tortuous Emancipation on Palestine

The other big clash, and a marked example of Europe's balancing of what it sees as irresponsible U.S. policy shifts, is on Palestine. Trump's December 2017 decision to move the U.S. embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem was about domestic politics and had very little connection to the Arab-Israeli peace process. From Trump's perspective, it was an easy domestic win with his pro-Israel electoral base, with maximum symbolic impact at almost no cost. At the same time, the move fit into the recent U.S. approach of tough love for the Palestinians paired with an unambiguous pro-Israel position in an apparent attempt to break the status quo in the stalled peace process.

The embassy move, heavily criticized across Europe, has driven a second wedge between the Trump administration and European governments. Despite initial hesitation in some European capitals over whether taking a firm stance on Palestine was worth another quarrel with the United States, the European consensus held and consolidated. The European countries have since implemented several policies to support the Palestinians, such as directly countering Trump's sharp rhetoric with unambiguous statements or compensating for U.S. funding cuts, and eventual entire cut of financial support,⁸ to the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees.⁹ Some

⁸ Clare Foran and Elise Labott, 'US ends all funding to UN agency for Palestinian refugees' CNN, September 1, 2018, <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/08/31/politics/trump-administration-ending-funding-palestinian-refugees/index.html>.

⁹ Jon Stone, 'EU pledges €42.5m extra aid to Palestinians after Donald Trump cuts U.S. contribution,' *The Independent*, January 31, 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/palestine-aid-donald-trump-eu-federica-mogherini-israel-a8187606.html>

⁷ Riccardo Alcaro, 'Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Europe's Uncertain Role in Middle Eastern Geopolitics,' IAI Policy Brief, May 2018, <https://>

European countries, such as Spain, have also publicly considered the formal recognition of the state of Palestine.

The background to the prospective draft peace plan being hatched by the president's son-in-law and adviser, Jared Kushner, provides a glimpse of the Trump administration's objectives in Israel and Palestine. In the face of the stalled peace talks, Kushner's prospective plan was born out of a desire to try something entirely different, again parting from past policies and traditions in a deliberately disruptive way. Instead of reshuffling the same ideas successive U.S. administrations have tried for the past 15 years, the prospective new plan appears to consist of a gloves-off approach towards the Palestinians alongside an unambiguous alignment with Israel. Awaiting the plan to come into the open, close observers expect disruption as the main theme, but there seems to be no ambition to bring both sides closer together.

Four elements inform the recent U.S. turn on Israel and Palestine, as Kushner explained to one observer.¹⁰ First, to make it impossible for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to say no to Trump by several actions that have essentially turned this special relationship into an exclusive one. Second, to develop strategic ties with key Arab states, helped by the confluence of interests between Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman of Saudi Arabia, Crown Prince Muhammad bin Zayed of Abu Dhabi, Netanyahu, and the Trump administration to fight Sunni jihadis and push back Iran. Third, to break the status quo by creating a new reality for the Palestinians and force them to the negotiating table by means of very openly disregarding their interests as long as they are not supportive of peace. The fourth step is to stay away from aspirational objectives such as a firm commitment to Palestinian statehood based on the borders established in 1967 or a Palestinian capital in East Jerusalem, and to focus largely on interim provisions and confidence-building measures. The underlying assessment of this approach is that if

there were a Palestinian state tomorrow, it would be corrupt, hostile to Israel, an ally of Iran, a state sponsor of terrorism, and a threat to its own people. The absence of criticism from Arab states on the new U.S. policy has reaffirmed this view in the Trump administration.

In many instances in the past, EU member states have overlooked what they perceived as a biased U.S. position on Israel and Palestine to preserve their good relations with the United States. A split European vote at the UN General Assembly in December 2017 saw five smaller EU members abstain from a resolution reaffirming Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and Palestine, in what was clearly a statement not on Palestine but on relations with the United States. The recent radical moves by the Trump administration, followed by its withdrawal from the JCPOA, however, might have turned the tide on Europe's going along with the United States on Palestine. In May France and the United Kingdom backed a UN Security Council draft resolution that called for the withdrawal of the U.S. recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. Harsh European condemnation of this decision contrasted with tame reactions from Arab governments.¹¹

Despite their sharp criticism of Trump's turn on Palestine, Europeans have not come up with any better idea to break the deadlock in the stalled peace process. Senior Israeli foreign ministry officials expect France to come up with its own peace plan should the United States fail to present the long-awaited plan hatched by Kushner.¹² Any new outbreak of violence in Palestine might well thrust Europe into the traditional U.S. role of the intermediary between the two sides if the Trump administration continues to signal so clearly that it is not interested in this role.¹³

11 Gol Kalev, 'The Battle for Jerusalem: Europe vs. the United States', *Jerusalem Post*, December 16, 2017, <https://www.jpost.com/Magazine/The-battle-for-Jerusalem-Europe-vs-America-517958>.

12 <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/premium-foreign-ministry-official-if-trump-delays-peace-plan-france-will-offer-alternative-1.6590159>.

13 James Traub, 'RIP the Transatlantic Alliance, 1945-2018', *Foreign Policy*, May 11, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/05/11/rip-the-trans-atlantic-alliance-1945-2018/>.

10 Interview with the author, Washington, D.C., June 2018.

Big Proxy Wars, At Arm's Length

The transatlantic divisions on the two pillars of Middle Eastern geopolitics – approaches to Iran and Israel/Palestine – partially condition U.S. and EU policy in the major proxy conflicts in the region, namely those in Syria and Yemen.

Throughout the Syria conflict, Europe has seen its interests frustrated and its influence sidelined as a result of internal divisions and developments on the ground. Via the EU/E4 dialogue on regional issues, it has been able to discuss Syria and Yemen with Iran, albeit without any breakthroughs. At the same time, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom increasingly rely on bilateral channels to preserve some influence. Europe's main bargaining chip in Syria remains its economic power. The EU and its member states have been the largest donor to the country since the beginning of the war, having contributed over €10.8 billion in humanitarian, development, economic, and stabilization assistance.¹⁴ Regarding post-war reconstruction aid and an eventual lifting of sanctions on the Assad regime, Europe's constant line has been to make both conditional to an inclusive political process. If the regime regains full control of Syria and keeps rejecting any meaningful inclusionary process, an already marginal Europe could therefore be pushed to the sidelines by losing its most important lever of influence.

The U.S. assessment on Syria has shifted only slightly from the Obama administration to the Trump administration. While the former prioritized the fight against ISIS and opposed Assad without being prepared to do much about it, Trump prioritizes ISIS and opposes Iran without being prepared to do much about it. In sync with his broad approach to foreign affairs, Trump wants to avoid further U.S. military engagement and financial strain. In Syria, this translates into no formal broadening of

the U.S. military mandate beyond fighting ISIS, and no meaningful role in post-war reconstruction. Some voices in Washington hope the United States can strike a deal with Russia, defeat ISIS, and get out. Trump has long made clear that all he cares about in Syria is ISIS, although more recently senior State Department officials have asserted that U.S. troops are in the country to stay and that Iran's presence there is a decisive factor in this decision. At the same time, the administration has frozen aid for Syria and programs (including post-ISIS stabilization work) are being shut down. Paradoxically, these measures are in direct contradiction to Trump's tough rhetoric on Iran, which would likely be the first benefactor of further vacuums in Syria.

The European countries have remained largely in sync with the United States on Syria, joining the coalition against ISIS and retaining their formal opposition to Assad. In April, French and British forces joined U.S. ones in coordinated airstrikes in response to the regime's use of chemical weapons. Beyond symbolic military and political action, however, they have struggled to claim a political role in Syria alongside their humanitarian efforts.¹⁵ As the conflict tilts in favor of President Bashar al-Assad, EU unity falters and U.S. engagement remains uncertain. European countries, in particular France, are worried that the United States may withdraw from Syria as they need it to counterbalance the Russian and Iranian presence. At the same time, Russia has been pressing hard for European countries to pick up the reconstruction bill regardless of Assad's future, and it has been keen on Europe acting independently from the United States. In October, France and Germany teamed up with

“ *The murder of the Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi has further led many to question the close partnership with Saudi Arabia.* ”

14 European Union, 'The EU and the Crisis in Syria: Factsheet', September 24, 2018, https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/22664/The%20EU%20and%20the%20crisis%20in%20Syria.

15 Richard Youngs, 'Bolstering Europe's Localist Approach to Syria', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2018, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2018/04/04/bolstering-europe-s-localist-approach-to-syria-pub-75914>.

Russia and Turkey to secure the implementation of the Idlib agreement, in which Europe has a strong interest as a measure to prevent a further refugee exodus. By joining an ongoing conversation between the powers involved in the Astana peace talks (Russia, Turkey and Iran), France and Germany have attempted to preserve some influence on an issue that is increasingly being negotiated between these powers. In doing so, Europe is increasingly de-coupling itself from the United States as the latter remains ambiguous on its engagement in Syria and is unwilling to pay for reconstruction in what could be a joint transatlantic bid for renewed leverage in a post-conflict setting.

In the case of the war in Yemen, concern over the humanitarian disaster is shared across the Atlantic, in particular in the U.S. Congress and the European Parliament. Formal U.S. statements, however, barely veil the Trump administration's preference for the Sunni Arab coalition led by Saudi Arabia to prevail through military victory. Republicans and Democrats share a hard line against Iranian aggression in the Middle East, and many see Yemen as prime example of where the United States should be pursuing a countering policy. At the same time, Congress has increasingly pushed the administration to exert pressure on the United States' Arab allies to end the humanitarian catastrophe. The murder of the Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi has further led many to question the close partnership with Saudi Arabia and to increased pressure from Congress and the public on the administration to push Riyadh on the Yemen war, which could bring the United States closer to the European position. These hopes were at least momentarily curtailed in November by an unambiguous statement by Trump, as well as an op ed by Pompeo, both geared at reassuring Saudi Arabia of their full backing.¹⁶ Nevertheless, the new Democrat-controlled House of Representatives is likely to push the White House on this issue in the

coming months. The recent Senate vote in favor of a bill to end the U.S. role in the Yemen war could be indicative of such a trend.¹⁷

U.S. and British defense contractors have been the main financial beneficiaries from the Yemen war, reaping huge benefits from arms sales to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Alongside the United States, the United Kingdom has backed the Saudi-led coalition with various types of support, including bombing coordinates, logistical provisions, and aerial refueling. Contractors from the United States are the largest arms suppliers to Saudi Arabia with \$8.4 billion worth of sales since 2014, followed by ones in the United Kingdom (\$2.6 billion) and France (\$475 million).¹⁸ Parts of the profits go into lobbying their governments to approve these sales, despite overwhelming evidence that the weapons involved are used against civilians in Yemen.¹⁹ The United Kingdom, the most prominent EU member state in the Gulf, including on the Yemen issue, is also the largest European source of weapons for the region's Sunni regimes and it has on numerous occasions provided them with political cover. France, Sweden, and Spain are also major sources of arms to the Gulf states involved in the Yemen conflict; their governments have disregarded regular calls, including two European Parliament resolutions, for an EU-wide ban on arms sales to them. By contrast, Germany, Denmark, and Finland have banned arms sales to Saudi Arabia in the wake of the Khashoggi murder.

Unlike the United States, whose support to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates has been critical to the Saudi-led military intervention against the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen, European countries have retained working relations with all the parties in the conflict. They have consistently

16 The White House, 'Statement from President Donald J. Trump on Standing with Saudi Arabia', November 20, 2018, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-president-donald-j-trump-standing-saudi-arabia/>; Mike Pompeo: The U.S.-Saudi Partnership is Vital, Wall Street Journal, November 27, 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-u-s-saudi-partnership-is-vital-1543362363>

17 Peter Beinart, 'What the Yemen vote reveals about the Democratic Party', *The Atlantic*, December 4, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/12/senate-moves-towards-ending-americas-role-yemen/577243/>.

18 'EU urges arms ban on Saudi alliance to stop Yemen war', Press TV, October 5, 2018, <https://www.presstv.com/Detail/2018/10/05/576117/Europe-Parliament-resolution-Saudi-Arabia-Yemen-arms-embargo>

19 Sarah Leah Whitson, 'Is Anyone Actually Winning the War in Yemen?', Carnegie Middle East Center, October 4, 2018, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/77389>

supported UN efforts to broker a ceasefire and to mediate peace talks. The EU is therefore seen as comparatively neutral, and the United Kingdom and France as UN Security Council members have some leverage to press for peace.²⁰ While those EU member states with great stakes in the Gulf arms market are reluctant to jeopardize their good relations with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, the recently launched dialogue between the EU/E4 and Iran over regional issues including Yemen displays European willingness to continue the engagement strategy with Iran, rather than going down the road of containment via sanctions as demanded by the United States. Greater coherence and unity in terms of arms sales to the Gulf states would greatly increase Europe's political weight in such talks.²¹

Despite his rhetoric on countering Iran, Trump has repeatedly stated his preference for withdrawing U.S. troops from Syria. Even if they stay, a broadening of their formal mandate beyond fighting ISIS appears out of question. The United States does not want Iran to build a permanent military presence in Syria. It needs to create disincentives for Iran through a mix of sanctions, military action, and diplomacy. The United States has engaged in military actions in Syria exceptionally to counter ISIS, to deter the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime, and to protect its forces on the ground. If it wants to prevent Iran from entrenching its presence militarily in Syria and other countries in the region, it needs to be able to credibly threaten military action. But Iran counts on the fact that the United States and the EU have a high threshold for military action. Effectively pushing back against Iranian aggression in the region, as so loudly propagated by Trump, would involve lowering this threshold, which the U.S. administration is not willing to do.

In Europe, the direct impact of Middle Eastern conflicts and instability has led to harder public attitudes on migration rather than to significant shifts regarding a more proactive role abroad (including in military terms) to help end these conflicts. France is an outlier in this, however. Its fighter planes stood ready to take off in August 2013 to help Obama enforce his “red line” over the use of chemical weapons in Syria, and there was frustration in its government when this failed to happen. Because of the great differences among individual countries – with France and the United Kingdom at the active end of the spectrum and Germany at the passive one – Europe has nevertheless been a reactive player in the Middle East and North Africa. The current European balancing efforts in reaction to Trump's hawkish policy towards the region are no exception to this; they do not constitute a move towards greater European agency there.

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Conclusion

The positions of United States and Europe in the Middle East have increasingly drifted apart. They have similar threat perceptions but weigh and process these very differently. While there is convergence in core interests, as well as constructive cooperation in several areas, the transatlantic partners clash on the two fundamental issues that condition most other hotspots in the current multipolar system in the Middle East: Iran's role in the region and the approach towards the Palestinian cause. As long as European and U.S. assessments and policy on these clash, effective transatlantic cooperation on sustainable Middle Eastern security will be unfeasible.

20 Joost Hiltermann, 'It's Time for the European Union to Push Yemen Towards Peace', International Crisis Group, June 8, 2018, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/yemen/its-time-european-union-push-yemen-towards-peace>

21 Alcaro, 'Between a Rock and a Hard Place'.

The EU and U.S. positions on the big regional proxy conflicts in the region point to a larger commonality in their respective Middle East policies, however; namely, the abyss between objectives proclaimed and means employed. Be it with regard to saving Syria or containing Iran, and albeit for very different reasons, EU and U.S. policies suffer from the underlying contradiction of a claim to leadership combined with an arms-length approach. The increasing entanglement of Middle Eastern and Eastern European geopolitics through Russia's role in Syria also exacerbates these dilemmas. Russia's involvement has raised not only the threshold for any military engagement by the EU and United States, but also the stakes in the conflict more broadly.

A major risk arising from the transatlantic drift on the Middle East is the creation of new power vacuums that leave the field to actors with aggressive expansionary agendas, which will jeopardize the chances of stabilization. In the current dynamics, the game in the Levant is increasingly negotiated between Russia, Iran, and Turkey, diminishing the role and weight of the United States and of the EU. In addition, transatlantic divergence and reluctant action on the Middle East play directly into Russia's hands. Meanwhile, President Vladimir Putin has been lobbying European countries to decouple from U.S. leadership in the Middle East. Transatlantic rivalry in the region will not only lead to its further destabilization, which is against EU and U.S. core interests, but also hand Russia ever-greater opportunities to play the transatlantic partners in other geopolitical arenas.

As far as policy and political divergences reflect a disagreement between European countries and the current U.S. administration, these developments might remain a temporary feature. In 'digesting' Trump, European political elites have gone through three phases: denial, waiting things out, and fighting back. In attempt to balance Trumpism in the Middle East, Europe has decided to counter U.S. policies whenever the Trump administration crosses a red line. It has also embarked on a path of its own on Iran, and to a lesser degree, Palestine and Syria.

Europe would much rather work with the United States in a region of such vital interest; however, a forced emancipation might help boost its unity, foreign policy resolve, and collective defense – an effect that would be likely to outlast Trump's presidency.

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