

The Eastern Mediterranean in 2020: Possible Scenarios and Policy Recommendations

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¹ *The opinions expressed in this policy paper are the author's and do not reflect the views of ELIAMEP or its research partners.*

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About this publication

The Eastern Mediterranean region has just recently come to the forefront of political concern again by being the main driver of a previously unseen flow of irregular migration to Europe. But long-prevailing issues lie behind these developments, including the continuing Syrian civil war as well as the conflict between Israel and Palestine. Against this backdrop of interlocking developments and the overall rising complexity, ELIAMEP and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Greece organized a conference in Athens in autumn 2015 - with Greece being one of the European countries most exposed to conflictual developments in the Eastern Mediterranean and the consequences of these very developments.

A number of leading thinkers and policy makers from across Europe as well as the relevant Eastern Mediterranean countries joined us in this endeavor. The intention was to discuss, during two days, informally and in depth the security problems in the Mediterranean. The focus was put on the conflict in Syria, the situation in Iraq, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the threat of ISIS/jihadist terrorism and population movements. Three papers were commissioned in advance to experts with a deep knowledge of the region. Each expert was asked to present one scenario: i) pessimistic/catastrophic, ii) medium/undesired, iii) optimistic/desired. Each scenario included recommendations for stakeholders on how to prevent the first two and how to increase the likelihood of the latter scenario. The three papers were discussed intensely during the workshop - and the input included by the authors thereafter. This publication provides the final results of this very process - with the intention of a threefold, scenario-based outlook to the possible developments in the Eastern Mediterranean region in the years to come.

We hope for the reader to find this exercise's results enriching.

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Introduction

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The Eastern Mediterranean and its adjoining regions remain an extremely turbulent and unstable neighborhood and the security environment continues to be ‘Hobbesian’. There is a long list of, frequently interacting, security problems including civil conflicts, the emergence of fragile, unstable, dysfunctional or even failed states, the possibility of de facto (or even de jure) border change in various parts of the region, the role of political Islam and sectarian tensions, Jihadist terrorism, extreme inequality in the distribution of income, democratic deficit, population flows, the proliferation of nuclear weapons, as well as small arms and light weapons, existing regional conflicts, the ambitious agendas of regional powers (including Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia), competition for energy resources, the lack of a regional security architecture, a relative decline in U.S. interest and presence in the region, and a deep, structural European crisis also affecting the EU’s global and regional influence and policies. All those factors combined to cause an almost perfect storm in the Mediterranean and the Middle East.

Due to the complexity of the above mentioned problems and interaction between many of them, there are no easy, quick or one-dimensional solutions. There is also considerable uncertainty about the evolution of the regional security environment, as a result of the several unknown variables in the related security equation. In view of the complexity of the problem, and the inherent difficulties for policy-makers to draft the necessary strategies, ELIAMEP and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Greece organized a two-day meeting of experts in Athens on October 22-24, 2015, for an intensive discussion of possible scenarios, their implications for regional solution and for drafting policy recommendations for Western institutions (i.e. the EU and NATO), as well as for local stakeholders. Participants to the workshop included experts and officials from all main actors involved (EU, NATO, US, Germany, France, Italy, Russia, Greece, Turkey, Israel [with the kind support of the Israeli Embassy in Athens], Palestine, Egypt, Jordan, etc.). The exercise focused on (a) the conflict in Syria (b) the situation in Iraq (including the Kurdish issue, which would be also examined as a regional issue) (c) The Israeli-Palestinian conflict (d) the threat of ISIS/jihadist terrorism and (e) population movements, including issues such as mobility, refugee & asylum policies, and organized crime.

Although of critical importance, the Arab revolts and related security developments are not the only factors shaping regional balances and security in the Middle East. Things are not happening in a vacuum. The impact of the Arab revolts is being added to the impact of other global trends (megatrends) and drivers such as the emergence of non-Western powers and the shifting global balance of power, demographic changes, technological developments, globalization and climate change.

We are witnessing a changing balance in global power configurations and a shift of economic, and potentially geopolitical, power from the Atlantic to the Pacific Rim. Western powers are losing ground -in relative, but probably in absolute terms as well—and the so-called BRICS are advancing. Of course, evolutions in the international system are almost never linear and the emerging powers have substantial current and future challenges and problems to deal with.

Changes in the global balance of power will be reflected in the Middle East as well. China has adopted a policy of close relations with resource-rich states in Africa and the Gulf region. Russia has also been trying -rather successfully, one might add- to re-gain some of its past influence in the region, and India is expected to make its presence more felt in the future. For the time being, China has limited its regional involvement to the economic sphere, satisfied with the U.S. guarantee to the safety of supply lines. But this will probably change give their growing energy dependency. The EU appears to be losing some of its regional influence. The other transatlantic partner, the United States is gradually shifting its strategic attention to Asia and has been trying to reduce its military presence in the Mediterranean by delegating responsibility for the western Mediterranean

and parts of sub-Saharan Africa to the EU and for the eastern Mediterranean to regional partners and allies, such as Israel and Turkey.

The transformation of the Arab world over the past few years has contributed to the weakening of state structures and to the creation of ungoverned territories (Sinai, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and elsewhere) that can be exploited by hybrid actors. In combination to the struggle for power between regional powers, this weakening of state structures could possibly lead to the collapse of the Sykes-Picot architecture and to the change of borders in the Middle East (with the Kurds in Northern Iraq being the most likely candidate, although traditional divisions among Kurds may complicate things and prevent the creation of a larger Kurdish state).

Considerable uncertainty and fluidity will remain standard features of the region, and several regimes will face substantial challenges for their survival, probably including -in the future- Saudi Arabia. Short- and longer-term concerns include the nature and stability of new regimes, the consequences for relations between the West and the Arab world (including the impact on oil prices) and implications for transatlantic policies towards the region. The Arab revolts are likely to lead to a far more heterogeneous and fragmented region and possibly to an increasingly polarized Mediterranean.

The emergence of fragile, unstable, dysfunctional or failed states can have important destabilizing consequences not only in the immediate neighborhood but also in adjacent regions. In some cases, such states may constitute “black holes” for the whole international system (for example, Afghanistan in the Taliban/Al-Qaeda era). There are states in sub-Saharan Africa which could be classified in the above categories. In some cases, they may constitute safe havens for a wide variety of criminal activities, with only local or limited regional impact. In other cases, such as Somalia and piracy problems, the impact is much wider. In the Middle East, the list of failed or dysfunctional states includes Yemen (with its population explosion, resource shortages, crumbling infrastructure, and sectarian violence), Libya and Syria.

Syria is, of course, the main regional concern as it has become a source of instability not only for the neighbouring countries, but well beyond as a result of the refugee flows. Of course, European perceptions of urgency regarding Syria are not necessarily shared by other actors (with the obvious exception of the Syrian people, and to an extent Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan). Several scenarios are theoretically possible and none of them is attractive: the transformation of Syria into a failed state, its fragmentation, protracted civil war, or even a new regime dominated by Islamist forces. Should negotiations in Geneva fail -and they very well could- the likelihood of a breakdown in 3-4 or more pieces, plus an unknown number of ungoverned regions, will increase dramatically. In order for Syria to survive as a single state, decentralization and federalism may be useful concepts. Indeed a new model of Arab state, with political Islam contained, federalism, and new types of political organization may be the answer to many states in the region. In any case, the stabilization of the country and the processes of reconstruction and reconciliation will be extremely difficult challenges for the international community.

The role of non-state actors -mostly of the militant Islamist/Salafist variety- has been growing and state bureaucracies always find it much more difficult to engage against non-state forces/actors. Daesh/ISIS is of course the main threat. It is much more than a terrorist organization, as it has been engaged into state building. Preventing the metastasis of ISIS and the contamination of other countries should be an important priority (although they have already established franchises, the relationship is unclear). Understanding the nature of the threat in order to design an effective strategy is of extreme importance. Decapitation strikes and counterterrorist policies alone will not do the job as there is currently no ownership of fighting against ISIS in Syria/Iraq. What is needed is to use the toolbox against organized crime against ISIS in order to target its financial capabilities and reduce the money flows. The Arab stakeholders should also become visibly engaged in the fight against ISIS to avoid giving the impression (as ISIS propaganda will try to portray it) of a Western crusade. Finally, a political solution in Syria and better governance in Iraq is much more of a threat to ISIS than military strikes.

The general picture in the region is quite bleak. There is a general failure of governance. Libya is for all practical purposes a failed state. Saudi Arabia has been quite active (providing economic assistance to Egypt and funding/weapons to various groups in Syria) but it is faced itself with serious challenges (demographic, low oil prices, potentially stability issues in the Eastern provinces, a generational change in the House of Saud, an ambitious and inexperienced heir to the throne and a fragile balance of power with the Council of Guardians (Wahhabis). The confrontation between Iran and Saudi Arabia, fuelled by domestic problems, is likely to

continue, albeit in the form of controlled conflict. There is need for deep structural reforms in Egypt in all sectors (starting with security) and European influence is quite limited (although stability in Egypt should be a high European priority). Turkey is often acting erratically, especially in connection to Syria and the Kurdish problem

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict ('Mother of all conflicts') is, unfortunately, alive and well. Israel has adapted an inward looking, status quo-oriented approach, although insecurity has been increasing because of the latest round of random violence (both from Occupied Territories and Israel proper). What is especially worrisome is the gradual shift in Israeli official thinking away from the two state solution, although the alternative is far from clear. Finally, the only positive development in the Middle East in the last few years has been the nuclear agreement with Iran and the beginning of the rapprochement process between Teheran and Washington.

Migration and refugee flows: a new security challenge for Europe?

Demographic developments and population movements are issues of serious concern for Europe as a whole and migration will remain a central and highly politicized issue for most European countries, to a significant extent for domestic political reasons. Ironically, Europe will be significantly labour-short by several million workers within the next 25 years due to the general aging of European populations. At the same time, the EU member-states are already home to more than six million immigrants from the Mediterranean non-members, especially from North Africa (but also increasingly from sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia). Illegal movement of people is greatly facilitated by the proximity of North Africa and the Middle East and there are also substantial numbers of irregular immigrants travelling via Turkey and crossing to EU territory through Greece's archipelago of islands, its long coastline and the land border between the two countries.

The population in North Africa and the Middle East is projected to double from 240 million in the early 1990s to almost 500 million by the year 2020. Demographic pressures of this magnitude are producing relentless urbanization, social and economic strains, and a steady stream of migrants seeking jobs and social services (a process which starts well to the south of the Maghreb and affects societies on both sides of the Mediterranean). The number of immigrants is increasing as a result of various conflicts and, in the near future, climate change. However much one tries to de-securitize the migration question, relations between Europe and the Middle East and the West and Islam will also affect domestic stability in those European countries with a substantial Muslim community.

By early September 2015, the UN announced that 7 million people had been displaced in Syria from a pre-war population of 22 million, with more than 4 million seeking safety outside Syria. Of those 2.1 million Syrians registered by UNHCR in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon, and 1.9 million Syrians registered by the Turkish government. It is possible that the actual numbers, especially in Jordan and Lebanon, may be higher. Although these facts have been known for some time, the sudden increase in the influx of refugees from Syria and other conflict ridden regions (Iraq, Eritrea, Afghanistan, etc.) caught Europe by surprise. With Greece and Italy as the main gates, most asylum seekers follow the so-called Balkan corridor through FYROM, Serbia, Croatia, Hungary and Austria in an effort to reach Germany and other northern European countries. Countries of first entry, transit and final destination have been trying, rather unsuccessfully, to manage the refugee/migration flows.

The Schengen Agreement, one of Europe's most tangible and widely recognizable achievements, is now faced with considerable, even existential challenges. The limited enthusiasm of several EU states (mainly in Eastern Europe but also in other parts of the continent), with the notable exceptions of Germany and Sweden (although the former already finds itself under tremendous pressure because of the large numbers of asylum seekers), to undertake any meaningful commitments in the context of a burden sharing agreement promoted by the European Commission, is once more testing the concept of a border free Europe, the limits of European solidarity and the idea of common European policies.

Although the migration debate should not become overtly securitized, there is an important security dimension as there is concern about radical individuals (jihadists) entering Europe disguised as refugees complicates the situation even further at a time of increasing radicalization of societies and rising xenophobia and/or islamophobia many EU countries. Although the gradual integration of refugees/immigrants may have long-term beneficial consequences for several European countries facing the prospect of demographic decline (including Germany, but also Russia), the arrival of too many 'guests' in a relatively short period of time may constitute a

significant challenge for social cohesion in a number of EU-member states. To make things even worse, the already high number of refugees and economic migrants is expected to increase in the not too distant future as large numbers of people, mainly in the developing world, may be forced to leave their homes as a result of climate change.

The immediate challenge for the EU is to manage the refugee/migration flows crossing the Aegean and arriving in Greece. Our policies should be based on the following assumptions: (a) preservation of Schengen, without unjustifiably and unfairly sacrificing any of its members, is very important; (b) we need to deal with jihadist terrorism and radicalization in our societies; and (c) Europe has a moral duty to offer asylum to a substantial number of refugees. Unlimited access, however, is not an option, as the EU's absorption capacity is finite. What are therefore our policy options?

Greece should fulfill its commitments regarding hotspots and full registration of all incoming refugees/migrants (with the provision of European economic support, as well as manpower and equipment). At the same time, it should be crystal clear to all that maritime borders cannot be fully protected without the cooperation of the 'other country' or without the use of force. "Push back" policies applied on small rubber boats filled well beyond capacity will only result to an increase, by at least an order of magnitude, of the number of people - mostly women and children- drowning in the Aegean. Such policies would be both inhuman and illegal under international law. Nor can Greece become a prison for several hundred thousand irregular migrants, as recently suggested by a senior government official of one of the founding members of the EU. The political, economic, security and, last but not least, human and moral costs involved would be enormous.

Refugees and migrants do not want to stay in Greece because the country has little to offer in terms of employment and social benefits. Many of them may temporarily stay in detention centers, but eventually they will grow impatient and desperate and border fences will not prevent desperate people from trying (and eventually succeeding) to cross. Furthermore, the fence in the borders between Greece and FYROM only covers a tiny portion. And traffickers will have a greater incentive as the price will certainly go up. The authorities of Balkan countries will be faced with increasing numbers of refugees -alone or in small groups- crossing their countries. It is therefore rather easy to foresee a long trail of human misery from Greece's northern borders till Austria, across the "Balkan route". And new routes may open: for example through Albania or Bulgaria.

As there is no magic bullet to deal with the refugee crisis, an effective management policy should have the following eight components:

- (1) End the fighting in Syria as soon as possible;
- (2) Provide financial support to neighbouring countries (Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey);
- (3) Provide incentives to Turkey to limit the refugee flows and accept return of refugees/migrants (despite its weaknesses, the agreement between the EU and Turkey, if implemented, would be a step in the right direction);
- (4) Implementation of re-allocation decisions among all EU member states;
- (5) Provision of humanitarian assistance to Greece;
- (6) More pressure on countries of origin to accept the repatriation of larger numbers of economic migrants;
- (7) More efficient protection of the EU's external borders and cooperation to address concerns about terrorism and radicalization;
- (8) Effective integration policies in European countries.

A quick end to the fighting in Syria through diplomatic means should be an obvious priority. Including Russia and, if possible, Iran would considerably increase the prospects for an agreement. A well-organized and supported reconstruction and reconciliation process may convince significant number of refugees to eventually return home. In the meantime, increased support to Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey should be another important priority. Access to the labour market and the education system would be critical factors in the refugees' decision on whether to stay in those countries or try to get to Europe. Increasing repatriation rates, through agreements between the EU and important countries of origin should be another priority, although such an objective would be extremely difficult to achieve.

We also need various filters to decrease the attractiveness of the “Greek road”. The cooperation of Turkey -not visible yet- is of critical importance. But Ankara needs incentives as well, such as a visa free regime (which is not expected to cause any significant flows of Turks to EU countries) and economic support. Turkey should also clamp down on traffickers and suspend its visa-free regime for Moroccans and some other nationalities. But the key element would be the establishment of hotspots on Turkish soil, for direct resettlement of refugees in various EU countries. That would alleviate the pressure on Greece and also save many lives in the Aegean.

Integration policies would also be of critical importance, but the challenges should be expected to be substantial as not all refugees may be capable or even willing to be sufficiently integrated. However, an end to the Syrian drama will reduce the current number of asylum seekers, but migration flows because of economic, environmental or security reasons will remain a major, even critical challenge for Europe, which will need to develop a long-term migration management policy.

On the security dimension, the creation of a European Coastguard, with extensive jurisdiction, and better coordination between security and information agencies (also promoted by the establishment of the European Counter Terrorism Centre), but also with neighbouring countries, especially in the South, should make an important contribution. NATO could make a modest contribution, provided Turkey allows the Alliance to patrol the whole Aegean and the US could apply some pressure to Ankara to accept a status-neutral solution to this problem. Also, Greece would need assistance (training, etc.) to deal with jihadists trying to cross through or operate in Greece.

Finally, it is important to keep in mind that the additional arrivals to Europe (in comparison to 2014) have so far been “only” 230,000 people and that number has been sufficient to almost overwhelm even the most developed European country, Germany. There are several hundred thousands more Syrian refugees (in addition to people from other conflict regions) waiting to come to Europe if the circumstances allow. In addition to practical, short-term problems, the long-term consequences for social cohesion in several European countries may be difficult to imagine if the refugee flow continues unhindered.

General guidelines for Europe’s policies vis-à-vis the Mediterranean/Middle East

Given that developments in the Arab world and the wider Middle East have obvious extra-regional implications, other actors will have to prepare new crisis management plans and longer-term strategies. Whereas the EU - which, along with the U.S., still carries the stigma of supporting authoritarian regimes in the region- has legitimate political, economic and security interests in its Southern neighborhood and should develop an active policy to safeguard such interests, it should however avoid an active military involvement except in the following cases: (1) to defend against a direct threat to its security interests; and (2) in order to avert an imminent humanitarian disaster or, under certain conditions, to prevent the escalation of a regional conflict. Even in such cases, every effort should be made to avoid unilateral involvement. A political involvement in the case of widespread human rights violations or a coup d’état would be a different matter, although any overt effort to influence domestic developments in the Middle East may very well prove to be counterproductive. However, the suggested caution against interference in domestic affairs should not be taken as an excuse for the EU not to develop a more coherent and effective policy towards the Mediterranean/Middle East.

It is no secret, of course, that the evolving financial crisis has weakened strategically the EU. There is increasing concern that Europe is sliding into strategic insignificance, losing its global role and influence as it is becoming more and more introvert as a result of its own economic and political crisis but also the lack of ambition. In view of the declining influence and appeal of the EU’s soft power and the large scale changes in much of the Arab world, the EU needs to devote increased resources and strategic attention in order to develop a comprehensive policy vis-à-vis the Arab world, employing all existing instruments to re-define its relationship and strengthen its regional role. France priority is north Africa and sub-Saharan Africa (taking into account that France is overstretched in sub-Saharan Africa and that BREXIT is a real possibility). In this context, NATO should also re-think its possible role in the emerging security environment in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East, as well as in Eastern Europe.

The EU vision for the region would include the basic values and principles the Union stands for, i.e. respect for human rights, rule of law, representative government. It would also include concepts such as from stability to democracy, increased differentiation -away from one size fits all, a relationship based on partnership,

conditionality: more for more, less for less. All available tools and instruments should be developed and used, including the European Endowment for Democracy, Mediterranean Solar Plan, Energy Community, Erasmus Mundo, Tempus, etc.

But despite its noble intentions and words, as the complicated domestic situation in Egypt clearly demonstrates, at end of the day the EU will still be faced with the same old dilemma: stability vs democracy. And there are no obvious [or easy] answers regarding the possible response to that particular dilemma, neither is the European record an exemplary one.

I would conclude with the following remarks:

- (a) Security, demographic, political and socio-economic developments in the Mediterranean and the Middle East will put an increasing strain on Southern European states (which are front-line states whether the Mediterranean is considered a faultline, a bridge or a barrier), but also the EU as a whole. The logical conclusion is that this is by far the most important neighbouring region for the EU and it must become the top priority for the Union's foreign policy, although sufficient attention should be given to the Eastern Neighborhood as a result of developments in Ukraine;
- (b) The region suffers from the lack of a regional security architecture, arms control agreements, confidence-building measures (CBMs), and mechanisms for the de-escalation of crises. The creation of a regional security forum would be a necessary first step in dealing with this institutional deficit;
- (c) Resolution of the Palestinian problem remains a necessary -but no longer sufficient- condition for a substantive improvement of the region's security situation;
- (d) Irrespective of which scenario will reflect more accurately future developments in the region, it would be fairly safe to predict that, in the long-term the wider Middle East is gradually evolving into a multi-player security system and the West may have to adjust to a new reality where its influence in the Middle East will decline, at least in relative terms;
- (e) Syria remains the most pressing regional problem. It would be extremely difficult to reach a diplomatic solution without the engagement of both Russia and Iran. Although Assad may be unwilling to leave office, it is difficult to imagine a solution with Bashir remaining in power for any extended period of time. However, moderate members of the regime would have to be included in a transition government, whereas radicals in the opposition should be isolated and marginalized by almost any means possible. Time is a critical factor as an agreement must be reached before the conflict in Syria, and especially ISIS, further 'contaminate' neighbouring countries and continues to send waves of refugees to Europe.
- (f) Due to the complexity of the above mentioned problems and interaction between many of them, there are no easy, quick or one-dimensional solutions. There is also considerable uncertainty about the evolution of the regional security environment, as a result of the several unknown variables in the related security equation. Perhaps the EU should aim not for a single neighborhood policy but rather a set of complex, bilateral, relationships. Synergies between EU and NATO should also be fully explored. A deeper understanding of the Middle East's complex and dynamic environment by Europe and the US would also be extremely useful.

Scenarios for the Eastern Mediterranean: The Pessimistic/Catastrophic Outcome

Emiliano Alessandri

In recent years, the Eastern Mediterranean region - and in particular the Levant - has been the stage of large-scale disintegrative processes accompanied by heightening social tensions, deepening political unrest, and rising violence. In some countries, centrifugal forces have prevailed. Syria and Iraq are currently torn by internecine strife and may not be able to survive as unitary states. International borders have been redrawn, or their relevance has largely evaporated, having ceased to reflect realities and power balances on the ground. Governance has become increasingly dysfunctional including in those contexts, such as Lebanon, that have been spared by the outbreak of conflict. Even states, such as Egypt, which have for now been able to weather the storm, are coping with fundamental challenges and a weakened resilience. Basic needs of entire swaths of the local populations, from access to food, healthcare and employment to the safeguard of human rights, are not adequately met.

A consensus has emerged that the Middle East state system as it came together after the fall of the Ottoman Empire is collapsing. Yet, the contours of the new order are hard to sketch. Long-standing actors and new forces are engaged in a ruthless and often bloody competition for survival or influence, frequently resorting to violence as a means to advance their goals. Yet, this confrontation has so far only exacerbated instability, leading to inconclusive or even self-destructive outcomes. Processes leading to a fragmentation of the region are compounded, and further exacerbated, by traditional inter-state competition. In fact, crises such as Syria's are as much the result of sectarian and ethnic conflict as they are the product of proxy wars involving regional and extra-regional powers.

Against this backdrop, a pessimistic/catastrophic scenario is one in which chaos prevails in the region as no settlement is found to any of its many unsolved questions. In light of today's extremely volatile and polarized environment, this outcome appears more realistic - as well as possibly more threatening - than the consolidation of a new hostile rule such as would be the case if the so-called Islamic State (IS) extended its sway eliminating or dislodging more established actors, or if a revisionist power, such as Iran, were able to impose a region-wide dominion.

Hypotheses and caveats

Scenarios are inherently and unavoidably subjective: they cannot avoid picking one of the many available and plausible viewpoints. The following scenario has a clear Western bias. The region is analyzed from the outside in and the strategies of regional actors, in particular Turkey, are assessed based on the expectations and desiderata of European and transatlantic counterparts. Definitions such as "revisionist" are applied to actors and strategies that undermine Western notions of order including normative as well as interest-based aspects.

Scenarios are often mistaken about the future. In fact, their function is not to predict but to inform, especially by discussing a wide range of possibilities and forcing to consider and articulate implications and outcomes. In the case of extreme scenarios covering one end of the spectrum of possible futures, it is hard to avoid unrealistic or even caricatured representations. This is almost inevitably the case with a "catastrophic" type of scenario: real catastrophes are a rare occurrence.

On the other hand, current Middle Eastern realities are so harsh that the present situation may already be seen as close to being "catastrophic". Simply playing out ongoing crises and taking unfolding dynamics to their ultimate consequences may be sufficient to outline a very pessimistic outcome for the region and its neighboring areas. Today's Middle East could indeed be included among those infrequent historical cases in which a "linear" scenario may be one pointing to future disaster, without the need for a disruptive discontinuity

or any other “wild card” to alter the course of event. Time is a key variable in drawing scenarios. The time line of the following scenario spans the next five years, therefore covering the medium term, or near future.

The already complex exercise is made more complicated by the fact that the Middle Eastern order that is unravelling had been widely seen as vastly suboptimal, dysfunctional, and “illegitimate” even in the era in which it still ran unchallenged. The question of the terms of reference, therefore, is a very pertinent one. Shall future outcomes be compared with the *status quo ante* or be contrasted instead with unrealized hopes, for instance those that had been raised by the so-called Arab Spring in 2011? The choice was made to make not to make unfulfilled expectations the starting point.

The scenario presented here is “catastrophic” in that none of the major actors - internal as well as external - operating in today’s Eastern Mediterranean region achieves their goals, an unlikely yet far from impossible development. The overall result is, therefore, upsetting and unsettling for all, leaving the already acute needs of the Middle Eastern peoples unaddressed. It is also catastrophic in that it is further aggravated by dynamics and events taking place outside the region - and vice versa: some negative interdependencies emerge between security developments in the Middle East and neighboring regions, especially Europe, that reinforce tensions and disintegrative processes in both areas, almost in a circular manner.

However, the scenario is short from apocalyptic in that it does not go so far as to predict a global conflagration to result from raging conflict and spreading regional unrest. This is, nonetheless, a direction which authoritative observers have not excluded, sometimes drawing analogies between today’s Eastern Mediterranean and the Balkans of the early 20th century. Among reasons that are cited for the risk of an escalation and globalization of conflict are an ongoing regional arms race, the hardening of ideological - not just power- blocs, the instrumentalization of minorities, and a risk culture that has adjusted to zero-sum thinking. All these are factors that played a contributing role to the outbreak of the First World War. Most recently, it was the Pope of the Holy See who remarked that a “Third World War” is already being fought “piecemeal”, with the Middle East providing one of the main flashpoints. The Syrian civil war alone is estimated to have caused the death of over 250,000 people.

An apocalyptic, yet not completely unrealistic, outcome could also be the “clash of civilizations” scenario famously outlined by Samuel Huntington some twenty years ago. There are indeed worrying signs of a “geo-civilizational” struggle compounding and exacerbating the geopolitical competition that has been at play in the region for much longer. Hardening sectarian divides within Islam and rising xenophobic sentiments in Europe are part of this landscape. What geo-civilizational interpretations, with all their oversimplifications, nonetheless capture is that today’s conflicts are not just about states, but also and increasingly about societies. The dynamism of sub-state or non-state actors, therefore, mirrors the weakness of state and supra-state entities and projects. Yet, in today’s Middle East, this dynamism may have predominantly destructive outcomes, as sadly illustrated by the rapid dissipation of the positive forces for change that had been initially unleashed by the Arab Spring.

Scenarios often posit more than they predict. Assumptions supporting the analysis, therefore, are generally more revealing than the offered forecasts. A major assumption underpinning this scenario is that the absence of order is harmful to virtually all players, irrespective of the specific stakes and normative standpoints. In this sense, catastrophic is largely synonymous with chaotic. Even for actors that thrive on instability, such as some of the region’s terrorist organizations, chaos represents a challenge in the long run as power vacuums that cannot be filled undermine their strategies as much as the restoration of order.

The reason why most or all players might fail to achieve their goals, thus perpetuating the current predicament, could be that “points of no return” have been reached in their respective strategies. The crossing of red lines may make reconciliation, or even only *détente*, an impossible undertaking, at least in the short to medium term. Moreover, the lack of a prevailing force could prevent any settlement to be reached for an indefinite period of time. Furthermore, state actors may lose their ability to control societal forces, leaving both constructive and destructive bottom-up energies un-channeled. This was, after all, the mainstream reading of the outbreak of the Arab Spring, which by causing the overthrow of several regimes contributed to the collapse of the old order.

The Kurdish issue comes to the fore, yet in an inconclusive way

The disintegration of Syria and Iraq has opened the prospect for a Kurdish state entity to finally be established in the region. The brave resistance that the Kurdish Peshmerga have opposed to the advances of the Islamic State has gained Iraqi Kurds nearly universal recognition as a military force and a political actor to be reckoned with. Yet, the future of the “Kurdish question” is not as widely debated as one would expect. As Kurds change realities on the ground (Iraqi Kurds were able to extend the territory controlled by the Kurdish Regional Government by 30% in 2014 alone), one could foresee they will ultimately gain on the battleground what they have never achieved through political means

However, prospects for the rise of a Kurdish state are far from certain, nor are they in any event straightforward. A pessimistic but not unrealistic scenario is one in which Kurdish groups in the region are able to consolidate their gains in various areas, but this does not lead to the creation of a full-fledged Kurdish state covering much or even most of Kurdistan. Rather, multiple and only partly established quasi-state entities in northeastern Syria and northern Iraq could be created, endowed with limited sovereignty.

These incomplete fragile entities would nonetheless pose very delicate problems of international recognition to the US, the EU, and regional actors. Turkey would most certainly be opposed to their consolidation and would double down its repressive actions against the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) in Turkey as well Kurdish armed groups across the border with Syria such as the People’s Protection Units (YPG). The no-fly zone Ankara has repeatedly asked Washington to establish on the Turkish-Syrian border may never materialize as the US has for now refrained from enforcing it even after Turkey’s decision to provide the strategic Incirlik air base and join the anti-IS military campaign this past August. Even if it did come into place, existing plans confirm that by design it would keep Syrian Kurds divided, thus providing a buffer for Turkey but not a suitable platform for Kurds.

Kurds in Syria and Iraq would in the meantime continue to be besieged by the Islamic State which, in a pessimistic scenario, would extend its range of action to become an even more threatening force. Possible losses by the Peshmerga of key cities and strongholds could lead to revise downwards expectations that well-rooted local forces represent a strong antidote to the expansion of IS. Advances by IS could indeed happen simultaneously with the consolidation of Kurdish entities in some areas.

In a negative scenario, Turkey’s uncompromising stance vis a vis the future of Turkish and Syrian Kurds would create tensions with European partners which have been sympathetic towards Kurdish political claims and have recently provided military support to Kurdish fighting factions in Syria. This could have wider implications for Turkey’s already uncertain European integration process. It could also have negative transatlantic reverberations. Western weapons could in fact keep flowing to Kurdish armed groups in Syria but Western countries could remain divided as to whether recognize any independent Kurdish political entity. Turkey could create a major transatlantic crisis and threaten strategic de-alignment if the pro-recognition front included Washington. Signs that the US position is evolving are not lacking even if for the time being a line has been drawn between military assistance to the YPG and support to the Democratic Union Party (PYD).

In the Iraqi Kurdistan, infighting between historical Kurdish factions could very well continue even as overall prospects for Kurds become more promising in the region. In particular, an already tested Masoud Barzani leadership in Iraq could be further undermined by regional developments. The “love affair” with Ankara may be waning, for instance, having showed its limitations. Barzani’s ability to deliver Turkish conservative Kurds as a voting bloc for the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) has lost much value in light of Turkish President Erdogan’s rightward shift in the direction of Turkish nationalists at the expenses of Kurdish constituencies. Barzani’s tribe is also uncomfortable with the rise of the PYD in Syria. At the economic level, falling oil prices and a severe financial crisis are posing a serious challenge to the Kurdish Regional Government and its leadership.

Internal divisions among the Kurds, often underestimated by Western observers, could in fact grow deeper, somewhat paradoxically, even as the historic achievement of Kurdish (relative) sovereignty would be reached in more and more places. This would be fueled by disputes arising from the prize - and challenge - of self-rule. Developments on the ground could also lead to a reshaping of the PKK, or at least to a falling out with Abdullah Ocalan. The PKK historic leader has proved incapable to deliver a settlement with Ankara and, due to his prolonged detention, is also increasingly disconnected from the rapidly evolving realities in the region. The

emergence of junior leaders tested by battle could provoke a leadership crisis and even lead to the emergence of new groups.

Some of these could be particularly threatening for Turkish security in the country's urban centers. Turkey's self-absorption in a new era of domestic terrorism would probably reinforce the ruling Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) and push it further towards a security-first agenda. The Turkish military brass, once the arch-rivals of the AKP, could get engaged once again the political arena, this time on the same side of the ruling elites, contributing to a securitization of Turkish politics and the militarization of Turkish foreign policy. The already tarnished process of democratization could be completely suspended or reversed.

In fact, under the pressure of mounting internal and external threats, Turkey would be pushed to adopt emergency laws, acquiring more and more features of an illiberal authoritarian state. Episodes of Kurdish political violence could also occur in Europe, especially if Kurdish frustration grew about possible non-recognition of realities on the ground in Syria and Iraq. On the other hand, the inability of even Kurds to organize themselves efficiently in functioning, coherent, and stable political entities could reinforce skepticism about the prospect of any territorial organization to be able to take roots in today's Middle East. Kurdish unsettled semi-states would add to the variety of hybrid entities in the region displaying only some of the traditional attributes of sovereignty, among which the same Islamic State.

The “Islamic State” metastasizes but does not develop full-fledged state attributes

One of the novel - and most threatening - elements of the new Middle East is the unanticipated rise of the so-called Islamic State. While it is rightly maintained that IS is neither Islamic nor is it really a state, the new entity has unique attributes that other regional terrorist organizations may hardly compete with, among which large-scale territorial reach and formidable propaganda machine. The organization has gained the control of key cities in Syria and Iraq such as Raqqa, Ramadi and Mosul. IS has also the ambition to act as a state with its own distinctive institutions, from education to health, drawing on significant financial resources and a growing infrastructure. In addition to an expanding road network, air transport is also being envisaged (communication with the outer region continues to be a challenge for IS). Strategic state infrastructure in Syria and Iraq, such as oil fields and dams, have been seized on a large scale by IS militants. In a not distant future, IS could pursue the development of state attributes in the military sector, for instance by acquiring long-range missile capabilities and even weapons of mass destruction.

Perhaps counterintuitively, a pessimistic scenario would not necessarily require the Islamic State to fully develop into a sovereign territorial Caliphate. The most threatening outcome, consistent with a chaos-like scenario, is one in which this entity would continue to enlarge but mainly by metastasizing and spawning new territorial entities, not just affiliated groups, beyond the original core of Syria and Iraq. This has already happened in Derna, Libya, in 2014, but may soon be replicated in Afghanistan and South Asia, in the Sinai and North Africa, as well as in places further afield such as Nigeria in Sub-Saharan Africa and Chechnya and Dagestan in the northern Caucasus. While IS in the Levant would remain a militarily formidable hybrid state (IS has lost a significant share of its territory and fighters over the past year but this has hardly weakened its military power), these other entities could over time develop into sorts of vassal states, not just loosely connected cells as was the case for Al-Qaeda and its affiliates.

IS and its many frontiers beyond the Levant, therefore, would represent a more versatile, and definitely more complex, threat for established regional actors than a more classical type of territorial state. IS' cancer-like expansion would continue to thrive on the disintegration of the regional order and would exploit any vacuum created by collapsing states and poor governance in the Middle East. Its existence would confirm beyond doubt that the region is doomed to a future of obscurantism and violence and that negative security spillovers will continue to affect neighboring regions.

Indeed, while spawning new entities, IS could also leverage the action of small cells and even “lone wolves”. These could proliferate in Europe and other regions, fueled by the circular movement of so-called foreign terrorist fighters. These “commuting terrorists” could attack systematically European and American cities but also increasingly target countries such as Russia, or even China. Radicalization processes and other regions could

intensify in the case of prolonged adverse socio-economic conditions, such as those experienced by Europe after the global financial crisis.

Terrorist organizations could also tap into the frustration and desolation of the many refugees and migrants who may never find a clear path to integration, remaining in Europe but in a limbo. The number of people in this situation could be particularly high if flows into Europe continued to grow, more and more resembling an exodus of historic proportions. Even the capacity of Germany, Europe's largest economy, seems to be tested as the expected number of asylum-seekers is continuously revised upward (the current estimate for 2015 alone is above 1 million).

Possible connections between IS and new comers would give populist and xenophobic movements in Europe additional ammunition to wage their inflammatory campaigns against the migration policies and integration-oriented approaches of moderate, mainstream parties. This in turn could lead to a drift of vast sections of the European public towards nationalism. A further weakening of the European integration project could ensue as more and more local governments and eventually some national governments would be taken over by extreme and anti-EU political forces, mainly on the far right. The 2017 French presidential election offers one such prospect.

The foreign policies of these new forces could be at the same time fiercely confrontational towards the "the Muslim world" and also very reluctant to support prolonged foreign engagements, especially expensive ones such as those involving nation-building. This aversion to international commitments could lead to an even less strategic European engagement in the Middle East. This haphazard and very guarded involvement would probably contribute to further stalling issues, from the Kurdish question to the Middle East Peace Process, which cannot find a full settlement without the involvement of extra-regional actors.

Against this backdrop, and even if directly threatened, Turkey could imprudently maintain its much-criticized hesitant approach towards IS, especially if the Bashar al-Assad regime in Damascus was not to capitulate. Lack of full resolve in dealing militarily with IS would cause Ankara's further international isolation which, combined with the uncompromising stance towards Kurdish aspirations, would weaken even further Turkey's already doubtful prospects for joining the EU. Turkey-US relations could also continue to suffer from this lack of alignment.

The rise of IS and the spread of terrorism could lead American voters to choose a new US president who would vow to defend the homeland first rather than continuing to support costly and ineffective Middle Eastern interventions tying America's future to strategies negotiated with its allies. This new president could have pronounced populist traits and combine militaristic attitudes with isolationistic instincts. This could lead to respond to the modest approach of the Obama administration with even further withdrawal from the Middle East, or at least a very selective engagement and almost exclusively of a unilateral nature. Future interventions could be aimed at retaliating against possible attacks rather than at building the foundations of a new regional order. This could reinforce dynamics leading to disaggregation and, ultimately, chaos in the region.

The refugee crisis becomes (yet another) European crisis

Among spillovers of the Syrian civil war is the massive flow of refugees fleeing to neighboring countries, especially Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan, as well as more recently the European Union. Over four million Syrians are reported to have left the country since 2011. "Mixed flows" directed to Europe include migrants from other places as well such as Afghanistan, Iraq, and countries of the Horn of Africa. A significant share is composed of so-called "forced migrants" escaping from the region's many failing states.

The fact that at the center of flows are people who are ready to put their lives at risk in a desperate attempt to leave behind war and hardship has led to look at the issue as primarily if not exclusively a humanitarian crisis. But what if the refugee crisis also had geopolitical implications? In a pessimistic scenario, chaos in the Middle East would push even larger numbers of refugees and migrants towards Europe, putting under strain the already tested reception systems of the EU countries and, more crucially, changing European politics for the long term. A European crisis, no less serious than the "Eurocrisis", could ensue.

Alarming gaps in EU solidarity have already been exposed as EU member states have responded with varying degrees of promptness, aptness, and humanity to the arrival of a rapidly growing volumes of irregular migrants from the entire “arc of instability” stretching from the Middle East to Sub-Saharan Africa. The difficult and acrimonious debate about “quotas” has revealed beyond any doubt that the prevailing attitude is to look at flows as a “burden” and that “burden-sharing” at the European level is far from an uncontroversial notion.

While clearly not saturating European capacity, systemic, large-scale flows could realistically put asylum mechanisms and integration policies under formidable pressure, leading to overload and major disruptions, not only at the border but also in Europe’s urban centers. This could exacerbate the perception of an unescapable migration-security nexus. In fact, public opinions and affected communities across Europe could perceive the unorderly flows as nothing less than an invasion, albeit a “soft” one carried out by people not by tanks.

Local politicians and, over the course of time, national leaders too, would be forced to campaign on the side of restrictive and defensive policies calling for the full re-establishment of the EU internal borders. This would lead to cracks in the free movement of people within the EU, up until a *de facto* or *de jure* dismantlement of the Schengen regime - one of European integration’s hallmarks. Recriminations among European countries on how to cope with the challenge could fuel increasingly unmanageable political tensions in Brussels, ultimately creating a stalemate in the EU-decision making system and overshadowing other important priorities in the EU agenda.

Germany’s open-door policy could be reversed under the pressure of events, leading to a more restrictive or contradictory stance. Swings in Germany’s approaches to the emergency could be perceived as signs of hesitancy or incompetence, thus undermining German leadership in Europe, or in any case depriving it of any moral claim. The rise of xenophobia and nationalism could support the emergence of inward looking when not parochial political leaders increasingly focused on domestic issues and reluctant or incapable to shape a positive international agenda.

The mainstreaming of anti-EU politics could easily undermine projects that the EU has tiresomely worked on since the outbreak of the Eurocrisis, such as plans for a banking union, blueprints for fiscal coordination, as well as policies to foster growth and employment. Indeed, by turning inwards under the effects of external demographic pressures, EU countries could end up putting their own economies and societies at risk, undermining precisely those standards of wealth and security which are so jealously guarded.

Public opinions could turn against any expansion of the EU budget out of fear that EU funds would be directed to integration policies. The EU as such could end up being despised as a humanitarian agency using EU tax payers’ money for costly policies allegedly only attracting more foreigners. In already widely Eurosceptic countries such as the UK, anti-immigrants sentiments could intensify. Anti-EU parties such as UKIP could unseat mainstream ones. “Brexit” could then become a distinct possibility.

In countries already massively affected by the humanitarian crisis - Turkey and Jordan host over three million Syrians combined - refugees without a path to integration and deprived of a European perspective could start creating spontaneous and even loosely organized movements. Protests and riots could become more frequent, fueling antagonistic dynamics with the local populations and communities. In a country already under great pressure such as Jordan, this could lead to severe instability. In turn, this would open the way for groups such as IS to infiltrate society and seize control of some areas, initially at the border but later also in the outskirts of urban centers. In Turkey, Syrian refugees could become both more frustrated and politicized. Episodes of violence could break out, adding to the volatility created by the conflict with Kurdish militant groups.

As the refugee crisis would become chronic, broken Middle Eastern generations would add to the decomposition of the region. Children represent over fifty percent of the total Syrian refugee population. Hundreds of thousands of school-aged pupils and teenagers are not enrolled in formal education in the hosting countries. A region wasting its youth jeopardizes its future.

The future of Syria and Iraq mirrors that of the Middle East and vice versa

The disintegration of Syria and Iraq is a key feature of today’s Middle East. The progressive fragmentation of the entire Levant along multiple ethnic and sectarian lines would be a defining element of a

pessimistic/catastrophic outcome. On the one hand, realities on the ground, from the spread of IS to the rekindling of sectarianism and factionalism, transcend the boundaries between Syria and Iraq as groups fight for influence or survival, largely irrespective of recognized international borders. Some have advanced the notion of “Syriaq” to capture the interdependences between the two contexts. On the other hand, it is hard to point to the features of any new order worth the name, including one more adherent to the ethnic realities and sectarian allegiances of the region. The latter compose a complex mosaic of overlapping communities whose interconnected tiles can hardly be shifted around lest causing even greater turmoil.

A pessimistic scenario would be precisely one in which not only violent groups with a revisionist agenda such as IS continue to make strides, but also in which none of the main parties to the bloody conflicts in Syria and Iraq manage to muster enough power to exert stable control over a large enough territory to be called a state. Sunni communities, the majority in several countries, have been incapable to join forces and have instead increasingly rely on the support coming from “Sunni powers” from outside the Levant. They also face a growing direct threat by IS from within.

Iran’s influence has ostensibly been expanding in both Syria and Iraq, purportedly strengthening the so-called “Shia crescent” in the region. Yet, Iran’s ability to translate its alleged appeal into actual territorial control beyond its borders is too often overestimated by Western observers. No matter how strong Iran’s proxies, Sunni constituencies remain a major source of resistance to any project of expansion and will continue to complicate strategies aimed at simplifying the regional mosaic. Shiite communities remain isolated minorities in the majority of contexts. The appeal of Shiites is also undermined by the prolongation of the agony of the brutal Alawite Assad regime in Syria, which is exposing the perverse, atrocious degenerations of ruling minorities resorting to indiscriminate violence to remain in power. Shiite elites are also unnaturally linked to IS. On the one hand, IS represents an existential to both Iran and its proxies, starting with the Assad regime. On the other hand, IS’ eradication from the region would remove a challenge to militant Sunni groups and refocus international attention on regime change in Syria. The relationship between the Damascus and IS, which purportedly also has significant and little investigated commercial component, could grow even more ambiguous in a pessimistic scenario.

Indeed, a pessimistic/catastrophic scenario would be one in which instead of uniting against the Islamic State - the one force ultimately threatening all - the various internal and external parties to the Syriaq nexus would continue their bloody contest as relentlessly as inconclusively. This could spread the conflict between Syria and Iraq to affect other neighboring countries, starting with Lebanon. Lebanon has been able so far to keep its internal delicate balances in place despite the turmoil surrounding it. Obvious failures of governance, such as most recently with the garbage crisis, could lead to an unravelling of its already weakened political structures, and to a demise of conciliatory politics and a return of civil strife.

Regional actors could also get increasingly enmeshed, and exposed to, regional conflict. Left largely alone in facing the revival of the Kurdish question, Turkey would feel compelled to fight on. Ankara could also calculate that a post-nuclear deal rehabilitated Iran would unavoidably erode Turkey’s clout in unacceptable ways, undercutting not only its regional ambitions but also Turkey’s own national security. For its part, Saudi Arabia could fear that an Iran fully encroached upon both Syria and Iraq would be able to turn to the Gulf, instigating unrest among Shiites communities there and further exacerbating the ongoing war in Yemen. Teheran, for its part, could feel that the lifting of sanctions following the nuclear deal signed last July makes it more capable to wage a contest for hegemony of indefinite duration, prompting it to follow an uncompromising regional agenda.

In this context of unabated competition and polarization, Russia could raise its profile in Syria, including by playing a primary political and military role in the conflict, along the lines of what has been happening in most recent weeks. However, this would not suddenly give the Kremlin the role of new regional king maker, if ever. Even if able to fill the vacuum created by a modest and unsuccessful US engagement, Russia would find it very hard to aggregate new coalitions. Moscow can hardly rally Gulf monarchies behind a Russian-led regional agenda. Russia is perceived as fully aligned with the Assad regime and too close to Teheran to broker solutions appealing also to others (for instance by persuading Iran to back off in Yemen). Jordan’s recent coordination with Russia is most of motivated by concerns about the trans-border implications of Russia’s air campaign in southern Syria. Ryad’s diplomatic warming up to Moscow seems for now mainly intended to send a message to Washington, which remains nonetheless the Gulf’s privileged interlocutor despite the anxieties Gulf monarchs harbor about recent developments in US-Iranian relations.

Russia could also be faced with its own limitations. Beyond the limited goal of helping the Assad regime maintain its grip on the capital Damascus, the Latakia and Tartus provinces, and other sections of Western Syria (some 20-30% of Syrian territory but still a vast share of Syria's remaining population and assets), Moscow could fear that a full-blown military engagement in the Syrian civil war would strain its resources in the medium term. Even a too frontal assault on IS would pose dilemmas. It could invite terrorist attacks against Russian targets abroad as well as at home - a development Russian political elites may feel they cannot afford at a time of distress for Russian society due to sanctions, a shrinking economy, and international isolation. Without the need for the Syrian civil war to become a new Afghanistan, the conflict could entrap Moscow in the region's perverse logics rather than raising it to the role of new regional leader.

Finally, the requirements of the Ukraine crisis will continue to set the limits of Russia's intervention elsewhere. The situation in Ukraine could significantly deteriorate in the years, including due to endogenous reasons such as the weakening of the Ukrainian economy and growing political infighting. The crisis could worsen considerably if, for factors explained in previous sections, the EU would turn inward-looking and decided to downscale its economic assistance. A populist US president with isolationist instincts could also opt for a lower profile in the standoff with Russia. This could further undermine and divide Ukrainian elites as they would deal with the risk of state failure and further loss of territory. Pro-Russian groups in Eastern Ukraine could be emboldened as a result of heightening tensions in Kiev and Moscow could look for new, forceful gestures. These would be seen as also deflecting attention from possible episodes of terrorism on Russian soil brought about by IS or its affiliates.

The recrudescence of the Ukraine crisis could see the EU increasingly divided. Much of Western and Southern Europe could be tempted to adopt a more passive approach, resisting the imposition of new sanctions. For their part, Eastern European countries, from the Baltics to Poland, could be pushed to adopt an even more confrontational posture, including by providing significant assistance and even direct military support. This escalation could create a context in which incidents at the expenses of Russian minorities in Eastern Europe would become frequent. Europe's growing division on Russia policy, and its focus on European security, would draw attention and energies away from the Middle East, undercutting prospects for a proactive diplomatic engagement.

The (in)security interdependence between Europe and the Levant could be compounded and aggravated by negative global externalities, such as growing travails of the Chinese economy. A rapidly weakening Chinese economy, due either to cyclical factors or political mismanagement, would send shockwaves across the world trade and financial system. Among consequences would be a reduction of Chinese imports, including fossil fuels from the Middle East. Coming on the heels of a significant drop in oil prices, this development would significantly depress industries of energy-exporting countries in the MENA region.

Free-falling oil prices would prevent virtually all major producers to balance their domestic budgets. This would be true from the Gulf to North Africa, adding to the volatility of the political situation. It is calculated that Iran needs 97 USD a barrel to balance the budget. Saudi Arabia needs 90 USD, and Algeria over 110 USD. For its part, Russia needs 105 USD. In the short term, these dynamics could prompt local elites to stir up nationalist and militaristic impulses in a desperate attempt to placate domestic unrest. Russia could conclude that only military successes can offset the political consequences of protracted economic distress. Even Gulf States could resort to military enterprises as a way to distract attention from growing domestic agitation. In fact, together with fragmentation and state failure, the risk of traditional inter-state conflict could compound a pessimistic/catastrophic scenario. Unable to assert themselves in the proxy wars of Syria and Iraq and feeling increasingly exposed to instability, Iran and Saudi Arabia could drift towards direct military engagement.

The Middle East Peace Process and the Iranian nuclear program issue linger on

A pessimistic scenario would see long-standing regional issues such as the Middle East Peace Process and the Iranian nuclear program remain unsolved rather than being made less relevant by the new dynamics of conflict. The Middle East Peace Process remains stuck. The recent UN address of the President of the Palestinian National Authority Mahmoud Abbas left no doubt that the parties are nowhere close to a compromise. Abbas

went so far as to declare that the 1993 Oslo accords are dead and that the Palestinians are no longer bound by them. As momentous this statement may sound, it ratified a situation all parties were already fully aware of.

In addition to the disagreement between Palestinian representatives and Israel, the former have - for many years now - been cut across by major internal divisions. With Hamas taking the harder line, Fatah has been pushed towards more confrontational positions in an effort to maintain its clout and defend its historical role as the dominant force in Palestinian politics. For its part, Hamas has continued its struggle despite the difficult situation in Gaza and new threats such as the emergence of groups sympathetic to the Islamic State in addition to traditional Salafi elements. Hamas' contested leadership could make it feel more vulnerable. In a pessimistic scenario, this vulnerability would not lead to a more compromising attitude but to a more resolute one. Even a lifting of the Gaza blockade, which was reportedly the object of recent talks spearheaded by the former envoy of the Middle East Quartet, would not necessarily create a momentum for peace. The outcome could be a temporary truce which the parties could use to prepare for further confrontation.

Considering the larger picture, it is not necessarily true that recent regional developments such as the Arab Spring of 2011 and the widespread turmoil that has ensued have made the Palestinian question somewhat less relevant. According to available surveys, this long-standing conflict continues to rank very high among issues of both symbolic and substantive significance, and remains a primary source of frustration and anger - indeed one of the declared motives for organized violence. Though focused on other short-term objectives, IS itself continues to look at this issue as a defining one.

On the other hand, there is no doubt that dramatic security developments in other areas of the Middle East have diverted resources and some of the political attention away, weakening or at least reducing the engagement of some of the key extra-regional players. According to a pessimistic/chaotic scenario, the Middle East Peace Process issue would therefore remain open and possibly become even less manageable as EU and US actors would circumscribe their regional engagement. Moreover, other concerns, from mounting security threats to economic challenges, would increasingly dominate the agendas of neighboring Arab countries which have a role to play in any future settlement, such as Egypt and Jordan.

The pessimistic scenario would not necessarily require a new military confrontation to break out between Israel and Palestine. For the Middle East Peace Process to remain unfulfilled, it is sufficient for local actors to continue their trajectories of non-dialogue and division while centrifugal dynamics intensify in the region. Violence could still erupt, either in the uncoordinated way of recent weeks or in a more traditional and structured fashion following a new Intifada. Especially if violence erupted in a less organized and more spontaneous way, the quest for security would become an increasingly elusive and private matter. This "post-Intifada" model of uncoordinated yet disruptive violence could prove to be much harder to deter and tackle, exposing the limits of Israel's national security policies and ultimately undermining trust in the country's ruling elite.

Unlike for the Middle East Peace Process, the Iranian nuclear issue has seen significant progress in recent months. The Iranian nuclear deal signed in July is considered by many an achievement of historic significance and possibly a catalyst for regional cooperation after decades of geopolitical competition between Iran and its rivals. For others, the deal is a strategic blunder for the US and all countries which oppose the prospect of a nuclear-armed Iran. According to this view, the agreement allows for the economic and political rehabilitation of Iran while its ability to develop a nuclear weapon in due course is not fully inhibited.

A pessimistic scenario would be one which, regardless of the merits and shortcomings of the deal, saw the agreement unravel, causing the controversy to go back to the unpredictable and dangerous path of before the negotiations. This could happen either because Iran would violate the terms of the deal or because Israel or others would decide to intervene to stop through action what they believe it was not achieved by diplomatic means. Most importantly, the deal could become dead letter simply because of undiminished mistrust. Lack of trust is one of the almost unavoidable outcomes of a more competitive and polarized regional environment.

It can be added that even if the deal was upheld, its transformative impact would be only one of many possible scenarios and not necessarily the most likely one. Iran has indeed showed a new willingness to be included in formats for regional dialogue, most recently in the talks held in Vienna about the future of Syria. However, even supporters of the nuclear deal recognize that Iran will strengthen its position as a result of the lifting of international sanctions. This is an undeniable development which will embolden Teheran. By contrast, the

catalyst effect of the deal on regional cooperation of the deal rests on assumptions and hypotheses which can only be subjectively interpreted at this early stage.

Recommendations

If, as this paper argues, the most threatening scenario for the Eastern Mediterranean is one characterized by further polarization and chaos, compounded by the relative disengagement of Europeans and transatlantic actors, then key recommendations include:

- Focusing international efforts and resources on maintaining at least a modicum of regional order. This may involve guaranteeing the existing international borders unless they are consensually changed and supporting regime change only when this can be attained through a political process.
- Strengthening and enlarging the international coalition against the Islamic State towards the goal of its eradication from the region.
- Addressing basic humanitarian needs, including by providing a path to safety to the skyrocketing number of international refugees and internally displaced persons fleeing violence and lack of security in Syria, Iraq, and Libya. Mechanisms for rapid humanitarian response in case of new crises should be created tailored to the specific challenges posed by civil war as well as failing states. This could involve new tasks and mandates for some of the existing regional security organizations.
- Engaging Turkey in a way that its strategic link with Europe and the West is not broken. Turkey is already being destabilized by the internalization of Middle Eastern instability. In a not distant future, it could become a gateway of Middle Eastern instability to Europe. It is in the interest of virtually all regional stakeholders, both friends and rivals, to avoid a further “Middleasternization” of Turkey.
- Continuing to leverage international coalitions, processes, and dialogue formats that multilateralize regional engagement and address burden-sharing needs, thus contributing to shift strategies from a zero-sum logic to cooperative approaches to security. In this context, the dialogue with Iran remains critical and should be supported through all available means, even more so as trust is yet to be built between Teheran and its regional and extra-regional counterparts and the success of the nuclear deal remains to be verified.
- Countering populist and isolationist tendencies at the domestic level to avoid that the Eastern Mediterranean crisis weakens Europe from within. Questions should be raised about the ability of xenophobic and nationalist parties to effectively deliver the stability and safety they promise. A counter narrative shall be deployed presenting these forces as factors of insecurity, making European societies less safe and intensified regional conflict more likely.

Security developments in the Eastern Mediterranean in 2020: The medium scenario

Florence Gaub

The Eastern Mediterranean is currently at the epicentre of regional upheaval; the last five years have unfolded in the most unpredictable manner, which raises concerns about the five years to come. One way of addressing these concerns is thinking about the future in a constructive manner. Not to predict the future, but to stimulate anticipation, discovery of potential links and the development of mid-term rather than short-term policies.

Scenarios are, in futurology, not only description of possible future situations but also the pathways leading there; they are instrumental as they flesh out not only a possible future, but reduce speculation because they come with an explanation on how it came about. By default, scenarios focus on deliberately chosen key factors while excluding others.

The starting point

The Eastern Mediterranean is currently experiencing a collusion of several conflicts reinforcing each other's severity. The implosion of Syria and Iraq are the result of two separate developments which are now converging; in their convergence, they are equally affecting directly Jordan as well as an already fragile Lebanon, and indirectly Turkey and Egypt in their economic fallout. Separatist tendencies in Kurdish territories in this area are being reinforced to the same degree as state control is waning; in the meantime, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict continues in an ever-more dangerous deadlock, and both Egypt and Libya still (mis)manage the aftermath from the 2011 regime-change. Security in the region is more intertwined than it ever was; transnational terrorist networks such as the Islamic State constitute a threat to all states of the region, whereas attempts to cooperate now experience a shaky revival. In addition, all states continue to manage the same problems which led to the uprisings of 2011: large-scale youth unemployment, food import dependency, low government effectiveness and stretched security sectors.

Megatrends

These are trends which will affect the next five years but are not reversible by human action. They define the possibility space in which any scenario has to be situated.

These include **population growth**: by 2020. The region will have moved from 357 million to 383 million. Even though a slowdown of demographic growth is predicted, the regional total fertility rate average (or the average number of children per woman) is expected to remain higher than the world average for the period 2015-2020. Even if fertility rates were to fall rapidly, population growth will persist. Owing to the prevalence of high fertility in the recent past, a large percentage of the population in most of the countries is young (usually defined by the age cohort 15 - 30).

This coincides with a second trend, **urbanisation**. In 2015, over 56% of citizens reside in cities, and this proportion is expected to reach 61.4% in 2020. This migration influx is important because most cities in the region lack the infrastructure and resources to accommodate the incoming rural populations, and therefore harbours some friction potential.

The impact of **climate change** will not be felt excessively in 2020, but temperatures will rise as much as severe weather disruptions (such as storms) will increase. Food price volatility will continue to be a problem for the region, as **food import dependency** is projected to increase as much as the populations.

Game Changers

In future studies, game changers are those instances which not only will have a disproportionate influence on the future, but are also those where uncertainty prevails on which direction will be taken. This has to do with the fact that there are several options, several actors influencing this instance and several linkages to other shifting areas. Narrowing down these instances to relative certainty is therefore simply not possible. Game changers are formulated as questions because there is uncertainty over their evolution.

In the Eastern Mediterranean, several such game changers exist. The fate of the Syrian civil war is one of them: **Will the Syrian civil war be over by 2020, and if yes under what circumstances?** Another is the question of the Islamic State and its role not only in Syria but also in Iraq: **To what extent will ISIS control territories and populations in the region?** And linked to these two questions is the issue of Kurdish independence: **Will the Kurdish regions of Syria and Iraq continue on their path towards independence until 2020 and if yes, with which consequences?** The results of these three game changers will undoubtedly also affect Lebanon and Jordan, which will be included in the analysis. Somewhat further South, the issue of peace between Israel and the Palestinians will continue to be present in 2020, but in what shape? **Where will the Israeli-Palestinian conflict be at this point, and with which fallout?** Lastly, the security situation in Egypt, especially the Sinai, will be influencing the Eastern Mediterranean as much as the one in Libya: **Where will security in Egypt and Libya be and with what consequences for neighbouring states?**

The Eastern Mediterranean Future: the medium scenario

In answer to the previous questions, this scenario posits a middle path between the best possible and the worst case scenario. It takes into account the mega trends outlined above, and looks at what is feasible within five years. It is based on the Assumption that decision-makers manage to address the most pressing issues without however turning them around.

In 2020, the **Syrian civil war** is in its 10th year and no comprehensive peace agreement is in sight. Rebels and regime alike have managed to garner large-scale international support from their respective allies; in a bold standoff, the United States and Russia have decided to both limit their ground presence to advisers. However, the security situation has stabilised thanks to a territorial stalemate. The main cities and the strip along the Mediterranean shore belong to the regime, whereas remaining areas are held by the main militias and their smaller allies. Maher al-Assad, who became President after his brother's death in 2020, has signalled readiness to accept an international peace enforcement force.

War fatigue, substantial destruction and equal support from outsiders for all parties involved have however led to the realisation that neither side will win militarily. 600,000 Syrians have died and 4.6 million have fled the country over the last decade.² More than 70% of its population now live below the poverty line, trade has dropped by 40% compared to before the conflict, while whole sectors such as industry, health care, tourism and agriculture have been severely damaged if not entirely destroyed. Projections foresee a three-decade period for Syria to recover in terms of infrastructure, trade, and human development rates more generally. The war will have cost the country several billion euro in direct costs, and one billion in terms of lost production opportunity.

The Islamic State has been severely damaged by a five-year campaign pushing it mostly out of Syria and reducing its scope in Iraq considerably. However, it still controls areas in North and North-Western Iraq amounting to 20% of its 2014 territory.³ It has also lost 30,000 of its fighters - either due to imprisonment, defection or death. But its core of 10,000 is the most battle-trained and most motivated and not only maintains control of its areas but has extended its hit-and-run activities across Iraq. Baghdad has failed to repeal the deBaathification laws entirely, and sectarianism is still running as high as youth unemployment. Potential for radicalisation is therefore still there, and as Iraq's young keep growing, so is the pool for candidates.

² These numbers are extrapolated from the Angola civil war (1975 – 2002) and its proportional impact on the country's population.

³ This number is a generous extrapolation of the military campaign results of 2014 - 2015

Suicide-bombings as well as drive-by shootings continue to plague the country. In addition, the organisation continues to inspire networks elsewhere. Its outlets have expanded in Egypt and Libya, and new ones have emerged in Tunisia, Morocco, Lebanon, Jordan and the Palestinian territories. As most of its **foreign fighters** have returned home, all sending countries, including Europe, are on high alert. In Germany, a network of 30 foreign fighters managed to seize control of Berlin city hall for four hours in 2019 before being taken out by Special Forces⁴. In Tunisia, tourism has died down as much as in Egypt, were a series of incidents against tourists have shrunk the industry by one third.⁵

Crucially, the stalemate in Syria will mean that refugees in Lebanon, Jordan and elsewhere do not return. This continues to put a heavy toll on these economies. In particularly **Lebanon** this has led to xenophobic violence as well as political pressure to return the refugees by force to territories considered safe. Meanwhile, extremism in country is on the rise generally as resources are scarce, revenues low and population pressure on infrastructure high. The Future Movement and Hezbollah continue to be at loggerheads over the Syrian civil war as well as Hezbollah's status as an armed resistance movement. Armed clashes between their respective supporters regularly take place across the country. In a state of increasing anxiety over Lebanon's future, almost 700,000 citizens have left the country - pushed further by increasing unemployment especially amongst the youth.

Further South, **Israel and the Palestinian territories** are stuck in a protracted low-level conflict. Following the unilateral repeal from the Oslo accords by the Palestinian Authority, the territories are now ruled by decree. Israel has imposed a blockade akin to the one on Gaza on the West bank, severely strangling the bank's economy and living standards. What Israel is trying to achieve is not clear, as it is not proposing any political alternative to the negotiations which broke down in 2014. It continued to strike Hamas positions in Gaza in 2016 and 2018, both campaigns leading to further deterioration of living conditions. Its harsh security measures prevent the eruption of a third intifada, but this promotes further radicalisation. Rumours of an Islamic State outlet in both parts of the Palestinian territories are increasing; the assassination of a former Fatah minister was claimed by an organisation claiming to be the 'Wilayat Falestin' (Province of Palestine).

Meanwhile, aborted statehood is about to be resumed in **Iraqi and Syrian Kurdistan**, albeit with different objectives. Erbil has managed to negotiate a national referendum on its separation from Iraq to be held in 2025; it has successfully come to an agreement on the status of Kirkuk and several oil fields, which will be managed jointly by Baghdad and Erbil even after a potential Kurdish independence. Even though tensions remain, these prospects have created certainty and some degree of stability. Meanwhile, the Syrian territories under Kurdish control have suffered severe damage from Turkish aerial bombings during the campaign of 2016 - 2018 against the Islamic State. It is widely assumed that Turkey used the opportunity to reduce prospects of a PYD-governed area; concerned that this would embolden its sister organisation PKK in Turkey, Ankara has undermined any Syrian-Kurdish ambitions for autonomy in Syria. It has however been more lenient towards Erbil, for two reasons: reassurance of neutrality when it comes to the Kurdish question in both Syria and Turkey, as well as large-scale contracts in the export of oil through Turkey.

Iran has been less enthused about prospects of Kurdish independence, but ultimately accepted stability in a rump-Iraq with an overwhelming Shia majority over territorial integrity. In addition, the referendum is still five years away - and Tehran estimates that a lot can happen in those years.

In 2020, the tenth anniversary of Mohammed Bouazizi's self-immolation, coincided with a spike in **food prices** following a surge in the oil price (the result of continued Libyan and Syrian production disruptions): overnight, bread and cooking oil prices tripled in Egypt and Algeria. Several hundred thousand demonstrators marched through the streets of Cairo, only to be brutally repressed by internal security forces. In an act of solidarity, several hundred thousand demonstrators carried placards in Tunis bearing the slogan 'We managed, so can you', alluding to the fact that Tunisia is the only Arab state to have successfully managed a transition to democracy.

Egypt in particular continues to face important security as well as economic issues; in spite of vocal reform plans ranging from a new capital to new economic ventures, President Sisi's first term came to an end in 2018 amidst criticism of slow economic progress, continued high youth unemployment as well as terrorist attacks in

⁴ This number is extrapolated from Thomas Hedgehammer's study which states the potential of radicalized returnees to be at 1 in 9. Thomas Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalisation of Jihad", *International Security*, Vol.35, No.3, Winter 2010 / 2011

⁵ This number is based on developments in Egyptian tourism following the terrorist wave of the early 2000.

the not only the Sinai but also in mainland Egypt. A corruption scandal surrounding the construction of the New Cairo severely injured the President's public image as a fighter against the phenomenon. Nevertheless, he was re-elected in 2018 with 78% of the votes. Meanwhile, Egypt's constructive cooperation with Israel in the Sinai has come under pressure due to competing interests over **gas fields in the Mediterranean**. In spite of an initial agreement, Egypt sees Israel using it to its own advantage, inciting already high anti-Israeli political sentiment in Egypt.

In comparison, **Libya** is recovering slowly from the protracted violence which followed the toppling of Muammar Gaddafi. Now under the authority of a United Nations High Representative, it still faces considerable pockets of unrest and terrorism throughout the country. Political semi-stability is largely the outcome of strenuous international mediation efforts which have put the democratic process back on track, but much remains to be done.

Risk assessment

Several important risks are the outcome of this scenario. These are the exacerbation of political tensions in Lebanon with a potential for renewed civil war, pockets of lawlessness in the rebel-controlled areas in Syria, continued destabilisation of Iraq as well as Egypt due to terrorism, and renewed Kurdish political violence against Turkey. All of these will spill over into Europe in the shape of a) refugees b) home-grown terrorist attacks c) potential disruption of trade d) unstable oil prices as Syria's and Libya's oil put remains shaky and will not be equalised much longer by Saudi Arabia.

Simply put, all sources of violence existing today have been contained rather than resolved, and continue to simmer. Consequently, they syphon off energy as well as resources from other urgent political reform projects. As states continue to be challenged in their capacities and their effectiveness, they do not manage security, economy or other pressing issues properly. Low-level violence in the shape of terrorism or isolated unrest is likely in this scenario. Already displaced populations will remain broadly where they are today and begin to settle down as prospects for return a dim; organized networks will expand as state capacity erodes, and will seize the opportunity for smuggling.

Recommendations to prevent this scenario

There are ways to prevent this scenario from unfolding.

- Push for wide-ranging reforms in Iraq including an abolishment of the entire debaathification law, employment programmes aiming at young Sunni men, a campaign of support to boost the Iraqi military's morale and educational reforms
- Assist Lebanon with its Syrian refugee population through resettlement, financial support and continued assistance to the Lebanese military to prevent and detect terrorist attacks as well as cross-border incursions
- Continue financial assistance to the Palestinian territories; continue mediation between Israel and the Palestinians and offer incentives in return for peace (e.g. access to Schengen area), European troops to monitor borders of independent state of Palestine
- Call for regional conference on the extraction of Eastern Mediterranean gas to set up a clearinghouse mechanism
- Consider a peacekeeping or peaceenforcement mission in Syria, forcefully bringing the conflict to an end to allow for refugee return and reconstruction
- Maintain donor pressure on Egypt to undertake political reforms as well as true economic innovation; assist in counter-insurgency programmes designed to be conciliatory towards Sinai population
- Continue to strengthen the league of Arab states' mediation and conflict management capacities
- Assist the United Nations in their Libyan disarmament and reintegration programme; prepare the reconstruction of the Libyan military from scratch

- At the European level, unify refugee policies and adopt a joint approach (including quotas and resettlement options)
- Study the economic potential to integrate at least portions of these refugee flows
- Increase European counter-terrorism cooperation (e.g. information exchange, development of joint strategy)

Security developments in the Eastern Mediterranean in 2020: A Desired Scenario

Pol Morillas & Eduard Soler i Lecha

Introduction

The focus of this study is security and, in that sense, understands that a desirable (and at the same time plausible) scenario is one in which the **intensity of violence has decreased significantly** and in which there is a **sound perspective for resolving long-lasting or relatively new regional conflicts**. It is also a scenario in which the key actors from the region **rely on cooperation and dialogue to resolve their differences**. It is, finally, a scenario in which external actors and particularly Europeans and NATO members are no longer approaching this region as the source of direct threats but rather as **an area where innovative and forward-looking arrangements** have been (or can be) found to cope with common threats.

This input paper is divided into four sub-sections dealing with specific topics or countries (Conflict in Syria; Situation in Iraq, including the Kurdish issue; The Israeli-Palestinian conflict; and Population movements, including refugees). For each of these subsections, the input paper outlines (1) potential drivers of change, understood as those key forces that are strong enough to move the region future into one specific direction as well critical junctures, understood as key moments in which decisions will be made or key players will confront each other and thus shape the region's future; (2) desirable (and plausible) outcomes; and (3) policy-recommendations for the EU, NATO and western countries to achieve these outcomes.

The conflict in Syria:

Potential drivers of change and critical junctures:

Change in the dynamics of the Syrian conflict should combine domestic and international factors. Internally, the **cohesion of the regime** is a key factor. Should large segments of the regime perceive that their survival is at risk, this could force Assad to negotiate under conditions that could be acceptable for the opposition. Similarly, an increase in the **cohesion and legitimation of the opposition** could facilitate a political solution. Up to now internal divisions and a lack of charismatic leadership have undermined the capacity of the opposition camp to hold as a coherent block and this has tarnished the prospects of a functional negotiation. Finally, a sustainable solution may require the **backing of militant groups** to this process, at least of some of them. And yet, they should not be in command of this process. It is beyond the scope on imagination that ISIS backs or participates in such a process. In fact, **ISIS' threat could act as an external federator** of almost all other relevant actors in the Syrian conflict.

Externally, **regional power strategies** have dealt with the Syrian war as a zero-sum game. International players could persuade them that a win-win solution to the Syrian quagmire is the best policy option. Unless they perceive that the risk of continuing the same policies entails an existential threat for their countries and/or regimes, they are unlikely to change the strategy. Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia are the key actors and any détente among them would have a significant impact in the dynamics of the Syrian conflict. A rapprochement among **global powers** is needed. A common vision by Russia, the US and key European states would push local and regional actors towards more compromising positions and prepare the post-war phase.

These drivers of change could materialise in several critical junctures. It is commonplace to point at the need an **international peace conference**. This could be a key moment in which a road-map for peace would be framed and all relevant actors would be involved to make it a sustainable and realistic option for Syria. It could be followed by an **International donors' conference** for reconstruction and reconciliation: a successful

conference would require generosity, ambition and cooperation among actors that have been supporting rival groups in the Syrian conflict. They should perceive this effort as both a moral duty and an investment for the future.

Towards a desirable scenario for Syria in 2020

Following a phase of **stalemate**, in which it became evident that none of the contending parties would be able to win the conflict through military means, **a peace conference was convened in 2016**, involving local, regional and global players. Islamic State/Daesh, which lost part of territory, including Raqqa, was neither invited to the table, nor involved in this process. The peace-conference built on the terms of a **UNSC resolution supported by the five permanent members and three key regional actors (Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey)** some months before. The result was the establishment of a permanent cease-fire, an interim government, increased power and resources for local governments and the first measures to reconstruct the country and reconcile the population. Elections took place in late 2017 and Assad announced some months before that he would not run.

In the run-up to the peace conference, **Assad's regime was pushed by a diminished financial and military support by its traditional allies** (Russia, Iran, Hezbollah), which perceived this conflict as too costly and/or too risky and thus decided to focus on other priorities. Yet, none of them fully gave up its support to the Syrian regime as they were expecting trade-offs in a sort of grand bargain that could put an end to a Syrian war that had lasted for almost a decade. **The emergence of a new and charismatic civilian leadership from the opposition was also instrumental** in brokering the peace deal and received the support of those regional players who had, beforehand, supported different militias and exploited the differences among different factions of the Syrian opposition.

In 2020, **two and half years after the peace conference, Syria remains dependent from external support**. A joint EU-Arab League stabilisation mission has been deployed under UN mandate and Russian and Iranian troops are still present in the Syrian territory but have already started the withdrawal phase that is expected to last until 2025. The country also benefited from an ambitious reconstruction plan, compared in official statements with the Marshall Plan. It raised 60 billion dollars to be implemented in the first five years, devoted primarily to Syria but also benefiting neighbouring countries negatively affected by this conflict such as Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq.

Policy-recommendations for the EU, NATO and western countries:

- Acting as a block, reducing the differences among them on critical issues (e.g. the future of Assad) and effectively coordinating all military and intelligence measures on the ground
- Conducting bilateral high-level dialogues among all relevant regional and global actors to define a road-map for conflict de-escalation
- Substantial increase of financial contributions to UN humanitarian agencies (UNHCR, Food Program, etc.)
- Measures that go beyond airstrikes aiming at reducing the economic and military capabilities of ISIS. Empowering dissidents in ISIS-dominated areas.
- Actively promoting short-term de-escalation measures such as local cease-fires, humanitarian corridors or prisoners exchanges
- Supporting any attempts to increase the cohesion and legitimacy of the Syrian opposition
- Supporting cross-communitarian civil society initiatives, with active measures to demonstrate that they not taking sides with one specific community or component of the Syrian society
- Actively seeking an international peace-conference, in coordination with all relevant stakeholders
- Get ready to contribute to peace-keeping and reconstruction efforts, even announcing a sum that these group of countries and organisations are ready to put on the table

- Design, in cooperation with the newly established Syrian authorities (including local actors) a comprehensive plan to fight against ISIS, deal with foreign fighters and prevent ISIS threat to change its operation base to other countries from the region.

Iraq and the Kurdish issue

Potential drivers of change and critical junctures

Iraq has been negatively affected by three simultaneous factors. (1) Since 2003 **sectarian strife** has undermined the cohesion of Iraqi society and has modified the ethno-religious landscape of significant parts of the territory. Sectarianism has not only damaged social cohesion in Iraq but in other neighbouring countries too. (2) **The sharp decline of oil prices** has limited the resources of the central government but also of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). Low oil prices could make the cost of current levels of violence and corruption unaffordable. (3) A **dysfunctional administration** perceived by many Iraqis as defending the interests of particular groups at the expense of other components of the Iraqi society.

Those trends could be reversed with the reinforcement of already existing cross-sectarian social movements, and substantial reforms, including in the energy sector. This could be the result of both citizens' pressure and self-driven interest by enlightened officials. *The next Iraqi parliamentary elections* could be a critical juncture, particularly taking into account that the results of the previous 2014 elections further intensified the divisions and the erosion of legitimacy of the Iraqi state.

Iraq has been a scenario **where regional powers and global players** project their ambitions. They may continue to do so, or see a successful and functional Iraq which has good relations with all of them and is not strictly aligned with any particular block as the best outcome of this confrontation.

As in the case of Syria, **ISIS** (or whoever may succeed them) is unlikely to completely disappear from Iraq. Yet, the group could become more marginal in terms of controlled territory and popular support. The **Battle of Mosul** may be a key moment. Whether and, even more important, how ISIS loses control over Mosul will condition the survival of ISIS and the sustainability of Iraq as a united country. It is fundamental that local population perceives this battle as liberation and that looting and revenge are strictly avoided.

Other focuses of violence in the region, such as the **struggle between Turkey and the PKK** could also experience significant and positive changes. The year 2015 was a negative turning point for the peace process with the PKK and Turkey experienced a wave of political violence and popular unrest unseen in the last 15 years. The willingness (and ability) of the Turkish state and the three key Kurdish actors (Imrali, Kandil and HDP) to resume peace talks is key to avoid Turkey plunging into a long period of violence that could undermine the prosperity of the economy and the cohesion of the society and could translate into a more aggressive Turkish foreign policy, particularly towards the Middle East.

Also relevant for the Kurdish issue as a whole is the possibility a **referendum of self-determination for the KRG**, an issue which is now less present in the agenda but still in the hearts and minds of many Kurdish Iraqi leaders. This demand may resurface if the Iraqi state is installed in a vicious circle of violence, sectarianism and corruption.

Towards a desirable scenario for Iraq and the Kurdish issue in 2020

In 2016, and following the **uprising of the Mosul population** against ISIS brutal rule, a joint operation of the Iraqi and KRG security forces, with external support by a large coalition of regional and global actors, succeeded in **liberating Mosul** and other parts of the Northern and Western Iraq. ISIS then turned into guerrilla-like activities and remained a security threat for Iraq for several years but its military capabilities and, above all, its popular support, considerably diminished.

Regional and global efforts to find a common ground on Syria (see the previous section) bore fruits for Iraq too. In the side-lines of the Syria peace conference, a global initiative to stabilise and support Iraq came into light and **Iraq started to benefit from the regional plans of reconstruction and reconciliation**.

Seen from 2020, **Iraq and Syria have become a buffer zone** that none of the key regional powers perceive as threat or an exclusive fiefdom. Each of those regional powers has some leverage over some segments of the Syrian and Iraqi societies and their influence is quite present through their contribution to peace-keeping and reconstruction efforts.

Regarding the Kurdish issue, one of the major challenges for the newly election Iraqi government in the early elections of 2017 was the announcement of the KRG to hold a **referendum** for self-determination. Baghdad reacted constructively and proposed to hold a referendum in which the population from the KRG (areas under effective control of the KRG such as Kirkuk were excluded) was asked whether they entrusted Baghdad and Irbil to negotiate a new status for the KRG in Iraq. Seen from 2020, Iraq is still a united country but the KRG enjoys a status of an “associated state” and is autonomous in terms of fiscal capacities and security.

In neighbouring Turkey, the **peace talks with the PKK** were resumed in 2016 and culminated in a peace deal one year later. A new Turkish constitution made significant progresses in recognising Kurdish cultural rights and regional and local decentralisation. Despite the fact that some nationalist groups called to vote against the new constitution, the yes vote won in all Turkey’s provinces. The wounds of three decades of violence are not yet healed but civil society initiatives are particularly active in reconciliation processes. The negotiators of the peace deal were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2018.

Policy-recommendations for the EU, NATO and western countries:

- A rapid and substantial increase in humanitarian assistance to the central government, the KRG and international agencies present on the ground
- Conducting bilateral high-level conversations with Russia, Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia on the future of Iraq and convening a meeting with all of them in addition to relevant local leaderships from Iraq to design a stabilisation, reconstruction and reconciliation program
- Promoting non-sectarian civil society initiatives.
- Put at Baghdad’s and Irbil’s disposal, technical assistance to launch reform programs of the public administrations.
- Restore trust in EU-Turkey relations, re-engaging not only with the Turkish government but also with large segments of the Turkish society.
- Support any attempts to move forward the peace process in Turkey, reinforcing those actors in the Kurdish camp that support a political solution.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict

Potential drivers of change and critical junctures

After decades of stalemate in the Middle East Peace Process, a key element to shift the preferences of the key actors would be an increased awareness on the **cost of conflict**. This could be met with renewed pressure for change by the international **community**. Relevant actors may decide to put **additional pressure on both sides** as a consequence of the region having become increasingly unstable. The international community may realise that, in contrast with other conflict zones, the solution for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is already defined. **Arab countries can also put pressure over Palestine** and stop using the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a domestic issue, preferring stability and peace as a consequence of the increased number of conflict scenarios in the region.

For Israel, **long-term trends of demographic evolution** shall act as a catalyser for more compromising attitudes. The realisation that Arab population under direct or indirect control of Israel outpaces Jewish citizens may empower those voices in Israel arguing that it is impossible to maintain Israel as both a democratic system and the national home of Jewish people. Similarly, the **underperformance of Israeli economy** due to external boycotts could push economic elites to urge Israeli authorities to seek peace with the Palestinians in order to fully reincorporate Israel into world markets.

These elements could be at play in the event of three simultaneous changes of leaderships: the **US Presidential election** of November 2016; **snap election in Israel**, most likely driven by rivalries within the governing coalition; and a **permanent agreement among Palestinian factions**.

Towards a desirable scenario the Arab-Israeli conflict in 2020

Following a phase of increased regional conflict, the international community put additional pressure on the parties to reach an agreement on the basis of a revamped two-states solution. 2017 was characterised by a new momentum, with **new leaderships** in Israel, the US and Palestine.

The newly appointed **US President managed to convene a peace conference** at the local level (Israel-Palestine) in 2017, followed by a peace support conference at the regional level. The new US administration teamed-up with European and regional leaders in substantiating this process.

Some months before **several EU Member States decided to bilaterally recognise Palestine** as a state and forced a modification of the EU's traditional stance towards the conflict. Despite an initial negative reaction by Israel, the authorities soon took this recognition as a *fait accompli* and it modified the correlation of forces. Europe also put forward a series of original proposals to uphold the compromise of both parties around the two-states solution.

After an intense round of negotiations following the 2017 Peace conference, a permanent but **more innovative solution around the two-states** was agreed. In 2020, Israelis and Palestinians have found a compromise on the traditional parameters of the two-states but have also included new narratives, jointly agreed thanks to European and US support.

Previously, both Brussels and Washington agreed that, in order to keep the two-states solution alive, new formulas for conflict management and resolution were needed. On one hand, both actors exerted **additional pressure** to prevent further disconnection among Palestinian territories and illegal settlements. On the other, there was general agreement regarding the need to **protect human rights both in Israel and Palestine, as well as the tenets of the human security doctrine**, replacing old-fashioned parameters of state security. A large diplomatic and assistance attention was put forward by Western and Arab countries, which backed an internally agreed solution to the conflict.

Policy-recommendations for the EU, NATO and western countries:

- EU, NATO and western countries act as a block and reduce foreign policy differences over Israel and Palestine. They coordinate bilateral assistance programmes and national positions over the conflict
- Western countries conduct high-level diplomatic dialogue with regional countries to increase the support base for conflict resolution and reinforce of regional dialogue mechanisms.
- EU adopts a policy aimed at addressing the consequences of illegal settlements, including trade with and investment in companies engaged in settlements. Labelling of settlement products is put forward in EU regulation, thus further differentiating the EU's policy towards Israel and illegal settlements.
- EU puts pressure over Israel regarding the accountability for demolition of its infrastructure in Area C of the West Bank and the settlement expansion in East Jerusalem.
- Western countries increase their humanitarian assistance and aid in Gaza and avoid the emergence of a failed state with a view to ensure intra-Palestinian reconciliation. They put pressure on reconciliation and support the establishment of initiatives that pave the way of intra-Palestinian agreement.
- Creation of a Middle East Peace Process International Support Group, formed by the members of the Quartet, some EU Member States (United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy and Spain), Norway, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. Iran could be offered to join the group in a second stage in order to increase the chances of lasting peace in the region, understood as the normalisation of relations between Israel, Arab states and Iran in the long-run, as well as the consolidation of the US-Iran rapprochement.

The refugee crisis

Potential drivers of change and critical junctures

The humanitarian emergency of 2015 set off the alarms in Europe. The perception that it was **not an isolated crisis** but the first episode of a larger phenomenon could push the Europeans to act.

However, an **amelioration of the conflict situation** in the EU's neighbours (Syria, Iraq) and the neighbours of the neighbours (Afghanistan, Somalia, Eritrea and Yemen) in coming years could enable a more optimistic scenario regarding the gradual decrease of refugees arrivals and the intensification of voluntary returns. Another element that could facilitate a better management of this crisis is whether **neighbouring countries** such as Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan would be provided with additional international assistance to accommodate the influx of refugees.

In addition, the humanitarian situation derived from the refugee crises could act as a catalyser for international discussions around the need to **reform the Geneva Convention** to re-set new international standards and policies to respond to the refugee crisis.

Last but not least, the level of **European solidarity** and the capacity to generate a more robust political response is key when envisaging a positive scenario. Should this crisis spark a wave of solidarity in European countries vis-à-vis refugees coming from conflict scenarios and should this translate into more cohesion among and within European countries, we could foresee further integration at the EU level and the adoption of joint policies.

Towards a desirable scenario the refugee crisis in 2020

In 2016, a **new phase of the refugee crisis** (of even bigger magnitude than the one in 2015) acted as a catalyser for further joint responses among affected countries. Even if **the situation in the countries of origin** started to improve, this did not reduce the influx of refugees immediately since stabilisation did not translate into better living conditions of affected populations.

The countries that received the largest number of refugees and EU countries established a **comprehensive cooperation scheme** providing assistance to refugees and the countries of influx, with the support of international bodies. There was also an increased political will to tackle the nature and roots of a global crisis.

As a consequence of a coordinated response to the global refugee crisis, new common policies were put forward. On the side of the EU, efforts were aimed at devising a **new joint asylum policy** that contributed to end internal fractures in the continent and devise a global response to the refugee crisis. The EU also put forward a **comprehensive foreign policy response** to the refugee crisis that bridged internal policies, humanitarian assistance, aid and neighbourhood policies, among others. Finally, the EU decided to put more emphasis on **resettlement** and the creation of humanitarian corridors and safe and legal ways to enter the EU.

At the international level, the international meeting devising a new Geneva Convention was strengthened through a **global initiative of return**. This initiative received financial support by western countries and reinforced international institutions dealing with refugee issues. Host countries saw their response capabilities reinforced and gradual return schemes were put forward with the countries of origin.

Seen from 2020, several studies had proven that the arrival of **refugees in 2015 translated into an opportunity for growth** and socio-economic development in the aftermath of the economic crisis. The arrival of high-skilled workers enabled EU economies to fulfil the needs of labour markets with skilled migrants and to build solid recovery economic policies. In addition, the economic contribution of refugees in national economies translated into better social conditions and integration, reinforcing the character of European societies as **diverse and multicultural societies**. EU values and solidarity were therefore reinforced.

Policy-recommendations for the EU and western countries:

- *Action in origin:* The EU puts forward a series of foreign policy measures that help to alleviate the refugee crisis. In countries such as Eritrea, more emphasis is placed on strong diplomatic measures, including sanctions when Human Rights are violated and political repression exists.
- *Action in support of intermediate countries:* Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, among others, receive additional support by EU authorities to deal with large amounts of refugees' influx. Packages of assistance channelled through INGOs and UN agencies help to establish better conditions in refugee camps and put in place programmes to increase the capacities of governments and local authorities to deal with the refugee crisis.
- *A comprehensive EU Global Strategy:* The EU takes advantage of its intention to review the European Security Strategy and publish an EU Global Strategy in June 2016 to add the refugee crisis as a priority. The EU Global Strategy foresees a comprehensive response to the crisis, bringing together policies and instruments in the area of internal policies, foreign policy, humanitarian assistance, development, neighbourhood, etc. The refugee crisis is perceived as a golden opportunity to prove the premises of the Lisbon Treaty right and there is further coordination among policies such as the CFSP and the ENP, for example.
- *Reform of existing policies:* The EU embarks on a programme of complete reform of its policies regarding the refugee crisis. In addition to a joint asylum policy, the EU puts forward mechanisms to anticipate humanitarian emergencies as a consequence of refugee influxes, creates better information-sharing mechanisms among Member States, reinforces FRONTEX in order to guarantee maritime surveillance and rescue, establishes a gradual scheme led by the Commission regarding refugee quotas and establishes a joint policy of humanitarian visas.
- *Leadership personal involvement:* EU and national leaders show signs of sympathy towards the refugee crisis and visit refugee camps and borders where most tragic incidents occur. The personal involvement of EU Heads of State and Prime Ministers, together with EU Commissioners and the EU High Representative and President of the Council contributes to transmit a solidarity message and enables a positive turn in EU public opinion towards the refugee crisis.

About the Authors

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About the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung

The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) is a German political foundation, named after the first Federal Chancellor Konrad Adenauer. Through political dialogue, civic education and policy-oriented research programs, KAS involves in strengthening democracy, furthering European integration, improving transatlantic relations and deepening development cooperation. More than 80 offices with projects in over 120 countries worldwide engage in the fields of domestic, social, economic as well as foreign policy, and involve in citizen education. Since 2012, the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Greece is based with an office in Athens and promotes political as well as civic dialogue projects between Greece and Germany and other European partner countries.

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About ELIAMEP

ELIAMEP is an independent, non-profit and policy-oriented research and training institute. ELIAMEP neither expresses, nor represents, any specific political party view. It is only devoted to the right of free and well-documented discourse. Over the years, ELIAMEP expanded its activities to include topics such as migration, human rights, civic participation and social inclusion, climate change and its impact on human security; good governance and security sector reform, and energy security, with a view to having a greater impact on the public through the dissemination of information and of policy proposals, the organisation of training and conflict management seminars and international conferences, the publication of books, journals and monographs. ELIAMEP is frequently visited by journalists from various parts of the world requesting the Foundation's help for information, analysis and interviews. It is now generally recognised as one of the leading think-tanks in the region.

www.eliamep.eu

Workshop on:

The Eastern Mediterranean in 2020: Possible Scenarios and Policy Recommendations

Athens, 22-24 October 2015
St. George Lycabettus Hotel

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The Eastern Mediterranean region has just recently come to the forefront of political concern again by being the main driver of a previously unseen flow of irregular migration to Europe. But long-prevailing issues lie behind these developments, including the continuing Syrian civil war as well as the conflict between Israel and Palestine. Against this backdrop of interlocking developments and the overall rising complexity, ELIAMEP and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Greece organized a conference in Athens in autumn 2015 - with Greece being one of the European countries most exposed to conflictual developments in the Eastern Mediterranean and the consequences of these very developments.

A number of leading thinkers and policy makers from across Europe as well as the relevant Eastern Mediterranean countries joined us in this endeavor. The intention was to discuss, during two days, informally and in depth the security problems in the Mediterranean. The focus was put on the conflict in Syria, the situation in Iraq, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the threat of ISIS/jihadist terrorism and population movements. Three papers were commissioned in advance to experts with a deep knowledge of the region. Each expert was asked to present one scenario: i) pessimistic/catastrophic, ii) medium/undesired, iii) optimistic/desired. Each scenario included recommendations for stakeholders on how to prevent the first two and how to increase the likelihood of the latter scenario. The three papers were discussed intensely during the workshop - and the input included by the authors thereafter. This publication provides the final results of this very process - with the intention of a threefold, scenario-based outlook to the possible developments in the Eastern Mediterranean region in the years to come.