

WORKSHOP SUMMARY

SUMMARY

The Eastern Mediterranean has emerged as a geopolitical flashpoint as the rising involvement of external powers, fragmentation of authority, and lack of a regional security architecture fuel instability and uncertainty. Yet despite the region's growing importance, the United States' ability to shape trends there has diminished, while the influence of other powers has grown.

Participants in a one-day workshop assessed that determining the appropriate role and level of engagement for the United States will first require identifying U.S. interests more clearly, rethinking core relationships, and understanding where the United States can have an impact. Traditional levers of U.S. power may be less effective than in the past, requiring new approaches.

Discussions outlined several important ways to start rebuilding U.S. influence, all of which would require greater physical and diplomatic presence in the region. As the Eastern Mediterranean's importance in the global order grows, so too do the implications of the United States' presence and role there. ■

The Strategic Seam Between Europe and the Middle East: Rethinking U.S. Policies Towards the Eastern Mediterranean

At a time when the Eastern Mediterranean occupies an increasingly central place in global geopolitics, what role should the United States seek to play there? Once viewed by U.S. policymakers as a vital zone of stability, the region is now a geopolitical flashpoint. Conflicts in the Eastern Mediterranean reverberate far beyond the region's borders, generating second and third-order effects that threaten to destabilize U.S. allies. Yet despite the Eastern Mediterranean's growing importance, the United States' ability to shape trends in the region has diminished, while the influence of other external powers has grown. How can the United States rebuild its influence in a way that promotes stability and advances U.S. interests?

The Europe Program and Middle East Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) convened a group of experts and distinguished practitioners on January 25, 2017 for the first workshop of its Eastern Mediterranean Initiative to debate these questions and evaluate U.S. policies towards a region in flux. The project seeks to understand geopolitical shifts underway in order to articulate challenges and opportunities for more effective U.S. engagement.

The Eastern Mediterranean's Importance

The Eastern Mediterranean is in a state of dynamic change driven largely by the growing involvement of outside powers, participants assessed. Many of the world's global and regional powers are locked in armed conflict in the Eastern Mediterranean including the United States, Russia, Iran, and Turkey. The lack of a security architecture has hampered the resolution of conflicts, most urgently Syria, which has become the primary engine of regional instability. Yet, although alignments in the region are shifting, participants judged that the United States has yet to articulate a strategic framework for the region that accounts for these changes. Determining the appropriate role and level of engagement for the United States in the region will first require identifying U.S. interests more clearly, rethinking core relationships, and understanding where the United States can have an impact.

THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN INITIATIVE

The Eastern Mediterranean Initiative (EMI) is a yearlong project by the CSIS Middle East Program and CSIS Europe Program aimed at developing a new strategic framework for U.S. policy in the Eastern Mediterranean. As the traditional anchors of stability have eroded and regional trends shift strategic alignments in the Eastern Mediterranean, the importance of a holistic U.S. approach is vital. The project analyzes the strategic seam issues affecting Europe and the Middle East that intersect in the Eastern Mediterranean and their impact on U.S. interests. The project is made possible in part through the generous support of the Stavros Niarchos Foundation. ■

As the weight of the Eastern Mediterranean in the global order grows, so too do the implications of the United States' presence and role there.

Articulating U.S. priorities and leadership interests in the Eastern Mediterranean is a critical prerequisite for developing a coherent regional strategy, participants argued. Participants acknowledged U.S. missteps but also agreed that the United States has traditionally led by promoting economic prosperity and universal values. There was consensus that no other country is capable or willing to lead in the region in the same way as the United States; other nations that might challenge U.S. leadership would operate from a much narrower calculation of self-interest. As the weight of the Eastern Mediterranean in the global order grows, so too do the implications of the United States' presence and role there.

Crafting a comprehensive Eastern Mediterranean strategy also requires a creative approach to spaces often divided into regional silos or distinct maritime and terrestrial spheres. Even within the Eastern Mediterranean, participants observed, actors often do not view themselves as connected to one another in a regional whole. The overlapping nature of many of the region's challenges and their second and third-order effects makes articulating a unified U.S. strategy there a particularly complex—yet vital—task. Some suggested that the region can offer valuable lessons as the United States determines its interests and leverage in situations of “new diplomacy,” such as negotiations over Arctic sovereignty or responses to China's “One Belt, One Road” project to link the economies of Central Asia and the Middle East.

Defining Objectives

Participants identified a number of intersecting trends fueling regional instability, including conflict in Syria; the fragmentation of state authority; mass migration; and economic uncertainties. Each of these on its own is a formidable challenge. Addressing them is made more difficult by the competing agendas of external actors, most importantly Russia and Iran, and by Turkey's drift from the NATO alliance. Moreover, traditional tools and levers of U.S. power may be less effective than in the past, requiring new approaches.

Syria is the greatest driver of regional instability.

Syria will remain a hinge issue for the region's security trajectory even if a resolution largely brings fighting to an end. While much remains uncertain about the path to ending the Syria conflict, the war's second and third-order consequences—particularly the migration crisis, mounting stress on the European Union, and resurgent Russian influence—will persist and could intensify once the fighting subsides. Despite Syria's centrality, participants judged the U.S. role there to be marginal compared to the roles of other actors, while the trajectory of its involvement beyond the anti-Islamic State group (ISG) campaign is unclear. Yet, there was consensus that understanding how different outcomes in Syria will affect a range of issues is critical for U.S. policymakers charting a course forward.

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Regional and state fragmentation pose long-term challenges.

The region is increasingly fractured into spheres of influence at the same time that states like Syria, Iraq, and Libya have also been internally fragmented. Non-state actors are pressuring state sovereignty even as most actors remain committed to existing borders. The United States will need to either figure out how to engage amidst this fragmentation or try to seal off and protect specific U.S. assets and interests, participants argued.

The region is both a source and destination of migration.

Eastern Mediterranean countries face a long-term challenge in grappling with semi-permanent migrant populations as conflict and economic pressures in Syria, Iraq, and sub-Saharan Africa continue to drive historically high human flows across the region. Small and sometimes economically strained littoral states like Greece lack the capacity to absorb large numbers of migrants. Meanwhile, Syria's neighbors continue to shoulder the greatest burden from displacement—in most scenarios, up to three million Syrians will become part of Turkey's permanent population. Participants stressed that these countries' success in integrating the new populations

and the ability of international donors to continue providing current levels of financial assistance will have important ramifications for national security, domestic politics, and humanitarian conditions across the region.

Assessing Other Powers' Motives and Interests

Rebuilding an effective and agile U.S. strategy in the Eastern Mediterranean will require not only rebuilding strained ties with state partners, but also determining how to respond to the evolving regional roles of Iran, Russia, China, and non-state actors.

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Reaching a “strategic understanding” with Turkey is vital for advancing U.S. interests in the Eastern Mediterranean:

Participants assessed that repairing ties with Turkey amid apparent splits over strategic goals and values might be the biggest diplomatic challenge facing the United States in the region. Progress would require carefully balancing U.S. support for Kurdish factions, which have emerged as an effective fighting force against the ISG and U.S. support for the rule of law, which is eroding under President Erdogan. It would also require a solution to the problem of Fethullah Gulen, the exiled preacher living in the United States.

Some participants were skeptical that a reset is possible under Erdogan given his authoritarian tendencies and drift from the West. Yet, participants were unequivocal about Turkey's importance as a regional power and the lack of viable replacements to power projection assets like U.S. access to Incirlik airbase. If the United States and Turkey continue drifting apart, figuring out how to cooperate on areas of mutual concern with fewer institutional ties will be vital.

Russia's intervention in the region and its ability to project power in Syria and Libya presents a serious threat to U.S. interests.

Russia's intervention in Syria limits U.S. military options in Syria, and its growing efforts to influence outcomes in places like Libya also presents a challenge.

Participants advised U.S. policymakers to distinguish between regional issues that converge with Russia's core interests, such as Syria, from those that Moscow seeks to leverage for cheap influence.

However, participants advised U.S. policymakers to distinguish between regional issues that converge with Russia's core interests, such as Syria, from those that Moscow seeks to leverage for cheap influence, arguably including its involvement in Egypt and Libya.

Iran seeks to project power in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The Eastern Mediterranean is important to Iran because it allows Iran to pursue its ambition to be recognized as a Middle Eastern power rather than a Central Asian one. Participants suggested that Iran has approached the region as it has the broader Middle East—by seeking inexpensive ways to create and leverage disorder to gain influence. Yet, participants noted that important uncertainties about Iran's future position in the region remain.

One key variable will be the longevity of Iran's cooperation with Russia and Turkey. While Iran currently shares some overlapping interests with both in Syria, the three powers are historic rivals. Iran needs Russia, one participant noted, but also distrusts it and does not necessarily want Russia to become a dominant regional power.

China's presence is not an immediate threat, but should be watched carefully.

In reviving the “silk road” and its ambitious “One Belt, One Road” project, China has the potential to emerge as an important power in the region.

Engaging effectively with non-state actors is critical.

The United States will need to reassess its approach to working with non-state actors, who are increasingly important players in the region's security landscape. The United States' lack of a framework for systematically engaging non-state actors has hampered its efforts. Participants debated the exigencies and potential pitfalls of engaging non-state actors, ultimately agreeing that doing so in a way that advances U.S. goals and interests without further empowering non-state actors is a risk that has to be managed carefully and on a case-by-case basis.

Towards a New Synthesis

Discussions outlined several important ways to start rebuilding U.S. influence, all of which would require greater U.S. physical and diplomatic presence in the region.

Reinvigorate traditional alliances.

Rebuilding trust and a sense of common mission with traditional U.S. allies in the region is vital for regaining influence. In particular, U.S.-Israeli relations should be reset, in part to more effectively leverage Israeli capabilities in the region.

Identify new strategic anchor points.

Participants raised the possibility of whether shared Egyptian and Israeli energy and security interests could rebuild the U.S.-Israeli-Egyptian anchor. Greece may also play an enhanced regional security role, although its internal challenges could limit its potential.

Participants noted that the Gulf Arab states may be in a position to play a greater role in the region; yet, it remains unclear what role they will seek and how they will position themselves in relation to Russia's regional engagement.

Promote entrepreneurship and innovation.

Old tools of bilateral assistance through bodies like USAID will not be sufficient to stimulate economic growth, participants cautioned. As the world's preeminent innovator, the United States should use its economic clout to encourage entrepreneurship as a driver of growth and prosperity.

The United States' retreat from championing visions for order has left a vacuum of thought leadership to be filled by others—something that one participant argued China is now doing.

Lead by articulating a transformational idea.

U.S. global leadership has been at its best when the United States has articulated big ideas to rally allies and partners, participants argued. Its retreat from championing visions for order has left a vacuum of thought leadership to be filled by others—something that one participant argued China is now doing. Potential frameworks for a U.S. vision for the Eastern

Mediterranean include a regional security architecture—or an open dialogue about the obstacles to creating one—an economic strategy premised on unique U.S. strengths, or a more robust “diplomatic assault.”

Ultimately, uncertainties surrounding the future of U.S. influence in the Eastern Mediterranean lie not only with how events in the region will unfold, but also with how the United States will define its priorities under the new administration.

An important consideration is how the United States chooses to pursue its interests while remaining true to core U.S. values that promote good governance and universal rights. Determining whether to retreat into a more protectionist posture in the face of the Eastern Mediterranean's fragmentation or to navigate this environment to advance U.S. interests will be an even more fundamental challenge for U.S. policymakers. ■

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