



## Antagonisms in the EU's neighbourhood

Overcoming strategic deficits with regard to Syria –  
How the EU can demonstrate resolve and  
respond to the interests of regional powers



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# The project initiative “Key States” – An introduction

In the process of its efforts to build a “ring” of stable states along its eastern and southern borders (e.g., from Belarus to Morocco), the European Union (hereinafter referred to as the EU) has had to face the reality of its diminished capacity to influence such developments within its neighbourhood. Four states in particular play an active role in the region: Russia, Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia. Each of these states have a direct influence on countries neighbouring the EU, many of which also share a border with Russia, Turkey, Iran or Saudi Arabia. From a European perspective, these four geographically large countries can also be described as “neighbours to the EU’s neighbours” or “key states” in terms of the EU neighbourhood framework.

The governments of these four key states use their influence to shape political and social developments within this common neighbourhood in ways that align with their own foreign policy principles and norms. In many cases, however, these objectives do not dovetail with the European Union’s stabilization efforts in the neighbourhood, which are designed to foster the transformation toward an open society and social market economy in the region’s countries. The success of EU policies in its neighbourhood regions thus increasingly depends on developing a better understanding of the interests and motivations of these four states. In addition, developing a better understanding of how these key states interact with each other and the interdependencies that define their relationships will also provide the EU with a greater capacity for action in terms of its European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) instrument. Brussels and the EU member states should therefore take into account such information when drawing relevant conclusions for their own policy strategies.

With this goal in mind, the Bertelsmann Stiftung's "Europe's Future" programme has formed a strategy group as part of the "Strategies for the EU Neighbourhood" project. The strategy group is made up of independent experts, each of whom has in-depth knowledge of these four states, international relations, and the EU's foreign and neighbourhood policies. The experts are as follows:

- Michael Bauer, Middle East international relations expert, MEIA Research, Munich;
- Christian-P. Hanelt, Middle East expert, Bertelsmann Stiftung, Gütersloh;
- Wilfried Jilge, Eastern Europe expert, Associate Fellow, German Council on Foreign Relations, Berlin;
- Dr. Christian Koch, Arab Gulf States expert, Bussola Institute, Brussels;
- Miriam Kosmehl, Eastern Europe expert, Bertelsmann Stiftung, Gütersloh;
- Dr. Stefan Meister, Russia and Eastern Europe expert, Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung and Associate Fellow at German Council on Foreign Relations, Berlin;
- Almut Möller, European Affairs expert, European Council on Foreign Relations, Berlin;
- Adnan Tabatabai, Iran expert, Center for Applied Research in Partnership with the Orient, Bonn;
- Prof. Dr. Erdal Yalcin, international economic affairs and Turkey expert, University of Applied Sciences Konstanz (HTWG).

Going forward and building on our first joint findings paper published in the fall of 2018 (["Antagonisms in the EU's neighbourhood. The EU, Russia, Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia struggle for influence in their common neighbourhood"](#)), the strategy group will focus on individual sub-regions of the EU's neighbourhood. The policy brief presented here, "Overcoming strategic deficits with regard to Syria – How the EU can demonstrate resolve and respond to the interests of regional powers", takes Syria as its focus because of the ongoing war and the overlapping interests involved that have gravely negative consequences for Europe as a whole. Because the United States and Israel also play a profound role in this conflict and should therefore be involved in EU and EU member states' efforts to achieve sustainable peace in the region, the strategy group has asked the following individuals to contribute their expertise to this publication:

- Julianne Smith, North America expert, currently Richard von Weizsäcker Fellow, Robert Bosch Academy, Berlin,
- and Richard C. Schneider, Israel expert and editor-at-large, ARD (German public-service broadcaster), Tel Aviv.

We would also like to thank Kristin Helberg (journalist and political scientist) and Daniel Gerlach (Syria specialist and director general of the non-profit Candid Foundation) for providing their expertise on developments in Syria.

The opinions expressed here do not necessarily reflect those of the institutions associated with each author.

## Knowledge Paper (Autumn 2018)

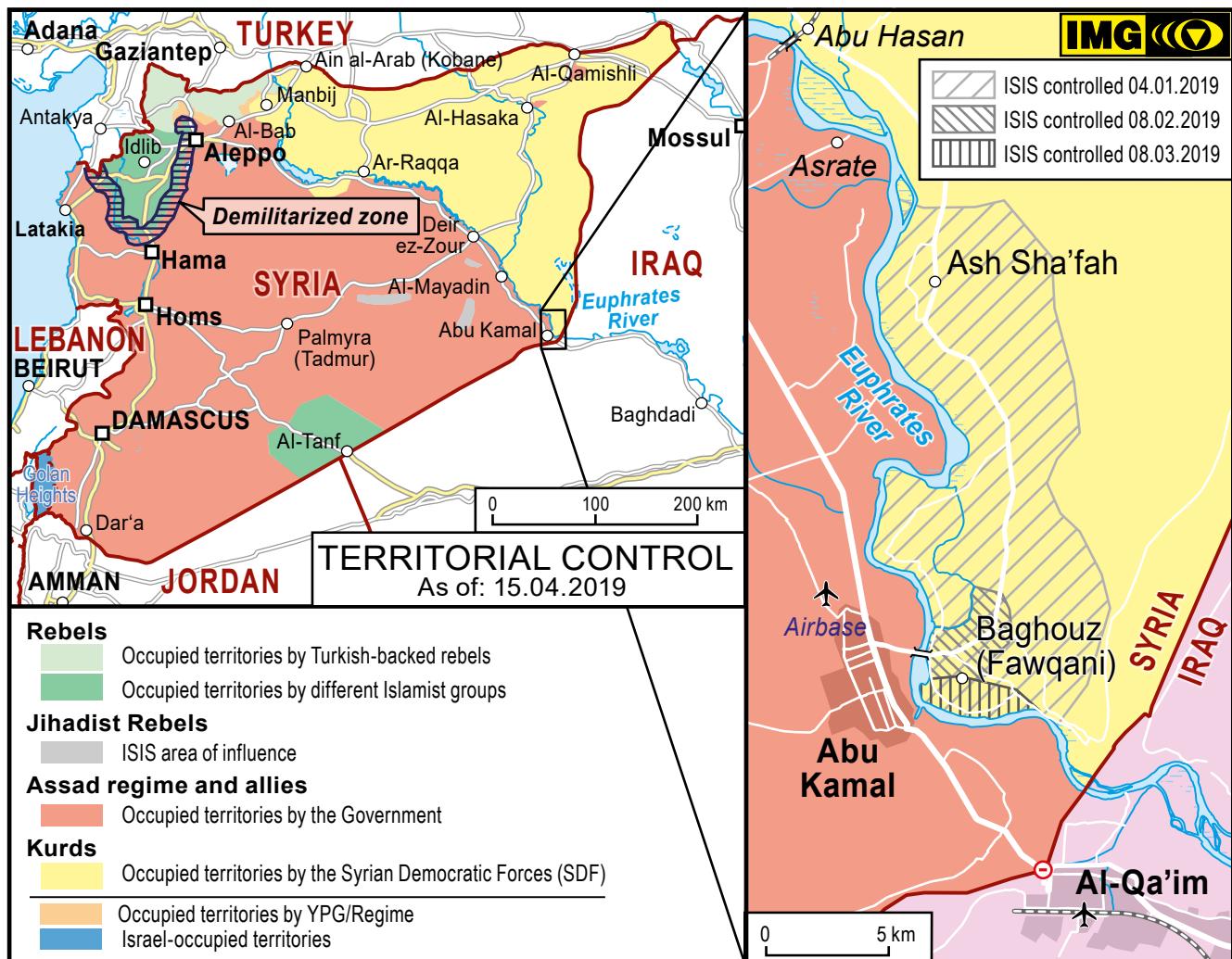
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## Syria: Zones of influence



### Source:

Fact Sheet Syria, 09 March 2019 – 15 April 2019, No. 73  
 Institut für Friedenssicherung und Konfliktmanagement (IFK), Vienna  
 COMPILED BY: IFK MENA-Team (Walter POSCH, Stefanie HARING, Benedikt ZANZINGER, David FUSSI)

## 1. New parameters in the EU's southeastern neighbourhood

Although located in the Middle East, in geographical terms, Syria also lies within the European Union's immediate neighbourhood. Since the outbreak of war in 2011, and with the wave of refugees in 2015/2016, more than 1 million Syrians have sought refuge in the EU's member states. The Syrian war has had a significant impact both on Europe and Syria's neighbouring countries. This is particularly true of Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Turkey and Israel, all of which are also located in the EU's southeastern neighbourhood.

As of early 2019, however, the parameters of the Syrian conflict have shifted in the following ways:

- As a result of their military interventions, Russia, Iran and Turkey have become the most crucial external actors. Within this constellation, Tehran and Moscow have the greatest influence over the Assad regime.
- The Assad regime holds more than 70% of Syria's territory, has most of the population under its control and regards itself as the victor in the Syrian war.
- For its part, the Israeli government has for the first time publicly acknowledged air strikes on Iranian positions in Syria; the potential for further escalation is great and extends beyond Syria's borders.
- In March 2019, the so-called Islamic State (or the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL); in the following, to be referred to as IS) lost its last territory on Syrian soil and no longer has a geographical presence east of the Euphrates. However, IS networks remain.

- With the third Brussels conference on "Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region" (in the following, "Brussels III"), the EU again demonstrated that it is the most important international donor and actor engaged in the support of refugees in Syria and its neighbouring countries. The EU has pointedly made itself an advocate for the country's population and civil society, both inside and outside of Syria. It continues to insist that the final resolution of the conflict be based on political negotiations, and that all parties respect human rights and international rules. However, even among the EU's member states, the exact conditions under which financial engagement for reconstruction in Syria would be acceptable, as well as the preconditions for any direct dialogue with Assad, remain a subject of controversy.
- The Trump administration's ill-defined policy toward Syria and the Middle East – from the unilateral decision to recognize Israel's sovereignty over the occupied Syrian Golan Heights to the pronouncement that the 2,000 American troops stationed east of the Syrian Euphrates area would be withdrawn – is reaping considerable uncertainty among allies and adversaries alike.
- Since April/May 2019: As a result of the intensified U.S. sanctions against Iran and the increasing tensions between Washington and Tehran in the Gulf region, Iran reduces its oil supplies to the Assad regime and freezes its credit line; this puts Damascus under financial pressure and rations the gasoline supply.

These factors and more form the backdrop of our policy paper "Overcoming strategic deficits with regard to Syria – How the EU can demonstrate resolve and respond to the interests of regional powers".

## 1.1. Basic shifts in U.S. foreign and security policy

When U.S. President Donald Trump came to office in January 2017, references to his "unpredictability" were circulated widely across Europe. Two years later, the EU and its members have a clearer view of what guides the U.S. president's foreign policy. President Trump's foreign policy approach is based on two core assumptions. First, Trump is convinced that countries around the world have for decades been taking advantage of the United States in terms of both trade and security issues. In response to such imbalances – regardless of whether they are tangible or simply presumed – he has shifted U.S. foreign policy away from multilateralism and toward positions of nationalism and unilateralism. He has also shifted U.S. economic policy in the direction of a more mercantilist approach. While doing so, he has discarded practically every existing U.S. trade treaty.

Second, Trump believes that America should be less engaged in the world, and instead should use its limited resources to address its own internal challenges. This feeling lies at the root of the two slogans coined by Trump: "America first" and "Make America great again." In the effort to extricate the United States from supposedly "bad deals" and onerous commitments, Trump has enacted a series of measures aimed at pulling the country out of various multilateral treaties, agreements and organizations. This list includes the Iran nuclear deal (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA), the Paris Agreement on climate change; the United Nations Human Rights Council, the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty on the reduction of medium-range missile systems, and the Universal Postal Union Treaty. In December 2018, Trump also announced the unexpected withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan and Syria. In the case of Syria, the withdrawal of roughly 2,000 troops began in January 2019. At the end of March, Trump declared that 200 soldiers would – for now – remain stationed at the al-Tanf base (southeast Syria, on the border with Jordan), and another 200 in northeast Syria, east of the Euphrates river. However, debate continues over how many soldiers should remain, and for how long.

Trump's foreign policy is also conditioned by his admiration for "strong men" and autocrats. During the course of his presidency thus far, Trump has expressed more appreciation for the United States' adversaries than for its allies. He has repeatedly criticized the NATO alliance, the European Union and leading government figures in friendly countries, including German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. By contrast, he has referred to North Korean dictator Kim Jong-Un as "honorable," and to Russian President Vladimir Putin as a "very, very strong leader." In a May 2017 Wall Street

Journal article, two of Trump's top advisers – National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster and National Economic Council Director Gary Cohn (both of whom have since left office) – wrote that Trump had undertaken his first overseas visit with "a clear-eyed outlook that the world is not a 'global community' but an arena where nations, non-governmental actors and businesses engage and compete for advantage." This transactional worldview marks a fundamental change in the international role played by the United States.

These shifts in U.S. foreign policy have had a significant impact on America's approach to the Middle East. For political leaders such as Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Egypt's President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, Trump's transactional foreign policy is a welcome change. Such leaders, along with others like them, are enthusiastic about a U.S. president who is less focused than his predecessors on an adherence to values. The Trump administration's pronouncements following the assassination of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi were unequivocal; the administration in no way wanted harm to come to its relationship with the Saudis as a result of the killing. Saudi Arabia simply plays much too large a role in the pursuit of several of the Trump government's most important foreign policy goals – that is, American efforts to counter Iran and to bring Saudi investments to the United States.

U.S. foreign policy toward Iran in particular has changed. In May 2018, when the Trump administration abandoned the nuclear deal with Iran, it also made 12 sweeping demands of the country. These relate to Iran's armament measures in the area of missile technology; the country's role in Iraq, Syria and Yemen; and its nuclear programme. Trump and his team announced that they would put "unprecedented financial pressure" on Iran until these demands were met. Political pressure was increased in parallel, with the Trump government placing Iran's Revolutionary Guards on its list of foreign terrorist organizations in April 2019. To date, however, Iranian policy has not changed significantly from the point of view of the U.S. government. Thus, Trump continues to regard the exit from the nuclear agreement as a justified move and from May 2019 will sanction all countries that buy Iranian oil. In addition, tensions rise in the Gulf region between the U.S. and Iran.

## 1.2. What the new U.S. foreign policy approach means for the EU

Trump's transactional foreign-policy approach has been disconcerting to both America's European allies and the committed Atlanticists in the United States who have long seen "common values" as determining the core of transatlantic relations. When European leaders visit the Oval Office, President Trump opens the conversation with two questions: How much does your country spend on defense? And: How high is the trade imbalance between your country and the United States? The answers to these questions, rather than the countries' common history, then determine the tone and character of the conversation.

Trump's skepticism regarding the utility of multilateral institutions is also casting dark clouds over transatlantic relations. Trump has engaged in repeated attacks on NATO throughout his entire campaign and tenure as president. During the campaign, in a 2016 interview with the New York Times, he proposed that the United States' Article 5 commitments be made conditional on whether or not the ally in need has achieved NATO's defense-expenditure goal of 2% of GNP. In addition, he has expressed open scorn for the European integration project. He supported Brexit, and in 2018, referred to the EU as a "foe."

Although President Trump believes that the United States is operating in an era of "strategic competition," his administration would appear to grant Europe little more than the role of observer. When Trump and his administration speak about China, they rarely mention one of the United States' greatest assets: its vast, worldwide network of partners and allies. The same can be said about the administration's approach to the Middle East's many challenges. When the president decided to withdraw troops from Syria, he did so without consulting even one of the United States' European allies, even though some European countries are members of the international anti-IS coalition. Nor is it solely in the Middle East that Trump and his government often fail to involve European actors in strategic debates about regional and global challenges.

For the EU and its member states, this is aggravated by the fact that other actors are already reacting to the (at least partial) withdrawal of the United States from the world stage, while Europeans continue to lack a clearly definable profile in the region and internationally, even toward the United States. Russia, Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Israel, for example, are asserting their interests and priorities proactively and with increasing self-confidence, both within the Middle East as a whole and with regard to shaping Syria's future in particular. As a consequence, the EU's scope for action within its neighbourhood is narrowing. The success of EU policy as it pursues its interests in its direct southeastern neighbourhood region thus depends increasingly

on developing a better understanding of the interests, motivations and strategies of these five states. Moreover, the EU must draw conclusions for its own political strategies on the basis of a detailed knowledge of these individual actors and their inter-dependencies.

Europe has an interest in supporting the return of Syrian refugees from the country's neighbours in particular, but also from Europe. Indeed, this is a key factor in Syria's economic and societal reconstruction. However, support for this process is linked to the question of whether and how a political transformation can be effected in the country despite the military successes of the Assad regime and its Russian and Iranian allies. In order to facilitate the safe return of Syrian refugees, and to enable the fundamental participation of all Syrians in post-war Syria, European policymakers believe it will be necessary to revitalize the constitutional process sought by the United Nations and thereby introduce the rule of law to at least a minimal degree. The EU has pursued this strategy since the release of its March 2017 policy paper on Syria, reiterating it once again in its final statement from the March 2019 Brussels III conference. In addition, the EU has called for the political process regarding the shape of Syria's future to be returned to the internationally legitimized negotiation framework at the United Nations in Geneva.

In this regard, the EU faces the challenge of convincing the key external countries of Russia, Iran and Turkey – which regularly assert their interests and zones of influence in Syria through their self-created Astana process (named after the location of meetings) – to contribute their political and diplomatic weight to the Geneva process. Even if the Astana powers and the EU have repeatedly invoked UN resolution 2254 in their statements, there are crucial differences in interpretation, for example with regard to the issue of what constitutes a "credible political solution" and how a "Syrian-led" constitutional process should be organized in practice.

For the EU, the issue of stabilizing its southeastern neighbourhood as a whole also plays a central role. Issues relevant to regional security include the conflict between Iran, Saudi Arabia and Israel; the Israel-Arab and Turkey-Kurd conflicts; the presence of violent sub-state actors in countries such as Syria, Iraq and Lebanon; and the effects of Russian intervention in the region. Europe has a clear interest in being able to deal more easily with regional rivalries. Efforts in this regard include contributing to the de-escalation and resolution of these conflicts, curbing the influence of militias, and supporting regional forums that promote principles such as non-interference in internal affairs, disarmament and border inviolability.

With regard to these issues, the interests, the relative influence, and the foreign and security policy strategies of Russia, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Israel are more important than ever for the EU. We therefore focus on the response of each of these key states to the changing policies of the United States:

How are these key states dealing with the new situation, however unclear it might be?

What opportunities and challenges do each of these countries see for their own foreign and security policy goals?

How does the U.S. withdrawal affect regional power structures and, as a result, how the key states interact with each other?

What challenges and opportunities for European policy – both with regard to Syria and the key states – are emerging as a result of the changed U.S. role?

## 2. How are Russia, Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Israel reacting to the changed U.S. role in the EU's southeastern neighbourhood?

### 2.1. Russia

Russia's leaders see the diminished U.S. presence in Syria and the changing U.S. role in the Middle East region as a fundamentally positive development. To be sure, the U.S. announcement that it would leave a small contingent of troops in Syria confirmed Moscow's skepticism as to whether the United States would in fact withdraw from Syria altogether. Nevertheless, Russia sees itself as a beneficiary of a weaker U.S. position in the region. As the (partial) withdrawal proceeds, Moscow's influence on Syria's future reconstruction and within the Middle East more generally will grow.

Until recently, Russia had counted on a tripartite division of Syria in which a large part remained under the control of Assad and its allies Iran and Russia (with Tehran and Moscow demarcating their own zones of influence), one part in the northwest would be placed under Turkish control, and another part in the northeast under Kurdish and U.S. control. The withdrawal is reshuffling the maps, and Turkey's role in northern Syria is expanding. From the Russian point of view, this is linked to the issue of whether Washington will rescind its support for its allied Kurdish fighters and thus allow Turkey to move into the border area of northern Syria. A move of this nature would strengthen Turkey's role in Syria, and work to the detriment of Iran and Moscow's interests in placing the entire Syrian state territory under Damascus' control. From Russia's perspective, further conflicts are also inevitable not only with Turkey, but also with Iran (e.g., with regard to the question of the future organization of Syria's military and state). On its own, Russia is unlikely to be able to keep Iran out of Syria. This would also place pressure on the balance between the three states within the Astana process.

Even if Moscow regards the U.S. withdrawal as a fundamentally positive development, it cannot fill the void Washington leaves behind in Syria. Will Turkey, the IS or jihadi groups close to al-Qaeda push into this vacuum? Or will there be a further rapprochement between the Syrian Kurds and Damascus? These questions must be discussed between Washington and Moscow. However, the lack of clarity in U.S. policy is a hindrance in this regard. At the same time, despite all the difficulties between the United States and Russia, the two countries communicate relatively well at the military level in Syria, and to some extent even cooperate. This has been evident in their coordination on air strikes, which have rarely resulted in clashes involving the two, and then only when there have been coordination difficulties on the Russian side. The U.S. withdrawal would diminish the importance of this arrangement or even render it obsolete. If this were to occur, one of the few ongoing points of contact between the U.S. and Russian militaries would be lost.

The U.S. withdrawal would also reduce the conflict's broader strategic resonance, which was what originally motivated Moscow to intervene in the region militarily. The goal of improving its own negotiating power with Washington, for example with regard to U.S. sanctions against Russia or with respect to Ukraine, would be difficult to achieve following Washington's withdrawal.

All of this clouds Russia's pleasure at the United States' withdrawal. The conflicts with Turkey and Iran over post-war Syria are only just beginning, and Moscow has only limited resources to devote to being a genuine peacekeeping power. In addition, Moscow observers are debating as to whether the United

States will establish no-fly zones over the area held by its allies, which could curb Russia's scope of action. Moreover, it is unclear toward whom such a policy would be directed.

Russia itself has announced three times that it would pull back from Syria, with plans outlined by President Putin in March 2016, December 2017 and June 2018. However, it has found that the conflict negotiations grew in intensity each time and that it was ultimately impossible to fully withdraw.

The consequence of such an action would be the loss of its own position of power in the region, as well as massive pressure on its ally, Assad, and the two Russian military bases in Tartus (navy) and Hmeimim (air base). Russian experts are therefore following the shifting U.S. presence in Syria with skepticism and concern; as changes appear to be taking place without planning or coordination, fears of growing conflicts between the regional powers that could expose Moscow's limited resources are on the rise.

## 2.2. Turkey

As a key state in the region, the Republic of Turkey evades being categorized as a clear partner or opponent of any of the region's other important political stakeholders, whether this be the EU, the United States, Russia or Iran. Turkey's ambiguous role represents a new challenge for the EU and the United States because, as a NATO member, the country has always been integrated into the European-American security alliance despite various political disputes. The new tactical alliances that Ankara has entered with Russia and Iran in the context of the Syria conflict can be explained primarily by security and economic policy dependencies and objectives. However, the viability of the military options announced by Turkey in Syria (such as an invasion into additional areas in northern Syria, or the establishment of a no-fly zone) have been called into question by the country's current economic crisis that is marked by high inflation rates and low growth with little improvement on the horizon. Ankara's military capacities will thus be correspondingly constrained.

Security policy currently entails alliances both with the United States and with Russia/Iran. While these are contradictory from the Turkish perspective, they are driven by Ankara's prioritization of a clear objective in the Syria conflict: Turkey wants at all costs to prevent the establishment of a Kurdish state or autonomous Kurdish region in the north or northeast of a Syrian state that is sovereign under international law. Ankara is unwilling to compromise on this issue and has condemned the military and political support provided by the United States and some EU member states to Kurdish militias fighting IS in northern Syria and northern Iraq. Particularly noteworthy here is the United States' military support for the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), the military arm of the Democratic Union Party (PYD). From Washington's perspective, the Kurdish People's Protection Units are the most important local on-the-ground fighters against the IS. By contrast, the Turkish government has criticized the YPG's military buildup, arguing that the militia is passing weapons to the Turk-

ish-Kurdish Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) that could be used in the fight against the Turkish state. In the effort to prevent Kurdish autonomy, Erdoğan has accepted the possibility of a direct confrontation with the United States. Unlike the United States and the EU, Ankara supported the Sunni Arab factions in the most active military phase of the Syrian conflict, as they were also operating against the Kurdish militias. In the wake of the United States' announcement of a military withdrawal from Syria, Washington has now demanded that Turkey not attack the Kurds militarily. At the same time, however, the United States have conceded that Ankara has the right to fight "terrorists." From Washington's point of view, these "terrorists" are the Islamic State and the jihadi groups linked to al-Qaeda. However, from Ankara's perspective, Washington's Kurdish allies are just as much "terrorists" as the Syrian-Kurdish PYD, which is considered to be a sister party of the PKK. The PKK is also included on the EU list of terrorist organizations. Ankara therefore sees a military crackdown on the United States' (former) Kurdish allies as justified.

Turkey's tactics on the issue of new arms purchases, as in the case of the Russian S-400 missile system, must also be seen in the context of these differences. Turkey is pursuing these prospective weapon purchases despite criticism by NATO allies in North America and Europe. Erdoğan leverages his declared purchasing intentions to pressure NATO partners who want to see Turkey firmly anchored within the Western alliance. Starting in April 2019, the U.S. Department of Defense began to exert counter-pressure, announcing it would suspend Turkish participation in NATO's F-35 fighter-jet project as long as Ankara retained its S-400 purchase programme.

President Erdoğan has soft-pedaled his criticism of the Assad regime in favor of his security policy goal of curbing Kurdish ambitions, and also to facilitate tactical cooperation with Moscow, Tehran and Damascus. In terms of the Kurdish question, Turkey is buoyed by the fact that Russia, the Assad regime and

Iran are all opposed to allowing Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria. This strategy underlies the Turkish-Russian-Iranian declaration issued in December 2018, which expressed the intention to restore Syria's territorial unity under Assad's leadership. However, the tripartite alliance of Turkey, Russia and Iran is ultimately a partnership of convenience, and has its limits. For example, at the subsequent three-way summit in Sochi in mid-February 2019, Russia and Iran rejected Erdogan's plans to establish a Turkish-controlled buffer zone in northern Syria between the Turkish border and the majority Kurdish-controlled areas. Russia and Iran made it clear that in the event of an actual U.S. withdrawal, this area must be returned to Syrian government control, and that the creation of a buffer zone would depend on

Assad's approval. There is also some disagreement between President Erdogan on the one hand, and President Putin and Supreme Leader Khamenei on the other, over the northwestern Syrian area already held militarily by Turkey, and over the situation in the adjacent Syrian province of Idlib, which Assad wants to take over with Russia's help. Ankara is trying to prevent that from happening. The Turkish government fears that if Assad troops attacked the province of Idlib, several hundred thousand Syrian Sunnis and thousands of jihadis could take refuge in Turkey. Turkey, which is currently accommodating around 3.5 million Syrian refugees, sees itself as having reached the limits of its capacity to handle refugee inflows.

## 2.3. Iran

The current debates in Tehran reveal that Iran is currently unable to discern any rigorous regional-policy orientation on the part of the United States. This has been evident in the country's assessments of U.S. government statements on dealing with the Islamic Republic. While Secretary of State Mike Pompeo specified the abovementioned list of 12 conditions that Tehran would have to fulfill in order to (again) be eligible for dialogue, U.S. President Trump said during a White House press conference in late July 2018 that he was ready to engage with Tehran at any time, without any preconditions.

Accordingly, Iran's government is reacting cautiously to Trump's push to withdraw troops from Syria. Tehran also showed little surprise when the White House announced in mid-February 2019 that a small contingent of U.S. soldiers would remain in Syria after all. At the same time, the countries' leaders publicly maintained that the U.S. had been brought to a geopolitical defeat in Syria, just as in Iraq. However, many of the Tehran policymakers engaged in international dialogue recall that the gradual withdrawal of U.S. troops in Iraq in fact strongly increased Iran's responsibility for stabilizing its neighbouring country. After all, the "American occupiers" could no longer be held responsible for the shortcomings in Iraq – for instance in the supply of water, energy and health care, and the realm of public order. Solving supply problems and stabilizing a country damaged by war – no matter whether Iraq or Syria – requires winning the peace as well as the war. This poses significant challenges for Iran in Syria. While Iran has historically deep roots in Iraq, its ties to Syria have always been driven by convenience and marked by less interaction between the two societies than in the case of Iraq. Thus, while the goal of driving the United States out of the region was to some extent achievable, Iran's role as a stabilizer or protective power in Syria will

not be an easy one. Investment for the purposes of reconstruction will be limited to a few Iranian infrastructure projects with military ties. However, on issues related to the Syrian security apparatus and its future structure, Tehran possesses deep, decades-long relationships that even Russia will have trouble overcoming. Iran's policymakers hope that Syria's reconstruction will be facilitated by development funds from Europe (and not from Saudi Arabia or the United Arab Emirates, for example). Iran has considerably greater confidence in Europe than in its rivals in the Gulf region.

In addition to the challenges within the Syrian context, the Iranian government is also examining possible regional shifts in the U.S. presence. For example, Iran worries that U.S. troops could be redeployed to Iraq. In early February 2019, Trump announced that he would not use troops stationed in Iraq for an attack on Iran – but said they would be used to observe Iran. This prospect was clearly rejected by the Iraqi government, which has made efforts to emphasize its own sovereignty. With the goal of signaling the "affinities" between Iran and Iraq, at least from Tehran's point of view, Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif made a five-day visit to the neighbouring country in January 2019, meeting with government representatives, tribal leaders, clergy from various religious groups and top politicians from the Kurdish Regional Government. Iranian President Hassan Rohani's visit to Iraq in March 2019 was also intended to cement Iran-Iraq ties further. Although all three important government offices in Baghdad (the presidency, the parliamentary speakership, and the prime minister's seat) are held by candidates closer to Tehran than to Washington, Iraq's political elite take great care to minimize the impact of Iran-U.S. tensions on their country, and are careful to avoid taking either the Iranian or American side.

Iran is also concerned that the United States may at some point enforce its containment policy against Iran within Afghanistan – unlike Syria, a country that borders Iran. To counter this prospect, Iran is intensifying its own Afghanistan policy. For example, the Iranian government has publicly opened direct talks with the Taliban, while the U.S. administration is conducting its negotiations with the Taliban through the Gulf emirate of Qatar.

While the Iranian elite prides itself on its own far-reaching networks in its neighbouring region, it is also closely monitoring any possible new fronts that the United States might be able to open against Iran. The public confrontation with Israeli forces

in 2018 remained without any significant Iranian counteroffensive. Tehran appears to recognize that a “red line” has been drawn here, and is apparently avoiding escalation of the military confrontation with Israel. Iran assumes that for its part, Israel will be content with having sent clear signals opposing an Iranian presence on the Syrian-Israeli border. In this way, Iran and Israel have made clear to one another just how far each is prepared to allow the other side to go. Nevertheless, this “game” remains extremely dangerous. In this regard, the task of soothing tempers on both sides has fallen to Moscow. No other actor in the Syrian context has similarly good and far-reaching contacts within both Israel and Iran.

## 2.4. Saudi Arabia

The Trump government’s announcement in late April 2019 that it would withdraw the majority of American troops from Syria was viewed negatively by Riyadh. The Kingdom clearly sees that it cannot fill the vacuum created by the U.S. withdrawal, and cannot conduct the fight against the Assad regime, Iran and Russia alone. Riyadh therefore appears to be coming to terms with Assad remaining in power. The United Arab Emirates in particular is currently trying to use political and economic investments to recover its own “Arab” influence, seeking to roll back Turkish and Iranian influence in Syria by establishing its own presence in Damascus. Even if Riyadh continues to delay Assad’s rehabilitation within the Arab League, Saudi Arabia is likely to follow the UAE’s engagement, with the aim of curbing Iranian influence.

Overall, Saudi Arabia’s rulers regard the United States’ changing stance toward the Middle East with considerable concern. On the one hand, the strategic relationship between Riyadh and Washington, which has lasted since the 1940s, has proved mutually beneficial. The United States has provided for the security of the Saudi Arabian state, and thus for the al-Saud regime, while the Kingdom – aside from the 1973 oil crisis – has always produced a stable supply of oil for the world economy. For Washington, the fact that Saudi Arabia has never threatened Israel’s existence has also been significant, as has its support of thousands of jobs for the U.S. economy through the purchase of American-produced arms. On the other hand, in the present phase of regional turbulence and volatility, Saudi Arabia sees no alternative to the U.S. security guarantee. The Kingdom’s rulers know full well that in the case of a scenario like the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq in 1990, only the United States has the capability and the willingness to reverse such a situation, or to protect the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia against a similar invasion of foreign troops. From the Saudi perspec-

tive, there is no security-relevant replacement for the United States in sight.

However, the dilemma for Saudi Arabia runs deeper than simply the United States’ new orientation away from the Middle East. The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 was undertaken against the strong objections of Saudi leaders. The consequences have fulfilled Riyadh’s worst fears: Iranian influence in Iraq and other parts of the Middle East has grown, and the Islamist extremist movement, which Saudi observers believe aims in part at bringing about the fall of the Saudi monarchy, has been strengthened. While the United States is considered indispensable with regard to the Kingdom’s security, Washington has at the same time proved to be a factor of increasing unreliability, taking the Saudi viewpoint and its associated regional interests into account to only a very limited extent. This was made particularly clear in the case of the nuclear deal with Iran. Riyadh deemed the Obama administration’s expectation that Iran would limit its regional activities as a consequence of the JCPOA to be naive and short-sighted.

Disillusioned by U.S. policies, Saudi Arabia has begun taking two distinct approaches. In one approach, Riyadh has begun to take foreign policy matters into its own hands, and has set a proactive agenda for regional issues. This position is being maintained by a new generation of leaders, epitomized by new Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Mohammed bin Salman himself has emphasized the importance of the Kingdom’s efforts to take up the fight with Iran, as well as to defend Saudi interests in Yemen. However, this approach carries two significant risks. First, Saudi Arabia does not have all the capabilities needed to play a decisive strategic role in the many arenas of the current Middle Eastern landscape. The war in Yemen offers an example of this shortcoming; here, despite an

intervention stretching back to March 2015, Saudi Arabia has been unable to end the Houthi uprising, a political-military movement by the Shi'a-affiliated Zaidi. Second, the new generation of leaders has little experience in regional or foreign policy. As a result, their policies are erratic and tactically driven rather than being oriented to the medium or long term. The inconclusive blockade of the emirate of Qatar, conducted by Saudi Arabia with the support of the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt since June 2017, has been one clear example of this.

The second approach in recent Saudi policy has been driven by the search for new allies. King Salman's visit to Moscow in 2017, the first Saudi king to do so, and his Asia trip the same year, were both emblematic of the Saudi search for new potential partners. However, the determination to diversify the country's foreign relations cannot obscure the fact that neither Russia nor China is willing or in a position to take over the United States' role as a protective power in the Gulf region, and thus resolve the Kingdom's security dilemma.

Saudi Arabia's policymakers are aware of these contradictions, and have tried to revive the U.S.-Saudi alliance by engaging in a wide-ranging charm offense directed at the Trump administration. For example, the U.S. president was given a sumptuous reception in Riyadh during his first overseas visit in May 2017, and Saudi Arabia subsequently announced investments worth several hundred billion dollars in the United States, along with additional arms purchases. Such measures ultimately protected the Kingdom from a break in relations following the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi. However, they have not been sufficient to dispel the significant doubts held by other relevant political institutions in the United States, particularly within Congress, regarding the Kingdom's leadership and political orientation under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

## 2.5. Israel

President Trump's declaration that he would withdraw all U.S. troops from Syria hit Israel like a slap in the face. The subsequent announcement that a small contingent of U.S. troops would be left in Syria does nothing to change the assessment that the U.S. presence in the region will be diminished. The Israeli government sees a U.S. step of this kind as creating a power vacuum that Russia and particularly Iran will continue to use for their own benefit. Israel is joined in this assessment by important Arab allies of the United States such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt.

Israel's years-long shadow war against Iran, which is currently playing out in and over Syria in particular, is increasingly coming into the foreground with the gradual end of the war in the neighbouring country. The number of Israeli air and missile strikes on Iranian weapons stockpiles and positions in Syria soared in 2018. In January 2019, Israel even abandoned its policy of deliberate ambiguity and publicly acknowledged these attacks. Most Israelis see Iran as the greatest threat to their country. A particular focus is the Shi'ite Hezbollah militia in southern Lebanon, with its estimated 120,000 missiles that are now regarded as having the capability to reach all of Israel. Iran's presence in Syria and Iraq has also given Hezbollah greater clout. Therefore, Israel's security strategy has been to prevent Iran and Hezbollah at all costs from gaining positions closer to its own borders. Israeli politicians and military figures alike believe that if Iran is not stopped, the next war threatens to be the first "northern war," with Lebanon and Syria serving as combat areas. Many in Jerusalem are convinced that for Israel to be able to win such a war, Iranian forces must already be massively weakened and pushed back; otherwise, Israel risks being driven into an indefensible position in the case of all-out war.

To be sure, it is unclear whether, when and how Trump will actually withdraw the U.S. troops from Syria. The U.S. president's political statements are making it increasingly difficult for Israel to identify any coherent Washington political strategy for the Middle East. The Israeli army thus sees itself as being forced to realign its planning games and war scenarios. Nonetheless, the Israeli government is getting full backing from the Trump administration for its military operations in Syria, and deliveries of state-of-the-art American weapon systems to Israel are continuing.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has for years pursued a balancing act in matters having to do with Syria, because Israel must take Russia's interests into account, and prevent unwanted clashes between the two air forces from emerging over Syrian air space. When Syrian troops mistakenly shot down a Russian plane with surface-to-air missiles during an Israeli attack in September 2018, President Putin used this as a pretext to limit Israel's freedom of movement. This may have changed since, however; Israel continues to intervene massively in Syria, and Putin and Netanyahu are meeting regularly (13 times between 2016 and April 2019), although there have been repeated admonitions from Russia that Israel should and must no longer operate at will within Syria.

The new governing coalition resulting from the April 9, 2019 parliamentary elections – with Netanyahu again serving as prime minister – is unlikely to enact any significant changes to the substance of the country's Iran policy, which regards Iran as the greatest foreign and security policy challenge.

Nevertheless, the U.S. withdrawal from the Middle East, which has been going on for a number of years, is currently causing fewer headaches than under Trump's predecessor, Barack Obama. The termination of the JPCOA treaty with Iran and Trump's clearly anti-Iranian position both accord with Netanyahu's political credo. From Israel's point of view, it was Obama's policy of rapprochement with Iran that shifted the balance of power in the Middle East, and which has meant that Israel can now more or less openly cooperate with key Arabic states such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE that are officially hostile to Jerusalem. This new rapprochement is guided by a common Iran threat analysis, and follows the motto of all Middle Eastern politics: "The enemy of my enemy is my friend." However, the termination of the nuclear treaty with Iran, with no replacement, has also raised critical voices in Israel. The Israeli general staff in particular was in favor of maintaining the agreement, which was deemed to be bad but better than nothing.

### 3. How do Russia, Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Israel view the role of the EU and its member states in the region?

#### 3.1. Russia

Russia's expectations of the EU in the region are limited. From Moscow's point of view, Brussels is not a military actor in Syria or the Middle East. The changing role played by the United States will do nothing to change this. If European member states such as France or the United Kingdom were to become militarily active in the region, it would only be in cooperation with the United States.

Moscow still believes that EU member states have a vested interest in Syria's reconstruction and in the return of refugees. The Kremlin is disappointed that its reconstruction plans for Syria and for the return of Syrian refugees have as yet received little support within the European Union. In this regard, Russian policymakers underestimate how seriously the EU takes the political and humanitarian conditions set by its member states for the return of the refugees. The same is true of the EU's willingness to invest in Syria only under certain political conditions, accompanied by a more or less democratic transition.

Moscow will continue to press for the EU to commit itself to Syria's economic and financial reconstruction, but the two sides' different ideas, as well as the Europeans' relative passivity, hold further potential for frustration within the EU-Russia relationship.

In addition, Moscow sees potential for divisions between the EU and the United States, as in the case of Washington's termination of the Iran nuclear agreement. However, neither Russia nor the EU appear to be politically strong enough to be able to counter the United States with their own strategy here.

If there were to be a military conflict between Israel and Iran, Russia's role as "honest broker" between the two parties would come under massive pressure. Russia believes that the EU would play only a minor role in any such conflict. However, the degree of support provided to Israel by the United States would ultimately be crucial.

#### 3.2. Turkey

The United States' announced withdrawal produces no changes with regard to Turkey's view of the EU. Ankara does not link its EU strategy to U.S. policies in Syria. Ankara expects the EU and its member states to respect Turkey's Middle East priorities, primarily by providing no support whatsoever to Kurdish militias and by opposing any kind of Kurdish autonomy. However, Turkey's foreign policy priorities are increasingly determined by its domestic economic developments. In this context, Turkish President Erdogan has let the EU know that his country is no longer in a position to accept new refugees should Syria enter another period of destabilization, particularly in the province of Idlib that borders Turkey. This assessment must be taken seriously. The outcome of the Turkish economic crisis cannot yet be foreseen. As yet, Ankara has refused to request aid from the International Monetary Fund, as the government believes this could be seen as a weakness.

In contrast to its military-policy goals, Turkey's economic dependence on the EU is clear. Turkey's economy is deeply intertwined with the EU's internal market, and the Turkish president's last visit to Germany in September 2018 focused particularly on efforts to normalize relations with the EU and with Germany, Turkey's most important economic partner, as quickly as possible. In addition, Turkey is seeking a modernization of its customs union with the EU that would take Turkish economic interests more strongly into account. In addition, Ankara hopes for continued financial support within the framework of the March 2016 EU-Turkey migration agreement. However, the Turkish government would prefer to determine how these financial resources are to be allocated autonomously, not in coordination with the EU.

### 3.3. Iran

Iran has repeatedly stressed that the country expects Europe to play a stronger role in the Middle East. In Syria, Iran wants Europe to act as a (co-)stabilizing force, and particularly as a financier of reconstruction. Politically, the country's policymakers confidently view Iran as being more influential than Europe. Nonetheless, the assumption in Tehran is that Syria is important for Europe, as it ultimately has direct impact on Europe's security. Thus, from the Iranian point of view, it appears plausible that the Europeans must commit themselves to a long-term stabilization plan, working together with the most influential actors – that is, Iran and Russia. Iran's leaders also understand this as sticking by Assad, or at least some government in Damascus that is friendly to Tehran.

However, Tehran has been somewhat disillusioned with the EU and individual member states and has had to readjust its expectations. While Iran's policymakers previously believed that the Europeans did not want a more significant global role,

and thus could not assert one, they now appear to realize that despite a strong desire to do so – as in the case of the conflict over preserving the nuclear deal – Europe clearly cannot act independently, at least in the sense of pursuing a foreign policy independent of the United States. However, there are regular calls within the Iranian policy discourse calling for "strategic patience." They argue that a paradigm shift toward greater European autonomy is just getting underway, and that more time will be needed before it can coalesce into actual actions. INSTEX, the "special purpose vehicle" that has now been set up to preserve the nuclear deal by maintaining trade relations with Iran, is regarded as a first step in this direction. It can therefore be assumed that despite Tehran's disillusionments in recent months, policymakers there have not given up hope of seeing Europe, or at least important EU member states, disassociate themselves more significantly from the United States' strategic goals.

### 3.4. Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia does not see the EU as a substitute for the United States in the Middle East. This is all the more true given the United Kingdom's imminent departure from the EU, which Riyadh believes will further weaken the EU's foreign and security policy competence. Saudi Arabia has always preferred to seek the support of individual European countries rather than of the EU as a whole. In this regard, it has focused primarily on the United Kingdom (even after Brexit), France, Spain and Italy – for example, in striking an agreement with Paris for the joint production of warships. Riyadh is also likely to seek strengthened relationships with eastern European states such as Hungary, Poland and Bulgaria, just as Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu has sought ties with the Visegrád states (Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia) in order to obstruct common European positions that he deems disagreeable. While Germany is seen as an important force in European policy, Berlin's ambivalence with regard to issues such as arms exports, along with some German policymakers' willingness to criticize the Kingdom's human rights practices and some of its foreign policy initiatives, have made Germany something of a second-tier player for Riyadh.

Saudi Arabia's policy toward the EU is aimed at obtaining support in European institutions. This can come either from individual countries that are reluctant to join the overall EU's rather skeptical attitude toward the Kingdom, or from selected factions in the European Parliament that view Saudi Arabia as being important enough to block potentially negative resolutions against the Kingdom. In March 2019, the UN Human Rights Council called for the release of Saudi activists. This was attended by the unanimous approval of all European member states, joining Japan, Canada and Australia; however, Saudi policy remains focused on muting or altogether blocking further steps against the Kingdom through pressure exerted at the bilateral level.

Riyadh policymakers understand that the EU is critical of the United States' international orientation as well. However, Riyadh is also aware that this in no way means that Europe will necessarily agree with Saudi policy in the region.

### 3.5. Israel

For Israel, the EU primarily plays a Middle East role in two areas: in the conflict with the Palestinians, and in its relations with Iran, the latter of which also affects efforts to resolve the conflict in Syria. However, from Prime Minister Netanyahu's perspective, the EU pays insufficient attention to Israel's security interests and its analyses of the region's strategic conditions. Thus, European policies have been regarded with a critical eye.

With regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the EU is relevant for Israel because it is the largest financier of the Palestinian Authority (PA), and because it advocates a so-called two-state solution. Israel certainly has an interest in the stability of the PA. However, in addition to the fundamental rejection of a two-state system among far-right actors in the government, this solution is viewed with skepticism given the current state of affairs in Israel regarding domestic political, ideological and technical security issues. From the point of view of many Israelis, the position held by largely liberal European states such as the United Kingdom, France and Germany is rather unbalanced, and even pro-Palestinian. Some even see this position as an unrealistic assessment of the conflict. The EU's belief that the PA is the appropriate negotiating partner for Israel – one with which a treaty and ultimately a peace can be reached – is rejected by many decision-makers in Jerusalem.

The EU's Iran policy has from the beginning been a source of rancor for the Israeli government. It contradicts Netanyahu's beliefs, and he accordingly did all he could to block the nuclear treaty. From the point of view of the Israeli government, one of the core weaknesses of the JCPOA treaty is the fact that it does not address the issue of Iran's ballistic-missile development, which causes great worry in Israel. According to the Israeli government's assessments, the release of frozen Iranian financial-institution accounts and funds (due to the

removal of sanctions after the signing of the nuclear deal in 2015) enabled Tehran to provide arms to the Iran-linked militias in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon on a still more massive scale than previously, enabling it to increase its regional influence further. Israel sees the Obama administration, and now primarily the EU, as holding responsibility for the problems in Syria and Lebanon. Accordingly, the Israeli government has opposed Europe's attempts to enable further trade with Iran by using its own INSTEX special-purpose vehicle despite the reintroduction of U.S. sanctions.

For the Israeli government, the EU is an extremely important economic partner. The maintenance of privileged trade and economic relations, and the country's participation in important EU development and support programmes, are of great significance to the Israeli market. However, Israeli know-how, particularly in the areas of high tech, green tech and genetic engineering, is also taking on increasing importance for European companies and institutions.

In order to counter EU positions critical of Israel, Prime Minister Netanyahu has walked a delicate path in recent years. By allying with the Visegrád states, he has succeeded in disrupting the development of a common European position on Middle East issues. Resolutions deemed by the Israeli government to be pro-Palestinian or even critical of Israel are regularly watered down or even blocked in Brussels. However, Netanyahu's new partnership with these EU member countries is largely political, and even problematic from a Jewish historical point of view: Israel now has partners that in some cases act with open anti-Semitism in their own states, and which misrepresent their own historical role in the Holocaust. Many observers in Israel consider this strategy to be dangerous.

## 4. What recommendations can be made to the EU? What guidelines should the EU follow with regard to Syria? How can it develop policies vis-à-vis Russia, Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Israel? What opportunities can the EU take advantage of?

Geographically speaking, Syria is part of Europe's immediate neighbourhood. In addition, Syria's war has had a significant impact on its neighbouring countries of Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and Israel, which are also located in the EU's immediate south-eastern neighbourhood. From a security policy point of view, the European Union and its member states are not in a position to fill the strategic gap left by the changed role of the United States, particularly in Syria. Russia and the regional powers of Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Israel see the EU and its member states as playing a very limited role in security policy issues. Only the United Kingdom and France, both permanent members of the UN Security Council and official nuclear-weapon states, are taken seriously in this regard. Given the complexity of the regional challenges, Europeans are once again confronted by circumstances offering them limited capacity to act at the international level. From the perspective of the key states in the region, the fact that the United States under Donald Trump has withdrawn basic support for the European Union as a project of regional integration has also damaged the EU's standing.

Meanwhile, pressured by the United States to take greater responsibility for their own security, Europe's capitals have become convinced that the EU itself is the only body capable of resolving the issue. Thus, after a long phase of stagnation, European security and defense policy has made political progress in recent years. Examples include the implementation agenda for the Permanent Structured Cooperation project, various pilot projects aimed at aligning defense-policy planning processes within the Coordinated Annual Review on Defense (CARD) framework, the European Commission's European Defense Fund (EDF), and the compact on civilian crisis management (Civilian CSDP Compact). Despite these developments, the EU has to date been unable to come up with effective security or defense policy options designed to counter the military operations conducted by key states in the European neighbourhood.

As it seeks to address regional expectations while remaining conscious of its own limited capacity for security policy action, the EU must now make a realistic assessment of its strengths and weaknesses, and focus its activity on tried-and-true political approaches.

Within this context, one priority for the EU should be the search for new forms of cooperation with the United States. Even with all the challenges in the transatlantic relationship described above, it is important for Europeans to bear in mind that the values and interests that align them with the United States are greater than those that would divide them. Given this reality, and despite all the difficulties, Europeans should seek to coordinate with the United States to the greatest extent possible in all their Syria-related initiatives, and in all efforts to contain regional tensions.

The EU may never succeed in convincing the Trump administration that the European project is an ally, and not – in Trump's words – a "foe." Against this backdrop, however, the European Union would be wise to develop new and innovative EU-US initiatives that might breathe life back into the flagging relationship. EU representatives should demonstrate to their American colleagues that the European Union wants to be more than an observer in the "strategic competition" highlighted by the administration in its national security strategy. President Trump appears not to understand that the United States' relationship with Europe is one of its greatest advantages in its competition with Russia and China. Working in parallel with national governments in Europe, EU representatives should do everything in their power to change American perceptions. One diplomatic success in this regard was the common statement by the German, French, UK and U.S. governments in March 2019 regarding the eighth anniversary of the outbreak of the Syrian conflict, in which the calls to action were entirely consistent with the declaration released after the EU/UN Brussels III conference on Syria. It is unfortunate that only a few days later, without any previous consultation between the United States and its European or Arab allies, U.S. President Trump announced the United States' recognition of Israel's 1981 annexation of the Syrian Golan Heights. In doing so, Washington is pulling its support for UN Resolution 242, an important international reference in efforts to resolve the Middle East conflict, and one which Washington had always previously championed.

Despite the challenges associated with dealing with the Trump administration, Europeans themselves would be wise to step up their efforts at reaching across the Atlantic. This includes identifying solutions to their own intra-European differences

in dealing with the United States, particularly regarding the conflicts in and over Syria and the Middle East. These were recently on display at a Middle East conference organized by Washington and Warsaw, with the EU/E3 (the United Kingdom, France and Germany) and Brussels on one side, and Italy, Poland and other central and eastern European countries on the other. The Trump administration sought to use this inter-governmental conference to highlight its strategy for isolating Iran, while signaling to the EU that a number of its member states in fact supported Washington. It is at least worth exploring why a number of central and eastern European EU member states heeded Washington's call for high-profile participation in this conference – for example, whether they might in fact place a higher priority on their bilateral relationships with the United States, because they expect effective protection from Russia to come only from Washington.

Given the UK's considerable foreign and security policy resources, its exit from the EU would deliver yet another blow to European ambitions in the Middle East. The EU and its members should therefore do everything they can to keep the United Kingdom involved. Specific new forums and joint projects will have to be created to facilitate this foreign and security policy cooperation. The EU must also be aware of, and strive to limit, the serious international damage being done to its reputation as a result of Brexit. One means of accomplishing this could be to translate the EU/E3 and EU/E4 forums (United Kingdom, France and Germany plus Italy) into a post-Brexit future. In this phase of tectonic shifts within the EU's neighbourhood, these and comparable forums for intensive diplomatic initiatives will be critical to maintaining communication channels even in the face of rising tensions, and may even enable a return to political processes over the long term.

In view of the increasing differences between EU member state governments on issues having to do with the Middle East, it is crucial that an EU/E3 or EU/E4 process or comparable forums retain close back-channel links with the EU27, in order to give broader scope to the EU countries' national positions. In this regard, it is likely that positions will increasingly clash, particularly with respect to the conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians. On Syria, coming to a unanimous opinion is a less thorny proposition, even if Germany, France and the United Kingdom have held fast to their position of avoiding direct dialogue with President Assad, while the Czech Repub-

lic, Italy and Poland have shown more willingness to compromise. Conflicting positions are also emerging between the EU/E3 and some central and eastern European member states with regard to future dealings with Iran in the Middle East. Precisely for this reason, however, it is important to continually reconnect the initiatives by smaller groups of member states with the EU Foreign Affairs Council; if necessary, the EU/E3 or EU/E4 forums could be expanded through the inclusion of a central or eastern European member state. Only in this way can communication be ensured on an ongoing basis, and the potential for unified positions of the EU at large can be explored. In principle, Europeans should in their own interest invest far more diplomatic resources in overcoming the growing foreign and security policy divisions within their own ranks. Germany should lead by example here.

Today, there are widespread calls for Europe to take majority decisions in foreign policy matters. However, without a change in the main European treaties, the scope of any such decisions would necessarily be limited. As long as unanimity remains the rule, the EU27's internal balancing mechanisms should be brought into greater use. Moreover, close foreign and security policy coordination with the United Kingdom will be necessary, even after a Brexit.

In addition, the EU should focus on deploying Europe's available economic resources more effectively so as to be able to exert political influence in the pursuit of European interests in Syria and the Middle East. These assets include the advantages gained through access to the European market, and the socioeconomic development and modernization opportunities provided by economic exchange with Europe. This particularly applies in the context of relations with Turkey. In the area of humanitarian aid and development cooperation, the European Union and its members can continue to play a substantial role. One particular advantage from the point of view of non-EU countries and international operations is the ability to depend on Brussels to reliably fulfill its financial commitments once they have been made.

## 4.1. Recommendations for the EU and its member states regarding Syria

In order to be taken seriously as actors in the international effort to shape Syria's future, the EU's institutions and member states must remain credible. This is particularly important with regard to implementing their basic Syria strategy dating from March 2017, and the declarations made at the Brussels conferences on Syria (2017, 2018, 2019), with their numerous references to UN Resolution 2254 and the Geneva process of negotiations. In taking these positions, the Europeans have established a commitment to the Syrian populations both in Syria and in exile as the centerpiece of their political, financial, economic, and humanitarian aid and support. The prospective return of refugees to their homes, along with mechanisms for ensuring their safety, should be a primary point of departure for future negotiations between the EU and the region's key states. The practical implementation of these core interests urgently requires the implementation of constitutional principles. In the absence of such a framework, there can be no security for the refugees. Specifically, this relates to the conditions needed to foster civil society institutions, and entails values and principles such as inclusion, reconciliation and the rule of law, as well as political, social and economic participation by all Syrian population groups. In other words, the EU's core interests and the associated values and principles constitute two sides of the same coin.

This value-based yet also interest-led policy adopted by the EU has kindled expectations among many Syrians in Syria and its neighbouring countries, as well as among the million Syrian refugees now living in EU countries; these populations believe that Europe takes the concept of human rights seriously, and will stand up for the protection of their human rights beyond the power games being played by the key states, the Assad regime and the jihadi groups.

However, the fine line between humanitarian aid and reconstruction in Syria – which cannot always be clearly drawn – represents a particular challenge.

Should Assad misuse "reconstruction as an instrument of dominance" (Kristin Helberg 2018), the EU should continue to refuse providing financial support. The Assad regime is already using ongoing construction efforts as an excuse to expel parts of the country's population, and as a means of advancing sympathetic groups. For example, Shi'ite combatants from Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan who have fought for the Assad regime are being resettled in Syria along with their families. Europeans must make it absolutely clear that they cannot accept developments of this kind. The continuation of such developments would render the return of Syrian refugees from Europe and from Syria's neighbouring countries hard to imagine and require the EU to

focus its support on providing care and assistance to this target group within Europe and Syria's neighbours. In such a case, EU engagement in Syria should take place only within international humanitarian-aid frameworks. This condition could be linked to the joint declaration of the October 2018 Turkish-Russian-French-German summit in Istanbul, which specified the "safe and voluntary return of refugees and internally displaced persons to their original places of residence in Syria" as a goal.

Given these circumstances, the EU and its member states should set clear benchmarks, criteria, and a chronological and organizational agenda for the financial and organizational support of reconstruction efforts and the lifting of sanctions on Syria. Following intra-European agreement on the issue, these tasks should be closely coordinated with the financially strong Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, in order to avoid a situation in which these countries are working at cross-purposes with European objectives. This strategy would give the EU more weight in talks and negotiations, particularly with the Astana powers of Russia, Iran and Turkey.

In the declaration following the March 2019 Brussels III conference on Syria, Brussels again emphasized the political conditions that the EU intends to link to its reconstruction aid. These conditionalities range from the initiation of a constitutional process that preserves Syria's integrity to a fair voting process based on secret balloting for all Syrians, to the creation of minimum rule-of-law standards. They aim at creating a situation like that called for by UN Resolution 2254. In addition, there must be a clearly formulated plan of action that specifies deadlines by which individual criteria must be verifiably fulfilled, thus allowing reconstruction aid to begin under European-set conditions. This also means that an independent and reliable local monitoring structure must be established, enabling the EU to verify that resources are being used in an efficient and targeted way. In the case of elections, a strong elections-monitoring mission must be put in place.

Because the EU has made itself the clear advocate for Syria's civilian population, and is demanding compliance with international rules and human rights, the commitment to prosecuting war crimes carried out in Syria is important. Otherwise, the EU's credibility will be called into question. In paragraphs 36 to 38 of its final declaration, the Brussels III conference on Syria explicitly emphasized the significance of this issue for societal reconstruction and reconciliation in Syria. In Germany, which received Europe's largest share of refugees (and thus potential witnesses), and where the principles of universal jurisdiction apply, investigations and legal procedures of this nature are already underway.

This commitment to prosecution should be maintained absolutely, and even strengthened if possible. If these efforts are indeed stepped up further, the German federal government should ensure that the international law department within the German federal prosecutor's office is furnished with sufficient funds and staff to carry out this work.

The successes of the "Council of the Syrian Charter" show that reconciliation can take place. This council includes influential Alawite dignitaries, Sunni tribal sheikhs, urban leaders and representatives of other communities and ethnic groups in Syria, and has allowed them to build ties with each other. The council signed a joint paper in Berlin in 2017, which could provide the foundation for a new social contract for Syria. The EU should integrate this charter into the political process in Geneva.

Europeans – particularly the EU/E3 – bear particular responsibility for the stabilization of northeast Syria. The military alliance constituted by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF; dominated by the Kurdish militias, with some Arabic Syrian fighting federations) liberated the area from IS rule with support from the U.S.-led international anti-IS coalition, with participation by the air forces of France, the United Kingdom and Germany. The Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), which led the fight on the ground, were instrumental in this task. The U.S. airstrikes – as well as those conducted by the EU/E3 – resulted in massive destruction in eastern Syria (particularly in and around Raqqa), and a high number of civilian victims. Leaving the area bereft of support following the U.S. withdrawal could result in instability and hopelessness, a resurgence of extremist groups, military escalation and renewed refugee flows.

The area is today under de facto Kurdish administration, and is governed by the Democratic Union Party (PYD), to some extent in conjunction with local partners. Since early 2016, it has been known as the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (or as Rojava, in Kurdish). The PYD rule is authoritarian, with its ideology, like that of its PKK sister party, based on an orthodox Marxism. The ruling party combines the advancement of women with grassroots democratic structures and the persecution of political opponents. Overall, many Syrian Kurds prefer PYD rule as a more tolerable variant of the Assad regime. The PYD allows the activities of about 80 NGOs; these must officially register and observe certain restrictions, but can work comparatively independently and freely in comparison to what would be possible in the areas controlled by the Assad regime. Expanding their scope for action vis-à-vis the PYD would be helpful for the maintenance and further expansion of local civil society structures. Given the weakened position of the Kurdish PYD, the EU/E3 could, in alliance with the United States, wield some influence in this regard, while also

helping the SDF to decentralize. Both approaches could help de-escalate the relationship between Turkey and the Syrian Kurds.

The Kurds face threats from two sides. On the one hand, Turkish President Erdogan has already signaled a military offensive aimed at expelling the YPG with the help of Ankara-supported Arab Syrian militias, designed to bring the border region under Turkish influence. On the other hand, the Assad regime has declared its intentions to bring the northeast back under its own control, a plan favored by Moscow and Tehran. Rather than either of these scenarios, the Kurds are likely to prefer that European partners and the United States secure the region.

Overall, the EU should apply its diplomatic and economic weight to restoring the legitimacy of the Geneva negotiations process under the leadership of the United Nations as the only international legitimated peace forum. The United Nations' negotiating table in Geneva is the only forum that can ensure a politically inclusive, holistic and sustainable conflict-resolution approach in Syria. In parallel, the EU should persuade Russia, Iran and Turkey, the key states organizing the Astana process, to throw their political weight behind the United Nations in Geneva. The Astana process is justified insofar as it allows Russia, Iran and Turkey, the interventionist powers in Syria, to coordinate with one another. However, the EU should work to ensure that its positions are given a hearing there, for example in a 3-plus-1 format. By applying strict conditionality in its provision of reconstruction aid, the EU would give its position greater weight vis-à-vis Moscow, Tehran and Ankara.

In order to counter regional tendencies toward escalation, particularly between Iran on the one hand and Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United States on the other, the EU should also establish and maintain an intensive process of shuttle diplomacy between Washington, Moscow, Ankara, Tehran, Riyadh and Jerusalem, with EU external representatives and a number of European foreign ministers taking part. Potentially, a political process addressing regional issues of dispute should also be created here; in addition to Syria, this could encompass the further stabilization of Iraq and support for ongoing negotiations aimed at ending the war in Yemen.

The fact that five EU members (or four, post-Brexit) – France, the United Kingdom, Germany, Poland and Belgium – are represented on the United Nations Security Council in 2019 should be used as an opportunity to communicate Europe's positions on the international stage.

## 4.2. Country-specific recommendations for the EU and its member states in dealing with Russia, Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Israel

### 4.2.1. Russia

Until the EU is willing to take more responsibility in Syria, it will not be taken seriously by Moscow as a relevant actor either in Syria or in the Middle East. At the moment, the EU's member states are allowing the Astana states of Russia, Iran and Turkey to restructure the Middle East region – with direct consequences for European security. To be sure, Russia is too weak to fill the gaps that the United States would leave in the event of a partial withdrawal. However, Moscow is deftly exploiting every bit of latitude afforded by the United States' changing role in the region. Thus, Russia's leaders must be factored into any effort to shape the post-war order in Syria. Europeans should therefore involve Moscow closely in their efforts to de-escalate tensions between Iran and Israel, the United States and Saudi Arabia, even if Russia is not a reliable partner with regard to establishing sustainable peace in the region. Russia's policymakers are seeking an authoritarian stabilization in Syria based on a centralized military regime. In so doing, they are prepared to cooperate with the EU within a narrow framework, for example in the coordination of conflict-management measures. However, the EU will also have to take Russian goals

into consideration; for example, Russia has an interest in securely retaining its military bases in Syria, and in establishing a political balance in the region in which Moscow continues to hold an important place. Conversely, if Russia expects Europe to make extensive commitments to Syria's reconstruction, it will have to be prepared to make serious concessions with regard to an inclusive and democratic future in Syria, and will have to allow the EU a substantial voice in shaping Syria's future political processes along the lines described above.

All this will require the EU to remain steadfast in its position, and to stand by its principles while persevering in its diplomatic efforts. Moscow will continue to regard the retention of Assad or a similar regime in power as a prerequisite for any deal. For Moscow, organizing stability along authoritarian lines takes precedence to the establishment of democratic processes, as Russian policymakers view the prospect of carrying out genuine democratic elections as being unrealistic and even undesirable in this devastated country that lacks functional institutions.

### 4.2.2. Turkey

Turkey and the EU are aligned on Syria policy particularly in the effort to prevent further refugee flows, for example as a result of an Assad attack on the northern Syrian province of Idlib. Similarly, they share the goal of enabling the return of Syrian refugees to their homes. Given these common interests, the EU should seek to strengthen Ankara, as Turkey often stands alone in the Moscow-Tehran-Ankara Astana-process power triangle, and is the weakest member of the three.

The EU would like to see the Erdoğan government reopen peace talks with the Kurds; restore the rule of law, media freedom and human rights within Turkey's domestic politics; and clearly dissociate Turkey from Russia. Most particularly, Brussels policymakers would like to see Ankara cancel its purchase of the Russian S-400 rockets.

The EU can demand compromises from the Erdoğan government if it makes visible efforts to help Turkey manage its economic difficulties, and puts forward trade- and energy-related offers for Ankara that will be conducive to Turkey's economic stabilization, and are thus equally in the interests of Turkey's government and its people. This demands the development of a strategy that goes beyond the EU accession debates. Such a plan should be aimed at reintegrating Turkey more deeply into concrete economic-cooperation mechanisms, and at resuming negotiations over the modernization of the EU-Turkey customs union.

If the EU and its member states want to anchor Turkey more deeply within Western structures, they cannot expect any concessions by the Erdoğan government on the Kurdish issue in Turkey. As long as no solution is in sight here, the Europeans should seek to have a moderating influence on both sides. At the same time, the Europeans should ensure that the Syrian Kurds are afforded equal political and economic participation in Syria's economic and societal reconstruction.

Both the EU and NATO should remind Turkey that they share common security interests beyond the question of Syria's future, and make clear that they want Ankara to take a leading role in preserving these interests. Brussels and Ankara both

see Russia's policies in the Black Sea region and the West Balkans as being destabilizing, and regard them as contrary both to Turkish and European interests.

#### 4.2.3. Iran

The realization of the nuclear agreement in July 2015 was both a milestone in international disarmament efforts and an outstanding success for European diplomacy. Accordingly, the EU should continue its efforts to uphold the agreement and fulfill its part. With the establishment of the INSTEX special-purpose vehicle despite U.S. opposition, Germany, France and the United Kingdom have sent a clear signal that they intend to uphold the spirit of the nuclear agreement. Most critical for Tehran will be the practical question of whether European companies will actually use this vehicle given the tightened U.S. sanctions in place since May 2018. Targeted European support for Iran in the fight against drugs and in providing care for refugees also sends important signals to Tehran that Europeans are seeking a cooperative relationship. Iran has served as a refuge for around 2 million people from Afghanistan and Pakistan, and – like Turkey and many European countries – faces great challenges with regard to caring for and integrating migrants and refugees.

However, despite their adherence to the nuclear deal, Europeans should make clear that they fully endorse the international criticism of Iran's support for militias in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen, and oppose the expansion of Iran's missile programme. For discussion of these issues, Europeans should on the one hand build on existing dialogue formats – for example, the framework of the EU/E4 (Germany, France, the United Kingdom and Italy) and its talks with Iran, which could also be

expanded to include Poland so as to integrate the central and eastern European member states' perspective into front-line diplomatic activities. Moreover, the EU should also incorporate its efforts into a broader diplomatic initiative aimed at countering regional tensions and tendencies toward escalation. In particular, this should take place through the previously mentioned campaign of shuttle diplomacy between Washington, Moscow, Ankara, Tehran, Riyadh and Jerusalem, involving the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and member states' foreign ministers. In this context, in addition to issues such as Iran's missile programme, conventional disarmament and support for militias, the EU should address the country's perceptions of threat, which cannot be dismissed given the barely concealed demands for regime change in Tehran.

In addition, the EU should clearly communicate to Iran that European reconstruction aid is indissolubly linked to political conditions (as noted above). This should in turn be associated with two demands: that Iran press the Assad regime too to comply with these stipulations, and that Tehran itself should additionally participate financially in the reconstruction efforts.

Moscow's policies will be decisive in reducing the potential for Iran-Israeli confrontation in Syria. In the context of the intensive shuttle diplomacy proposed in this paper, the EU can give political support to these de-escalation efforts.

#### 4.2.4. Saudi Arabia

Because Saudi Arabia has to address key issues of strategic uncertainty in its neighbourhood, the EU should find ways of expanding its own engagement with Riyadh. A policy of increased isolation, in part due to the continued impact of the Khashoggi affair, will do little to produce a more constructive Saudi policy that accords more closely with the EU's thinking. This applies both to Saudi domestic policy and to the important role that Saudi Arabia will continue to play in the politics of the Middle East. By pursuing a policy of constructive engagement, the EU should signal to Riyadh that it is committed to maintaining balanced relationships in the Middle East and the Gulf Region,

and that this entails taking the Kingdom's interests into consideration. However, this does not preclude the EU and its member states from communicating to Riyadh that they want an end to the war in Yemen, and want to see the suffering population there securely provided for. Accordingly, following the promising start of the February 2019 Yemen talks in Stockholm, the EU should step up its current international de-escalation and conflict-resolution mediation efforts in Yemen, and make sure that its diplomatic activities and support measures are coordinated and linked.

It is also critical that the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), as economic heavyweights, play a central role in Syria's reconstruction alongside the Europeans. The EU should therefore coordinate its political demands and socioeconomic objectives for Syria's future with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in particular, so as to prevent the Gulf States' policies from working at cross-purposes with those of the EU.

As part of its approach, the EU should initiate discussions at the level of the inter-regional relations between the EU and the GCC, aimed at strengthening institutional relations between the two organizations. The joint action plan between the EU and the GCC states for the years 2010 – 2013 could serve as a template here. If possible, this point should be placed on the agenda of the next annual EU-GCC ministerial council meeting.

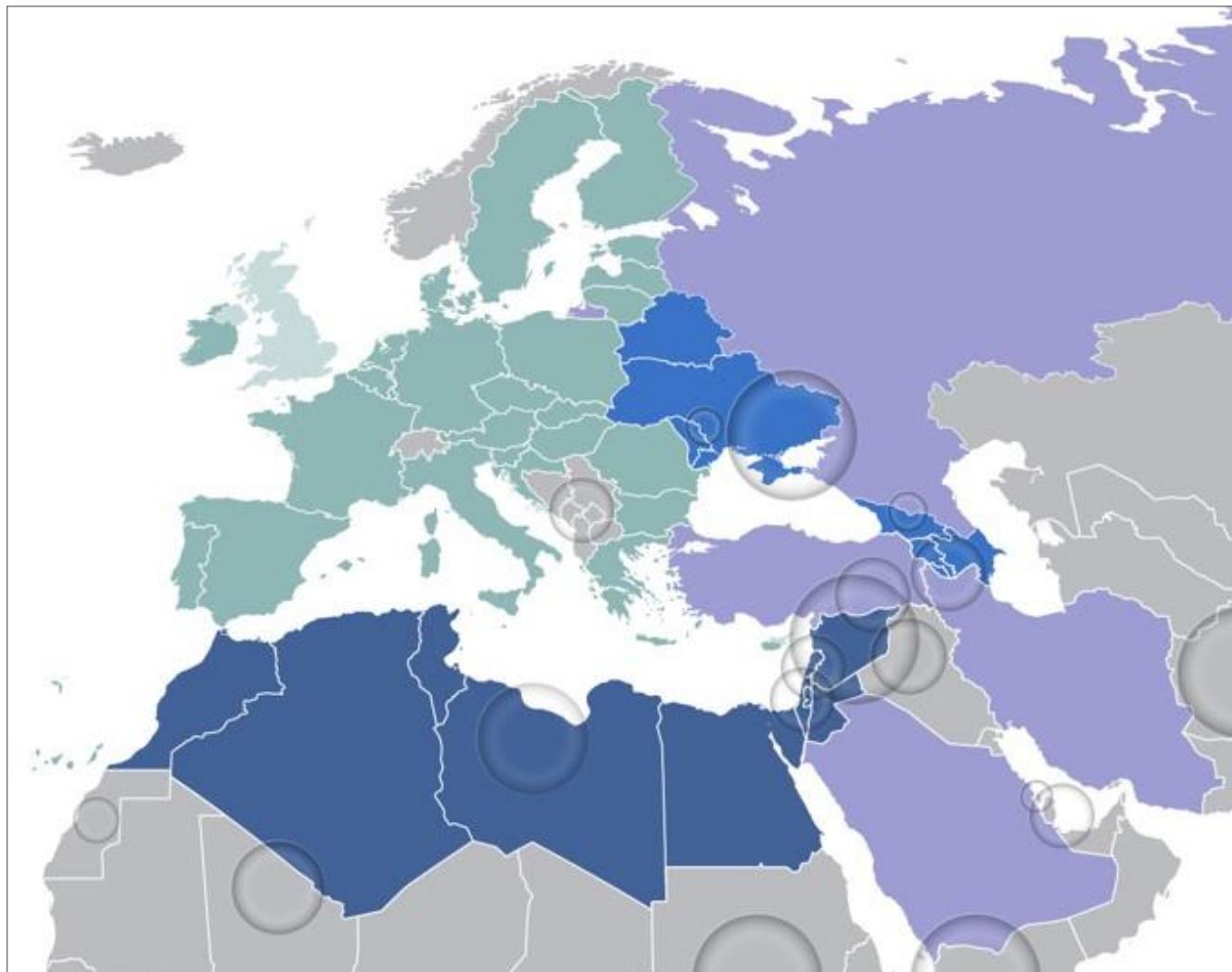
In line with this multilateral approach, the EU and those of its member states that are also part of the G20 could use Saudi Arabia's coming G20 presidency, scheduled for 2020, as an opportunity for further engagement.

In the future, the EU and Saudi Arabia might also expand their relations beyond the purely political and economic levels. For instance, EU policymakers could wherever possible establish contacts with the growing younger generation in Saudi Arabia, as this group will play a key role in the Kingdom's future development. Given the numerous youth organizations that have emerged in recent years, such as the MiSK Foundation (founded in 2011 by the Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Foundation), the EU should examine the degree to which closer engagement with such entities could be useful and productive.

#### 4.2.5. Israel

Israel is dominated by concerns over Iran's widening regional influence, the Iranian missile programme, and particularly Iran's presence in Syria. The EU should take Israel's security concerns seriously, and work to counter the potential for escalation presented by the Israeli-Iranian conflict. In seeking to address the confrontation between Israel and Iran in Syria, the EU should coordinate in particular with Russia, which could also mediate between the two conflicting parties out of its own interests. In the context of the dangerous tensions in the region as a whole, the EU should pursue firm diplomatic initiatives – such as the previously mentioned campaign of shuttle diplomacy between Washington, Moscow, Ankara, Tehran, Riyadh and Jerusalem – with the goal of initiating a political process that addresses core challenges including the role of militias, military interventions in regional conflict centers (Syria, Iraq, Yemen), and additional questions of regional security and socioeconomic development.

If the EU engages in regular dialogue with Israel over the Syria conflict, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict could also be placed on the agenda. Israel has an interest in the European Union continuing to provide financial support to the Palestinians, as it is the largest donor to the Palestinian Authority. A give and take between Brussels and Jerusalem could be successful here. Both parties to this conflict, the Palestinians and the Israelis, are part of the European neighbourhood. Even if the current local realities are rendering a two-state solution increasingly less likely, the EU should continue to work toward its realization. The more it achieves for Israel on issues related to Syria, the more likely it is that the EU will gain influence in Jerusalem on issues related to Palestine. Because the Palestinian-U.S. relationship has suffered serious damage as a result of Trump's policies, and Trump's son-in-law is working on a plan for the solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – which will in all likelihood be rejected, at least by the Palestinians – this conflict should also be placed on the agenda of U.S.-European talks on Syria. The EU should use its financial strength to make sure that its position is given a hearing in Washington.



## Neighbours of the neighbours

- EU 28/27
- Influential neighbouring states Iran, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey
- Conflicts of values and interests
- Eastern Partnership Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine
- Southern Neighbourhood Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Syria, Tunisia, Westbank including East-Jerusalem and Gaza

Source:

<https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/de/publikationen/publikation/did/antagonisms-in-the-eus-neighbourhood/>



## 5. Recommendations for the EU and its member states – in brief

### 5.1. Regarding the Syrian conflict and related crises

1. The EU and its member states should continue to insist on the minimal conditions declared at the Brussels III Conference as a prerequisite to providing European reconstruction aid to Syria. These conditions include finding a political solution that introduces a basic rule of law framework, allows for the safe return of Syrian refugees, and provides opportunities of political and socioeconomic participation to all Syrians in a post-war setting. In order to strengthen the importance and credibility of their demands, Europeans should specify the economic support they are prepared to make available for reconstruction aid in Syria.
2. It is important to state unequivocally that any misuse of reconstruction aid to consolidate the Syrian regime's grip on power is unacceptable. In the interest of a transparent use of European taxpayers' money, the EU must insist on investments in Syria being subject to independent and reliable monitoring. European aid should remain limited to humanitarian affairs. This includes providing Syria's neighbours the help they need in handling refugee inflows and investing in education and training for Syrians seeking refuge in the EU.
3. In northeastern Syria, where Syrian Kurds and their militias as well as individual Syrian Arab combat units have shouldered the brunt of the struggle against IS, the E3 bear a specific responsibility for stabilization and reconstruction efforts. As the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria proceeds, European responsibilities will grow. The EU/E3 could promote local civil society structures and rebuild destroyed infrastructure. Improving living conditions in the region, stabilizing security and ensuring equal political participation opportunities for Kurds and Arabs alike would help counter widespread dissatisfaction and the sense of hopelessness found among the people of northeastern Syria while also deprive extremists of the terrain upon which mobilization and recruitment can flourish. Demonstrating a commitment of this nature in the formerly IS-held territory would also represent a contribution to a broader and long-term fight against terrorism.
4. Participating in stabilization and reconstruction efforts in northeastern Syria requires military security. The EU/E3 should therefore seek to ensure that the United States maintain a presence in the region with a certain number of troops. An increase in the military presence of the United Kingdom and France (relative to their respective size) that targets the security and long-term stability of those regions east of the Euphrates could render a continued U.S. presence more palatable to the Trump administration. For their part, Europeans could use their own presence to nudge the Kurdish autonomy authorities to transfer more power to local structures (e.g., in the Arab majority regions) and to allow non-state stakeholders greater leeway in their activities.
5. More broadly, the EU should use its diplomatic and economic influence to help restore the legitimacy of the Geneva negotiations process under the leadership of the United Nations as the only internationally legitimated diplomatic framework for an inclusive peace process. At the same time, the EU should persuade Russia, Iran and Turkey, the key states that structure the Astana process, to throw their political weight behind the United Nations in Geneva. The Astana process is key to allowing Russia, Iran and Turkey to coordinate their positions among themselves. However, the EU should seek to ensure that its positions are also represented in the process, for example in a 3-plus-1 format.
6. Europeans should support or step up national, European and international efforts to take legal action and prosecute war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in the Syrian war.
7. The EU should bring the draft of a new social contract for Syria, as prepared by the "Council of the Syrian Charter" and which represents all major religious and ethnic groups in Syria, to the UN negotiations held in Geneva.
8. The EU should ensure that Syrian Kurds can enjoy full participation on equal footing and that they are integrated into the process of political and economic reconstruction in Syria.

9. The EU must make it clear to Iran and Russia that it expects both states to exercise their influence with the Syrian regime in convincing them to meet the conditions formulated in UN Resolution 2254, which the EU has also identified as a prerequisite for European reconstruction aid. The key practical criterion for implementation should be the return of refugees to a safe and secure environment grounded in a functioning rule of law. Both countries should also be encouraged to make a substantial contribution to the reconstruction of Syria, a process that must yield benefits for the civilian population as a whole.
10. Finally, the EU should coordinate its political demands and socioeconomic objectives regarding humanitarian aid and the reconstruction process with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in order to ensure that the Gulf States' policies do not work at cross-purposes with those of the EU.

## 5.2. Regarding the international context and the EU's position vis-à-vis the key states

1. Under the leadership of the EU High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy and several EU foreign ministers the EU should engage in shuttle diplomacy between Washington, Moscow, Ankara, Tehran, Riyadh and Jerusalem in order to counter a potential escalation of tensions in particular between Iran and Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United States.
2. Despite the various problems currently at work in transatlantic relations, Europeans should seek to coordinate as much as possible with the United States on all their Syria-related measures and in all efforts to contain regional tensions. In terms of values and interests, Europeans and U.S. Americans show greater unity than division – despite the transactional nature of President Trump's foreign policy approach.
3. In order to prevent a military confrontation between Iran and Israel in Syria, the EU should seek to secure Russia's cooperation in particular. As one of the essential security policy actors in the Syrian war, Russia currently has the greatest influence with both Iran and Israel.
4. Turkey's full integration into Western structures is an EU interest. European efforts to ease Turkey's capacity to overcome its economic and financial crisis, which involve resuming negotiations on modernizing the customs union, are a constructive means of ensuring the Erdogan administration's ability to engage in compromise. However, the Erdogan government is unlikely to offer much in the way of a compromise on the Kurdish question in Turkey; a solution to this issue is currently out of reach. Nonetheless, in return for its efforts, the EU/E3 can expect Turkey to pursue a constructive policy of de-escalation within its neighbourhood, particularly in northeastern Syria, and to re-affirm the rule of law at home.
5. Any increased EU/E3 engagement in northeastern Syria should involve coordination with the United States and be sure to include Turkey as an actor. For the Kurds in northeastern Syria, EU/E3 involvement in reconstruction and military security efforts could hinge on whether or not the YPG continues to supply weapons to the PKK in Turkey. Ankara's cooperation with the Kurdish Regional Government in northern Iraq can prove helpful here. In terms of Turkish security, this strategy is preferable to Ankara launching a military takeover of northeast Syria, which neither Russia nor Iran would tolerate. More broadly, an EU-driven reconstruction process that delivers long-term stability in a region bordering Turkey would also be within Erdogan's security interests.
6. The EU should take a rigid dual-pronged approach to Iran: On the one hand, it should take concrete steps to demonstrate its commitment to the nuclear treaty (e.g., via the special purpose vehicle INSTEX), its will to cooperate with Iran, and to show that Europe rejects demands for a regime change in Tehran. On the other hand, the EU/E4 and the EU/EU3 – in the diplomatic pursuit of peace in Syria – should be unequivocal in declaring Europe's rejection of any efforts by Iran to instrumentalize militias in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon or to expand its missile programme, which will be viewed as a threat to regional security.

7. The EU should seek a policy of engagement with Saudi Arabia that signals the European intent to take the Kingdom's interests into account on regional issues. At the same time, however, the EU should clearly reject the means and ways by which Saudi policy has been implemented – in particular the war in Yemen and the persecution of Saudi dissidents at home and abroad. Multilateral frameworks such as the EU-GCC consultations and the Saudi G20 presidency in 2020 also offer platforms for greater engagement.
8. Regarding the war in Yemen, the EU should continue to support the ongoing international mediation efforts to de-escalate and resolve the conflict while insisting that all parties involved in the conflict make it possible for those suffering in Yemen to receive the aid support that has been announced.
9. Europeans should take Israel's security concerns regarding Iran's regional policy more seriously and incorporate these concerns into their bilateral and multilateral diplomatic initiatives. Regarding Israel, the EU, in unity with all member states, should continue to work toward a two-state solution for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

### 5.3. Formulating a European foreign and security policy

1. The EU must strengthen its security policy instruments. This involves expanding defense policy initiatives within the Permanent Structured Cooperation and developing further proven diplomatic formats such as those of the EU/E3 or EU/E4.
2. The EU could command greater diplomatic clout if the EU member states represented in the UN Security Council which, in 2019, will include Belgium, Germany and Poland in addition to France and the UK, were to cooperate more closely and jointly represent in New York positions that have been agreed upon in Brussels.
3. The EU should use its economic resources and reputation for being a reliable provider of promised aid as levers in pursuing European interests, particularly with respect to addressing security deficits.
4. Geographical responsibilities within EU institutions should be organized more flexibly, thereby allowing these institutions to respond more effectively to crises in the neighbourhood region, for example, by including Turkey and Iraq in the Syria-Lebanon-Jordan dossier.
5. Given the growing differences among European governments on how to approach Middle East policy issues, it is crucial that the EU/E3 format or comparable formats remain in close diplomatic contact with the EU27 and thereby regularly involve member states that do not fully share the foreign policy objectives of the E3. For example, the EU/E3 and EU/E4 formats could be extended to include a member state from Central and Eastern Europe.
6. Looking ahead to a post-Brexit era, the EU will need to develop appropriate mechanisms designed to keep the UK involved in EU foreign and security policy initiatives. This applies in particular to the EU/E3 and EU/E4 formats.
7. Though it would be desirable to do away with the requirement of a unanimous vote of agreement on foreign policy decisions in the Foreign Ministers Council, this is not a feasible goal in the short term. Decision-makers should therefore work more intensively on creating a "common corridor" that would enhance the EU's political profile and credibility.

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## Methodology

The project initiative “Key States” brings together experts on the key states, experts on EU foreign and neighbourhood policies and experts on international relations on a regular basis.

In addition to these individuals' expertise, this paper incorporates findings from a series of talks held with various stakeholders, NGOs and independent experts in the capitals of the key states. These talks were held in the form of bilateral and or/roundtable discussions in Ankara (September 2018), Riyadh (September 2018), Moscow (November 2018) and Tehran (November 2018).

Discussions with decision-makers in Brussels and Berlin took place in February and April of 2019 respectively.

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