

Can the EU help prevent further conflict in Iraq and Syria?

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Mercury rising

As the battles for Aleppo and Mosul rage on, the wider Middle East appears to be in free fall. So-called Islamic State (Daesh) and the proxy wars between regional powers in Iraq and Syria have drawn the US, Russia and European states into the vortex and up-ended former alliances. Grand visions about a new security architecture are utterly unrealistic because the forces that have been unleashed are beyond any power's control now. Any intervention in the Middle East's nation-building processes risk backfiring. Even those insisting on the two-state solution for the settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have come to realise this. If the Middle East has indeed embarked on a thirty-year war, then the regional order established by the infamous Sykes-Picot Agreement at the end of World War I has only just started to unravel.

The best the West can do is to support those in the region who are trying to find peaceful, constructive solutions, and to stick with them. The challenge is to secure the lands they inhabit; establish effective development policies in close partnership with them; address underlying issues of governance, corruption and repression; and find functional ways to help restructure their economies, opening up to other stable parts of the region.

The new Trump administration will not be willing or able to solve all these problems on its own. But together with the European Union, the US can achieve much more. The EU is the world's largest provider of overseas development assistance and has an extensive toolbox of civilian capabilities. Moreover, it has a direct stake in a more stable Middle East: the EU's collective homeland security depends on peace beyond its borders. This has been amply illustrated by the phenomenon of foreign fighters and terrorist attacks on European soil. Also, the conflicts in the Middle East continue to spill out across borders, propelling waves of refugees that EU member states are anxious to control. Furthermore, the EU talks to all parties on the ground – with the exception of Daesh. This allows the EU to play a diplomatic role in support of conflict mitigation and resolution.

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The EU's approach to conflict and crisis management

Despite criticism about the weak and divided nature of the European Union and its foreign policy, the foregoing shows that member states do share common interests, which are most efficiently and effectively protected at the supranational level. These interests are expressed in the June 2016 EU Global Strategy and its numerous sub-strategies, such as that for Syria, Iraq and the threat of Daesh. The challenge is to implement these strategic commitments.

Conscious of its weakened position on the international stage and its internal divisions, the EU has adopted the concept of 'principled pragmatism' to guide its external action in the years ahead. This somewhat elusive phrase encapsulates an approach to EU foreign policy that is premised on security and building resilient states and societies on its outer periphery. This is not the finger-wagging missionary EU that some outsiders have come to know over the past 25 years. Although the EU is still bound by a constitutional duty to promote its values abroad, and indeed respect for international law writ large, it is approaching the world in a more realist fashion.

This new approach to EU foreign policy could be helpful in dealing with the deeply fractured Middle East. Circumstances, not preferences, dictate policymaking. The most imminent strategic goal is to contain and defeat Daesh. Here, the EU – as an international organisation with an underdeveloped military arm – is barely present. But individual member states are active in the air and on the ground: France, Germany, the UK and other EU countries have entered the US-led coalition against Daesh in Iraq and Syria. Some have done so in response to France's activation of the EU's collective self-defence clause in the wake of the November 2015 Paris terrorist attacks. Other configurations of member states (including Croatia, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia and Hungary) are arming and training Peshmerga forces in Iraq, and supporting the EU's humanitarian aid effort for refugees and internally displaced people in the 'free' Kurdistan Region of Iraq. This provides the stepping stone for the kind of resilience-building that the European Union could engage in. Close coordination by High Representative Federica Mogherini is key to a common sense of purpose among the EU's collective, in tune with the US and local allies.

In this context, the EU knows that talk about values, good governance and post-oil economics in a reconstituted Iraq rings hollow in the ears of Erbil and Baghdad. Such concerns are secondary when the regional and the federal government cannot even agree on plans for securing, governing, and rebuilding Mosul – a religious and ethnical microcosm of Iraq – once their own and several other Shiite and Sunni groups' armed forces liberate it from ISIS. Further tensions and fragmentation are to be expected when some of these actors claim or grab land in a fierce free-for-all, with potentially disastrous consequences for Iraq as a whole. At the moment, we do not know whether Iraq will emerge as a multi-sectarian state, a set of sectarian and ethnic enclaves, or sovereign states. To avoid opening a new chapter in the violent implosion of Iraq, the EU and the US should spare no effort to nudge the parties towards a power-sharing agreement for Mosul.

As things stand on the multi-dimensional chessboard of the Middle East, however, such efforts will mean balancing the security interests of regional powers too. With so many targets moving across the blurring borders of Iraq and Syria, each driven by different dynamics, this is a task of Herculean proportions whose time has not yet come.

Managing Turkey's aspirations

How to rein in Turkey's President Erdoğan, who recently stated that his country has not reconciled itself to its century-old border with Iraq's Nineveh province? Between 2,000 and 3,000 Turkish troops are active in northern Iraq, in support of the more moderate Muslim Peshmerga forces in 'Kurdistan' but in flagrant disregard of the 'sovereign' will of Baghdad, which does not want Turkey to extend its zone of influence in Nineveh. Meanwhile, Turkey has entered the fray in Syria to eliminate US-backed Kurdish Popular Protection Units (YPG) south of its border – militia that have launched an offensive to clear Raqqa from ISIS, another thorn in Ankara's side. Ankara's flip-flopping in the fight against ISIS and preference for divide-and-rule tactics towards the Kurds will greatly complicate its ability to play a role in both Iraq's and Syria's post-conflict rehabilitation processes.

Whereas Erdoğan's neo-Ottoman aspirations of a Greater Turkey are deeply troubling for a region riven by faith and faction, as indeed they are for Brussels and Washington, there is reason to believe that it is not in Ankara's strategic interest to estrange itself completely from its NATO allies. A separate agreement can be found to delineate Turkish/Kurdish interests in the region.

Balancing the interests of Riyadh and Tehran

It is the struggle between Riyadh and Tehran that appears the most difficult to resolve. It lies at the core of the region's geopolitical confrontation. To avoid larger-scale conflict and to advance the chances of stabilising the Middle East, functional relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia are essential. The EU can play a constructive – albeit limited – role in balancing the security interests of these two regional protagonists.

For decades Iran and Saudi Arabia have projected their power and struggled for regional supremacy in an area that stretches from Libya to Yemen. By backing competing forces across the Middle East, the rivals' proxy wars have polarised politics and sectarianised social relations between Shiites and Sunnis. Saudi Arabia and Iran have started to interfere directly in each other's domestic security, which is a recent and potentially even more dangerous twist. Diplomatic relations between Tehran and Riyadh completely broke down in January, when dissident Shiite cleric Nimr Baqir al-Nimr was executed in Saudi Arabia and the Saudi embassy in Tehran was stormed in retaliation.

The nuclear agreement (officially: 'Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action' or JCPOA) between Iran and the P5+1 – brokered after years of talks facilitated by the European Union – has not helped to decrease political tensions or increase regional security. For years, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries have warned that Iranian-Western rapprochement would endanger their own regional status at a time when Iran's 'expansionist regional policies' and 'sectarian approach' posed a major security threat. Saudi officials have admitted that the Kingdom's military campaign in Yemen against the Houthis was a necessary step to counter Iranian influence in the region.

Iran's Supreme Leader has recently upped the ante. Whereas Iranian President Rouhani and Foreign Affairs Minister Zarif were keen to use this year's powwow of world leaders at the UN General Assembly to signal the government's willingness to improve relations with the West by implementing the JCPOA, Ayatollah Khamenei has struck a different chord. Concerned with the protection of the Revolution's legacy ahead of the presidential elections

in May 2017 – and his own succession process, the Supreme Leader has heavily criticised the nuclear agreement for not having any meaningful impact on the livelihood of ordinary Iranians. If President-elect Trump follows up on his remarks to renegotiate the “disastrous” JCPOA, then Khamenei may be able to walk away from Iran’s obligations while pinning the responsibility on Washington. Meanwhile, the Supreme Leader continues to rely on the army and the Revolutionary Guard to project Iran’s military prowess. He has recently used the anniversary parades marking the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) to show off Emad ballistic missiles (with a range of 1,650 km), along with S300 missiles purchased from Russia.

In this tug of war, a newly developed emphasis on shared interests and common challenges between Iran and Saudi Arabia is more crucial than ever. The EU is trying to roll out an even-handed policy that tries to integrate the Iranian and Saudi positions into regional affairs. For the moment, these efforts have been limited to Mogherini (and Germany’s Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier) seeking common ground in Tehran and Riyadh to facilitate the resumption of UN-mediated intra-Syrian talks. But the odds appear to be against the EU, in at least three ways.

First, it is doubtful whether Mogherini’s interlocutors can instigate change. Just as Rouhani and Zarif act by the grace of the Supreme Leader, the Saudi Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Nizar Madain, and Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir (as well as the brazen young Deputy Crown Prince and Minister of Defence Mohammad bin Salman, the architect of the flailing military campaign in Yemen), ultimately depend on the blessing of King Salman bin Abdulaziz. Whereas Mogherini gets to engage with King Salman directly, she is not allowed ‘face time’ with Iran’s Supreme Leader. Both elderly statesmen are distrustful of any change, but they do respond to signs of popular discontent. This is the limited fertile land left to the EU and its allies to till.

Second, given the volatile conflict in Syria, it is doubtful that Mogherini’s offer that the EU will “do a lot” to create the conditions for the physical, political and social reconstruction of Syria “once a peace agreement is reached and a political transition has begun” will impress decision-makers, especially in Riyadh. Part of Mogherini’s problem is that, apart from promises to cooperate on counter-terrorism, counter-radicalisation and migration, she has precious few concrete items on offer to coax Saudi Arabia into siding with Iran to address security challenges in Syria, let alone other parts of the region. But with the Kingdom on the brink of its first non-oil sector recession in three decades, there may be renewed interest in dealing with the EU. Hence, there is more homework to be done by the EU before the High Representative can take a truly balanced approach towards the two regional adversaries. Using her authority as Vice-President of the European Commission, Mogherini needs to mobilise the Commissioners’ Group on External Action and cobble together a policy agenda for relations with Saudi Arabia that is as rich as the one set out in her post-JCPOA joint communiqué with Zarif of 16 April 2016: an agenda for the renewal of bilateral socio-economic relations.

Third, the EU’s post-JCPOA approach to Iran exposes another shortcoming: its dependence on US policy. This manifests itself in at least two ways. First, Mogherini’s diplomatic actions have allowed European (mainly Italian and French) businesses to strike up new contracts in Iran, albeit largely thanks to the absence of any competition from the US. What is worrying is that these deals have been concluded with the same corrupt ruling elites that have caused problems before. In the absence of an independent Iranian judiciary, any foreign direct investments cannot be guaranteed. Moreover, there is no way of knowing how the next US President’s transactional business diplomacy will play out, in particular with Iran. All of this

leaves European contracts in suspended animation. Second, the confidence with which Mogherini recently presented the autonomy of EU external action from US foreign policy belies another fundamental truth: the EU can only pursue its exploration of the Iranian market on condition that the new Republican establishment in Washington does not dramatically change course on Iran, either on the economic or the security front. The same applies to relations with Saudi Arabia.

Where the EU can be helpful

Within these parameters, the EU is nevertheless in a position to take on a role of mediator and developer of confidence-building measures between Riyadh and Tehran. Indeed, from 'track 2' consultations hosted by the Centre for Applied Research in Partnership with the Orient (Bonn) and the EastWest Institute (Brussels) in recent months it appears that Iranian and Saudi opinion-makers and decision-shapers see the EU as a trusted institution to:

- (1) initiate and facilitate dialogue on various levels, (2) engage all regional stakeholders to identify vital interests and concerns and support the development of a regional security architecture, (3) help creating economic incentives to foster cooperation and overcome regional zero-sum mentality, (4) raise awareness and introduce regulatory measures to tackle environmental challenges, and (5) empower and enable local actors to develop long-term visions and measures.¹

The EU and its partners should make the most of these attributes. In trying to align positions between Riyadh and Tehran, it will be crucial to discourage the two rivals from competing in their humanitarian assistance given to the needy throughout the region. This is also the case for the post-conflict reconstruction and rehabilitation of Syria, Iraq and other theatres for their proxy wars.

Tiptoeing through the political minefield of the Middle East, the EU and the US will require political will, perseverance and a conflict-sensitive approach if they are to have any success in their attempts to prevent further violent escalations in the region.

¹ See A. Tabatabai and K. Hassan, "Know Your Enemy: Iranian and Saudi Perspectives on ISIL", CARPO Brief No. 3, 22.04.2016; J. Hanrath, "The EU's Balancing Act in the Middle East: How to Engage Iran Without Alienating GCC States", CARPO Brief No. 4, 08.07.2016; and W. Abdul-Shafi, K. Hassan and A. Tabatabai, "Victimized by Geopolitics: Iranian and Saudi Perspectives on the Refugee Crisis", CARPO Brief No. 5, 24.10.2016.