Restoring the Eastern Mediterranean as a U.S. Strategic Anchor

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Acknowledgments

A plethora of reports have been produced on the Middle East, on Turkey, on Greece, and on the Syrian crisis. But few have brought together Middle Eastern and European analytical perspectives. In this comprehensive report, we aimed to develop a policy framework for the Eastern Mediterranean as a specific region, as a region that represents a geostrategic seam between Europe and the Middle East, and one that is vital to U.S. and European national security interests.

It was ambitious and challenging work because think tanks, like the U.S. government, tend to silo their expertise into regional definitions. What made this project so rich and rewarding was that it brought together senior officials, experts, and colleagues with European and Middle Eastern experience, as well as those who have deep knowledge of energy, migration, and economic dynamics in the Eastern Mediterranean. We turned to our historical knowledge of the region to reassess old and new political fault lines. Therefore, the authors would like to sincerely thank many colleagues who offered their valuable insights and perspectives, and challenged us to think about the Eastern Mediterranean in a new way. During our research, we brought together experts in three workshops; the first and third workshops were held in Washington, DC, in January and October 2017, and our second workshop was held in Athens, Greece, in July 2017. Our gathered experts contributed enormously to our final report. The report was in a constant process of revision as we grappled with major events unfolding in the region, which occurred on a near-daily basis. We were determined to be realistic in our assessment of the region, and to make tough calls about what was required to restore U.S. influence in the region. It was not easy.

It is always a privilege and an enormous benefit to be able to collaborate across CSIS programs. We are grateful for the dedicated and diligent work of the CSIS Middle East and Europe Programs, particularly for Europe Program deputy director Jeffrey Rathke and Turkey Project director Bulent Aliriza for their insights, ideas, and guidance. In the Middle East Program, Will Todman and Ben Westfall provided valuable support and research. Emily Grunewald did much behind the scenes to ensure this report was published. A complex report always benefits from graphics that break down that complexity and translate analytical work into compelling visual form. CSIS is very fortunate to
have the CSIS iDeas Lab as our partner, and we are grateful for the skills and dedication of Caroline Amenabar.

Above all, this report would not have been possible without the generous support of our partner, the Stavros Niarchos Foundation. We hope this report serves as a foundation for new thinking and a new U.S. policy approach toward the Eastern Mediterranean.
U.S. strategy in the Eastern Mediterranean is long overdue for revision. Policies, priorities, and activities girded by U.S.-led alliance structures were developed to stabilize Europe and deter Soviet aggression at the dawn of the Cold War. Seventy years later, they are no longer fit for purpose. However, the region remains a linchpin for an array of vital U.S. interests.

In the last decade alone, regional conflicts and state fragmentation have caused millions of migrants and internally displaced to flee their homes, creating one of the largest migration crises since World War II. The arrival of an unprecedented number of migrants has triggered political backlash and polarized domestic politics in Europe and in the Eastern Mediterranean. Many of the littoral states in the Eastern Mediterranean have faced destabilizing economic crises that have created deep political and strategic vulnerabilities. Significant natural gas deposits discovered off the coasts of Israel, Cyprus, and Egypt could boost regional economic prospects as a potential energy-producing region, but a divided Cyprus, historical animosities, as well as a lack of infrastructure connectivity hinder this regional economic potential.

Despite these dramatic changes, U.S. policy toward the Eastern Mediterranean region today is most often a series of tactical military operations. These operations focus on narrow tasks, without a longer-term view either of their strategic context or their impact on U.S. influence in the region. The diplomatic engagement, economic investment, and security presence of the United States—all hallmarks of U.S. policy since the 1940s—have dramatically receded. Other powers—primarily Russia, China, Turkey, and Iran—have increased their strategic footprint, weakening regional governments’ ties with the United States and Europe.

The United States needs a holistic and integrated strategy in the Eastern Mediterranean that will stabilize Europe and shift the regional balance in the Middle East back toward the United States. Resolving the Syrian conflict is essential for Eastern Mediterranean stabilization, and developing an appropriate policy approach toward an increasingly antagonistic and antidemocratic Turkey is the key to solving the Syria puzzle and reanchoring the region toward the Euro-Atlantic community. These policies not only must be linked, but they must be integrated into a unified and distinctly
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regional approach. This will not be easy to accomplish, as U.S. bureaucratic silos prevent an integrated regional strategy, and taking a comprehensive approach requires an uncommon amount of U.S. interagency and transatlantic cooperation.

With this in mind, we propose the following pillars and tools of U.S. strategy in the region.

SYRIA

The U.S. strategic goals in Syria are to resolve the Syrian conflict on terms acceptable to the United States and to maintain U.S. influence in the region. The United States has a keen interest in ensuring that Syria does not further destabilize the region and does not serve as a base for further Iranian or Russian expansion. The United States should ensure that outcomes deny safe haven to jihadi-salafists, support greater Kurdish autonomy within the borders of a unified Syria, and reduce the likelihood of Israeli-Iranian conflict or U.S.-Turkish conflict within Syria. These objectives should be achieved through a set of interconnected tools:

- Initiate sustained, senior-level U.S. diplomatic engagement to ensure a credible political settlement to the crisis and to influence the post-conflict security order by internationalizing the Russian-Iranian-Turkish diplomatic process. This should be done by building a new contact group on Syria, in cooperation with European partners, that includes all key regional actors and includes international verification of adherence to agreements;
- Maintain the U.S. military footprint in the Middle Euphrates River Valley in cooperation with key European allies, both to serve as leverage against Russia and the Assad regime and to prevent further Iranian gains;
- Work with relevant stakeholders, including Russia and Turkey, to promote limited Kurdish self-administration within a unified Syria;
- Utilize U.S. leverage within the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) to press for political and territorial arrangements that Turkey can be persuaded to tolerate and that minimize prospects for local unrest or jihadi-salafi resurgence;
- Support reconstruction and stabilization in areas held by U.S. allies, while making national reconstruction contingent on a credible international political settlement.

TURKEY

The U.S. strategic goal for Turkey is to develop a comprehensive U.S. and transatlantic approach to the growing policy divergence with Ankara that will simultaneously seek to reanchor Turkey to the West while strengthening U.S. bilateral relationships with Eastern Mediterranean littoral states. Turkey has been the linchpin of a stable Eastern Mediterranean region and of U.S. strategy for decades, but increasing tensions between the United States and Turkey require that the United States identify and enhance regional partnerships in the region (principally with Greece and Cyprus). There is a clear interest in reinvigorating Turkish civil society within and outside Turkey to
attempt to forestall further democratic backsliding. Transatlantic unity and coordination is vital in the face of disruptive Turkish policies, while the United States should keep engaging Turkey to positively shape a stable post-conflict Syria. The United States should:

- Reinvigorate U.S.-Turkish diplomacy by initiating a high-level dialogue, establishing a formal bilateral working group on Syria, sustaining the military relationship, and appointing a respected U.S. ambassador to Turkey;
- Engage Turkish civil society through a new paradigm of grassroots-level aid that focuses less on a top-down approach and more on support for independent organizations that defend democratic standards;
- Work closely with key European allies, such as the United Kingdom, France, and Germany, as well as the European Union, to develop a unified policy approach toward Turkey;
- Identify and strengthen other regional basing and military assets by upgrading ties with other regional partners.

NEW REGIONAL OPPORTUNITIES AND STRATEGIC ALIGNMENTS

By reinvigorating U.S. strategic alignments in the region, the United States can shape the Eastern Mediterranean’s future development through a series of actions:

- Formulate a strategy to leverage Israel’s assets more effectively to further regional maritime security and counterterrorism policies, working with NATO allies to better incorporate Israel’s naval assets and capabilities into U.S.-allied naval operations in the Eastern Mediterranean;
- Engage NATO at the upcoming July 2018 NATO Summit to develop a clearer mission and priorities in the Eastern Mediterranean, including a more robust naval presence in the region, by sharing assets with key partners and expanding multilateral naval exercises;
- Explore greater trilateral (United States, Greece, and Cyprus) and quadrilateral cooperation (United States, Greece, Cyprus, and Israel) through an Eastern Mediterranean dialogue intended to foster economic cooperation and growth in the region;
- Create an Eastern Mediterranean “Shangri-La”-like security dialogue to bring together foreign and defense ministers from the region, and include European and U.S. participants to focus on current and future security trends in the region.

The United States must comprehensively engage in the Eastern Mediterranean region and develop an integrative diplomatic, economic, and military strategy. It is not sufficient for Washington to rest on a regional policy architecture that is no longer responsive to profound changes in the region. The goal of this exercise is not to re-create what once existed, but instead to determine what the region’s future should look like and take proactive steps to restore U.S. influence in the region. The stability of Europe and the Middle East is at stake. The security and economic prosperity of the United States are also at stake. The task could not be more important.
Introduction

The Eastern Mediterranean forms a geostrategic fault line between Europe and the Middle East. Wars, genocidal acts, nationalist movements, and upheavals have scarred the region over centuries and have presented the international system with some of its most vexing strategic challenges. As the Cold War began, the United States and its allies invested mightily in the Eastern Mediterranean as a pillar of U.S. and Western security. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the United States has reduced its investment. As a result, the 70-year-old U.S. strategy has frayed, and its ties have weakened.

Despite a relative lack of U.S. attention to the Eastern Mediterranean, the U.S. stake in the region continues to be great. U.S. interests include European unity and security, greater stability in the Middle East, and safeguarding state capacity against a myriad of nonstate actors that pose an increasing range of strategic challenges to the Eastern Mediterranean. Increasingly, a range of complex issues—interstate conflict, terrorism, Iranian and Russian power projection, Chinese investments, Turkey’s drift away from the Euro-Atlantic community, rising regional tensions between secular and religious forces, illegal migration, demographic changes, new economic patterns, and state fragmentation—are interacting to create second- and third-order effects that harm U.S. strategic interests in Europe and the Middle East.

This paper argues that the United States must develop a specific regional strategy for the Eastern Mediterranean based on a new strategic environment, in which state and nonstate actors alike have sought to fill the void left by waning U.S. influence. This new U.S. strategy must make hard choices and embrace realistic goals, however unattractive, to reinvigorate U.S. diplomatic, economic, and security engagement in the region. This will require addressing and reconciling seemingly incompatible U.S. policies toward Syria and Turkey that can only be bridged through active,

1. For the purposes of this report, the geographic scope of the Eastern Mediterranean includes the littoral states—Greece, Cyprus, Turkey, Lebanon, Israel, the Palestinian Territories, and Egypt. While Libya shares many of the same challenges found in the Eastern Mediterranean, it is beyond the scope of this analysis. Jordan, however, given its connection to the Syrian crisis, should be considered an ancillary part of the region.
creative, and sustained diplomacy backed by ongoing military engagement. Only by taking an active stance that confronts the region’s strategic challenges can the United States rebuild its regional influence and advance as well as protect U.S. interests.

To formulate this strategy, the United States government must restructure how it thinks about the Eastern Mediterranean. The Eastern Mediterranean region falls along bureaucratic seams in the State Department, Defense Department, National Security Council, and intelligence community. Each draws the boundaries between Europe and the Middle East differently, structurally inhibiting the U.S. government from viewing the region holistically. Understanding how the problems of Europe and the Middle East intersect in the Eastern Mediterranean is a first step toward a more holistic regional policy.

The report is divided into two sections. After offering a brief history of U.S. strategic involvement in the Eastern Mediterranean, Section 1 provides an overview of the current regional environment. It concentrates on the power players that have emerged in the region and that—in the absence of a focused and engaged United States—are seeking to shape it to their own needs: Russia, Iran, Turkey, and China. The discussion suggests that while these players present real challenges to U.S. interests, their activity should not be viewed solely through a zero-sum lens. Section 1 then reviews several trends that have transformed the Eastern Mediterranean in recent years, looking in turn at the fragmentation of state structures, migration patterns, economic crises, and energy discoveries.

Section 2 articulates and discusses in depth the two most important strategic challenges and goals for the United States in the Eastern Mediterranean: resolving the Syria conflict so that the region is not further destabilized, and managing the United States’ growing policy divergence with Turkey. The discussion breaks down each overarching strategic goal into several interconnected objectives and then identifies policy tools for pursuing those objectives. For Syria, the objectives are to contain Iranian and Russian power projection, deny jihadi-salafists safe haven, give Syrian Kurds a degree of autonomy within a unified Syria, and lessen the chances of Israeli-Iranian and U.S.-Turkish conflict in Syria. For Turkey, U.S. efforts should start with trying to recalibrate U.S.-Turkey relations by engaging in more sustained dialogue over what divides the two countries. Simultaneously, the United States should develop military and diplomatic assets that complement Turkey’s to hedge against the possibility of a more lasting break in the U.S.-Turkish partnership.

What all of these efforts have in common is an overarching drive to rebuild U.S. influence through a combination of widespread diplomatic and economic engagement backed by military deployments and a demonstrated willingness to use force. It is time for the United States to abandon its tactical and hesitant posture and adopt clear and achievable policies for the region. In this way, the paper suggests, the United States will both be able to help shape the region’s future and to increase its security and economic prosperity.
Background and Current Challenges

For nearly four centuries, the Ottoman Empire controlled the Eastern Mediterranean. By the late nineteenth century, however, the Ottomans’ grip was faltering and the British, French, and Russian empires expanding. The Ottoman Empire became known as "the Sick Man of Europe," and its post–World War I collapse drew European powers into the Eastern Mediterranean to secure its remains. European leaders drew new borders that united provinces into states, and they established governments with varying degrees of legitimacy and capacity.1

World War II weakened the European powers. When the British government announced in 1947 that it could no longer assist Greece in its battle against a Communist insurgency, the geostrategic implications of Europe’s economic insolvency became clear to the United States. The United States and the Soviet Union—the world’s two superpowers—squared off in the Eastern Mediterranean, initiating a fundamental strategic realignment in the region.

The United States developed a new strategy with three essential policy elements: (1) an overarching policy framework—the Truman Doctrine—that explicitly and unapologetically sought to curtail the spread of Soviet influence in the Eastern Mediterranean;2 (2) a mechanism—the Marshall

1. The Sykes–Picot Agreement of 1916 divided the lands of greater Syria and Mesopotamia into zones of British and French control; the abortive Sèvres Agreement of 1919 and the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923 ended the Ottoman Empire, ceded Arab lands to the European powers, and defined the borders of modern Turkey.
2. On March 12, 1947, President Harry S. Truman announced that the United States would provide financial, military, and technical assistance to Greece and Turkey to create the “conditions in which [the United States] and other nations will be able to work out a way of life free from coercion.” Known as the Truman Doctrine, U.S. policy supported “free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or outside pressures” primarily through economic and financial aid, and de facto tied U.S. national security interests to peace and security in the world. Harry S. Truman, "President Truman’s Message to Congress," Document 171, 80th Cong., 1st Sess., Records of the United States House of Representatives (Record Group 233), National Archives, March 12, 1947.
Plan—that provided U.S. assistance to empower governments to stabilize themselves; and (3) an emphasis on stabilizing Europe in order to avoid regional fragmentation and resist adversarial forces inserting themselves into the region. Anchoring Greece and Turkey within the Euro-Atlantic community, along with maintaining a robust and persistent U.S. regional presence, was seen as the antidote to a growing malignant Soviet presence within and around Europe.

Since 1947, the United States’ strategy in the Eastern Mediterranean has relied on two sets of allies. The first was NATO, which incorporated Turkey and Greece shortly after its inception and was a vital bulwark against Soviet expansion. The second was Israel and Egypt, whose 1979 peace treaty was a boon to U.S. efforts to promote stability in the Eastern Mediterranean and ended the Cold War rivalries that had opened the region to Soviet meddling and contributed to four Arab-Israeli wars in 25 years. These relationships have been the foundation of U.S. security posture in the region for decades, but both they and the region have changed dramatically since the end of the Cold War.

For the United States, the importance of the Eastern Mediterranean has persisted even as the Cold War ended. The region has grown even more intimately connected to its periphery, creating a web of interrelationships and dependencies. The Eastern Mediterranean is no longer a rampart that defends the free world from tyranny. It has become the hub of a whole system of ties and interests

vital to U.S. national security. Instability in the region cannot be contained. Rather, when instability breaks out, it ripples into key areas and relationships in Europe, the Middle East, and beyond.

POWER PLAYS IN THE REGION: RUSSIA, IRAN, TURKEY, CHINA

Since the early 1990s, a series of large-scale U.S. military interventions have altered the balance of power in the Middle East, and they have exhausted many Americans’ zeal to invest more in the region. The European Union (EU) had hoped to play a role in anchoring and stabilizing the region, but has not done so, despite substantial EU economic and development assistance. Egypt has been unable to overcome the unrest fostered by the 2011 Arab Spring, and it has proven a less effective and less reliable partner for the United States than in the past. The Eastern Mediterranean has become a region in which threats have mutated and traditional alliances have weakened, which in turn has diminished the U.S. strategic advantage.

Taking advantage of unfocused U.S. policy and dwindling U.S. investments, Russia has returned to the region, Turkey has reengaged in the Middle East as it has turned away from Europe, and Iran and China have deepened their regional activism and engagement. These nations have substantially increased economic investment (particularly China), deepened diplomatic and military ties, and in some cases have pursued military interventions (Iran, Turkey, and Russia) to advance their regional interests. A firm understanding of what these countries are pursuing in the Eastern Mediterranean, and how, is necessary if the United States hopes to regain its strategic advantage in the region. Each country is discussed below.

Russia’s Return

Russia has deep and enduring commercial, military, cultural, and historic ties to the Eastern Mediterranean, and its government views the Eastern Mediterranean as a cohesive region encompassing both Europe and the Middle East. Russia has made substantial investments in commercial ventures, sold arms, deployed military forces, and engaged in diverse political and economic activities throughout the region. Over 1 million Russian speakers live in Israel; Russia is a major investor in Cyprus, Greece, and Turkey; and the Russian Orthodox Church is increasingly active in the western Balkans as a religious, social, and political force.

Since the return of Russian president Vladimir Putin to the Kremlin in 2012 and growing fears of regime change by U.S.-encouraged “color revolutions” and the Arab Spring, Russia has launched a significant policy return to the Eastern Mediterranean. Russia’s growing presence in the region challenges the policies of the United States, U.S. allies, and the international community. Moreover, President Putin views a U.S.-led international system in Europe and the Middle

4. This movement by Turkey is sometimes referred to as “neo-Ottomanism.”
East as a threat to its sovereignty and seeks to minimize U.S. influence and maximize its own freedom of maneuver. These perspectives culminated in Russia’s military intervention in Syria in September 2015 to protect the Assad regime. Approximately 4,300 Russian military personnel are deployed in Syria, and eight Russian warships have operated near Syria’s coast. Moreover, Russia has secured 49-year leases for two military bases in Syria—the Khmeimim air base near Latakia and the Tartous naval base. These bases restore Russia’s capacity to maintain an enduring presence in the Mediterranean and enable power-projection capabilities into the Persian Gulf and Red Sea. Russia’s deployment of S-300 and S-400 missile defense systems in Syria also threatens U.S. and allied aircraft within the systems’ range. In May 2017, a Russian frigate and submarine

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launched cruise missile strikes at Islamic State group (ISG) positions near the Syrian city of Palmyra, demonstrating a land-sea capability with broader regional implications.¹⁰

Russia has looked beyond Syria to deepen its military presence in the Eastern Mediterranean. In November 2017, Egypt and Russia signed a preliminary agreement authorizing the countries to use each other’s airspace and military bases, increasing Russia’s air power-projection capabilities in the Mediterranean region.¹¹ The Kremlin also obtained access to Cypriot ports for its naval vessels in 2015, purportedly for antipiracy and counterterrorism missions.¹² This renewed military posture in the region directly challenges U.S. security interests.

Along with its regional military strategy, Russia has developed positive working relations with a range of interlocutors, including many mutual antagonists with contradictory agendas. For example, it maintains a high-level political and military dialogue with Israel (primarily to deconflict forces in Syria) and a strong working relationship with Iranian leaders. In Syria, Russia launched a separate negotiating framework from that of the United Nations—the Astana negotiating track—with Iran and Turkey. Moscow has built ties with Syrian Kurdish forces that Turkey regards as terrorists (and which the United States also supports). Russia’s political strategy is to develop ties with as many actors as possible, build leverage over those actors, and use that leverage when necessary to advance Russia’s interests and objectives.

Where U.S. regional policy has been tactical, ambivalent, and contradictory, Russian policy has been strategic, focused on undermining the U.S.-led order in Europe and the Middle East (which is perceived as a threat to Russian sovereignty) and maximizing Russia’s economic and security interests.¹³ In Europe, Russia seeks to block NATO and EU expansion and undermine transatlantic collective defense; in the Middle East, it seeks to preserve an authoritarian status quo that in its view the United States seeks to disrupt—for example, through support for the 2011 Arab uprisings. The Russians were especially concerned that the overthrow of Libyan dictator Muammar el-Qaddafi—led by NATO forces under U.N. auspices—set a disturbing precedent for international intervention in the domestic affairs of an authoritarian government. Russia sees its actions in the region as restoring its great-power status, reducing Western threats to Russian sovereignty, and weakening the Western liberal order in favor of the sort of balance-of-power politics at which Russia excels, all in the name of fighting terrorism.¹⁴

¹³ According to Fiona Hill, Putin has tried to “rupture the integrity of NATO and EU collective defense,” and “consistently pushed for a renegotiation of European security structures to downgrade the conventional military and nuclear role of the United States and NATO, and give Russia military and security parity with European forces.” See U.S. Congress, House Committee on Armed Forces, “Understanding and Detering Russia: U.S. Policies and Strategies,” 114th Cong., 2nd Sess., February 10, 2016 (Testimony of Dr. Fiona Hill, Brookings Institution).
¹⁴ Ibid.
Russia will be an unavoidable military and diplomatic factor for the United States in the Eastern Mediterranean. It will remain militarily deployed in Syria, and it will seek to expand military ties in the region with a range of regional players, including U.S. partners and allies. Some regional actors see Russia’s growing presence as possibly beneficial, given the opportunities it creates for commercial dealings, arms purchases, and diplomatic support with few ideological conditions. Cooperation with Russia, or the potential of greater cooperation, is also a tool U.S. partners and allies use to gain leverage over the United States. Turkey has increasingly used this tool in Syria.

Many countries in the Eastern Mediterranean, including U.S. allies, have long had deep ties to Russia, as described below:

- **Cyprus** is a well-known financial tax haven for Russian individuals and businesses. Since the 2013 financial crisis, Russians have poured over $4.33 billion in private investment into Cyprus, in part due to a scheme that grants Cypriot citizenship to wealthy Russians in exchange for investment in the country. In a personal message sent to Cypriot president Nicos Anastasiades in February 2017, Vladimir Putin himself reaffirmed Russia’s wish to further the countries’ trade and economic relationship. This came after Russia extended Cyprus a $3.3 billion loan in 2011 to alleviate the burden of the sovereign debt crisis. In 2013, Russia extended the maturity of the loan and lowered the interest rate in recognition of Cyprus’s importance as an entryway for Russian investments into EU markets—and, conversely, as a way to repatriate Russian money under the guise of foreign investment in Russia.

- **Turkey** has a historic rivalry with Russia, which in recent years has fluctuated between confrontation and cooperation. Russian-Turkish trade in goods in 2015 was approximately $15.8 billion before Turkey shot down a Russian military aircraft that crossed into Turkish airspace from its base in Syria. Following that incident, bilateral trade relations plummeted, and Russia imposed sanctions on Turkish imports and tourism. In June 2016, President Erdogan wrote an official apology to President Putin for the incident, and soon thereafter, Turkey and Russia agreed to

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18. The cited amount was converted from €2.5 billion using the 2011 average annual exchange rate of 0.748. See Internal Revenue Service, “Yearly Average Currency Exchange Rates.”


take steps to improve bilateral relations “without delay.” In December 2017, Turkey announced that it had finalized an agreement to buy Russian S-400 missile defense systems to protect the presidential palace. But Turkey’s military offensive in Syria (in particular the January 2018 invasion of Afrin) and the growing threat of confrontation between pro-Assad regime and Turkish forces threaten Turkish-Russian cooperation in Syria.

- Russia’s ties with Egypt under President al-Sisi have also deepened. From 2012 to 2015, Egypt signed arms transfer agreements with Russia worth $9.3 billion, which supplemented the $1.3 billion annual grant in military assistance from the United States. In October 2016, Russian state news announced that Egypt was planning to lease to Russia a former Soviet Air Force base in western Egypt, and by March 2017, a few Russian special forces troops had deployed there to support operations in Libya. In 2017, Egypt received the S-300VM surface-to-air missile system it had reportedly purchased from Russia in 2015 for around $1 billion, and Russia is scheduled to deliver 50 MiG-29 fighter jets to Egypt by 2020. President Putin visited Cairo in December 2017 and announced the resumption of Russian civilian flights to Egypt, which had stopped in 2015 after Egyptian militants bombed a Russian plane in the Sinai Peninsula, killing all 224 people aboard. Putin also announced a $21 billion agreement for Rosatom to build a nuclear power plant in el-Dabaa, on the Mediterranean coast.

- Israel and Russia have engaged in dialogue on strategic issues to an extent that Washington has not fully acknowledged. Bilateral relations have deepened over the past decade, as


military sales, trade, and people-to-people ties have increased. But Russia’s military intervention in Syria has complicated this delicate relationship. Russian forces cooperate with Iran and Hezbollah, which Israel considers its primary strategic threats. For now, informal Israeli-Russian understandings have allowed Israel to strike targets in Syria when it deems necessary. According to former Israeli Air Force chief of staff Amir Eshel, the Israeli and Russian air forces have frequently communicated to avoid aerial incidents. Yet the presence of Russian aircraft, radar, and missile systems in Syria potentially constrains Israel’s freedom of operations and would limit the effects of Israel’s air superiority should Russia oppose Israeli operations in Syria. Russian-Israeli understandings were tested following the April 9 Israeli strike on the T-4 (Tiyas) Airbase in Syria, which Russian officials publicly condemned. An accidental Israeli strike on Russian troops, or some other confrontation with Russian forces, would damage a range of Israeli diplomatic, economic, and strategic interests.29

Moreover, Russia’s cooperation with Iran, the Assad regime, and Hezbollah presents two sets of problems for Israel. First, either intentionally or unintentionally, Russia could share intelligence on Israel with its enemies, ranging from sensitive information to radar data that Russian-installed missile systems have gathered on Israeli aircraft hundreds of miles away. Second, Russia could supply Israel’s enemies with advanced weapons systems and guided missiles that would be difficult for Israel to defend against. While Russia’s presence in theory provides a check on Iranian forces deployed in Syria, its support for what it considers Iran’s “legitimate” presence in Syria and its unwillingness to seek limits on Iranian and Hezbollah activities raise long-term U.S. and Israeli concerns about Russian intentions.30

- Jordan, a stalwart U.S. ally, has also deepened its cooperation with Russia. In 2015, it opened an intelligence channel to monitor a U.S.-Russian-Jordanian cease-fire agreement in Syria’s southern zone, along the Jordanian border.31 Jordan was also brought into the Astana process as an observer, and reportedly acts as a bridge between Russia and Sunni Arab governments.32 Jordan relies on Russia to keep Iranian forces from infiltrating along its northern border. Destabilizing Jordan, a strong U.S. military ally and bulwark for Sunni Arab states, would be a strategic gain for Iran.

Russia’s activities with U.S. allies make Russia integral, if not indispensable, to any U.S. Eastern Mediterranean policy initiative.

Iran’s Growing Presence

Iran has steadily built its presence in the Eastern Mediterranean for nearly four decades. Since the 1979 revolution, Iran has intervened in Palestinian and Lebanese affairs as an outgrowth of its

32. Ibid.
conflicts with the Sunni Arab states and Israel. Since the 1980s, Iranian military and intelligence personnel have provided training and expertise, economic support, and weapons for Lebanese Shi‘ite militias, most importantly Hezbollah. Iran also became a patron of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad organization in Gaza and the West Bank and supports Hamas’s military wing.\(^3\) The Islamic Republic’s alliance with Syria stretches back to the rule of the late Syrian president Hafez al-Assad, who broke ranks with the Arab consensus and supported Iran in the eight-year Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988).\(^3\)4

Iran now sees an opportunity to expand its influence substantially in the Eastern Mediterranean by building a more intimate relationship with Syria. It seeks to establish permanent naval, land, and air bases in Syria, which would give it an unprecedented level of power-projection capability. From these bases, Iran could directly infiltrate Israeli and Jordanian territory, threaten Israeli and Egyptian offshore gas platforms and infrastructure, threaten access to the Suez Canal, and create a platform for sea- and land-based missile attacks against Israel in a future confrontation. Its anti-access area denial (A2/AD) capabilities already pose a direct threat to freedom of operations of the U.S. Sixth Fleet in the Eastern Mediterranean. Finally, using an estimated 10,000 foreign Shi‘ite militiamen and supported by an estimated 60,000 Syrians in popular militias known as the National Defense Forces, Iran is creating a Hezbollah-type militia that it can control within Syria.\(^3\)5 It could use these forces both as a weapon against Israel and Jordan and as a check on the Assad regime in order to protect Iranian interests. Iran has already made significant progress toward this goal; according to the former U.S. national security advisor, H. R. McMaster, approximately 80 percent of pro-regime forces in Syria are Iranian proxies.\(^3\)6 Iran also seeks a “land bridge” through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon and the Mediterranean Sea. An uninterrupted stretch of friendly territory would have significant economic, security, and intelligence benefits for Iran, which would build upon its already significant economic interests in Syria. Iranian construction companies, many of which are linked to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), are actively seeking opportunities to rebuild Syria’s civilian infrastructure. Tehran also has ambitious military construction plans for Syria:

- Satellite imagery has revealed construction of an Iranian infantry base southwest of Damascus near the town of al-Kiswah, just 31 miles east of the Israeli border. From January to


Alterman, Conley, Malka, and Ruy
October 2017, three new buildings were erected at the installation, and at least a dozen others underwent renovation. Before an Israeli air strike leveled several of its buildings, the base could house up to 500 troops and nearly 100 military vehicles. There is no evidence of large or unconventional weaponry stored at the site, though.

- Satellite imagery has revealed the construction of a ballistic missile factory near the coastal city of Baniyas.
- Iran has reportedly signed a deal to lease a naval base near Tartous, which could potentially host an array of Iranian naval vessels and weaponry. From this base, Iran could deploy C801/802 missiles and Khalij Fars antiship ballistic missiles, threatening shipping in the Eastern Mediterranean, and could also replicate the unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) program that it uses to monitor and harass U.S. warships in the Persian Gulf.

Israel charges that Iran has been operating a drone program out of the T-4 (Tiyas) Airbase—some 90 miles northwest of al-Tanf, which is home to over 150 U.S.-led coalition forces. On April 9, 2018, Israeli jets attacked the base, claiming that Iran had sent an armed drone from the base into Israeli airspace. Israel claimed that seven members of the IRGC were killed. Previously, Israel had downed at least four Iranian-made drones that encroached in Israeli airspace since the beginning

of the Syrian war. The downing of an IRGC-operated drone that violated Israeli airspace in February 2018 precipitated an Israeli air strike that destroyed the drone program’s mobile command center at T-4 and the downing of an Israeli F-16 by Syrian antiaircraft fire. Given the portable nature of the program, it is realistic that Iran could reestablish—or already has reestablished—drone operations at a different location. In June 2017, the United States shot down two armed Iranian-made Shahed-129 drones “displaying hostile intent” near the American base. Rather than unconnected activities, Iranian actions add up to a coherent strategy to expand its military footprint in the Levant and Mediterranean Sea.

**Turkey’s Domestic Shifts and Foreign Policy Reorientation**

Turkey’s policy reorientation away from the Euro-Atlantic alliance and toward the Middle East has been one of the most dramatic shifts in the Eastern Mediterranean over the last decade. This shift has been driven by a combination of domestic and external factors. While the July 2016 military coup attempt accelerated Turkey’s turn away from its democratic and Euro-Atlantic orientation, this shift has been slowly evolving for nearly two decades.

Since the end of the Cold War, during which the United States and Turkey shared a common adversary in the Soviet Union and a common geographic focus, U.S.-Turkish relations have drifted. While NATO military missions in the 1990s and early 2000s in the western Balkans and Afghanistan involved Turkish interests, Turkey was primarily interested in the Middle East and Central Asia, which coincided with heightened U.S. military intervention in the Middle East, starting with the 1991 Persian Gulf War and the 2003 Iraq War. Increasingly, Turkish and U.S. threat perceptions and policies in the region have diverged. The United States and Turkey now differ on a range of issues, including Iran (the country’s nuclear program, its missile program, and its regional policies), Russia, the Armenian Genocide, and Palestine. It is the Kurdish issue, however, and the Turkish view that U.S. support of the Syrian Kurds presents an existential threat to Turkey, that threatens a

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rupture in the relationship. Each side doubts the actions and intentions of the other. These differences represent fundamental disagreements about strategic and symbolic issues.

Most analysis points to Turkey’s embrace of conservatism and an Islamic orientation after nearly a century of imposed secularism as the primary drivers for this shift in policy. In fact, the force driving foreign policy is not religion, but Turkish nationalism and regime self-preservation. After a decade of economic growth, Turkey’s self-confidence, sense of pride, and drive to defend its interests—which it believes the United States seeks to undermine—have created a foreign policy often at odds with U.S. interests.

Turkey’s policy reorientation has significant strategic consequences for the United States, Europe, and the region. Turkey has been a linchpin of stability in the Eastern Mediterranean and a pillar of U.S. and NATO defense policy. As a NATO member, Turkey was a bulwark against Soviet expansion, fields one of the largest militaries in the alliance, and hosts thousands of U.S. and NATO troops and weapons, including nuclear weapons. NATO established its Allied Land Forces Command in Izmir, Turkey in 1952. Incirlik Air Base has been a critical hub for the United States and NATO since 1955, has been used in numerous U.S.-led military operations, and since 2015 has been used by the anti-ISIL coalition to launch air strikes against ISG.

51. Ibid.
Turkey’s international and external reorientation has also affected its relationship with the European Union. Trade relations are robust, but diplomatic relations have deteriorated over the last decade. Since initiating Turkey’s EU accession process talks in 2005, Turkish institutions have been strengthened, but neither the European Union nor Turkey was politically capable of taking the necessary steps to realize Turkey’s membership in the European Union. Yet neither side wants to be responsible for formally ending the negotiation, though neither supports moving forward. Turkey’s ties with individual EU member states, particularly Germany, Austria, and the Netherlands, have suffered after a series of public spats that have increased calls for reducing EU pre-accession funding to Turkey. While Turkey-Greece relations have improved, Turkish jets repeatedly violate Greek airspace, and President Erdogan has indicated a wish to renegotiate the 1923 treaty that established the borders of modern Turkey. In the background, Cyprus’s ongoing division, Turkey’s continued demand to provide security guarantees, and its recent maritime incursions near offshore energy exploration efforts around Cyprus are long-standing areas of contention that remain deadlocked.

While Turkish ties with the United States and Europe have deteriorated, its relations with Iran (and Russia, as stated above) have improved. Turkey and Iran are historic rivals, but they have enjoyed strong trade relations in recent years. Between 2012 and 2016, bilateral trade volume totaled $69.6 billion. In an apparent effort to circumvent U.S. sanctions against Iran over its nuclear program, Turkey’s gold exports to Iran went from $54 million in 2011 to $6.5 billion in 2012, at which point U.S. sanctions were imposed and international banks were barred from processing other countries’ payments for shipments of Iranian oil. According to Reza Zarrab, a Turkish-Iranian gold trader who was arrested in 2016 for allegedly violating sanctions against Iran, Turkey deposited payments (in return for gas and oil imports from Iran) into Iranian accounts opened at the state-owned Turkish bank Halkbank, converted funds to gold through a series of shell companies and fictitious trades, and transferred them to Iran until July 2013, when gold was added to the U.S.


sanctions list. Zarrab has implicated high-level Turkish officials who allegedly received bribes and payments, including the former interior minister, the former economy minister, and even President Erdogan, who was prime minister at the time.

**China’s Economic Investment**

Since 2012, China has increased its presence in the Eastern Mediterranean, as it views the region as an area of strategic economic opportunity through its Belt and Road Initiative. Its infrastructure investments in the region serve as a gateway for Chinese investments in Europe, the western Balkans, and the Middle East.

- Greece is a pillar of China’s Eastern Mediterranean strategy, and Beijing has invested more than $10 billion in Greece, largely in infrastructure projects and utilities. In 2016, a Chinese company acquired a controlling 51 percent stake in Greece’s principal port, Piraeus, and invested $650 million in the port’s infrastructure. As Greece has experienced a 25 percent drop in GDP since 2008 and has received its third financial bailout package from the European Union, Greek officials welcome any source of capital investment. However, China’s investments may have political strings attached. Although the Greek government disputes this, in July 2017 Greece blocked an EU resolution condemning China’s human rights record and military activities.

- The Chinese government has begun investing in the Suez Canal, a move likely to be welcomed by Egypt, which relies on the canal as a significant source of foreign currency. The canal is a major pathway for Chinese freight destined for Europe. In November 2017, a government-owned Chinese company won a contract to build logistics infrastructure in the canal zone.

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• Cyprus is seeking Chinese investment. In 2015, Cyprus’s president pledged his country’s cooperation in implementing the Belt and Road Initiative and encouraged Chinese investment in Cypriot infrastructure. In June 2017, Cyprus signed an agreement with a Macau-based firm for the construction of a $650 million casino resort, which could be Europe’s largest.

• While Lebanon currently has relatively few economic ties to China, four Chinese trade delegations have visited the country within the past two years, primarily out of interest in Syrian reconstruction.

• In 2016, China invested $642 million in Turkey by acquiring stakes in the telecommunications and banking sectors. Chinese construction firms are poised to build 14,000 kilometers of new railways (including 10,000 kilometers of high-speed rail) in Turkey by 2023, helping to connect trade from the Middle East to Europe.

• Israel has been an increasingly important economic and high-tech investment target for China. In 2015, the state-owned Shanghai International Port Group won a 25-year contract to administer a new port in Haifa, beginning in 2021. Overall, Chinese investment in Israel increased more than tenfold between 2015 and 2016, from around $1.5 billion to $16.5 billion. Most of this investment is in high-tech fields, including cybersecurity, Internet business, and medical devices. A recently signed “innovation” partnership agreement allows China to more effectively access Israeli technology, fueling concerns that China’s strategy is to improve its own technology by using and adapting Israel’s, and causing some Israelis to worry about the possible long-term strategic costs of Chinese engagement.

Regional economic activity in the Eastern Mediterranean does not necessarily need to be a zero-sum game. Russian and Chinese investments in ailing economies have boosted fragile states in Greece and Cyprus. But because of Russia’s and China’s desire to preserve state authority at all

costs, their lack of interest in promoting transparent, rule of law–based, and resilient systems, and their deep distrust of U.S.-led multilateral frameworks that the United States has struggled to strengthen for almost three-quarters of a century, their increasing investments in the region represent a strategic challenge to the United States and the West. While much of what they do may appear to be tactically and economically driven, it has strategic implications that erode the principles by which the United States has managed global security in the post–World War II era.

REGIONAL TRANSFORMATION: FRAGMENTATION, MIGRATION, ECONOMIC CRISES, AND ENERGY

The regional power plays described above are only part of the complex strategic environment that the United States confronts in the Eastern Mediterranean. Equally significant are a series of seismic forces—state fragmentation, large migration flows, economic crises, and energy discoveries—that are currently transforming the region. These forces are described below; their implications for the United States are addressed more fully in Section 2. It is enough to say here that the U.S. policy response to a transformed Eastern Mediterranean will indicate whether the United States seeks to preserve an increasingly fragile status quo, or views the changes taking place as an opportunity to realign the region’s future in a way more consonant with U.S. strategic interests.

State Fragmentation

In the Eastern Mediterranean, state borders that were sacrosanct for nearly a century are increasingly being challenged by internal conflict, ethnic-based separatist movements, weak governments, and nonstate actors possessing state-like attributes. Globalization, cross-border supply chains, economic interconnectedness, and unprecedented regional population movements are further blurring the meaning of terrestrial and maritime borders.

The shattering of unified states that had held together disparate ethnic and religious groups was accelerated by the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq and subsequent 2011 NATO campaign against Muammar el-Qaddafi in Libya. The Arab uprisings in 2011 intensified internal conflict in a number of previously strong states and created openings for nonstate actors to challenge state authority. Nonstate actors such as the ISG are not bound by national borders and are able to exploit ungovernable spaces to emulate the functionality of a nation. These ungovernable spaces are also havens for illicit trafficking in persons, weapons, and drugs, as well as money laundering in the service of illicit terrorist activities.

In Syria, by some accounts, the government ceded control of up to 70 percent of the country’s territory, including international border crossings. The depth of the Assad regime’s losses forced

71. The Paris Peace Conference redrew borders following the near-simultaneous collapse of the Ottoman, Russian, and Austro-Hungarian Empires.

72. The regime remained in control of 60 to 70 percent of the population at this time, however. See Kenneth M. Pollack, “Breaking the Stalemate: The Military Dynamics of the Syrian Civil War and Options for Limited U.S.
Iran in 2013 and Russia in 2015 to intervene militarily to shore up the regime. Even after the tide of the war shifted in the Assad regime’s favor with control over main population and economic centers of the country, Syria is unlikely to return to the strong centralized and unified state it was before 2011. As of March 2018, Kurdish forces controlled about 25 percent of Syria. It remains unclear to what extent the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) would be willing to cede significant portions of this territory.

**Migration and Population Movements**

Conflicts in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan have driven millions of people to flee their homes, creating one of the largest refugee crises since World War II. The majority of refugees reaching Europe in the past several years traveled to and through Turkey and crossed the Aegean Sea to reach Greece. In August 2015, Greece received as many as 12,500 migrants per day, many of them hoping to travel north to reach Germany and Sweden. Over 3.9 million refugees applied for asylum in the European Union between 2011 and 2016. The flow stemmed in 2017 due to reimposition of internal border controls and bilateral agreements between receiving countries and source and transit countries. The European Union as a whole has also attempted to address the challenges of unregulated migration by restricting the movement of asylum seekers. In March 2016, Turkey agreed to restrict migrant departures to Europe and accept migrant deportations in return for $3.3 billion in EU aid to address the migrant burden, which has been slowly disbursed. As a result,

Central Mediterranean Migration Route

TOTAL ARRIVALS SINCE 2015

454,753

Arrivals in 2015 Arrivals in 2016 Arrivals in 2017
119,369 181,436 153,948*

*Includes Malta Source: IOM

Eastern Mediterranean Migration Route

TOTAL ARRIVALS SINCE 2015

1,120,555

Arrivals in 2015 Arrivals in 2016 Arrivals in 2017
38,692 193,057 888,806

Source: IOM
migrant arrivals to Greece have dropped by over 90 percent.77 But growing tensions between EU member states and Turkey threaten the arrangement.

The influx of refugees to Europe and the European public’s perception that Europe is being engulfed by migration have fueled nationalist and xenophobic political sentiment, weakened coalition governments, and strengthened ultranationalist political parties. Moreover, the economic burden of providing basic needs for refugees, and the long-term costs of integration, are diverting state funds from other priorities at a time when many governments are navigating rising or unmet social safety expectations among populations. While migration is not a new phenomenon in Europe (during the Balkans conflict of the early 1990s, 2.7 million people were displaced), the historically high human flows across the Mediterranean since 2011 have amplified the political pressures.78

The conflict in Syria alone has forced over half of the country’s prewar population—more than 11.5 million people—to flee their homes and left Syria’s neighbors straining to absorb large displaced populations. For vulnerable Middle Eastern states, the refugee populations not only create an economic burden; they also risk disrupting fragile social-political orders and could potentially trigger internal conflict and instability. More than 5 million Syrians have left the country, while over 6 million have been internally displaced since the war began.79 Turkey has taken in over 3 million Syrian refugees.80 In Jordan, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has registered 655,624 refugees, though the Jordanian government claims there are over double that number of Syrians in the country.81 If the government’s higher estimate is accurate, nearly one in seven people living in Jordan is a Syrian refugee.82 Lebanon, a country that has been pushed into conflict in the past when refugee populations disrupted its delicate demographic balance, today hosts

77. Over a year and a half after the deal went into effect, data from the UNHCR indicate that the daily average for sea arrivals in Greece has dropped by 97 percent. As of December 2017, Greece registered 76 arrivals per day. This figure is up from the daily average of 54 recorded in December 2016, however. See UN High Commissioner for Refugees, “Operational Portal: Mediterranean Situation: Greece,” as of January 31, 2018, http://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean/location/S179.


nearly 1 million Syrian refugees, according to UNHCR. Lebanon’s government estimates that the number is closer to 1.5 million Syrians, accounting for one-quarter of the total population.83

Border restrictions along the Turkey–Aegean Sea–Greece–western Balkans route have led to increases in more difficult crossings in the Central Mediterranean, from the Libyan coast to Italy.84

In July 2017, over 5,000 migrants (most originating from sub-Saharan Africa) arrived in Italy each day.85 Italy (and not the European Union) has made arrangements with the Libyan Government of National Accord to prevent migrants from leaving Libyan territorial waters. The European Union is engaging with North African countries to tighten border patrols and providing aid to source countries with the intention of limiting migration, including $2 billion in aid pledged to sub-Saharan


African countries through the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa.\textsuperscript{86} Given that Africa’s overall population is expected to double in the next generation to over 2.5 billion people, migration pressures and the flow of irregular migrants will increase, presenting a long-term strategic challenge to Europe.\textsuperscript{87}

**Economic Crises**

Many of the littoral states in the Eastern Mediterranean have faced destabilizing economic crises in the last decade that have created deep political and strategic vulnerabilities. Prolonged economic recession, unmanageably high debt burdens, high inflation, and chronically high youth unemployment have hit Greece, Cyprus, Lebanon, and Egypt particularly hard. After eight years of recession and three financial bailouts, Greece’s GDP has dropped by 25 percent, while it retains a 180 percent debt-to-GDP ratio, an unemployment rate of over 20 percent, and a rising poverty


rate. The 2012–2013 Cyprus economic crisis devastated economic activity and the financial sector. The country is emerging from the crisis, but with a debt burden (107 percent debt-to-GDP ratio) that impedes economic growth and creates overdependence on the financial sector. In Lebanon, the government has struggled to restart economic growth and boost revenue to reverse its sizable budget deficit. Political turmoil in the country has long delayed economic reforms and new public investment projects.

In Egypt, once an anchor of stability in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East, political turmoil has exacerbated economic woes. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states believe that Egyptian stability is crucial to stability in the Arab world, and in the 18 months after the 2013 overthrow of Mohamed Morsi, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia provided Egypt with $23 billion in assistance to help support the country’s economy and finance its imports. In November 2016, the International Monetary Fund agreed to provide an additional $12 billion in loans in exchange for structural economic reforms, including cutting subsidies and floating the Egyptian pound. While these measures have boosted currency reserves and reduced public debt, inflation spiked to more than 30 percent in 2017, in a country where 28 percent of the population lives below the poverty line.

Turkey, another historic anchor of stability in the region, has witnessed a decade of impressive economic growth, but this was fueled largely by external credit. Although recent economic projections point to remarkable short-term growth (7 percent in the first quarter of 2018), this has been fueled primarily by household spending and unsustainable government spending. Inflation reached 13 percent in December 2017, the highest in 14 years; the youth unemployment rate

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(age 15–24) is at 20 percent,95 and the value of the Turkish lira has fallen 10 percent against the U.S. dollar, due in part to actions taken by the Turkish government following the July 2016 attempted coup and growing diplomatic tensions.96 Economic growth is expected to slow in 2018, as uncertainty about future Turkish policy and an independent monetary policy has led to foreign capital flight, and public and private debt continues to mount.97

The frequency and depth of economic crises in the Eastern Mediterranean have become a strategic vulnerability for the region. The economic downturns have contributed to mounting domestic political strain or unrest. In the Middle East, socioeconomic grievances—tied not only to extreme poverty but also to the lack of opportunities for an educated middle class and young people—were among the drivers of popular uprisings beginning in 2011, and they continue to fuel discontent.98 In Europe, financial leaders have expressed concern that persistent unemployment risks alienating a generation of young people from public institutions and from governments.99

For China and Russia, the region’s economic fragility has provided an opening to accelerate and deepen economic ties with the region; this trend was described above. China has been active in Greece, Turkey, and Cyprus through its Belt and Road Initiative, while Russia has reenergized its economic activities in Cyprus, sought opportunities to boost its investment in Greece’s economy,100 and established a $1 billion joint investment fund in Turkey.101 Russia’s forays into natural gas in Lebanon and Egypt are discussed further below.

Energy Prospects

Significant natural gas discoveries off the shores of Israel, Cyprus, and Egypt have boosted economic prospects in the region and drawn the attention of external actors looking for investment opportunities. While the discovery of gas is unlikely to transform the region, it will provide important domestic sources of energy and a potential source for Europe, where many leaders are keen

97. Ibid.
101. “Russia, Turkey Create Investment Fund for up $1 Billion,” Reuters, March 10, 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-turkey-funds/russia-turkey-create-investment-fund-for-up-1-billion-idUSKB16H21V. Bilateral trade has increased since Russia removed trade restrictions following the downing of a Russian Air Force jet in Syria. Turkey has not participated in the U.S. or EU sanctions imposed against Russia after its annexation of Crimea.
to identify additional energy sources and lessen dependence on Russian and North African energy supplies. Developing Eastern Mediterranean gas requires billions of dollars of investment, which hinges on securing export markets that can absorb the gas and make it profitable for companies producing and supplying it.

The U.S. government has long practiced so-called “pipeline diplomacy,” aimed at cementing ties between neighbors through energy infrastructure development and energy interdependence. In the Eastern Mediterranean, U.S. policymakers sought to use energy as a tool to improve relations between Israel and Turkey and among Greece, Cyprus, and Turkey.102 Building a pipeline through Turkey was meant to solve a key export problem for Israeli gas. But this approach has not been as successful as expected, due to long-standing diplomatic tensions, regulatory uncertainty, high infrastructure construction costs, and limited energy expertise within the region. Moreover, while the U.S. government can encourage cooperation, ultimately private energy firms’ investment decisions are based on commercial calculations and market conditions. Thus far, each country has pursued an independent path for production.

The first major indication that the region possessed significant energy deposits was the 2009 discovery of Israel’s Tamar gas field by the U.S.-based firm Noble Energy.103 Other discoveries followed, including the Leviathan field within Israel’s exclusive economic zone (EEZ), the Aphrodite field off Cyprus,104 and the Zohr field off Egypt, which is considered the largest discovery in the Eastern Mediterranean.105 Although no proven reserves have yet been discovered in Lebanon, a consortium of France’s Total, Italy’s ENI, and Russia’s Novatek submitted a bid for five offshore exploration blocks within Lebanon’s EEZ in October 2017.106 The consortium has since signed agreements covering two of these blocks, with one in disputed Lebanese-Israeli territory.107

Much of the initial enthusiasm generated by these discoveries waned in the face of bureaucratic, political, and diplomatic delays, as well as the continued division of Cyprus. Exclusive economic zones claimed by Cyprus are contested by Turkey (which sent warships in July 2017 and in February 2018 to the location where seismic and exploratory drilling activities were taking place);\(^\text{108}\) antitrust regulators in Israel ruled that the Leviathan field was controlled by a monopoly; and an 800-square-kilometer area off the Israeli-Lebanese border thought to be rich in hydrocarbons is claimed by both countries, which have no formal diplomatic ties. In December 2017, Cyprus, Israel, Italy, and Greece signed a memorandum of understanding to explore a natural gas pipeline linking Leviathan to European markets, though the cost and technical requirements raise doubts about the feasibility of such an undertaking in the foreseeable future.\(^\text{109}\)

Unlocking Cyprus’s natural gas reserves in the Aphrodite field could potentially bolster its economy, but will require two things: large-scale investment for either a liquefaction facility or export pipeline, and resolution of the diplomatic conflict with Turkey over delineation of EEZs, which would likely require successfully negotiating the reunification of Cyprus.\(^\text{110}\) More broadly, Cyprus faces the challenge of securing export markets to make its production economically viable. Discussions with Israel over a pipeline or joint liquefaction facility have been ongoing, but show little sign of progress.

Meanwhile, the breakdown in diplomatic relations between Israel and Turkey in 2011 has greatly diminished prospects of connecting the two countries via a natural gas pipeline. Russia has also reenergized its pipeline diplomacy in the region. Russia and Turkey have begun to construct a natural gas pipeline (known as TurkStream) that begins in Russia, traverses the Black Sea, and terminates in Turkey, with potential future gas lines to Greece. For many of these energy proposals, the sufficiency of export markets is in doubt; as markets are currently constructed, companies cannot foresee an adequate return on their investments.

Egypt’s natural gas infrastructure is the most developed in the Eastern Mediterranean. Egypt, which previously supplied natural gas to Israel via pipeline, went from a net gas exporter to an importer in 2015.\(^\text{111}\) The Zohr field discovery gives Egypt the opportunity to meet growing domestic demand and resume exports. With the region’s only liquefied natural gas (LNG) plants (located at Idku and Damietta), Egypt could position itself as a regional energy hub for European and African markets. Russia now appears interested in Egyptian (and Lebanese) gas; in October 2017, state-owned

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Rosneft purchased a $1.1 billion, 30 percent stake in Egypt’s offshore Zohr gas field from the Italian firm ENI. After several years of regulatory delay and debate over pipeline export plans, Israel’s natural gas development is improving. Preceding gas for Israel’s domestic market as well as for Jordan, and Israel is in ongoing discussions with the Palestinian Authority for a pipeline connecting the West Bank city of Jenin to Israel’s natural gas pipeline. Production from the larger Leviathan field is expected in 2019. Israel’s reserves could potentially provide for all of its domestic gas needs, as well as those of Jordan and the Palestinian territories. Jordanian industries are already connected to Israel’s natural gas pipeline network.

The development of Egypt’s and Israel’s gas industries provides an opportunity for cooperation that would be mutually beneficial and solve a key export conundrum. In February 2018, Israel and Egypt signed a $15 billion deal to supply Egypt with gas from Israel’s Leviathan field, most of which will be used for domestic consumption. Further linking Israeli supply with Egypt’s two LNG facilities could create an important outlet for Israeli exports and provide Egypt with additional revenue.

While Eastern Mediterranean energy is unlikely to transform the region and resolve conflict, it could boost economic stabilization and growth and significantly lower government import bills.

114. Israel has contemplated three primary export options: a pipeline to Turkey, a pipeline via Greece to Italy, and a pipeline to Egypt for liquefaction. Building either an onshore LNG facility or an offshore floating LNG facility has also been raised, but each was turned down because of cost or environmental concerns. An internal foreign ministry memo following Israel’s initial discoveries recommended that Israel not export natural gas but instead preserve its reserves for domestic consumption, which could help transform Israel into a natural gas–driven economy in terms of utilities and transportation.
U.S. Goals and Priorities in the Eastern Mediterranean

For the United States, all the factors described in Section 1 heighten the importance of viewing the Eastern Mediterranean both as an integrated region and as a vital nexus where Europe and the Middle East intersect. An event in one country is quickly felt elsewhere. As the region’s ongoing transformation unfolds, external actors are competing to shape its future to their own needs. The United States needs to engage more strategically in the Eastern Mediterranean in order to strengthen broader U.S. strategic interests and goals in both the Middle East and Europe. Should it now fail to restore U.S. influence within the changing geostrategic contours of the Eastern Mediterranean, it may find that its future ability to do so in the region itself, or even in surrounding areas, is greatly diminished.

There are two pressing priorities to advance U.S. interests within the framework of a distinct policy for the Eastern Mediterranean:

- Resolving the Syrian conflict on terms acceptable to the United States, so that Syria does not destabilize the region and threaten U.S. interests.

- Managing the growing policy divergence with Turkey by simultaneously seeking to recalibrate U.S.-Turkish ties, while building alternatives to the strategic benefits Turkey provides.

These two goals, and the specific objectives they seek to achieve, are described in detail below. Although some near-term elements of a new U.S. Eastern Mediterranean policy will appear to be transactional in nature and may be interpreted as acknowledging declining U.S. influence in the region, these steps must be part of any long-term and sustained effort to rebuild a credible regional policy that restores U.S. influence.

STRATEGIC GOAL 1: RESOLVING THE SYRIAN CONFLICT

The continuation of Syria’s now-seven-year conflict undermines U.S. interests in a number of ways. Waves of refugees have destabilized Europe, Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon; jihadi-salafists
have used Syria as a base to coordinate attacks in Europe and beyond; Russia is using conflict in Syria to project power and influence in the Eastern Mediterranean; and Iran is using Syria as a forward operating base and bridge to the Mediterranean Sea. The United States must engage meaningfully in a diplomatic process to end the conflict in Syria so that Syria’s internal problems and divisions do not continue to threaten U.S. interests or export instability to Syria’s neighbors and to Europe. The challenge ahead is defining the most effective way to do that, while acknowledg- ing the tremendous human suffering experienced by—and the atrocities committed against—several generations of Syrians.

None of the options the United States faces are attractive. Conditions were different when the uprising in Syria started in 2011, but with each successive year of U.S. policy inaction, U.S. influence has declined, while that of Russia, Turkey, and Iran has increased. Russia’s military intervention in September 2015 to protect the Assad regime changed the conflict profoundly and
constrained U.S. military and policy options. Turkey’s August 2016 intervention in the northern province of Aleppo and the January 2018 assault on Afrin (Operation Olive Branch), fueled by its alarm over the prospect of an independent Kurdish entity with ties to Turkey’s Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) on its southern border, have further complicated the battle space and U.S. choices. 1 Meanwhile, Iran’s deepening military presence in Syria strengthens its ability to challenge U.S. interests and allies in the region.

Interventions by Russia, Turkey, and Iran have reshaped the landscape for a political resolution to the conflict in ways that have sidelined the United States. Even as the United States has committed approximately 2,000 troops to fighting the ISG and remains one of the largest donors to refugee and humanitarian aid efforts—providing $7.4 billion in assistance since 2011 2—it’s influence has not matched that of other external actors. The United States has been largely peripheral to the UN-led Geneva process (which has produced few tangible results in any case), has been even less engaged as an observer to the Russian-Iranian-Turkish–led Astana process, and has played no role in the Russian-led Sochi talks. The Astana talks emerged as an important track for addressing local issues on the ground, including cease-fires, de-escalation, delivery of humanitarian aid, and troop deployments, but renewed regime offensives in Idlib and rural Damascus in early 2018 undermined their effectiveness. Though the United States expanded military operations in Syria in 2017 to combat the ISG and increased diplomatic discussions with Russia (particularly focused on deconfliction and cease-fire zones), it has less influence than Russia, Iran, or Turkey on the terms on which the conflict is being resolved. None of this means, however, that the United States has no leverage or options.

A difficult reckoning is at hand. After seven years of violence, the Assad regime is close to “winning” the civil war with the help of its Russian and Iranian allies, albeit at the cost of the country’s unity. Whether Syrian president Bashar al-Assad enjoys either legitimacy or the consent of the majority of his population will be left for Syrians to decide. 3 But to restore a semblance of stability and end the violence, the central government must be able to exert some form of control over


Syria’s borders and economic centers. Any outcome that undermines Syria’s territorial integrity would ensure ongoing conflict and further destabilize Syria’s neighbors.

To play a role in shaping this post-conflict environment, the United States will have to redouble its diplomatic efforts to effect reconciliation within formerly rebellious areas, and it should encourage Kurds and the regime to agree on limited self-administration in the Kurdish region. This will require U.S. government engagement at the highest levels with numerous actors including Russia and Turkey. The parameters that former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson outlined on January 17, 2018, are a practical starting point. The United States should not directly assist the Syrian regime or provide reconstruction aid for regime-held territory until a post-conflict political agreement is negotiated and guarantees of compliance are enforced. A case can also be made (though Secretary Tillerson argued against it) for U.S. reconstruction assistance in areas controlled by U.S.-allied forces. An eventual return of government control should reduce the need to deploy external forces within Syria, including Russian, Turkish, Iranian, and U.S. forces.

It is painful to support the position that a murderous regime should regain control over Syria. The wider policy and moral consequences of this position are not trivial. According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights, by mid-2017 Assad’s forces had killed 192,793 civilians, including 21,631 children. The regime has repeatedly used internationally banned chemical weapons, including sarin gas, on civilians. As long as Assad remains in power, the main impetus for the uprising in 2011—the desire of many Syrians to escape the authoritarian grip of a brutal regime—remains. Though violent opposition might become dormant after the regime reasserts control, it will not disappear. In reality, any practical outcome in the next 12 to 24 months will likely be characterized by some level of violence and conflict.

The United States cannot solve Syria’s deep internal problems, nor is it in a position to decide who governs Syria. However, the United States must increase its leverage in what seems to be a forthcoming settlement, and it must set clear objectives that advance U.S. interests and match U.S. capabilities. All U.S. actions in Syria should work to maximize U.S. influence in the region as a bulwark against the power and actions of other actors—Russia, Iran, Turkey, Syrian Kurds, and the Assad regime—so that the United States can influence negotiations for a future settlement from a position of strength. While the war seems to have ebbed in parts of the country, there are multiple challenges and flashpoints ahead that will draw out negotiations. Agreements will also need to be reached on a number of post-conflict issues, such as reconstruction, the exodus of foreign fighters, and the return of refugees and internally displaced. Playing a more active diplomatic role in concert with U.S. military deployments would advance and protect U.S. interests and could help rebuild some of America’s damaged credibility in the region.

The U.S. administration’s approach, first articulated in November 2017, provides a new opportunity to reset U.S. strategy in Syria. It announced that the United States was working closely with Russia

6. The November 11 statement is the clearest articulation of U.S. government goals in Syria since the civil war erupted in May 2011. It came after a meeting between President Trump and President Putin on the sidelines of the 2017
to solve the Syrian crisis based on three phases: defeat of the Islamic State group; stabilization efforts and de-escalation of hostilities, including the removal of non-Syrian foreign forces; and a political resolution of the conflict based on the UN-led Geneva process. The statement represents a step forward in clarity on U.S. Syria policy, yet in actuality, the Geneva process is moribund and hostilities have continued. And while the territory held by the ISG has greatly diminished, jihadi-salafi groups and cells will be a persistent regional and global challenge. To ensure greater success, U.S. policy should focus on four primary objectives, described below.

Objective: Prevent Iran from Establishing Syria as a Base for Regional Expansion and Power Projection into the Mediterranean Sea

The United States must work to counter Iranian military entrenchment in Syria that will expand Tehran’s power-projection capabilities and threaten U.S. interests and assets in the region. Iran’s effort to turn Syria into a more dependent client state presents a complex threat to the United States, its allies, and the region. In particular, the United States must work to prevent the establishment of permanent Iranian military bases and weapons production facilities in Syria, impede Iran’s efforts to establish a land bridge to the Mediterranean Sea, and secure the withdrawal of Iranian troops and Iranian-backed foreign fighters from the country. Given Iran’s strategic partnership with the Assad regime, Iran will maintain some level of military advisory and intelligence presence in Syria for the foreseeable future. The challenge facing the United States is to minimize Iran’s presence in Syria to the greatest extent possible. If the administration is serious about containing Iran, as it claims to be, it must start by denying Iran’s goal of making its forward operating presence in Syria permanent. For the United States, any effective Iran policy has to hinge on Syria, and any effective Syria policy must hinge on Iran.

Objective: Deny All Jihadi-Salafists Safe Haven

The United States and its allies are primarily responsible for the territorial defeat of ISG in Syria. As of late December 2017, ISG had lost about 98 percent of the territory it once held in Iraq and Syria. Jihadi-salafists, however, remain a threat in several ways that will affect U.S. interests. First, jihadi-salafists remain entrenched in northwestern Syria, specifically in Idlib and Hama Provinces, where the al Qaeda-linked Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) and other militant salafist groups operate. Many of these groups have ties with Turkey. As long as al Qaeda or other jihadi-salafists find safe haven in Syria, they will pose a threat to the United States, U.S. interests, and U.S. allies, and will


ensure that Syria’s conflict persists. Second, ISG forces that were based in Deir ez-Zor Province have fragmented and pose a different kind of threat as ISG fighters adopt insurgency tactics, defect to other militant groups in northern Syria, or seek to cross the border into Turkey.10 U.S. secretary of defense James Mattis acknowledged the ISG’s continued lethality in November 2017, asserting that “We’ll keep fighting [the ISG] as long as they want to fight.”11 Yet President Trump has made no secret of his interest in withdrawing swiftly from Syria. He told an audience in Ohio in March 2018, “We’re knocking the hell out of ISIS. We’ll be coming out of Syria like very soon. Let the other people take care of it now . . . We are going to be coming out of there real soon. We are going to get back to our country, where we belong, where we want to be.”12 U.S. goals are currently clearer than the means that will be used to achieve them.

**Objective: Support Kurdish Autonomy within the Borders of a Unified Syria**

The United States should support limited self-administration for Kurds in northern Syria, within the structure of a unified Syria. The exact parameters and level of self-administration are less important than establishing some degree of autonomy, which will need to be negotiated between Syrian Kurds and the central government. It is not a strategy without risks, and it will require diplomatic skill to balance competing interests—primarily opposition from Turkey, which launched an assault on People’s Protection Unit (YPG) forces in Afrin in January 2018. Yet the opportunities for much-needed leverage cannot be missed. The multiethnic SDF military alliance, dominated by the Kurdish YPG, is an important U.S. ally and an effective force against the ISG. Moreover, Kurdish governance in areas the SDF controls in northeast Syria have been relatively stable,13 and the SDF has seized a number of important economic assets—including some of Syria’s largest oil and gas fields.14 Syrian Kurdish gains and those of the SDF in Manbij offer the United States important sources of leverage against Russia, Turkey, Iran, and the Assad regime in future negotiations. Strong U.S. backing for Kurdish areas in the north has also served to limit the territory Iran is able to exploit in its efforts to build a land bridge across Syria and Iraq to its proxies in Lebanon. Further, Kurdish groups remain the most capable force fighting against the ISG and terrorist elements, and

keeping them in the U.S. camp will help the United States respond more effectively to any future resurgence of the ISG or successor groups.

Greater self-rule in Kurdish-majority areas of northern Syria may carry additional strategic benefits. Kurdish-governed areas, which also host large numbers of Syrians displaced from other parts of the country, have achieved relative stability and arguably prevented the outflow of additional refugees. In addition, greater autonomy for local Kurdish actors may allow the United States to bypass the central regime in channeling local reconstruction support. Finally, being seen to deliver for a core ally could help the United States begin to rebuild credibility in Syria, or at least prevent further damage to its credibility.

**Objective: Reduce the Likelihood of Israeli-Iranian Conflict in Syria**

For Israel, which has struggled for decades to contain and deter Hezbollah, the Iranian presence in Syria complicates the threat environment. Israel has communicated clearly that it will use military force against Iran, Hezbollah, the Assad regime, or other targets in Syria to prevent any strategic shift in the battlefield that would neutralize its military and technological edge. The Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) must now shift their focus from Hezbollah to contend with a more cohesive Iranian-Hezbollah axis operating near Israel’s borders. Israel is most alarmed by the potential of permanent Iranian military bases, Iranian production facilities that could supply precision munitions directly to Hezbollah, and Iran’s support for a Hezbollah-like proxy in Syria.

The risk of direct military confrontation between the Iran-Hezbollah axis and Israel is increasing. Current IDF assessments do not indicate that either Iran or Hezbollah seeks escalation, but accidental or misinterpreted actions could trigger an unintended confrontation, which would have negative consequences for U.S. interests and those of its allies. At a minimum, Israel and Iran are locked in a low-intensity ongoing struggle in Syria, in which unintended triggering events could quickly escalate. Moreover, as the Assad regime regains its confidence and control, it has responded more aggressively to Israeli military strikes in Syria. Should a war with Iran or Hezbollah

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break out, it will likely inflict higher casualties and damage than Israel’s 2006 war with Hezbollah, and would potentially cause widespread economic damage in Lebanon and Israel.20

Israel has so far avoided taking a side in Syria’s conflict, though it has used military force more than 100 times in Syria since 2011 to reinforce its deterrence.21 On December 2, 2017, Israel conducted air strikes against a suspected Iranian military base located just 31 miles east of the Israeli-held Golan Heights—destroying a number of newly constructed buildings and reportedly killing 12 Iranians.22 As noted above, Israel destroyed an Iranian drone facility after an armed drone strayed into Israeli airspace in April 2018; and on February 10, 2018, after an Iranian drone infiltrated Israeli airspace and a Syrian SA-5 air defense missile downed an Israeli F-16, Israeli air strikes destroyed several IRGC positions and half of the Syrian regime’s air defense systems.23 In the past several years, Israel has also used military force to deny IRGC attempts to establish outposts near the Israeli-Syrian border. On January 18, 2015, Israel carried out an air strike that killed IRGC general Mohammad Allahdadi and 10 other operatives in Quneitra, which lies on the Syrian-Israeli border.24

Israeli prime minister Netanyahu has repeatedly appealed to both President Trump and President Putin to limit Iranian and Hezbollah activities in Syria. Netanyahu met several times with President Putin in 2017 (and once in January 2018) to discuss Syria, and the two speak by phone frequently. Israel’s relationship with Russia, which provides the Syrian regime with significant air defense capabilities with Russia’s S-400 systems, will be tested each time Israeli aircraft enter Syrian airspace. Israel initially insisted that any cease-fire agreement reached in the southwestern zone ensure that Iranian forces and Iranian-backed militias (including Hezbollah) stay 60 to 80 kilometers away from

20. It is likely that the next war with Hezbollah will cause greater destruction of lives and property than the 2006 war. In the next confrontation, Israeli population centers will likely be targeted by thousands of missiles, which could cause civilian casualties and damage to Israel’s economic infrastructure. Israeli officials have asserted that Israel would hold the Lebanese government responsible for Hezbollah’s actions, and that in the next confrontation IDF would consider Lebanese infrastructure a fair target.

21. Former Israeli Air Force chief Amir Eshel said that the number of Israeli military operations in “the northern sector” since 2012 was “close to three figures.” See Amos Harel, “ ‘We Prevented Israel from Going to War’: Outgoing Air Force Chief on Iran, Gaza and the Conflicts Ahead,” Haaretz, November 7, 2017, https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news /1.808556.


24. Israeli later said that the Iranian general was not the intended target of the attack. See Yasser Okbi, “Report: Iranian General Was Killed in Israeli Strike Because He Didn’t Turn Off His Phone,” Jerusalem Post, January 24, 2015, http:// www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/Report-Iranian-general-was-killed-in-Israeli-strike-because-he-didnt-turn-off -his-phone-388779. In addition to IRGC general Mohammed Allahdadi, the strike reportedly killed Jihad Mughniyah, son of the Hezbollah military mastermind Imad Mughniyah, who was linked to the U.S. Marine Barracks bombing in 1984 and who was reportedly assassinated in February 2008 by the CIA and Mossad. See Adam Goldman and Ellen Nakashima, “CIA and Mossad Killed Senior Hezbollah Figure in Car Bombing,” Washington Post, January 30, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/cia-and-mossad-killed-senior-hezbollah-figure-in-car -bombing/2015/01/30/ebb88682-968a-11e4-8005-1924ede3e54a _story.html.
the Israeli-Syrian border on the Golan Heights (as defined by the 1967 armistice line). According to Israeli media reports, that request was rebuffed. Instead, Russia agreed only to restrict Iranian forces and their allies from approaching closer than five kilometers from the border. Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov told Russian state media that U.S.-Russian consultations on de-escalation in southwestern Syria did not cover the withdrawal of Iranian troops or their proxies. More concerning for Israelis was the fact that Iran’s presence in Syria was neglected by the Trump administration and was not a part of U.S. understandings reached between President Trump and President Putin during their November 2017 meeting.

Tools and Approaches for Advancing U.S. Objectives in Syria

For the United States, the Syrian conflict is moving from a primarily military mission to one that requires greater diplomatic engagement to shape outcomes favorable to the United States. U.S. military deployments in Syria are still critical, but they should now be used to support diplomacy aimed at advancing broader U.S. strategic goals in Syria. All U.S. actions in Syria should seek to rebuild U.S. influence and shape a post-conflict security and political order that protects core U.S. interests. To achieve this end, the United States must deploy significant and sustained diplomatic, military, and economic tools.

To advance the four objectives aimed at resolving the Syria conflict on acceptable terms, the United States should develop and use the following tools and approaches, which are designed as interconnected, mutually reinforcing, and sometimes overlapping sets of actions.

1. **Strengthen U.S. diplomacy to bring about a credible political settlement to the crisis and influence the post-conflict security order.**
   
   o **Work with European partners to build a new contact group on Syria to include all key regional actors.** The United States remains committed to the UN-led Geneva talks, which convened for the eighth round in late November and early December 2017. But these talks are unlikely to produce the political breakthroughs necessary to end Syria’s conflict if they continue to be undermined by Russian-led processes at Astana and Sochi. New offensives in Idlib in late 2017 and eastern Ghouta in early 2018 have shown that Russia, Iran, and the Syrian regime are quick to break agreements made at Astana when expedient to do so. Russian-led talks at Sochi also lacked credible representatives, and the main result, a U.N.-led committee to alter the Syrian constitution, was swiftly rejected by the Syrian regime. The United States should support French president Macron’s initiative to launch a “Syria

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26. Ibid.
contact group” that would include key actors and extend to Turkey, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Iran.²⁹ Appointing a new special envoy for Syria, a post which was vacant as of April 2018, would signal U.S. seriousness. Coordinating closely with European allies toward common objectives, including on issues like Iranian bases and troop deployments, will enhance the United States’ position within the process. The United Kingdom, France, and Germany have assumed forward-leaning supporting roles in the anti-ISG operations in Syria. German, British, and French air forces have all participated in anti-ISG bombing campaigns. The German parliament approved the deployment of 1,200 soldiers in northern Iraq in support of Syrian operations in 2015 and has recently extended its deployments to the region; and both the United Kingdom and France have dispatched special forces to train opposition forces,³⁰ and both countries joined the United States attacking Syrian regime targets on April 13, 2018 after the Syrian government reportedly used chemical weapons in Douma a week prior. Likewise, the European Union is an important aid donor and has signaled willingness to tie pledges for early recovery in Syria to engagement in political negotiations which will enhance its leverage over the Syrian regime and Russia.³¹

- **Work with relevant stakeholders including Russia and Turkey to promote limited Kurdish self-administration within a unified Syria.** It is critical that Syrian Kurds maintain a minimal level of autonomy that satisfies their own requirements and that neither the Assad regime nor Turkey views as an existential threat. A regime-Kurdish

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accommodation would help rebuild stability in Syria and is in the U.S. interest. This process should allow for a slow, transparent, and confidence-building process in which Assad regime forces gradually retake control over Syria's external borders without leading to clashes between regime forces and both U.S.-backed forces and Turkish troops. A cease-fire agreement in Deir ez-Zor may help form a base for SDF-regime security dialogue on which future talks could be developed, but Turkey's military operation near Afrin complicates this task greatly.

2. **Maintain troop numbers and military assets deployed in Syria, with a focus on taking actions that increase U.S. influence.** Although the official U.S. force limit has remained at 503 since before Barack Obama left office, the Pentagon reported a presence of 2,000 troops in December 2017. U.S. deployments are an important signal of U.S. commitment and a deterrent against hostile forces. Deploying even modest numbers of U.S. troops in areas controlled by allied forces can deter attacks by Turkish, Iranian, Russian, and regime forces. Russia and the regime have begun to test this assumption, however. On February 7, 2018, a force of approximately 550 Russian mercenaries and pro-regime militiamen assaulted an SDF position, where U.S. forces were known to be embedded. Responding coalition aircraft reportedly killed or injured over 300, though Moscow has been slow to acknowledge the Russian presence. These forces may have been testing U.S. and coalition resolve. While forays by irregular forces may continue, it is unlikely that any of these actors seek to provoke a direct military confrontation with the United States. For instance, U.S. military presence in Kurdish-held areas remains the most important asset in preventing a regime or Turkish assault on Syrian Kurds in Manbij and eastward. Thus, deploying troops both gives the United States greater negotiating power and gives negotiators time to work out complicated political issues. The continued deployment of U.S. forces also ensures that the fight against ISG remnants will continue and could grow more necessary should YPG forces dissipate to confront Turkish forces.

   o **Continue supporting the SDF, while discussing the umbrella group’s future in a post-conflict Syria.** The SDF, the coalition-backed umbrella organization led by the YPG, is among the most effective and competent U.S. allies in Syria. Keeping the SDF in the U.S. camp creates leverage for the United States and maintains an important policy tool. Unfortunately, U.S. military support for the SDF has further damaged U.S. relations with Turkey, which views the YPG as a "terrorist" group linked to the PKK. A series of misunderstandings has fueled additional tension. In November 2017, senior Turkish officials announced a promise by President Trump to cease supplying

Kurdish forces with arms. Defense Secretary James Mattis responded by clarifying that the Pentagon would "move away from" providing offensive military capabilities to the SDF and YPG and move toward improving their policing and territory-holding capabilities.\(^{34}\) In January 2018, Turkish sources again announced that the United States had agreed to stop arming the YPG,\(^ {35}\) though there has been no U.S. confirmation or shift in policy. Despite the obvious tension with Turkey, support for the SDF is one of the few leverage points the United States has in Syria.

- **Maintain the U.S. military footprint in the Middle Euphrates River Valley in cooperation with key European allies, both to serve as leverage against Russia and the Assad regime and to prevent further Iranian gains.** Currently the United States has a limited physical presence in what is typically referred to as the Middle Euphrates River Valley (mainly Deir ez-Zor Province)—a primary arena through which Iran is attempting to build its land bridge to Lebanon. As of February 2018, U.S.-backed SDF forces were positioned on the eastern bank of the river, while pro-regime forces, including Iranian proxies, lined the western bank. Without deconfliction and a strong show of U.S. commitment to SDF forces deployed there, chances of confrontation are high.\(^ {36}\) The Assad regime views the Conoco gas field and al Omar oil field, which the SDF captured in November 2017, as integral to reasserting control over the country.\(^ {37}\)

Given the SDF’s overextension into the region, the U.S.-led coalition should provide the umbrella group with sufficient military and logistic support to prevent an expansion of regime and pro-Iranian forces east of the Euphrates. The coalition should also expand deconfliction measures with the Assad regime in the east vis-à-vis Russia. Although lines of deconfliction have been negotiated between the SDF and regime forces,\(^ {38}\) they have already withstood several significant tests, such as the February 2018 attack.

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3. **Internationalize Discussions with Russia over Syria.** The United States and Russia share overarching interests in restoring stability to and combating the ISG in Syria. The challenge is that Russia is unreliable and will exploit opportunities for its own agenda even in situations where U.S. and Russian objectives appear to overlap. The commander of U.S. military’s Central Command, General Joseph Votel, explained this dilemma, claiming that the Russians “play the role of both arsonist and fireman—fueling tensions and then trying to resolve them in their favor.”

Cooperation with Russia will require highly skilled diplomacy that keeps in mind that, first and foremost, Russia is an adversary and that Syria has become a proxy for the Kremlin’s policy of displacing U.S. presence in the region, breaking traditional U.S. alliances, reasserting Russian presence, and reestablishing Russia’s traditional (i.e., Cold War) military alliances. Moscow characterizes all negative policy outcomes as problems caused by the United States and as a threat to its interests. As Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov has described Syria, “if one looks at who poses the biggest threat, it is the United States’ charges, specifically, various foreign terrorists and militants, who cling to those armed opposition groups backed by the U.S.”

Moreover, Russian intentions and policy announcements related to Syria cannot be trusted and must be independently verified. Despite repeated declarations of military drawdown, Russia is in fact constructing an enduring military presence in Syria. In November 2017, the Russian government claimed that it had developed a common strategy for Syria with the United States, but Russian sources then denied that the government had agreed to a withdrawal of Iranian forces and called Iran’s presence in Syria “legitimate.”

Finally, in a highly polarized American domestic political environment partly stemming from Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election, U.S.-Russian cooperation in any manifestation will be extremely difficult, requiring that Russia be brought fully into a Syrian Contact Group format rather than provide what the Kremlin seeks—a bilateral U.S.-Russian agreement that attempts to return the international system to a Cold War—bipolar construct.

- **Widen and seek international monitoring and verification of cease-fire and deescalation agreements.** In mid-September 2015, Russia began a military buildup in Syria ahead of its full-scale intervention later that month. Both the United States and Russia understood the risks of their forces and assets operating in the same arena, so Ash Carter, the secretary of defense at the time, and Russian minister of defense


Shoygu reopened the military-military dialogue, which had been suspended since March 2014. After Russia commenced its bombing campaign on September 30, the two militaries signed a memorandum of understanding and opened a 24-hour “deconfliction hotline.”

For the United States, the hotline has been operated out of al-Udeid Air Base in Qatar, the CENTCOM forward headquarters. From there, the U.S. military relays aircraft coordinates and other flight data to Russian operators on the ground in Syria, and vice versa, to avoid midair incidents. But as U.S. and Russian engagement in Syria has deepened, so have these deconfliction measures. With U.S. and allied forces now operating on the ground in close proximity to Russian and regime-backed forces, the hotline facilitates regular contact between all assets—both air and ground. The coalition-backed SDF umbrella maintains a separate hotline with Syrian regime forces.

Such communication helped establish a physical line of deconfliction between the SDF umbrella and regime-backed forces, as they converged along the Euphrates River in the summer of 2017. This line stretches south along the river from al-Tabqa to Iraq, and has largely prevented clashes between the opposing forces—keeping the focus on the parallel counter-ISIS campaigns. Coalition forces have similarly created a deconfliction zone surrounding al-Tanf base near the convergence of the Jordanian and Iraqi borders.

The incidents in which the hotlines have failed and the physical lines have been breached highlight the very importance of maintaining deconfliction procedures. In


September 2017, Syrian forces, backed by Russian airpower, pursued ISG militants east across the Euphrates River, breaching the deconfliction line. Russian aircraft hit several SDF positions, which were in close proximity to U.S. special forces. In February 2018, pro-regime forces again advanced east of the Euphrates and engaged an SDF position, where U.S. special forces were embedded. Responding coalition aircraft killed or injured over 300 Russian contractors, who themselves were among pro-regime forces.

These incidents demonstrate the importance of deconfliction to the safety of opposing troops. However, they also highlight the likelihood that Russia and the regime will not always be willing to abide by the established deconfliction measures if other priorities supersede. U.S. forces had been monitoring the build-up of pro-regime forces in advance of the February 2018 assault, and repeatedly warned Russia via the hotline of the presence of coalition troops in the vicinity. Yet the attack still occurred, and Russian nationals were among the aggressing forces. As the war progresses, and the regime consolidates its grip on areas west of the Euphrates, such forays across the river will become more likely. The regime and its Russian/Iranian benefactors want to seize the lucrative oil and gas fields captured by the SDF. The United States must clearly establish the parameters of the deconfliction line, and the consequences of breaching it. The deconfliction hotline will prove useful to this end.

Further cease-fire agreements with Russia as part of the Syrian Contact Group should aim to facilitate the return of displaced populations, prevent further displacement and violence, encourage economic revival, and lay the groundwork for a political settlement. While the cease-fire in the southern zone along the Jordanian border has been relatively successful, repeated clashes and cease-fire violations have undermined deconfliction in other zones. In eastern Ghouta, for example, intensified shelling from Russian and regime aircraft killed more than 500 people in just a week in mid-February 2018. The challenge will be to ensure Russian and regime compliance with cease-fires and deconfliction.


50. Tsvetkova, “Russian Toll in Syria Battle was 300 Killed and Wounded.”


The United States should work with Russia to declare Kurdish-majority areas in the north a cease-fire zone. The regime and Kurdish forces agreed to a cease-fire in the northern city of Hasaka in August 2016, but it did not last. Some deconfliction mechanisms are in place, but they should be formalized. Getting Turkish agreement will be challenging, but critical.

Moreover, the United States should work with Russia to uphold the cease-fire in southwestern Syria that it negotiated with Russia and Jordan. Deir ez-Zor, where U.S.-backed forces and regime-backed forces are competing to entrench themselves as they fight the ISG, is a potential flashpoint that the United States should seek to freeze through a cease-fire. Ensuring that cease-fires hold will require greater U.S. support for allies deployed in those zones as well as U.S.-Russian coordination. A verification and enforcement mechanism that keeps parties accountable is critical for ensuring that cease-fires are respected.

- **Pursue a formal transparency and verification mechanism for Syria and the region.** The United States in partnership with its European allies should develop a transparent, confidence-building mechanism—one similar to the Vienna Document of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE); its purpose would be to limit the deployment of Iranian and Iranian-allied forces (including Hezbollah) to an agreed-upon distance from the Israeli and Jordanian borders and to prevent deployment of any permanent Iranian or Iranian-linked militias in Syria. Under this mechanism, Iran should be unable to lease, control, or construct military bases and weapon-producing facilities. The objective is to ensure that Syrian government forces redeploy and replace the Iranian-backed forces and Hezbollah forces currently along the Syrian-Israeli border. The mechanism could be extended to include Russian, Turkish, and U.S. forces and could develop consistency with military deconfliction efforts while respecting Syria’s international borders and state structure.

- **Promote Kurdish autonomy.** Russia has engaged with Syrian Kurds, encouraged reconciliation efforts between Kurds and the Syrian regime, and championed limited decentralization as a solution to the conflict in constitutional drafts put forward in May 2016 and January 2017. Moscow has also reported providing air support to Kurds in their post-Raqa fight to clear Deir ez-Zor from the ISG in late 2017. However, it remains to be seen whether Russia views greater self-administration for Kurds

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as a policy solution or a tactic to generate leverage against Turkey and the Assad regime or to split an important ally from the U.S. camp. Russia has played the “Kurdish card” in the region for over a century but is also reluctant to ignite deeper tensions with regional powers, including not only Turkey but also Iran. The United States should seek to outline with Russia and other European partners a common policy for Kurdish self-administration in northern Syria that respects Syria’s international borders and state structure. A policy which is supported by both the United States, European partners, and Russia could strengthen leverage over Turkey on the issue.

- Narrowly and clearly define the parameters of cooperation within the Syrian Contact Group to contain jihadi-salafists. The United States should pursue an exploratory dialogue within the Contact Group to address the problem of jihadi-salafists in Idlib and northwest Syria. The number of people fleeing their homes toward the Turkish border has increased since November 2017, and Turkey will be directly affected by any operation in the area. The dialogue should in part focus on ensuring that civilians are not targeted in the Assad regime’s effort to retake the area and on providing aid for the civilian population. The United States should not agree to provide any assistance or intelligence in fighting jihadi-salafists without verifiable guarantees that such information would be used to target al Qaeda affiliates and not other groups.

4. Engage with Turkey to deconflict on Kurdish autonomy and address shared security concerns, but impede Turkish actions that undermine U.S. objectives and interests. Turkey’s ongoing Operation Olive Branch in northern Syria is drawing Turkish and coalition-backed forces into direct conflict. Turkey has stated that it wishes to expand its military operation to Manbij, where U.S. forces are embedded with their SDF counterparts. In August 2017, the United States and Turkey successfully deconflicted a situation in which Turkish-backed FSA forces fired upon an SDF position in Manbij, threatening U.S. forces. Deconfliction should remain a priority on this front as well.

Equally important is persuading Turkey that Kurdish self-administration in northern Syria does not pose a direct threat. Doing so will be difficult and will depend on several interconnected efforts. First, the United States must promote transparency and confidence-building measures to address Turkish national security concerns, border security, and antiterrorism efforts and thereby minimize direct confrontation between Turkey and Syrian Kurdish populations. This step may require a specific bilateral forum or channel dedicated to discussing Syrian policy. Second, the United States should encourage Turkey to play a constructive economic role in northern Syria through trade and reconstruction activities, similar to its approach to the Iraqi Kurdish Regional Government. Third, as part of a coordinated U.S. military transition plan for Syria, U.S. officials should encourage Ankara to redeploy Turkish troops

back into Turkish territory. This effort should include assistance in reinforcing Turkey’s border to regulate refugee flows and prevent the infiltration of jihadi-salafists.

5. **Utilize U.S. leverage within the SDF and the PYD to press for political and territorial arrangements that Turkey can be persuaded to tolerate and that minimize prospects for local unrest or jihadi-salafi resurgence.** The United States and European allies should use a combination of aid conditionality, dialogue, and capacity building to limit the PYD’s political and territorial ambitions and to promote an autonomy arrangement that is mutually acceptable to the Syrian Kurds, the Syrian regime, and Turkey. The United States should continue to press the PYD to verifiably disengage from the PKK and eventually withdraw from non-Kurdish territory that it helped liberate. Improving the accountability and inclusivity of local governance arrangements, which remain dominated by the PYD at the expense of other Kurdish parties and non-Kurdish populations, is also critical to avoid internecine fighting.58 The United States should press the SDF to address sources of mistrust by Arab populations in territories they have captured; specifically, the SDF should end the forcible conscription of Arab residents, more precisely target arrests of ISG suspects in post-ISG territory, and accelerate the demining and rehabilitation of population centers to allow the timely return of populations displaced by fighting.

6. **Reaffirm and revitalize U.S. and European cooperation with key regional allies, most importantly Israel and Jordan.** In addition to working multilaterally, the United States should coordinate closely with Jordan and Israel, two allies directly affected by developments in Syria. The United States maintains strategic dialogues with a number of important allies, including Israel, yet the U.S.-Israel dialogue often follows a routine set of issues and avoids the complicated strategic questions dividing Israeli and U.S. officials, particularly related to Russia. As a result, friction over Syria and Iranian deployments in Syria have caused tension between Israel and the Trump administration, which some Israeli security officials believe has ignored Israeli security concerns in Syria. The United States should work to define with Israel what an acceptable Iranian presence in Syria would look like.59

7. **Support reconstruction and stabilization in areas held by U.S. allies, while making national reconstruction contingent on a credible international political settlement.** The United Nations estimates Syria’s reconstruction needs to be at least $250 billion.60 International support for rebuilding Syria will be vital to the restoration of stability and return of displaced populations but must be contingent on implementation of negotiated agreements and respect for international law and human rights. Because national reconstruction will be a

58. The United States should heed the example of Iraqi Kurdistan, where de facto autonomy guaranteed by a U.S.-led coalition after the Gulf War was followed by years of internecine fighting among the main Kurdish parties. Denise Natali, *The Kurdish Quasi-State: Development and Dependency in Post-Gulf War Iraq* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2010).

59. This should be given priority in bilateral relations at the current juncture, because the level of Iranian military engagement in Syria over the long term could require a rethinking of Israeli military strategy. Israeli security officials will be hesitant to articulate their bottom-line position, however, out of concern that it will be interpreted as an opening position.

strategically fraught endeavor under the Assad regime, which has demonstrated a pattern of corruption and a lack of interest in needs-based rebuilding, the United States should for the time being support both stabilization and reconstruction in areas held by U.S. allies, allowing displaced populations to return home. Coordinating stabilization and reconstruction with European allies will help avoid redundancy and focus aid more efficiently. It will also be vital to enlist the financial support of U.S. partners in GCC states for rebuilding devastated areas. GCC support for various rebel groups since 2011 helped destroy Syria; Gulf states should now be willing to support its rebuilding. U.S. efforts at reconstruction should proceed through multilateral channels, ensuring a credible political process and including robust accountability mechanisms. The U.S. willingness to contribute resources and marshal the resources of allies should be an incentive to the Syrian and Russian governments to strike a political settlement with formerly rebellious areas.

STRATEGIC GOAL 2: MANAGING GROWING POLICY DIVERGENCE WITH TURKEY

Growing and deepening policy differences between the United States and Turkey have reached a point where they threaten a deeper rupture in relations, with operations in Syria bringing the two sides closer to conflict. The direction of U.S.-Turkish relations will be shaped in large measure by whether the two NATO members can reach basic understandings on Syria’s and Turkey’s future. Having facilitated the Islamic State group’s rise in Syria to fight the Assad regime, Turkey now prioritizes waging war against Syrian Kurds instead of fighting the ISG and coordinates more closely with Russia and Iran over Syria than with fellow NATO members.

Turkey’s antidemocratic slide also affects relations with the United States and Europe. It has directly accused the United States of supporting the July 2016 military coup attempt as the United States harbors Fethullah Gülen, the exiled social-religious leader blamed by President Erdogan for organizing the coup attempt. Through constant purges, prolonged detentions, and arrests, Turkey not only undermines human rights and democratic institutions; it also threatens its own future political and economic stability—all while senior Turkish government officials openly fan and inflame anti-American public sentiment in Turkey. It is difficult to see how the United States and Turkey can reconcile their conflicting policy interests and objectives in such a highly charged domestic atmosphere.

The Turkish political leadership has accused senior Turkish military officials of intricate conspiracies for more than 15 years—starting with the so-called “Sledgehammer” case in 2003 and continuing through the supposed Ergenekon plot starting in 2007 and the 2016 coup attempt. Throughout, purges—first of secularists, then of suspected Gülenists, and now opposition figures—has weakened the country’s NATO representation and hollowed out senior Turkish General Staff leadership.

In 2012, 322 serving and retired Turkish military officers were sentenced to prison, and following the 2016 coup attempt, nearly one-third of Turkish generals were fired. By December 2016, another 150 military envoys and officers had been recalled from NATO posts in Europe. Some sources claim the number is much higher, approaching 400. Many of their replacements are considered “Eurasianists” who are distrusting of the United States and NATO and are more strategically aligned with Russia and Iran.

Whether President Erdogan believes that the United States supported the coup attempt or is exploiting the episode to increase anti-American sentiment, mistrust and animosity have deepened on both sides and have further complicated bilateral ties between Turkey and a number of NATO members. In July 2016, the Turkish government temporarily closed the airspace over Incirlik and cut electricity to the air base following the failed coup, and it publicly accused senior-ranking U.S. military officials of involvement in the coup. In 2017 Turkey also blocked a visit by German parliamentarians to visit German troops stationed at Incirlik and Konya bases. The dispute was resolved only after NATO’s secretary general publicly intervened. In response, Germany reportedly moved some of its air assets to the Muwaffaq Salti air base in Jordan. Turkey has also announced that it intends to purchase Russia’s S-400 missile defense system, which is incompatible with NATO systems, jeopardizes NATO’s missile defense capabilities, and whose purchase likely violates U.S. sanctions against Russia. This close cooperation with Russia is especially concerning given Turkey’s participation in the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter program; the risk is that sophisticated F-35 technology could leak to Russia.

These actions and events have eroded trust and worn down the partnership, but a more fundamental U.S.-Turkish confrontation could ensue from Turkey’s offensive against Kurdish forces in January 2018. Turkey’s president threatens that Turkish troops will move into areas where U.S. forces are deployed. Although senior U.S. officials have made repeated visits to Turkey and issued public statements about recognizing Turkey’s security interests, they have resisted any changes to U.S. military policy of working closely with the SDF and PYG. These visits and statements have had little impact on Turkey’s policy or actions.

The immediate impact of Turkey’s Operation Olive Branch/Afrin campaign in Northwest Syria is that it draws Kurdish forces away from battling the ISG to defend territory from Turkish and Turkish-allied forces. The other threat is that Turkish or Turkish-backed forces could clash with U.S. forces unintentionally because of a lack of communication or deconfliction over troop positions. Even one casualty on either side could do damage to bilateral ties that would be difficult to repair in such a combustible environment.

Turkey and the United States are at a policy standstill in Syria. Turkey is neither an adversary in the conventional sense, nor an ally. A formal break in the relationship would have strategic consequences for the United States, Turkey, and NATO, as well as for the security and stability of Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean. It would affect U.S. military operations against ISG in the Middle East, U.S. and NATO military basing in the region, maritime security, European security (particularly as it relates to migration issues), and the U.S. nuclear posture. It would have a host of other unintended consequences related to migration, energy flows, and transatlantic trade, and would be an important strategic gain for Russia, which has tried to divide NATO for decades.

Faced with a Turkey radically different from the one that joined NATO 66 years ago, the United States and the Alliance must come to terms with having a less reliable NATO partner. Because U.S.-Turkish relations are stuck in an antagonistic and competitive cycle, the United States must find new ways to stabilize and improve relations with Turkey by acknowledging that bilateral relations remain important but not bound by the old shared assumptions. Ties are unlikely ever to return to the intimacy of the Cold War, and Turkey is not irreplaceable as a strategic partner, though it remains a highly desirable one. The United States must find a manageable equilibrium where Turkish hostility and actions do not undermine U.S. interests and policy.

The United States must make a concerted effort to manage and mitigate these downward trends to effectively develop a strategy for the Eastern Mediterranean. It must reframe the U.S.-Turkey bilateral relationship within this new regional policy approach. Attempts to reframe the relationship have been delayed by the United States in the hope that the situation with Turkey would somehow

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resolve itself. But President Erdogan’s tenure has now lasted 14 years and could continue for the next ten years (two five-year terms) following the next election, extending his presidency until 2028. The past several years in particular have been marked by efforts to consolidate power (most recently under the April 2017 constitutional reform), authoritarianism, and calls to renegotiate Turkey’s borders.

For its part, Ankara views U.S. and European policies toward Turkey and the Eastern Mediterranean region as hypocritical, supportive of Turkey’s enemies, and harmful to the development of a “new Turkey” and its president’s vision. President Erdogan viewed the 2013 Gezi Park antigovernment demonstrations as the work of foreign powers and extremists, and the protests marked the beginning of a fierce crackdown on antigovernment dissent that has deeply divided Turkey internally.72 Distrust of the United States has been reinforced by the continued U.S. refusal to extradite Turkish cleric Fethullah Gülen, whom President Erdogan views as an existential threat to Turkey; by U.S. support for the YPG in Syria; and by the U.S. Zarrab trial that implicates President Erdogan, along with members of his cabinet and family, in a scheme to help Iran evade sanctions.73 Many in Turkey also resent what they saw as the United States and Western countries’ delayed and tepid condemnation of the 2016 attempted coup, and the lectures on the rule of law that accompanied it. In addition, when European governments refused to let Turkish officials campaign in their countries for an April 2017 referendum on Turkish constitutional changes due to fears of sparking domestic unrest (which concentrated power within the presidency and diminished checks and balances), President Erdogan took this as a diplomatic affront, claiming that the changes were necessary to fight enemies of Turkey. On the other hand, although Turkey is increasingly critical of its NATO allies, it acknowledges its important economic ties with Europe and has recently initiated efforts to soften its rhetoric while at the same time recognizing the leverage it possesses over Europe’s security (related to migration flows and foreign fighters from Syria) and the value to the United States of its strategic location in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The United States must pursue a two-pronged strategy that attempts to reinvest in the Euro-Atlantic-Turkish relationship while simultaneously developing complementary or, if necessary, alternative assets and partnerships with other regional actors to provide strategic benefits and military assets similar to those Turkey provides. To navigate this complex situation and ensure that growing differences with Turkey do not undermine U.S. strategy in the Eastern Mediterranean, U.S. policy should focus on four primary objectives, described below.

Objective: Reanchor Turkey to the West

President Erdogan’s dramatic policy decisions appear designed to rupture Turkey’s relationship with the West, but he assumes that European and U.S. policymakers will not risk a complete rupture; in his view, the West needs Turkey more than Turkey needs the West. But Turkey is also


vulnerable. An economic downturn sparked by greater tension with Europe and the United States would undermine President Erdogan, who has governed during a period of heightened economic growth. Some observers believe Turkey’s economy is overheating, with double-digit inflation and a fast-growing current account deficit. In March 2018, Moody’s downgraded Turkey’s sovereign debt further into junk status, judging it two levels below investment grade.\(^7\)

Distancing itself from the Euro-Atlantic alliance would also leave Turkey vulnerable to Russian designs and meddling. Turkey and Russia cooperate on a range of common interests, but as historic rivals they are deeply mistrustful of each other. Having said this, it is possible that Turkey has changed too dramatically and that the gap between U.S. and Turkish strategic interests has grown too wide to bridge. But before reaching that conclusion, the United States must attempt a broader effort to recalibrate the relationship, in part by looking beyond President Erdogan.

**Objective: Actively Engage Turkey to Positively Shape a Stable Post-Conflict Syria**

It is essential for Turkey to be pulled away from the narrow Russian-Iranian dialogue on resolving the Syrian conflict and toward a broader Syrian Contact Group with U.S. and European allies, as described above. Transparency, military deconfliction, and confidence-building measures must be components of an active engagement of Turkey. The threat to Turkey of jihadi-salafist fighters reentering Turkey and the possibility of a protracted military deployment in Syria create some incentives for the United States and Turkey to discuss Syria’s future more directly.

**Objective: Hedge against Further Decline in U.S.-Turkey Ties by Building Complementary Military Basing Rights and Assets**

Given the Eastern Mediterranean’s importance to U.S. global posture and interests, it is imperative that the United States and NATO identify and build up complementary strategic assets to hedge against a further rupture with Turkey. At a certain point the strategic benefits that Turkey provides to NATO and the Euro-Atlantic alliance may be so constrained as to be no longer available. In this scenario, alternative basing arrangements would need to supplement Turkish bases and assets. This change will not be an easy one. The United States has relied on Turkish air bases and facilities to fight wars in the Middle East since the 1991 Gulf War. While U.S. forces should remain engaged in Turkey for as long as conditions permit, the United States must develop contingency plans and devote resources to a more regionally distributive strategic posture throughout the Eastern Mediterranean region.

**Objective: Support Turkish Civil Society Within and Outside of Turkey**

President Erdogan’s increasingly authoritarian path has polarized the country and threatens Turkey’s economic and political stability.\(^7\)\(^5\) Given the country’s size and regional economic

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importance, instability in Turkey will reverberate throughout Europe, the Middle East, and Central Asia. Commitment to "democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law" is a clear premise of the Washington Treaty of 1949 (NATO's founding document). U.S. and European assistance to civil society should aim to mitigate repression of free speech, a free press, and civil society. In the run-up to the June 2018 elections, when a constitutionally strengthened Turkish presidency will go into force under perpetual national state of emergency laws, it is important that the United States make every attempt to reach out to Turkish civil society in and outside of Turkey to help ensure that the foundations of Turkey's democracy remain in place despite the assault on basic democratic principles.

Tools and Approaches for Advancing U.S. Objectives in Turkey

U.S. interests are best served by trying to bridge the strategic gaps between the United States and Turkey. This attempt will require an intensive diplomatic effort coordinated between the White House, Defense Department, State Department, director of national intelligence, and Congress. Unfortunately, there is no guarantee that diverging strategic interests and objectives can be fully repaired.

The United States should develop and use the following tools and approaches, which are interconnected, mutually reinforcing, and sometimes overlapping, to advance the four objectives aimed at managing growing policy divergence with Turkey.

1. **Initiate a high-level U.S.-Turkish strategic dialogue to address U.S.-Turkish policy differences, including differences on Syria.** Turkey and the United States need a formal mechanism to discuss bilateral differences and issues of mutual concern rather than a series of ad hoc meetings. A 4+4 dialogue format led by the national security advisor that includes the secretaries of defense and state and the director of national intelligence, would help unify the U.S. position and project a coherent and consistent U.S. policy message to Turkey. It would seek to put all outstanding issues on the table at once to determine where the United States can cooperate more effectively and where differences are irreconcilable, and why. Before such a dialogue can begin, however, the U.S. government must formulate a coherent set of policy objectives vis-à-vis Turkey covering the full spectrum of bilateral issues, including (but not limited to) U.S. deployment of nuclear missiles on Turkish soil; U.S. sanctions against Iran and implications for Turkey of noncompliance; U.S. judicial processes and Turkish efforts to bypass them; the war in Syria; as well as relations with Iran, Russia, and Israel. A broader dialogue should include a congressional component, and specifically should entail both dialogue between the White House and key congressional committees and a greater dialogue between congressional leaders and their Turkish counterparts. A comprehensive U.S.-Turkish strategic dialogue could either find common ground on which to recalibrate the partnership or conclude that the partnership is not reparable. In either case, it could help clarify options ahead for how to manage a relationship in which Turkey is not necessarily an enemy but is also not an ally.

76. The bipartisan Caucus on U.S.-Turkey Relations and Turkish Americans comprises 138 current members of Congress.
Establish a formal U.S.-Turkish working group on Syria as a component of the broader U.S.-Turkish strategic dialogue. The United States must be transparent about its military cooperation with the SDF, and Turkey must in turn be transparent about the nature of its deconfliction agreements with Russia as well as the prolonged nature of Operation Olive Branch in northwest Syria. In addition, Turkey, NATO, and the United States should work constructively to strengthen the Turkish-Syrian border in the northwest to prevent ISG and jihadi fighters from moving from Syria through Turkey and into Europe. The United States should also actively engage Turkey to positively shape diplomatic outcomes in an expanded Astana-Sochi diplomatic process, with the United States and its European allies through a Syrian Contact Group mechanism that would include a Syrian Kurdish autonomous zone.

Finding a solution to the Kurdish conundrum that Ankara will tolerate will be the greatest challenge. In Ankara’s view, the PYD’s and YPG’s links to the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), along with the prospect of an autonomous Syrian Kurdish entity on Turkey’s border, pose an existential threat to national security. Turkey’s alarm at the growing power of the PYD—in the context of a breakdown in peace talks with the Turkish PKK and tumultuous internal political dynamics surrounding the July 2016 coup attempt—helped fuel a transformation of its broader Syria policy: Ankara abandoned its earlier aim of overthrowing the Assad regime to keep the Kurds from consolidating their gains. Turkey’s deployment of troops across the Syrian border in August 2016 in Operation Euphrates Shield, designed to thwart the connection of Kurdish-held areas into a single contiguous territory, marked an increasingly confrontational approach to the Syrian Kurds. However, in the context of a broader divergence with Turkey, the United States can present its stronger engagement with an actor Turkey considers an enemy as a policy of Syrian Kurdish restraint and as a positive contribution to possible future efforts to resolve PKK-Turkey disputes. The U.S. efforts should demonstrate the potential benefit of U.S. engagement with Syrian Kurds. This approach becomes more difficult in the aftermath of the Kurdistan Regional Government’s ill-timed referendum on independence from Iraq in September 2017, which further inflamed Turkey’s fears of Kurdish independence coming at its expense.

Create a U.S.-Turkish deconfliction mechanism in Syria. The United States should open a specific channel with Turkey to avoid military confrontation in conjunction with a U.S.-Russian deconfliction hotline.

Immediately appoint a qualified and respected U.S. ambassador to Turkey. The lack of strong diplomatic representation in Turkey has limited diplomatic effectiveness and signaled the administration’s lack of an overall policy toward Turkey. Appointing a senior person respected by Washington and Turkey’s leadership could help improve dialogue between the countries and project greater U.S. interest in Turkey policy.
2. Work closely with key European allies bilaterally (such as the United Kingdom, France, and Germany) and with the European Union to develop a more unified policy approach toward Turkey. This effort should take into account Turkey’s importance to European interests—including migration and counterterrorism—while supporting an ongoing dialogue on trade relations, the rule of law, freedom of speech, and a free press in Turkey. A more coherent and unified U.S.-European approach can help reanchor Turkey to the West.

- Hold Turkey-specific talks through EU-U.S. joint ministerial meetings with foreign affairs ministers, as well as at the technical level between the Department of State, the European External Action Service, and the European Commission’s Enlargement Policy team. Encourage the European Union and Turkey to continue discussions over status questions (such as accession or visa liberalization) by focusing on the most productive areas of cooperation (trade and humanitarian support to refugees), while highlighting the benefits of the EU-Turkey Customs Union and the value of Turkey’s integration into European production chains.

- Support the European Union in developing a contingency plan should Turkey reopen the Eastern Mediterranean migration route. This step should include identifying resources that could provide additional financial, humanitarian, and security aid to Greece, the western Balkans, and southeastern European transit countries to address any renewed migration flows.

3. Identify and strengthen alternatives to Turkish basing and military assets by upgrading ties with other regional partners.

- Take advantage of improvements in U.S.-Greek relations to support the Greek economy. Although U.S. policy has historically viewed Greek stability as a geostrategic
imperative, the bilateral relationship has ebbed and flowed. From the advent of the 1967 Greek military junta, to the restoration of democracy in 1974, to the assassination of a CIA station chief in 1975, the U.S.-Greek relationship has weathered bitter bilateral differences over conflict in the western Balkans, particularly the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999 and the recognition of Kosovo’s independence (Greece is one of five EU members that do not recognize Kosovo). The United States has repeatedly engaged bilaterally to prevent conflict between Greece and Turkey over opposing claims to uninhabited islands in the Aegean Sea, narrowly averting conflict in 1996. Recent Turkish military maritime deployments near Cyprus as well as the recent capture of two Greek soldiers by Turkey both underscore the fragility of Turkish-Greek relations and demonstrate the lack of previous senior-level U.S. engagement to resolve these bilateral crises. Despite these tensions, Greece continues to be a consistent proponent in the European Union of Turkey’s Euro-Atlantic orientation. U.S.-Greek relations should be considerably strengthened.

The United States should develop a strategic bilateral defense dialogue with Greece while simultaneously pursuing greater U.S. trade and investment opportunities in Greece. U.S. energy companies have realized Greece’s hydrocarbon potential, and in June 2017 ExxonMobil became part of a consortium that was granted the right to explore and drill for oil and gas off the island of Crete. The swift progress in the construction of the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) is another area of common interest: TAP has created many jobs, and is the first new energy infrastructure built in Europe specifically to carry non-Russian gas; as such, it has the potential to break Gazprom’s energy monopoly. Greece is also a potential importer of U.S. LNG and has plans to build an LNG storage terminal in northern Greece. The United States should encourage capital flows to Greece and support its economic recovery (the country returned to capital markets in mid-2017). Inflows of foreign investment from the United States and other allies could provide a welcome boost and balance increasing Chinese and Russian investments in the country.

- Explore expansion of basing rights as alternatives to Turkish facilities. The Navy Support Activity (NSA) Souda Bay, a naval base that the Hellenic Navy provided to the


United States in 1980, provides forward deployment opportunities for the Sixth Fleet and supports joint U.S. Navy/Air Force reconnaissance missions as well as air refueling. The base can host a permanently based aircraft carrier, destroyers, and amphibious ships. Additional options are investigating shifting resources to Naval Air Station Sigonella in Sicily and expanding the U.S. presence at the Bezmer Air Base in Bulgaria.

4. Identify and strengthen alternatives to Turkish basing and military assets by upgrading ties with Cyprus. Cyprus’s proximity to conflict areas in the Levant and North Africa makes it a vulnerable yet strategic U.S. ally. The U.S. relationship with Cyprus is not particularly well-developed but holds potential. In 1997, Greek Cypriots purchased a Russian S-300 surface-to-air missile system, which was subsequently transferred to Crete after strong objections from Turkey and pressure from the United Kingdom and NATO. But in 2014, the Cypriot Navy was invited for the first time to participate in search-and-rescue exercises with the U.S., Greek, and Israeli navies. Since its independence, the island has hosted the British Royal Air Force base of Akrotiri. Approximately 650 miles from Baghdad and only 350 miles from Raqqa, the base has provided support to air, land, and sea operations for both British and allied forces, and British planes launched strikes from Akrotiri against ISG. The most significant obstacle to a Cyprus more firmly anchored to the Euro-Atlantic community is that it has remained a divided island since 1974, with the presence of around 30,000 Turkish forces in its northern part. The United States should explore the redeployment of military assets to the United Kingdom’s Sovereign Base Areas of Akrotiri and Dhekelia.

- Support Cyprus’s security position in the region. Cyprus is not equipped to ensure its own security, having only a little over 10,000 Greek Cypriot troops in the National Guard, around 100 maritime forces, and a dozen coastal patrol vessels. The United States in cooperation with the European Union should explore how its Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and Defense Investment Fund can be targeted to strengthen Cypriot border and maritime security.

- Strengthen diplomatic and economic engagement with Cyprus. The United States should work with the European Union to enhance the institutional transparency of Cyprus’s financial sector and to promote greater transparency in infrastructure.


85. It should be understood that long-term plans for these bases will be limited by stipulations of any future peace agreement on the island. In January 2017, the United Kingdom promised to hand over half of its territory in Cyprus as part of the peace deal. Patrick Wintour, “Cyprus Peace Talks—All You Need to Know,” The Guardian, January 9, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/news/2017/jan/09/cyprus-peace-talks-all-you-need-to-know.

projects. Offshore energy finds in particular create an opportunity for Cyprus to improve its economic position, and the United States should support Cyprus’s energy development in a way that creates deeper linkages with European energy markets. This approach will reinforce Cyprus’s Euro-Atlantic orientation and help counterbalance growing Russian and Chinese influence. Should Turkey implement substantial policy changes (such as proactively working against reunification or encouraging migrants to cross into the European Union), a strengthened transatlantic policy framework for Cyprus will be important. Specifically, the United States should fund and encourage greater business-to-business and civil society linkages to encourage Cypriot parties to continue their reunification dialogue, but should refrain from high-level diplomacy until the parties demonstrate concrete benefits of reunification to citizens. With its European partners, it should remain engaged in quiet negotiations, seek to strengthen local leaders in their search for compromise, and encourage bi-community economic activities as a broader confidence-building measure. Discussions related to future security arrangements and guarantees should emanate from the parties in cooperation with the United Kingdom, Greece, and Turkey (based on the 1960 treaties).

5. **Explore the potential for trilateral cooperation with Greece and Cyprus.** Although both are solidly anchored in the Euro-Atlantic sphere, these two countries are now caught in a balancing act as China’s and Russia’s influence expands and tensions with Turkey mount. The United States should engage more directly with Greece and Cyprus on a trilateral basis to reaffirm the benefits of partnering with the United States and give those countries a viable alternative to Russian and Chinese capital and investment. The trilateral dialogue should prioritize financial stability and transparency, energy infrastructure and production, and maritime security. Greece, Cyprus, and Israel have held annual trilateral dialogue meetings since 2014, in part to build a potential alliance against Turkey. The United States should encourage greater cooperation between the three countries and explore whether there is the potential for a more formal U.S. role that could develop into an “Eastern Mediterranean Quad.”

6. **Formulate a strategy to leverage Israel’s assets more effectively to further regional maritime security and stability.** The United States should work with European allies to better incorporate Israel’s naval assets and capabilities into U.S.-allied naval operations in the Eastern Mediterranean. Israel, which had an early history of seamanship through its national shipping company, increasingly sees the Eastern Mediterranean as an important area of strategic depth and is reshaping its navy from a coast guard–style force to a strategic arm of its military. This change could play an important role in broader Eastern Mediterranean maritime security. Given the importance of offshore energy infrastructure to a number of countries, maritime space could become increasingly contested (as it is around Cyprus, Lebanon, and

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88. New academic and policy centers are working on the Eastern Mediterranean, including the University of Haifa’s School of Maritime Studies, which issues an annual survey of Eastern Mediterranean maritime activity.
Israel) and a potential flashpoint for military conflict. In the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war, Israeli naval assets were attacked by Hezbollah, and the growth of unmanned naval and aerial vehicles ensures that the maritime arena will be a front in future conflicts.\(^8\)\(^9\) Israel can play a complementary role in enhancing specific maritime security missions with European and other countries. As part of the effort, specific Israeli capabilities should be developed, including search and rescue and disaster relief, that can be used for broader regional purposes.

- **Encourage Egyptian-Israeli energy cooperation.** The United States should encourage Egypt and Israel to cooperate more closely on energy. The two sides continue to disagree about Israeli claims of damages when Egyptian gas supplies were interrupted in 2012.\(^9\)\(^0\) Resolution of these claims would allow advanced discussions on Israeli access to Egyptian liquefaction facilities, which is a logical synergy and would be mutually beneficial. In particular, a pipeline from Israel’s Leviathan field could link to Egypt’s liquefaction plants for export purposes and provide Egypt with additional revenue. For Israel, this would be less costly than a pipeline to either Turkey or Cyprus and would help cement Israeli-Egyptian ties beyond security. Israel seemed to signal its intentions to prioritize this route when the operators of the Tamar and Leviathan fields signed a $15 billion deal on February 19, 2018, to provide an Egyptian company with natural gas.\(^9\)\(^1\) Part of a broader energy cooperation plan should help encourage the completion of a pipeline linking Israel with the West Bank and integrating the energy infrastructures of Israel, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority.

- **Support a Gaza development plan.** The Gaza Strip represents an ongoing security liability for Israel and Egypt, given its precarious economic and humanitarian situation. Supporting a Gaza infrastructure development plan, including connecting Gaza to regular energy supply, would give Gaza’s 1.8 million people a chance for relatively greater economic and political stability. Inter-Palestinian reconciliation provides an opportunity for the West Bank–based Palestinian Authority to resume administration of Gaza and creates chances for normalizing economic activity there. Supporting Gaza reconstruction would allow the United States to play a positive role in the Palestinian arena and potentially sideline Turkey’s and Iran’s efforts to use conflict in Gaza for their own advantage.

7. **Develop a more robust naval presence in the region by sharing assets with key European partners, while expanding multilateral naval exercises.** The U.S. Navy should increase ship visits to Eastern Mediterranean ports to demonstrate U.S. presence, and seek to synchronize

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naval deployments with the United Kingdom, France, Italy, and Germany. Synchronization optimizes assets that are thinly stretched, improves interoperability with allies, and can send a message of U.S.-European resolve. The port in Haifa should be more strategically utilized as a hub for U.S. naval operations in the region. In addition, multilateral naval exercises should be expanded in order to demonstrate U.S. presence and help build capacity and interoperability among allies.

- **Diversify U.S. military deployments in the Eastern Mediterranean.** Widening the geographic scope of U.S. and NATO assets would provide broader U.S. strategic reach and stability in the Eastern Mediterranean and limit the United States’ over-reliance on any one country in the region. In addition to Israel, Jordan, Greece, and Cyprus, the United States should consider a combination of asset-sharing and increasing deployments in the Eastern Mediterranean.

- **Enhance the capabilities of the Sixth Fleet.** This step is needed to account for the significant security changes that have occurred not just in the Eastern Mediterranean but in the Mediterranean Sea more broadly. The United States should consider an enhanced naval posture in the Eastern Mediterranean (to include Souda Bay) and should recognize that the Rota naval base in the Western Mediterranean may be insufficient for growing security requirements in the Eastern Mediterranean.

8. **Encourage NATO to identify and develop a clearer mission and priorities in the Eastern Mediterranean.** The Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East are once again on the security agenda for Europe and the United States. As early as 2005, NATO officials recognized that “in the years to come, the evolution of the Middle East will affect Euro-Atlantic security more than the development of any other region.” NATO must now clarify—and give weight to—its role in enhancing security in the region.

- **Evaluate and adapt NATO’s role in the Global Coalition against ISIS after the fall of Mosul and Raqqa.** This effort should include assessing the need for increased counterterrorism operations at the Turkish border, and training and reconstruction efforts. Recommendations should be discussed at the July 2018 NATO Summit.

- **Have NATO task its Military Committee with assessing operational limitations and vulnerabilities related to enhanced Russian air and maritime presence in the Eastern Mediterranean.** Such an assessment of Russian A2/AD capabilities should include Russia’s military buildup in the Black Sea and Eastern Mediterranean region and vulnerabilities to U.S. and NATO assets in the region. The very close military (aircraft and maritime) vessel contacts between U.S. and Russian forces in and around the Black Sea heighten the need for such an assessment.

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93. Gunther Altenburg, “An Opportunity We Cannot Miss,” Middle East Round Table 6, no. 3 (February 17, 2005), http://www.bitterlemons-international.org/previous.php?opt=1&id=72#298. Dr. Altenburg was NATO assistant secretary general for political affairs and security policy.
Restoring the Eastern Mediterranean

- Reaffirm the importance of burden-sharing and common threats in the geographic focus of NATO missions, particularly to strike a balance between the Eastern Flank and the Southern Flank. Ensure a rotation of assets from all NATO members between the multiple fronts.

9. Create an Eastern Mediterranean security dialogue. The Eastern Mediterranean would benefit from a small but high-level annual conference to address the region’s most pressing security issues. This conference, like the “Shangri-La” dialogue organized by the International Institute for Strategic Studies, would assemble defense and foreign ministers and intelligence officials from the region as well as participants from Europe and the United States. The purpose would be to foster discussions about a regional security framework and advance new thinking on regional security trends.

- Include specific Eastern Mediterranean working groups in bilateral strategic dialogues. The United States should devote time and space to specific bilateral discussions with its partners in the Eastern Mediterranean, including with European allies. Governments in the region see a need for these kinds of specific discussions with the U.S. government. To ensure a comprehensive approach to the discussions, the U.S. component should include officials from different agencies that work on both the Middle East and Europe. The dialogue should articulate the assessments, priorities, and goals of the U.S. government and its partners. For those partners who do not hold annual strategic dialogues, the U.S. government should initiate specific discussions.

LOOKING FORWARD

The Eastern Mediterranean is now in flux. What was once a predictable region enjoying strong U.S. and European influence and engagement has begun to fragment. It is increasingly consumed by global power competition that threatens a wide range of U.S. and transatlantic interests. While the region has witnessed significant change since the end of the Cold War, the seven-year war in Syria has accelerated the region’s transformation. Conflict has created safe havens for jihadi-salafists, triggered the largest refugee crisis since World War II, and eroded state cohesion and control. These developments have combined with economic crises and opportunity to encourage Turkey, Russia, China, and Iran to think about the region more strategically and incorporate their engagement in the Eastern Mediterranean as part of their broader foreign and defense strategies. Each employs a range of economic, diplomatic, and military tools in the region to build influence that can more effectively advance their respective strategic objectives.

Meanwhile, the United States has been militarily tactical and its policy has been unfocused and largely reactive. U.S. hesitation has created a vacuum that has both been exploited by competitor states and raised doubts among allies about U.S. commitment to the region. These trends reinforce each other and shake the regional alignments and assumptions that have guided U.S. policy for more than a half century. Rather than look to the United States for diplomatic leadership and vision, regional states are turning to alternative structures.
After nearly two decades of war-fighting in the Middle East and South Asia, the United States has grown averse to intervening and attempting to solve regional conflicts. But U.S. policy indecision also stems from a lack of vision of what the region could evolve toward, combined with a failure to recognize how the region has changed since the end of the Cold War. At the heart of the problem are two quandaries that have vexed U.S. policymakers: how to address Syria’s seven-year conflict and how to manage Turkey’s drift away from the Euro-Atlantic alliance.

The U.S. interest in Syria is to ensure that Syria does not continue destabilizing the region. This requires sober U.S. acknowledgment that despite the Assad regime’s brutality, its control over a unified state will prevent future destabilization. Closer cooperation with European allies and a more active U.S. diplomatic role backed by U.S. military deployments will be essential to achieving U.S. aims, denying jihadi-salafists safe haven, containing Iranian and Russian power projection, and giving Syrian Kurds a degree of autonomy within a unified Syria.

For the sake of NATO’s future cohesion and U.S. interests, the United States has an obligation to recalibrate its relationship with Turkey to narrow the gap between U.S. and Turkish objectives and interests in the region. Turkey is a partner of the United States and, while all efforts must be made to ensure the continuation of this partnership, the United States must begin to develop alternatives to the strategic benefits and assets Turkey provides. By setting out clear objectives vis-à-vis Turkey, the United States must balance and manage competing interests while understanding that Turkish policy and decisionmaking will have a major effect on the relationship’s future.

How the United States addresses these two interconnected problems will shape the region’s future and the United States’ role in that future. There is no easy formula, but the United States can begin to formulate a strategy based on practical and achievable objectives that clearly communicate U.S. intentions to allies and adversaries alike and strengthen U.S. and European influence in the region, which would ultimately allow the United States to play a greater role in influencing how the region evolves. The key is a greater diplomatic presence in the region. The United States has demonstrated that it can use tactical military tools to successfully degrade the ISG. The region wants to see a more committed, sustained, and focused U.S. diplomatic, economic, and military posture in the region. The current conflict and crises provide a new opportunity to reengage and demonstrate U.S. leadership. But the region will not wait for the United States.

The challenge ahead is to reconceive the Eastern Mediterranean as a vitally strategic seam connecting Europe and the Middle East and an imperative for U.S. strategic interests. The United States has to make difficult decisions that carry moral and strategic consequences. Continuing on the tactical path or a narrow focus on military operations against jihadi-salafists without a broader regional vision and without diplomatic and economic engagement will further diminish U.S. influence in the region and make the United States increasingly irrelevant in the Eastern Mediterranean. It will allow U.S. rivals to shape the region in a way that ultimately undermines U.S. interests and threatens our allies. The United States has to look forward now, not to rest on what once existed but to determine what the future should look like. The stability of Europe and the Middle East is at stake.
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Restoring the Eastern Mediterranean as a U.S. Strategic Anchor

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