



## Trump, the Middle East, and North Africa: Just Leave Things to the Proxies?

*Sven Biscop*

When Trump says that he wants NATO to take more responsibility in the Middle East, what he means is that he wants the *European* allies to do more. He is campaigning for re-election and has promised to bring the boys (and girls) home for Christmas. And of course, in Iraq American troops are less than welcome these days, after the targeted assassination of Iranian General Soleimani near Baghdad airport (3 January 2020). In late 2019, Trump had already withdrawn most troops from Syria, and now the peace agreement with the Taliban (29 February 2020) will allow him to draw down the US military presence in Afghanistan too. And the US is considering pulling its troops out of the Sahel as well. What does this mean for Europe?

The Afghanistan deal is a good thing, because withdrawal at some point was inevitable: American and European troops cannot stay in Afghanistan forever. It's not because Trump decided it that it cannot be a wise decision – though one that should have been taken years ago. Since we must leave anyway, some sort of agreement leaves some hope for a stable future in the country, although it will be an uphill struggle.

When it comes to Iraq, however, Europeans can rightfully claim that the Americans have created a mess that they now leave for Europe to clean up. A good many of the current problems in the region can still be traced back to the original sin (of the 21st century, at least) of the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The forces that the destruction of the Iraqi state unleashed have yet to be tamed. But part of the mess is also of the Europeans' own making. It was Britain and France that convinced the US to intervene in Libya in 2011, not the other way around. That intervention directly triggered the escalation of the crisis in Mali, and probably contributed to the start of the uprising in Syria. All three countries are still in turmoil.

Whoever is to blame for which particular problem, the fact is that many problems remain, in Europe's backyard in the Middle East and North Africa, and so Europeans will have no choice but to address them.

### **OPERATIONS THAT COULD HAVE BEEN**

There is little appetite in Europe to deploy more troops to the region. In the first instance, limited numbers will likely have to be sent nonetheless, to replace Americans in the training mission in Iraq. Arguably however, no further significant increase will be required, unless of course an escalation or a new crisis occurs. If Europeans had been envisaging a large-scale deployment on the ground (which they never really did), the moment for that has now passed.

In Syria, for a while the war appeared to be grinding down into a stalemate. Russia and Iran had achieved their war aim, keeping Assad in power, while the US and Europe, focusing on the destruction of ISIS, gave support to some of the opposition but did not directly intervene against the Assad regime. As the warring parties were wearing themselves out and the foreign powers involved would not help them to decisively defeat each other, different groups seemed likely to end up in control of different territories.

At that time, Europeans could have decided whether any of these groups merited their permanent support, and if so, whether that would include military support. This debate never happened, however, and the window closed. Russia and Turkey stepped up their intervention, setting Assad on the path to regaining control of nearly all of Syria. When in late 2019 Trump suddenly pulled the majority of US troops out of northern and eastern Syria, abandoning the West's Kurdish allies and allowing Turkey to move in and establish a "safe zone", Europe was placed for a fait accompli. A few hundred US

troops remain in the far east of Syria, "to secure the oil", as Trump ordered.

Europeans reacted very upset, but if they felt that a military presence there was so important for their security or to protect the Kurds, why did they not move in themselves when they still had the chance? After all, Trump's pull-out was sudden when it came, but had been in the making for quite some time, and so a gradual relief of American troops by Europeans could have been planned.

Now the Kurds have made their pact with Assad to protect themselves from Turkey. And if Turkey has overreached and is creating flashpoints with Assad and his Russian backers, it is not up to Europe to provide a military solution. Those who call for a real safe zone for the civilian population must realise that a no-fly zone will not create safety, while an intervention on the ground in between Turkish, Russian, and Syrian forces would demand a very large-scale deployment, backed-up by serious firepower, or the Europeans troops would be at the mercy of the others. This is not a job for a battalion-sized EU Battlegroup. No European government is willing to commit such a large force and to potentially engage in combat. Europeans will have to make their own pact, therefore, for only a political agreement can provide a lasting solution, between Turkey, Russia, and Syria, and for all the people of Syria.

In Libya, there was limited political follow-up to the successful air campaign, which won the war for the opposition against Khadafi. It is questionable whether military intervention on the ground could ever have helped, in view of the fractiousness of the Libyan opposition. But if it should have been attempted at all, then the time was shortly after the fall of Khadafi, when it had become clear that the country was not coming

together. In the current state of affairs, and even after an agreement between the main contenders for political power, in Libya too any military intervention would have to be very large-scale and ready to fight in order to hold its own against all possible spoilers. Again, this is not the kind of operation that any European government is willing to launch.

The ongoing EU Training Mission in Mali (EUTM) was enabled by a French military intervention in 2013, Operation *Serval*, and some 5000 French troops remain in the country on Operation *Barkhane* as the backbone of the international presence, which includes the 15,000 strong United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). The question can be asked whether Europeans should not have contributed more troops to MINUSMA itself, to increase its effectiveness. The EU and many Member States are also present in Niger and support other Sahel countries as well.

### MILITARY: OVER THE HORIZON

All in all, Europeans need not send significantly more troops to the region now, because the European objective is limited. Only vis-à-vis ISIS did Americans and Europeans pursue an unlimited war aim: its total destruction. That having been (nearly) achieved, the European objective is not to destroy a particular opponent nor to remodel certain states and societies, but to maintain sufficient security and stability in the region for Europe's interests not to be jeopardised.

Direct use of force by Europeans must only be considered therefore if, for example, a conflict threatens to spill over onto EU/NATO territory, to cut off Europe's connectivity, or to generate migration towards Europe at such a scale that only restoring peace can prevent it. If the UN were to activate the mechanism of the

Responsibility to Protect (which is very unlikely given the divisions between the five permanent members), that too would require European participation in whichever action the Security Council decides upon.

For a long-term strategy, Europeans can pursue the current "indirect approach":<sup>1</sup> building the capacity of national military and security forces, supported by regional troops when necessary, and with a European military backbone only if an acceptable degree of stability cannot otherwise be guaranteed (as in Mali). This limited military presence on the ground serves, first of all, to influence the strategy of the states of the region, so that it would not run counter to Europe's security. At the same time, a light but effective footprint will reduce the chance that European forces would overstay their welcome, for in many states of the region their presence, from a European point of view, will likely be required for many years to come.

A semi-permanent military presence has also become a geopolitical imperative, however, because where Europe leaves a vacuum, Russia and China move in, including in the immediate periphery of Europe. And Europe cannot allow Russia or China to steer its neighbours' strategies in a direction that would undermine its security. That will happen, however, if Europe remains unable to transfer weapons to its partners, in addition to training their forces. Troops cannot go into combat unarmed. If Europe does not supply lethal equipment, then its partners will turn to someone who will, and that often is Russia. The European Peace Facility must include the possibility to transfer arms.

Even an "indirect approach" requires strategic enablers, however, and over-the-horizon reserves.

Enablers include in particular transport and all types of intelligence. Europeans have but limited capacity in these areas; most enablers are provided by the US. If in the context of the US troop reduction these enablers would be withdrawn, Europeans would be hard put to replace them. Even in Mali, where we see the largest European presence in the region, American enablers play a vital role. Furthermore, whenever and wherever a single American soldier is deployed, there will be a reserve, in a high state of readiness, to extricate or reinforce him/her if necessary. Again, Europe's own capacity is very limited; in fact, when Europeans deploy alongside Americans, they rely on the US over-the-horizon reserve.

These shortfalls cannot be remedied in the short term. The point of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) when it was created in 1999 was exactly that: to allow for autonomous European operations in Europe's periphery, up to corps level (60,000 troops). More than twenty years later, this so-called Headline Goal has still not been achieved. The EU has now created new instruments, notably Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO). This should be its priority: to create a coherent full spectrum force package capable, at the very least, of power projection in Europe's broad neighbourhood.

Generating the capabilities by aligning national forces through the EU does not mean that Europeans always have to deploy under the EU flag. In a crisis, the circumstances of the moment will determine whether to deploy on an EU, NATO, UN or coalition operation. However, it does seem logical for the semi-permanent European military capacity-building presence to be organised through the CSDP, for it will be one aspect of an encompassing integrated approach, which Europeans put into effect through the EU. The US cannot expect to pull out its forces yet

continue to control things through NATO. The Europeans are more than proxies for the US.

### DIPLOMACY: ON THE HORIZON?

Capacity-building only makes sense indeed if it is part and parcel of an overall strategy, which for the Europeans the EU is best set to provide. Even the best trained and equipped national forces in Europe's periphery will not fight for a state whose project they do not believe in. Once again, the European objective is limited, however. The aim is not necessarily to create democratic states along the European model. The EU aim must be to have a ring of states around Europe that provide sufficiently effective as well as inclusive government for them to appeal to the broad population. That is a precondition for their military and security forces to be able to uphold a sufficient degree of security and stability, so as to maintain that public support and, in the end, to prevent the emergence of threats to the European interest.

If the internal dynamics in a country lead to democratisation, the EU must of course support that, for well-governed democratic states are more likely to generate durable stability. Where democracy is established, the EU might even have to consider whether it could offer a certain security guarantee – but this is a type of question that so far the Europeans have never been willing to ask themselves. Artificially triggering or accelerating democratisation would be counter-productive. Human rights promotion, on the contrary, is an indispensable part of the integrated approach, because by their very nature they are universal – they are human rights, not European rights, and protecting them is a moral duty whenever and wherever one acts. Pragmatism must prevail, though: a gradual and country-specific approach is called for, which does not upset the overall strategy.

This Realpolitik may be frustrating – one would wish that one could do a lot more for democracy and human rights – but strategy requires the capacity to accept the result of a rational analysis of what is possible, even if it is not the result one had hoped for. Staying true to Europe’s values in foreign policy does not mean exporting the European way of life or cooperating only with those who share or aspire to it. In order to safeguard the European way of life, the EU must be able to cooperate with any regime, as long as by doing so it does not itself become party to the human rights violations that a regime might commit. The only red line would probably be regimes that are guilty of the crimes that can trigger the Responsibility to Protect: genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes, and crimes against humanity.

Where the EU has a strategy, it has been relatively effective, not in the least because if one has a clear idea of one’s objectives, one can be proactive. EU strategy for the Sahel is one of the better examples of European strategizing. Nevertheless, even a good strategy does not guarantee good results. For a while it seemed the situation was being contained, and Europe’s security interests guaranteed, but things are turning ugly again in Mali. That is why the option should remain on the table to contribute more Europeans troops to MINUSMA, among other measures, but that would only make sense if the Security Council would grant it a more robust mandate.

With regard to Libya, the EU has supported the UN-recognized Government of National Accord in Tripoli, yet without a concrete plan to help it achieve control of the country. At the same time, France in effect began to support its contender, General Haftar. Such an intra-EU divide makes it impossible, of course, to agree on an effective strategy. Russia and Turkey have filled the diplomatic and military void left by the EU,

which tried to take back the initiative at the Berlin Conference called by Chancellor Merkel (19 January 2020). The EU must now stay at the forefront of the diplomatic efforts, and make a comprehensive offer for close relations, including military assistance (conditional, of course, upon the end of hostilities and a political agreement between the main parties), in order to be in a position of influence strong enough to safeguard the European interest. A significant “EUTM Libya” is in order.

Europeans did not, and still do not have a strategy for the Middle East and the Gulf (with whose security it is inextricably linked). They did have two objectives: to destroy ISIS, and to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. The first has been nearly achieved through the US-led coalition, the second through the JCPOA, which has since been undone by the US. Europeans never had a strategy beyond those two important but intermediate objectives, however: Which political end-state do they seek in Iraq and in Syria? How do they see the future of the EU’s relations with Turkey? Which regional order do they pursue that could gain the agreement of both Iran and Saudi Arabia? The 2016 EU Global Strategy actually stated that the EU “will deepen dialogue with Iran and GCC countries on regional conflicts, human rights and counter-terrorism, seeking to prevent contagion of existing crises and foster the space for cooperation and diplomacy”, but it never acted on that. Without clear strategic goals a proactive role is impossible. The EU was thus forever reacting to events, and still is.

The US is reducing its military presence in the immediate crisis zones.<sup>2</sup> Its diplomatic strategy, which has directly undermined Europe’s security interests, has not changed. US withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal has increased, rather than decreased, the risk of proliferation, and has

played into the hands of the hawks in Iran. Fighting between Iranian and Saudi proxies continues across the region. The Trump administration may in the end not go to war against Iran (though the risk remains), but if it continues to support Saudi Arabia in its quest for dominance of the Gulf, there will not be peace either. The EU has attempted, but failed, to shield its own companies doing business with Iran from American extra-territorial sanctions. A European coalition of the willing has launched a naval operation, European Maritime Awareness in the Strait of Hormuz (EMASOH) in an attempt to demine the tensions. But the fact of the matter is that Europe alone does not have the leverage to alter the stance of the regional powers. Why would Riyadh consider compromise if Washington backs it unconditionally?

Following the defeat of ISIS, Iraq needs a strong and effective government to set it on the road to stability and prosperity. If Europeans and Americans accept that they will have to negotiate with Assad (although that may be crossing a red line, but peace may otherwise never be achieved), for Syria perhaps a peace conference involving the regional players as well as the great powers could make some headway. EU diplomacy should be probing for possibilities. Closely consulting with Turkey would be a way towards restoring good working relations with Ankara (though the future form of the long-term EU-Turkey relationship remains in doubt). But the regional geopolitical competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia remains a massive nuisance factor. As long as the US does not change tack, a diplomatic solution does not seem to be on the horizon, neither for Iraq nor for Syria.

## CONCLUSION

The European contribution to the security of the Middle East and North Africa is highly significant, especially in the coalition against ISIS and in the Sahel. Where the European military contribution (to UN, NATO, EU and coalition operations) has not been framed in a broad EU strategy, however, Europeans have not been able to create the circumstances that would safeguard their security interests in the long term. Several EU Member States have preferred to make policy outside the EU, in various informal formats, but in the end they have had but little impact on what the US does, and even less on the governments in the region.

Europeans have power. But to leverage it, they need strategy, which in turns requires unity. Somehow I feel that I have written this before...

*Prof. Dr. Sven Biscop, an Honorary Fellow of the EU's European Security and Defence College (ESDC), directs the Europe in the World Programme at the Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations in Brussels and lectures at Ghent University.*

*His latest book is [European Strategy in the 21st Century](#) (Routledge, 2019).*

*The author warmly thanks his colleagues at the Egmont Institute, Brigadier-General (Ret.) Jo Coelmont, Em. Prof. Dr. Rik Coolsaet, Ambassador (Ret.) Marc Otte, and Prof. Dr. Nina Wilén for their insightful comments.*

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Sir Basil H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy. Second Revised Edition.* London, Faber & Faber, 1967.

<sup>2</sup> This does not affect America's permanent military bases in the wider region: nearly 50,000 US troops remain in Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates.



The opinions expressed in this Policy Brief are those of the author(s) alone, and they do not necessarily reflect the views of the Egmont Institute. Founded in 1947, EGMONT – Royal Institute for International Relations is an independent and non-profit Brussels-based think tank dedicated to interdisciplinary research.

[www.egmontinstitute.be](http://www.egmontinstitute.be)

© Egmont Institute 2020. All rights reserved.