STABILISING THE EU’S NEIGHBOURHOOD:
THE ROLE OF KEY STATES (RUSSIA, TURKEY, IRAN AND SAUDI ARABIA)
IN LIGHT OF THE UNITED STATES DECISION TO WITHDRAW FROM
SYRIA AND BEYOND

Majlis Discussion – February 21, 2019  Bussola Institute, Brussels
SUMMARY

On the 21st of February 2019, the Bussola Institute and the Bertelsmann Foundation hosted a majlis discussion focused on the topic of “Stabilising the EU’s neighbourhood: The role of key states (Iran, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey) in the context of the United States (US) decision to withdraw from Syria.” The event was an opportunity to engage with experts on each of these states to understand the impact of a potential change in the US role in the Middle East. Speakers and discussants exchanged opinions on the varying positions and shifting interests of these key states in light of the Trump Administration’s recent announcement that it would withdraw the majority of its troops from Syria. The concluding remarks were dedicated to sharing recommendations on how the EU can help in stabilising its neighbourhood by taking these key states’ interests into account in formulating its next foreign policy steps.

INTRODUCTION

Despite the fact that the EU’s external policy objective is to establish stable systems and structures in its eastern and southern neighbourhoods, destabilising conflicts remain all across both regions. In the meantime, the governments of four states in the immediate vicinity of the EU – Iran, Russia, Saudi Arabia and Turkey – exert significant influence on some of the countries in the EU neighbourhood and on several occasions, they have used their political power to shape political and social developments in these regions in line with their own national interest. In this context, the EU should take the interests of these four countries into account if it wants to see stable transformations in the regions from Morocco to Egypt to the Caucasus. For the EU, these so-called ‘key states’ represent “the neighbours of the neighbours.”

The Majlis session began with speakers elaborating on the position of each of these key states. They addressed a large set of questions and topics including outlining the interests of these states and how they differ from EU interests, the relations between the four of them and their individual relationships with the EU and the US, the EU’s interests in the stabilisation of its direct neighbourhood, and finally what that means for the EU itself.
RUSSIA, SYRIA, AND THE US

“Russia does not bring order, it needs opportunities that come from disorder”

It was mentioned that Russian foreign policy has more to do with US action, or inaction, in the Middle East and less to do with the region itself. It sees the US withdrawal as an opportunity to prove itself as a global power and maintain a bargaining chip in its dealings with the US. In the opinion of Russian experts, the Syria campaign has been successful for several reasons:

(i) It has recognised Russia as a global and regional military power capable of protecting its interests.
(ii) It increased Russia’s role in the Middle East where the US has had a monopoly for several decades.
(iii) It provided Russia with economic benefits, such as improving its relationship with OPEC states, like some of the GCC states.

While Russian President Vladimir Putin expressed his ‘delight’ at the news of the US withdrawal from Syria, the discussion highlighted several disadvantages from Moscow’s point of view. These include:

(i) Russia being financially too weak to be a stand-alone power and stabilise Syria, which would ultimately imply that they need financial help from the US and the EU.
(ii) The US withdrawal will change the ‘rules of the game” in terms of overall territorial control and could lead to greater confrontation between Russia, Iran, and Turkey.
(iii) Syria is one of the examples where Russia and the US military have cooperated in weakening ISIS. A US withdrawal might mean that this relationship will come to an end, which may harm any future US-Russia relationship.

Looking at the EU’s role in the stabilisation of Syria from a Russian perspective, Moscow is becoming increasingly frustrated as the EU does not appear to be willing to bear the cost of bringing refugees back to Syria as originally believed by Russian policy officials. Russia thus underestimated the political preconditions for the EU to do so and overestimated the ability to stabilise and reconstruct Syria without EU help. The reality is that Russia is simply not financially or militarily powerful enough to undertakethis on its own.
TURKEY, THE KURDS AND THE EU

“Instead of increasing pressure on Turkey, the EU should offer a carrot to integrate Turkey’s economy”

Turkey has been suffering its biggest economic crisis since 2001 that, so far, has primarily affected the private sector, as opposed to the government. Still, its involvement in Syria is a detrimental situation for Turkey’s future. There are two important issues that Turkey has stressed to the EU in the case for Syria:

(i) There lies a fundamental difference between the EU’s policy and the Turkish view on the Kurdish minority in northern Syria. Turkey has made it clear that it is not going to accept any compromise on the possibility of the establishment of an independent Kurdish state or large-scale Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria. This position, however, is contrasted by the fact that, despite being fellow NATO members, the EU and the US have gone against Turkish interests by supporting the mainly Kurdish militia YPG units in northern Syria. This, in turn, has led Turkey into closer negotiations with Iran on how to settle the Kurdish minority issue due to a common interest in repressing the Kurdish population in Syria, Turkey, Iraq, and Iran.

(ii) The economic situation in Turkey has given Ankara the impression that the EU has no interest in stabilising or integrating the Turkish economy due to the fact that the EU supports the Kurdish resistance who in turn are engaged in combat with the Turkish military.

When discussing the US withdrawal from Syria, it is unclear whether Turkey is particularly happy about the announcement of the withdrawal; it is a complicated situation in terms of the future of Turkish relations with the US, the EU, and the Middle East. One of the many reasons for this uncertainty is that US President Trump has said that he will not tolerate an attack on the Kurdish population by the Turkish military, but has also underlined that he encourages Turkey to continue its campaign against “terrorists.” The result is very much a grey area given that Turkey has classified certain Kurdish groups including the PKK and the YPG as terrorists.
IRAN, THE US AND THE EU

“We kicked the Americans out of Iran and we will slowly kick them out of the entire region”

Tehran is sceptical of any US withdrawal from Syria and has stated multiple times that President Trump will say one thing yet his administration does something else. However, if an entire withdrawal from the region is the plan, then Iran would definitely welcome it. Tehran’s goal is to reduce US influence in region until it is ultimately eliminated.

The nature and timeline of the draw down are of crucial importance to Iran. Whether it represents an actual withdrawal or is a superficial one, for example, in terms of removing soldiers but bringing in private contractors, is still a major question that needs to be addressed. Still, experts indicate that a US withdrawal from Syria would have adverse consequences for Tehran even if the Islamic Republic publicly welcomes such a step. As a result:

(i) One factor of concern is how order will be restored in Syria following a withdrawal. If it were to play out in a similar fashion to the US withdrawal from Iraq then there is a possibility of even greater instability in their neighbouring states, bearing in mind however that Iran also welcomed the US withdrawal from Iraq.

(ii) Iran is concerned with what the withdrawal might mean for its hostilities with Israel. Israel might feel the need to become a greater player in the region to curb Iranian influence.

(iii) A withdrawal will affect Iran’s relationship with Saudi Arabia and the GCC as a whole. Iran would welcome initiatives by GCC countries to normalise relations with Syria as it supported Saudi Arabia’s restoration of relations with Iraq. At the same time, there are concerns that an increased involvement by the GCC countries would largely be aimed at trying to curtail Iranian influence.

It was mentioned that both Iran and the EU share a common interest in stabilising Syria, given that the current state of destabilisation creates uncertainty for both regions. An argument was put forward that Iran wants the EU not just to be a payer but also a player in the stabilisation process. However, there does not seem to be a mechanism in place that would ensure the stabilisation process does not overshadow Iran’s national interests, which is preserving the current Assad regime’s power.
SAUDI ARABIA, THE GCC AND THE US

“In the short term, there is no possibility whereby Saudi-Iran talks would lessen the tensions in the region”

The discussion highlighted that Saudi Arabia is not happy with the announcement of US withdrawal from Syria or from the region. The US and Saudi Arabia have had a very strong strategic relationship since the 1940s to the benefit of both sides. Riyadh’s current position is that the US is the only power capable and willing to come to Saudi’s assistance in the case of increased threats against the Kingdom, for example stemming from the rising hostilities with Iran.

Ever since the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, there have been growing concerns within all of the GCC states about the strategic direction of the US. Saudi Arabia, for example, vehemently opposed the invasion of Iraq as they foresaw the possibility that such a step would lead to greater instability. As far as Riyadh is concerned, those fears have manifested themselves 15 years later, most prominently in the spread of Iran’s influence in the region. For the moment, there is no indication that greater confidence in the US role has been restored by the volatile nature of the Trump administration’s policies. Saudi Arabia sees President Trump’s declaration of a withdrawal from Syria in the same vein as President Obama’s decision to leave Iraq immediately after becoming president in 2009, i.e. withdrawing before the actual job is done. For Riyadh, a premature departure will only cause more instability and uncertainty.

Saudi Arabia’s reaction to the US policy direction and the recent decision has been 3-fold:

(i) Undertaking a concerted effort to re-emphasise the strategic relationship with Washington despite the transactional character of Trump administration policies.

(ii) Taking on a greater role in regional affairs and trying to fill the many vacuums that currently exist in the Middle East.

(iii) Expanding relations with allies in other parts of the world including Europe (France) and Asia (China, Pakistan, and India). Experts presume that this approach is meant as a signal to Washington that the Kingdom has options and that Riyadh will not sit and wait for the US to make up its mind.

The situation with Iran remains Saudi Arabia’s and other Gulf state’s primary concern and there is a need for the international community to invest political capital in trying to defuse some of the existing tensions. While no breakthrough can be expected at this stage, the EU may potentially become a conduit for shuttle diplomacy if it is serious in taking on such a role.
RECOMMENDATIONS

Following an open discussion on the possible role of the EU in stabilising its neighbourhood, a number of recommendations were put forward:

(i) The EU is in urgent need of stronger and more strategic communication with all four key states if it intends to contribute to the stabilisation of its neighbourhood.

(ii) The EU should support Turkey’s economic and security situation by making greater efforts to integrate Turkey’s economy into the EU as well as entering into a constructive dialogue with Ankara on its security concerns when it comes to the Kurdish question.

(iii) In the long-term, the EU needs to evaluate its own role in de-escalating tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia. One way to approach this could be if the EU becomes involved in the stabilisation and reconstruction of Syria.

(v) The EU should explore ways in which reconstruction efforts can be put forward together with Russia, given Moscow’s inability to make significant progress on its own when it comes to the re-building of Syria.

(vi) The EU needs its own initiative when it comes to the future of its neighbourhood. Its current largely reactive policy is allowing all four key states to expand their own interests in their respective regions, often in contradiction to EU interests.