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About this Series

Op-Med is an ongoing series of opinion pieces on topical issues in Mediterranean politics from a transatlantic perspective. The series brings together European, North American, and southern Mediterranean experts through the German Marshall Fund–Istituto Affari Internazionali strategic partnership. The series examines key questions surrounding the political, societal, and economic evolution of specific Mediterranean countries as well as the broader regional and international dynamics at play in the Mediterranean region as a whole.

Changes in the Mediterranean Security Environment: A View From Athens

by *Thanos Dokos*

Scarcely two years since the beginning of the Arab revolts, the key words describing the regional security environment in the Mediterranean and the Middle East are fluidity, instability, and unpredictability. There has been regime change in several countries (Tunisia, Egypt, Libya — in the latter case also as a result of a NATO operation), violent suppression of the protests in Bahrain, continuing instability in Yemen, and civil war in Syria. The general feeling is that this process of protest and demand for regime change is likely to continue, although the exact form it will take in each Arab country, as well as the final result, is all but impossible to predict. It can be safely assumed, however, that the lengthy road to more representative government will not be smooth for most countries in the region and there may be important setbacks along the way.

The major transatlantic concern has been the possibility that extremist Islamic, anti-Western political parties might rise to power in some countries, especially Egypt, long perceived as a pivotal country for regional stability. While the concern is valid in view of popular support for such groups

(although each country constitutes a different case) and of the potential implications should some of these countries adopt a radically different foreign policy vis-à-vis the West and/or Israel, such a change hasn't taken place yet. The early days of Egypt's new president, Mohamed Morsi, a former Muslim Brother, have not caused any serious consternation along the lines described above, although it is, of course, too early to reach any definite conclusions.

The Syrian crisis is another source of serious disquiet for all neighboring countries, as well as the international community in general. In addition to the humanitarian dimension, including the increasing number of refugees, the stakes are high regarding the day after an (eventual) regime change. Iran and Russia, (for different reasons), would like to prevent such a development, or at least have a significant say in the post-revolutionary period; several Arab countries are supporting various groups among the opposition; Turkey has openly sided with the opposition and has been engaged in (minor) skirmishes with the Syrian military. Meanwhile Western countries, having no appetite

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for a Libya-type military intervention, have limited their role to the application of economic sanctions against the regime of Bashar al-Assad.

Dealing with Iran's nuclear program is undoubtedly the most critical strategic question in the proliferation field and a very important issue on the international security agenda. The regional security problem is in reality not limited to the nuclear issue, although Western countries, Israel, and Iran's Gulf neighbors perceive it as the most pressing security concern. In this context, the dominant view in Athens is that military action must be viewed as a component of a comprehensive strategy rather than a stand-alone option for dealing with Iran's nuclear program. Leaving moral arguments aside, there is general concern that under the current circumstances, an Israeli attack would be of limited effectiveness in destroying all the intended targets, counter-productive in the long-term in stopping the Iranian nuclear program, and inordinately costly because of Iran's probable asymmetric response. Furthermore, sanctions — which, in their latest form, appear to be “biting” — should continue to be used as a tool of pressure against Iran, but the critical component of the West's strategy should be engagement, an approach that has also been advocated by Turkey.

Mainly as a result of the Syrian crisis, but also because of its failure to achieve any substantial improvement in relations with Armenia, Greece, Cyprus, and Iran, the Turkish foreign policy doctrine of “zero problems with neighbors” is also under review. The resumption of PKK military action, as well as developments regarding the Kurdish question in Syria, tensions with Russia over the Syrian crisis, and with Iran over both Syria and the deployment of a NATO early warning radar have further complicated matters for Turkey. What's more, other challenges have arisen in the Eastern Mediterranean with the discovery of significant natural gas deposits in the exclusive economic zones of Israel and Cyprus and the alleged deposits of the Levant Basin, which may provide an additional energy source outside the former Soviet space and the Middle East proper. The evolving cooperation between Israel and Cyprus, with Greece as a potential third partner, is a new element in regional politics in the Eastern Mediterranean and a possible source of friction with Turkey.

Greece is an important regional player who in essence has been absent from regional developments in the Eastern

Mediterranean. Indeed, if Greece remains weak for a long time, there may be negative repercussions for regional stability in Southeastern Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean, as well as for the EU's and NATO's ability to play a substantial role in those regions.

The EU, more broadly, has also been weakened strategically by the evolving financial crisis. Without underestimating Greece's own responsibilities, at the global level it was the EU's inability to successfully manage the crisis that has been perceived by competitors and friends alike as a signal of weakness and has hurt the image of the Union as an important strategic actor. Completely ignoring the geopolitical consequences of the Greek crisis is yet another symptom of the European foreign policy malaise. There is increasing concern that Europe is sliding into strategic insignificance, losing its global role and influence as it is turning more and more onto itself as a result of its own economic and political crisis.

In view of the declining influence and appeal of the EU's soft power and the large scale changes in much of the Arab world, the EU has no other option but to develop a comprehensive policy vis-à-vis the Arab world, employing all existing instruments to re-define its relationship and strengthen its role in the Middle East. In this context, the

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Union for the Mediterranean might prove quite useful, despite its early problems, but of course much more needs to be done. NATO should also re-think its possible role in the emerging security environment in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. By developing country specific strategies, the Western objective should be to prevent a takeover by radical Islamic groups and promote the establishment of moderate regimes in the Eastern Mediterranean that would be willing to work together with their transatlantic partners.

About the Author

Thanos Dokos holds a PHD in International Relations from the University of Cambridge. He has worked at the Hellenic Ministries of Defence and Foreign Affairs and he is currently the Director-General of the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP). He also teaches at the University of Athens. His interests include global changes, security developments in the Mediterranean and the Middle East, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and Turkish foreign policy.

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