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A Transatlantic Approach for the Arab World: Stability through Inclusivity, Good Governance, and Prosperity

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Four years after popular uprisings for rights, dignity, and economic justice erupted across North Africa and the Middle East, US and European pledges to strongly support the region's democratic and economic transformation are but a faded memory. At a 2011 White House summit, the United States and the European Union (EU) committed to work together closely to help nascent democratic transitions succeed.¹ Unfortunately, in the face of mounting challenges across the region and recurrent doubts that the West has much influence to wield, that commitment never took root in US, EU, and European member state bureaucracies.

Now, with all the uprisings except Tunisia's failing to bring democratic governance, and the Arab world instead experiencing a dark phase of violent conflict, sectarian tension, state deterioration, and authoritarian regression, US and European engagement has reverted to its pre-2011 pattern of prioritizing security through close cooperation with autocratic Arab governments. Transatlantic cooperation on security, intelligence, and military action in the region is strong. However, there is limited bandwidth and motivation for the United States and Europe to work in a robust manner to encourage inclusive political systems that can protect Arab citizens' basic rights, provide lasting security, and deliver broad economic prosperity.

Given the gravity of the dangers emanating from the region, it is understandable that the priorities of the Obama administration, the EU, and European member states revolve around core security goals: preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons and countering the Islamic State of Syria and al-Sham (ISIS)



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and other terrorist groups. But it is still striking how much the themes of human rights, good governance, and economic opportunity have receded in US and European policy toward the Middle East, especially in the past year.

US President Barack Obama's September 2014 speech at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) largely focused on the campaign against ISIS and, for the first time since the 2011 uprisings, barely mentioned the need for political reform in the region.² Since 2013, the US administration has downgraded its regional policy initiative on Arab reform, eliminated a special coordinator post for the Arab transitions, and scaled back democracy assistance. European criticism of Arab governments' human rights violations has become more muted. The EU post of special representative for the

¹ EU-US Summit Joint Statement, November 28, 2011, http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/126389.pdf.

² "Remarks by President Obama in Address to the United Nations General Assembly," New York, September 24, 2014, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/24/remarks-president-obama-address-united-nations-general-assembly>.

southern Mediterranean region, whose focus was the Arab transitions, has been vacant for months. Instead of forward-leaning reform initiatives for the region, much of the talk in Europe is focused on protecting the continent from the southern neighborhood's threats. Although US and European officials occasionally give speeches mentioning the need for inclusive governance, human rights, and equitable growth as part of an anti-ISIS strategy for the region, this rhetoric has not translated into any significant policy measures.

What Went Wrong

There are two main reasons why the United States and Europe have failed to leverage sufficient diplomatic support and resources to help struggling Arab uprising countries get on a firm transition path.³

First, the post-uprising period has been far more difficult than expected. The initial US and European responses were based on unrealistic assumptions that significant political and economic change would unfold in a linear, peaceful fashion. The United States and Europe focused too much on free elections at the expense of human rights and institution-building, and on liberalizing economic reforms. They saw their role as reinforcing a smooth process of reform, through familiar engagement tools such as lengthy negotiations for enhanced trade agreements or loan guarantees. Then democratization stalled and an authoritarian backlash began: Syria descended into civil war; militia and tribal violence erupted in Libya and Yemen; and many Arab governments adopted more statist economic policies. Free elections did not produce democratic governance. Confronted with these messy realities, Europe and the United States were ill-prepared to shift approaches and instead seemed stuck.

Second, the United States and Europe were overly hesitant, due to worries about Arab resentment of a heavy Western hand and self-consciousness about their limited leverage. To be sure, the Arab uprisings needed to be treated as home-grown events, and US and European influence in the region is in decline. But these truths became an excuse not to push harder on promoting democratic values. Since 2011, the United States and Europe have been distracted by problems in their own democratic systems and economies. The assertiveness of wealthy Gulf countries determined to use their vast resources to prevent a new democratic political order from emerging in the region, by

empowering the old guard in the transition countries with billions of dollars, has been another factor leading to US and European reticence. In the past four years, the transatlantic partners have spent a lot of time talking about what they cannot do far more than what they *can* do, and have often stepped back and ceded ground to the Gulf countries.

The Need for a Transatlantic Approach

It is unsurprising that the “urgent” trumps the “important” in foreign policy, and that what dominates the headlines will absorb both the voting public and policymakers. But the United States and Europe privilege short-term security interests and sideline the issues of political and economic reform in the region at their peril. The ultimate US and European interest in this region is stability, and a stable, secure Middle East requires, in part, addressing popular grievances inside Arab countries. To be sure, terrorism, extremism, and violent conflict are immensely complex problems. Democratization and economic reform are not silver bullets, and can even complicate matters in the short term. However, it is likely that failing to address repression, poor governance, and dysfunctional economies will make extremism and violence worse.

The United States and Europe seem slow to learn this lesson. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the United States and its European allies were quick to work with now-overthrown autocratic leaders in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, and even Libya to combat terrorism and keep a tight lid on political dissent and religious expression in the name of internal security. Nearly fourteen years later, the rise of ISIS and the threat of jihadists with Western passports are resuscitating that same short-term thinking. The recent experience of Iraqi politics also demonstrates how profound governance failures, if neglected, can lead to extremism and violence that threaten Western interests and can trigger an urgent military reaction.

Despite US and European claims of a major policy adjustment after the 2011 uprisings, there is still insufficient understanding of the deep connection between the factors that led millions of Arab citizens to protest—rampant corruption, a culture of impunity for those who hold power, pervasive injustice for those who do not, and a lack of economic opportunity—and the grievances that feed extremism and violent instability. These problems are not exogenous concerns but are at the core of instability in this region.

Although most attempts at Arab democratization have failed since 2011, the economic and political exclusion that drove the uprisings remains. In fact, in nearly every country these problems have worsened,

³ For further information about what resources the United States and EU provided to the Arab countries in transition, see Danya Greenfield, Amy Hawthorne, and Rosa Balfour, *US-EU: Lack of Strategic Vision, Frustrated Efforts Toward Arab Transitions* (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, 2013), http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/publications/US_EU_Lack_of_Strategic_Vision_Frustrated_Efforts_Toward_Arab_Transitions.pdf.

especially for the youth population, many of whom feel disenfranchised and see a hopeless future under the status quo. The 2011 uprisings should be seen as part of a long, painful process of regional change—not the end. The stark reality of the region’s youth bulge⁴ and anemic economic growth⁵ suggests that without attention to underlying grievances, another wave of youth-led, bottom-up uprisings against repressive, ineffective governments will happen sooner or later. Authoritarian rule is not a lasting solution.

Even among transatlantic policymakers who believe that helping to bring about inclusive, participatory political and economic systems is a long-term strategic interest, there are concerns about vigorously pursuing this goal now. Such policymakers pose a very relevant and poignant question: if US and European influence is diminished, and if their impact is marginal, why should the United States and Europe expend scarce resources, energy, and diplomatic capital on issues that are unlikely to result in any near-term tangible change and that often antagonize authoritarian Arab governments in the process? Overcoming this frustration and fatigue is a central challenge at present, but the solution is not to give up. Yes, US and European influence is limited, and Western powers cannot shape on their own the evolution of Arab countries. Yet, even within a modest, narrowed scope for action, there is a strong rationale for why the transatlantic partners can and should engage in supporting democratic change in a more sustained, persistent, and visible way.

First, even in authoritarian countries, the governments and societies are not monoliths, and there are those inside and outside the state system who want more change and more openness. They may be weak, but they are not absent. By maintaining consistent messages and engagement that uphold core democratic principles and by pressing leaders on these issues, the United States and Europe can help to nurture over time the vision of those who want to chart a different path for their countries. Such support is essential for nascent movements and individual actors to push toward more inclusive, participatory political systems, even if this change takes many years to unfold.

4 Marilena Stoenescu, “Youth Statistics—North Africa and Eastern Mediterranean: Large Youth Population Plus High Unemployment—Challenges Facing ENP-South Countries,” Eurostat, October 2014, http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Youth_statistics_-_North_Africa_and_Eastern_Mediterranean; Farzaneh Roudi, “Youth Population and Employment in the Middle East And North Africa: Opportunity or Challenge?,” UN Population Reference Bureau, July 2011, http://www.un.org/esa/population/meetings/egm-adolescents/p06_roudi.pdf.

5 International Monetary Fund, *Regional Economic Outlook: Middle East and Central Asia* (Washington, DC, October 2014), <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/reo/2014/mcd/eng/pdf/mreo1014.pdf>, p. 29.

AFTER THE TERRORIST ATTACKS OF SEPTEMBER 11, 2001, THE UNITED STATES AND ITS EUROPEAN ALLIES WERE QUICK TO WORK WITH NOW-OVERTHROWN AUTOCRATIC LEADERS TO COMBAT TERRORISM AND KEEP A TIGHT LID ON POLITICAL DISSENT IN THE NAME OF SECURITY. NEARLY FOURTEEN YEARS LATER, THE RISE OF ISIS AND THE THREAT OF JIHADISTS WITH WESTERN PASSPORTS ARE RESUSCITATING THAT SAME SHORT-TERM THINKING.

Second, attending to these underlying issues is not a luxury for the United States and Europe, but a necessity. Inconsistency on governance issues only diminishes limited US and European influence. The conditions for serious instability and pressures for change are present in every country; they cannot be suppressed indefinitely. The transatlantic community can either be a steady partner in supporting those who seek peaceful transformation to pluralism and rule of law and inclusive economies, or can wait on the sidelines, only to have to reengage later when the problems become even more urgent.

The challenges in the Arab world are complex and what is needed is persistent effort rather than episodic attention through grandiose speeches or lofty promises left unfulfilled. What is needed is high-level political championing of the region’s longer-term



US President Barack Obama greets Tunisian students during the White House visit of former Tunisian Prime Minister Mehdi Jomaa in April 2014. *Source:* Pete Souza, official White House photo.

development within EU and US policy circles. This is not a region where technical fixes delivered by diligent public servants can get close to exerting the necessary leverage. Obviously, the United States and Europe cannot solve the region's problems, but a constructive role by external actors can help. The United States, Europe, and other allies must look beyond the region's immediate security crises to determine what is at stake and how the transatlantic community can contribute toward the creation of more stable and prosperous countries. They should identify specific but important goals—the reform of a civil society law in one country or advancing anticorruption norms in another—and then work tenaciously, together and with regional partners, to advance them.

This is an opportune moment for the development of such a joint, long-term strategy to promote more open and inclusive political and economic systems in the Arab world. With just two years left in office, the Obama administration should create a visible, well-resourced agenda for a *positive* legacy in the Middle East, so that hard-power engagement is not America's only profile. In Brussels, a new EU leadership recently took office and is revamping the European Neighborhood Policy for the southern Mediterranean. Together, the United States and

EU need to carve out space in their heavy policy agenda for the Middle East and renew their pledge to advance a positive future for the region, one that links political and economic reform to security goals. They should bolster such engagement with stronger diplomatic and aid resources and much closer transatlantic cooperation.

Such a joint strategy must at the outset recognize that the United States and European countries do not have identical views of, interests in, or approaches to the Middle East and North Africa, and indeed even compete in some spheres. For the United States, the region is an ocean away, and carries mainly geopolitical importance that has required recurring and costly military involvement to ensure a stable global energy supply, prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, protect Israel's security, and combat terrorists that target American interests around the world. (Even within the US bureaucracy, the executive and legislative branch are often not on the same page, and, in the case of Egypt, there are divisions within the administration as well.)

For Europe, the Arab world is on its doorstep, and its main interests reflect this geographic proximity. They include expanding European economic and investment in regional markets, stemming illegal migration, and

defending against terrorism and other security threats; Europe also has a stronger focus on the Palestinian cause (this is a growing area of transatlantic divergence) and a much smaller military footprint than the United States. Within this framework, Europe is not unified: individual EU member states often have conflicting approaches vis-à-vis the Arab transition countries. National governments (France, Spain, Italy, and, to some extent, Germany and the United Kingdom) often act without reference to the EU's collective positions and funding initiatives on a number of issues. Along with the United States, they are in all-but-open competition over arms sales and export markets into the Gulf, for example.

Yet the United States and Europe, at the most basic level, share two important things: a fundamental interest in the region's stability and a commitment to core democratic and economic values that is at the heart of transatlantic ties. A joint approach to reform in the region makes sense because it would draw upon the unique global strength of the transatlantic alliance derived from these shared values. A joint approach is also *required*. The challenges in the Middle East and North Africa are so profound, the stakes for the United States and Europe are so high, and competition among actors in the region is so intense, that more strategic coordination of diplomatic engagement and aid is the only way to magnify limited US-European influence. At the same time, the effort of cooperating more with the United States could spur greater intra-EU coordination on critical issues, such as Libya's worsening civil conflict or Egypt's resurgent authoritarianism.

In an era of hand-wringing over declining Western global power and weak influence in the Arab world, it is important to remember what Europe and the United States *can* offer to the region in a highly relevant, soft power agenda, and to leverage their comparative advantages with respect to other major actors (the Gulf states, Russia, China, Iran, Turkey) in this regard. Notwithstanding widespread resentment of US policy in the Arab world and distrust for Western support for democracy, anecdotal evidence suggests there is organic demand—especially among the younger generation, which is educated, networked, global, and entrepreneurial—for what the United States and Europe can offer.⁶ Such support can be provided in the form of incentives or through the “power of example” and knowledge transfer. The key is to figure out how to support these constituencies in ways that respond

⁶ For example, see Shibley Telhami, *The World Through Arab Eyes* (New York: Basic Books, 2013). As an overview of the book notes, “Decades of perceived humiliations at the ends of the West have left many Arabs with a wounded sense of national pride, but also a desire for political systems with elements of Western democracies—an apparent contradiction that is only one of many complicating our understanding of the monumental shifts in Arab politics and society” (from <http://theworldthrougharabeyes.com/>).

to indigenous demands, cultivate local constituencies, and are respectful of—and collaborative with—Arab partners inside and outside of government.

Incentives that the United States, the EU, and European member states can offer to governments, based on their democratic and economic progress, include:

- trade and privileged market access, leveraging the combined weight of US and European markets;
- financial aid and development assistance accompanied by world-class technical advice;
- shareholder influence within powerful international/multilateral institutions such as the United Nations, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development to press for financial support for Arab governments (or to argue against it); and
- political legitimation that comes through US/EU/European praise of Arab governments' human rights records and political performance, or criticism of backsliding in these areas.

Influence, in terms of the “power of example” and knowledge transfer to governments and citizens, includes:

- know-how on an array of economic reforms, small business development, vocational and technical education, technology, entrepreneurship, and innovation economies—all of which are closely connected to the core economic challenges facing the transition countries;
- technical assistance for civil society strengthening, administrative capacity-building, decentralization, local governance, volunteerism, police and judicial reform, and institution-building; and
- experiential exposure to democratic values and institutions by time spent in the United States and Europe (through work, travel, and study).

A transatlantic strategy on reform does *not* mean a common approach on every issue or every diplomatic statement, or aid programs implemented in lockstep. To be sure, European governments are sometimes hesitant to partner too visibly with the United States on sensitive issues in the Arab world due to the poor US image there. But it does mean more than occasional information sharing or synchronized responses to crisis situations. A strategic level of coordination means working toward a shared, overarching, long-term goal that includes some

ALTHOUGH THERE HAS BEEN A RELATIVELY HIGH LEVEL OF WESTERN FOCUS ON ECONOMIC ISSUES IN THE ARAB WORLD SINCE 2011, US AND EUROPEAN POLICIES AND PROGRAMS LARGELY HAVE IGNORED THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF VESTED INTERESTS AND DEEP PATTERNS OF CORRUPTION THAT STYMIE INCLUSIVE GROWTH AND JOB CREATION.

actions in concert, and others in parallel. The United States should take the lead on some matters and Europe on others, drawing upon the particular strengths of the United States, the EU, and key member states. For example, in the aid realm, many European countries have relevant experience with vocational education and the United States has useful know-how in technological innovation.

The United States and Europe have shown their ability to forge such a strategic approach when the issue is deemed of urgent importance, such as preventing a nuclear Iran, beating back ISIS' advance, or pushing back against Russian aggression in Ukraine. Strategic cooperation to advance democratic and economic reform in the Middle East will be far more challenging in part because it is a long-term goal that lacks the day-to-day urgency of security issues, and because positive results may not be seen for years. It requires above all strategic patience, advancing a proactive, long-term policy to mitigate the underlying causes of instability.

Toward a Transatlantic Approach

Alongside the shared effort to degrade ISIS and to pursue other urgent security priorities, the United States and Europe need different approaches for what are effectively four categories of countries:

- **Dysfunctional and collapsing states**—Yemen and Libya—where a sustained transatlantic response is needed and US and European leadership could be instrumental to preventing further conflict and resolving these crises. The immediate priority should be to sustain US-European attention, to stabilize these countries in the security and political spheres, and to ramp up efforts to stimulate national dialogue and reconciliation that are essential to stem the tide of violence. The United States and Europe should play a strong regional leadership role in resolving these crises and avoid the temptation to “outsource” them to Gulf states. They also must make sure that solutions pushed are not exclusively military ones, but are political in their essence, focused on forging inclusive systems. Anything else will be a quick fix that will only generate more instability.
- **Fledgling democratic transition**—Tunisia—where there is broad agreement in the United States and Europe that Tunisia represents an important test case for the viability of a pluralistic system in which Islamist parties can work within democratic rules. Yet Tunisia's success is far from assured. More consistent transatlantic attention, a clearer plan of support, and greater political will are needed to help Tunisia move forward, especially economically, and to protect against democratic backsliding.
- **Non-uprising countries with limited political reforms and stunted economic transformation**—Morocco, Jordan, Algeria, and the Gulf states—where authoritarianism and old economic models hold sway and major turbulence has been averted for now, but social discontent is often palpable. In these cases, the United States and Europe should push incremental, but real, change and avoid policies based on unrealistic complacency with authoritarian stability. The 2011 uprisings demonstrated how cosmetic, top-down reforms do not bring stability but can actually lead to eruptions from below.
- **Nations with resurgent authoritarianism and ongoing unrest after significant popular mobilization or political opening**—Bahrain and Egypt—where a joint US-European approach based on core democratic principles and human rights is essential to send a strong message. In Egypt,

the approach on economic issues should avoid advocating reforms that would replicate the failed approach of the Mubarak era.

The “What” of a Transatlantic Approach

Based on the four country categories outlined above, US and EU institutions, along with key member states, should work collaboratively to design *country-specific plans* that are responsive and appropriate for each country’s characteristics, opportunities, and challenges.

Develop an effective approach to promote economic reform that leads to *inclusive growth*. Although there has been a relatively high level of Western focus on economic issues in the Arab world since 2011, US and European policies and programs largely have ignored the political economy of vested interests and deep patterns of corruption that stymie inclusive growth and job creation. The transatlantic partners should develop assistance programs and diplomatic engagement that advance an economic reform agenda with an explicit orientation toward building transparent, rule-abiding economies, with greater opportunity for all, not just the politically connected elite. A macroeconomic reform agenda focused on reducing deficits and shrinking the state budget is not enough, especially in a region when populist, state-led policies have increasing appeal as social justice measures.

To do so, the United States and EU should identify those economic reforms that would reverse economic patterns contributing to structural youth unemployment and corruption. They should then reevaluate diplomatic engagement and assistance programs on a country-specific level to ensure they are addressing these issues effectively. In particular, attention should focus on key grievances that triggered the uprisings: youth unemployment and under-employment, frustration with cronyism and corruption, and poverty. To address youth unemployment, US and European donor agencies should prioritize creating the conditions for private sector development and small and medium enterprise (SME) growth that leads to new job creation. They should also support programs that equip young job seekers with new skills by funding or establishing vocational and technical schools and by expanding scholarship programs. This requires sustained policy attention, additional resources, and, in some cases, much more carefully designed aid programs.

Focus on inclusiveness, pluralism, and institution-building, not just on elections, and increase engagement with independent civic actors. US and European attention should shift from an often narrow focus on elections to a broader agenda of institution-building: helping to create responsive, inclusive,

ASSESSING DEMOCRATIC PROGRESS SHOULD BE BASED AS MUCH ON THE DEGREE OF INCLUSIVENESS AND RULE OF LAW AS ON THE PEACEFUL CONDUCT OF ELECTIONS, PARTICULARLY IF THE ELECTORAL PROCESS IS TECHNICALLY SOUND BUT DELIVERS AN AUTHORITARIAN LEADER (AS IN EGYPT) OR A DIVISIVE GOVERNING BODY (AS IN LIBYA OR YEMEN).

effective institutions of governance. US and European officials often say that “elections do not alone create democracies,” but then fail to devise a postelection strategy in transition countries. Assessing democratic progress should be based as much on the degree of inclusiveness and rule of law as on the peaceful conduct of elections, particularly if the electoral process is technically sound but delivers an authoritarian leader (as in Egypt) or a divisive governing body (as in Libya or Yemen). Since 2011, an over-focus on elections as a legitimating process often diverted attention from crucial processes of consensus-building and dialogue, and constrained the United States and Europeans in their ability to wield diplomatic pressure to encourage greater pluralism.

Instead, the United States, the EU, and key European member states should identify joint goals for political reform that extend beyond the fair conduct of elections, building upon what has already been outlined in EU association agreements. They should also identify incentives—economic or diplomatic—that could help nudge governments toward reforms. Although the “more

for more” principle of the 2011 European Neighborhood Policy, which made some aid contingent on democratic progress, is often critiqued, it was never fully put into practice or tested, and certainly was not implemented in coordination with the United States.⁷ This is the opportunity to state clearly what is on offer and what is at stake. The key is for the transatlantic community to stay engaged, even when governments move in the wrong direction, but be clear (and unified) about the core principles that the transatlantic community seeks to defend.

Where political developments are not moving in the right direction, the United States and the EU should not disengage. In these situations, a new approach to supporting civil society is needed, one that protects vulnerable rights groups but avoids fostering unsustainable groups that depend on foreign donor resources to survive and are not strongly connected enough to their societies. For civic organizations to be successful and act as change agents, the transatlantic community needs to help them build legitimacy as well as a better legal framework. Civil society development remains a huge need. Democracy-oriented civic groups are crucial to help hold states and leaders accountable and to advocate for rights, pluralism, freedoms, and tolerance as an indigenous counternarrative to the exclusionary and repressive messages of jihadism. In this regard, a crackdown on independent civil society directly undermines the counter-ISIS campaign. The United States and Europe need to stand up for civil society at every opportunity and make this a much more visible part of their engagement with the region.

Europe and the United States also must try to remain aligned on a policy of supporting the inclusion in politics of Islamist parties that renounce violence and accept the democratic process. This is a politically sensitive issue, especially in EU member states facing rising tensions and debates over the integration of Muslim immigrant communities. It also may be a difficult one on which to maintain transatlantic unity, especially as regional states press the United States and key European countries to see all Islamists, from Muslim Brotherhood-linked parties to Libya’s Islamist militias to ISIS, as part of the same spectrum of extremist threats. But in the long

⁷ The European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) was revised immediately after the 2011 uprisings and sought to emphasize the goal of democratic change by providing additional incentives to countries making progress on political and economic reform—the “more for more” principle. The rationale of the revised ENP was to anchor the southern Mediterranean countries more closely to their northern partners by improving the quality of economic and financial assistance and expanding the range of fields for cross Mediterranean engagement. However, the underlying assumptions of the ENP policy—that the EU has leverage and attraction vis-à-vis its Arab neighbors and that a combination of trade liberalization, development aid, and closer political relations would be the recipe to keep the region stable—has not manifested itself in an effective policy.

DEMOCRACY-ORIENTED CIVIC GROUPS ARE CRUCIAL TO HELP HOLD STATES AND LEADERS ACCOUNTABLE AND TO ADVOCATE FOR RIGHTS, PLURALISM, FREEDOMS, AND TOLERANCE AS AN INDIGENOUS COUNTERNARRATIVE TO THE EXCLUSIONARY AND REPRESSIVE MESSAGES OF JIHADISM. IN THIS REGARD, A CRACKDOWN ON INDEPENDENT CIVIL SOCIETY DIRECTLY UNDERMINES THE COUNTER-ISIS CAMPAIGN.

term, it is essential for the transatlantic partners to remain unified because an approach of exclusion is likely to cause more serious problems in the years to come.

Promote more balanced civil-military relationships and security sector reform even while addressing acute security threats in partnership with Arab governments. The regimes of Hosni Mubarak, Zein Al Abidine Ben Ali, Ali Abdullah Saleh, and more recently Nouri al-Maliki, clearly demonstrated that autocratic rule cannot provide long-term stability, and that efforts to shore up such leaders in the name of regional security or counterterrorism cooperation had serious limits over time.

At the most basic level, regimes that do not build institutions based on rule of law and justice cannot provide real security to their populations, let alone prevent ongoing threats to the broader international community. Those Arab states that ignore such dynamics



US Secretary of State John Kerry poses with EU High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini. *Source: US Department of State.*

and neglect broad political and institutional reforms typically end up eroding their security and that of the broader region and transatlantic community. When security forces are corrupt, incompetent, repressive, or sectarian, empowering them can exacerbate factors that fuel jihadist recruitment.

To start, an effort should be launched to map how the United States, the EU, and European member states are engaged in the security aid space, what the priorities for assistance and reform should be, and how better cooperation could be facilitated. This is an important area where US and European partners have complementary strengths (for example, some European member states have strong experience with police training, while the United States has experience with civilian-military relations).

At the same time, security assistance programs should include a focus on the reform of military, internal security, and judicial systems from the outset, not as an afterthought. US and European partners claim to share deep concerns about these issues, yet they frequently relegate them to the back burner in practice. A transatlantic strategy should develop a common understanding of what reform efforts are needed to make Arab security forces more effective in confronting

the very real threats of terrorism, and to safeguard Arab citizens from abuses of power by those who should be protecting them.

The “How” of a Transatlantic Approach

- **Identify points of agreement and focus efforts there:** The United States and Europe do not always have (and do not need to have) the exact same priorities and approach in every country, but should concentrate on the major areas where they have broad agreement: democratic values, the importance of robust civil societies, market-based economies and equitable economic growth, and the need for greater youth inclusion in economies and political systems.
- **Pursue a differentiated, country-specific approach based on shared priorities,** even while taking into consideration cross-national trends that shape each context. The transatlantic partners should identify top priorities for each country, jointly develop a strategic approach related to those priorities, and then delineate how they will work together to advance them, either in coordination or in parallel, determining where a division of labor would be most effective.

- **Undertake a comprehensive assessment of the major recent US and EU aid programs** in the most important spheres to determine where there is duplication and what programs are working best and *why*. The assessment could examine, for example, job creation programs, entrepreneurship training, SME development, civil society capacity-building, civic education, human rights support, and governance assistance, looking honestly at what has been effective and what has failed.
- **Coordinate transatlantic outreach to the Gulf states** on their role in the transition countries, namely Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Yemen. The United States and EU should develop shared messages to these countries based on the constructive roles that they would like them to play relevant to US and European priorities. This will not be easy, given diverging agendas on democracy, human rights, and the inclusion of Islamist parties. Economic reform is perhaps the only area of convergence at present.
- **Create more regular, formal channels for consultations between US and EU institutions** on political and economic transition issues in the Arab world, alongside bilateral discussions between the United States and member states. This will not happen organically and indeed has been lacking at high levels for the last few years, in part due to other regional priorities; such dialogue must be deliberately cultivated and institutionalized. Key actors on the EU side are the European External Action Service, the parts of the European Commission dealing with trade, development, and other economic issues in the southern neighborhood, and the European Parliament. On the US side, key actors include the White House, the Department of State, the US Agency for International Development, the Department of the Treasury, and the Congress; the Department of Defense should be brought in more often when discussions cover security issues.
- **Ensure that messaging on the most crucial political and economic issues is unified and consistent.** A great strength of the United States and EU is the ability to bestow approval on Arab governments that want international legitimacy. Using diplomatic channels and private and public messaging is a strong tool for this. The United States and the EU should be willing to use Arab leaders' desire for such endorsement as leverage, but this will only be effective if the transatlantic partners are unified in their messages, tactics, and strategy. Libya and Yemen are good examples of such unified messaging and show that this is possible when the political will exists.

The Way Forward

Countries with governments that repeatedly fail to respond to the needs of their citizens can become breeding grounds for instability, discontent, and violence. There is a temptation now to re-embrace the idea of strongman rule in the Arab world, but resorting to this old way of doing business is misguided. What is important is not check-the-box elections or political parties that exist in name only, but rather the development of inclusive, responsive, representative political systems and legal frameworks that protect the rights of all citizens, advance the rule of law, and provide mechanisms to hold elected and appointed leaders accountable for their decisions.

To advance this ambitious long-term goal, enhanced and more collaborative US-European engagement with Arab countries on their internal political and economic challenges is essential. Currently, the United States and Europe are distracted by other priorities, disheartened by the lack of impact they have had since 2011, and discouraged by the deteriorating situation across the region. Nevertheless, it is time to reengage by developing a coherent and comprehensive transatlantic strategy for both specific countries and the region more broadly. Doing so will require the United States and the EU to think much more creatively about how they can most effectively work together. They will also need to develop a transatlantic consensus on the essential elements of that strategy, including the direction of economic change in the region, the need for political inclusion and transparency, the challenge of security cooperation, and better outreach to the Gulf states and other regional actors. This paper has provided the rationale and some initial suggestions for a basic framework for such an approach.

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