

## The US, the Mediterranean and Transatlantic Strategies (ARI)

*Ian O. Lesser*\*

**Theme**<sup>1</sup>: Cooperation in the Mediterranean is likely to be a key test for the quality of US-EU partnership over the next few years.

**Summary:** The Mediterranean holds an extraordinary concentration of issues of concern to Washington and on both sides of the Atlantic there is a keen interest in building on the 'Obama bounce' and reinvigorating transatlantic cooperation. The conditions are therefore favourable for greater attention to Mediterranean places and issues as part of American strategy in Europe and the Middle East, and as part of the transatlantic relationship. The convergence of American and European interests looking south, and the fact that both the US and Europe can act with roughly equal effect around the region, could make cooperation on security and development in the Mediterranean a key near-term test of improved transatlantic relations.

**Analysis:** The advent of the Obama Administration has spurred transatlantic debate across multiple foreign policy questions. Without question, the style of the new US Administration differs markedly from its predecessor. On substance, the new leadership inherits many of the same challenges, plus some dramatic new problems arising from the global economic crisis. The Bush years were characterised, among other things, by a shift away from a traditional, regionally-based foreign policy, towards a more transformative strategy driven by functional challenges, and especially counter-terrorism. This was often a difficult fit with European strategies framed in regional rather than global terms.

The Mediterranean holds an extraordinary concentration of issues of concern to Washington, from terrorism in North Africa to Aegean stability, from energy security to the Middle East peace process. Policy towards Turkey is also part of the picture, alongside the southern dimension of NATO strategy. Recent shifts on missile defence in Europe have arguably made the Mediterranean the centre of gravity for this key aspect of transatlantic defence policy. As Europe has come to see the Mediterranean as an area of strategic concern, driven by migration, stability and energy security issues, the US has also acquired a greater stake in the region's future. On both sides of the Atlantic there is a keen interest in building on the 'Obama bounce' and reinvigorating transatlantic cooperation. Cooperation in the Mediterranean is likely to be a key test for the quality of US-EU partnership over the next few years.

\* *Senior Transatlantic Fellow at the German Marshall Fund of the United States in Washington.*

<sup>1</sup> The opinions expressed in this paper are the author's and do not represent the views of GMF, its staff or directors.

### *Sources of American Interest*

Despite two centuries of American presence in the region, the US has never felt a need to frame an explicit Mediterranean strategy. Rather, the American approach has been driven by distinct European and Middle Eastern policies. The American interest in the Mediterranean –even if it is rarely articulated in specific terms– is driven by several elements. Washington has focused on the region as part of the European security equation ('we care because Europe cares'), as a contributor to power projection beyond the Mediterranean itself ('the route to the Gulf') and as a centre of crises and potential flashpoints ('a place where American diplomacy and security strategies are directly engaged'). All three dimensions continue to be relevant, although the balance between these sources of interest has shifted over time. During the Cold War, the European security rationale for American engagement was paramount and closely linked to the containment of Soviet power in the Middle East and elsewhere. Over the last two decades, this aspect of American interest in the Mediterranean has declined relative to interests in power projection and crisis management.

US policy has been strongly affected by the progressive 'Europeanisation' of relations with individual southern European countries. Over the last two decades, Portugal, Spain and Greece have developed a new basis for relations with the US (Italy has always been a special case, more closely tied to the European core as seen from Washington). These relationships are now firmly rooted in EU soil, to the extent that it is difficult to envision bilateral arrangements in defence or other fields that stray very far from European norms. The contours of these relationships are now based overwhelmingly on the nature of transatlantic relations as a whole. This phenomenon was clearly demonstrated during the Gulf War in 1990-91, when Spain and Greece emerged as active contributors to coalition operations in Iraq. This forward-leaning approach was made possible because there was a European consensus in support of American-led action. By contrast, the Iraq War of 2003 onwards was highly unpopular in southern Europe, and this posture was firmly within the European mainstream. Relations with Spain deteriorated markedly in the Bush years, and the Bush-Zapatero dynamic was especially troubled. But this experience was hardly unique. In short, Washington's relationships across southern Europe, once highly distinctive, have largely been subsumed within wider European and transatlantic relations. With Obama in office, the public diplomacy environment is now tremendously improved across Europe, including Spain.<sup>2</sup>

Secondly, Europe's own foreign and security policy debate has acquired an important southern dimension, driven by concerns over migration, energy security, terrorism and criminal activity. The ongoing economic crisis has sharpened the prosperity and identity-based aspects of these concerns. These features of the current European security debate are visible in Washington, and can have important if indirect effects on American policy. As a practical matter, there is little that the US can contribute to Europe's evolving immigration policy, much less the evolution of European debates over identity and the integration of migrants. At the level of intellectual debate, however, the implications of a multicultural Europe, closely bound up with Mediterranean migration, are very much part of the American policy scene.

---

<sup>2</sup> See *Transatlantic Trends 2009: Key Findings*, German Marshall Fund of the United States, Washington, 2009.

Third, the recent improvement in relations between the US and France has potentially far-reaching implications for Mediterranean partnerships. Very few Americans, even at the official and expert level, have been familiar with the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (the Barcelona Process). By contrast, the French-inspired concept of a Union for the Mediterranean (UPM) attracted a surprising degree of attention in Washington. To an extent, this reflected a growing American interest in North Africa, driven by energy security and counter-terrorism concerns. The 'Sarkozy effect' also played a major role. The presence of the UPM Secretariat in Barcelona might create new opportunities for dialogue and cooperation with Spain. In addition, the UPM's concentration on practical projects has resonated with American observers (a similar phenomenon is observable in NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue, where the American approach has favoured training, exercises and other pragmatic aspects of cooperation over political dialogue). With the French return to NATO's integrated military command, new avenues for cooperation on Mediterranean security and strategy may emerge with Paris.

Fourth, the Mediterranean is poised to become a key test for transatlantic cooperation on regional security. The Obama Administration has many competing issues on its international agenda –quite apart from serious economic and social policy challenges at home– and effective, 'low maintenance' multilateralism is likely to be the order of the day. The Mediterranean space is an ideal test for this approach, not least because this is a region where American and European capabilities are relatively balanced. In contrast to the Gulf, or South Asia, the Mediterranean is a place Europe can 'reach' and European partners are already playing a leading role in crisis management in the Balkans, Lebanon and the Red Sea. In trade, investment and economic development, Europe is a dominant actor. As NATO recasts its strategic concept, looking towards the Lisbon summit in 2010 or 2011, it is likely that many of the new concepts and contingencies under discussion will emanate from the European periphery, from the Maghreb to the Levant.

#### *Crisis Management and Future Scenarios*

As noted earlier, the US rarely thinks in terms of an explicit Mediterranean strategy. But this does not mean that Mediterranean places and issues are low on the American list of foreign and security policy priorities. Indeed, American policymakers spend a great deal of time and energy addressing crises and flashpoints around the Mediterranean basin, even if these are not portrayed as 'Mediterranean' problems. A short list of such challenges would include the Western Sahara dispute, threats to stability in Egypt, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Syria, Lebanon, Cyprus and unresolved frictions in the Balkans. If flashpoints in the Black and Red Seas are added, and perhaps even Iran and Iraq –both significant influences on the Mediterranean scene– the list becomes even more comprehensive and consequential.

A full discussion of the evolving American approach to the Israeli-Palestinian dispute is beyond the scope of this analysis. But there can be little question that the character and effectiveness of American involvement in the peace process will have significant implications for the strategic environment around the Mediterranean. US policy on this question can also interact with public opinion around the region, and can shape the course of relations in other areas. American policy towards Israel and the Palestinians is a central issue in bilateral relations across the Maghreb, with Egypt, Turkey, and to a lesser but significant extent, with southern Europe. The early engagement of the Obama Administration in the peace process and the reinforced commitment to a two state solution has set a more positive tone around the southern Mediterranean. American policy towards

---

the dispute is likely to remain a leading factor in the outlook for US cooperation with Mediterranean partners.

One very positive development over the last decade has been the rise of an apparently durable *détente* between Greece and Turkey. For decades, crisis management in the Aegean imposed extraordinary demands on American policymakers. NATO strategy and operations were hindered by the dispute. On occasion, frictions over Cyprus and the Aegean threatened to deteriorate into military conflict between Athens and Ankara, most notably over Imia-Kardak in 1996.

Today, the Aegean and Cyprus are marginal issues on the American foreign policy agenda, although the importance of the Cyprus problem as an obstacle to Turkey's EU candidacy is widely recognised. In his April 2009 speech to the Turkish Parliament, President Obama underscored the continued US support for Turkey's EU candidacy. By almost any measure, the candidacy is troubled, and characterised by mounting ambivalence on all sides. The Bush Administration was not well placed to make the case for Turkey in Europe, and an improved atmosphere in transatlantic relations generally might make the US a more credible advocate for Ankara in Europe. But continued French and German opposition to the idea of full membership for Turkey, and weak support for the idea in many other quarters, suggests that even the Obama Administration will face an uphill battle on this issue.

Turkey's EU candidacy is a long-term project, and as the candidacy has progressed it has moved into a more closely measured legal and political phase in which broad gauge American arguments about 'anchoring' Turkey to the West no longer carry the same weight in Europe. Ultimately, the core US interest is not in Turkish membership *per se* – although this will always be welcomed – but rather continued Turkish convergence with European norms and policies in various sectors, from the economy to security policy. To the extent that Turkey's troubled candidacy also impedes the movement towards closer EU-NATO defence cooperation, something Washington strongly favours, US interests will be affected. This could be especially visible in the Mediterranean, where many of the potential contingencies for new transatlantic security cooperation and crisis management are to be found.

Beyond the standing disputes and unresolved conflicts requiring Washington's attention, it is possible to imagine a series of potential, over-the-horizon crises which would be transforming for the strategic environment in the Mediterranean. Such shocks might include: the collapse of one or more regimes around the southern Mediterranean, perhaps under pressure from Islamist opposition; chaos in Gaza or the West Bank; social instability or political violence in south-eastern Europe, perhaps as a result of economic stress; or a military confrontation with Iran. Equally, it is possible to imagine a range of unexpected, positive developments, equally transforming for the region and American interests, from a comprehensive Israeli-Palestinian settlement to resolution of the Cyprus dispute. Scenarios of this kind underscore the extent to which American policy around the Mediterranean continues to be driven by issues, events and bilateral relationships rather than a comprehensive regional strategy.

#### *A Security-Driven Agenda*

Over the last decade, American international policy has been driven to a great extent by a series of functional rather than regional concerns. For the Bush Administration after September 11, counter-terrorism was at the top of the agenda, to the extent that much of America's recent foreign policy could be described as extended homeland defence. The Obama Administration appears committed to a different approach, in which counter-terrorism is one part of the strategic agenda, rather than the other way around. In a Mediterranean context, too, US policy is driven by a series of functional rather than regional concerns, including terrorism and maritime security, energy security, proliferation and missile defence. These concerns overlap with, but are not identical to, concerns in Europe.

America's interlocutors in North Africa often complain that the only way to attract the attention of policymakers in Washington is via security issues, and especially the question of terrorism –an exaggeration, perhaps, but not without a grain of truth–. Analysts debate the implications of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan for the terrorism challenge in Europe and around the Mediterranean. Substantial numbers of Maghrebis and Egyptians have reportedly fought as insurgents in Iraq and possibly Afghanistan. Security services around the region are concerned about the return of these individuals over the coming years, and where they might gather next. Recent briefings by senior American intelligence officials have cited North Africa as an emerging centre of terrorism concern. Even in the context of a refashioned and lower-key approach to counter-terrorism strategy in Washington, terrorism is likely to remain a leading functional concern for American policy around the Mediterranean, and a leading issue for cooperation in North Africa and the Levant.

The US is likely to pay closer attention to maritime security in its various dimensions, including terrorism, the smuggling of goods and people, environmental risks and maritime safety. All of these concerns will be present in the Mediterranean, and will be part of the logic of bilateral and multilateral cooperation. NATO's Operation Active Endeavour has enjoyed strong support from Washington. At the same time, the US has been working closely with partners around the southern Mediterranean to improve national capabilities for surveillance and interdiction at sea.

Energy is another facet of the evolving American interest in the Mediterranean. Here, US interests are engaged in several ways: via Europe's own stake in North African oil and gas; as a hedge against Russian energy dominance; as a partial guarantor of the physical security of energy transport around the region; through American investments in the energy sector around the Mediterranean; and as a significant importer of Algerian LNG. The proliferation of gas, oil and electric transmission lines around the Mediterranean has given rise to an increasingly important Mediterranean energy market, in which the US is a stakeholder. As energy security becomes an even more important facet of transatlantic relations, there is likely to be a convergence of American and European perspectives. To date, the American discourse on energy security has focused largely on Persian Gulf oil, whereas Europe has focused on Eurasian gas. At some point, this gap will need to be closed.

Proliferation and missile defence questions continue to dominate American strategic discussions. Directly, or indirectly, the Mediterranean will continue to be part of this equation as seen from Washington. Libya is an obvious example, where the divestiture of the country's rudimentary nuclear (and not so rudimentary missile) programme opened

the way for normalisation of relations with Washington. The prospect of a nuclear-armed Iran could reshape the strategic environment in many ways, with direct and indirect implication for US policy. Turkey, Israel, Egypt and southern Europe are already exposed to Iran's increasingly sophisticated missile capability. A nuclear-armed, even a near-nuclear Iran would exert a formidable influence on security perceptions and balances across a wide area, and not simply around the Gulf. The prospect of multiple, new nuclear-armed states around or near the Mediterranean would be transforming and could radically alter the character of American security commitments in Europe and around the Mediterranean.

The recent decision by the Obama Administration to cancel planned missile defence installations in Poland and the Czech Republic in favour a mobile, maritime approach will make the Mediterranean the centre of gravity for US and NATO ballistic missile defence architecture. This decision could turn out to have far reaching consequences for regional security, the role of southern European allies, and the evolution of the transatlantic agenda. The new approach will require far closer coordination with southern European partners, including Turkey. It will also transfer key debates over defence and strategic reassurance from the centre and east of Europe to the south.

#### *Policy Towards North Africa*

Although North Africa was among the first focal points for American diplomacy and military intervention, dating to the early days of the republic, America's modern engagement with the region has been overshadowed by more pressing demands and higher-profile relationships elsewhere in the Middle East. Washington has long had a close bilateral relationship with Morocco, reinforced by the Kingdom's moderate stance on Arab-Israeli issues and, most recently, by a free trade agreement. Elsewhere in the region, American policy has faced greater challenges. Algeria has been keen to develop closer ties to Washington as a counter-balance to Paris and Brussels, and there has been substantial bilateral cooperation in the energy sector, and to a lesser extent, on security. Nonetheless, bilateral ties have not fully recovered from Algeria's decade of violence, a tradition of sovereignty consciousness and continued attachment to concepts of non-alignment in Algiers. With Libya, relations have literally started with a blank page following the full re-establishment of relations in late 2008. The Obama Administration is likely to continue the process of normalisation with Tripoli, but residual wariness in the US Congress, coupled with the Libyan leader's mercurial behaviour, set limits to what is possible.

Overall, American interest in the Maghreb has increased in recent years, partly driven by counter-terrorism and energy interests. European attention to the region has played a role, as noted earlier. But some degree of American interest has also been fuelled by the search for new approaches and new geometries in relations with the Arab and Muslim worlds, an indirect strategy aimed at improving the atmosphere without necessarily resolving core disputes in the Gulf and the Levant. It is most unlikely that the US will displace European influence in North Africa. There are strong, structural reasons for Europe's predominant position in the region, and there is no American interest in seeking a political or commercial competition in Europe's backyard. On the contrary, American policymakers are likely to see the Maghreb, like the Balkans, as an area where Washington need not take a leading role.

One theme that has become central to the American debate has also preoccupied European policymakers and observers: the remarkably underdeveloped nature of south-

south cooperation. This has been neatly summarised in terms of the 'costs of a non-Maghreb'.<sup>3</sup> The closed border between Morocco and Algeria is emblematic of this problem, alongside the persistence of the Western Sahara dispute (a frozen conflict in the desert) and the remarkably low volume of intra-regional trade and investment. To the extent that current American policy towards North Africa has a guiding theme, it is clearly the desire to promote greater economic integration and political cooperation along south-south lines. The US desire to encourage regional integration is fully compatible with the thrust of recent Euro-Mediterranean policy, and is integral to the projects envisioned within the UPM.

## **Conclusion**

### *Outlook for a Transatlantic Approach*

Even with the emergence of a new American approach in many areas of consequence for the region, the prospects for a deliberate Mediterranean policy emanating from Washington are remote. The tradition of viewing Europe and the Middle East as distinct geopolitical spaces is too well entrenched, and there is little in the way of a Mediterranean consciousness to animate a trans-regional approach of this kind. In all likelihood, the US will continue to stand apart from the more explicit Mediterranean policies and partnerships pursued across the Atlantic.

Nonetheless, conditions are favourable for greater attention to Mediterranean places and issues as part of American strategy in Europe and the Middle East, and as part of the transatlantic relationship. Indeed, the convergence of American and European interests looking south, and the fact that both the US and Europe can act with roughly equal effect around the region, could make cooperation on security and development in the Mediterranean a key near-term test of improved transatlantic relations. The changed relationships with France and Spain, a shared interest in south-south integration, the recasting of missile defence architecture southward and a strategic scene that is already highly multi-polar, all suggest that the Mediterranean could be a leading theatre for new forms of US-EU cooperation in the coming years.

*Ian Lesser*

*Senior Transatlantic Fellow at the German Marshall Fund of the United States in Washington*

---

<sup>3</sup> See Gary Clyde Hufbauer & Claire Brunel (Eds.) (2008), *Maghreb Regional and Global Integration: A Dream to be Fulfilled*, Peterson Institute for International Economics, Washington.