

# **Mediterranean Academy of Diplomatic Studies (MEDAC)**

**The United States And The Mediterranean:  
A New Strategic Context**

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# THE UNITED STATES and THE MEDITERRANEAN: A NEW STRATEGIC CONTEXT

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### *Old Presence, Diffuse Strategy*

The United States has been a Mediterranean power for over 200 years, but American strategy toward the region remains fragmented and diffuse. Traditionally, the US approach has been divided, intellectually and bureaucratically, along rigid geographic lines: Europe, including Turkey on the one hand, and the Middle East/North Africa on the other. With the important exception of wider-ranging military commands, including EUCOM and the Sixth Fleet, American foreign and security policy lack the trans-regional, north-south aspect that has been a key feature of European strategy toward the region in recent decades.

How durable is this fragmented approach, and does a new Administration in Washington offer an opportunity for change? This analysis argues that the US is unlikely to develop a specific Mediterranean policy any time soon. But a changing strategic environment suggests that Mediterranean issues and Mediterranean activities are likely to become more central to transatlantic cooperation over the next few years. From an American perspective, there will be important new opportunities for cooperation on both sides of the Mediterranean, and on both sides of the Atlantic.

### *The Mediterranean as a Euro-Atlantic Interest*

In recent decades, the US has had multiple sources of interest in the Mediterranean. Washington has focused on the region as part of the European security equation (“we care because Europe cares”), as an ante-room to areas of strategic interest beyond the Mediterranean basin (“the route to the Gulf”), and as a center of crises

and potential flashpoints (“a place where American diplomacy and security strategies are directly engaged”). All three aspects continue to be relevant, although the balance among 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. But European concerns continue to influence American thinking about the region, and cooperation with southern European partners continues to be an integral part of the US approach.

Several trends are worth noting in relation to the European dimension of American strategy in the Mediterranean. First, US policy has been strongly affected by the progressive “Europeanization” 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 defense or other fields that stray very far from European norms. With some exceptions, the distinctive and often contentious character of American relations with southern European partners has largely disappeared. 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 first Gulf War in 1990-1991, 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 onward was a “tough sell” 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.

Second, 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 noted by 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 migration policies, much less the evolution of European debates over identity and the integration of migrants. At the level of intellectual debate and lessons from North American experience, there is more scope for collaboration. Simple analogies between the Mediterranean and the Rio Grande are not very useful. But the immense prosperity gaps between north and south in each hemisphere (much greater in the case of the Mediterranean) give rise to some similar challenges. The utility of American and European models of integration and border management can be debated, and policymakers can benefit from a discussion of lessons learned.

Third, the recent improvement in relations between the US and France has potentially significant implications for American thinking about the Mediterranean and Mediterranean partnerships. Very few Americans, even at the official and expert level, have been familiar with the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (the Barcelona Process). In the early years of the initiative, Washington was focused on other challenges in the European space, above all, NATO and EU

enlargement eastward. In the south, American policy was firmly fixed on Arab-Israeli diplomacy. European policy toward the Mediterranean was not on the agenda for Clinton administration, with the narrow exception of the crisis in Algeria. At the same time, proponents of the Barcelona Process in Europe were not eager to bring in extra-regional actors, even as observers. NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue attracted more American attention, but was hardly a leading policy interest for the Clinton or Bush administrations.<sup>1</sup>

By contrast, from the start, the French-led notion of a Union for the Mediterranean 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 role. But in more substantive terms, the US interest flows from a sense that closer relations with France could open up new areas for cooperation on security and development, with the Mediterranean as an obvious case. In addition, the UPM's concentration on themes for practical cooperation has resonated with American observers (a similar phenomenon is observable in NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue, where the American approach has favored training, exercises, and other pragmatic aspects of cooperation over political dialogue). If France returns to NATO's integrated military command, this could open up further avenues for cooperation on Mediterranean security and strategy, and would build on a long history of cooperation between the US Sixth Fleet and French forces.

Fourth, the Mediterranean is poised to become a leading test for closer transatlantic cooperation on regional security. The

<sup>1</sup> For a good survey of recent developments in Europe's Mediterranean policy, see *The Euro-Mediterranean Dialogue: Prospects for an Area of Prosperity and Security* (Rome: Foundation for European Progressive Studies, 2009); and Hardy Ostry and Gerrit F. Schломach, eds., *Perspectives of European Foreign and Security Policy in the Mediterranean* (Amman: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2006).

Obama administration has many competing issues on its foreign policy agenda – quite apart from overwhelming economic challenges at home – and effective 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 in which transatlantic 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. Europe’s engagement looking south is increasingly noticed and understood in Washington, and it is recognized that a relevant American involvement in European security should accommodate this reality. As NATO seeks to revamp its strategic concept, looking toward the Lisbon summit in 2010, it is likely that many of the new concepts and contingencies under discussion will emanate from challenges on the European periphery, from the Maghreb to the Levant. (and the “wider Mediterranean,” including the Red Sea and the Black Sea).

### **Power Projection Requirements**

In addition to seeing the Mediterranean as part of the European security picture, the US has a well-established tradition of engagement in and around the Mediterranean as a vehicle for power projection to critical areas further afield. The importance of the logistical link to the Gulf is the most obvious example. In 1990-91, and again in 2003, the vast bulk of forces and material sent to support operations in Iraq went through or over the Mediterranean. In the first Gulf War, this dependence was reportedly around 90 percent. For the Iraq War, a figure of around 75 percent is often mentioned for transits through Turkey alone. As Russian and Central Asian routes for air

transport are increasingly constrained, the Mediterranean contribution to logistics for Afghanistan is also likely to grow. Turkey's Incirlik airbase, near Adana, has long been a crucial node in American lines of communication for Iraq and Afghanistan (Turkey has allowed the US extensive access to Turkish ports and airfields for logistical purposes, but not as a base for combat operations). But Incirlik is at one end of a line that stretches from the US east coast to Portuguese bases in the Azores, to airfields in Spain, Germany, Italy and Greece (Souda Bay on Crete). Taken together, southern Europe continues to be an essential security partner for the US for power projection in the Middle East and Eurasia.

Similarly, the Georgia crisis underscored the importance of the eastern Mediterranean and the Turkish straits for crisis management and power projection into the Black Sea. Passage through the straits is strictly controlled by the provisions of the Montreux Convention, and despite periodic Turkish suspicions, successive American administrations have made clear that the US has no interest in questioning Turkey's right to regulate traffic into and out of the Black Sea. That said, the US would like to see an expanded role for NATO in Black Sea security; something neither Russia nor Turkey favor. Indeed, Turkish opposition has been central to preventing the extension of NATO's Operation Active Endeavour from the Mediterranean to the Black Sea. To the extent that relations between the US and Russia become more competitive and crisis prone, the issue of American cooperation with Turkey (as well as Bulgaria and Romania) for power projection purposes east of the Bosphorus could become more critical, and contentious.

Looking south, access to the Suez Canal remains important for the projection of US naval power to the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean and the Gulf. It is also a critical contribution to European freedom of action

in support of American security interests. As an example, it would be difficult or impossible for smaller European states to contribute to anti-piracy and other operations in the Red Sea without access to the canal. The ability to shift forces rapidly between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean has gone hand in hand with changes to the US posture in the region over the last decade, including an end to the practice of keeping a carrier battle group in the Mediterranean on a permanent basis. The risk of losing relatively unfettered access to the Suez Canal is one significant reason, among many, for the continued American stake in Egyptian stability.

For decades, Northern and Sub-Saharan Africa were part of the EUCOM area of responsibility, and closely tied to the American security presence in Europe. Since 2007, this area has been the responsibility of AFRICOM, although the command remains based in Germany. The future of AFRICOM's basing and defense cooperation arrangements to the south of the Mediterranean remains an open question. Partners in the Maghreb, the Sahel, and sub-Saharan Africa have been keen to cooperate on specific counter-terrorism projects. But the creation of a wider and higher-profile system of security cooperation remains elusive, and African states have been unenthusiastic about hosting a regional headquarters for AFRICOM. Under these conditions, the Mediterranean is set to remain a bridge for engagement in North Africa and points south. Malta and Morocco are well placed to play a role in this regard. Even Libya, with its restored relationship to the US and declared African ambitions, could eventually emerge as an important partner for American power projection in Africa.

### *Mediterranean Crisis Management*

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 Palestinian-Israeli 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 toward 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 toward 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. In the early stages of the Bosnian crisis, many American strategists feared that conflict in the Balkans could draw in Greece and Turkey and lead to a wider conflagration in the eastern Mediterranean. In the event, the fear of a Greek-Turkish clash in the Balkans proved unfounded (in fact, both countries opted for a non-confrontational, multilateral approach). But crisis management between Greece and Turkey was a lasting pre-occupation in the Mediterranean for successive American administrations.

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 recognized. If the US chooses to become more heavily involved in Cyprus diplomacy, it will do so in order to resolve a political rather than a security challenge. Moreover, in the wake of Cypriot accession, American policymakers have come to see the Cyprus dispute essentially as a problem for Europe and Turkey to resolve.

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 southeastern 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.

### *The Rise of Functional Concerns*

Over the last decade, American international policy has been driven to a great extent by a series of functional interests. For the Bush Administration after September 11<sup>th</sup>, 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 defense. 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 increasingly driven by a series of functional rather than regional concerns, including terrorism and maritime security, energy and environmental security, and nuclear and missile proliferation. These concerns overlap with, but are not identical to concerns in Europe, where migration is also high on the list.

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. American strategists are now more attuned to the evolution and behavior of extremist networks across North Africa, including the transformation of Algeria's Salafist group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) into the self-styled Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. At the same time, terrorist networks with a Maghrebi connection have become a more prominent risk in Europe, and an increasing focus of transatlantic counter-terrorism cooperation. 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 center 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.

In a related fashion, 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. As the new American administration reshapes the US approach to climate policy, the Mediterranean could emerge as a leading area for practical cooperation with European and North African partners, especially on solar power and the urban environment.<sup>2</sup>

Energy security is another facet of the new 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

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<sup>2</sup> See Pamela Lesser, "Greening the Mediterranean: Europe's Environmental Policy Toward Mediterranean Neighbors," *Mediterranean Quarterly*, Vol. 20, No.2, Spring 2009, pp. 26-38.



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 US is already actively involved in energy commerce with Algeria and Libya, and the US has been among the leading supporters of successive Turkish pipeline projects, including Baku-Tiblisi-Ceyhan. 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. A more concerted perspective and strategy could also have a more prominent Mediterranean component.

Proliferation and nonproliferation policy continue to dominate the American strategic debate. 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) program opened the way for normalization of relations with Washington. Libya and Syria have been leading recipients of North Korean nuclear and missile technology, and at least one major interdiction of North Korean missile components at sea has taken place in the Mediterranean. As the US seeks to make such transfers more transparent and open to sanction by the international community, the Mediterranean will be a critical area of focus.

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. Even short of this, the conventional responses to a "nuclearizing" Iran could trigger local arms races and alter sub-regional balances, especially in the eastern Mediterranean.

## Old and New Actors

Since the end of the Roman Empire, the Mediterranean has never really had a “uni-polar moment.” Today’s Mediterranean is truly multi-polar, with Europe and the US each playing distinctive roles, and with key regional actors such as Egypt and Turkey, deploying considerable influence. At the same, new external actors are appearing on the Mediterranean scene, and American policy will need to take account of this. Russia – an old actor – has returned to the region after almost a twenty year absence. Russia is now present as an investor, especially but not exclusively in the energy sector, through tourism, as a trading partner, and as a supplier of military hardware. Algeria has made substantial purchases of Russian fighter aircraft and other items (spurring Morocco to purchase American F-16s). Syria, and Libya are once again leading purchasers of Russian defense systems. In the fall of 2007, the Russian navy returned to the Mediterranean to exercise in strength for the first time since the break-up of the Soviet Union. Russia has reportedly negotiated new port agreements with Libya and Syria. Thus far, the renewed Russian involvement in the political, economic and security life of the Mediterranean has had only modest geopolitical significance. But it could acquire deeper meaning if relations between Russia and the West remain troubled and perhaps take a more directly competitive turn. A return to Cold War-style competition, even if at far lower levels, might have a center of gravity in the south, including the Mediterranean and the Black Sea – areas at the margins of the first Cold War.

China is emerging as an economic actor of some importance around the Mediterranean, and a potentially significant political and security player. The rapid expansion of Chinese investment in sub-Saharan Africa has drawn attention from the smaller but still significant growth in Chinese investment in North Africa. These investments

extend beyond the energy sector and include substantial stakes in the Tunisian textile industry and port facilities around the Mediterranean. Chinese construction companies and retail businesses are now a highly visible part of the Algerian economy. China has long been a partner in Algeria's nuclear program, and has been a defense-industrial partner with states as diverse as Syria, Egypt and Israel. Looking further ahead, India, already a partner in defense cooperation with Israel, could develop a broader interest in Mediterranean commerce and security. India is active in anti-piracy operations in the Indian Ocean, and these operations make a direct contribution to the security of the Suez route, of critical importance to the Egyptian economy. From an American perspective, the net effect of this expanding roster of Mediterranean actors is to link the region ever more closely to global foreign policy interests and trends, both cooperative and competitive.

### **Engaging 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. Since the end of the Second World War, the Gulf and the Levant have been the two dominant poles in US policy around the region. Bureaucratically and intellectually, North Africa has been treated as a secondary area of interest.

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. Morocco has also been one of the first recipients of Millennium Challenge funding for innovative development projects. 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. All of this, together with a difficult climate for trade and investment outside the energy sector has made Algeria a promising but difficult partner for the US. With Libya, relations have literally started with a blank page following the full reestablishment of relations in late 2008. The Obama administration is likely to continue the process of normalization with Tripoli, but residual wariness in the US Congress, coupled with Libya's mercurial foreign policy behavior, 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.<sup>3</sup> European attention to the region has played a role, as noted earlier. But some degree of American interest has also been fueled 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

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, *Why the Maghreb Matters: Threats, Opportunities and Options for Effective American Engagement in North Africa* (Washington: Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies and the Potomac Institute, 2009). Globalization and an influx of foreign direct investment have also changed American perceptions of the region. "The Med's Moment Comes," *The Economist*, July 12, 2008, p.78.

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 summarized in terms of the “costs of a non-Maghreb.”<sup>4</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 toward North Africa has a guiding theme, it is clearly the desire to promote greater economic integration and political cooperation along south-south lines. This was the essential thrust of the “Eizenstat Initiative” during the Clinton Administration, and this idea has been taken up in various ways through the Middle East Partnership Initiative in the Bush Administration, and ongoing development projects. 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 Union for the Mediterranean.

### Turkey, the US and Europe

Traditionally, the US has seen Turkey through a NATO Europe lens. In recent years, this core perception has been augmented with closer attention to the course of Turkey-EU relations, and awareness of Turkey’s growing role in the Middle East. Washington may not define Turkey as a “Mediterranean” partner, but in a practical sense, Turkey is very much part of the Mediterranean strategic equation when seen from across the Atlantic.

US-Turkish relations have been characterized by recurrent

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4 See Gary Clyde Hufbauer and Claire Brunel, eds., *Maghreb Regional and Global Integration: A Dream to be Fulfilled* (Washington: Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2008).

tensions alongside strategic cooperation. Many Turks describe the Clinton years as a lost golden age in bilateral relations, despite significant differences in that period over northern Iraq, Cyprus, the Aegean, human rights and other issues. But the period since 2003 has, by any measure, been one of extraordinary suspicion and tension in relations between Washington and Ankara. The deterioration of Turkish public attitudes toward the US in recent years has been among the most dramatic, globally, and especially striking in a NATO context.<sup>5</sup> Differences over Iraq policy, and especially the Kurdish issue, have been at the heart of bilateral tensions, reinforced by rising Turkish nationalism and suspicion about American intentions around the Black Sea and the Gulf. This strained climate has been relieved, to an extent, by improved bilateral cooperation against the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party), including intelligence sharing and American pressure on the Kurdish regional government to constrain insurgent activities from bases in northern Iraq.

In April 2009, President Obama made a very well received visit to Turkey, only his second bilateral visit since taking office. The early timing of the visit was significant. So, too, was the fact that the visit came as part of a European rather than a Middle Eastern tour. The change of Administration in Washington has fostered a considerable improvement in the style of Turkish-American relations, although observers on both sides acknowledge the need for greatly improved cooperation on specific policy issues. On Iraq, the US will look to Turkey for continued access to Incirlik airbase and broader Turkish contributions to security and stability as the US disengages from the country. On Iran, Turkey could be a leading beneficiary of a successful

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5 See *Transatlantic Trends: Key Findings 2008* (Washington: German Marshall Fund of the United States, 2008). The Pew Global Attitudes Survey and other polls reveal similar negative attitudes toward the US, and particularly towards US leadership in international affairs.

strategic dialogue between Washington and Tehran. Turkey has no interest in seeing the rise of a new nuclear-armed power on its borders, but it also has a stake in avoiding new military confrontations in its neighborhood. From an American perspective, Turkey's improved ties to Iran (and Syria) could prove useful, but many in Washington also worry about the longer-term implications of growing Turkish affinity with Middle Eastern neighbors. Ankara's willingness to deliver tough messages to Iran on the nuclear issue could be an important test for bilateral relations, whatever the leadership in Tehran.

Similarly, Turkey's expanded economic and political relationship with Russia could prove a source of tension with the US and NATO if relations between Moscow and the West remain competitive. Russia is a leading energy and commercial partner for Turkey, and Ankara shares the Russian sensitivity to sovereignty issues around the Black Sea. That said, modern Turkey inherits a long history of unease about Russian power, and few Turks view ties with Moscow and Eurasia as a viable strategic alternative to the US and NATO.

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 characterized 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 toward closer EU-NATO defense cooperation, something Washington strongly favors, 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.

### *The Mediterranean and Relations with the Muslim World*

The Obama Administration confronts a substantial public diplomacy challenge in the wake of the Iraq war, and the controversial approach of the Bush administration to global counter-terrorism. This challenge is about specific policies, but after almost a decade of deteriorating attitudes toward the US, it is also about the perception of American power. The challenge is most acute in relations with the Muslim world, and the new administration has moved rapidly to change the style of American foreign policy. In this context, it is significant that the Administration chose Egypt for President Obama’s much anticipated first address to the Muslim world. To be sure, the visit to Egypt was not cast in a Mediterranean frame. But taken together with the visit to Turkey just a few weeks earlier, the new President has clearly made a mark on the Mediterranean scene. More importantly, the Mediterranean, including southern Europe, has been among the areas most directly affected by the troubled course of Muslim-Western relations in recent years. To the extent that these early public diplomacy

successes augur for an improved discourse between civilizations, the Mediterranean region will be among the leading beneficiaries.

### *Toward an American Mediterranean Strategy?*

Does all of this add up to a new American approach to the region, and perhaps the development of an explicit Mediterranean strategy? Even with a new approach to policy 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, even the “broader” 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 favorable 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 relationship with France, an interest in promoting south-south integration, multiple security challenges, shared stakes in the future of Turkey, and a strategic scene that is already highly multi-polar, all suggest that the Mediterranean could be a leading theater for a more multilateral American foreign policy over the next decade.



# About the author

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A frequent commentator for international media, he has written extensively on international security issues. His books and policy reports include *Beyond Suspicion: Rethinking US-Turkish Relations* (2008); *Security and Strategy in the Eastern Mediterranean* (2006); *Global Trends, Regional Consequences: Wider Strategic Influences on the Black Sea* (2008); *Countering the New Terrorism* (1999); and *A Sense of Siege: The Geopolitics of Islam and the West* (with Graham Fuller, 1995). Dr. Lesser was educated at the University of Pennsylvania, the London School of Economics, and the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, and received his D. Phil from Oxford University. He is a senior advisor to the Lusio-American

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# About MEDAC



**The Mediterranean Academy of Diplomatic Studies (MEDAC)** is an institution of higher learning offering advanced degrees in diplomacy with a focus on Mediterranean issues. The programme consists of courses in International Law, International Economics, International Relations, Diplomatic History and the practice of diplomacy.

MEDAC was established in 1990 pursuant to an agreement between the governments of Malta and Switzerland. The Geneva Graduate Institute of International Studies (HEI) was among its first foreign partners.

With Malta's membership in the European Union and with the financial support of the Arab League MEDAC, more than ever, is emphasizing the Euro-Mediterranean dimension by building bridges between Europe, North Africa and the Middle East. MEDAC is a member of the European Diplomatic Training Initiative (EDTI), a group of EU diplomatic academies training EU personnel. Our institution is also part of the Advisory Board of the journal *Europe's World*. MEDAC has established close strategic relationships with a large number of prestigious international diplomatic institutions including the Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, the Institute for Diplomatic Studies in Cairo, Centre for European Integration Studies (ZEI) of the University in Bonn, Germany as well as Wilton Park – UK, Spanish Diplomatic School, Madrid, Spain, and Department of Mediterranean Studies, University of the Aegean, Rhodes, Greece.

## Academy Courses

- Master of Arts in Diplomatic Studies (M.A.)
- Master of Diplomacy (M. Dip.)
- **NEW** Joint M.A. with George Mason University (Virginia, USA) on Conflict Resolution and Mediterranean Security
- Diploma in Diplomacy (DDS)

The programme of Master of Diplomacy (M.Dip.) course is designed for junior diplomats with some field experience. They are instructed in the same core disciplines as the M.A. students ( Diplomatic History, International Relations, International Economics, International Law as well as selected lectures in diplomacy) but with a special emphasis on diplomatic practice, languages, public speaking and on-line skills.

The course covers two semesters, from October to June, and includes field trips to Switzerland and to Germany. (See details of all courses on our website: [www.um.edu.mt/medac](http://www.um.edu.mt/medac) )



