



PRESS RELEASE

THE GREAT RIVALRY III SECURITY AND DEFENCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The Euro-Gulf Information Centre (EGIC), the Center for American Studies (CAS) and the NATO Defence College (NDC) hosted — on 16 April 2018 — a conference to discuss regional challenges in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)—emphasising recent developments in Syria's 7 year old civil war.

The session was opened by CAS Director, **Paolo Messa**, who underlined the importance of a global solution to face the problems that linking war in Syria to other regional and trans-regional crises.

The keynote speech was delivered by Col. **Filippo Bonsignore**, Director of the Middle East Faculty at NDC, identified NATO's response in a region which is changing in terms of the nature of military challenges. NATO's Istanbul Cooperation Initiative — and the Alliance's training mission in Iraq — aimed to empower local forces to defeat Daesh a point that Bonsignore held up as a near-perfect sample of NATO's new operational commitments. Bonsignore also noted that the Middle East is increasingly emerging as an important focal point due to the military power concentrated in the region which is a reflection of: 1. increased military spending of the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), 2. Russia's heavy military involvement in Syria and 3. According to the Military Balance report China has built in the last four years new naval capabilities equal to the size of the entire French Navy. China is setting its first overseas military base in Djibouti and will be certainly a future key player in the region.

Bonsignore provided a deep-read of the macro-issues associated to great-power competition.

Following the keynote address, the panel was formed to provide further explorations of the micro-macro dynamics unfolding in the shadow of the Great Rivalry.

The [panel](#) consisted of:

David Des Roches—who explained how the conflict in Syria highlights three strands in US foreign policy: isolationism, realism and idealism. In context, Des Roche noted that during the Trump's election campaign an isolationist doctrine foreseeing the end of US commitments in the Middle East was pronounced. But, the other strands prevent its implementation. Consider that the realist approach in the State Department and the Department of Defence ensures a US military presence in North-East Syria and in Iraq even after the apparent defeat of Daesh while the recent military response against the use of chemical weapons in Syria is clearly based on ideals such as the universal protection of human rights.

Gumer Isaev—argued that the strategic retrenchment of the US opened space for a more robust Russian involvement in Syria. Moscow feared a Libya-style Western intervention against Syria's Assad—Russia's only ally in the region. This, together with Russia's interest in preserving

its naval base (Tartus), provided the conditions for Moscow's largest foreign military intervention since the 1979-1989 Afghan war. And, despite the temporary tactical alliance between Russia and Iran to support the Assad regime, Isaev suggested that Moscow and Tehran will soon be competing to expand their influence in Damascus. Increased economic cooperation between Russia and Saudi Arabia — Iran's main regional adversary — is expected to develop as the Russian and Iranian regional objectives become incompatible.

Vincenzo Amendola—noted that the Middle East connects the foreign policies of major global players such as the EU, China, Russia and the US and Italy contributes. He cited the destruction of the chemical weapons handed over by Syria in the southern port of Gioia Tauro. The MENA region is vitally important for Italy's economy as it accounts for more than 30% of the total export of national products. In order to promote peace, Italy pushes for a stronger EU involvement and for the establishment of a multilateral security architecture in which all rivals should be engaged in; from Israel to Iran, from the United States to Russia, including Turkey and the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council GCC.

David Campbell Bannerman—confronted the problem of Iran and unveiled Tehran's efforts to ignite Shia-Sunni tensions across the Middle East and Tehran's nefarious impact on European and US efforts to defeat Daesh and stabilise Iraq. The European parliamentarian suggested a re-negotiation of the nuclear deal with Iran to pressure the Ayatollah's regime to stop interfering in other countries in the region.

Ashraf Kishk—argued that the signing of a defence agreement between NATO and the countries of the GCC would send a strong message to Iran and Russia as well as enhancing cooperation in Yemen and Iraq. The main obstacle to such development is the stall in further integration among GCC members. Further integration is key to reduce the existing gaps between NATO's possible commitments and the security needs of the GCC's.

Moderation was conducted by **Cinzia Bianco**.

This conference was concluded by **Mitchell Belfer** who suggested that Europe and the US support those forces in the Middle East that were trying to pave the way forward such as the reforms carried out by Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman and the tolerance embedded in civil society understood as the Bahrain Model. Belfer was cautiously optimistic about preparing for the coming peace.

The full transcript, galleries and additional information will be made public at the soonest possible opportunity. Visit us at www.egic.info.