

COUNCIL OF COUNCILS

An Initiative of the Council on Foreign Relations



INSIGHTS FROM A COUNCIL OF COUNCILS WORKSHOP

Council of Councils Eighth Regional Conference

October 4–6, 2015, Istanbul, Turkey

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*In October 2015 Global Relations Forum, in collaboration with the Council on Foreign Relations, held the eighth regional conference of the Council of Councils. The conference was made possible by the support of the Robina Foundation and a few distinguished GRF members. The views described here are those of workshop participants only. **The Council on Foreign Relations takes no institutional positions on policy issues and has no affiliation with the U.S. government.** In addition, the suggested policy prescriptions are the views of individual participants and do not necessarily represent a consensus of the attending members.*

CONFERENCE TAKEWAYS

- As the world grapples with the ongoing refugee crisis in Europe and confronts new security threats, solutions to transnational challenges increasingly call for international cooperation and burden sharing. International institutions have struggled to keep pace, although there are a number of opportunities on the horizon for a more robust role for multilateral action.
- The traditional domains of sovereign states, such as migration and energy, would benefit from a greater degree of global governance. To maintain their legitimacy and increase participation, however, global institutions need to adapt to more accurately reflect current global dynamics and include emerging powers.
- Policymakers need to strengthen their capacity to handle regional issues. The challenge is to minimize redundant initiatives among multiple regional and international institutions while allowing them to complement each other in efficiently resolving crises and devising longer-term solutions.
- Many of today's challenges are protracted and further complicated by geopolitical tensions between the West and Russia, as well as the growing influence of extremist groups. Officials should seek to empower global institutions to better provide for those caught in conflict while remaining committed to durable political solutions.

INTRODUCTION

In a year characterized by intensified great power rivalry and an expanding global migration crisis, global governance is facing a number of interlinked challenges. The world is grappling with the worst refugee crisis in over sixty years, even as it confronts new security threats, ranging from the self-proclaimed Islamic State to climate change. International institutions have struggled to keep pace, although there are a number of opportunities on the horizon for a more robust role for multilateral action. In this context, delegates from twenty-one countries gathered for the Council of Councils Eighth Regional Conference in Istanbul, Turkey, on October 4–6, 2015. The conference was hosted by Global Relations Forum. What follows is a summary of the discussion, which was conducted on a not-for-attribution basis.

The first session addressed the ongoing refugee crisis and humanitarian tragedy that has spread from Syria into Turkey and its neighbors, and on toward Europe. The aim was to assess how international cooperation could be reinforced to respond more effectively and humanely to uncontrolled flows of refugees and migrants. Subsequent sessions addressed the pressing issues of instability in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), the evolving conflict in Ukraine, and Europe's prospects as an effective global actor. The second day analyzed prospects for redesigning global energy governance and international climate cooperation beyond the upcoming Paris summit.

REINFORCING INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION ON REFUGEES AND MIGRATION

The world is currently experiencing the worst refugee crisis since World War II and policymakers are struggling to determine the regional and global actions required to improve the current system of humanitarian response. Several participants stated that the European Union (EU) should have predicted and responded more quickly to the crisis, particularly because the buffer states had reached their capacity to absorb refugees, even as the conflict in Syria showed no signs of abating. Other participants disagreed, arguing that the EU could not have foreseen this tragedy; indeed, most refugees had expected to return to Syria. Still others noted that the EU response was hampered by the bloc's internal troubles, as well as by preoccupation with the Ukraine crisis. Many participants agreed that the EU's lack of a coherent policy for addressing the refugee crisis—particularly a unified approach to processing refugees and adjudicating asylum requests—had caused friction among EU member states and jeopardized the union's credibility as a global actor. With eighteen million people left in Syria, and millions still in refugee camps outside that country, the refugee crisis shows no signs of abating, even as it contributes to a “lost generation” of Syrians.

Many agreed that the EU's lack of a coherent policy for addressing the refugee crisis had caused friction among EU member states and jeopardized the union's credibility.

One participant suggested that the EU could absorb 5 to 10 percent of asylum seekers without enduring negative socioeconomic consequences of the sort Syria's neighbors have experienced. Were they to overcome the fear of the "Islamization of Europe," European countries might well benefit economically from a generous refugee policy, since many asylum seekers are young, educated people capable of contributing immediately to national workforces. Given their ability to develop and retain additional skills, young refugees might also eventually return home to help rebuild Syria after the current conflict. At the same time, participants agreed that the EU was not exclusively responsible for addressing the refugee crisis. All capable states should contribute, including the Gulf states, whose efforts have not yet matched the countries' potential.

One dilemma the European refugee crisis has highlighted is an increased blurring of the categories "refugee" and "economic migrant." Such ambiguity may well increase in the future, as the world grapples with an entirely new category of individuals displaced by global warming, or "climate refugees." Participants acknowledged that the situation in the Middle East and Europe was only one piece of a global humanitarian crisis, characterized by protracted emergencies and the need to sustain displaced persons for years (as in many African countries), or even decades (as in the case of Palestinian refugees). In their efforts to assist unprecedented numbers of refugees and internally displaced persons, the United Nations (UN) and other humanitarian actors are being stretched to the breaking point, particularly as financial support has proven woefully inadequate. Immediate priorities include more coherent and coordinated EU and international efforts to manage refugees and uncontrolled migration; more effective and equitable divisions of labor and burden sharing, in Europe and elsewhere; and adequate and predictable funding for UN agencies tasked with responding to humanitarian emergencies.

Policy Prescriptions

- Officials should be as precise as possible in distinguishing between "refugees"—those who flee conflict or prosecution and have special status under international law—and "migrants"—those who choose to leave their countries for better living conditions.
- International dialogue should focus on devising regional and global action plans for dealing with the crisis and sharing the burden in a fair and effective way, as well as developing and implementing common plans for screening asylum applicants. Interregional cooperation should also be improved.
- Officials should put greater effort into addressing the root cause of the problem: the conflict in Syria. In addition to diplomatic efforts along the lines of the Geneva process, Western governments should be prepared to deploy funds and expertise, conflict resolution mechanisms, and reconciliation committees to achieve lasting peace and stability.
- The Group of Twenty (G20) should prioritize the issue of climate refugees and formulate a plan to relocate the most vulnerable populations.
- The UN High Commissioner for Refugees, the International Organization for Migration, and other relevant humanitarian and development agencies should be bolstered with increased funds and a mandate enabling them to exercise greater leadership.

THE FUTURE OF THE MENA REGION AND GLOBAL SECURITY

To shed light on the uncertainty of the MENA region's future, conference participants first evaluated the relevance of the MENA concept while analyzing the region. Many agreed that thinking of the region as a monolithic entity is unhelpful for analysis or policymaking.

Stressing that countries of the region have different contexts and development prospects, participants noted factors such as increasing urbanization, rates of literacy, and Internet access as reasons to be optimistic about the region's future. The relative stability in Tunisia and Algeria, Iraq's work on countering corruption, Libya's abundant oil resources compared to its small population, and the prosperity of the Gulf states were put forth as positive indicators. Other participants, however, saw no room for optimism about the Arab world, noting manifest evidence of destabilization: Syria and Yemen have fallen apart, the Islamic State has become a great threat to regional and global security, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's government is far from providing reconciliation in Egypt, Iraq is unable to overcome its trauma, young people throughout the region are becoming radicalized, extremists and aggressive nonstate actors have proliferated, and the social fabric in many states has been torn asunder.

Participants also debated the implications of the nuclear agreement with Iran for the region's future. Some predicted that the deal with Iran would contribute positively to regional dynamics by signaling to other states, who might otherwise view Iranian aims as "imperial," that its ambitions were limited. Other participants, however, doubted that Iran would use its revenue for benign purposes once sanctions were lifted.

Many participants agreed that proxy interventions along sectarian lines had contributed to extraordinary Shia-Sunni tensions in the region. This is especially the case in Syria. Participants stressed that states continuing to act as patrons for radical actors would only deepen sectarian conflict.

Policy Prescriptions

- The umbrella concept of MENA should be abandoned in favor of a more nuanced and accurate understanding of the countries in the region.
- In Iraq, the establishment of a power-sharing system between Shia and Sunni regions, instead of a sectarian division into two separate states, should be encouraged. The Kurdistan regional government might be a source of stability and serve as a buffer in the region.
- Saudi Arabia should terminate its sectarian policies, which deepen the Sunni-Shia divide, with potentially destructive consequences for regional security and stability. More generally, all states should refrain from destabilizing interventions carried out through support of radical nonstate actors.
- To address the global phenomenon of foreign fighters, interdisciplinary studies should be conducted in different regions with the aim of identifying the factors that push youth from across the world into joining the Islamic State. More time and funds should be invested in de-radicalization efforts.

SPECIAL SESSION ON UKRAINE

As the Ukraine crisis nears its second anniversary, peace rests on a fragile cease-fire that has yet to be consolidated. Although the hostilities have subsided, the humanitarian situation remains grim, with over seven million people affected by the conflict, many of whom have become refugees or internally displaced. In an attempt to predict the future of the crisis that unearthed a latent East-West rivalry, the participants discussed what the conflict in Ukraine meant for the world order and reflected on the possible scenarios for the near future.

According to one participant, Russia's annexation of Crimea symbolizes the destruction of the post-Cold War system, arguing that the global order has proven to be less international, less liberal, and less orderly than assumed. Some participants argued that the subdued U.S. reaction to the crisis did not match the magnitude of Russia's aggression, suggesting that this provided an indicator that the unipolar moment of the United States has ended. Though many participants agreed that an immediate solution to the situation in Crimea did not seem probable, some suggested that Crimea might eventually obtain a status similar to that of Northern Cyprus.

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Despite pessimism on the future of Crimea, participants were more optimistic about Ukraine's recovery after the crisis. The European Leadership Network's plan for the Ukrainian economy, coupled with the growing vitality of Ukrainian civil society, provided reasons to believe development in Ukraine will be back on track in a few years, assuming that the national leadership takes steps to contain corruption and donors provide necessary assistance. One participant added that Germany's assumption of the chairmanship of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe in 2016 will give the organization an enhanced leadership role in addressing the Ukraine crisis.

Policy Prescriptions

- Heavy weapons should be withdrawn and a security zone should be established in accordance with the Package of Measures for the Implementation of the Minsk Agreements.
- The government of Ukraine and the separatists should facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid to eastern Ukraine.

- States should support the full implementation of the Minsk agreements including the political, economic, and humanitarian provisions.

THE ENDGAME IN THE EUROZONE AND EUROPE'S PROSPECTS AS AN EFFECTIVE GLOBAL ACTOR

In the live-streamed public session of the conference, the panelists discussed the economic and political future of the EU in the face of developments such as the narrowly avoided “Grexit” (Greece’s exit from the eurozone), the conflict in Ukraine, and the refugee crisis. On the economic front, the speakers agreed that the growth prospects of Europe look discouraging. In the absence of coordination among national economic policies, fiscal convergence is lacking, job creation has fallen, and Europe’s share of the global gross domestic product is decreasing. Regarding the EU as an effective global actor, the panel agreed that Europe performs poorly in terms of pooling military capabilities and functioning as a collective military power. Some speakers regarded this as a shortcoming that hinders the growth of the union’s political influence, whereas others argued that the EU can thrive with soft power and the ability to foresee crises and take nonmilitary preemptive action.

REDESIGNING REGIONAL AND GLOBAL ENERGY GOVERNANCE

Although energy policy has traditionally been considered a matter of national sovereignty and security, the effects of global oil price fluctuations, the rise of major new energy consumers, and concerns over Europe’s energy security following the crisis in Ukraine have led some to conclude that greater global and regional governance in this sector would be useful and necessary. Participants suggested that stronger coordination in managing energy dynamics could have several advantages. Enhanced cooperation could help improve security of supply in case of disruptions, reduce uncertainty associated with price volatility, facilitate investment in the energy sector, and accelerate the development of clean technologies. Participants discussed the potential reform of the International Energy Agency to include major consuming countries, including China and India, while noting the legal and political hurdles to expansion, including the requirement that all candidates be members of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

At the regional level, participants suggested that greater multilateral energy governance could generate efficiency gains and increase bargaining power among groups of states. Perhaps the most prominent effort in this realm was the planned European Energy Union. One participant stated that although the controversial initiative interfered with gas market dynamics, it had also produced greater integration of the two separate European gas markets only one year after its launch. As for oil, many participants argued that multilateral coordination should be improved, given its significance both for EU-Russia relations and for Europe’s overall energy security. Another participant suggested that now that a European Commission vice president in charge of the Energy Union has been appointed, the existence of a central, leading figure could enhance the EU’s capacity for energy governance.

The session also addressed Turkey’s role in global energy markets. As a consumer country highly dependent on energy exports, Turkey can become significant in energy governance only if it acts as a reliable partner and a dependable transit country. One speaker asserted that EU-Turkey cooperation for energy investments in northern Iraq could help realize the area’s great potential and prevent delayed investments there, benefitting the world economy. Participants noted that the eastern Mediterranean area also has much potential, but Turkey’s unresolved issues with Cyprus and Israel are blocking progress on the matter.

Another approach to securing and diversifying Europe’s energy supply was hastening the import of gas from Turkmenistan. One participant suggested that, by working together, the EU and Turkey might convince Russia to drop its opposition to the transport of Turkmen gas through the Caspian Sea. Several other experts recommended that Turkey facilitate the Azeri-Turkmen negotiation on the construction of a trans-Caspian pipeline. Finally, participants discussed the uncertain future of Iranian oil and gas exports in the aftermath of the nuclear deal. Although Iranian energy sources have a “game-changing” potential, the dilapidated state of Iran’s oil infrastructure will delay its full integration into global energy markets.

Policy Prescriptions

- EU nations should increase coordination and integration in the oil market and standardize energy subsidies.
- All states should partake in a global dialogue for setting global standards for sustainable energy.
- Turkey and the EU should overcome their political disagreements and cooperate on a range of issues including investments in northern Iraq's energy supplies, dialogue with Russia on the transportation of Turkmen gas through the Caspian, and Turkey's role as a transit country.
- Turkey should open up channels of dialogue with Israel and Cyprus to unleash the potential of eastern Mediterranean energy sources.

GLOBAL CLIMATE COOPERATION BEYOND PARIS

The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change's twenty-first Conference of Parties (COP-21) is scheduled to take place in Paris in November and December 2015, and aims to achieve a universal agreement on steps to mitigate and adapt to global warming. After several rounds of failed attempts to agree upon a collective action plan for keeping global warming below two degrees Celsius, countries will now make their individual, nonbinding, and nationally determined pledges for emissions reductions. The last session of the Istanbul conference debated whether the bottom-up approach is feasible for generating effective global climate cooperation or instead will result in a feeble (and likely futile) effort to bring about the desired outcome.

One participant declared it unrealistic to expect COP-21 to be a breakthrough event. The Paris conference will be one step in a lengthy process. The world is experiencing an economic slowdown and climate must compete for global attention, as the decrease in fossil fuel prices weakens the case for renewable energy in developing countries. The United States and China are showing more commitment to reducing greenhouse gas emissions than before, but their actions remain insufficient. Consequently, many participants agreed that even if they are realized, the modest pledges made in Paris will not be enough to keep global warming below the targeted rate. The question then becomes how the gap between the pledged levels and the necessary ones will be closed.

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One participant suggested that the energy sector should be seen as the "low-hanging fruit" of global action on climate. Another participant asserted that although the drop in oil prices reduced the appeal of renewable energy, the current environment also presented an opportunity for shifting some resources toward investing in research and development (R&D) for clean technologies. Another proposition was the introduction of "green" official development aid but others were skeptical, arguing that stressing the "green" element would jeopardize its feasibility. Incentivizing responsible and efficient material use rather than imposing strict instructions would be a better strategy, one participant suggested. Participants also discussed complementary measures to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change process, such as regional initiatives.

Arguing that the greatest global challenge cannot be resolved through individual actions, a number of participants suggested that countries need to agree on binding and rewarding agreements that also set standards, while investing in green technologies that appeal to investors and are accessible to the public. Despite the prescriptive and rigid structure of such agreements, some participants considered them the only realistic way to counter climate change.

Policy Prescriptions

- The progress of individual states regarding the pledges made at COP-21 should be monitored by an independent body, and evaluations should be made of the gap between targets and results.
- More binding emissions reduction targets should be coupled with rewarding standard-setting agreements.
- Public investments in R&D and innovation for clean technologies should be increased and access to such technologies should be improved.
- ODA should encourage the efficient and responsible use of materials for infrastructure projects.
- Small-scale efforts such as reforestation should complement emissions reduction efforts.