
Chapter 11

The Middle East, the Mediterranean, and Afghanistan in the Czech Foreign Policy

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THE MIDDLE EAST, THE MEDITERRANEAN AND AFGHANISTAN IN THE CZECH FOREIGN POLICY: BACKGROUND AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

In 2015, the general principles of the Czech Republic foreign policy concerning the Middle East remained identical to the former years in the main points. According to the new *Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Czech Republic*, adopted in June 2015, the Czech Republic continued focusing on strengthening the bilateral economic relations with the countries in the region, particularly Israel, the Gulf countries, and North Africa with the aim to ensure stable security in the area. The bilateral priority remains the strategic partnership with Israel; however, the newly adopted concept binds the Czech Republic to strengthen the cooperation with the Palestinian administration and the preparation of the Palestinian representation to accept statehood. The new concept also highlights the necessity to standardise the relationships with Iran. Unlike those of the former years, the new concept reflects the aim of the left-wing government to support new bilateral partnerships in the region without priority focus on the interests of Israel.¹

In 2015, the Czech Republic was forced to increasingly react to the actual development in the region, which was more complicated than in the previous years and mostly related to the violent aftermath and reactions to the Arab Spring. Despite the success of the Czech Republic in strengthening the bilateral cooperation with some of the countries in the region, the options within the foreign policy are still limited in the Middle East.

The most dramatic development was in Syria and Iraq because in 2014 a self-proclaimed entity “Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)” was strongly established in parts of the region. At the same time, the bloody conflict continued in Syria between the regime of President Bashar al-Assad and various fractions of the opposition forces

which included a significant participation of various important foreign players, such as Russia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and others.

In 2015, a serious security situation was in Yemen where a long-lasting conflict of low intensity grew into civil war. The Czech Republic traditionally shares strong relations with Egypt; however, the country *de facto* faced the return of the “old regime” after the Field Marshal Sisi removed the democratically elected establishment of President Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood which was becoming strongly authoritative. Undoubtedly, a positive development was in Iran where the international powers signed the treaty on the restriction of the nuclear program of Iran during 2015. At the beginning of 2016, the International Atomic Energy Agency issued the declaration that Iran observed the conditions of the treaty, which subsequently resulted in a reduction of the sanctions for the regime of Iran. A certain improvement occurred in the region of Maghreb, except for Libya. Whilst Libya is still in the state of a civil war and threatens the stability of the countries in the region, Morocco, Tunisia, and lately also Algeria are gradually becoming significant partners for the Czech Republic in the region.

One of the main interests of the Czech Republic still includes the maintenance of the strategic partnership and above-standard relationships with the State of Israel. We have registered certain critical claims from the leading Czech politicians considering the Israel-Palestine policy. In 2015, Lubomír Zaorálek was the first significant Czech politician after a long time to visit both the “safe” West Bank and also the Gaza Strip which was not frequently visited by politicians. During his visit to Israel and Palestinian National Authority, Minister Zaorálek criticised Israel for building Jewish settlements in the Palestinian territory. In his words, Israel takes unilateral steps which prevent the continuity of the Middle East peace process.² The Minister of Defence, Martin Stropnický, also criticised Israel. In 2015, the Czech Republic strengthened its relationship with Jordan which played an important role in the region. It is wedged between the countries involved in regional conflicts (Iraq, Syria, Israel, and Palestine), and they still remain stable. The Czech Republic was actively involved in the aid for Syrian refugees in Jordan.

The problems in the Middle East were reflected in the domestic politics in relation to the inflow of refugees to Europe, particularly from Turkey and North Africa. The above-stated problems and a bad level of information provision started to polarize the Czech politics and the public. Various Islamophobic, anti-immigration, and anti-European initiatives grew in popularity, and some populist political parties started using the topics to increase their popularity. President Miloš Zeman and politicians from some mainstream parties (ODS, “conservative” wing of ČSSD, etc.) started to intervene in this chaotic, emotional, and quiet irrational discussion with populist statements. In 2015, the matter of the immigration crisis was discussed at the meetings of the Chamber of Deputies of the Czech Republic. Upon the approval of EU quota for the refugees, a special meeting was summoned in order to settle the matter of illegal migration. Despite the vote of the Czech Republic against the acceptance of the quota, the Prime Minister, Bohuslav Sobotka, received significant criticism for accepting the voting result. Some parties (KSČM, movement Svoboda) even suggested

to follow the example of Slovakia and to take legal action at the European Court. The Chamber of Deputies decided to refuse the permanent mechanisms on the relocation of refugees. At the same time, in 2015, the sum provided to help third-world countries where the immigrants arrive from increased significantly. The total special sum provided by the Czech Republic was 136 million CZK to be divided within the EU Trust Funds for the Middle East and the Western Balkans (MADAD). The political debate and often controversial statements of some Czech politicians were reflected in a more extreme mood in the Czech society. The issue of the Middle East still remains significantly politicised.

THE MIDDLE EAST, THE MEDITERRANEAN AND AFGHANISTAN IN THE CZECH FOREIGN POLICY: EVENTS AND AGENDA

Czech diplomacy and Israel and Palestine

In 2015, the above-standard strategic partnership continued between the Czech Republic and Israel. It included many state visits between both countries and also the support of economic relationships.

In 2015, no significant political events occurred on the Czech domestic political scene; however, preliminary elections took place in Israel in March 2015. The winning party – despite the surveys – was the nationalist-right wing party Likud, and the Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu continued in his fourth term. Before the elections, the Czech Prime Minister, B. Sobotka, stated that the Czech Republic would cooperate with the new government regardless of which of the main Israeli political blocks would win.³

In 2015, several significant state visits took place between the Czech Republic and Israel. In June, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, L. Zorálek, visited Israel. He visited Israel and also the Gaza Strip as the first significant representative of the Czech Republic to do so during the last 15 years. After returning from the Gaza Strip, he stated he had been shocked by the bad conditions of the area.⁴ We must state here that the Czech Republic helps Palestine within the development aid; however, most of the Czech aid goes to the West Bank and not to the Gaza Strip.⁵

Before meeting Prime Minister Netanyahu, Minister Zorálek expressed certain criticism of Israeli politics because, in his opinion, Israel undermined the peace process in the Middle East by building Jewish settlements in the Palestine territory.⁶ During the visit to Israel, at the security conference, he mentioned that Prague was ready to host the Israeli-Palestinian peace talks. In his opinion, both parties involved in the conflict should try more to find the solution. A significant problem is particularly the construction of the Jewish settlements in the Palestine territory.⁷

In October, the Israeli President Reuven Rivlin visited the Czech Republic and met President Zeman. When asked to comment the current unrest in Israel, Mr. Rivlin highlighted that his state had never declared war on Islam, and he wanted to see Jews and Muslims living together in Jerusalem. Then M. Zeman moved to the security situation. *“Both countries are exposed to the pressure of fundamentalists or,*

if you prefer, extremists, even though within different levels. Israel faces direct danger; therefore, I have appreciated the sending of our monitoring mission at the Golan Heights and other Czech missions in Sinai. In my opinion, it would be reasonable to involve the Czech Republic in the UNIFIL mission in Lebanon,” stated the Czech President.⁸ However, Zeman strongly supported Israel in its refusal of the proposal of France and other countries to appoint an international monitoring mission to monitor peace in Jerusalem. He pointed out former unsuccessful foreign interventions in the Middle East. The Czech President also refused the negotiations with the radical Palestinian movement Hamas.

He was even sharper than Rivlin who did not completely rule out the talks with this organisation.⁹ Zeman and Rivlin both agreed that the trade development between both countries was insufficient. The Czech Republic still has significantly active balance with Israel. Last year the exported goods were worth 13.7 billion CZK, and the imported goods from Israel were worth 5.9 billion CZK. Both politicians were probably referring to the trade volume without any recorded changes.¹⁰

In December 2015, in relation to Israel, the Chamber of Deputies in its resolution refused the decision of the European Committee which stipulated that Israeli goods from the Palestinian area had to be marked with a notice that the goods originated from the Jewish settlement. 98 from 118 Deputies voted for individual parts of the resolution.¹¹

In 2015, the Czech and Israel economic relations were strengthened in many fields. For example, they included the completely new diplomatic-scientific position, to which a young diplomat, Delana Mikolášová, was appointed in August 2015. She will specialize in the search of contacts for creating the Czech and Israeli common projects within the activity of the Czech Embassy in Israel. She will particularly focus on the development of cooperation within the projects financed from the International Cooperation Program Geshet and Contact, from European Structural and Investment Funds, and from the program Horizon 2020. She will support and develop the strategic partnership between Israeli and Czech Universities and research centres, present the Czech science and research at conference and professional forums, and support the presence of the Czech scientists in the research teams in Israel.¹² Another impulse of the Czech and Israeli relations resulted from four new contracts with the Israeli companies signed during the entrepreneur mission organised by the Chamber of Commerce of the Czech Republic and the Israel-Czech Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ICCCI).¹³

New business contracts were concluded in the area of defence. The Czech Army planned to purchase the new Israeli 3D mobile radars for almost 6 billion CZK. However, instead of the planned tender, the army decided to purchase the technology by a direct governmental contract.¹⁴ In 2015, the representatives of the Czech military industry offered their products at the International Israel Defence Exhibition in Tel-Aviv. This year, for example Great Britain, France, and Scandinavian countries did not participate in the Exhibition. Their Governments never issued permissions for the arms industry as a protest against building the Jewish settlements in Palestine. It was not the case in the Czech Republic.¹⁵

In the area of the cyber security, the worldwide-recognised leading Israeli company CyberGym decided to move its know-how to the Czech Republic and build its first commercial training arena in Europe. According to the company, the customers shall learn the protection against the most sophisticated cyber attacks. The arena will be located near Prague, in the village of Řitka, and the opening is planned in 2016.¹⁶

President Zeman is known for his unshakable support of Israel practically on all occasions with the presence of listeners. Shortly after the arrival from Jordan and other Arabic Middle East countries, he was invited to and had a speech at the conference of the pro-Israel conservative lobby AIPAC (American Israel Public Affairs Committee), in the USA in March 2015. He received great ovations after stating: *“You all know the famous statement: Ich bin ein Berliner. Now we all have to say: I am a Jew.”* The presenter then asked why the Czech Republic supports Israel. *“Both the question and the answer are very simple. Because we share the same history. We were surrounded by enemies, dictatorships. Former Czechoslovakia was the only island of democracy in the heart of Europe,”* stated Zeman.¹⁷

At the end of this sub-chapter, we must mention that in October 2015, one of the local gardens at a corner of Hebron Road was named after Václav Havel to commemorate the restoration of the relations between Israel and former Czechoslovakia. The signature of Václav Havel was unveiled in the lobby of the most famous Israeli hotel King David. Also the bench dedicated to Václav Havel was unveiled in the premises of the Tel Aviv University.¹⁸

Czech diplomacy related to Syria and Lebanon

Syria, prior to the conflict outburst in spring 2011, was one of the key countries in the region in terms of the economic cooperation with the Czech Republic. The Czech Republic planned to realise several projects in Syria. The armed conflict destroyed the plans and, at the same time, became a security threat to Israel, which was the number one Czech partner in the region. Despite Israel and Syria being in the permanent state of war, the borders between both states have been considered safe since the last significant conflict in 1973. The armed conflict between the regime of President Bashar al-Assad and the disunited opposition can directly impact the security of Israel. However, as defined above, the Czech Republic has a consistent approach to the conflict in Syria. Syria also threatens the security of other neighbouring countries – Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon – the few countries which can be considered stable in the Middle East region. The conflict in Syria also affected the relationships of the Czech Republic with the neighbouring countries.

The Czech Ambassador in Damascus, Eva Filipi, described the situation in Syria as very unclear, considering both the disunity of the Free Syrian Army, and the provision of distorted information by the Syrian and foreign media. She defined the situation in Syria as sectarian and religious fights. In her statement, she also challenged the approach of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. We should remember that the Czech Embassy in Syria gradually took over the administration activity for the USA and Slovakia which closed their Embassies.¹⁹ During the summit in New York, Bohuslav Sobotka stated that the agreement on the termination of war in Syria had to include

President Assad. During his speech at the United Nations General Assembly, President Zeman also called on the unified fight against the radical movement of the Islamic State and to the creation of the international antiterrorist forces. During his visit to the United Nations General Assembly in New York, he also introduced the information that the Syrian government and opposition, which were in the process of a cease-fire negotiations in Geneva, were interested in signing the final declaration in Prague. At the same time, he highlighted that the negotiations were not yet over and should continue for some time. According to Zeman, the Syrian representatives have started using the term “Prague Declaration”. Syrian President B. al-Assad confirmed Zeman’s statement in the interview with the Czech Television.²⁰ The Minister of Foreign Affairs, L. Zaorálek, has previously mentioned that Czechia considered the current regime had to be present at the negotiating table. Mr. Zaorálek shared this opinion on the occasion of the negotiations between the Deputy of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Martin Tlapa, and the Chief of Syrian diplomacy in Damascus.²¹

The President acknowledges the fact that this diplomatic matter was affected by the Czech Embassy in Damascus representing the interests of the United States. At the same time, he highlighted that the Czech Ambassador to Syria, E. Filipi, did a great job. He also stated that she would not be dismissed due to age. According to the civil service law, the ambassadors should leave their function upon reaching seventy years of age.

A serious topic related to Syria is the above-mentioned migration crisis. In 2015, Minister of Interior Milan Chovanec, with the aim to restrict the impending migration wave of the Syrian refugees to Europe, proposed to the Government that the Czech Republic should support the solution directly in Syria or in the surrounding states where the refugees were running to safety. The program “*For the assistance to refugees in the regions of origin and the prevention of extensive migration movements*” shall be established. The governmental budget reserve shall provide 100 million CZK to the account for the program. The amount should become a part of budget of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the following years. The Government discussed the proposal.²²

President Zeman commented the acceptance of the refugees from Syria in the Czech Republic as an unfortunate solution. However, he supported the plan to provide humanitarian help in the state of origin or in the neighbouring countries. At the same time, he repeated that people unable to adapt to the regulations in the host country should leave the country.²³ The Government of the Czech Republic still approved the acceptance of Syrian refugees in 2015. To be precise, it included fifteen families with the maximum number of seventy Syrian citizens.²⁴ The refugees selected by the Ministry should have received the asylum and ill children were to receive treatment at the University Hospital Motol.²⁵ During the year, the first Syrian refugees arrived. According to the Ministry of Interior, all persons passed thorough the security check.

The Czech humanitarian organisations operating in the Middle East considered the decision of the Government to accept only seventy refugees from Syria outrageous. The organisations stated this in their declaration issued on the fourth anniversary of the outburst of the conflict in Syria. The Czech Republic has greater capaci-

ties for accepting many more refugees; the optimum number is about one thousand people.²⁶

Minister of Foreign Affairs L. Zaorálek approved the funding at the total of 15 million CZK to help people from Iraq and Syria affected by the fighting. The money shall be used for purchasing necessary items and also for education, etc., as defined in the press release of the Ministry. The funding shall be used for the support of non-profit organisations. Help to the citizens of Syria shall be provided also by the Evangelical Church and the Charity together with People in Need. *“The projects of the organisations People in Need and the Charity of the Czech Republic focus on material, medical, psychological, and educational help in Syria, and the project of Diaconia of the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren (DECCB) supports the Syrian refugees in Jordan,”* confirmed the office. The Czech Government previously agreed to grant the asylum to selected refugees from Syria and provide the treatment of Syrian children in domestic hospitals. Czech physicians operated the Syrian refugees in Jordan within the humanitarian program MEDEVAC.²⁷ We should remember that the Czech Republic was involved in the humanitarian aid already in 2012. It provided 3 million CZK to the UN mission for refugees UNHCR and 3.5 million CZK to the International Committee of the Red Cross. Further 7.5 million was allocated in autumn for humanitarian projects for the Syrian refugees living in Jordan. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs supported the program MEDEVAC focusing on the treatment and education of (not only) Syrian refugees.²⁸

Czech Republic and Jordan

As defined above, despite the continual crisis in the Middle East, Jordan is one of few countries in the region which can be defined as stable. Nevertheless, Jordan also faces the impacts of the armed conflict in Syria and Iraq, particularly with the massive inflow of refugees. Jordan also participates in the military actions against the Islamic State; the actions grew in intensity after the Islamic State published the footage with the burning of the Jordanian pilot.

In 2015, several significant meetings took place between the Czech leaders and the Jordanian leaders. Prime Minister Sobotka visited the country and met King Abdullah II and Prime Minister Abdullah Ensour. During his visit, the Czech Prime Minister visited the Zaatari Refugee Camp. The fight with the self-proclaimed ISIS and the immigration crisis were the two main reasons for the visit of Mr. Sobotka.

During his visit, Sobotka offered the aid of 100 million CZK to manage the immigration crisis.²⁹ This aid should be implemented in 2016. In 2015, Czechia earmarked approximately 80 million CZK for help to Jordan, and 45 million CZK went for the development of the Zaatari infrastructure. Between 2012 and 2014, the Czech Republic provided approximately 30 million CZK for aid for the Syrian refugees in Jordan. Prime Minister Sobotka also offered medical aid and training for Jordanian soldiers. Before his visit, he stated that two medical teams should operate in Jordan in 2015 within the program MEDEVAC. Before 2014, the total of twelve civil medical teams were sent to Jordan and they completed a total of 224 surgeries in cooperation with local partners.³⁰

The Czech President visited Jordan in 2015. During his visit to Amman, he supported Jordan in its fight against the self-proclaimed ISIS and stated that Czechia was ready to participate in the action against the extremists together with Jordan. Prime Minister of the Jordanian Government, A. Ansour, mentioned at the reception of the Czech Embassy that the fight against the self-proclaimed ISIS was not just the fight of Jordan and the states in the Middle East but the fight of the whole world. He mentioned that Islam was the hostage of terrorism and refused one-sided perception of the religion. During his visit, the Czech President stated that after the war, the economic cooperation should increase, and Czechia which exported weapons and machines to the region, should participate in the construction of the first Jordanian nuclear power plant.³¹ It is anticipated by the memorandum signed during the visit of the President. Both countries also prepared the agreement on mutual cooperation within the power industry.³²

The Vice-President of the Economic Chamber of the Czech Republic, Michal Štefl, made similar comments with respect to the economic relations between both countries. He spoke with the Deputy Chairman of the Parliament of The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, J.E. Khalil Atieh, with the delegation. K. Atieh invited Czech companies to participate in Jordanian tenders. Vice-President Štefl recalled the industrial and technological tradition of the Czech Republic, and during the meeting at the Economic Chamber of the Czech Republic, he recalled the long-lasting cooperation of the Czech and Jordanian companies. In relation to this fact, he also mentioned that the potential of the trade exchange between the Czech Republic and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan was strongly unfulfilled.³³

President Zeman also stated that Czechia should probably send a field hospital to help the refugees. The General Staff of the Czech Republic had no information about the plan.

According to the spokeswoman, Jana Růžičková, it is necessary to process a detailed analysis in case of the political intention. The preparations lasted months, the costs reached hundreds of millions. The field hospitals comprised of tents and containers with located e.g. operating theatres, pharmacy, and dentist surgery. The hospital provides care at the level of a regional hospital. The Czech Republic used the field hospital last time in 2007 and 2008 in Afghanistan, since then ten to fifteen members of the field hospital surgery teams have operated in the country.³⁴

In 2015, ten of the Czech army instructors traditionally started to train Jordanian soldiers in Amman in the fight against chemical weapons. The pyrotechnics and chemists arrived in the country during the times of growing fears of terrorist attacks by the self-proclaimed ISIS. The Czech army has been in Jordan for the third time; it plans the training for 2016 too.³⁵ The Czech help during the training of Jordanian soldiers shall be reciprocated by the possibility of the Czech specialists training in the Jordanian desert conditions. It was stated by the Prime Minister of Czech Government after the negotiations with the Jordanian Prime Minister, A. Ansour. Czechia has cooperated with Jordan during the training of its soldiers for many years. The members of the Jordanian armed forces are trained in the Czech Republic and the team of Czech instructors arrive in Jordan every year. According to Mr. Sobotka, the Government

considers the cooperation with Jordan during the training of the Special Forces. The members should feel the benefits from two important reasons. These include the acquaintance with the natural conditions in the desert and the possibility to get to know the local cultural background.³⁶

Czech Republic and Egypt

The Arab Republic of Egypt still remains one of the crucial partners of the Czech Republic in the Middle East. Despite the complicated post-revolution situation, the business cooperation of both countries still continues. Except for 2011, when the mutual trade stagnated, both countries have been strongly interested in strengthening the cooperation. This trend is further supported by mutual official visits. In 2015, the Egyptian Deputy to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sameh Shukri, visited the Czech Republic. During his visit, he met his departmental colleague L. Zaorálek and the Minister of Trade and Commerce, Jan Mládek, to negotiate a possible strengthening of the mutual business cooperation.³⁷ In 2015, President Miloš Zeman received the credentials from the new Egyptian Ambassador, Abd ar-Rahman Salahaddine.³⁸

The reoccurring strengthening of the mutual trade occurred due to the partial stabilisation of the Egyptian political scene after the Arabic Spring revolution. In 2013, the military coup d'état removed the Egyptian President, Muhammad Morsi, from power, and the Muslim Brotherhood, which officially won the post-revolution elections, was declared illegal. The army became the leader in the state again; it controlled the political events in pre-revolution Egypt. In 2014, the Egyptian President appointed the Army General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. Despite restoring the "old order" in Egypt, the security situation still remains complicated. The army takes brutal actions against the opposition, particularly against the members of the Muslim Brotherhood.

In reaction to the army brutality and the suppression of fundamental rights and freedoms, many terrorist attacks took place in 2015 aiming at the governmental targets. As indicated by the opinion of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, the worst security situation is in the north of the Sinai Peninsula which has been a long-lasting target not only of the Egyptian Islamists.

In October 2015, a Russian Metrojet 9268 aircraft crashed in Sinai. All of the 224 passengers died in the crash. The aircraft belonging to the Russian airlines flew from the Egyptian holiday resort Sharm El Sheik to Petersburg.³⁹ According to the Russian-Egyptian investigation team, it was a terrorist attack. Later, the self-proclaimed ISIS claimed the attack. Despite some EU member states interrupting the air transport to the Sinai Peninsula, the Czech Republic never took this step.⁴⁰

Czech soldiers were present in the Sinai Peninsula in 2015 within the mission Multinational Force and Observers (MFO), with the task to monitor the compliance with the peace conditions between Egypt and Israel.⁴¹ Additionally to the Sinai Peninsula, a further security risk is present at the border with Libya. The Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs further warns against travelling to Egypt and recommends using the organised trips.

In reaction to the security situation, the Egyptian Government changed the visa obligations for the Czech citizens in 2015. Czech citizens who decide to travel to

Egypt individually will have to apply for a visa to enter Egypt solely at the Egyptian Embassy in Prague, and they will no longer receive a visa during the entry to the country.⁴²

The priority interest of the Czech Republic is strengthening the bilateral economic cooperation. Egypt belongs to the group of so-called interest states within the export strategy of the Czech Republic. During the recent years, the Czech export levels grew sharply. In 2014, Czech export reached 450 million USD.⁴³ The Czech Republic focuses mostly on engineering, power, and arms industry.⁴⁴ In 2014, the supplies of weapons were restored to Egypt, which had been formerly interrupted due to the army coup d'état in 2013. In order to support the mutual trade, the agency Czech-Trade organised the conference Cairo Energy, focused on processing oil, natural gas, and renewable energy.⁴⁵ The Czech Republic also hosted the conference Africa and Middle East which mostly focused on the export opportunities in the Middle East, i.e. in Egypt.

Czech diplomacy and the states in the Arabian Peninsula

In 2015, the media strongly focused on the topic of exporting weapons from the Czech Republic to Saudi Arabia. The Czech export of the army material currently breaks the records. In 2014, the Czech companies exported to Saudi Arabia the army material worth approximately 1.9 billion CZK. This has been a record sum since 2005 when the Ministry of Industry and Trade started monitoring the data. It is a sextuple to 2013. More than a half of the Czech export comprises of freight vehicles produced by Tatra Kopřivnice. It signed a partnership with the Saudi Government in 2013. The contract includes the construction of a factory where the Saudi employees produce some parts by themselves.⁴⁶

The army material is naturally exported by private companies and not by the state directly. The Ministry of Industry and Trade must award license to the companies. It is subjected to the agreement with the Ministry of Interior, Defence, and Foreign Affairs. The military budget of Saudi Arabia represents approximately 80 billion USD, which more or less corresponds to the budget of the Russian Federation, for example. Therefore, the Saudi Arabia represents a lucrative opportunity for the Czech arms industry. However, there is a problem with the aversion of western powers that have reservations considering the Saudi regime and consider the arms industry supplies inappropriate.

During the recent years, the Czech Republic has placed a greater emphasis on economic diplomacy; however, it also declared human rights as one of the fundamental goals of the foreign policy. Saudi Arabia was involved in the armed conflicts in neighbouring Yemen; the Saudi regime has been criticised for violating human rights, in 2015 about 150 people were executed in the country, etc. There is a question if the West should support states of such type. In 2015, this topic was greatly discussed in the Czech media and many polarised opinions emerged. For example, Great Britain and Germany faced the same problem. German secret services stated that Saudi Arabia is on the best way to becoming the greatest source of instability in the region. Germany then banned the export of weapons to Saudi Arabia.⁴⁷

In 2015, the media were captured by the appearance of Miloš Zeman at the meeting of a movement which was known for its hatred of Islam and Muslims. Especially Saudi Arabia monitors such statements with care. The President of the Czech-Saudi Business Chamber, Martin Vrba, stated that the President's statements had affected the relations between the Czech Republic and the OIC countries. The Czech Ambassadors to the Muslim states had to explain various statements of the President frequently. Vrba also added that the Czech companies exporting to the countries had experienced a chill in relationships particularly with respect to the state contracts.⁴⁸ President Zeman enraged Saudi Arabia with his statements already in 2014. The Czech Ambassador to Riyadh, Jiří Slavík, had to apologise for the President's statements.

United Arab Emirates

In 2015, the Czech Republic declared the intention to develop economic partnerships with the countries in the Persian Gulf in its latest concept of the foreign policy. It is, therefore, not surprising that the United Arab Emirates (SAE) are included in the actual Czech export strategy as a priority country of interest. The current Czech export to the United Arab Emirates is 800 million USD which is the highest export to the countries outside Europe, after the USA, China, and Japan. Currently 20% of export comprises of computer components and the recording devices, further 20% comprises of telecommunication devices, and 10% glass products. The rest of the export comprises of dozens of items and none of them exceeds one percent of the share on export. An important fact is that hundreds of Indian, Chinese, and Iranian companies currently reside in SAE and focus on re-export to Asia and Africa. Furthermore, the recognised construction and technological companies operating in the whole Persian Gulf, particularly in Saudi Arabia, reside in the Emirates. SAE represent a kind of entrance gate for trading with other countries in the whole Middle East.⁴⁹

The Czech Republic is very well aware of the specific position of UAE in the region, and in 2015, the Czech Republic commenced an active approach to UAE particularly within the economic diplomacy. In 2015, two leading representatives of the Czech Republic visited UAE. President Zeman visited UAE in February, and Minister of Industry and Commerce Mládek visited UAE in November. His counterpart, Minister of Economy Sultan Mansouri, visited the Czech Republic in April. The delegation of the Economic Committee of the Chamber of Deputies of the Czech Republic arrived in UAE with Minister Mládek.

The economic topics and new business options were the key interest of the negotiations. The visit was evaluated very positively and it significantly contributed to the development of mutual economic and business relations.⁵⁰

In addition to the visits, the Czech Republic tries to support the Czech businessmen using other tools. The representative office in Abu Dhabi traditionally organised the annual seminar and workshop for the Czech companies. The goal of the seminar is to receive actual information on the UAE economy and new business and investment opportunities.⁵¹

Qatar

Qatar was discussed in 2015 mostly in relation to two kidnapped tourists – Hana Humpálová and Antonie Chrástěcká. They disappeared in Pakistan three years ago. Qatar is said to have played a significant role in their liberation upon a discreet request of the Czech Republic to mediate the negotiations. Qatar also localised the kidnapped Czech young women in the south of Afghanistan. According to the official version, the release of the young women was organised by the Turkish humanitarian organisation IHH. The sources of the newspaper *Lidové noviny* have stated that their release was provided by Qatar.⁵²

Czech diplomacy and the Maghreb states

The region of Maghreb, in particular Morocco and Tunisia, has recently become a significant target of the Czech investors. The interest of the Czech Republic grew after both countries concluded the association agreement with the EU, and in 2008 became involved in so-called Plan of European Neighbourhood Policy. The cooperation of Morocco and Tunisia with the EU greatly guarantees suitable conditions for the Czech investors to develop their investment. Within the neighbourhood policy, the EU also monitors the application of individual economic reforms with the guarantee of protection for the investors.

Morocco is still the most stable state in the Maghreb region and it seems to be a suitable partner for the Czech Republic for possible business contacts in the region of Trans-Saharan Africa. A significant strengthening of the economic cooperation between the Czech Republic and Morocco occurred in 2013 when both countries agreed on the cooperation in the area of the travel industry by signing a bilateral contract. Last year, the Czech Chamber of Commerce (HK) sent the business delegation to Morocco with the Vice-President of HK, Bořivoj Minář. During the visit of the Czech business delegation, the Czech-Morocco Business Forum was convened. The Czech companies had the possibility to meet the Moroccan ministers. The Moroccan party expressed a strong interest in the cooperation within the travel industry, power industry, and healthcare.⁵³ Morocco, which has been lately experiencing an economic growth and also guarantees a stable security situation, seems to be a great strategic business partner in the region. The Czech Republic should continue to strive for and strengthen mutual cooperation.

For many years, Tunisia has been an economic partner of the Czech Republic in the region; however, it still faces the problems with the post-revolution transformation. In 2014, the political situation was partially stabilised after the election of a new government and passing of a new constitution. In 2015, the Czech Republic hoped to support mutual cooperation between the two countries. The Tunisian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Taïeb Baccouche, officially visited the Czech Republic.⁵⁴ He negotiated possible political-security cooperation with the Czech representatives of the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Czech Republic is still strongly interested in mutual cooperation with Tunisia and it considers Tunisia to be the leading partner in the Maghreb region.

However, the relation with Tunisia is still complicated by the deteriorated security situation caused particularly by the unstable security situation in Libya. Tunisia closely cooperates with the EU in regard to the fight against terrorism. Despite all security measures, Tunisia faced three terrorist attacks aimed at tourist targets in 2015. The complicated security situation could discourage Czech investors in the long run.

Algeria, which has been for many years on the verge of a civil war and where the security situation does not guarantee the protection of foreign investors, became a point of interest of the Czech Republic. In the efforts to commence an economic cooperation with it, Czech Minister of Foreign Affairs L. Zaorálek and Minister of Defence M. Stropnický officially visited Algeria. The visit of Minister Zaorálek was the first official visit of the Czech Minister of Foreign Affairs from 2002. L. Zaorálek stated that Algeria was an important partner in the area of North Africa with strategic relevance for the stability in the region, mostly Libya. The Czech Republic expressed interest in strengthening the cooperation within the area of military cooperation and trade with army materials.⁵⁵ In May 2015, the contract on cooperation in the defence area was signed. The agreement is valid for ten years and it should enable the Czech Republic to strengthen the economic cooperation.⁵⁶

Libya is still in the state of the Civil War. The government is not able to control the country, even in the Capital of Tripoli. Individual Islamic groups, some of them endorsing the self-proclaimed ISIS, control some oil fields and they also managed to receive significant amounts of military material from the army warehouses. With respect to the inability of the Libyan Government to ensure the control over the army warehouses, the UN Security Council still insists on banning the import of weapons and military material to the country, which has been required by the Libyan Government for many years. In regard to the critical security situation, the Czech Republic evacuated its Embassy in Tripoli, and there has been no diplomatic representation in the country.

In 2015, the media published a report on the kidnapping of the Czech citizen, Pavel Hruža, who worked in Libya for the Maltese company Value Added Oilfield Services. Despite all diplomatic efforts from the Czech Government, the Czech citizen was not found.⁵⁷

The complicated security situation in Libya also threatens the stability of the whole region and enables uncontrolled movement of the immigrants and also terrorist groups which use the situation to strengthen their influence in the region. The fear of uncontrolled movement of migrants and possible infiltration of terrorist groups to Europe resulted in the EU approved EUNAVFOR-MED (*European Union Naval Force Mediterranean*). The Czech Republic promised its help and three Czech officials were involved in EUNAVFOR-MED in 2015.⁵⁸

Czech diplomacy and Iraq

Iraq was perceived by the Czech Republic as one of the priority countries in the Middle East and the prospect of mutual cooperation seemed promising.

The whole situation is currently seriously affected by the security situation caused by the activity of a terrorist organisation, the self-proclaimed ISIS, which still controls some parts of Iraq. The security situation in the country has very significant implications for the whole Czech foreign policy in Iraq. Despite the current form being completely different from the expectations of the Czech foreign policy after the end of the second Gulf War, we can state that the Czech Republic quickly adjusted to the current situation; it has an active approach in the relations with Iraq; for example, it tries to facilitate the resolution of the situation in the country.

In regard to the current situation in Iraq, the Czech foreign policy focuses on the support of the country in the fight against the ISIS. In September 2015, the Czech Prime Minister met the Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi shortly after the termination of the summit against the Islamic State, terrorism, and violent extremism convened in the UN facility. During the bilateral meeting, Prime Minister Sobotka ensured his Iraqi counterpart that the Czech Republic was still prepared to actively help in the fight against the self-proclaimed ISIS. The role of the Czech Republic in the fight against terrorism was appreciated by the American Vice-President, Joe Biden.⁵⁹ Within the policy of the support of Iraq against the ISIS, the Czech Republic granted a large supply of military material to Iraq. Specifically, it included ten million bullets for submachine guns and five thousand manual grenades. A part of the supply was sent directly to the Iraq Government and a part to the Kurdish armed forces. The transport was provided by Great Britain together with the USA. However, this was the second supply of this kind. The first supply was sent in 2014 when the Czech Republic donated 8 million bullets for the machine guns and 5 thousand rockets for RPG7. The total value of the gift reaches almost 41 million CZK.⁶⁰

In 2015, the Czech government introduced the proposal to donate 7600 assault rifles, model 58. Almost a half of them are almost new. All rifles originate from the eliminated reserves of the Czech Army. The transport of the weapons from the Czech Republic to Iraq should be provided by the USA.⁶¹

In addition to the support of Iraq in the form of gifts, two important business transactions were completed. Firstly, the Czech Republic finalised the sale of advanced light combat L-159 aircraft. In March 2015, the Czech Government approved the sale of fifteen advanced light combat L-159 aircraft. The trade was organised by Aero Vodochody, which purchased the advanced light combat aircraft from the Czech Army for almost 800 million CZK and then sold them with the complete service, spare parts, and training to Iraq for 4 billion CZK. The Czech Republic had been very close to the conclusion of the contract in the past; however, the final part was not achieved until then. Currently, Iraq needs the aviation support against the land forces which is the domain of the advanced light combat L-159 aircraft. In November 2015, the first two advanced light combat aircraft were handed over at the Baghdad airport with their expected utilisation in the fights with the self-proclaimed ISIS. Iraqi pilots that will fly the aircraft passed their training in the Czech Republic.⁶²

The second significant business deal was completed by Excalibur Army, which concluded the contract with the Iraqi Government for the supply of renovated tanks T-72 and armoured fighting vehicles BVP-1. The total contract is worth hundreds of

millions and it shall be implemented in the years to come. The business was approved by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Interior, and Defence.⁶³

In addition to the supplies of the military material, the Czech Republic tries to help Iraq using other tools. In addition to the material help, the Czech Republic shall provide training of Iraqi pilots of helicopters. The contract on their training was signed in 2014. The state-owned company LOM Praha provides the training in the Centre of Aviation Training in Pardubice. The training of the pilots shall last at least one year.⁶⁴

In 2015, several types of non-military support were provided to Iraq from the Czech Republic. For example, Minister L. Zaorálek approved the funding of 15 million CZK for the citizens of Iraq and Syria affected by the armed conflict. The finances should be used for the purchase of the required items, and also for education, and they should be divided into three projects in Iraq and three projects in Syria. The projects were implemented by the non-profit organisations Czech Red Cross, *Diakonia of the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren* and the Charity of the Czech Republic.⁶⁵

In 2015, the Czech Government agreed to receive 153 Iraqi refugees. They were Iraqi Christians affected by the armed conflict. Prime Minister Sobotka stated that the Czech Republic acted with solidarity during the migration crisis and his government should continue to do so. The costs for the relocation shall be borne by the Government and the non-profit sector, and most costs shall be covered by Nadační fond Generace 21.⁶⁶

Czech diplomacy and Iran

In 2015, the Czech foreign policy continued in strengthening the relationship with Iran. This trend commenced in 2014 when Iran decided to disconnect a part of the device for the enrichment of uranium (the part which enriched uranium above 20%), and started to dispose of the reserves of this enriched uranium. This immediately resulted in the release of sanctions from the European Union which opened new opportunities for the Czech Republic, particularly within trade. We must note that in 2014, the Czech political scene experienced quiet a stormy debate on the effects of human rights protection politics on the export of Czech companies when we could notice many polarised opinions across the whole political spectrum. Despite the debate, the first business mission travelled to Iran in 2014, which could be considered a clear signal of the efforts of the Czech Republic to have closer relationships with Iran. For the whole year 2015, the Czech foreign policy clearly aimed at strengthening the efforts concerning Iran. Iran provides great opportunities to the Czech businessmen because the mutual cooperation offers a great potential. The development of business-economic cooperation with Iran fits in the concept of the increased diversification of Czech exports promoted by the Government.⁶⁷

A very important milestone for the development of mutual relationships is the agreement from 2015 when the international powers agreed with Iran to restrict its nuclear program. The West promised to gradually lift the economic sanctions imposed in several rounds in 2006 by the USA, UN, and the European Union, providing Iraq observes the contractual conditions. In January 2016, the International Agency for Nu-

clear Energy stated that Iran observed all conditions stipulated in the Agreement, and then the USA and EU immediately announced the lifting of the sanctions.⁶⁸

The strengthening of mutual relationships was confirmed by the visit of the delegation from the Chamber of Deputies led by the Deputy Chairman of the Chamber of Deputies of the Czech Republic, Vojtěch Filip, to Iran in 2015.

The main goal of the delegation was the improvement of the relations between both countries, the restoration of the cooperation, and the opening of the Iranian market to the Czech companies. The delegation also included the representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Industry and Trade. During the two-day visit, the delegation met some Iranian leading representatives, for example the Minister of Industry, Commerce, and Mining, and the Minister for Economic Matters and Finance. The delegation also participated in the Czech-Iranian Forum with the aim to establish contacts between the Czech and Iranian businessmen. Iran plans an investment of hundreds of millions of dollars, which is a great opportunity for the Czech businessmen to be engaged in the country. There are many areas suitable for cooperation.⁶⁹

In addition to the above-mentioned delegation, the Czech Minister of Foreign Affairs, L. Zaorálek, visited Iran in September 2015. He commenced the business forum in Isfahan, where the representatives of Czech companies tried to find new business partners. During his visit, Mr Zaorálek met his Iranian counterpart, Mohammad Javad Zarif, who stated that it was the new beginning of mutual relationships. Zarif also expressed a wish to simplify the relations at the political level due to economic cooperation. The visit of Mr. Zaorálek shall simplify mutual contacts. In addition to the bilateral topics, the Ministers discussed the security situation in the Middle East, the migration wave and terrorism, including the self-proclaimed ISIS. At the end of the visit, Mr. Zaorálek met the Iranian President, Hassan Rouhani, and they shared the same topics during their dialogue. After the negotiation, the Czech Minister of Foreign Affairs stated that if we wanted to resolve the migration crisis, we had to focus on its causes, i.e. the conflicts in Iraq and Syria. According to Zaorálek, Europe alone is not able to change the situation in Syria. Iran should play a key role during the settlement of the crisis.⁷⁰

The Current situation in Iran and particularly the lifting of the sanctions by the USA and the EU represent a great opportunity for the Czech Republic to restore the relations of both countries. Historically, Iran had quiet strong connections with former Czechoslovakia which was a stable business partner of the country. The Czech companies still have very good reputation in Iran.⁷¹ The crucial aspect for the development of the business relations between the countries was the signature of the contract in Prague on the abolishment of the double taxation and the prevention of the income tax evasion at the end of April.⁷² Important help for the Czech exporters was provided by the Export Guarantee and Insurance Corporation (EGAP), which restored the insurance of the export to Iran. It significantly reduces the risks for the domestic companies which plan to introduce their products on the local market.⁷³

As mentioned earlier, the Czech-Iranian business relationships have a long tradition. Nevertheless, the relationships suffered strongly by the sanctions imposed on

Iran and also by the “quiet embargo” by Iran imposed between 2003 and 2007 due to the Persian broadcast of Radio Free Europe/Radio Europe (RFE) from Prague that had been criticised by Iran. Whilst in 2010, the value of the Czech export to Iran represented 1.8 billion CZK, in 2014, the exported goods were worth 564 million CZK.⁷⁴

The above-mentioned broadcasting was one of the topics which strongly affect the relations of both countries. It was the reason for withdrawing the Iranian Ambassador from Prague in 1998. Minister of Foreign Affairs Zaorálek stated that the negotiations during his visit were very supportive; however, this topic was not mentioned.⁷⁵

The restoration of the diplomatic relationships of both countries at the level of Ambassadors seems to be the next logical step to restart the mutual relations.

Czech Republic and Afghanistan

Afghanistan has ranked amongst the priority countries of the Czech foreign policy for many years. We must note that that on 1. 1. 2015, the mission NATO ISAF in Afghanistan was officially completed and replaced by the mission Resolute Support. The Alliance in Afghanistan still keeps the military presence. The Czech Republic contributes to the mission particularly with the guard company operating at the strategically important base in Bagram, the aviation advisory team, and the field surgery team. The task mission headquarters of the Czech Army is located at the Kabul base. The Czech Republic is also represented at the headquarters of the mission Resolute Support in Bagram and Kabul. Almost three hundred Czech soldiers operate in Afghanistan. This contribution ranks Czechia amongst the ten greatest contributors to this mission.⁷⁶

In 2015, Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka negotiated the stay of the Czech soldiers with the Secretary General of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation Jens Stoltenberg. The Czech Army has approved the mission in Afghanistan before the end of 2016; after the meeting, Prime Minister Sobotka announced that the Czech Republic should be engaged in Afghanistan after 2016.⁷⁷ Therefore, the Czech Republic fulfils its alliance obligations and actively participates in the fight against terrorism.

In August 2015, the Czech Government approved the use of 40 million CZK designed for the help in Afghanistan. Half of the sum shall be sent to the Afghan Reconstruction Fund operated by the World Bank and the money shall be allocated to the development programs. They are focused on education, healthcare, agriculture, development of rural areas, building the infrastructure, and good governance. These are the areas recognised for the Czech expertise including the interest of the Czech economic subjects in direct participation in the programs. The second half of the money shall be allocated to the development of the Afghan security forces. We must mention that the Czech Republic provides financial help to Afghanistan every year and the plan for this help was accepted by the Czech Government in 2012 upon appeal to provide the help. The USA then required the help for Afghanistan until 2024. The Czech Republic, just like most other contributing countries, undertook to help only until 2017 and promised to make the decision on the extension later.⁷⁸

According to the above-mentioned plan, until the end of 2017, the Czech Republic should donate 140 million CZK, 80 million CZK should go to the support of the development programs, and 60 million CZK to strengthen the security units. According

to L. Zaorálek, the Czech Republic pledged this help in the past years at various security conferences. It fulfilled its promise to help people in the countries with the highest migration to Europe. Minister Zaorálek then stated that the Czech Republic should preventatively engage directly in the problematic regions. He mentioned before that the Czech Republic was prepared by means of various programs to help keeping people in their countries. Prime Minister B. Sobotka confirmed the words and stated it was important for the countries with fleeing citizens to protect the lives and property of their people and provide them with the perspective of a dignified life so that their citizens would not try to leave the country.⁷⁹

THE MIDDLE EAST, THE MEDITERRANEAN AND AFGHANISTAN IN THE CZECH FOREIGN POLICY: IDENTIFYING AND CHARACTERIZING THE KEY ACTORS

In 2015, the Czech Republic within the Middle East policy – similarly to other countries – focused with priority on Israel; however, it had to react to other challenges in the region with decreasing stability, too. For example, the Czech Republic strengthened its relationship with Jordan, which played an important role in the region close to the destabilised countries such as Syria and Iraq (and partially also Lebanon). The Government of Prime Minister Sobotka continued with the positive approach to Israel; however, certain critical voices aimed at Israel particularly from the Minister of Foreign Affairs, L. Zaorálek, who announced, shortly after his election, the necessity to adopt a *“More balanced policy to the Middle East”*.⁸⁰

The critical approach of Mr. Zaorálek to Israel was apparent during his visit to Israel in 2015 when he openly criticised Israel for the construction of Israeli settlements in the West Bank of Jordan and in East Jerusalem. On the other hand, President Zeman still maintains a non-critical approach to Israel; during 2015, he met the Israeli President Rivlin and pointed out the necessity to strengthen mutual cooperation.

In addition to strengthening the relations with Jordan in 2015, the cooperation with the Maghreb countries grew. Like Jordan, Tunis, and Morocco, they represent the strategically stable partners in the region which is increasingly exposed to the armed conflicts in the surrounding countries, and to terrorism. Lately, the Czech Republic tried to strengthen the cooperation with Algeria which had been marginalised by the Czech diplomacy for a long time. In 2015, Minister of Foreign Affairs Zaorálek and Minister of Defence Stropnický visited Algeria.

Due to the partial stabilisation on the Egyptian political scene, the Czech Republic continued strengthening the Czech-Egyptian economic cooperation in 2015 and still perceived Egypt as one of the priority countries of interest in the region.

Afghanistan is traditionally the priority country of the Czech foreign policy and since Prime Minister Sobotka promised the participation of Czech soldiers in the mission Resolute Support, it shall remain the priority country. In 2015, a positive development occurred in Iran, which was immediately used by the Czech Republic for the development of new business contacts, and the relationships of both countries have

generally improved. This trend shall continue in the coming years because Iran has a great economic potential. At the same time, the Czech Republic is very well aware of the important position of UAE in the Middle East, and it aims to be engaged in the country, establish business contacts, and support Czech companies in their efforts to penetrate the local markets.

CONCLUSION

It seems that Czech foreign policy in 2015 started to perceive the reality of the Middle East more comprehensively and it does not consider just the events in Israel, as it used to be. It does not mean that the Czech diplomacy did not continue strengthening the Czech-Israeli strategic partnership in 2015 which was reflected by strengthening the economic relations or the visit of the President of Israel to Prague.

To a certain level, it is a natural shift, the deterioration of the security situation in the Middle East is unprecedented and it is obvious that it is unrelated to Israel and Israel-Palestine conflict. Therefore, the Czech Republic has to develop more allies and information channels in the Middle East which could engage the Czech diplomacy in the reality of the whole region and strengthen the economic and other interests of the Czech Republic. To a certain level, the changed approach to the Middle East may relate to the head of the current Ministry of Foreign Affairs who has a more comprehensive and critical standpoint to this area contrary to many of his predecessors.

The attention to the Middle East and the related topics, such as Islam, Islamism, migration, terrorism, etc., in 2015 is related to the migration crisis which – even within a limited scope – affected the Czech Republic. A negligible – still very asymmetrically published – number of refugees came to the Czech territory or planned to use it as transit. Not many Czech citizens could escape the above-mentioned topics in 2015. The related discussions – sadly often triggered on the basis of various media misinterpretations and ignorance of the terminology – were omnipresent. For example, the obscure-pathological opinions of entomologist Martin Konvička, who was unknown before 2015, became a part of the national discussion. It was greatly supported by President Zeman, who has been known for his Islamophobic statements (which he “somehow” managed to spare during strengthening the contacts with Muslim countries such Jordan); the President also stood next to Konvička during the official commemoration of 17 November in 2015.⁸¹ Not only Konvička but also many “intelligent people with university degrees” started to comment the Middle East situation in 2015, which had been unknown to them until then. It all resulted in a totally chaotic, superficial, and often fascist discussion on the defined topics with the contribution from politicians of mainstream parties, from ODS and also ČSSD, and other political subjects.

The Czech foreign policy clearly indicated the continuation of the efforts to commence new partnerships which would compensate the losses caused by the fall of the regimes after the wave of the so-called Arab Spring. The bilateral relations between the Czech Republic and Jordan were strengthened. In February 2015, President Ze-

man made an official visit to Amman where he pledged to help Jordan with the problems of growing numbers of Syrian refugees and also to strengthen the economic and security cooperation.

At the same time, the Czech Republic restarted the cooperation with Algeria which started being perceived by the Czech diplomacy as a possible strategic partner for the stability in the region, particularly in relation to neighbouring Libya currently facing the civil war; the Libyan instability threatens the whole Maghreb region.

The maintenance of stability in the region should be the priority goal of the Czech policy in the Middle East. It requires withdrawing from unilateral support of some parts to the conflict and Middle East players (for example the Kurds or their regional and political fractions). The Czech Republic should further focus on the balanced policy in relation to the region and on strengthening the bilateral cooperation with individual countries in the region. Iraq was perceived by the Czech Republic as one of the priority countries in the Middle East and the prospect of mutual cooperation seemed very promising.

However, it was strongly affected by the serious security situation caused by the ongoing armed conflict. The Czech Republic quickly reacted to the development and adjusted to the situation very well. In 2015, we could see a very active approach of the Czech Republic in relation to Iraq when the Czech Republic provided significant help in the fight against the self-proclaimed Islamic state in the form of military material, humanitarian help or, for example, the training of Iraqi pilots in the Czech Republic. In 2015, several important business transactions were completed, namely the sale of the advanced light combat L-159 aircraft, which had faced many problems for a long time.

The Czech Republic also managed to react to the situation in Egypt, which gradually returned to the pre-revolution state in 2015. In 2014, the Czech Republic renewed the supplies of weapons to the country. Egypt still represents a significant economic potential for the Czech Republic. In 2015, the economic cooperation deepened and the CR continued with its efforts to support the penetration of the Czech investors to the Egyptian market.

We have to positively evaluate the Czech foreign policy concerning Iran for its active approach. The Czech Republic reacted to the actual development in the country and before the sanctions were lifted in 2016, it organised several visits of the leading Czech representatives together with the business delegations which were supposed to help the Czech companies to start new business contacts. The Czech Republic has a good base because the Czech-Iranian business relations have a long tradition and the Czech products have a good reputation in Iran. Undoubtedly, Iran provides a great economic potential and the Czech Republic should strive to utilize it.

Afghanistan has ranked among the priority countries of the Czech foreign policy for many years. Despite the official completion of the ISAF mission in 2015, the coalition soldiers are still present in Afghanistan within the mission Resolute Support. This mission still includes the Czech soldiers and Prime Minister Sobotka promised the cooperation for the future.

The United Arab Emirates are included in the actual Czech export strategy as a priority country of interest. The Czech Republic is very well aware that the UAE currently represent a very important business centre and the gate for trade with other countries in the Middle East. Within this context, we can very positively evaluate that the Czech Republic tries to be engaged in the country and establish new contacts. This is also supported by the representative office in Abu Dhabi which regularly organises seminars and workshops focused on the actual events in the economy and on the new business and investment opportunities in the UAE.

In 2015, Saudi Arabia was connected with the Czech foreign policy by means of a significant export growth of Czech weapons into the country which increased six times in comparison with 2013. The media especially published the topic whether the Czech Republic should export weapons to the Saudi Arabia at all – with respect to the nature of its authoritative regime.

The efforts of the Czech Republic to comprehensively perceive the issues of the Middle East were reflected by the adoption of the new *Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Czech Republic* which highlighted the importance of maintaining the strategic partnership with Israel and also supported the necessity to strengthen the relationships with other countries in the region.

The Czech foreign policy set the goal to strengthen the relationships with the Gulf countries and the regions in North Africa and to standardize the relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran. The Czech Republic also tries to become involved in the international cooperation with the goal to preserve the security stability in the region. In 2015, the goals were achieved and the Czech Republic was actively involved in the solutions of the Syrian migration crisis within the cooperation with Jordan. The Czech diplomacy also positively reacted to the deepening security situation in Iraq which received significant humanitarian and military help. At the same time, the economic cooperation with UAE and Saudi Arabia and the North African countries was strengthened. The cooperation of the Czech Republic and Iran was also successful. In 2015, the Czech Republic was able to react to the complicated situation in the region and managed to significantly strengthen the bilateral partnership with the Middle East countries and fulfil the goals of the foreign policy concept.

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