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## Chapter 9

# The Middle East and the Maghreb in the Czech Foreign Policy

### CONTINUITY IN THE FACE OF REGIONAL TURMOIL

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**Executive Summary:** In 2017 the Czech foreign policy toward the Middle East and the Maghreb did not witness significant shifts and followed the wider goals established in the previous years. It continued to be oriented on the stabilisation of the states affected by the wars in Syria, Iraq and Libya, limiting the number of refugee arrivals to Europe, strengthening the business co-operations with promising regional partners and enhancing the co-operation and strategic partnership with Israel. Accordingly, economic diplomacy, security assistance and humanitarian relief remained the dominant modes of engagement with most of the countries in the region. Similarly to the previous years, the Czech policy mostly reactively followed the common EU positions, while being proactive regarding the issues concerning Israel and, to a lesser extent, also Syria, Jordan, Iraq and Libya. The Czech policy for the Middle East did not strongly enter the domestic public debate. The only exceptions were the conflicting positions on the issue of the Czech embassy's relocation to Jerusalem and the role of the ambassador in Syria.

### POLITICAL BACKGROUND

Despite the significant rollback of the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the security and societal turmoil in the Middle East did not seem to calm down in 2017. Though transformed by the stronger involvement of Turkey and the gradual demise of former opposition strongholds, the war in Syria continued, as did the conflict in Libya. The regional competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran did not de-escalate either. Nevertheless, there were several new developments which had a strong impact on the regional politics. *First*, the commencement of Donald Trump's presidency brought an increased level of unpredictability to the US policy towards the region and especially to its position on Syria and Iran. President Trump strengthened the US al-

liance with the Arab Gulf states and continued to be highly critical of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which raised doubts over the future of the Iran nuclear deal and put the US at odds with the EU.<sup>1</sup> *Second*, the year 2017 witnessed increased Russian and Iranian roles in the Middle East. While Iran expanded its foothold in Iraq and Syria, Russia continued in its efforts to establish itself as a strong political actor which is able to influence the outcomes of the regional crises.<sup>2</sup> *Third*, Saudi Arabia and the UAE assumed a more assertive position in the region, which was manifested by, among other things, their more confrontational policy towards Iran and its allies as well as their row with Qatar.<sup>3</sup> *Fourth*, the refugee crisis continued as the number of Syrian refugees which fled the country reached five million. While the overall rate of refugee arrivals to Europe declined, the EU as well as individual European countries still perceived dealing with the refugees as a top political priority.<sup>4</sup>

Correspondingly to the rest of the EU, the Czech policy towards the (wider) Middle East has been, for the past few years, highly influenced by the region's instability, the need to tackle the expansion of radical Jihadist movements and the refugee crisis.<sup>5</sup> On the most general level, this did not change in 2017 and the Czech foreign policy had to react to the mentioned issues. As such, the Czech policy toward the region was oriented mostly toward the security and stabilisation policies in the countries affected by civil wars and the influx of refugees with the aim of limiting the migration to Europe and enabling these states to cope with societal pressures and security issues. An important part of the Czech activities in the region was oriented especially on economic diplomacy and the support of the Czech exports to selected countries. As was traditionally the case, the strategic priority was given to relations with Israel.<sup>6</sup> The results of the parliamentary elections held in October 2017 and formation of the new Czech government under the Prime Minister Andrej Babiš did not change the Czech Middle Eastern policy in a significant way. Although Babiš himself insisted on a stronger Czech contribution to the EU anti-smuggling activities in Libya and a more significant support for the Libyan authorities, such assistance was limited to financial aid.

Important Events and the Czech Agenda for the Middle Eastern and North African States

### *Israel and Palestine*

In 2017, being perceived through the prism of a 'strategic partnership' defined in the Concept of the Czech Foreign Policy, the Czech-Israeli relations were the most intense of out of all the Czech relations with states in the Middle East. Although under Minister Lubomír Zaorálek, the Czech Republic assumed a slightly more balanced position towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, this change did not impact the other policies related to Israel. In general, the public discourse has remained in favour of a close co-operation with Israel as well.

However, the nature of the Czech-Israeli relations has been gradually changing. Unlike in the second half of the 2000s, when the intensity of the partnership was reflected by many political contacts on both sides, mutual visits, and even joint government meetings, in the past few years the Czech Republic has been significantly more

active and Israel has been increasingly passive in the bilateral relations. In the years 2015–2016, at the time of Netanyahu's third government, Israel actively engaged only in around 10% of their mutual interactions.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, the Czech Republic and Israel maintained a strong co-operation, which was reflected by the significant number of Czech ministers, MPs and special delegations that visited Israel. At the same time, Israel sent to Prague its Minister of Science and Technology and members of the Knesset to increase the co-operation between the parliaments.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, on the highest level, there were talks between the Czech Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka and the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and the two prime ministers also took part in the first *Visegrad 4 + Israel* summit in Budapest.

Nevertheless, the lower Israeli activity in the mutual political relations did not prevent the signing of several new agreements which heralded the two countries' active and growing ties in various sectors. Among other measures, new initiatives were inaugurated in the fields of research and development, military and security co-operation and training (even with the designation of a new Czech defence diplomat in Israel), protection against terrorism, cybersecurity, and cultural co-operation.<sup>9</sup> Also, the Czech-Israeli trade co-operation remained strong and growing in 2017 as Israel was the sixth largest importer of Czech products outside of the EU.<sup>10</sup> However, the most publicised bilateral contract with Israel, which was negotiated by the Ministry of Defence and consisted of the Czech Republic acquiring some MADR radars from Israel for CZK 3.5 billion, was repeatedly postponed in 2017.<sup>11</sup>

On the level of the public and the political debate, the issue of the divided Jerusalem came repeatedly to the forefront. The first round of politicisation of this issue on the national level took place in May, when the Parliament strongly criticised UNESCO for a resolution which proclaimed the Temple Mount to be an Islamic holy site. The Czech conservative and liberal right-wing MPs called for a cessation of payments to the agency and urged the government to recognise Jerusalem as Israel's capital.<sup>12</sup> Prime Minister Netanyahu, in response, publicly thanked the Czech President Miloš Zeman and the Czech Parliament for their support of Israel.<sup>13</sup> The MFA, however, sided with the EU position on the issue and it did not withdraw from UNESCO – a move which was criticised by right-wing MPs.<sup>14</sup>

The second round of the debate on Jerusalem took place in December, when the US President Donald Trump declared his intention to relocate the US embassy to the city. President Zeman already called for such a move in 2013 and repeated his position again.<sup>15</sup> On the other side, the MFA, under both Minister Zorálek and (later) Minister Stropnický, as well as the Prime Minister Andrej Babiš sided with the common EU position and stated that due to the unclear status of Jerusalem, the American relocation would not be replicated by the Czech Republic in the near future.<sup>16</sup> But even when the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) adopted a resolution calling for Trump's move to be void, the Czech Republic abstained and did not vote against the move (as opposed to the majority of EU countries).<sup>17</sup>

In 2017 the Czech Republic's relations with the representatives of Palestine were not as strong as, for instance, in 2015, and their planned inter-ministerial meeting

did not take place. Nevertheless, the Palestinian Minister of Foreign Affairs Riyad al-Maliki officially visited the Czech Republic and held discussions with Czech representatives.<sup>18</sup>

### *Iran*

In 2017, the main contours of the Czech policy towards the Islamic Republic of Iran followed the priorities established in 2014 and 2015, when the negotiations on the Iranian nuclear programme were concluded. Under these circumstances, the Czech Republic mostly followed the common European position on Iran and did not join in the US attacks on the JCPOA agreement.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, Czech diplomacy aimed at strengthening the bilateral political relations, as well as increasing the mutual trade exchange with Iran.

The consolidation of political relations was highlighted in particular by the appointment of the new full-fledged Czech ambassador to Tehran in October 2017.<sup>20</sup> The position had been vacant since 1998, when Iran withdrew its ambassador from Prague and refused to accept the Czech ambassador in Tehran due to the row over the establishment of the Farsi branch of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty in Prague.<sup>21</sup> Following a period of cold relations between the Czech Republic and Iran in the 2000s, the ties took a more co-operative turn in 2014 with the conclusion of the talks on the nuclear programme and a more accommodating Czech policy towards the Islamic Republic.<sup>22</sup> In 2017, there were no similarly high-profile visits from the Iranian or Czech side to the other country as those in 2015 or 2016, when the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of both states made official trips to the other country. Nevertheless, the number of official contacts remained high as three official trips to Iran were made by Czech deputy ministers, and the Iranian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs visited Prague.<sup>23</sup>

The emphasis on increased economic co-operation was reflected in the growing Czech exports to Iran, as well as the signing of the new agreement on protection of investments, new agreements between the Czech export insurance company EGAP and the Iranian Central Bank and both countries' participation in business fora.<sup>24</sup>

Even though in general the more co-operative relations with Iran were not politicised, the attempt to revoke the law forbidding the sale of equipment for the nuclear power-plant in Bushehr by the Government incited a controversy in the Parliament. The Czech Social Democrats, the Communists and the Chamber of Commerce supported the proposal, which was already discussed in 2016. However, the Parliament blocked the revocation as the right-wing liberal and conservative MPs cited their fears of a potential misuse of the equipment and harm to the close Czech alliance with Israel.<sup>25</sup> The discussion in Parliament thus showed clear limits of the potential future enhancement of the Czech co-operation with Iran.

### *Syria and Lebanon*

Similarly to the preceding years, the policy on Syria had to react to the context of the ongoing civil war there. On the international stage, the Czech government sided with the common EU position calling for a political settlement of the Syrian conflict in line with the UN SC Resolution 2254, while President Zeman came closer to the Russian

position on the issue in his statements.<sup>26</sup> On the policy level, most Czech activities conducted in Syria were oriented on humanitarian relief and future reconstruction efforts, yet the Czech Republic continued to diverge from some other European countries as it remained in closer contact with the Syrian government. The related political debates were mostly concerned with the Czech reaction to the main events in the Syrian conflict and the role of the Czech ambassador to Syria. Together with Jordan, Lebanon is considered as a strategic partner in solving the Syrian immigration crisis and thus the foreign policy agenda focused on humanitarian aid as well as strengthening of the bilateral economic ties.

Inside Syria, the Czech Republic was active as a provider of humanitarian aid. In line with its long-term interdepartmental plan for its reaction to the Syrian conflict and its pledge to 'help on the spot', the Czech Republic contributed CZK 50 million to the humanitarian relief operations in Syria. The funds supported projects carried out by several Czech partner organisations, the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and missions of the UN, as well as small projects pursued in co-operation with local beneficiaries. Moreover, the funds covered logistics, including the strengthening of the diplomatic corps in Lebanon and Syria.<sup>27</sup> Also, in another kind of contribution to the post-conflict reconstruction of Syria, the MFA supported the participation of Czech companies in the International Trade Fair in Damascus.<sup>28</sup>

The official Czech policy towards the Syrian government was repeatedly politicised by diverse political and civil society actors. A significant part of the debate took place in reaction to the chemical attack in Khan Shaykhoun in April 2017. The Government and the right-wing opposition condemned the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian Air Force and supported the common European reaction, as well as the US strikes on the Syrian air base in Shayrat. In contrast, President Zeman expressed doubts about the perpetrators of the chemical attack and called for its impartial investigation, whereas the Communist Party condemned the US retaliatory attack.<sup>29</sup>

The debate frequently concentrated specifically on the role of the Czech ambassador to Syria, Eva Filipi, as the Czech Republic remained one of the few European countries with an operational embassy in Damascus. Some liberal politicians called for Ambassador Filipi's withdrawal from Damascus to manifest the Czech Republic's disassociation from the Syrian government after the attack in Khan Shaykhoun.<sup>30</sup> Subsequently, Ambassador Filipi's position was publicly questioned also in relation to her reports on the situation in Syria, which allegedly contradicted the NATO sources and presented biased views close to those of the Syrian government. Furthermore, her position was criticised also in relation to the visas issued by the Czech Embassy to certain members of the Syrian regime and Assad's family, who were allegedly attending peace talks in Geneva.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, Filipi remained in Damascus despite these critiques and Minister Zaorálek asserted that her service contributes to the wider Czech and allied efforts in Syria and strengthens the Czech position in negotiations with key allies, in particular with the USA.<sup>32</sup>

Following the controversy over the abduction of the Czech citizens in Lebanon in 2015 and their release in 2016, the relations with Lebanon have reportedly stabilised.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, the policy agenda for Lebanon was mostly focussed on support of the mitigation of the refugee crisis' impact on the country. Specifically, the Czech Republic supported three small local projects and contributed to the UNHCR fund oriented on the provision of healthcare for Syrian refugees.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, the Czech Republic enhanced its diplomatic mission to Lebanon with two additional diplomats – the first focussed on the agricultural issues and was tasked with the promotion of bilateral economic ties in this area, and the second had a portfolio oriented on humanitarian issues.<sup>35</sup>

### ***Jordan***

In 2017, the Czech policy in Jordan continued to be concentrated primarily on the mitigation of the Syrian civil war's impact. However, the relations between the two countries gradually grew as further co-operation in the economic and political area increased. The Czech policy focussed on humanitarian relief programmes, while also aiming at enhancing the Jordanian capabilities so that the country would better cope with the crises, and actively finding new opportunities for economic co-operation.

These primary areas of co-operation were also reflected in frequent official trips – e.g. the Jordanian Industry and Trade Minister and Prime Minister's visits to Prague, the visits of the Czech Deputy Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Interior and Industry and Trade to Jordan, and the working trip of the Jordanian Prince Hasan bin Talal to Prague. In April and August, the Czech and Jordanian representatives signed two new agreements – the first being on economic co-operation, and the second on the co-operation in the development of the peaceful use of nuclear energy.<sup>36</sup>

Adhering to its previously established policy of limiting the migration to Europe by actively providing humanitarian and development assistance to the affected countries in the region, the Czech Republic played an active role in the humanitarian response to the ongoing refugee crisis in Jordan. The main part of the Czech humanitarian support was allocated to the al-Azraq refugee camp, where CZK 40 million was spent on housing and infrastructure projects in 2016 and 2017. Furthermore, CZK 15 million were dedicated to financing a capacity-building project focussed on asylum policy infrastructure. Besides this, the MEDEVAC program operated by the Ministry of Interior (MoI) supported short-term visits of fourteen Czech medical teams to the country.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, the co-operation between the two countries remained strong also in the defence area as the Ministry of Defence (MoD) and the Czech Army facilitated anti-IED and CBRN training for the Jordanian armed forces.<sup>38</sup>

The increased co-operation with Jordan was also reflected in the growth of trade exchange. Following the 62% increase in the Czech exports to Jordan in 2016, which stemmed from the co-operation between the Tatra Company and the Jordanian arms manufacturer KADBB, there were new forms of trade co-operation established in 2017. Also, as side results of the MEDEVAC program, new agreements were signed in the area of medical equipment and several Czech products gained new certification for the Jordanian market.<sup>39</sup>

### ***Iraq***

In 2017 the Czech policy in Iraq was mainly defined by the reaction to the ongoing war against the Islamic State, and the resulting programmes were oriented on the support of the Iraqi state, as well as engagement in the humanitarian assistance and post-conflict reconstruction. As in Jordan, in Iraq the Czech Republic focussed on the broader stabilisation of the country, coupled with the support for Czech exports to it. Also, even though the Czech Republic has established close ties with the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in the previous years, Czech representatives did not deviate from the European position on the referendum in the region as they declared their support for the unity of Iraq.

Iraq continued to be among the priority countries for the Czech foreign policy in the Middle East. This was further reflected in the number of high-profile visits between the countries. While Prime Minister Sobotka and the Deputy Minister of Agriculture visited Iraq, the Czech Republic hosted the Iraqi Minister of Foreign Affairs.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, the Czech parliamentary delegation was joined on their trip to Iraq by a large business mission, which discussed the potential Czech role in the post-war reconstruction of Iraq and the KRG.<sup>41</sup>

The Czech assistance to the Iraqi armed forces fighting ISIS remained among the most highly visible activities in 2017. The Czech Republic maintained three military missions in the country: the first was tasked with the training of Iraqi pilots with Czech-manufactured L-159 planes, the second was in the form of the field surgery team deployed in Mosul and the third consisted of military police active within the joint Operation Inherent Resolve.<sup>42</sup> The fourth Czech contingent in Iraq – a police mission – served within an Italian police-training mission and was mandated to support the re-establishment of the Iraqi police.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, in 2016 and 2017 the Czech Republic remained, due to the deal for the delivery of the L-159s, the main exporter of weapons to Iraq.<sup>44</sup>

The Czech Republic also continued to be one of the more important providers of humanitarian aid, and in 2017 the Czech Government amended its three-year plan on the post-conflict reconstruction of Syria to also include new activities in Iraq. In sum, the Czech Government pledged to provide up to CZK 180 million in the next three years, while the humanitarian assistance planned for 2017 rose to CZK 65.5 million.<sup>45</sup>

### ***Egypt***

Traditionally, Egypt represented one of the main Czech economic partners in the Middle East. However, its importance for the Czech Republic has been slowly decreasing due to its ongoing unstable political and economic situation, and because the Czech diplomacy is focussing also on the Czech Republic's new economic partners in the region. Nevertheless, the perceived importance of Egypt goes beyond its traditional political and economic role in the region, as the European countries treat it also as a partner in the fight against irregular migration to the EU. This role was highlighted in particular at a common meeting of the PMs of the V4 and the Egyptian President Abdal Fatah Sisi, where Prime Minister Sobotka stressed Egypt's contribution to limiting migration to Europe.<sup>46</sup>

Nevertheless, the security agenda in Egypt extended beyond migration. In the Sinai Peninsula various Islamic groups continue to fight in the name of the Islamic State, creating a critical security situation. Currently the Islamic militants attack primarily military targets. Yet, in 2017, the Islamic terrorism directly affected Czech citizens at a beach resort in Hurghada when a young Egyptian stabbed to death several tourists, including a Czech national.<sup>47</sup> Minister Zaorálek sent two diplomatic notes to Egypt saying that the Czech Republic requires Egypt's co-operation in the case and requested an explanation of the incident, including its causes. Subsequently, other Czech diplomats also raised the issue.<sup>48</sup>

The Czech army continued to participate in the independent mission Multinational Force and Observers (MFO). MFO not only supervises the security arrangements between Israel and Egypt but also monitors activities of Islamic extremists in the area. In addition to its involvement in MFO, the Czech Republic also continued to provide financial support to a small medical project in the Dakhla Oasis.<sup>49</sup>

Egypt remained one of the most important partners for Czech exports in the region. The economic relationship was confirmed by mutual official visits and bilateral political negotiations. Since the USA lifted the arms embargo on Egypt, Czech arms manufacturing companies reinstated their exports to Egypt. Thus, the Czech Republic continued to support Egypt's efforts to fight terrorism by providing military equipment to the Egyptian police and army.<sup>50</sup> The exports of military equipment and arms help the Egyptian regime fight the Islamic militants and internal opposition. Despite President el-Sisi arguably bringing a certain level of authoritarian stability to the Egyptian political scene, the military support of the non-democratic regime's might is highly questionable when it comes to the maintenance of basic human rights standards as well as the long-term sustainability of the regime. The Czech army exports to the authoritarian regimes in Egypt and Saudi Arabia were thus highly criticised by international organisations such as Social Watch and Amnesty International.<sup>51</sup>

### ***The Arabian Peninsula***

The political isolation of Qatar in 2017 had a direct effect on EU interests in the region, and thus on the interests of the Czech Republic in the region as well. In recent years, the EU expressed its high interest in the Gulf region. In 2017, the Delegation of the EU to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf tightened its co-operation with the Secretariat of the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC), focussing on economic relations. Also in 2017, a Czech representative participated in the seminars organised by the EU focussing on investments in the Gulf, and the MFA hosted events aimed at potential Czech investors in the Gulf.<sup>52</sup> However, the Czech pro-active policy to straighten the economic relations with the Gulf States can be limited by Qatar's isolation and the crisis of the GCC.

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) remained the Czech Republic's strongest economic partner in the region and represented one of the largest Czech export markets outside of the EU. For example, in 2016 the cost of Czech weapons exported to the country reached CZK 1.4 billion.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, the Czech Republic seeks to penetrate Asian and African markets as many international companies reside in the UAE.



In 2017, the Czech Republic focussed on trying to achieve a diplomatic reconciliation with Saudi Arabia after the Saudi Kingdom expressed its disappointment with the Islamophobic statements of President Zeman in the past years.<sup>54</sup> Nevertheless, the Czech Republic continued to export military equipment and arms there. Moreover, Saudi Arabia established the Saudi Arabian Military Industries (SAMI), which could further facilitate the exports of Czech military industries and thereby increase the Czech army exports to the country.<sup>55</sup> This export policy was criticised by some civil society groups which pointed to the authoritarian nature of the Saudi regime and its routine violations of human rights.<sup>56</sup>

In 2017 the Emirs of Qatar and Kuwait accepted the letters of credentials of the new Czech ambassador to Kuwait, who serves as a *non-resident* ambassador to Qatar as well.<sup>57</sup> Since the Czech Republic focusses on bilateral economic relations with the states of the Arab Peninsula, the Czech diplomacy closely follows the political developments there, including Qatar's isolation, Iran's regional role and its involvement in the Yemen civil war, and the strong position of Saudi Arabia in support of the former Yemeni government, because the clashes of interests could directly affect Czech investments and the fragile stability of the region.

### ***The Maghreb***

In 2017, the Czech foreign policy towards the Maghreb maintained its stance from the previous years, i.e. the Czech Republic continued to follow the interests of NATO and the EU in the region. The Joint Declaration signed between NATO and the EU in 2016 enhanced the co-operation between the two organisations and affected their involvement in the Maghreb, which primarily focussed on security issues.<sup>58</sup>

The ongoing unstable security situation in Libya is the main concern for NATO and the EU in the region, as the Libyan under-governed territory controlled by the rebels became a safe haven for Islamist radicals. Besides the threat of terrorism, Libya is a key transit country for illegal immigration from Africa to Europe. As for the Czech Republic itself, in 2017, it continued to follow its commitment to EU NAVFOR MED. For the purpose of mitigating the immigration crisis, the Czech government approved a subsidy to support the Libyan coast guards<sup>59</sup> and the MFA resumed its focus on enhancing the co-operation with the internationally recognised Government of International Accord.

This proactive initiative is a direct effort to solve the immigration crisis outside of the EU borders as the Czech Republic continuously opposes the EU mandatory refugee quotas.<sup>60</sup> Prime Minister Babiš promised to support the migration fund financially and came forth with a proposal to send the Czech Army to Libya to help Libya protect its borders and fight illegal immigration.<sup>61</sup> However, after a meeting between the Minister of Defence Karla Šlechtová and the Chief of the General Staff Josef Bečvář, Šlechtová stated that the Czech Republic did not plan to send any troops to Libya.<sup>62</sup>

Concerning the Mediterranean immigration corridor, the Czech Republic was actively trying to find policies to reduce the number of refugees arriving through it. For this purpose, the representatives of the Committee of Foreign Affairs, Defence and

Security of the Senate of the Czech Republic met with the representatives of the Moroccan parliament and the Moroccan MFA to discuss Moroccan immigration policies and the reduction of Europe-bound migration.<sup>63</sup>

In 2017, the Czech Republic also continued to enhance its economic involvement in the region and strengthen its economic contacts in the area of investments and trade. As members of the European Neighbourhood Policy Programme, Morocco and Tunisia are stable partners for Czech investors. Primarily Morocco became a strong potential economic partner. The MFA is strongly supporting Czech investors in their efforts to penetrate the Moroccan market and sees the Moroccan market as an opportunity to reach markets in Sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>64</sup> As for Tunisia, the Czech Republic continued to prioritise its economic partnership with it as well. Since the establishment of the Czech-Tunisian Business Council in 2016 the economic exchange between the two countries continued to increase. The Tunisian economic growth picked up in the last two years after a relative stabilisation of the political situation in the country. In addition, as a part of the PROPED initiative of the MFA, the regional chamber of the conference of Brno was welcomed in Tunisia for the purpose of participating in workshops and bilateral economic negotiations.<sup>65</sup>

## IDENTIFICATION AND CHARACTERISTIC OF KEY ACTORS

The Czech policy towards the Middle East continued to be driven primarily by the Prime Minister and the MFA in 2017. In general, in the majority of their public statements both actors reactively followed the EU common positions regarding the Middle East, although there were some active co-operative moves on the part of the Czech Republic – such as Prime Minister Babiš's willingness to contribute more substantially to the EU efforts in the Mediterranean region, namely Libya, or the Czech Republic's humanitarian relief and training assistance for the national armed forces in Iraq and Jordan.<sup>66</sup> However, there were some issues where the Czech policy deviated from the European line. As was traditionally the case, the Czech Republic maintained a significantly less critical position regarding Israel's policies than the rest of the EU, which was reflected on the international stage in the Czech vote regarding the status of Jerusalem.<sup>67</sup> Nevertheless, the MFA represented a moderate voice in the debate as it tried to reconcile the traditionally pro-Israeli position of many Czech political elites, including the President and a number of MPs, with the position held by most EU states. Another highly visible example of the Czech Republic deviating from EU policy was the distinct Czech policy in Syria, where it maintained relations with the Syrian government. Thus the Czech Republic's position in this case could be interpreted as a long-term offensive and proactive foreign-policy position. Besides the main political issues, economic diplomacy formed an important, even if low-profile, proactive part of the Czech foreign policy in the Middle East as pursued by the MFA.

Other ministries contributed to the Czech activities in the Middle East as well, even though to a lesser extent. The MoI carved a distinct active role for itself in the Czech foreign policy by raising funds and pursuing humanitarian and assistance proj-

ects in Jordan, Iraq and some other countries in the region with the aim to limit migration to Europe.<sup>68</sup> Meanwhile, the MoD continued in its activity in managing the foreign military and training operations and deciding on their scope and composition.<sup>69</sup>

The issues of Czech relations with Syria and Israel became among the most politicised issues in 2017 and enabled actors beyond the relevant ministries to assume a distinct actorness. President Zeman repeatedly articulated more offensive positions on both Syria and Israel, which went against the common European policies and came closer to the views of the current Israeli (in the case of UNESCO and the moving of the embassy to Jerusalem) and Russian governments (in the case of the legitimacy of the strikes against Syria and the legitimacy of the Syrian government).<sup>70</sup> The policy on Syria was also repeatedly politicised by the liberal civil society, the media and certain MPs, who called for a disassociation from Assad's regime and a withdrawal of the ambassador to Syria.<sup>71</sup> Some parts of the liberal and human rights-oriented civil society politicised the arms exports to authoritarian regimes, such as the UAE, Saudi Arabia or Egypt.<sup>72</sup> Finally, liberal and conservative right-wing MPs politicised the Czech co-operative and reactive policy on the UNESCO declaration on Jerusalem and the potential closer business co-operation in the area of nuclear energy with Iran, and called for a rejection of policies which could potentially hamper the ties with Israel.<sup>73</sup> However, with the exception of the debate on the revocation of the Czech co-operation on the development of the Iranian Bushehr nuclear power plant, the politicisation has only rarely led to a significant change in foreign policy. Thus, the distinct actorness of these actors was quite limited.

## **MEDIA AND PUBLIC SPACE**

Based on the sample of articles on the Middle East obtained through the Anopress database, in 2017 the reporting regarding the Middle Eastern region continued to be framed primarily in negative terms. The Middle East was in general presented as a hostile region ridden by conflict, while Islam was portrayed as a direct threat to the European and the Czech culture. In general, the dominant part of the media coverage of the region was dedicated to the war in Syria, the campaign against the Islamic State, terrorist attacks on diverse targets in the region and general geopolitical issues. Compared to the Middle East (in particular the Levant), Northern Africa (the Maghreb) received significantly less attention and so did the Arabian Peninsula apart from Saudi Arabia.

The Czech media reported frequently and positively on the State of Israel in terms of both its dynamic and successful society and the related governmental policies. These aspects were in some cases cited as a potential inspiration to Europe and the Czech Republic, especially regarding the fight against terrorism. Israel also continued to host the only permanent correspondent of the Czech national TV station in the region. However, due to the increased anti-Islamic rhetoric in the media, more anti-Semitic sentiments, including those connected with Israel, can be seen among the media networks, especially in the so-called alternative media.<sup>74</sup>

The anti-immigration and the closely linked anti-Islamic rhetoric remained a major issue in the Czech media, and such arguments are often spread even by Czech politicians, including President Zeman and some MPs. The conservatively oriented media such as the newspapers *Právo* and *Lidové noviny*, and alternative media such as the website *Parlamentní listy* tended to give more space to the critics of Islam and the anti-immigration agenda than the other side.<sup>75</sup> At the same time this trend of anti-immigration and even Islamophobic discourse was particularly noticeable in the media owned by the publishing house Mafra, which is linked to the Czech PM Andrej Babiš and controls some of the mainstream media such as the newspapers *Mladá fronta DNES* and *Lidové noviny* or the internet portal *iDNES.cz*.<sup>76</sup> The prominence of anti-Islamic rhetoric in the Czech Republic was also noticed by the international media network Al-Jazeera, which reported that the Czech Muslim minority is subject to hate from the majority society.<sup>77</sup>

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Czech foreign policy in the Middle East did not experience any significant changes in 2017. As the region continued to suffer from conflicts and instability, the Czech foreign policy followed the policies established in previous years. Accordingly, the main Czech interests in this regard were perceived through the need to contribute to the security and stabilisation of the states in the region, while contributing to increasing the Czech exports to the region.

In general, the Czech diplomacy retained its reactive and co-operative approach, which was in line with the policies of the EU and NATO in the region, particularly in the Maghreb and the Arabian Peninsula. The Czech Republic demonstrated its proactive participation in EU efforts to mitigate the impact of the refugee crisis in the Mediterranean, as well as to enhance the stability of the Maghreb region in general. The same could be said about the active Czech contribution to the humanitarian relief in the countries affected by the conflict in Syria or the war against the Islamic State, particularly Jordan and Iraq. The Czech diplomacy also continued to be highly active in the area of economic diplomacy while searching for new business partnerships in a number of Middle Eastern countries. In some cases – e.g. in Jordan, the Czech humanitarian relief activities also contributed to new forms of economic co-operation.

As in the past years, in 2017, there were also some issues where the Czech foreign policy slightly deviated from the common European position. While subscribing to the most common EU political statements, the Czech Republic was less critical and more accommodating towards Israel than other EU member states. The relations with the state of Israel continue to be perceived as a strategic partnership, and a wide range of Czech actors actively pursued a closer co-operation with Israeli partners. The second main issue was the Czech Republic pursuing a more proactive policy concerning its relations with the Syrian government. However, even in this area the Czech Republic did not directly challenge most of the common EU positions on the issue.

The Czech diplomacy seems to be effective in attaining the modest goals of reactively contributing to regional stabilisation and actively increasing Czech exports in the Middle East. Bearing in mind the limited capabilities of a medium-sized Central European state, this approach still begs the question of whether these goals are the only ones which the Czech Republic should aim for in the region and whether its overall approach, which is usually focussed either on immediate humanitarian relief or on co-operation with political and business elites, fits the long-term goals of stabilisation. More attention to enhancing the capabilities of the civil society so that it would cope with the looming societal challenges brought about by the refugee crisis or other crises, as well as stricter conditions applied to the economic co-operation with the authoritarian states in the region would, in our view, provide a better and more sustainable reaction. The support for Syrian students at Czech universities seems like a promising, even if very limited, start.

Sobotka's Government diversified the Czech policy on the region as it established closer relations with Iran and assumed a more balanced position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This approach seems correct and should be retained in the future, even though the Czech position on the relations with Israel is still significantly less critical than those of most of the Czech Republic's other foreign policy partners. This might hamper the Czech interests in maintaining an effective multilateral co-operation within the EU and alienate some of the country's European partners, especially when the Czech Republic votes against the majority of the other European states on rather symbolic issues, though this position is also questionable when it comes to a number of highly controversial Israeli policies. The Czech Republic might be a strategic partner of Israel, but that should not mean that it needs to be blind and silent towards some of the worrying trends inside Israeli politics, especially when these are openly criticised even by many Israelis. A wider Czech reflection of these issues could help to portray Czech Republic as an honest, even if more pro-Israeli, broker on some issues rather than an uncritical supporter of the one side.

Furthermore, while the focus of the Czech foreign policy in the region seems to be mostly on the Levant, a stronger emphasis on economic co-operation with the states in the Maghreb, particularly Tunisia and Morocco, might also contribute to reaching the wider goal of stabilising the Mediterranean region through contributing to the economic development of these countries and the creation of new jobs.

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## Endnotes

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