

What Does the Taormina G7 Summit Mean for MENA Stability?

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Executive Summary

This policy brief discusses the effectiveness and consequences of the G7 Summit meeting in Taormina on stability in the Middle East and North African (MENA) region. The brief, like the G7 discussions, predominately focuses on the countries of Libya and Syria in establishing peace and stability in the region. It highlights how G7 countries have united against online extremism, which is driving individuals to terrorist training camps in Libya, and analyses the G7's potential effectiveness. The role and position of Tunisia as an ally and G7 outreach partner is also brought into the discussion. Previous talks among G7 Foreign Ministers in Lucca, Italy, and their impact on the Taormina Summit are also discussed.

Introduction

The G7 summit in Taormina, Sicily, was the 43rd meeting of the seven major industrialized nations. Several African leaders were in attendance and stability in the MENA region was a key focus point as it is closely connected to the two issues of G7 concern, migration and terrorism. Whilst Syria is often the main focus of MENA instability, Libya has generated a great deal of attention in discussions on how best to facilitate peace and growth.

Libya

Following the [Manchester terror attack](#) on 22 May, Libya was placed at the forefront of MENA discussions after it was discovered that the attacker had

links with the country. Indeed, the attacker who [killed over 30 people in Sousse](#) in 2015 was also linked to Libya, having received training there. Despite cutting her attendance at Taormina short, UK Prime Minister Theresa May noted in her press conference that the fight against terror had moved “[from the battlefield to the internet](#)”, and rallied support from her fellow G7 members in pushing social media firms to do more to combat the spread of extremist material online. The outcome of this is difficult to foresee. On the one hand, should the internet giants comply, less material would be available online that might radicalise individuals to turn to extremism, and thus reduce the numbers seeking training in countries like Libya. However, on the contrary, [tech firms have fought back](#) against previous government requests, citing privacy as a priority; therefore, the effectiveness of the G7’s agreement is yet to be seen.

The G7 countries are not only facing terror issues from Libya, but are also

facing significant migration and human trafficking problems. Indeed, the [majority of the 180,000 refugees](#) who arrived last year in Italy had travelled through Libya. The Taormina Summit dampened the hopes of European leaders, particularly Italy, for a solution. Although the US acknowledged the human rights of migrants, it insisted that countries should set their own migration limits, and went further by stating that refugees should be located as [close to their home nation as possible](#). In addition, Japan [admitted only 27 refugees in 2015](#), and little mention was made at this summit regarding raising such levels. Consequently, the G7 appears to have made little progress on any short-term solutions in battling the flow of migrants to Europe via the Mediterranean.

Prior to the summit, Italy sought to [prioritise Libya](#) at the G7. Additionally, the United States committed increased foreign aid to Libya, as well as Iraq and Syria, despite an overall reduction in the [US foreign aid budget](#). However, it was

ultimately Mahamadou Issoufou, the President of Niger, who brought the region to the forefront of discussion by stressing the urgent need for an [end to the crisis](#) in Libya. Consequently, the G7 called upon all nations in the MENA area to “[play a constructive role](#)” in the region’s political stability.

Political and economic stability in Libya will be crucial for any meaningful progress within the region. Indeed, the [Taormina Leaders’ Communique](#) makes clear reference to this point and outlines “Inclusive political dialogue and national reconciliation” for Libya. Nevertheless, while G7 leaders acknowledge the issues and desired outcomes, they appear to only go as far as offering their support to programmes already in place, and do not offer any new or significant courses of action. This may reduce confidence in their intentions and limit progress in nurturing political stability, investment and economic growth. Indeed, analysts and aid organisations were concerned that leaders “[would lack the resolve to make any serious commitment](#)”.

Tunisia has also been a key focus of this year’s summit, as many of the leaders are hoping that Tunisia, who is now a major US ally, can assist in bringing stability to Libya and the North African region. This month, the European Union, who sits at the G7 summit table, released a joint statement with the Tunisian Minister of Foreign Affairs outlining their commitment to development. Moreover, they [discussed their desire to combat regional issues](#), specifically Libya, highlighting the EU’s acknowledgement of Tunisia’s central role in the MENA region’s stability. The G7’s decision to invite President Beji Caid Essebsi suggests that it wishes to use Tunisia as a key ally in the struggle to create stability. Essebsi, alongside the leaders of Kenya, Ethiopia, Niger and Nigeria discussed with the G7 a range of African issues. Indeed, innovation and development, which are key components of stabilising an economy, were [core objectives](#) of the talks among African and G7 leaders.

Syria

The G7 Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Lucca prior to Taormina demonstrated little unity on the direction of G7 action to resolve the Syrian crisis. Despite the Trump administration acknowledging that President [Assad's rule is facing an end](#), G7 Foreign Ministers were unable to generate a united front against Assad and his ally, Russia. UK Foreign Minister Boris Johnson [failed to unite G7 states](#) on his preferred course of action – namely, further sanctions against Russia. A united G7 front would still face significant challenges in ending the crisis in Syria; however, a lack of unity will make any progress even more difficult. Additionally, a lack of progress among the Foreign Ministers provides little in the way of foundations for the leaders to build on and may impact by making them more cautious of suggesting further courses of actions.

Yet, the initial failure to pursue further sanctions against Assad's ally, Russia, could result in greater cooperation from the Russians within the region. This is

because Paragraph 8 of the [Taormina Leaders' Communique](#) outlines that "If Russia is prepared to use its influence positively" then the G7 will work with Russia to pursue a political settlement in Syria. Avoiding further sanctions might encourage the chances of "positive Russian influence" in the region, possibly increasing the likelihood of a resolution. Nevertheless, peace and stability in Syria are unlikely to be established while Assad remains in power. Although the [Communique](#) outlines that G7 countries are "prepared to contribute to the costs of [Syrian] reconstruction", this is conditional on a "credible political transition". Therefore, the effectiveness of the G7 in the Middle Eastern region will be limited, unless a satisfactory regime change in Syria is realised.

Conclusion

On the one hand, the Taormina Summit appears to have not taken any backwards steps in the MENA region. The direction of travel, however, has failed to meet the desires of many,

including the Italian government. The belief that migrants should be located as close to their home nation as possible will do little to ease the burden that the Italian government currently finds itself shouldering. Further discussions with Tunisia, however, could result in progress in reducing the number of traffickers smuggling refugees across the Mediterranean and supporting greater stability in Libya. The G7's call for cooperation with countries in the MENA region might be a sign of the future direction of its efforts to stabilise the

region. Ultimately, the Taormina Summit's treatment of the MENA region has offered little hope of resolution in Italy's migration crisis and, without a regime change in Syria, there appears to be little chance of future progress in the region. Whether the G7's rallying against online extremism will be effective or not will come down to the cooperation and/or ability of the tech giants.

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