EU POLICY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Unfulfilled aspirations

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The track record of European policies in the Middle East is a disappointing one. On the surface, here is a rich continent with in-depth experience in promoting economic growth and overcoming historical animosities and conflict. Yet, with regard to the Middle East, its most prominent geographic neighbor, European policies have had virtually no impact on the trajectory of the Middle East towards greater stability and prosperity. From a broad perspective, it can be argued that Europe is largely a bystander that deals with the symptoms of the various crises but without fundamentally impacting on any of its developments.

There is no single explanatory or conceptual approach that can be put forward for illuminating Europe’s approach to the Middle East and its associated shortcomings. Instead, European policies when it comes to the Middle East are caught between several dichotomies. First, a realist interpretation of international relations prevails. While Europe through the EU and Brussels attempts to frame its policies within a multilateral approach, it is in fact the individual European states that continue to construct their relationship with Middle Eastern partners primarily from a national interest–based perspective. Similarly, the normative approach of the EU in which the principles of rule of law, human rights, and overall liberal democracy are put forward as the cornerstones around which policies are constructed, compete and often contradict against the pure national economic and security interests of individual European states. This, in turn, leads to frictions and inconsistencies in the way European policies in the region are applied, pursued, and implemented. It also results in the clear discrepancy between Europe as an actor and Europe as largely a spectator.

Second, Europe has found it difficult to balance its policies in the Middle East between its own internal European priorities and those other external relationships that Europe pursues, primarily, the US and within the context of the transatlantic alliance. Although much more directly impacted by developments in the Middle East, the inability and unwillingness of Europe to match the US or other external actors such as Russia in their strategic reach means that Europe finds itself in a mostly reactive position and therefore unable to show that it can play a more determining role in the Middle Eastern region. The US decision to launch the invasion of Iraq in 2003 is one poignant example.

A direct consequence of this balancing act is the increased securitization of policies whereby efforts to promote medium– to long-term change and reform in the Middle East give way or are sacrificed by the priorities tied to establishing order and stability. This creates a discrepancy
EU policy in the Middle East

between what Europe says and what Europe does in the Middle East. As Europe finds its impact being negligible on the ground, a growing fatigue has begun to set in when it comes to the turmoil of its neighboring region. This can be seen since the events of 9/11, the reverberations of the Arab Spring since 2011, and especially the migration wave of 2015 and 2016. A direct result is a Europe that is more concentrating on the protections of its borders rather than trying to influence developments in its near-abroad. Europe also becomes more concerned about stabilizing its neighborhood rather than transforming it. The emphasis in the EU’s Global Strategy of 2016 on “the security of Our Union” is symptomatic of this trend.

Third, Europe simply seems overwhelmed when it comes to the Middle East. Without a doubt, the Middle East represents the most strategically challenging arena for European foreign policy-making, and there is also little dispute that the challenges that the Middle East poses to Europe have increased substantially both geographically and thematically over recent decades. While the Middle East for Europe used to be largely confined to North Africa and the Levant, it now stretches to the Gulf, the Indian Ocean, and into sub-Saharan Africa. Equally, no longer just confined to the Arab-Israeli conflict, the region’s security agenda has broadened to include terrorism, issues of proliferation, sectarianism, state failure and decay, refugee and migratory flows, to renewed forms of authoritarianism, just to highlight the more obvious developments. Competition is also increasing at the international level in what is already one of the most externally penetrated regions of the world, as can be seen by Russia’s recent role in Syria and China’s advancement through its One Road, One Belt initiative. With suggestions at the same time that the US might be considering some form of strategic drawback from the Middle East, the tools and instruments available at Europe’s disposal appear increasingly inadequate due to the shifting dynamics taking place.

This chapter will try to shed light on how the changing nature of the political challenges in the Middle East interact with the more reactive nature of the EU as an international actor and what this means for the assumptions commonly made about European foreign policy. It will further examine what is likely to be a more complex and individual set of relations emerging that will question some of the assumptions of the past in terms of current and future trajectories of Europe–Middle Eastern ties. A core question to be addressed is to what degree Europe can still play a role in the strategic environment of the Middle East region and what this implies for the involvement of other powers.

An overview of European policies in the Middle East

Under European imperialism, the modern Middle Eastern state system was created. Hollis describes three distinct phases into which to divide European policies, starting with the period and decline of European imperialism stretching across the two world wars, the period of the Cold War, and Europe’s approach post-1990 with the emergence of the EU as a foreign policy actor trying to formulate a broader and more principled approach. In terms of the imperial legacy, Hollis states that: ‘European imperialism came to take the blame for dividing up the Arab world and setting up a competitive state system that undercut Arab unity and produced militarist, undemocratic, and client regimes thereafter’, citing the infamous Sykes-Picot Agreement and the Balfour Declaration that provided the basis for the creation of the state of Israel. Ultimately, it would not be until 1971 that the age of imperialism came to an end with the British withdrawal of its territories ‘East of Suez’, although it ended earlier for France with its defeat in the Algerian civil war of 1954–62.

Within the context of the Cold War, access to energy resources and security considerations begin to play an overarching role, as evidenced by the 1973 oil crisis and the numerous
Arab-Israeli conflicts spawning the period from 1948 to 1973. The critical year of 1979, which witnessed the Iranian Revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan followed by the eight-year-long Iran-Iraq War from 1980 to 1988, ensured that security considerations remained predominant when designing and framing European policies towards the Middle East. With the EU mostly restricted still to economic and internal issues, foreign policy towards the Middle East was largely a single nation or bilateral effort. France and Great Britain remained in the forefront. Any direct intervention was left primarily to the US to carry out. Meanwhile, Europe did engage in the Euro-Arab Dialogue beginning in 1974 in order to provide European policies with some form of institutional basis. But by the end of the 1980s, this dialogue had been put mostly on the back burner given the events mentioned earlier and the fact that Europe became caught up in the end of the Cold War era and the demise of the Soviet Union by the end of the decade. As long as the Iron Curtain ran through Europe, Middle Eastern developments and its associated security concerns were not considered of primary importance.

The end of the East-West divide was accompanied by the growing process of European integration. The Single European Act of 1987, the first major revision of the 1957 Treaty of Rome, not only set the objective of establishing a single market by the end of 1992, but it also codified European political cooperation, in essence the forerunner of the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy. Thus, in addition to the UK and France maintaining their historical links to the Middle East, the EU as an institution begins to push forward with numerous initiatives on the Middle East following the Treaty of Maastricht in 1992 (to be followed further by the European Security and Defense Policy in 1998 and the Treaty of Lisbon of 2007, which created the current external policy set-up of the EU). This resulted in the introduction of two new elements: the attempt at formulating and then putting forward a unified European position towards the foreign policy challenges in the immediate neighborhoods of the Union and a move away from the very restricted balance-of-power security-centric point of view to a broader, more inclusive emphasis on social, economic, and political issues as focal points of European interests.

Starting in the 1990s, one thus begins to witness a series of initiatives being put forward in the name of Europe. This included in particular the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (known as the Barcelona Process), the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), and the push for greater cooperation on the EU-GCC front. The foundations for this approach were grounded in the belief that security in Europe would be enhanced by economic growth and prosperity in the neighborhood regions of Europe and that through comprehensive, structured cooperation on the political/security, the economic/financial, and the socio/cultural front, the political transformation and institution-building process in the Middle East could be significantly enhanced.

There were two additional aspects. The first was that with the removal of trade barriers and through the pursuit of enhanced trade arrangements, Europe would also benefit due to deeper market penetration in the economies of the Middle East. This has always been a key objective, but with the EU taking the lead on trade-related matters, new initiatives gave the policy approach a new twist. The second was that following up on the Middle East peace process started with the 1991 Madrid conference, and the EU also wanted to carve itself a role in terms of conflict resolution mechanisms for the region and thus extend a broader role for Europe’s ability to influence its neighborhood through the application of non-military means. Building on the experience of European integration and the lessons learned coming out of the ashes of two world wars, the core belief was that an emphasis on regional cooperation and integration would ultimately contribute to a more secure and stable neighborhood.

Given the nature of interdependence, Europe placed its emphasis on “soft power” tools as well as numerous socio-economic strategies. On the political side, the stated emphasis was
EU policy in the Middle East

on reform promotion through gradualism and a step-by-step approach, building cooperative partnerships by utilizing arguments of persuasion, and promoting democracy through the advocacy of the rule of law and economic liberalization but also indirectly through education and culture programs. On this front, the EU wanted to showcase its approach based on economic interdependence, rule of law, and role of institutions as a contrast to the military power and interventionist approach of the US.

European initiatives would soon show their limitations, however. The fact that much of the emphasis was placed on economic ties, an area where the EU has central power over that of its member countries, meant that promoting broader economic relations did not in fact represent a new approach to structuring Europe’s relations with the states of the Middle East given that Europe remained the core while the Middle East became the periphery. The result was that Europe became integrated into the economic fabric of the Middle East as aid donors and suppliers of products rather than as dynamic equal trading partners. It would soon become apparent that one of the key limitations of this approach was its reliance on the concept of the neoliberal capitalist economy, which in the Middle East fostered vested interests by an economic elite and led to greater corruption and centralization of power rather than the opposite. Moreover, while economic ties fostered a level of integration with Europe, they did not lead to any levels of integration within the Middle East, instead resulting in a combination of the EU as the highest trade-integrated region of the world with the Arab world as being the least integrated. As such, the stated goal of the Barcelona Process of the establishment of a Mediterranean Free Trade Zone by 2010 was never realized.

Outside of the economic realm, the Barcelona Process also failed to fulfill other stated aspirations. As Neugart has pointed out: ‘In spite of the establishment of a considerable institutional apparatus, the Partnership [Euro-Mediterranean] has neither succeeded in stimulating a regional security structure nor in sparking a political reform process in the partner states’. Instead of regional integration, the Barcelona system led to a hub-and-spoke system of bilateral deals between the EU and individual southern neighborhood countries. Little progress was made on ending corruption, promoting accountability, or exporting European norms.

Following the event of 11 September 2001, Europe began to shift its emphasis for a more fundamental reform of the Arab state system, although this cannot be defined as an overarching paradigm shift given that many of the policy instruments to support reform efforts were already in place. But in addition to past efforts, what evolved were the 2004 European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), the 2004 Strategic Partnership with the Mediterranean and the Middle East, and the 2005 European Initiative on Democracy and Human Rights. The ENP was considered the cornerstone and became the chosen mechanism through which to enhance stability and prosperity in the EU’s periphery. It was put forward as a flexible and differentiated approach to bilateral relations built around action plans and the core concept of strategic partnerships.

However, EU enlargement also meant that within Europe there was an enlargement in the diversity of interest, which ultimately meant that regional initiatives were based more on pragmatism rather than vision. Thus, while the ENP was developed ‘with the objective of avoiding the emergence of new dividing lines between the enlarged EU and our neighbors’, the fact that it sought to propose a single coherent policy that would apply to all 16 countries on the eastern and southern neighborhood soon exposed the limitations of the proposed approach. Here, the ENP in fact stood in direct contrast to the Strategic Partnership Document from just one month later (June 2004), which emphasized that “there is no basis for a one-size-fits-all approach”.

The outbreak of the Arab Spring revolts beginning at the end of 2010 highlighted the fact that while the EU had put forward a variety of instruments to promote greater prosperity,
stability, and security in its immediate neighborhood, the mechanisms had failed to provide the sufficient foundation for a gradual and sustainable reform process to take hold. By 2015, the EU acknowledged that events of recent years have demonstrated the need for a new approach, a re-prioritization and an introduction of new ways of working. 14 Even immediately after the Arab Spring events in March 2011, the EU had put forward an approach to focus on institution-building and promoting transformation through a “more for more” approach, i.e., recipient countries would qualify for more EU aid and support for the greater amount of economic, political, and social reforms they would implement. This was defined in detail in the “Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the southern Mediterranean” document and its three elements of (1) democratic transformation and institution-building, (2) stronger partnership with the people, and (3) sustainable and inclusive growth. 15 In terms of a partnership with the people, the EU also proposed a Civil Society Neighborhood Facility, as well as a series of mobility packages, especially in terms of education and training.

Yet, similar to previous approaches, it soon became clear that while the stress on implementing reforms required an indirect bottom-up approach, what the EU pursued was mostly elite-guided reform measures to be largely imposed from the top. The EU tended to accord the regimes in the region the benefit of the doubt with the positive democratic conditional- ity that formed the core of the European stated approach applied loosely and inconsistently in both design and principle. As Youngs points out, it was “reform with caveats”. 16 Proposals thus became referred to as old wine in new bottles. The more-for-more concept also suffered from the same shortcoming as the conditionality principle would prove to have little impact given that there was little active response from the other side.

The EU’s reform-based approach also failed to improve on the short-term stability of the region. The relationship between the maintenance of stability alongside the promotion of democracy was once again exposed as one of Europe’s most persistent dilemmas. The more immediate consequence was that stabilization soon emerged as the key focus and concern and began to replace the principle of enacting transformation. The 2003 European Security Strategy was the first step towards a more securitized approach by the EU towards the Middle East. In this context, Barcelona and the ENP became defined as relics of the past that were more a ‘description of risks and threats than a clearly defined strategic concept’. 17

Finally, on 23 June 2016, the EU unveiled its Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy (EUGS) document. The EUGS was the result of a year-long process in which the EU’s High Representative for Foreign Affairs, Federica Mogherini, consulted with member states and the larger expert and academic community in an effort to give EU foreign and security policy greater coherence and strategic direction. Upon its release, the Global Strategy document was judged to be a far more realistic and therefore less ambitious attempt at defining and outlining the EU’s role in the world than previous attempts. It places a strong emphasis on unity (“unity of purpose and unity of action”) alongside a determination to place the security of the EU at the forefront of concerns. As such, the strategy calls for greater cooperation in strategic communication among its members to focus on key areas such as counterterrorism, energy security, and cyber security.

At the same time, the document acknowledges that ‘security at home depends on peace beyond our borders’ and therefore calls for pre-emptive peacebuilding and diplomacy efforts alongside multilateralism as the key principle to be followed. While it is recognized that current developments on the international scene have brought about an existential crisis for many regions, the EU also sees this as an opportunity to refocus its energies and adjust the tools it has available to encourage conflict resolution and stability mechanisms. But instead of a focus on...
EU policy in the Middle East

democratization and producing changes in neighboring regions, the emphasis in the EUGS lies on “balanced engagement” and “resilience”.

The benchmark by which the EU hopes to achieve its objectives is defined as “principled pragmatism”. By this the EU means less grand and global one-size-fits-all ideological strategies meant to demonstrate European values and more focus on individual cases and the specific requirements that are needed to resolve certain crises on the ground. Instead of strategic partnerships or the need for a comprehensive European Neighborhood Policy, the Global Strategy speaks of managing interdependence and promoting tailor-made partnerships. It can be argued therefore that in this context, European policies in the Middle East have come full circle in that numerous approaches have been tried before, coming back to a less idealistic and less common consideration.

At the same time, what can be said two decades plus after the initial Barcelona Process is that Europe has failed to provide answers to the key questions that have been around from the outset; i.e., what is Europe’s capacity and willingness to re-structure its relations with the Middle East?; what distinguishes Europe’s policies from those of other countries?; and how can Europe devise a policy that operates on the interface of security, stability, and domestic change? Instead of Europe having considered and undertaken a paradigm shift, there have merely been adjustments to policy approaches. While one can argue that there possibly were too many initiatives, as most have suffered from a wide gap between the stated intention and the ultimate delivery, the result is also one in which Europe has shifted from positive incentives of expanding prosperity and promoting integration to the more negative approaches of avoiding chaos, containing radicalization, and prioritizing stabilization. If the Middle East was supposed to be a test case for a different application of international relations, then European policies failed miserably.

Factors limiting European effectiveness

The shortcomings in Europe’s approach to the Middle East and the inability of its policies influencing developments on the ground in the direction of seeing European interests being implemented can be traced back to a number of limitations and structural factors. Three particular elements can be identified here: (1) the individual vs. collective action dichotomy between the activities of the EU as a single actor and the policies pursued by the individual member states; (2) the discrepancy between the EU’s normative approach and the realpolitik factors that determine both European policies and Middle Eastern responses, including the prioritization given to the developments in the Middle East in light of challenges being faced within the EU itself; and (3) the competition between the actions taken by Europe vs. the policies pursued by other external powers in the Middle East. With regard to all of these factors, Europe has found itself to be an inhibited actor. In addition, the shifting and more complex security environment in the Middle East over the past two decades has provided an additional obstacle that Europe has found it difficult to adjust to. What is clear is that unless the incompatibilities remain in place and unless the structural factors are dealt with, European policies will continue to fall short of their pronounced expectations.

While European integration has proceeded on the economic and social level, the EU does continue to grapple with the four fundamental questions in terms of its common foreign and security policy, particularly as far as the Middle East is concerned. This includes (1) how to construct a policy approach that properly reflects the interests of all 28 member states; (2) what role to play apart from that of the US or how to ensure a European stamp on policy outreach; (3) whether to deal with the Middle East as a whole or divide policies into the different
constituent parts and regions; and (4) how to combine short-term interests that necessarily are a response to the ever-changing events in the region with the long-term prerogatives that are required for stability and security for both Europe and the Middle East. The hope of the 2007 Lisbon Treaty to provide the EU with a broader institutional basis with which to promote its value-based foreign policy approach has not been fulfilled. One could even raise the question that based on the developments not only in the Middle East but in international relations as a whole, whether the European approach is still applicable and whether Europe is not being transformed by external influences as much as Europe has aspired to transform its neighbors earlier. The EU and its member states suddenly find themselves on the defensive in this regard.

**Individualism vs. collectivism**

A key impediment of European policies in the Middle East is the fact that Europe as a multilateral actor in the form of the EU and the European Union’s member states often work at cross-purposes. Europe does not speak with one voice, despite the fact that under the 1992 Maastricht Treaty, EU member states committed themselves to a Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). In most cases, regional multilateralism has never been seriously attempted, with Europe promoting multilateralism while practicing bilateralism. On the functional level, the EU tends to lead on overall trade issues and some economic policies, but member states continue to pursue their own individual commercial interests vis-à-vis each other. This can clearly be seen when it comes to competition for contracts in the Gulf region, for example. Rosemary Hollis has in fact referred to Europe’s approach to the Gulf as a “competitive business”, highlighting that commercial considerations and access to business contracts are in fact leading European countries to compete with one another in this part of the Middle East.18

The competition can also be witnessed in terms of individual European countries keeping certain files for themselves rather than putting the issue forward in Brussels in order to create a common European approach. Thus, on foreign policy issues, policy results in the EU are often compromises reached on the basis of the lowest common denominator. The split among northern, southern, and eastern European countries is illustrative here. While the southern countries tend to focus on their immediate neighborhood of the Mediterranean region, Eastern European countries have a great deal of more concern as far as Russia and developments to its east are concerned. Northern EU countries, meanwhile, voiced their initial opposition to the establishment of the Union of the Mediterranean and its replacement of the Barcelona Process, seeing this as an attempt by the southern EU countries to impose their agenda on the subject issue.19 Similar in terms of the Gulf Region, Richard Youngs notes that Spain blocked a Dutch attempt in 2004 to reinvigorate the EU’s relations with the Gulf, as it saw this as taking attention away from the Mediterranean focus.20 As Luciani and Schumacher have pointed out, the UK and France have never perceived a benefit in the Europeanization of relations with the GCC states.21

Overall, there is little structural congruence outside the European Neighborhood Policy and the Euro-Med framework. What has been missing from the European policy approach is a broad regional approach that links its various regional parts, i.e., the EU’s Mediterranean policy, its position on the Arab-Israeli conflict, its “East of Jordan policy”, and other bits and parts. This has resulted in a multitude of European policies in the Middle East.22 Youngs states that “threads of a standard European approach developed in the Middle East, but this was injected with varied elements specific to the distinctive nature of the trends and challenges in different parts of the region”.23 While Palestine and the wider Mediterranean region saw the most collective “Europeanized” approach, EU engagement was far more sporadic and least structured in the GCC states, Iraq as well in the lead-up and immediate aftermath to the 2003 invasion of Iraq.
EU policy in the Middle East

All of this results in what Schumacher has argued is a ‘continued absence of a commonly
shared understanding of the EU’s strategic interest in the region’. Jörg Monar has referred to
this as the duality of European foreign policy, as the EU stands as the clearing house of different
interests devoid of a common direction. The direct result is a lack of consistency due to the
absence of political will by individual member states to engage with other EU states to forge
a broader and more consensual approach and the overall lack of readiness to see the EU as an
institution take the leading role. And as Hiltermann has written, ‘their diverging policies to the
region’s crisis and conflicts undermine the possibility of effective solutions while at the same
time undermining the EU as an institution with a coherent approach’. All of this can also be
understand within the context of the complex nature of European actorness.

The EU’s normative approach vs. realpolitik

The dichotomy between the EU as a collective foreign policy actor and the individual Euro-
pean states pursuing their national interests separately has direct implications for how European
policy is conducted on the ground. Thus, while Europe as a whole tends to look at its security
from a broad perspective, individual European policies are much narrower focused. Instead
of just imminent and potential military threats, other aspects such as economic deprivation,
population growth, environmental pollution, and migration are considered to come under the
security umbrella for the EU. European documents have always laid out the argument that by
promoting economic development in its neighborhood, Europe is in fact reducing the threat to
its own security. In contrast to what is often referred to as a normative approach to international
relations, a more realist interpretation is put forward and practiced by the individual European
states in terms of border security, direct threats, and securing economic benefits.

This contrast is most visible when it comes to the issue of political reform. Europe crafted
the EU-Mediterranean Partnership in order to encourage greater reform in its southern neigh-
borhood on the basis of democratic accountability, the necessity of institutions, and the pro-
motion of a liberal economic model, seeing this as the precondition for greater stability and
less volatility. A core concept advanced after the Arab Spring revolts of 2011 was the “3M”
approach in which Europe would offer monetary support, market access, and increased mobility
through a reinvigorated European Neighborhood Policy. A few years later, it became clear
that Europe did not deliver on these promises. Money was made available but way too little to
have a real impact, market access was granted only selectively and when only on EU terms, and
mobility was offered restrictively and only to small segments of the population. The result was
greater chaos and instability and the EU and its member states reduced to “being bystanders”.

The European approach to civil society development in the Middle East is equally illustra-
tive as it can be argued that this aspect of democracy promotion has in fact never been taken
very seriously as far as European policy officials are concerned. Democracy Assistance provided
by Europe is often done through governments and thus distributed to those parts of civil society
that exist with government acquiescence. The dilemma has come to the forefront in the current
move towards some form of postmodern autocracy in the Middle East, whereby a shell of dem-
ocratic institutions is left in place but hollowed out of its pluralist essence, i.e., the free press,
the independent judiciary, a fair electoral playground, and civil society. As has been pointed
out: ‘the flow does not lie in the methods, instruments or means utilized by the EU but in the
prioritization of security to the detriment of political reform, termed as the democratization-
securitization dilemma’.

Europe’s approach to the Middle East has also been one focused more on conflict manage-
ment rather than on conflict resolution. As far as the latter is concerned, Europe has relied
mostly on declaratory policies rather than implementable strategies such as direct interventions or concerted mediation efforts. Three examples underline this approach. In the fight against the Islamic State, Europe engaged largely without post-conflict stabilization strategies or peace-building requirements. In Iraq, the EU has supported Kurdish parties but without addressing Sunni Arab grievances within the state-rebuilding process taking place there. And as far as Libya is concerned, the EU focuses on handling migration flows but has done little to impact the actual stability situation in the country.

The discrepancy between stated policy and its result has become more readily apparent in recent years as issues closer to home have also impacted the way Europe operates. While those working in Brussels tend to take a longer-term view and can argue for stabilization policies to put in place in stages and over time, policy officials inside member states are often required to respond to current developments with voter sentiment on their minds. Along with all the challenges that the Middle East has experienced, Europe has had to deal with a mounting refugee crisis, an unresolved Eurozone financial crisis, and discussions about the future direction of the EU given the UK’s impending exit, just to name the most obvious examples. At the same time that the Middle East is dwelling deeper into chaos, Europe finds itself in the midst of a crisis of identity. While public opinion mostly continues to support the project of an ever-closer EU, populist parties throughout the continent have begun to push back on certain idealist notions in the wake of the refugee crisis and economic uncertainty.

In light of developments occurring in Europe proper, events in the Middle East have to compete for prioritization despite the fact that many of the current geopolitical and geoeconomic issues that dominate European headlines are directly tied to Middle Eastern stability. While Brussels and individual European capitals recognize that Europe needs to foster its engagement with Middle Eastern countries on a broader strategic level in order to promote regional peace and security, Europe as a whole remains hesitant and unsure of how to structure those relations in a mutually beneficial way or how to push forward with an engagement agenda. The result is that ties between the two regions remain stuck in simple cooperation with no consensus either within Europe or the Middle East where the relationship should be heading.

There are also structural limitations that play a role. On the GCC front, the main obstacles are (1) that the EU and the GCC are institutionally two quite different organizations trying to build an institutional set of ties; (2) that the bilateral approach to relations of individual member states on both sides tends to dominate the multilateral approach; and (3) that there are often different expectations put forward vis-à-vis the other side regarding policy priorities. The EU sees the GCC as an incomplete partner with no real integration, a weak organization, an opaque decision-making process, and an overall lack of capacity. Each of these factors plays a role in determining the effectiveness and forward movement of building relations between the EU and the GCC. These differences have played a role in preventing a functional partnership from emerging. The GCC-EU dialogue in existence since the late 1980s has as a result produced nothing more than fruitless emphatic final declarations without concrete results in terms of effectiveness.

Taken together, the EU has not lived up to its image of a normative power. When it comes to following through on its stated policies and implementation, Europe has remained largely risk averse, and a contradiction has ensued between the gradualist approach to enact political change on the one side and the actual results being produced on the other end. The autocratic nature of many Middle Eastern governments, in particular the often dismal human rights record, makes the EU hesitant and indecisive when it comes to dealing with countries of its southern neighborhood. While conflict resolution, human rights, and democracy promotion are mentioned in the official documents, they are often not pursued and generally do not have the full support
EU policy in the Middle East

of the EU member states. The result is a strong discrepancy between words and deeds, meaning that in the end, the need for stability won over the need for reform. The EU’s bottom-up approach thus tends to clash and pull back from the predominant top-down approach prevalent in the Middle East. What this contributes to is a widening gap between Europe’s self-proclaimed ambition of a fully fledged political actor and that of a passive spectator. Moreover, one sees the ‘calibration of a value-based EU strategy to material-based interest calculation’.30

Europe vs. the US in the Middle East

The third factor that impacts heavily on European effectiveness when it comes to the Middle East is the role being played by outside powers in the region. For Europe, this primarily concerns the transatlantic relationship and the policies being pursued by the US in the region. In most instances, it can be argued that Europe has tended to second its Middle East approach to that of the US and that the importance of transatlantic relations tends to outweigh the readiness by Europe to pursue more independent policies in the region outside of the US umbrella. While this notion might be changing under the current US Trump administration given the way Washington has begun to question transatlantic relations, for the moment the prerogative of not jeopardizing ties with the US remains in place.

The Arab-Israeli conflict is the one issue whether clear divergences between Europe and the US exist and where the predominance of the US relationship with Israel has resulted in Europe repeatedly seeing its policy initiatives being undermined. Through the Venice Declaration of 1980 and the European acknowledgment of the right of the Palestinian people for self-determination, Europe intended to inject the peace process with needed momentum while limiting the territorial policies of Israel. Europe supported its policy with concrete assistance and soon became the largest donor of financial assistance to the Palestinian people, a position the EU holds to the present day. But the EU’s policies of large-scale financial aid, support to institution-building and governance at the local and national levels, various programs to promote private sector and economic development, as well as numerous developmental projects, have in the end not resulted in any positive movement in the peace process and in bringing about a political solution to the conflict. Instead, Europe has found itself consistently blocked by the US support for Israel, the use of the US veto in the UN Security Council on resolutions deemed too critical on Israel, and by US hesitancy to move decisively against Israeli settlement policy, which is seen as being detrimental to the peace process. Thus, while Europe has been at the table, whether through the EU or its member states in virtually all diplomatic engagements regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict, it has never pushed its policies to the point of risking a rift with the US.

Numerous other examples can be cited, including prominently the US decision to invade Iraq in 2003, a decision vigorously opposed by France and Germany, and the more recent case of the US withdrawal from the nuclear deal with Iran, or Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) as it is officially known. In the case of the Iraqi invasion and subsequent fall of Saddam Hussein, Europe was deeply divided, with some supporting the US plans while others made their objections very clear. In the end, the US had to fall back on the coalition-of-the-willing concept for the invasion, as it was unable to gain enough support for a UN Security Council resolution. The toppling of the Saddam Hussein regime nevertheless went ahead, and soon Europe found itself confronting an increasingly unstable Middle East region that was the direct result of the US decision to carry out the invasion.

Leaving the Middle Eastern political field to the US is of course the result of the fact that the EU simply does not have all the tools necessary to apply to the general strategic situation in the
Given the hard security nature of the Middle Eastern security environment, the EU is simply not a strong security actor that can provide a real alternative to the US role, despite the fact that there is concern and uncertainty about the US policy direction in the region. Thus, on military matters, Europe has tended to follow the US’s lead not out of conviction but largely due to the unwillingness to deploy military assets for the pursuit of political objectives. Yet, the dilemma for Europe is that when US policies in the region fail, as they have in Iraq and with regard to the Arab-Israeli conflict, Europe has to deal with the mess left at its own border.

The past few years have seen the competition over the region once again escalate on a larger geopolitical level, including the re-introduction of Russia as a key player. In this context, the direction of the US when it comes to the Middle East is a main concern for Europe. The US Trump administration has clearly de-prioritized political reform and human rights as pillars of US policy in the Middle East, although it can be argued that these issues were never a real priority to begin it. Nevertheless, Europe finds itself once again alone in terms of advocating the rule of law, an institutional process of decision-making, and strong support for human rights, all items fundamental to the future stability of the region. More worrisome is increased securitization of all issues related to the Middle East, with the US seeing developments first and foremost through the lens of extremism and terrorism. This means a reactive rather than a proactive policy environment in which there is a general inability and failure to address root causes. In addition, the re-entry of Russia into the geopolitical considerations of the region also indicates a return to a balance of power distribution when it comes to spheres of influence in the greater Middle East. This is a fundamental challenge to the European approach, which has sought to apply diplomatic skill and open doors in an effort to avoid a further escalation of violence and instability in the region.

The US withdrawal from the Iranian nuclear accord is a clear example of the different points of view held in capitals such as Washington and Moscow as opposed to the thinking still prevalent in Brussels and Berlin. And while Europe has maintained an initial front of unity when it comes to trying to keeping the JCPOA with Iran alive, it is equally clear that European companies will succumb to the US dictate on sanctions given the significantly higher stakes involved in terms of risking business opportunities in the US as opposed to those in Iran. While the different positions on the future of the Iran nuclear deal have once again underscored the calls for greater European autonomy when it comes to their own national interests, the current distribution of power still means that when it comes to the Middle East, Europe will find it difficult to pursue a more independent path than that of the US.

### Outlook and the way ahead

The 2018 Munich Security Conference Report stated that the EU ‘has yet to become a strategic actor’. While the EU is certainly a player in terms of trade, economic development, and climate change, it struggles on aspects such as military force and other strategic questions. Daniel Keohane has argued that as a result ‘others will determine Europe’s strategic future’. Or as Marc Otte, the former EU envoy to the Middle East Peace Process, has put it: ‘If Europe wants to voice in the reduction of instability and the political solution of the problems, it urgently needs to give itself the means to be a strategic player instead of being a simple spectator of the fate that others are ready to assign to it’. The incentive of economic assistance and trade is here insufficient ‘in the absence of a coherent and common EU vision of the regional order that should emerge’.

As the world enters a new era of turbulence with a fraying international order, questions will continue about Europe’s capacity and willingness to reorient itself when it comes to the Middle
EU policy in the Middle East

East. In the context of all of the initiatives that Europe has put forward, Europe has found itself moving from overestimating its influence (through the Barcelona Process) to underestimating (the present situation) its political influence. What is important to realize is that Europe can influence but not dictate the various processes taking place in the region.

As it stands, there is no confidence within the Middle East that Europe is ready to undertake the necessary investment in long-term regional security. While there is clear awareness that Europe is potentially the only actor able to work with all political players in the region in the search for potential solutions, the lack of a broader long-term focus on the outline of a stable regional economic, social, and security order in the Middle East has led to that awareness being undermined by a lack of political will and hesitancy in the approach to take. Within this context, the model character of the EU in terms of regional integration has begun to fade, also due to the fact that Europe appears to be eroding from within. Until recently, the European integration experience was viewed largely positively by most of the countries in the Middle East. Given the history of antagonistic regional relationships and the existing mutual (mis)perceptions among countries of the region, Europe was seen as potentially having something valuable to offer the Middle East that could provide lessons to overcome its own history of strife and national animosity. But as Marc Otte has argued: ‘Europe’s failure to change the status quo eventually turned out to be a disappointment and a threat against the European model itself’.35

The inability to produce tangible results in bilateral ties has resulted in the GCC, to some degree, turning away from the EU and looking at other models of regional integration such ASEAN and MERCOSUR. While the GCC has moved on to capture the momentum of change and globalization, Europe has treaded mostly in the same place. The result is that whereas in the past the Middle East has looked toward Europe for a variety of reasons – from trade, technology, and education to even foreign policy issues – the level of determination to build and maintain wide-ranging strategic ties with Europe has declined.

For its part, Europe must understand clearly that the Middle East is going through multilevel transitions that are bound to be disruptive and that whatever happens in the region will have an impact beyond the regional borders. It is thus imperative that Europe begins to engage with all regional actors in a more systematic and strategic manner than has been the case so far.

To be sure, the Middle East is very much a focus of European policy, as it is seen as a litmus test for the future of the international system. The EU also still represents the most advanced experiment in multilateral cooperation and integration. Yet, the Middle East presents new challenges to outside actors in terms of its political debate, open contestation, violent conflict, and resurgent authoritarianism. There is a clear connection between the turmoil in the Middle East and the refugee flows toward Europe or terrorist incidents being carried out on European soil. Overall, the balance of power in the region is shifting without a clear idea of how it will shift. As was stated in a recent report: ‘The EU will have to equip itself to deal with a more diverse geopolitical scenario, more assertive governments and an increasingly aware and audacious population’.36

From a normative perspective, Europe continues to struggle with how to promote political transitions without this leading to chaos or retrenched authoritarianism. Europe is at present unsure how to respond to the developments in Egypt, Libya, Syria, the Gulf region, and Yemen, while on the Arab-Israeli front there has been “no tangible impact”.37 One has already seen the abolition of the EU Special Representative for the Middle East Peace Process, although Special Representatives remain in place for Syria and Libya. There also appears to be no strategy on how to deal with the phenomenon of Violent Non-State Actors (VNSA). With a view to the Gulf region, Europe struggles with the transition of Gulf governments being active rather than passive actors. As a result, ‘Europeans have been largely reduced to ad hoc partners in crisis interventions
of multinational alliances and to shouldering parts of the humanitarian fallout of violence and war.\(^3\) Europe has also largely been reduced to being a payer instead of being a player.\(^3\)

In such an equation, the danger exists that Europe will find itself further distanced from this part of the world and that as issues become more difficult to deal with, it will switch to strategies of containment rather than engagement. From the economic angle, Europe is fast being replaced by Asia as far as the Middle East is concerned. In the Gulf region, the GCC’s trade with the EU totaled €138.6 billion, which was slightly less than the GCC trade with China alone.\(^4\) The month-long trip of Saudi Arabia’s King Salman to Asia in March 2017 clearly underscored the direction in which the GCC states are looking as far as their economic future is concerned. Equally, the impending exit of the UK from the EU and the crisis with Qatar over the future direction of the GCC has added two more developments to the list of issues confronting Europe.

Given these issues, it is unlikely that many of the dilemmas faced by EU policy in the region will be solved any time soon. Relations are as a result headed to becoming more contentious and fractured. Given the volatile environment in the entire Middle East, alongside the relatively dim prospects for conflict resolution in the region, Europe’s ties are likely to experience greater periods of tension rather than moments of constructive engagement. Instead of an effort to come to similar trajectories, the likelihood is one of increased divergences in outlook and policy priorities.

This does not mean that some of these trends cannot be reversed. But in order to do so, Europe and the Middle East must begin to better understand the limitations which impact their relationship and focus on concrete areas of cooperation that can give their ties a better foundation. To state that relations can develop into the institutional equivalent of a strategic partnership ignores the realities on the ground. Nevertheless, given that the EU and the Middle East do share common interests, including a commitment to the stability and security of the Middle Eastern region, a determined effort to divide those interests into functional parts should be undertaken in an attempt to regain the initiative. Such an effort can include working at both the bilateral as well as multilateral levels to structure ties: for example, (a) better coordination of aid programs to support economic development in particular in the Mediterranean region; (b) devoting more human resources to strengthening the overall relationship; and (c) focusing on areas of cooperation such as renewable energy, education and research, and business-to-business ties.

Yet, the true effectiveness of Europe–Middle Eastern relations will be measured on the issue of foreign policy and regional security. On this front, coming to an understanding on the steps to be taken to de-escalate tensions and return the Middle East region to a more positive forward trajectory will prove much more difficult. Overall, the Middle East remains unsure of where the EU stands, whether the EU has the right approach, or whether Europe is in fact ready to make the necessary investment to ultimately achieve a strong, viable, secure, and prosperous neighborhood.

**Notes**


4 See, for example, Amitai Etzioni, “The United States’ Retreat from the Middle East and Pivot to the Far East Is Likely to Intensify,” Defense & Security Analysis 30, no. 4 (2014): 304–310 or Pankaj Mishra, “America’s Inevitable Retreat from the Middle East,” New York Times, 23 September 2012. www.nytimes.com/2012/09/24/opinion/americas-inevitable-retreat-from-the-middle-east.html, accessed 8 December 2017. The debate has intensified under the US Trump administration, with President Trump describing the Middle East as a “troubled place” and vowing to withdraw US troops from Syria, for example, where they have been engaged in battles against the Islamic State.

5 Hollis, in Fawcett, op. cit., 334–335.


7 There was a plethora of other initiatives, including the Forum for the Mediterranean, the 5+5 Grouping of European and Arab States (also known as the Western Mediterranean Group), and the Global Mediterranean Policy. A description of each can be found in Bichara Khader, “The European Union and the Arab World: From the Rome Treaty to the Arab Spring,” European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed) Papers 17, March 2013.

8 Hollis, in Fawcett, op. cit., 383.

9 Ibid., 347.


11 Hollis in Fawcett, op. cit., 340.


16 Richard Youngs, Europe and the Middle East: In the Shadow of September 11 (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2006), 224.


19 See Timo Behr and Teija Tiilikainen, eds. Northern Europe and the Making of the EU’s Mediterranean and Middle East Policies: Normative Leaders or Passive Bystanders (Farnham, Burlington: Ashgate, 2015), 29–32 and 203–204.

20 Youngs, op. cit., 180.


22 Youngs, op. cit., 224.

23 Ibid., 226.

24 Tobias Schumacher, “The EU and the Arab Spring: Between Spectatorship and Actorness,” Insight Turkey 13, no. 3 (Summer 2011): 117.
29 Khader, op. cit., 31.
30 Youngs, op. cit., 226.
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
37 Asseburg, op. cit., 1.
38 Ibid.
40 For GCC-EU trade statistics, see http://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/regions/gulf-region/.