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## The EU and Conflict Resolution in the Mediterranean Neighbourhood: Tackling New Realities through Old Means?

Silvia Colombo and Daniela Huber

EuroMeSCo 





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## Introduction

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During the 1990s and early 2000s, the European Union (EU)'s efforts to structure relations with its partners on the southern rim of the Mediterranean stumbled upon existing inter-state conflicts, such as the Israeli-Palestinian dispute and the conflict over Western Sahara, pitting Morocco against its neighbour, Algeria. In spite of the declaratory attempt to foster peace and stability in its backyard as a way to promote its own interests and security in the framework of, first, the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), and, then, the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), the EU took only limited action to solve these conflicts and to address their root causes. This can be explained by the unipolar context in international relations, whereby the EU left the American "great power" shaping security dynamics in the Mediterranean region, and by the very nature of the conflicts themselves, whereby the EU preferred to focus on a mildly transformative agenda that was meant to foster peace indirectly.

As the United States is partially disengaging from the region in an increasingly multipolar world and as the region has been transforming decisively since the Arab uprisings, the EU's conflict-related practices are bound to change. Not only have "old" inter-state conflicts not been resolved, but – more pointedly – new, potentially more dangerous intra-state cleavages and (proxy) wars have emerged throughout the region. The cases of Syria and Libya are in point here, as well as the heightened tensions in Egypt between the military-backed regime and Islamist groups. All this is contributing to blurring the boundary between hard- and soft-security issues as new actors (terrorists, smugglers, traffickers, militias, migrants and refugees) have become increasingly assertive domestically and regionally. The confluence of ethnic, religious and ideological fissures along with a vast governance deficit has resulted in bloody civil conflicts that are fast spilling into neighbouring countries. Conflict spill-over – including the economic and social burdens created by the refugee crisis and the spread of extremism – are destabilising neighbouring countries, raising the risk of military intervention and reactive violence. Since the Arab uprisings, conflicts that were previously localised or contained have crossed national borders and have developed into regional proxy wars.

This paper discusses the extent to which the EU's conflict-related aims and practices in the Mediterranean region have changed since the Arab uprisings and how. It starts with a brief review of the rather substantive literature that has explored the EU's security practices in the 1990s and early 2000s. Then, it presents an overview of the ways in which the EU dealt with two inter-state conflicts (Israel/Palestine and Western Sahara) until 2011. Furthermore, it examines the changes and continuities of the EU's approach to address those two inter-state conflicts as well as three intra-state



conflicts (Libya, Egypt and Syria) in the wake of the Arab uprisings, by focusing on the nature of the cleavages, the actors involved, and the aims and concrete actions undertaken by the EU to cope with them. It concludes with policy recommendations, highlighting the potential contribution of regionalism and inter-regionalism as part of the EU's tool kit to address conflicts in the Mediterranean Neighbourhood.



**State of the Art: The EU,  
Crisis Management and Conflict Prevention**

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The literature on the role of the EU in conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) can be broken down into several parts. One of the first emerging literatures on the EU's role in conflict and peace was the literature on security communities which focused on the EU's "cooperative security practices, region building, and pluralistic integration in order to achieve peaceful change" (Adler & Crawford, 2006) through regional policies such as the Barcelona Process/Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP). As, however, the EMP was largely blocked by the end of the Middle East peace process with the outbreak of the second Intifada and thus substituted by the much lower-scale Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), this literature has ebbed off. It has also been criticised for its Euro-centrism (Ferabolli, 2014), styling not only the European integration process as the role model for region building, but also the EU itself as a normative power. Another strain of the literature has looked more concretely into the impact and effects of EU policies on conflicts in its neighbourhood. Analytical and comparative frameworks have been set up by Diez et al. (2006) who developed a four pathway-model (compulsory, enabling, connective and constructive impact), Tocci (2007), who introduced a model focused on the recipient regions itself, Gross and Juncos (2010), who concentrated on EU roles, institutions and policies, and Whitman and Wolff (2012), who suggested a model based on EU capabilities and local, state, regional and global contexts. This literature has been substantiated by single studies of the EU's involvement in conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa; that is, the quite extensive literature on the EU in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Aoun, 2003; Tocci, 2009; Peters, 2010; Harpaz & Shamis, 2010; Mueller, 2013; Del Sarto, 2014; Pardo, 2015), as well as in Western Sahara (Darbouche & Zoubir, 2008; Gillespie, 2010; Darbouche & Colombo, 2010) and Lebanon (Engberg, 2010; Ruffa, 2011). Furthermore, also connected to the issue discussed in this paper is the literature on the EU as a promoter of democracy, rule of law and human rights (Seeberg, 2009; Pace, Seeberg & Cavatorta, 2009; Pogodda, 2012), specifically when considering the importance of the issue of state sustainability in many of the newly emerging conflicts (Colombo & Tocci, 2011). This literature is only slowly being matched by studies on the EU's response to new conflictual dynamics in the MENA region and our paper therefore seeks to move exactly into this lacunae. Specifically, we are interested in evaluating the EU's response from the viewpoint of new regional dynamics. We are therefore less interested in explaining specific EU policies and actions, but rather in evaluating them. This means that we will focus on the EU's responses *in terms of aims and practices*, rather than on the EU's actorness. This does not mean that this is not a problematic category, quite the contrary; but it does mean that our research focus lies somewhere else.

Nonetheless, before turning to aims and practices, the issue of EU actorness should be addressed. The EU is not a unitary actor when conducting its foreign politics. Following Jupille and Caporaso (1998), actorness can be assessed with four criteria: recognition,

authority, autonomy and cohesion. Recognition is the “acceptance of and interaction of an entity with the others” (Caporaso & Jupille, 1998, p. 214). The EU has clearly been accepted as a distinctive actor in crisis management and conflict resolution in its neighbourhood through de facto as well as de jure interaction. The EU also has a “legal competence to act” (Caporaso & Jupille, 1998, p. 214). Since the Maastricht Treaty, the EU has developed stable rules and mechanisms for decision making in foreign policy. Autonomy is “distinctiveness, and to some extent independence from other actors, particularly state actors” (Caporaso & Jupille, 1998, p. 217). This is a sensitive area for the EU; the High Representative and the European External Action Service (EEAS) have sufficient autonomy to act in order to see the EU as an actor in its own right; however, member states interfere directly, notably through the European Council. Furthermore, member states often display their own agency for specific EU policies (Spanish leadership in the Barcelona Process is an example or the French one in the UfM), and member states can, on the other hand, block specific initiatives, which are then often cut down to the lowest common denominator. Finally, Jupille and Caporaso also raise the criterion of cohesion or coherence in foreign policy which, as Tanja Börzel, Assem Dandashly and Thomas Risse argue, is not necessarily an ingredient for assessing actorness. “Whether an actor pursues an inconsistent and incoherent foreign policy is an empirical question, not a definitional criterion” (Börzel, Dandashly & Risse, 2015). They propose capability as a fourth criterion and, again, the EU has acquired most of the traditional foreign policy tools – i.e. military,<sup>1</sup> economic and diplomatic tools – as well as specific EU ones that nation-states do not possess (Smith, 2003, p. 67; Keukeleire & Delreux, 2014). Thus, we do assume EU actorness in this paper, but will mention member state dynamics when they are of direct importance for the outcome.

Turning to the EU’s aims and practices analysed in this paper, they fall into two diverse areas of action: crisis management and conflict prevention. There is some terminological confusion in the literature on the usage of these terms (Gross & Juncos, 2010, p. 6). We distinguish them as two types of responses which are related to two diverse types of foreign policy. Crisis management is short/medium-term oriented and relates to facilitating “the settlement and containment of violent conflict” (Ramsbotham, Miall & Woodhouse, 2011, p. 107). It includes aims such as securing ceasefires, demobilisation, disarmament or peacekeeping; related practices are located in the more traditional foreign policy toolbox which “seeks to influence the attitude and behaviour of other actors as well as the relations with and between other actors” (Keukeleire & Delreux, 2014, pp. 27-28). Practices therefore include crisis diplomacy, the deployment of civilian and military missions, or emergency humanitarian aid. Conflict prevention, in contrast, is long-term oriented and prevents “armed conflicts or mass violence from breaking out” (Ramsbotham, Miall & Woodhouse, 2011, p. 107). It includes aims such as good governance and democracy, the protection of human rights and

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<sup>1</sup> With the European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP), the EU has also acquired military capabilities. In 2003, in the peacekeeping mission in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, the EU actually engaged in its first military mission. Keukeleire and Delreux comment that these missions “symbolize remarkable progress in the development of EU foreign policy, not least considering that until the mid-1990s it was inconceivable for many member states that the EU might embark on military operations” (Keukeleire & Delreux, 2014, p. 2).

minorities, transitional justice or socioeconomic development. Practices here belong to what Keukeleire and Delreux call structural foreign policy which “aims at sustainably influencing or shaping political, legal, economic, social, security or other structures in a given space” (Keukeleire & Delreux, 2014, pp. 27-28). Thus, conflict prevention practices include legalisation, regular dialogue platforms, and technical and financial assistance.

Two further points are worth stressing here before delving into past and current conflict realities in the MENA region. On the one hand, both practices – crisis management and conflict prevention – can be located at different levels; that is, the local, state, regional and global levels (Whitman & Wolff, 2012, p. 16). This is crucial, as changing conflict realities in the region are reflecting changes on the global and regional (polycentric world plus new regional actors and dynamics coming onto the stage), state and local levels (blocked transitions, failed states/disintegration of states plus old and new groups competing for power); therefore, they have to be matched by adequate responses (aims and practices) on all four levels. Bearing this in mind, this paper will only focus on the response of the EU towards conflict situations in the region, providing limited evidence regarding the responses of other actors at the four levels with which the EU has had (or failed to have) interaction. On the other hand, crisis management and conflict prevention responses by the EU have to take into account evolving conflictual dynamics in the MENA region. Some of the aims and practices outlined above might not be relevant for specific types of conflicts, particularly taking into account the fact that some of them today go beyond traditional definitions of warfare.

## New Conflict Realities in the MENA Region

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Since the onset of western colonialism and imperialism in MENA, the region has been plagued by conflicts and instability. It suffers from comparatively high levels of poverty, uneven distribution of wealth, weak political institutions often as a result of war or prolonged authoritarian rule and corruption, religious and ethnic heterogeneity, and a sharp difference in terms of wealth compared to its neighbour in the Mediterranean North – the EU. All this caters for diffuse and interdependent factors of risk throughout the region. These structural features of MENA (in)security are aggravated by more proximate causes, such as the link between conflict dynamics, demography and migration, the diffusion of unconventional weapons and the regional impact of long-standing internal and external conflicts (Bhardwaj, 2012). What is meant by the latter are more traditional forms of conflicts, also defined as inter-state wars or “old wars”. On the contrary, the former refers to intra-state conflicts which have always been present in MENA, but have arguably been on the rise since the outbreak of the Arab uprisings in the region. The state represents the point of reference in this distinction, with statehood being contested in the case of inter-state conflicts while often being failed in the case of intra-state conflicts.

As Charles Tilly argued in his seminal work on warfare (Tilly, 1990), old wars were linked to the rise of the modern nation-state and performed a state-building function.<sup>2</sup> During the 19th and well into the middle of the 20th century, wars contributed to consolidating states by allowing them to gradually gain monopoly over organised violence, to increase administrative efficiency through some forms of taxation and to create a political community linked to a specific territory, both under the control and protection of the central state. The job of the state was to defend the territory against external aggression and this job, when successfully carried out, would grant legitimacy to it. This paradigm, it should be noted, has mainly grown out of an analysis of war and the state in the West. Lustick (1997), for example, argues that the MENA region has never witnessed such wars.

New wars have opposite features in terms of context, belligerent actors and purposes. The context is often that of disintegrating states (typically authoritarian states under the impact of globalisation and contentious politics), whereby conflicts result from or accelerate processes of state failure and loss of legitimacy. Wars are fought by networks of state and non-state actors; the distinction between combatants and non-combatants breaks down as civilians are often the main victims of such conflicts. The line separating legitimate violence from criminality also blurs as looting, illegal trading and other war-generated revenues mostly feed the conflict. In terms of purpose, these wars exploit and construct new identities, be they religious, ethnic or tribal, that undermine the sense of a shared political community. These sectarian divisive lines are accentuated and new friend-enemy distinctions are created (Kaldor, 2005, pp. 492-493).

<sup>2</sup> To this the imperialistic and colonial conflicts that ravaged the American, African and Asian continents between the 15th and the 20th centuries should be added.



Moving from this distinction between old and new wars – a distinction that carries far deeper meanings than the temporal one, it is safe to argue that the MENA region has seen a relative increase in the second type of conflicts in the wake of the Arab uprisings. New conflicts, in this context, have coincided with civil conflicts or intra-state wars. On the one hand, civil conflicts are frequently defined in conjunction or interchangeably with other forms of intra-state violence, insurgency and counter-insurgency, uprisings, genocide and general loss of internal monopoly over the legitimate use of force. On the other, intra-state conflicts can be defined as belligerent situations in which groups of state and non-state actors fight for power and resources against the backdrop of the collapse of state structures. Sometimes intra-state conflicts have the capacity to spill over beyond the confines of a state, because similar cleavages manifest themselves at the regional level, or to give rise to proxy wars.

This shifting dynamics in conflict situations in the MENA region can be split into three periods: 1) the 1990s and the United States (US)' unipolar moment in the region in which the US allies could “free-ride”; 2) the post 9/11 period that heralded the US invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq and a reshuffling of regional power balances; and 3) the period following the US disengagement from Iraq and the almost parallel commencement of the Arab uprisings with the ensuing collapse of state structures in some countries, such as Libya and Syria, under the impact of the proliferation of non-state criminal and terrorist groups. The regional level is characterised by a decline of US presence in the region, the removal of Egypt as a key power and a strengthened Iran which is balanced by Israel and Saudi Arabia. It is safe to argue that these momentous transformations have impressed a decisive acceleration onto the changing dynamics of conflict in the MENA region.

In the 1990s, the Middle East and North Africa was clearly dominated by the United States. As argued by Aliboni, Guazzone and Pioppi, “the Cold war terminated the most relevant inter-state conflicts in the area without proving able [...] to give them a political solution” (Aliboni, Guazzone & Pioppi, 2001, p. 7). According to the same authors, the end of the Cold War drastically reduced the military capabilities of a number of MENA countries and changed their strategic perspective, thus curtailing their warfare potential. As a consequence of this change and of international pressures, the most relevant inter-state conflict in the area – the Israel-Palestine one – declined temporarily, while the Arab-Israeli one basically stalled. This new phase was embodied by the Oslo Accords of 1993 and the Oslo Process, a peace process aimed at achieving a peace treaty between the two parties based on the United Nations Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338 and at fulfilling the “right of the Palestinian people to self-determination” and statehood. The fact that it was

not completely solved – but only harnessed in a fragile multilateral negotiation framework underpinned by the international community and by the EU's attempt to build a regional security architecture – was mirrored by the re-eruption of the conflict with the second Intifada in 2000.

The conflict scenario of the Middle East and North Africa underwent its next transformation with the US-led invasion of Iraq. This invasion triggered two developments. On the one hand, US allies such as Israel, Turkey or Saudi-Arabia, but also US foes such as Iran, started to drive more independent policies in order to deal with a deteriorating security environment in their immediate neighbourhoods. On the other hand, the Iraq war also led to a domestic fear of US overstretch, hesitancy to get involved in conflicts abroad and a weariness of projecting US power in the region (i.e., the “pivot to Asia”). But just as the United States was disengaging from Iraq, the first flames of the 2011 Arab uprisings swept from Tunisia through North Africa and the Middle East, and authoritarian regimes thought invulnerable to protest and impossible to oust began to cede to massive popular unrest.

In a regional context where the rise of Iran was actively balanced by Saudi Arabia and Israel and where no regional security architecture was in place to absorb these animosities, locally evolving civil wars could not be contained. Intra-state conflicts, sometimes acquiring the features of proxy-wars, in countries such as Libya, Syria and Yemen have matched the very tense situation in Egypt following the ousting of the first Islamist president, Mohamed Morsi, in mid-2013 and the ensuing social strife between the military-led regime and the repressed Muslim Brotherhood. As a result of this situation, the MENA region is currently characterised by a unique combination of latent inter-state conflicts (with many new war characteristics) and a proliferation of intra-state conflicts/proxy wars.

All in all, when active inter-state conflicts as well as locally-contained civil wars, such as the Lebanese or the Algerian ones between the 1970s and the 1990s, prevailed in the MENA region, the security conditions on the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean appeared fragmented and heterogeneous. This was clearly illustrated by the sharp East-West divide, whereby the eastern sector of the Southern Mediterranean was taken hostage by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with far greater intensity than what was the case in the western sector, in which the animosity between Algeria and Morocco over the Western Sahara dispute since the 1970s was one of the most significant factors preventing the creation of an integrated sub-regional architecture. The situation seems markedly different following the spread and spill-over of intra-state conflicts at the regional level in 2011 and later. Following a counter-intuitive logic, it could be argued that intra-state conflicts are sharpening the perception of the MENA as a region due the fact that their effects tend to

transcend borders into neighbouring countries. While political conditions as well as security agendas differ substantially from one country to the other, a regional arch of instability is emerging as a result of changing conflictual dynamics matched by other trans-national phenomena such as the smuggling of migrants and human trafficking, the proliferation of Islamic terrorism and region-wide sectarian tensions. This instability is also contributing to linking the MENA region to other neighbouring areas, such as the Sahel, the Horn of Africa and the Gulf, thus creating a penetrated system of insecurity that deserves new attention and policy responses.

One of the main and most evident repercussions of this shift is that some of the EU's policies towards the Neighbourhood in general and its crisis-management and conflict-prevention strategies in particular emerge increasingly out of touch as conflict realities on the ground are evolving fast. At its basics, the very conceptualisation of the Mediterranean region by the EU does not match the current region-wide dynamics. Both the multilateral EMP and the UfM, on the one hand, and the bilateral European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), on the other, tend to be based on a rather restrictive conceptualisation of the region. In this light, for example, the Gulf region, including Iraq, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, Yemen and Iran are not part of these frameworks, in spite of the increasingly substantial links between this region and the MENA regional security equation.

Turning to the EU's crisis-management and conflict-prevention strategies in the context of the EMP, they were rather underdeveloped if not totally non-existent (Vasconcelos & Joffé, 2000). Neither crisis-management nor conflict-prevention were mentioned in the Barcelona Declaration of 1995. First of all, this framework, despite its multilateral flavour, has always suffered from the Southern Mediterranean perception of northern unilateralism and intrusion. This perception has been particularly acute when it comes to the use of military instruments, in particular in a crisis- and conflict-management perspective, and to the policies aimed at strengthening democracy and human rights. Second, Euro-Mediterranean mechanisms for crisis-management and conflict-prevention never went beyond the enhanced political dialogue dimension. Any EMP joint action entailing the use of military or civilian instruments for whichever kind of peace support initiative, as well as an EMP mandate to the EU to use these instruments in a crisis-management or conflict-prevention perspective, were never conceived. As a result of these shortcomings, security cooperation, the first pillar of the EMP, achieved only meagre results. With regard to inter-state conflicts – the most diffuse cause of violence in the Euro-Mediterranean region during the 1990s, this was the case not only because of the encroachment of the yet unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict but also because of the strong Southern and Eastern Mediterranean perceptions of a northern interference in their domestic business in the name of promoting peace in the backyard.

The lack of adequate strategies and tools to tackle conflicts in the MENA region has become even more acute in the framework of the ENP and of the UfM in the following decade. On the one hand, the transformative agenda of the ENP – launched in 2003 on the eve of the biggest enlargement of the Union to the East – only indirectly addressed the issue of conflicts in the Neighbourhood. Economic development goals, democracy, human rights and civil society promotion, and good governance were regarded as structural long-term preventive actions to be pursued through the instrument of conditionality, which was ultimately not used in a coherent and convincing way (Joffé, 2011; Seeberg, 2014). On the other, the UfM totally sidelined political and security cooperation in favour of technical projects targeting six priority areas, ranging from civil protection and higher education and research to alternative energies and de-pollution.

In conclusion, while these Euro-Mediterranean frameworks have not lived up to the expectation of harnessing inter-state conflicts in the MENA region during the 1990s and the 2000s, they appear even less equipped to tackle intra-state conflicts. Since the beginning, Euro-Mediterranean relations explicitly excluded any form of intervention in intra-state dynamics and conflicts (Aliboni, Guazzone & Pioppi, 2001, p. 25). As a result, today's conflicts and the interdependence and transnationality of risk factors in the Mediterranean region are not matched by a coherent set of security policies on the side of the EU. This argument will be developed in the following section that presents and discusses five case studies of conflicts in the MENA region following the Arab uprisings. Two of them, Israel-Palestine and Western Sahara, are inter-state conflicts that include substantial new war dimensions, while the other three, Libya, Egypt and Syria, are examples of the new intra-state conflicts that have permeated the region since 2011.

**The EU and Changing Conflict Dynamics  
in the MENA Region: Aims and Practices**

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### Israel-Palestine

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been a key issue in EU foreign policy since the European Community tried to assume a common foreign policy role; that is, since the European Political Cooperation emerged in 1970. In fact, it was the Yom Kippur/Ramadan War which, in 1973, pushed the nine foreign ministers of the European Community to attempt to explore common foreign policy values in a shared document (European Council, 1973). Thus, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been from the beginning one of the key drivers for a shared European foreign policy. While the EU's position on it has never been unequivocal, the EU member states' attempts to define a shared lowest common denominator and milestones in this endeavour resulted in the 1977 London Declaration, which called for a "Palestinian Homeland", and the 1980 Venice Declaration, which recognised the Palestinian right to self-determination and declared settlements illegal under international law and an obstacle to peace. Indeed, as Elena Aoun has pointed out, if the EU has played a role in the conflict, then it has been its relative success in creating a certain normative framing of the conflict in the international arena (Aoun, 2003).

The EU's role in the conflict was then boosted with the Oslo Accords and the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (PA), as the EU committed itself to build up the institutional structure of a future Palestinian state. Until today, the EU and its member states are the biggest donor of the PA which is therefore highly aid-dependent on the EU as a key financial provider for the functioning of its quasi-state and the provision of common goods. Besides its aid, the EU has sought to establish a mediating role in the conflict, but this was in the 1990s still blocked by both Israel and the United States. Somewhat in competition with the US-led multilateral talks (Peters, 1998), the EU set up the Barcelona Process as a regional forum which would surround and anchor Israeli-Palestinian peace talks in an envisaged regional security community. In the framework of the Barcelona Process, the EU has signed an Association Agreement with both Israel (1995) and the PLO (1997). As the peace process deteriorated, however, the regional dimension of the Barcelona Process also became increasingly stuck. At the same time, the EU succeeded to be included into the main diplomatic forum established in 2002 during the second Intifada – the Middle East Quartet. It also started to engage more in crisis management practices through two civilian missions, EUPOLL COPS, based since 2005 in the West Bank, and EU-BAM Rafah, established in 2005 to monitor the border crossing between the Gaza Strip and Egypt and temporarily suspended in 2007 when Hamas took over control of the Gaza Strip.

Besides these crisis management practices, the EU has also included both Israel and the Palestinian territories into the ENP in the framework of its conflict-prevention strategies. However, the final results of the EU's engagement are problematic. Currently, the European

Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) is the main tool through which the EU channels its aid to the Palestinians. In 2014, its funding amounted to 309.5 million Euros, of which 170.5 million Euros were direct financial support through PEGASE (European Commission, 2015a).<sup>3</sup> This does not, however, represent all the aid which is coming from the EU into the West Bank and Gaza.<sup>4</sup> While the total is still a far cry from the 3 billion USD which Israel annually receives in military aid from the United States, it does show the aid dependency of the Palestinians on the EU. Furthermore, this aid is problematic as it can be seen as financing the occupation and so releasing Israel from a financial burden and as it operates within the parameters set by the occupying power (Khalil & Del Sarto, 2015, p. 144). In addition, this aid is not matched by a coherent conditionality policy and supports a regime that lacks democratic legitimacy. Regarding the Palestinian Authority, while in the 1990s the EU was willing to tolerate President Yasser Arafat's authoritarian rule and human rights violations in the belief that this would keep the peace process alive, this changed in 2001-2002 during the second Intifada and this approach was perceived as a failure. The EU pressured Arafat into introducing the office of a prime minister, fostering the independence of the judiciary and the oversight capacity of the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC), bringing all security services under the auspices of the Ministry of the Interior, and placing all revenues under the supervision of the Ministry of Finance. This policy, however, was reversed again in 2006 with Hamas winning the parliamentary elections. The EU changed course and supported the concentration of power in the hands of the president with the distribution of funding to his office and ultimately the increased securitisation of Palestine (Tocci, 2006). In light of the ongoing division between Fatah and Hamas, as well as of the EU's no-contact policy with Hamas, this policy continues.

To come to EU-Israel relations, in the framework of the ENP, Israel received 6 million Euros in the 2011-13 period (European Commission, 2011) for its participation in Twinning, a programme which seeks to approximate Israeli norms and standards to the EU's. Israeli civil society organisations are supported through the Partnership for Peace programme (5 million annually for Israel, Palestine and Jordan) and through the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) (1.2 million Euros in 2014). Furthermore, Israel is part of Erasmus Mundus, Tempus and the EU's R&D programme, Horizon 2020 (European Commission, 2015b). There is an array of subcommittees, but no subcommittee on human rights, only a working group that is guided by an informal agreement that only human rights violations within Israel, not within the Occupied Palestinian Territories, are discussed (Bertrand-Sanz, 2012). In 2007, Israel asked for an upgrade in relations, which would have enabled its participation in further community programmes. This was first positively received by the EU, but then put on hold in wake of the Israeli offensive on the Gaza Strip in late 2008 and the unwillingness of the Netanyahu government to commit to substantive

<sup>3</sup> €87 went to UNRWA and €52 million has been allocated to governance (€13 million); investment, trade and vocational training (€10.5 million); Hebron Wastewater Treatment Plant (€15 million); Support to Area C (€3.5 million) and support to East Jerusalem (€10 million).

<sup>4</sup> Running a search on the OECD Qwids database (2015), in 2013, EU institutions disbursed almost 359 million USD and DAC-EU members 514 million USD to the West Bank and Gaza.

negotiations. Nonetheless, relations in practice continued to deepen in areas not covered by the upgrade and trade continued to increase.

At the same time, the EU's practices in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are currently undergoing a substantial change which has been triggered by the deadlock of peace talks, the unabated growth of Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories that are making the two-state solution supported by the EU increasingly unfeasible, and the shift of Palestinian tactics from the local towards the international arena. This shift is met by growing international consensus regarding the recognition of the State of Palestine. Against this backdrop, changes in the EU's practices, which aim at sustaining the two-state solution, can be observed in two dimensions:

- 1) At the United Nations level: an increasing number of EU member states support Palestinian statehood at the international United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) level, as well as the national parliamentary level.
- 2) At the EU level: with the implementation of the rules of origin in 2005, the 2013 settlement guidelines and the 2015 resolution of the European Parliament calling on the EU to issue labels for products originating from areas beyond Israel's pre-1967 lines, the EU is asserting the Green Line, the two-state solution and the illegality of the settlements.

While these actions do indicate new practices by the EU, they are first steps in a new direction that brings EU practices in line with international and EU law, but do not yet represent a coherent new approach.

### Western Sahara

While the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been central to EU foreign policy making for decades, the opposite is true for the Western Sahara conflict where the EU has been comfortable to hide behind the United Nations as the main broker in the dispute (Darbouche & Colombo, 2010). Gillespie has explained the EU's debility over the issue by the intractability of the conflict, the nature of the EU, inadequate policy instruments and the prioritisation of relations with Morocco (Gillespie, 2010). The two former European colonial powers in the area – Spain and France – have both played problematic roles in this respect with France being traditionally supportive of Morocco to the point that Jacques Chirac famously referred to Western Sahara as “Morocco's southern provinces” in 2001 (Tuquoi, 2006). Spain, for its part, had to be reminded by the UN that it is the de jure administrative power of the area (Corell, 2002). As it does have to cooperate with Morocco, notably in the area of migration, it has driven more of a balanced policy towards Western Sahara, Morocco and Algeria, especially since 2004.



When it comes to the EU's policies, the Action Plan signed with Morocco in 2013 does not include any reference to Western Sahara. There is no Association Agreement with Western Sahara (the legal implications of which are discussed below), no inclusion of it as a separate partner in the ENP, there is no special envoy and there have been no EU civilian missions to Western Sahara.<sup>5</sup> Since 1993, the EU has provided more than 150 million Euros in humanitarian aid to Sahrawi refugees in Algeria, which is half the amount the EU provides to the OPT annually (European Commission, 2009). The EU does not recognise the authority of Morocco over Western Sahara, but it has signed successive fisheries agreements with Rabat since 1988 covering the natural resources of the occupied territory.

As the UN process was faltering, opposition within the EU to these fisheries agreements has risen, specifically by Northern European states led by Sweden, which in 2006 voted against the agreement in the Council. In 2011, the European Parliament rejected the then negotiated agreement, but a new version was then adopted in 2013 which continues to include the waters of Western Sahara. As this came at a time when the EU published the settlement guidelines and was working on the labelling issue in the Israeli-Palestinian context, it opened itself to allegations of double standards, so weakening its own policies.<sup>6</sup>

Like the Palestinians, Sahrawis have, as Fernandez-Molina points out, pursued an internationalisation strategy, which has, however, been less effective, due to "the Sahrawis' more peripheral position, lack of an internationally recognised state-like 'authority' and less developed foreign networks" (Fernandez-Molina, 2015, p. 248). While their demand to extend the MINURSO mandate to monitor human rights had been initially adopted by the United States in a proposal to the UNSC in April 2013, it was dropped in the eventual resolution, likely due to lobbying from France, even though the French ambassador denied this. In response to a written question in the European Parliament on the standpoint of the Commission on the inclusion of a human rights monitoring capacity into MINURSO, High Representative Federica Mogherini answered that the "EU supports UN efforts and will not undertake any action that could undermine them" (European Parliament, 2015); in other words, the EU has not adopted a position that would promote the inclusion of such a capacity.

## Libya

Upon the outbreak of the popular revolution in Libya on 17 February 2011, the EU responded with a combination of actions, measures and instruments in the fields of diplomacy, humanitarian aid, trade and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). High Representative Catherine Ashton made her voice heard with strong diplomatic declarations condemning the use of violence against civilians and urging the regime to refrain

<sup>5</sup> The UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) exists but is the only UN peacekeeping mission that lacks the capacity to monitor human rights.

<sup>6</sup> These allegations, it should be noted, apply mainly from a political/moral point of view, but not from a legal one. As Gordon and Pardo have pointed out, in contrast to the Western Sahara case, where the EU has signed an Association Agreement with Morocco only, in the Israeli-Palestinian context, the EU has signed Association Agreements with Israel and the PLO and "each of the two Association Agreements has its own territorial scope, and there is no overlapping between the two" with the 1949 Armistice Agreement serving as the border (Gordon & Pardo, 2015, p. 92). See also the development of this issue from a legal perspective by Kamel (2014a, b).

from any further violence. An extraordinary European Council meeting was convened on 11 March 2011 where Heads of State and Government spoke in a similar unequivocal manner, asking Gaddafi to step down. On this occasion, they also legitimised the National Transitional Council (NTC) by recognising it as the only “political interlocutor” (Koenig, 2014)<sup>7</sup>. The initial unity of intent quickly dissolved when the prospects for military intervention in the Libyan crisis became more concrete and diverging internal role demands and visions for a European role in the conflict became evident among the member states (Koenig, 2014, pp. 260-264).

In addition to humanitarian aid, the EU was also active in the field of the CSDP by adopting a decision on EU Force (EUFOR) Libya, a military operation to support humanitarian assistance operations in the country.<sup>8</sup> However, it was in the fields of civilian training and border control that the EU played a major role, following a division of labour with the United Nations for the support to the country's reconstruction (Gottwald, 2012). In this framework, on 22 May 2013, the Council of the European Union gave the green light for EUBAM Libya, a civilian mission under the CSDP, to support the Libyan authorities in improving and developing the security of the country's borders. This civilian mission responded to an invitation by Libya and its mandate was framed as a civilian crisis management mission with a capacity-building mandate so as to assist the local authorities at the strategic and operational levels to contribute to developing border management and security capabilities. The ultimate goal was to put in place a national Integrated Border Management (IBM) strategy (European Union External Action, 2015a). In light of the deterioration of the security conditions in the country, following the rekindle of the hostilities in May 2014, EUBAM has been operating from Tunisia since August 2014 and was downsized to 17 international mission members two months later. This failure can be explained by the fact that the mission was launched too late when the security situation in the country had already deteriorated. Furthermore, from the outset EUBAM was ill-conceived as it put far too much weight on the capacity-building of the local population through the transfer of know-how and best practices, while failing to address the political roots of border insecurity (Colombo, 2015).

At the political and diplomatic levels, the EU has had major difficulties in contributing to the Libyan transition following the ousting of Gaddafi. Besides engaging with the country's authorities at the bilateral and multilateral levels (e.g., meetings in Paris, London, Rome and Madrid) to discuss international support to Libya, the EU has lacked the instruments to conduct a serious and effective foreign policy towards this pivotal Southern Mediterranean country. This is also the result of an inter-twining of factors. First, a division of labour appears to persist between the EU and other international organisations and initiatives, e.g., the League of Arab States, on the one hand, and the UN, on the other, which is in charge of the political process. This process has unfolded in the framework of the United Nations Support

<sup>7</sup> See European Council, Declaration at the extraordinary European Council (2011, March 11). Brussels: General Secretariat of the Council.

<sup>8</sup> See Council Decision 2011/210/CFSP.

Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), led by Bernardino León, until November 2015, and then by Martin Kobler and enjoying the full support of the EU's diplomacy. In a recent declaration, High Representative Federica Mogherini pledged to provide immediate support to the unity government that is foreseen by the UN Special Envoy's plan, notably with a 100 million Euro package.<sup>9</sup> Second, in the absence of an Association Agreement with the EU, Libya remains outside most of the frameworks of cooperation that Brussels has established in the Mediterranean region. For example, Libya does not take part in the ENP. Nevertheless, it is eligible for funding under the new European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) launched in 2014 as well as under thematic assistance programmes – for example, on democracy and human rights through the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR). Currently, the EU's total assistance to Libya stands at 130 million Euro, targeting public administration, security, democratic transition, civil society, health, vocational training and education. This is in addition to the 80.5 million Euro disbursed to provide humanitarian relief during the conflict phase in 2011. Democratic governance, active citizenship and youth, and civil society promotion represented the main priority sectors of the EU's assistance to Libya in 2014-2015. From a situation of non-existence or total co-optation and inefficiency, independent civil society organisations have begun to emerge in Libya following the collapse of the old regime and despite the conditions of insecurity prevailing in the country. Against this backdrop, the EU's attempts to support both the development of the institutional dimension of the Libyan civil society sector and the capacity building of civil society organisations are positive factors for the country's botched transition, which could eventually contribute to fostering compromise and moderation at the broader social and political levels. These goals can be considered part of a conflict-prevention strategy that is pursued by the EU in support of other actors' more explicit crisis-management and political measures, namely the United Nations.

Another crucial aspect that represents a powerful lens through which the EU looks at the Libyan conflict is migration, and in particular the potentially and seriously explosive interlinkages between smuggling and trafficking practices that take place in Libya in its role as a transit country for mixed migration flows (Toaldo, 2015). Once again the EU reacted from a purely security perspective. On 18 May 2015, High Representative Federica Mogherini announced the creation of the EU Naval Force – EUNAVFOR Med – aimed at breaking the business model of smugglers and traffickers in the Southern Central Mediterranean region. Planning and assessment of smuggling networks have been the first stage, completed by September 2015, followed by the searching, seizing and disruption of assets of smugglers all within the framework of international law (European Union External Action, 2015b). This CSDP military mission has raised many doubts concerning the possible

9 See Statement by the High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini on the finalisation of the Libyan political dialogue, Brussels, 22 September 2015, 150922\_03\_en. Retrieved September 29, 2015, from [http://eeas.europa.eu/statements-eeas/2015/150922\\_03\\_en.htm](http://eeas.europa.eu/statements-eeas/2015/150922_03_en.htm). The pledge was further reiterated on 8 January 2016 on the eve of the unveiling of the unity government. According to the European Commission Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection's latest factsheet, the Commission has contributed 8.76 million Euro in humanitarian aid to Libya since the current crisis started in mid-2014. See [http://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/aid/countries/factsheets/libya\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/aid/countries/factsheets/libya_en.pdf) (accessed on 1 October 2015).

risks for civilians and the effectiveness of such a practice in curbing the profitability of the smuggling and trafficking businesses.

This short account of the EU's response to the Libyan crisis since 2011 onwards sheds light on some of the Union's limits when it comes to addressing complex conflict situations in the Neighbourhood. The Libyan conflict has morphed from a popular revolution against the dictatorial regime of Gaddafi to a civil war, a fully-fledged intra-state conflict, whereby two factions have contended power through both political and military means. The lack of security and stability in the country is made even more acute by the overlapping and mutually reinforcing dynamic among a number of threats, ranging from tribal fault-lines and petty criminality to human trafficking and Islamic terrorism (Bhardwaj, 2012; Toaldo, 2015). Throughout the Libyan crisis, the EU's response has failed to address the core issues regarding the lack of political and institutional confidence among the warring parties and to develop *ad-hoc* effective crisis-management strategies. In the first phase, the Libyan revolution was described as a "missed opportunity" for the EU (Biscop, 2011; Brattberg, 2011), which was portrayed as slow, reluctant, divided and incoherent in dealing with the crisis. During the most recent phase of the intra-state conflict, the EU has lacked the adequate means and, most importantly, the necessary political credentials to play a meaningful role – also with a view to securing its own interests and security – for both structural and contingent reasons. On the one hand, Libya escapes from the EU's reach in terms of the existing frameworks of cooperation, and this has allowed the member states to take the lead and to dictate the agenda to Brussels. On the other, the EU appears to be trapped in the ill-fated security-first approach when addressing the Libyan crisis – its agenda is dominated by EU security concerns, thus neglecting its far more complex and wide-ranging political dimension and implications. This concerns both the Libyan domestic situation and the regional context, in light of the spill-over effects of the conflict and instability into neighbouring countries and of the role played by other regional players – such as the Gulf States and Turkey – in Libyan affairs.

### Egypt

Egypt has arguably been occupying an uncomfortable position since the outbreak of the Libyan civil conflict. A target of violent radicalisation itself – as shown by the brutal kidnapping and killing of 21 Egyptian Coptic Christians in February 2015 by fighters pledging support to the Islamic State operating in Libya,<sup>10</sup> Cairo has been deeply and actively involved in the Libyan crisis as one of the main supporters of the Tobrouk government in the east of the country. This has caused the country both criticism and strategic support. On the one hand, Al-Sisi's regime has been accused of conducting a campaign aimed at rooting out Islamist movements, both domestically and regionally, by conducting a zero-sum-game-type of

10 See "ISIL video shows Christian Egyptians beheaded in Libya", *Al-Jazeera*, 16 February 2015. Retrieved October, 1, 2015 from <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2015/02/isil-video-execution-egyptian-christian-hostages-libya-150215193050277.html>.

strategy. On the other, Egypt's involvement in Libya has allowed its authorities to divert public opinion's attention from the serious security situation facing the country internally (Malsin, 2015). Cairo is indeed participating in the wearing military campaign against the Houthis in Yemen, next to the Saudis, and has waged war against terrorists and restive tribes in the Sinai.

This picture adds onto an already difficult domestic situation following two 'revolutionary' episodes that drastically changed Egypt's outlook in February 2011 and in June/July 2013 (Seeberg, 2013). Following widespread demonstrations, which started in late January 2011, President Hosni Mubarak was toppled and replaced by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), which took over presidential, legislative and executive powers. 2011 and 2012 saw the first rounds of elections (parliamentary followed by presidential ones) of the post-Mubarak era. These elections resulted in the formation of a Muslim Brotherhood-leaning parliament and in the coming to power of the first Islamist president in Egypt's history. These changes sent shockwaves across the domestic circles of power and the international arena alike, while the country embarked on a rather bumpy transition process that was characterised by a number of conflicts and u-turns. The *fil rouge* of the Egyptian transition has been until today the power struggle between the military, in all its different incarnations, and the Muslim Brotherhood. In this sense, the Egyptian political experience following the fall of the Mubarak regime can be described as an intra-state conflict between opposite visions of state-society relations. The most dramatic episode that showed this conflict was the Rabaa massacre, from the name of the place where supporters of ousted president Mohamed Morsi had gathered before being evicted by force by Egyptian security forces. More than 800 people were killed in Egypt in a series of accidents around mid-August 2013, according to Human Rights Watch (2014). The bloody crack-down on the Muslim Brotherhood prompted international condemnation and alarm, but the military-backed government in Cairo was also skilful enough to exploit this circumstance to consolidate its widespread domestic support.

The complex and often violent Egyptian transition has not left the EU motionless. In view of the important set of relations existing between Brussels and Cairo, these events have challenged the EU's capacity to fulfil its role as an international actor in many respects. First, while reacting to a Neighbourhood in turmoil, the EU has appeared almost reticent to grasp the full magnitude of the events in Egypt and their repercussions domestically, regionally and internationally. The EU's reaction to the overthrow of one of the Middle East's longest standing authoritarian regimes was self-effacing and reluctant at best (Teti & Gervasio, 2011; Pinfari, 2013). This is linked to an important aspect of the EU's foreign policy making towards the Neighbourhood in general. The history of relations between Cairo and Brussels – since

the Association Agreement signed in 2001 and entered into force in 2004, replacing the earlier Cooperation Agreement of 1977 – points to an in-born tension and dichotomy between the EU's “hard” interests, be they commercial or security-related, and “soft” power aspirations in line with its supposed normative identity (Bicchi, 2006). For example, European officials signed a Memorandum of Understanding agreement with Egypt in early 2008, a few weeks before the European Parliament published a condemning report on the state of human rights protection in the country (European Parliament, 2008). Furthermore, yielding to pressure by the Egyptian government, which criticised the European Parliament for interfering in the country's domestic affairs, the EU unveiled a four-year (2007-2010), 558 million Euro package deal that, ultimately, put the emphasis on matters of security (be it economic or political) rather than democratisation (Pace, 2009). Therefore, it should come as no surprise that European reactions to the Egyptian uprisings were tepid, with the UK Prime Minister, the German Chancellor and the French President all praising Mubarak for “his moderating role over the years” a few days before he was forced to resign from his post (Hewitt, 2011).

Second, when dealing with societal change and unrest, the EU has appeared ill-equipped with regard to policies and instruments to engage with civil society. This was particularly true as far as the Islamist movements and parties are concerned. Grounded on a fear of instability, the EU's strategy in Egypt has long been to not engage in talks with any of the Islamist-leaning local civil society actors, especially if they are in the opposition, and to discuss and negotiate exclusively with the ruling elite. If this was possible under Mubarak's rule, the electoral gains of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist parties in 2011-2012 created some inevitable ideological frictions with EU authorities, which first and foremost found themselves at a loss over new, intelligible and reliable political partners in post-revolutionary Egypt. Similarly, even if most European capitals refrained from taking sides in Egypt's political contest, European leaders would have clearly preferred secular parties to have emerged victorious from Egypt's elections (Lazarou, Gianniou & Tsourapas, 2013).

Last but not least, following the Arab uprisings the EU has been increasingly competing for influence in a crowded Southern and Eastern Mediterranean region where other regional and international players are also vying for influence. Compared to the financial prowess of other partners, such as the Gulf States, which have stepped up their clout in Egypt by granting large bulk-sum grants aimed at redressing some of the country's macroeconomic difficulties, the financial appeal of the EU vis-à-vis the Egyptian authorities has further been undermined by the “Euro crisis” and the teetering of the European model of integration and governance.



In light of these constraints, the EU's approach to the new political developments after 2011 and the rapidly escalating intra-state conflict in Egypt was characterised by continuity and pragmatism. Both these features have a temporal as well as substantive dimension. On the one hand, relations were never suspended despite the somehow abrupt changes undergone by the Egyptian authorities' composition and political inclination. Moments of tension did exist though. For example, the EU considered halting Egypt's aid in mid-August 2013 in response to rising violence between the military and the ousted Muslim Brotherhood's supporters. European authorities officially announced the urgent need to review relations to Egypt and adopt measures aimed at pursuing the end of violence and the resumption of dialogue, including considering suspending various forms of aid and loans in total worth 5 billion Euro, which had been earmarked to foster the Egyptian transition towards democracy (Fontanella-Khan, Allam & Politi, 2013).

On the other, the EU's official response was dictated by substantive pragmatism. In 2011-2012, the EU's institutions were successful in demonstrating their support and commitment to Egypt's first elected president, despite the obstacles mentioned above. The EU's offers were laid out and discussed during the first meeting between High Representative Catherine Ashton and President Morsi on 13-14 November 2012 in Brussels. The meeting was also the occasion to launch the Egypt "Task Force", a trademark initiative aimed at providing a comprehensive forum for promoting bilateral cooperation. Pragmatism, matched by a certain amount of scepticism, also prevailed as far as the EU's approach to Egypt's political transition and the process of constitutional change are concerned. As aptly observed by Pinfari (2013, p. 463), "Catherine Ashton repeatedly called for the newly elected authorities to govern according to the principles of 'consensus-building and inclusion,' echoing the general climate of scepticism surrounding the hegemony of Islamist parties in all elected institutions, and yet congratulated the Egyptian authorities on their attempts to develop a working electoral democracy". More critical stances vis-à-vis the EU's poor aid conditionality were held by the European Parliament and by the European Court of Auditors, whose report described Europe's aid programme to Egypt as ineffective in improving governance (Pinfari, 2013, p. 464).

This report came only a few weeks before Morsi's removal following a new round of popular demonstrations between the end of June and the beginning of July 2013. The events that followed posed a number of dilemmas to both the EU and its member states. However, despite the opinion held by some authors that Morsi's downfall was accompanied by considerable activism by the EU's authorities that contrasted with their timid reaction to the 2011 revolution (Pinfari, 2013), once more continuity prevailed over change. Consistently with the approach enshrined in the "Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity in

the Southern Mediterranean”, the EU expressed support for what it termed “deep democracy”, defined as:

free and fair elections; freedom of association, expression and assembly and a free press and media; the rule of law administered by an independent judiciary and right to a fair trial; fighting against corruption; security and law enforcement sector reform (including the police) and the establishment of democratic control over armed and security forces (European Commission and High Representative, 2011).

With regard to addressing social tensions and political conflicts in Egypt, the EU has to date not developed a proper crisis-management strategy, but rather has continued to focus on conflict-prevention initiatives centred on good governance, civil society development and, in parallel, poverty alleviation, local socio-economic development and social protection (European External Action Service and European Commission, 2014).

### Syria

Since its onset as a popular rebellion, which quickly morphed into the worst humanitarian and security crisis after World War II, the intra-state conflict in Syria has become the key geo-strategic confrontation in the region. This conflict has a number of different dimensions and escapes ready-made definitions. It involves local, regional and international actors, among which the most prominent ones are the United States, Russia, individual EU member states such as France and the United Kingdom, as well as regional powers such as Saudi Arabia and Iran. As such, it represents the perfect example of a regional conflict or proxy war. Against the backdrop of the ever escalating humanitarian crisis, with the estimated number of people in need of immediate assistance inside the country amounting to 13.5 million in January 2016 (European Commission, 2016), the impact of the Syrian civil war on the MENA region at large as well as Europe has further been heightened by the coming to the fore of the Islamic State and its brutal attacks against civilians inside and outside the country.

In order to understand the aims and practices of the EU when facing the Syrian conflict, it is necessary to start with a short overview of EU-Syria relations, whose evolution has never been straightforward. While Syria did sign the Barcelona Declaration in 1995, the EU has always been reluctant to enter into contractual relations with Damascus. As a result, the legal basis for relations with Syria has been the Cooperation Agreement signed in 1977. Negotiations on an Association Agreement progressed very slowly and were concluded in 2004 only. A few months later, former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Al-Hariri was assassinated and due to the alleged Syrian involvement in the assassination, the EU put the agreement negotiations on hold, as several EU member states refused to sign an



Association Agreement with Syria. In 2009, following Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005 and the re-establishment of the relations between the two countries in 2008, the EU showed its willingness to proceed with the signature of the agreement. However, at that time, it was the opposition of the Syrian leadership, emboldened by its "rapprochement" with key regional and international allies, such as Turkey and France, which ultimately led to the failure to reach an agreement. The Syrian regime's violent repression of the popular rebellion in 2011 contributed to further putting the EU and Syria on a divergent track. As an immediate response, the EU suspended all bilateral cooperation programmes, froze the draft Association Agreement and imposed an arms embargo, travel ban, and asset freeze in May 2011.

Also in the case of Syria, EU member states were divided over key issues, which became most evident in August 2013 as proof of the use of chemical weapons in the civil war seemed to make international action increasingly unavoidable. The EU3 (UK, France, Germany) were divided on the issue, with France and the UK – until called back by the vote in the House of Commons – pushing for military action, while Germany pushed for more UNSC involvement. This, in addition to the hesitant US position, opened the way for Russian diplomacy that led to UNSC resolution 2118 regarding the elimination of Syria's chemical weapons arsenal.

In June 2013, the EU adopted a joint communication outlining four goals regarding the civil war; that is, to support a political solution, prevent regional destabilisation, and address the dramatic humanitarian situation and the consequences of the conflict for the EU. From the security point of view, the EU adopted a Counter-Terrorism/Foreign Fighters Strategy for Syria and Iraq in October 2014, which is part of its regional strategy for Syria, Iraq and the Daesh threat adopted in March 2015. On the political side, the EU has repeatedly expressed its full support to the efforts of the UN Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, to de-escalate violence in preparation for a broader, sustainable political process. In the framework of the UN-led political process outlined in the UNSC resolution 2254 dated December 2015, the EU recalls that the overall objective remains a Syrian-led process based on negotiations between the Syrian government and the opposition and leading to a transition government and path that meets the aspirations of all the Syrian people. However, the EU has arguably not been a driver in finding a political solution to the conflict by engaging itself at the regional level, not least since it is internally divided on the Al-Assad issue. The United Kingdom and France, which have run a military campaign against the Islamic State in Syria by participating in the US-led air strikes, continue to insist on his removal, while Germany and Eastern European states, such as Poland, increasingly push for the idea that he should be part of a transitional solution.

Finally, on the humanitarian front, the EU and its member states collectively have been leading the international response to the refugee crisis that has dramatically invested the MENA region and Europe. In spite of the fact that more than 5 billion Euro have been mobilised at the European level for relief and recovery assistance to the population inside Syria and to the refugees and their host communities in neighbouring Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Turkey and Egypt, the EU has failed to shield itself from the consequences of the conflict due to internal divisions and competing narratives on the scale and best way to deal with the influx of refugees at its own borders.

What emerges from this brief account and analysis of the EU's actions vis-à-vis the Syrian civil war is that the EU has not been able to channel all its efforts into a comprehensive and coherent set of policies at the multilateral and bilateral levels. Moving from the correct understanding of the complex Syrian conflict reality, which is made up of a number of inter-linked dimensions, the EU has ended up dealing primarily with the management of the humanitarian crisis rather than stepping up its role on the security and political side.

## Conclusions

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In light of the changing conflict realities in the MENA region the EU does not seem to have lived up to the expectations of fostering peace in the Neighbourhood, which has always featured as one of its key declaratory foreign policy objectives. Looking back at the past twenty years (1995-2015), at least two big changes can be spotted in the EU's conflict-related aims and practices. While during the times of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, there was the ambition to solve ongoing, inter-state conflicts in the region, such as the Israeli-Palestinian/Israeli-Arab one, through the creation of a regional security community, this goal was put aside around the turn of the century. This moment coincided with a growing disillusionment with the possibility to tackle these conflicts at their roots as well as with the growing securitisation of foreign relations in Europe in the wake of 9/11. However, the EU continued to play a limited role in crisis management, as testified by its engagement in the Middle East Quartet and in the two civilian missions EUPOLL COPS and EU-BAM Rafah. Nonetheless, the EU's crisis management effort in the MENA region was further diluted in the last years of the 2000s and then, quite surprisingly, following the outbreak of the Arab uprisings and of intra-state conflicts. The EU's responses to the Libyan civil war, to the tensions in Egypt and to the unabated violence and conflict in Syria demonstrate that the EU has largely failed to make use of its (limited) crisis management toolbox, mainly due to internal political divisions, and has rather opted for an indirect role of conflict prevention through the mildly transformative agenda enshrined in the ever more delegitimized ENP – which might well be the result of the EU working on a lowest-common-denominator basis between the interests of all member states.

In conclusion, the EU should substantially revise its tools and practices in addressing the MENA conflicts in two respects. Content-wise, it should be stressed that conflict prevention, entailing democracy promotion, good governance, human rights respect and the fostering of civil society, is good but, being preventive measures, they cannot be implemented when conflicts are already in full swing. Given the situation in the MENA region, the EU needs to equip itself with the full array of policies and tools that can be used to manage crises, including military instruments but also multilateral diplomacy at the cultural, political and economic levels. The EU has developed and used these tools and capabilities in other parts of the world, such as the Balkans and sub-Saharan Africa and could draw significant lessons from that with a view to stepping up their presence in the EU's toolkit needed to tackle MENA conflicts. Furthermore, these crisis management tools fall under the umbrella of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). As the recent experience in Libya in particular demonstrates, there is the need to further integrate them into the ENP towards the Southern Mediterranean region. In other words, it would be important to bring security considerations back into the EU's strategy and action in a more coherent and effective manner.

Regarding the format of the EU's conflict-related aims and practices, the Union could find it beneficial to go back to fostering the creation of a security community in the MENA region as it did in the heyday of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership during the 1990s when the EU was keen on tackling and solving regional conflicts, and it actively did so. Despite its being short-lived and over-ambitious, the spirit of the Barcelona Process contained some important elements that made the EU's contribution to conflict resolution and security significant. These elements are totally missing today. There is thus the need to go back to talking about conflict resolution tools and policies and to the EU's role as a contributor to setting up a new security architecture in the region, which should be tailored to current regional and global dynamics. In the age of multipolarity, this security architecture cannot but be *flexible* and *non EU-centred*. However, the EU has the potential and the tools to engage with a broad range of regional, sub-regional and international players that have a stake in MENA security and progress to work out this regional security configuration. This need becomes even more pressing in light of the times of crisis and widespread conflicts the region lives in. In terms of tools, the EU should invest in locally formed regional and sub-regional platforms and dialogues as well as make full use of the opportunities offered by inter-regionalism. One such opportunity would be to significantly step up its cooperation with the Arab League and other regional organisations, as well as ensuring greater coordination with the UN, also with a view to making them more effective in dealing with security issues in the MENA region. The other would be to go down the path of multilateralism more vehemently – as the EU is already doing in the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.



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## EuroMeSCo

Comprising 102 institutes from 32 European and South Mediterranean countries, the EuroMeSCo (Euro-Mediterranean Study Commission) network was created in 1996 for the joint and coordinated strengthening of research and debate on politics and security in the Mediterranean. These were considered essential aspects for the achievement of the objectives of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership.

EuroMeSCo aims to be a leading forum for the study of Euro-Mediterranean affairs, functioning as a source of analytical expertise. The objectives of the network are to become an instrument for its members to facilitate exchanges, joint initiatives and research activities; to consolidate its influence in policy-making and Euro-Mediterranean policies; and to disseminate the research activities of its institutes amongst specialists on Euro-Mediterranean relations, governments and international organisations.

The EuroMeSCo work plan includes a research programme with four publication lines (EuroMeSCo Joint Policy Studies, EuroMeSCo Papers, EuroMeSCo Briefs and EuroMeSCo Reports), as well as a series of seminars, workshops and presentations on the changing political dynamics of the Mediterranean region. It also includes the organisation of an annual conference and the development of web-based resources to disseminate the work of its institutes and stimulate debate on Euro-Mediterranean affairs.

