

Collective Security and Multilateral Engagement in the Middle East: Pathways for EU Policy

by Silvia Colombo and Andrea Dessì

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ABSTRACT

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is experiencing deep and profound challenges spanning the geopolitical and geoeconomic domains, as intra-state rivalry and competition mixes with mounting socio-economic threats and fraying social contracts within multiple states in the region. Stepping back from the brink and developing new and inclusive frameworks for dialogue, de-escalation and confidence building in the region represents a generational challenge, requiring the active buy-in and support of regional actors themselves. The European Union has a vital interest in supporting such objectives, but needs to contend with limited capabilities, a retrenching United States and its lack of internal cohesion to have a positive impact. Against this backdrop, the EU should carefully priorities its engagements, working both internally and externally to improve its policies and leverage vis-à-vis three regional cleavages – the Arab-Israeli, the Saudi-Iranian, and the Arab-Turkish – and a number of associated “hot-spots” in an effort to mitigate the prevalence of zero-sum competition and contain the risk of new conflicts or crises, operationalising the EU’s concept of “principled pragmatism” in the region.

Middle East | North Africa | Regional security | European Union | Conflict mediation

keywords

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Introduction

In the ten-year period since the outbreak of the 2010–11 Arab uprisings, the regional environment in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has gone from bad to worse. Conflicts and proxy wars have expanded, socio-economic indicators deteriorated, geopolitical rivalries deepened and the gap between states and societies widened. At no point in the recent history of the Middle East have crises, fragmentation and dysfunctionality been so prevalent across the region, fuelling significant apprehension for the short and medium future of the Middle East.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the global economic downturn, coupled with the recent collapse of oil prices, will only aggravate this scenario, worsening economic outlooks and disrupting social life, jobs and trade. Domestic pressures will grow as a result, and with them so will the regime survival instincts of ruling elites, hardening repression at home and dangerous brinkmanship abroad. The result is a highly volatile regional disorder where trends of conflictual multipolarity and zero-sum rivalry run supreme, amidst a combustible mix of overlapping domestic, regional and international instability drivers that could well explode into new conflicts and crises in the near future.

Stepping back from the brink and developing new and inclusive mechanisms for dialogue, de-escalation and confidence building in the Middle East is no easy task. Such efforts will likely be a long-term, even generational endeavour. There are no assurances of success and progress will ultimately depend on the active buy-in and support from regional actors themselves, as such mechanisms cannot simply be imposed from the outside. The fact that such goals have been avowed objectives for many decades only speaks to the depths of the challenges at hand, while shifts in the international arena underscore the new complexities of such efforts against

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the backdrop of declining transatlantic cohesion and leverage vis-à-vis the Middle East and the increasingly proactive and independent policies of other actors, both regional and international.

The European Union (EU) and its member states retain limited capabilities to assume a lead role in efforts to establish new security frameworks for the Middle East, lacking in internal cohesion and appropriate instruments to foster regional buy-in, oversight and/or accountability. Faced with three regional cleavages – the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Saudi-Iranian rivalry and the growing Arab-Turkish rupture – that are responsible for much of the geopolitical tensions in the region, the EU should focus on gradual, intermediate steps that aim to create a more conducive environment for de-escalation across conflict lines, pursuing ad hoc dialogue formats, de-confliction initiatives and a principled defence of international law and EU values. Acknowledging the EU's limited leverage to address the underlying material and ideational drivers that are defining these regional cleavages, efforts could be directed towards a number of hot-spots – the Eastern Mediterranean and Libya, Palestine and the Persian Gulf – in which these ruptures converge and where EU interests and leverage are more clearly defined. Working to stabilise these hot-spots and a number of associated pressure points therein could have positive carry-on effects on the broader region, avoiding a further deepening of rivalries across regional cleavages. Conversely, a deepening of conflict and competition in each of these hot-spots would further exacerbate regional cleavages, harden threat perceptions and thereby further complicate efforts to de-escalate tensions through dialogue and confidence building.

Such objectives imply both an internal and external dimension to EU policy. They involve both a correct assessment of external threats and challenges and a careful quantification of EU leverage and influence to have a positive impact. This latter dimension requires the EU to look inwards, reassessing its policy-making approaches and decision-making modalities in an effort to strengthen its cohesion and coherence vis-à-vis the region. The establishment of lead groups composed of key member states working in close cooperation with the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the delineation of stable working groups gathering representatives from the policy planning units and relevant ministries of large EU member states represent two indispensable components of any effort to better position the EU in the region, helping to pool leverage among EU members and better delineate objectives and the sequencing of policies in a given context.

Underscoring how the Middle East is likely to make or break the European Union's newfound ambition to act geopolitically on the world stage while enhancing its strategic autonomy in foreign and security policy, the challenge facing the EU is that of operationalising its concept of "principled pragmatism" in the region, demonstrating the EU's ability to pursue principled but independent policies that best reflect its values and interests, working to de-escalate tensions and establish new avenues for direct and indirect dialogue among competing states as a means to establish a more conducive environment for the discussion of formal regional or sub-regional security frameworks for the Middle East.

1. Regional challenges: Socio-economic turmoil and geopolitical ruptures

The post-2011 MENA is “more combustible than ever”,¹ as multiple overlapping challenges span the geopolitical, socio-economic and security domains placing increased strain on social contracts and already weak and fraying regional cooperation forums. Intra–Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) tensions and the ongoing blockade of Qatar, the mounting Saudi and Emirati rivalry with Turkey and Iran and the emergence of energy and geopolitically driven alliances in the Eastern Mediterranean, not to mention competition over the conflicts in Syria, Libya, Palestine and Yemen as well as the fragile states of Iraq and Lebanon, are all examples of the present conflictual multipolarity in the MENA region. On top of these developments, the protest movements that have rocked Lebanon, Iraq, Algeria and Sudan have once again displayed the weakness of social contracts in many countries of the region, reminding observers that many of the underlining criticalities that contributed to the outbreak of the Arab uprisings in late 2010 remain unaddressed and have actually worsened considerably over the ensuing decade.²

Indeed, on top of the risk of regional war and the multiple ongoing proxy conflicts, attention should also be directed towards the internal, domestic causes of instability and insecurity, among which corruption, lack of opportunities and growing repression are contributing to high levels of popular frustration and anger.³ As noted by one observer, “gloeconomics, not geopolitics, is the key”⁴ and the COVID-19 pandemic will further affect internal stability and state–society relations. The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) has noted that the Arab region will shed 1.7 million jobs due to the pandemic, while Arab states’ GDP is expected to decline by at least 42 billion US dollars in 2020.⁵ A further study by ESCWA has demonstrated a striking increase in poverty and inequality levels across the Middle East. Outlining how the “current growth model in the Arab region is no longer economically feasible”, the report estimates that 115 million people in 14 Arab countries live in poverty in 2020, up

¹ Robert Malley, “The Unwanted Wars”, in *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 98, No. 6 (November/December 2019), p. 38–47, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2019-10-02/unwanted-wars>.

² Andrea Dessì, “Crisis and Breakdown: How Can the EU Foster Resilience in the Middle East and North Africa?”, in *IAI Working Papers*, No. 17|37 (December 2017), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/8678>; Marwan Bishara, “Beware of the Looming Chaos in the Middle East”, in *Al Jazeera*, 3 August 2020, <https://aje.io/qgw3q>.

³ Rami Khouri, “Poverty, Inequality and the Structural Threat to the Arab Region”, in *POMEPS Studies*, No. 34, March 2019, p. 28–32, <https://pomeps.org/?p=10712>.

⁴ Julien Barnes-Dacey, “Trump or Biden: Three Ways to Make Europe Matter in the Middle East”, in *ECFR Commentaries*, 15 October 2020, https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_trump_or_biden_three_ways_to_make_europe_matter_in_the_middle_ea.

⁵ ESCWA, “COVID-19 Economic Cost to the Arab Region”, in *ESCWA Policy Briefs*, No. 1 (March 2020), <https://www.unescwa.org/sites/www.unescwa.org/files/escwa-covid-19-economic-cost-arab-region-en.pdf>.

from the 66 million in 2010. Inequality, meanwhile, has continued to grow, with the top 10 per cent of wealthiest adults in the Arab region, all of whom are male and live in the GCC countries, accounting for 76 per cent of total household wealth in the region in 2019.⁶

Faced with these twin geopolitical and geoeconomic challenges, Europe must urgently develop a more effective set of policies to mitigate these risks, preventing the further exacerbation of conflicts and rivalries before the next major crisis erupts. For this to come about, the European Union not only needs to better contextualise the causalities and interlinkages between recent challenges in the Middle East, internalise past errors and work to diminish disagreements among its member states; it must also revisit certain principles and approaches that have long accompanied its action in the region.

After decades of reliance on the United States, recent disagreements with Washington surrounding President Donald Trump's policy on Iran are serving as a wakeup call for the urgent need to develop a degree of "strategic autonomy" in EU foreign and security policy.⁷ Trends of US relative retrenchment and unpredictability in the region,⁸ which predate the Trump administration and are dictated by the United States' growing focus on Asia, will remain a constant independent of who sits in the White House.⁹ Given Europe's geographic vicinity and exposure to migration, terrorism, economic and energy disruptions from this region, the European Union does not have the luxury of simply ignoring these developments and nor can it withdraw into a so-called Fortress Europe. Ultimately, the risks of complacency with (or de facto support for) the deeply flawed and unsustainable status quo far outweigh the challenges and uncertainties of proactive engagement, starting in those domains where the European Union does retain influence and leverage, and seeking to position the Union as a reliable and trustworthy external actor, capable of tracing balanced policies across conflict lines without deepening the militarisation and polarisation of the region.¹⁰

The United States' relative retrenchment from the Middle East, combined with the resurgent influence of Russia and the growing activism and competition among a number of regional states – Turkey, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia,

⁶ ESCWA, "A Solidarity Tax to Address the Impact of COVID-19 on Poverty in the Arab Region" in *ESCWA Policy Briefs*, No. 7 (June 2020), https://www.unescwa.org/sites/www.unescwa.org/files/20-00187_covid-19-policy-brief-en.pdf.

⁷ Andrea Dessì and Vassilis Ntousas (eds), *Europe and Iran in a Fast-Changing Middle East*, Brussels, Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS) and Rome, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), June 2019, <https://www.iai.it/en/node/10554>.

⁸ Jordi Quero and Andrea Dessì, "Unpredictability in US Foreign Policy and the Regional Order in the Middle East: Reacting vis-à-vis a Volatile External Security-Provider", in *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 17 February 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2019.1580185>.

⁹ Julien Barnes-Dacey, "Trump or Biden: Three Ways to Make Europe Matter in the Middle East", cit.

¹⁰ Silvia Colombo et al., "The Art of the (Im)Possible: Sowing the Seeds for the EU's Constructive Engagement in the Middle East And North Africa", in *MENARA Final Reports*, No. 4 (April 2019), <http://menara.iai.it/?p=1588>.

Qatar, Israel and Iran – are the major elements that define the contemporary region. They will not be reversed and cannot be ignored or simply contained. Indeed, the objective of fostering security dialogue and cooperative frameworks cannot be that of rolling back the recent advances of one or another actor. Rather, the objective should be developing avenues for dialogue and de-confliction on the basis of inclusive frameworks and principles that reflect the contemporary geopolitical realities of the Middle East, seeking to enhance mutual understandings, diminish threat perceptions and mitigate the risk of miscalculations or further escalations in the region.

Developments since 2010–11 have only increased these trends, also contributing to a further weakening of regional and sub-regional integration forums such as the League of Arab States and the GCC. More importantly a new, geopolitical cleavage has emerged, pitting the Arab Gulf states of Saudi Arabia, the UAE and al-Sisi's Egypt against Turkey and Qatar, a cleavage that is spreading instability to other locations, including the Eastern Mediterranean and Libya. Centred around Ankara and Doha's support for Muslim Brotherhood-linked parties in the wake of the Arab uprisings, movements considered as existential threats to the legitimacy of Arab Gulf monarchies, this regional fault line has progressed in parallel to another, older regional cleavage involving the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The combination of these twin fault lines, and their at times overlapping convergence on the third and oldest regional cleavage, the Arab-Israeli conflict, are such as to create a critically combustible region with high risks of conflict, either by design or miscalculation. Each cleavage involves a number of regional (and international) states and together they converge in various pressure points that could well catapult new and multidimensional crises across the region. Capturing the interplay between these three regional cleavages and their respective pressure points, broadly located in three hot spots – the Eastern Mediterranean, the Persian Gulf and the Near East – can help the European Union prioritise engagements, tailoring policies and pooling leverage to maximise influence and results.

The oldest of these regional cleavages is the still unresolved Arab/Palestinian-Israeli conflict, a rupture that for decades has sprouted instability, militarisation and conflict. Independently from the growing Israeli–Arab Gulf cooperation, and the more recent announcement of normalisation agreements by the UAE, Bahrain and Sudan with Israel, one would be naïve to ignore the importance the Arab-Israeli conflict has had – and continues to have – on the international relations of the Middle East, including the two further cleavages of Saudi-Iranian and Arab-Turkish tensions.¹¹ Indeed, the future of Palestine arguably retains key significance for the viewpoints and ambitions of key states that make up each of these three regional cleavages, retaining a central role in their respective rhetorical and conceptual

¹¹ An overwhelming 88 per cent of Arabs surveyed in the latest Arab Opinion Index 2019–2020 were opposed to recognition of Israel by their home countries. See, Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies (ACRPS), *The 2019-20 Arab Opinion Index. Main Results in Brief*, Doha Institute, October 2020, p. 54-55, <https://www.dohainstitute.org/en/Lists/ACRPS-PDFDocumentLibrary/Arab-Opinion-Index-2019-2020-Inbreef-English-Version.pdf>.

aspirations for the future of the region, the role of the state, of citizenship and the balance between authoritarianism and representation, rights and repression.

Aside from its local dimension in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, the conflict remains of significant relevance for Israeli-Lebanese and Israeli-Syrian relations, it has long been a source of contention between Israel and Iran and has more recently returned to cause significant tensions and animosities between Israel and Turkey as well as Turkey and certain Arab states. These elements, combined with the continued internal tensions caused by the Palestinian issue within Jordan and Lebanon among others, are sufficient to remind audiences of the continued importance of this regional cleavage for any effort that aims to stabilise and build trust among regional actors, their citizens and the international community. Palestine is also an issue on which internal EU cohesion is more established and where support for international law and the two-state framework could provide avenues for a more proactive (and public) EU policy approach, one that would also imply carry-on benefits for EU legitimacy and influence, both regionally and internationally.

The next regional cleavage, that of Saudi-Iranian rivalry, exhibits four separate pressure points. These include both Syria and Lebanon, as mentioned above; Iraq, which in a similar fashion to Lebanon has become a battleground between opposing axes; and finally, the Strait of Hormuz, where significant tensions and a series of pinpoint military attacks targeting US allies during the summer of 2019 repeatedly brought the region to the brink of conflict. While EU leverage is arguably less pronounced when it comes to the Gulf, a sub-region which has traditionally been the remit of the United States, European states have more recently sought to (re)assert themselves in this area and this may provide some room for increased EU action. A case in point is the French-led naval mission in the Strait of Hormuz, the European Maritime Awareness (EMASOH), which is headquartered in Abu Dhabi and has remained separate from the other, more avowedly anti-Iran naval missions launched by the United States and the United Kingdom.¹² The French led-mission involves the navies of other member states, including the Netherlands, Greece and Denmark, as well as political support from Italy, Belgium and Portugal.¹³ EMASOH could prove conducive to reassure Arab Gulf states of EU commitment to freedom of navigation, helping to balance the perception of Europe being biased towards Iran out of its continued support for the 2015 nuclear deal. It is also a way to ensure that the European Union has a presence in this volatile area, eventually

¹² See for instance, "We Are Here to De-escalate and Reassure Merchant Shipping", 22 September 2020, in *Hellenic Shipping News Worldwide*, <https://www.hellenicshippingnews.com/?p=833684>; Tangi Salaun and John Irish, "French Warship to Spearhead European Mission in Gulf from Next Year", in *Reuters*, 19 December 2019, <https://reut.rs/2ExBjWf>.

¹³ See, French Foreign Ministry, *European Maritime Awareness in the SoH (EMASOH): Political Statement by the Governments of Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, and Portugal*, 20 January 2020, <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/europe/news/article/european-maritime-awareness-in-the-soh-emasoh-political-statement-by-the>. The mission's mandate was extended by one year on 1 October 2020.

allowing it to build on this initiative to develop further avenues for dialogue and de-confliction between the Arab Gulf states and Iran. Proposals for hotlines for military de-confliction and other track II initiatives could be pursued in this pressure point, building on EU experience in these domains.¹⁴

Indeed, even in the midst of significantly heightened threat perceptions emanating from the Persian Gulf during 2019 and 2020, a number of regional and international states have recently advanced proposals for security networking or multilateral dialogue in this sub-region.¹⁵ While elements of these Russian, Iranian and Chinese proposals may be problematic, and have thus far not received any formal reaction let alone engagement by the European Union or its member states, they do signal a growing understanding about the value of such forums to mediate intra-state relations and avoid costly misunderstandings or misinterpretations that may well catapult further crises or conflicts in the region. Such approaches are conceptually very close to the EU's own principles and experiences, with significant parallels existing in terms of language and inspiration with other regional security initiatives, particularly the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe and the subsequent Organisation for Security Cooperation in Europe. The fact that such calls have been presented in public demonstrates the growing applicability of such objectives, and while significant challenges remain, the EU would be best placed to act as a facilitator for the establishment of such mechanisms, building on its past experiences and less divisive reputation in the region.

The most recent regional cleavage in the Middle East is the Arab-Turkish rupture. This cleavage revolves around the growing animosities between Turkey and Qatar on the one hand and the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Al-Sisi's Egypt and Israel on the other. Centred around opposing models and viewpoints about the future of the Middle East, the role of political Islam and the West in the region, this rivalry has increased in relevance over the past year and has arguably today become the most threatening fault line in the Middle East, both for the region and Europe.¹⁶ Turkish-Arab rivalry is today playing out in the context of Libya, where the two axes support opposing sides in the ongoing civil war, in the context of the energy

¹⁴ See for instance, Crisis Group, "The Urgent Need for a U.S.-Iran Hotline", in *Crisis Group Middle East Briefings*, No. 77 (23 April 2020), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/13846>.

¹⁵ Proposals range from the Iranian Hormuz Peace Endeavour (HOPE) initiative to Russia's call for a Collective Security Concept for the Gulf and, most recently, China's call for a "regional multilateral dialogue platform" for the Gulf. See, Poornima Balasubramanian, "China's Approach to Mediating Middle Eastern Conflicts", in *The Diplomat*, 16 October 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/10/chinas-approach-to-mediating-middle-eastern-conflicts>. On top of these formal state-led initiatives, research centres and think tanks have long been working on similar themes, developing proposals and bridging solutions to help foster dialogue and de-escalation across the Middle East. See for instance, Crisis Group, "The Middle East between Collective Security and Collective Breakdown", in *Crisis Group Middle East Reports*, No. 212 (27 April 2020), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/13832>.

¹⁶ Andrew England, Laura Pitel and Simeon Kerr, "UAE vs Turkey: The Regional Rivalries Pitting MBZ against Erdogan", in *Financial Times*, 26 October 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/990f13cf-613f-48a5-ac02-c8c73741a786>.

and geopolitical realignments underway in the Eastern Mediterranean,¹⁷ as well as more recent tensions over the UAE and Bahrain's normalisation agreements with Israel. Brewing for some years, this rivalry has most recently taken the form of a growing Arab economic boycott of Turkey,¹⁸ a dynamic that poses further worrying challenges for the goals of regional stabilisation.

2. EU cohesion and coherence: The challenge of (re)building consensus on interests and instruments

The European Union and its member states have often been criticised for being bystanders to conflicts and crises in the region. A recent report by the European Council on Foreign Relations described EU influence in the region as “weaker than ever”, with policies largely focused on short-term, transactional concerns.¹⁹ In light of the interlocking regional cleavages and pressure points, the European Union's role risks shrinking to the point of further endangering its already limited leverage in a region of strategic importance. To offset this prospect, it is important to start by dissecting the internal obstacles and challenges to a more robust and effective EU role in the Middle East.

The obstacles and challenges identified pertain, first and foremost, to the lack of cohesion and coherence in the EU foreign and security policy towards the MENA.²⁰ The contrasting viewpoints among EU member states when it comes to the Middle East have become even more manifest in the growing tensions underway in the Eastern Mediterranean. Besides Cyprus and Greece's long-lasting tensions with Turkey over maritime demarcation lines and Northern Cyprus, the conflict in Libya and the issue of access to offshore energy resources have added to the conundrum, with France in particular taking an assertive stance on Turkish policies in both theatres. Despite some limited attempts by Germany to play a mediation and de-conflicting role on Libya, the European Union has failed to coalesce around common policies. Furthermore, competing interests concerning trade opportunities and arms sales by individual EU member states vis-à-vis their partners in the Gulf (and Egypt) have complicated efforts to design and implement EU-wide responses to regional crises in a way that could also account for the Union's core principles and values.

¹⁷ Asli Aydıntaşbaş et al., “Deep Sea Rivals: Europe, Turkey, and New Eastern Mediterranean Conflict Lines”, in *ECFR Publications*, No. 322 (May 2020), https://ecfr.eu/special/eastern_med.

¹⁸ Hebshi Alshammary and Mohammed al-Sulami, “Campaign to Boycott Turkish Products Gains Momentum,” in *Arab News*, 18 October 2020, <https://arab.news/npkfy>; Mustafa Sonmez, “How Much Damage Can Arab States Do to Turkish Economy?,” in *Al-Monitor*, 2 October 2020, <http://almon.co/3efy>.

¹⁹ European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), “Mapping European Leverage in the MENA Region”, in *ECFR Publications*, No. 310 (December 2019), https://ecfr.eu/specials/mapping_eu_leverage_mena.

²⁰ Silvia Colombo et al., “The Art of the (Im)Possible”, cit.

While EU member states often share the diagnosis of the problem(s) – with security concerns topping the list of priorities²¹ – they struggle to translate this understanding into concrete policies due to the fact that their interests diverge. The greater the lack of a clear and defined set of common interests in the short, medium and long term, the more room there is for individual member states to entrap the European Union. The result is that “principled pragmatism” does not have a solid anchoring in clearly defined and identifiable common interests beyond the broadly framed need to protect the multilateral system and the need to foster economic and trade opportunities, thus diluting its practical implementation as the sum of the individual member states’ preferences and actions.

The European Union also struggles to ensure consistency between the goals on which its foreign policy is based and the instruments it deploys in the MENA. Democracy, respect for the rule of law and personal freedoms, as well as international law and cooperative security, have traditionally been the cornerstones of EU declarations and strategic documents on the Middle East. Yet, the pursuit of these goals has been incoherent at best. With regard to the conflicts in the Middle East, the European Union’s ambition to play a more geopolitical role has stumbled upon the lack of adequate tools and capabilities, not just of political willingness. In particular, the crisis-management dimension of the EU toolbox – as applied to the MENA – has traditionally been less developed compared to the conflict-prevention one, making it difficult for the Union to undertake its actions coherently with its principles and stated goals. Crisis-management, entailing policies aimed at stopping or containing violent conflicts, by seeking to influence the attitude and behaviour of other actors, such as securing ceasefires, demobilisation, disarmament and peacekeeping, deploying civilian and military missions and emergency humanitarian aid, has suffered from three main shortcomings. First is the lack of adequate resources available to reach the stated goals of de-confliction and dialogue. Second is the existence of conflicting goals and priorities leading to a re-prioritisation of partial, short-term interests that appear to be lower-hanging fruits. And third, the member states more often than not pursue policies that are tied to their own partial interests, which often means going against the EU’s proffered principles and values. On the contrary, conflict prevention, largely based on development cooperation and on a mildly transformative agenda centred on the concept of resilience, and “entailing democracy promotion, good governance, human rights respect and the fostering of civil society, is good but, being preventive measures, [these actions] cannot be implemented when conflicts are already in full swing”.²² This situation is deeply

²¹ Vincent Durac, “Counterterrorism and Democracy: EU Policy in the Middle East and North Africa after the Uprisings”, in *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (2018), p. 103-121; Anthony Dworkin and Fatim-Zohra El Malki, “The Southern Front Line: EU Counter-terrorism Cooperation with Tunisia and Morocco”, in *ECFR Policy Briefs*, 15 February 2018, https://ecfr.eu/publication/the_southern_front_line_eu_counter_terrorism_cooperation.

²² Silvia Colombo and Daniela Huber, “The EU and Conflict Resolution in the Mediterranean Neighbourhood: Tackling New Realities through Old Means?”, in *IEMed/EuroMeSCo Papers*, No. 27 (March 2016), p. 35, <https://www.euromesco.net/publication/the-eu-and-conflict-resolution-in-the-mediterranean-neighbourhood-tackling-new-realities-through-old-means>.

connected with some degree of bureaucratic inertia that percolates through the EU institutions, from the European Commission to the EEAS, and relates also to the competition for funds among different priorities, frameworks and policies, both at the national and the supranational level.

Given the intricate geopolitical situation discussed above, dialogue, de-escalation and confidence building measures are of utmost importance. However, as recalled above, these are going to be long-term goals at best. A number of steps, also entailing putting the European common house in order, are needed to create an environment that is more conducive to regional governance. First, given the complexity and intractability of the security issues at stake, it is important to acknowledge that that EU cannot address them in one go. On the contrary, the Union should break them down into several components, compile a list of priorities as well as borrow from Europe's own experiences in other geopolitical contexts, such as the Balkans, and those of other regional organisations, such as the Organisation for Security Cooperation in Europe or the Association of Southeast Asian States. Such a list of priorities should not make the geographical scope its guiding principle – that is, an approach based on the supposed Europe/US division of labour between North Africa and the Middle East. On the contrary, there is an urgent need for a prioritisation of the European Union's engagement in those areas and on those issues where the Union has the highest stakes and can truly make a difference, starting from Libya and the Eastern Mediterranean, but also including Turkey and Palestine, and perhaps only finally the Gulf.

Second, another important step would be to make good use of the interests and instruments the EU can already mobilise to provide substance to its agency. With regard to the interests, just as it is necessary to create a conducive environment in the region for dialogue, de-escalation and confidence building measures through gradual steps, a similar conducive environment for intra-EU discussions and coordination on EU Middle East policy is also needed. In this respect, work should begin immediately, starting with the German Presidency of the European Council and the new Commission, by exploiting the added value provided by the external arrangements and actions of its member states on the different dossiers and pressure points. There is no need to reinvent the wheel but to inject an element of coordination and leadership into the pool of often conflicting interests of the member states by strengthening the capability and budget of the EEAS so as to attain a greater degree of cohesion in EU external action.

Third, there is evidence that the European Union would do better to invest its cards in playing a geo-economic rather than a geopolitical role with a view to addressing those structural factors that are core drivers of regional insecurity and conflict proliferation.²³ The Union's repeated calls and pledges to play a more robust geopolitical role on the Middle Eastern regional chessboard obscure more than they reveal. First of all, this is not in its nature and could therefore be detrimental

²³ Julien Barnes-Dacey, "Trump or Biden: Three Ways to Make Europe Matter in the Middle East", cit.

to its ontological self (or the perception thereof both by its own citizens and by external stakeholders). It is also misleading as it assumes that the European Union should compete with other geopolitical players, such as Russia and China. On the contrary, the Union has much more to offer by simply being a different kind of player that makes use of its already sophisticated toolbox ranging from trade and economic development, climate and energy policies, and food security to migration management, education policies and people-to-people contacts. All these are important soft-power issues related to conflict prevention, that can have indirect albeit significant effects on the broader agenda of fostering dialogue, de-confliction and confidence building measures.

3. Stepping back from the brink: EU pathways for dialogue, de-escalation and confidence building in the Middle East

Preserving EU influence across geopolitical conflict lines, while not ignoring the ticking geoeconomic timebomb brewing in many states of the region, represent the twin challenges facing the EU in its proverbial “southern neighbourhood”. Acknowledging that instability in the region impacts Europe in a far more direct manner than the United States, China or even Russia, complacency with the unsustainable status quo is not an option. More courageous and proactive engagements are needed, starting in those areas where the EU holds most leverage and has greatest interests and capabilities to act. All in all, what is proposed here as a pathway to harness the European Union’s potential to promote collective security and multilateral engagement in the Middle East by fostering dialogue, de-escalation and confidence building is to increase the dialogue and coordination between the EEAS, the other EU foreign policy institutions and individual member states. To bridge gaps, divergences and forms of competition in interests and instruments, both among the member states and between the EU institutions and the member states, two avenues should be explored. First, creating and strengthening ad hoc, permanent working groups (some of which are already in existence) composed of representatives of the EU institutions, and members of the policy-planning units and foreign ministries of the member states. Second, facilitating the establishment of lead groups of key member states working in close cooperation with the EEAS.

The former would provide much-needed arenas to discuss and define collective EU priorities and goals while remaining mindful of specific national interests; to decide upon instruments vis-à-vis specific dossiers and pressure points to be deployed in the short, medium and long term; and to identify possible divisions of labour among member states in different contexts. In a nutshell, these working groups would represent a way to strengthen EU coordination, cohesion and coherence in preparation for concrete action to foster dialogue, de-escalation and confidence building measures on a limited number of dossiers and individual pressure points in the Middle East. The latter – acting in close coordination with the working groups – would be responsible for undertaking concrete actions. Having a thematic or a strict geographical focus (i.e., not encompassing the entire

Middle East) and composed of a limited number of member states (ideally one or two of the key member states joined by other smaller ones) with significant exposure to and key interests and capabilities when it comes to each specific issue area/context, these lead groups would meet and act in the form of small, flexible coalitions that would thus become prominent vehicles to channel foreign and security policy proposals and actions for the region. This approach would build on the past successes of small European coalitions, particularly those on the Iran nuclear deal.²⁴

The combination of the working groups and the lead groups would provide the EU with the necessary platforms to discuss, articulate and implement its own approach to conflicts and crisis management, while strengthening the cohesion and coherence of the Union in foreign and security policy in general. A number of key specific actions addressing each of the three regional cleavages identified above are presented here. They stem from the need to have clear and actionable policies to put on the table, discuss, detail and concretely implement while bearing in mind the strategic opportunities and limitations offered by the external conditions. Taking local approaches and solutions to regional problems into account is another important precondition to conduct this exercise.

Starting with the Arab-Turkish cleavage, this is arguably the one in which the European Union enjoys the most potential for leverage. There are a number of dimensions to a potential EU role in seeking to mitigate the growing Arab-Turkish rivalry. In Libya, the European Union should continue its support for the UN-recognised Government of National Accord in Tripoli and oppose and call-out continued violations of the UN arms embargo by multiple states, also expanding its aerial component to the renewed EU efforts to enforce the embargo via the Iriini naval mission in the Mediterranean while adding a land-based monitoring capability. Avoiding singling out Turkey over other destabilising actors, including Egypt, the UAE, Qatar and Russia as well as France, would be conducive to these efforts. Meanwhile, the European Union should make an effort to promote dialogue between Tel Aviv and Ankara as well as Cairo and Ankara, as EU leverage on these countries is by far greater than the influence it enjoys over the UAE and Saudi Arabia. One way to do so is the – no doubt difficult – integration of Turkey into the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum headquartered in Cairo. Any easing of tension between Turkey and Israel or Turkey and Egypt, building on the fact that Ankara represents less of a threat for Tel Aviv or Cairo compared to Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, would have significant benefits on multiple dossiers, from Libya to the Eastern Mediterranean gas tensions and even Palestine.

At the bilateral level, the European Union and Turkey have a deep, albeit no doubt difficult and at times contentious relationship. Aside from Libya, the Union can utilise Turkey's undeniable interest in the modernisation of the EU–Turkey customs

²⁴ Riccardo Alcaro, *Europe and Iran's Nuclear Crisis. Lead Groups and EU Foreign Policy-Making*, Cham, Springer-Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

union as well as the long-delayed visa liberalisation process to gain some leverage over Ankara. These are domains, also including the migration issue, that play on mutual interests, as opposed to disagreements, and could be used as springboards to build new avenues for dialogue and discussion on other fronts. To support these objectives, the European Union should counsel its member states, Greece, France and Cyprus in particular, to limit public displays of political or military support from the UAE and Saudi Arabia in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Turning to the Arab-Israeli regional cleavage, specific attention should be paid to the dire humanitarian and socio-economic crisis in the Gaza Strip and to the political stalemate in the West Bank, domains where the European Union could provide badly needed assistance and political-diplomatic support, pushing for a resumption of long-delayed elections in the Palestinian territories while supporting nascent reconciliation attempts between the Palestinian groups Fatah and Hamas. There is also much that the Union could do to deter continued Israeli settlement construction, home demolition and other illegal activities in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, policies that would go some way towards demonstrating a real European commitment to the two-state formula and international law, beyond its rhetorical embrace of these notions. Europe should moreover publicly clarify its stance vis-à-vis Trump's vision for "peace and prosperity" and the recent normalisation deals with Israel as well as publish its own diplomatic parameters, while pushing for and embracing any changes made by the incoming Biden administration by highlighting the inconsistencies between the current US approaches and the significant security risks they imply for Israel in the absence of progress on the Palestinian front.

The Arab-Israeli fault line also has a significant impact on Syria and Lebanon, which are technically still in a state of war with Israel. The European Union should direct more efforts to assist Lebanese civil society, dialoguing with local organisations and trustworthy individuals to channel technical assistance and economic support while not directly benefitting the corrupt governing elites or indirectly strengthening the sectarian system on which they rely. European actors, especially but not only France, retain important interests and leverage in Lebanon and this should be utilised to avoid a deepening of the socio-political and economic crisis in the country. In this respect, the European Union should promote a degree of "daylight" between US and European approaches on Lebanon (as well as on Palestine), particularly when it comes to the US use of primary and secondary sanctions that are causing further socio-economic hardship in the country and efforts to pressure Europe into a blanket sanctioning of Hezbollah as a terrorist organisation.

Turning to the harrowing ten-year conflict in Syria, EU policy and leverage is substantially restricted. Yet, principled policy stances – including via public diplomacy – that seek to prioritise the human security of ordinary Syrians and ensure access for aid and UN humanitarian missions are the bare minimum. To step up the EU's engagement on Syria, creative diplomacy in the name of "principled pragmatism" should be pursued along two paths. On the one hand, in synergy with

the United Nations, the EU should increase its dialogue and engagement with the external actors involved in the country (Russia, Iran, Turkey, the United States and Israel) with a view to containing their spoiling effects in the case of Syria itself and in light of the deepening Arab-Turkish animosities.²⁵ On the other, a process of ad hoc and limited engagement with Syrian institutions for humanitarian and development assistance should be pursued by the EU and a specific lead group in line with the policy of mutual engagement with those other Arab states that are slowly returning to Damascus, with a view to advancing the discussion about Syria and its future.²⁶

Finally, lying more distant from the EU geopolitically and where it enjoys less leverage, the Gulf region is the epicentre of the Saudi-Iranian fault line. To address this regional cleavage, more concerted action and focus towards Yemen and Iraq, building on the EU's involvement in negotiating the Stockholm Agreement in the former and the presence of various European military contingents in the latter, would be required to retain leverage and influence over these two pressure points. Yemen clearly represents a key hotspot of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, but has recently also become an object of increased Turkish–Arab Gulf rivalry.²⁷ Working closely with the United Nations, Europe should strengthen the action of the existing lead group composed of France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom (E4) as well build on the recent prisoner exchanges between the warring factions to advance dialogue and mitigate the country's humanitarian catastrophe.²⁸ Speaking to the Houthis would be important in this domain, as would a clearly communicated limit on the sale of European weaponry to the Saudi-led coalition.

Iraq represents another key pressure point of the evolving Saudi rivalry with Iran. The European Union is well placed to enhance its proactive engagements with Iraq across multiple sectors in an effort to mitigate a further erosion of public services, rebuild public trust in the government and institutions and mitigate new outbreaks of inter-communal violence and geopolitical meddling. Given the United States' increasingly uncertain presence in the country,²⁹ a decision will soon need to be

²⁵ David Hearst, "Exclusive: Mohammed bin Zayed Pushed Assad to Break Idlib Ceasefire", in *Middle East Eye*, 8 April 2020, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/node/166021>; Andrew England, Laura Pitel and Simeon Kerr, "UAE vs Turkey", cit.

²⁶ The UAE, Oman and Bahrain have all announced the re-opening or re-appointment of ambassadors to Damascus, in a clear signal of a growing effort to limit Iranian and Turkish influence in the country. See, "Oman Reinstates Ambassador to Syria after Years-Long Hiatus", in *AP News*, 5 October 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/embassies-dubai-united-arab-emirates-oman-middle-east-35335060326a924ecd46f0df4373935b>.

²⁷ "Turkey Sets Sights on Yemen, Raising Regional Security Concerns", in *The Arab Weekly*, 5 September 2020, <https://theabweekly.com/node/48831>; Ali Bakeer, "How the UAE Is Using Fake News to Manufacture a Turkish Role in Yemen", in *TRT World*, 9 July 2020, <http://trt.world/13j3>.

²⁸ See for instance, Raiman Al-Hamdani and Helen Lackner, "Talking to the Houthis: How Europeans Can Promote Peace in Yemen", in *ECFR Policy Briefs*, 14 October 2020, https://ecfr.eu/publication/talking_to_the_houthis_how_europeans_can_promote_peace_in_yemen.

²⁹ See, Robert Burns and Zeke Miller, "US Withdrawing Thousands of Troops from Iraq and Afghanistan", in *AP News*, 10 September 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-middle-east-islamic-state-group-donald-trump-iraq-a6d9550ea12d041436dda09f30873f55>; Louisa Loveluck,

made in European capitals as to what future policies to pursue in this country. A complete withdrawal of European forces still deployed to Iraq carries particular risks, not only in terms of a possible revival of activities by the Islamic State (ISIS), but also in light of the increased likelihood of more widespread conflict given the continued efforts by Iran and Arab neighbours, as well as Turkey, to compete in pressuring Iraqi authorities. Continued and visible European military and diplomatic presence in Iraq – not only in Baghdad but also in some key provinces – clearly carries risks, but if communicated correctly and pursued in synergy with broader policies that aim to enhance dialogue with Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey – as well as the incoming Biden administration – could also help deter provocative actions and help Iraqi authorities increase manoeuvrability to foster good governance in the country. Ultimately, increased European efforts in Iraq should not only be directed at the traditional security sector and the central authorities, but should also assist local stakeholders and civil society groups, particularly in improving basic services and the reconstruction of badly damaged cities – like Mosul – which have been starved for funds and support since the defeat of ISIS.

Conclusion

2020 marks the 25th anniversary of the 1995 Barcelona Process that sought to promote closer cooperation and dialogue among European and southern Mediterranean countries and usher in a new era of reform and security for the MENA. Looking back at the past 25 years, it is clear that much still needs to be done to attain this goal and that renewed efforts by Europe towards the region are badly needed. As the European Union grapples with the painful and uncertain adjustment process triggered by the unprecedented socio-economic impact of COVID-19, the space for a common foreign and security policy seems modest due to persistent disagreements among member states, budgetary constraints and the revival of inward-looking tendencies due to the pandemic.

However, calls for a more prominent geopolitical role in foreign policy and for gaining strategic autonomy from the United States have become the new mantras in Brussels. Nowhere have these calls been heard more loudly than in the Middle East, a region that is tied to Europe because of proximity, history, people-to-people connections and mobility, trade patterns and security issues. The Middle East stands at the core of Europe's own present and future challenges, thus making it impossible for EU and its member states to turn their heads and ignore the crises and conflicts besetting this space at Europe's immediate doorstep.

Indeed, the Middle East facing Europe today is completely different compared to 1995 when the Barcelona Process was launched in the wake of the 1991 Madrid Conference seeking to develop closer ties and cooperation between the northern

Missy Ryan and John Hudson, "U.S. Tells Iraq It's Planning to Pull Out of Baghdad Embassy", in *The Washington Post*, 28 September 2020, <https://wapo.st/3i8rPT1>.

and southern shores of the Mediterranean. While commendable, these efforts were gradually overcome by events in the region – particularly the exacerbation of the Arab/Palestinian-Israeli conflict and other crises – and ultimately failed to develop concrete avenues for regional integration and/or a resolution of outstanding tensions and rivalries.

Significantly, the Barcelona Process was developed at a time when optimism was running high in the region and when US and European influence were at their climax. The failure of such efforts serves as a reminder that external influence and leverage alone are not sufficient to engender peace and stability in the region, requiring the active buy-in and support of regional and local actors themselves. This in turn would require them to compromise on their interests in order to accommodate inclusive understandings with opposing states and axis, a dynamic that has been rendered difficult due to the deep power asymmetries across the region and the active support and backing that certain regional states enjoy from the United States, which diminishes their propensity for compromise, particularly if this would require them to diminish their reliance on the US security umbrella.³⁰

The US presence in the region seems to be retrenching and old as well as new patterns of external balancing and alliances across the Middle East are emerging in its wake, contributing to a deeply volatile and uncertain geopolitical environment. As argued above, the region is currently experiencing the effects of at least three geopolitical ruptures (the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Saudi-Iranian rivalry and the Arab-Turkish cleavage) that manifest in specific pressure points, namely the manifold conflicts and tensions raging in the Middle East as broken down in three hot spots (the Eastern Mediterranean, the Gulf and the Near East). On top of this, or better largely as a result of the state of competition and conflict experienced by most state and non-state actors in the region, the Middle East suffers from the accumulation of multiple crises, of different nature and spanning both the geopolitical and geoeconomic domains, which represent a ticking bomb. Worsening economic indicators, social cleavages and conflicts, fragile environments, heightened militarisation and the restoration of authoritarian governance are all factors that make the situation in the Middle East deeply dysfunctional and unstable.

Against this backdrop, the European Union cannot afford to remain idle and observe other international and regional actors increase the fragmentation of the region or attempt to forge new security mechanisms according to their own principles and interests. The Union needs to remain engaged with the Middle East and to do so it needs to carry out a thorough revision of its modes of action towards the region. In other words, it needs alternative pathways to conduct its policy amidst external and internal challenges.

³⁰ See for instance, Paul R. Pillar et al., “A New U.S. Paradigm for the Middle East: Ending America’s Misguided Policy of Domination”, in *Quincy Papers*, No. 2 (July 2020), <https://quincyinst.org/?p=2924>; also see, Trita Parsi, “Pax Americana vs. Inclusive Security in the Middle East”, in *IAI Papers*, No. 20|30 (November 2020), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/12327>.

The European Union's ultimate objective would be to navigate the current troubled Middle Eastern waters by offering its contribution in terms of fostering a more conducive environment for dialogue, de-escalation and confidence building in the region instead of opting for a "grand bargain" approach in the form of a security architecture, which could only represent a long-term and gradual process. The set of policies to be undertaken would range from directing more efforts and assistance to Lebanese civil society in dialoguing with government entities to carry out the necessary reforms with the ultimate goal of overcoming the country's deeply corrupt sectarian system; to remaining steadfast in Europe's support for Palestinian self-determination and rights; to launching a gradual process of ad hoc and limited engagement with Syrian institutions and entities for humanitarian and development assistance; to strengthening EU commitment to freedom of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz, helping to balance the perception of Europe being biased towards Iran out of its continued support for the Iran nuclear deal; to maintaining European focus and visibility on Iraq at a time when this country is dangerously slipping from the international radar; and to favouring de-confliction and dialogue between Tel Aviv and Ankara and Cairo and Ankara respectively as a way to foster dialogue, de-escalation and confidence building in the wake of the Arab-Turkish regional cleavage.

To accomplish all this, two preliminary steps should however be taken: first, clearly articulate common EU interests as a means to avoid the cacophony of standpoints and positions by individual member states that diminish EU effectiveness and leverage; and second, to make good use of the existing instruments in a way that is mindful of the European Union's key principles and values with a view to substantiating the call for principled pragmatism. Greater cohesion and coherence are two necessary ingredients if the European Union wants to provide its contribution to a more peaceful, prosperous and stable Middle East.

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