

# EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF



## THE EU AND GEOPOLITICS IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

This document summarizes the findings of MEDRESET's WP2 on key powers' (namely the United States, China, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Israel, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey) construction of the Mediterranean and identifies policy implications.

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### INTRODUCTION AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The present research conducted within MEDRESET Work Package 2 has aimed to answer a series of questions relating to the role of major global and regional powers in reshaping the geopolitics of the Mediterranean in the twenty first century. The work began in search of answers for the following: How the eight key states in this region – namely the United States, China, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Israel, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey – have been constructing, or at least have attempted to construct, different geopolitical imaginations of what has become known as the Mediterranean region? How do these constructions relate to the identity, role perception and self-representations of these powers, and inform and guide their foreign policy narratives? We explored these questions with a specific focus on the policies these states promote in terms of actors, policy instruments and priority policy areas. Through this process, WP2 partners (Cairo University, Durham University, CIDOB, PODEM and ASI-REM) aimed at highlighting the conflicting, competing and converging policies and visions of these states with regard to EU policies and priorities. In so doing, this project has prepared the ground for developing a new regional perspective for the EU. The key findings of this research are these. **First, security drives policy of all key powers. Second, their definitions of security are incompatible. Thirdly, these powers do not conceive the**

**Mediterranean as a single space, let alone a shared space. Which, fourthly, leads to dramatic divergences in their approaches and priority areas.**

## EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS

### **Convergence with the EU: Securitization of the Mediterranean**

Similar to the EU's the securitized construction of the Mediterranean, the practices and discourses of almost all the eight key powers in question indicate their securitized views of the region. But each power has developed its own unique perspective. So, **Russia**, having strategic distrust of the West, interprets the transformational changes in the region (like the conflicts in Syria and Libya) as the West's attempt to undermine Russia's influence. This securitized view has made the rift between the European Union and Russia deeper. In its view, the West, mainly represented by the US, is pursuing an agenda of destabilization in the region. From this starting point Russia has characterized its growing presence in the Eastern and Southern Mediterranean countries as a guarantor of stability in these uncertain situations. Based on its worldview, Moscow sees its presence in the Mediterranean space as part of its endeavour to secure a greater role for Russia in international affairs.

**China** is concerned with the expansion of radical Islam in the MENA region and its destabilizing consequences for the many countries and regions in which it has economic presence and interest. Since China has Muslim communities of its own on its western borders, it fears that these populations could be radicalized in the course of growing radicalism in the MENA/Mediterranean regions. In addition, it is highly dependent on energy supplies from the Middle East and consequently fears that instability in West Asia and the Mediterranean could jeopardize its strategic interests in the field of energy. Having adopted a securitized view of the Middle East, China fears that the future of its multinational programme to boost its economy, namely the Belt and Road Initiative, might be endangered by inter-state tensions and domestic strife in the Mediterranean.

**Israel** constructs the Mediterranean as an arena of security and trade, both forces going hand in hand. Thus, Israel seeks to use commerce to enter security compacts especially with the European part of the Mediterranean. Moreover, Israel pictures the Mediterranean as a vulnerable space open to political pressure and instability (such as the Arab uprisings). Such conditions increase regime vulnerability and in extreme cases can bring about regime change, which could give rise to political forces coming to power more hostile to Israel and more assertive in their support of the Palestinian cause. Further, Israel's securitized conception of the Mediterranean also extends to Europe. So, European policies towards the Levant, in terms of support for Palestinian agriculture and boycotting of exports from Israeli settlements, has meant that any action against its policies is perceived as a direct assault, in the

context of its broader securitized conception of the Mediterranean and the geopolitical conditions which dominate Israel's strategic objectives.

**Saudi Arabia's** view towards political instability in the Arab region from 2010, a series of events which came to be known as the Arab Spring, became an ontological concern. The rise of the Muslim Brotherhood as a legitimately-elected government in Egypt was of particular concern. From Saudi Arabia's perspective, the MB's electoral success in 2012 not only gave it a voice in pan-Islamic circles but also legitimacy to address Sunni Muslims, particularly Sunni Arab Muslims, across the region, presumably challenging the narrative of Saudi Arabia and its ulama. Therefore, Saudi Arabia's concern was to present itself as the only and true representative of (Sunni) Islam, in contradistinction to Morsi's Egypt. Saudi Arabia interpreted these post-Arab Spring developments as potential sources of threat to the national security of the Kingdom itself, as well as challenges to the stability of some of its other GCC neighbours. The view that local Muslim Brotherhood affiliates could one day oust the monarchies of the GCC had acquired traction. This perception and sense of vulnerability can contribute to an explanation of Saudi Arabia's support for the new president, General Sisi after Morsi's government was removed, as well as its support for Salafi groups in Syria.

For **Qatar**, the Arab Spring provided a historic opportunity to create a condition of balance of power against Saudi Arabia. Yet, unexpected regional developments have created new tensions between Qatar and many of its Arab neighbours. In contrast to Saudi Arabia's largely defensive posture after the Arab Spring, Qatar's approach to the Mediterranean was fuelled by activism and presentation of markedly different approach to that of Saudi Arabia. Doha viewed the situation as an opportunity for extending its influence in the Southern Mediterranean and thus using weakening state structures as an opportunity to create new alliances and for enhancing its role in the region. This strategy was primarily focused on getting closer to the Muslim Brotherhood parties, especially those forming the new post-uprising governing elites in Egypt and Tunisia. It also endeavoured to use Al-Jazeera as a medium through which revolutionary ideas could be circulated across the region. Post-Arab Spring developments subsequently triggered a competition between Saudi Arabia and Qatar in the Mediterranean. Heightened tensions resulted in a major diplomatic split in 2014 between and a much deeper and broader crisis in 2017 between Qatar and several GCC countries (Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the UAE) as well as Egypt. The 2017 crisis has led to a boycott of Qatar and attempts by the Arab region's 'quartet' to isolate Doha and punish it for its regional policies, bringing perilously close the disintegration of the GCC, the Arab region's only successful regional organization.

The **United States'** approach and view towards the Mediterranean is similar to that of the EU. It has an unrivalled affinity with the EU countries in terms of culture, political institutions, and identity. The US's attitude was arguably further securitized following 9/11 and the growth of such radical groups as al-Qaeda in a region hitherto dominated by the US. In addition, following the formation of

the US-led coalition against ISIS in September 2014, and the intensification of the war against the group in Iraq and Syria, has deepened Washington's securitized perspective of the region. Also, the link between terror networks and uncontrolled migration was further strengthened following a number of terrorist attacks in the EU countries and the possible infiltration of radical jihadist terrorists to the US. President Trump's 'Muslim ban' policy arguably stems from the same securitized attitude towards the region. Focus on counter-terrorism and migration has come at the expense of collaboration in the economic development of the Mediterranean countries, where the United States has even mooted the idea of cutting back on its aid package to Tunisia.

It can be argued that an alternative worldview is evident in the discourse of the **Islamic Republic of Iran**. This discourse is grounded in an alternative narrative and distinct use of terms and terminologies which have embedded within them different conceptualizations and concepts. So, Iranian elite have begun using terms such as 'West Asia' instead of the 'Middle East' in reference to their geopolitical neighbourhood, and 'Islamic Awakening' instead of 'Arab Spring' when discussing the post-2010 Arab uprisings. This could be read as an attempt at creating an alternative world order which challenges the dominant Western discourse. Along the same lines, Iran's use of the phrase 'Axis of Resistance' which refers to Tehran's own Arab-based regional alliance structure and the ideological driver of its regional security approach. In this ideological Axis, which is deployed to counter Western presence in Iran's perceived areas of influence one also finds the kernel of Iran's securitized approach. With regard to political ideas, anti-hegemonic perspectives and critical geopolitics form another feature of Iran's discourse in framing the world, in contradistinction to the geography-oriented and state-centred traditional geopolitical approach of the West. Some significance is accordingly given to Shiism as an influential factor in the geopolitics and geo-identity of the region, and one that features heavily in Iran's discussions of, and involvement in, the Eastern Mediterranean.

**Turkey's** foreign policy has arguably gone through a process of change in the post-Cold War period, moving from close cooperation and alignment with its Western allies and the EU in particular towards a more independent and Muslim world-focus foreign policy. The shift is discernible in Turkey's policies the Mediterranean region. The re-orientation is a direct product of the rise of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) to power in 2002. Initially the AKP government viewed the EU's regional integration initiatives as drive towards building a greater economic, political and social community in order to create greater stability in its neighbourhood. Foreign Minister Davutoglu's policy of 'zero problem with neighbours', which mainly aimed at de-securitizing relations with Turkey's neighbours including Syria was the key idea in this new approach. However such dramatic events as the Arab Spring, state weakness (in Iraq and Syria) on its doorstep, civil strife in the Middle East, and massive migration flows, have contributed towards rising tensions between Turkey and its neighbours and has

led to Turkey adopting a security-driven approach to the new environment in the Mediterranean. Finally, issues such as the Turkey's stalled EU membership bid, the Cyprus question, and Turkey's projects of dam construction on the two rivers the Tigris and Euphrates, are serious challenges that can affect Turkey's relationships with its neighbours in the Mediterranean and further complicate Ankara's already strained relations with the Union.

**While all powers observed securitize the area, the divergence is to be found in the policy measures applied which are justified through this securitization process. There is no common approach to address what these powers perceive as security problems. And with everyone going it alone, they are all bound to clash.**

### **Areas of Divergence with the EU**

The EU has to deal with actors whose influence and presence is arguably on the rise, and thus needs to develop a fuller appreciation of the areas of divergence between its own priorities and those of these omnipresent powers.

The term and concept of the Mediterranean as a region is almost absent in each of **Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar's** discourses. Rather, their emphasis as indicated in their discourses respectively, rests on interactions with a set of Muslim and/or Arab countries. What is important in the region for Iran is its counter-hegemonic Axis of Resistance bloc, with supporting the Palestinian cause and upholding an anti-Zionist/Israeli position as one of the main principles of its foreign policy. This contrasts greatly with the EU's position, which regards Israel as a country associated to the European Union, conditioned on its commitment to the two-state solution. Saudi Arabia, has defined itself as the leader of the Muslim world (majority Sunni Islam), in contrast with Qatar's discourse which promotes a sense of pan-Arabism and support of the Muslim Brotherhood.

**China** is distant from the EU priorities in the Mediterranean due to its different mindmaps of the region. China positions itself as a developing country afflicted by colonialism and excesses of colonial powers. This narrative plays strongly in its policy discourses with North and sub-Saharan African states. The principle of non-interference gives China credit and credibility in its interactions with the Mediterranean countries. **Russia**, in contrast, displays a very different self-representation and it cuts its role in terms of its place in a fast-evolving international order in which it anticipates acting as a global power. Moscow displays this role perception in its actions in Syria, in which it is the dominant external military power who has a clear security presence on the ground. Moscow is positioning itself in the MENA region as a counterbalance to the West. Hence there is a limited ground for effective and meaningful cooperation with the EU, despite apparent shared goals of fighting terrorism or preventing further destabilization in the region.

Clearly there is great deal of convergence in **Israel's** policies with EU, reinforced by their cultural and social affinity and the presence of democratic political institutions in Israel. But different strategic interests and the EU's unwavering support for a two-state solution has imposed pressures of divergence, especially in such fields as migration, water usage and agricultural development. Furthermore, Israel's occupation of the Palestinian territories undermines its democratic credentials and stands at variance with the EU's self-conception as a liberal democracy and its unwavering belief in the right of Palestinians for self-determination.

Since the onset of the Arab uprisings, **Turkey's** lack of a comprehensive vision for the Mediterranean and the role it sees for itself in this region is quite striking. Ankara's policy priorities do not always tally with the EU's and as Turkey tries to forge its own sphere of influence in the Mediterranean following the post-Arab Spring it inevitably clashes with some of EU's priorities. Its ad hoc approach to the region has arguably deepened its differences with the EU.

Finally, while the analysis demonstrates a remarkable similarity and complementarity between the **United States'** and EU's approaches to Mediterranean there has been a clear divergence in American and European priorities. Thus, whereas Europeans have mostly focused on the entire Mediterranean area as their 'neighbourhood', the US' focus has been overwhelmingly on the Eastern part of the Mediterranean; itself because of the concentration of geopolitical concerns and hard security threats touching on Washington's 'vital' and 'strategic' interests.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In sum, our analysis shows that the Mediterranean is a changing geopolitical space in which the number, type and role of actors are in flux. Interaction with many of these actors remains difficult and complicated. With all actors securitizing the region, but under different parameters, it is difficult for the EU to develop a single comprehensive approach towards them. Furthermore, while Israel and Turkey are relatively well known quantities to the EU, Iran, Qatar and Saudi Arabia bring with them new and less clear cut policies to the Mediterranean, complicating the EU's assessment and calculations regarding the behaviour of these actors. Further, the intense competition amongst the Persian Gulf's states themselves in the Mediterranean poses the danger of spill over of these countries' disputes and quarrels to the Mediterranean. In the light of this assessment, the key policy recommendation WP2 puts forward is to review the nature and type of EU's interactions with the regional and major powers being present in this area. **A way forward would be to widen the Euro-Med contact group to include non-Mediterranean states which are key powers in the Mediterranean, namely China, US, Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia to discuss some initially very**

**limited issues of common concern – terrorism, migration, water security, environmental protection, energy cooperation, employment enhancement – are areas for further multilateral dialogue.** By desecuritizing its approach the EU could contain the other parties' securitized approach as well and identify pathways towards a more cooperative interaction with the emerging actors. However, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Qatar are likely to resist involvement in any EU-led forum for dialogue, but this will leave the door open for bilateral European engagement with one or more of these countries. **Selective engagement could allow for both bilateral and multilateral interaction.** **With Russia,** a dialogue which goes beyond Syria could facilitate a conversation over the reconstruction of Libya and thus help diffuse the overly securitized approach of Moscow in the region. **With regard to China,** the EU has a definite opportunity to capitalize on the OBOR (BRI) to enter into a constructive dialogue with Beijing about a more collective approach to development in the Mediterranean (West Asia). Development drives China's discourse and in this the parties share an interest in the stabilization of the Arab and West Asian economies, but also their growth and diversification. Both China and the EU share the intervening space for the success of the OBOR which aims to link Europe with East Asia. **The United States** and EU have arguably neglected other key policy priorities for the region, notably energy, industry, water, agriculture, and other vital areas for sustainable economic development. Such tendency is expected to strengthen in the years to come, especially under the Trump administration which came to powerfully prioritize the region's security and stabilization in hard/traditional security terms.

A change in the security discourses used to define the societies and states in the Mediterranean can help diffuse some of the tensions which now characterize the EU's interactions with the Mediterranean actors, and facilitate a dialogue about the social and individual rights of citizens, gender equality and the importance of good governance and rule of law. Such an approach could help nurture the conditions for closer EU cooperation with some of the other actors in the Mediterranean. As was suggested elsewhere in this project, such an approach does not imply downplaying, or even ignoring, existing security dynamics in the Mediterranean; rather the adoption of, and adherence to, a more holistic, diversified understanding of the multifaceted developments in a geopolitical space that is ever evolving.

## RESEARCH PARAMETERS

The primary theoretical approach used in our research has been informed by constructivist school of thought and based on discourse analysis, as elaborated in the WP2 concept paper (see further reading below). The purpose of WP2 has been to observe the changing role and influence of different leading

stakeholders (the US, Russia, China, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, and Israel) in the Mediterranean area, as well as their policies, in order to show how they construct the region and to see if these policies are conflicting, competing or converging with the EU's policies.

## PROJECT IDENTITY

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<b>FURTHER READING</b>	ASI-REM/Arab Studies Institute–Research and Education Methodologies (2017), “Israel’s Discourses and Practices in the Mediterranean Since 2001”, in <i>MEDRESET Working Papers</i> , No. 8 (June), <a href="http://www.medreset.eu/?p=13418">http://www.medreset.eu/?p=13418</a>

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