

EUROPEAN POLICYBRIEF

ELITE SURVEY: HOW LOCAL ELITES PERCEIVE THE EU AND ITS POLICIES IN THE MEDITERRANEAN



This document summarizes the findings of MEDRESET Work Package 3 (WP3). This WP surveyed elite responses to EU policies in the Mediterranean region through a comprehensive qualitative fieldwork having covered 9 different countries (i.e. Lebanon, Egypt, Iran, Israel, Morocco, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, Turkey). Respondents were asked to analyse their countries' resistance to or adoption of the EU conceptualization of the Mediterranean, assess the EU policies targeting the region and identify current geopolitical issues they consider of crucial importance.

December 2018

INTRODUCTION

The research conducted within the MEDRESET Work Package 3 (WP3) has aimed to address a series of issues relating to Euro-Mediterranean policies, which have been characterized by a Euro-centric approach based on a narrow geopolitical construction of the Mediterranean. This WP thus takes its starting point from the assumption that “stakeholders, policy instruments, and policy issues have been defined from a European standpoint, marginalizing the perspectives and needs of local states and people, and ignoring the role played by new and powerful regional and global actors” (Huber and Paciello 2016: 2).

While MEDRESET WP4-7 have adopted a bottom-up approach based on local stakeholder consultations, WP3 has matched this with an “**Elite Survey**”, one of the key stages in the MEDRESET project, investigating how EU policies in the region are perceived and assessed by elites in the region including but not limited to decision makers, bureaucrats, business people, leading academics, and media professionals in 9 countries of the region through fieldwork. The Elite Survey, which has been led by the Center for Public Policy and Democracy Studies (PODEM) with contributions by Arab Studies Institute – Research and Education Methodologies (ASI-REM) as partner, covered Iran, Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, and Lebanon with a total of 169 stakeholders from July 2017 to May 2018 (see the section ‘Research Parameters’ for further details). These countries were chosen based on geographic distribution and for their political relevance, with all holding either material or normative weight in the region.

This Policy Brief thus aims to introduce a snapshot of the Elite Survey findings under three main headings: (1) perception of the EU as an international actor; (2) conceptualization of the Mediterranean and how the EU is seen to address changing geopolitical dynamics; and (3) effectiveness of EU instruments, based on the WP3 policy report and the country reports (see the section ‘Further Reading’ for the references), all of which discuss the findings in depth.

EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS

Perception of the EU as an international actor

In the Elite Survey countries, there is the consensus that the EU’s collective role in the Mediterranean is overshadowed by the policies and interests of its individual member states. The EU is often viewed as a “soft power practitioner”, a “trade partner”, and a “development/funding agency”.

In **Lebanon, Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia**, the findings demonstrate familiarity with the EU as an institution. Across the elite surveys conducted in these four countries, there was an overwhelming consensus that the EU’s rhetoric of promoting normative values abroad in previous Mediterranean policies was not fully realized due to structural constraints within each country. These constraints include authoritarian rule, corruption, and lack of governance and also infrastructure. The fieldwork results indicate a desire for partnerships with the EU that entail knowledge exchange in the areas of economic growth, institutional building, educational and health systems. Furthermore, the EU is perceived by the respondents as shifting from its international role as a normative institution to a realistic actor whose discourse and policies increasingly focus on security and migration.

For **Iran, Qatar and Saudi Arabia**, which are not traditionally a part of the Euro-Mediterranean policies, the fieldwork data showed that more emphasis is given to relationships with specific member states rather than with the EU as an institution. The term and concept of the Mediterranean as a region is relatively unimportant. Rather, their emphasis as indicated in their discourses respectively, rests on interactions with certain Muslim and/or Arab countries in the broader Mediterranean. These countries view the EU as a “soft power” on the international stage that could provide economic benefit through increased trade and business relationships. Respondents also noted that the EU was often perceived as secondary to the US as a regional influence. The findings suggest that bilateral relations with the EU are perceived relatively new in these three countries and the EU is seen to have an opportunity to develop effective policies with Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Iran.

On the other side, the EU is perceived as a strategic ally to **Israel**; however, there is a frustration with the EU institutions due to the political disagreements over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Israel’s violation of international law in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. The Israeli stakeholders also noted their frustration with the disconnect between the EU and its member-states at the bureaucratic functional level.

Turkey is geographically connected to Europe, and the relationship between the EU and Turkey is one defined by periods of political and economic integration, as well as frictions affecting the level of bilateral interaction on both sides. Among the Mediterranean countries included to the Elite Survey, Turkey is the only country to gain EU candidate status, which it officially attained in 2005. However, as reiterated by the interviewees, the repeatedly stalled accession negotiations have led to a rise of Euro-sceptic sentiments among the public and a decrease of the EU leverage over years. On the official discourse, the EU is still seen a key partner and the EU-Turkish relations have been more defined by migration issue and security against the backdrop of regional conflicts, more notably the Syrian war in the recent years with a focus on shared challenges to scale up the partnership.

Conceptualization of the Mediterranean and how the EU seen to address changing geopolitical dynamics

Across the nine countries in which the fieldwork was conducted, the conceptualization of the Mediterranean in the narratives of the stakeholders reveal a “**fragmented representation**” as the region is described highly “heterogenous” in its political, social and economic alignments.

Being asked about the region’s most pressuring geopolitical challenges, the stakeholders pointed to **regional security and conflicts, migration and refugees, and economic and social imbalances** in their narratives. The Elite Survey also touched upon the EU’s function in the region in relation to the geopolitical developments:

- *Response to the Arab uprisings*: The EU’s response to and involvement in the Arab uprisings was viewed negatively by a great majority of the stakeholders in the Mediterranean. Among the elite survey respondents, there was the sentiment that the Union had the opportunity to promote democracy, human rights, rule of law, and respect for human dignity.
- *Agenda on security*. The perception of the EU’s security policies and response to the migration crisis is intensely negative. Many elite survey responses noted the EU’s increased emphasis on border control, stability, and migration deterrence. According to the respondents, the ideological direction of the Union’s policies towards the region is increasingly embracing a “securitizing” nature.
- *Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)*: As understood from the research findings, despite the US withdrawal, the multilateral diplomacy facilitated the Iran nuclear deal was appreciated by various stakeholders. The EU’s instrumental role in the diplomacy dialogue for the implementation of the JCPOA is perceived to have increased its political leverage as an international actor. On the other side, being apprehensive about Iran’s regional goals, Saudi Arabia sees the EU’s efforts and the JCPOA a destabilizing factor especially for the Middle East.
- *Gulf crisis*: The diplomatic move of the Arab quartet (Saudi Arabia, UEA, Bahrain and Egypt) has left Qatar partially isolated in its economic, political and cultural relations with its immediate neighborhoods since 2017. In that regard, the diplomatic hyperactivity of Qatar with the West including the EU states during this period was uttered an opportunity for both sides to deepen the historically limited bilateral relations and enhance the economic partnership.
- *Israeli-Palestinian issue*: For the Israeli stakeholders, the EU’s persistence on the two-state solution creates a deadlock as the termination of the conflict is believed to necessitate a new diplomatic initiative. Israel was told to appreciate the EU’s monetary assistance to Gaza and the West Bank.
- *Syrian conflict*: Undoubtedly, the Syrian war was uttered a major factor pushing instability and insecurity in the entire region by almost all stakeholders, and in Turkey and Lebanon specifically. With respect to the EU’s role in the Syrian conflict, according to the interlocutors in Turkey, the Union was not counted among the regional players like the U.S. or Russia and its diplomatic absence was stressed.

On EU instruments in the area of civil society, democracy assistance and economic development

The Elite Survey further explored how local stakeholders evaluate the EU instruments that aim to foster the advancement of the civil society sector; democracy; and economic development in the Mediterranean.

While the EU efforts in the area of civil society was overall appreciated by the interviewed stakeholders, a good majority pointed the Union’s “technocratizing” and “selective” approach in its working relations with CSOs, criticizing that the EU treats CSOs as service agents and not change-makers in their respective societies.

With respect to the EU's democracy assistance to its Southern neighborhood, the EU's promotion of normative values is not always seen as coherent with domestic needs or interests of the societies in the region. The Union was said to export its own model of democracy to a region that should instead be addressed within its own local context and actors when forming a coherent human rights and democracy promotion strategy. Furthermore, of countries already included in the Euro-Mediterranean policies, elite survey results revealed a common sentiment that the EU's goals and policies in the region have not been fully realized.

It is further worth noting that the stakeholders in the Mediterranean pointed informal economy, social polarization, youth unemployment as well as regional disparities and lack of good governance are among the most priority socio-economic challenges. There is an expectation from the EU to put particular focus on these issues in their regional development agenda, adding that the Union should also give more space to the Mediterranean countries in trade negotiations by lessening bureaucratic barriers as much as possible.

As far as the EU substance is concerned on gender, especially in the countries of Lebanon, Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia, the EU enjoys a good reputation regarding its leverage on the promotion of gender equality, albeit with certain expectations. In Lebanon, the respondents pointed to a lack of general human rights, including gender rights, with the expectation that the EU should impose more leverage over the government to better facilitate gender reforms, while emphasizing their concern on LGBT rights and the status of migrant workers. On the other side, Moroccan elites expressed their appreciation for the EU's efforts through civil society against the discriminatory laws and violence against women.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Main take-aways of WP3 as policy recommendations to the EU:

- The EU should work towards a single comprehensive European approach to the Mediterranean. This comprehensive approach should serve as an umbrella under which member state relations with Mediterranean states are conducted. Member state policies can align themselves within this EU policy umbrella to complement and strengthen overarching policy goals in the Mediterranean region.
- While the EU has well established economic and political relations with countries such as Turkey, but also Tunisia, Morocco, Israel, Lebanon and Egypt, it has the opportunity to define new, clear-cut policies with Iran, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. The Union is expected to build a regional policy in MENA that fosters regional security, aiming to improve intra-regional relations in the EU's expanded southern neighbourhood and to resolve political disputes throughout the region.
- In terms of its current security policies, the EU can work to shift its rhetoric to one that disentangles migration from security. However, respondents believe that immigration, while perceived by Europe as a security threat, is not only a security issue, but a global crisis that requires economic, political and humanitarian solutions. Elites urged the EU to provide additional aid to support refugee populations and expressed hope that the EU can adjust policies to provide economic, diplomatic and political incentives to governments, businesses and civil society groups that support refugee and immigrant populations in the Mediterranean.
- Elite Survey respondents across the Mediterranean expressed the desire for aid policy reform. The respondents see existing EU aid policies as Eurocentric and ineffective within their Mediterranean country-specific context. The EU is perceived to imitate its own practices in its Mediterranean policies without fully considering the needs and expectations of the societies there.

- Development is a key term. The EU is expected to give more space to green energy investments, water conservation, waste management and agriculture technologies in its development agenda especially when targeting Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt and Lebanon.
- The EU is expected to engage more with the local population in formulating its gender policies for the Mediterranean countries. The EU should impose more leverage over the governments to better facilitate gender reforms including the status of migrant women.
- The EU should ease bureaucratic/technical difficulties for civil society exchanges with the Mediterranean countries. The Union is expected to act more inclusively towards civil society groups and to be open to knowledge exchange for their improvement.
- Strengthening institutional mechanisms and promoting good governance, accountability and transparency are the areas where the EU can provide support in the region.

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

The primary purpose of the WP3 is to explore how different stakeholders in the region practice their own “Mediterranean” and construct their own understanding of geopolitics, while investigating how they perceive the EU’s presence in and the effectiveness of its policies addressing the region. Subsequently, the methodology of the WP3 is based on to provide a perception analysis of the local elites in Mediterranean within a qualitative assessment context through a comprehensive “**Elite Survey**”.

Perspectives towards the EU’s role and policies targeting the region were explored through **semi-structured in-depth interviews**, which were carried out with the local elite actors residing in the targeted Mediterranean countries from July 2017 to May 2018. The Elite Survey interviews were conducted with local agencies at the elite level in Iran, Turkey, Qatar, Morocco, Israel, Tunisia, Egypt, and Lebanon (i.e. due to the travel limitations to Saudi Arabia, the researchers reached relevant stakeholders in London/Brussels for the interviews). Target groups comprised bureaucrats, decision makers, political advisors, business people, youth, women, academics, media professionals and civil society representatives; aged between 20 and 70.

The overall number of female stakeholders involved in the Elite Survey was fewer than male participants. Within the research limitations, women’s representation in decision-making circles was not observed to be high, with fewer female respondents in governmental positions.

Table 1 | Overview of interviewees

Country	Male	Female	Total	Fieldwork period
Egypt	16	13	31**	August–November 2017
Iran	10	2	12	February–April 2018
Israel	10	10	20	February–May 2018
Lebanon	15	15	30	July–September 2017
Morocco	19	3	22	January–May 2018
Qatar	11	1	12	January 2018
Saudi Arabia	8	4	12	February–April 2018
Tunisia	9	2	11	February 2018
Turkey	15	4	19	November 2017–March 2018
Total	113	54	169**	July 2017–May 2018

(**Two unidentified)

PROJECT IDENTITY

PROJECT NAME	MEDRESET: A comprehensive, integrated and bottom-up approach to reset our understanding of the Mediterranean space, remap the region and reconstruct inclusive, responsive and flexible EU policies in it
COORDINATOR	Dr. Daniela Huber and Dr. Maria Cristina Paciello, Istituto Affari Internazionali, Rome, Italy, d.huber@iai.it , mc.paciello@iai.it
CONSORTIUM	American University of Beirut, Lebanon Arab Studies Institute – Research and Education Methodologies, Lebanon Barcelona Centre for International Affairs, Spain Cairo University, Faculty of Economics and Political Science, Egypt Center for Public Policy and Democracy Studies, Turkey College of Europe Natolin Campus, Poland El Manar University, Faculty of Law and Political Science, Tunisia Forum Internazionale ed Europeo di Ricerche sull’Immigrazione, Italy IPAG Business School, France Istituto Affari Internazionali, Italy University of Durham, UK University Moulay Ismail, Morocco
FUNDING SCHEME	Horizon 2020 Framework Programme for Research and Innovation – INT-06-2015: Re-invigorating the partnership between the two shores of the Mediterranean – grant agreement no. 693055
DURATION	April 2016 – March 2019 (36 months)
BUDGET	EU contribution: 2 497 million €
WEBSITE	http://www.medreset.eu
FOR MORE INFORMATION	Dr. Daniela Huber and Dr. Maria Cristina Paciello, Istituto Affari Internazionali, Rome, Italy, d.huber@iai.it , mc.paciello@iai.it
FURTHER READING	ASI-REM (forthcoming), “Egyptian Elite’s Views on Egypt, and Its Relations with the EU”, in <i>MEDRESET Working Papers</i> Bayburt, Emir, Eyal Ronen and Nimrod Goren (forthcoming), “Israel, the EU and the Mediterranean: Understanding the Perceptions of Israeli Elite Actors”, in <i>MEDRESET Working Papers</i> Dark, Gülşah (forthcoming), “Attitudes towards the EU and Its Presence in the Mediterranean: Perceptions of Local Elites in Turkey”, in <i>MEDRESET Working Papers</i> Dark, Gülşah (2018), “EU Seen from the Outside: Local Elite Perceptions on the Role and Effectiveness of the EU in the Mediterranean Region”, in <i>MEDRESET Policy Papers</i> , No. 5 (November), http://www.medreset.eu/?p=13672

Dark, Gülşah and Zeynep Gülöz Bakır (2017), “Review of Surveys on Euro–Mediterranean Relations, and an Introduction to the Elite Survey in MEDRESET”, in *MEDRESET Methodology and Concept Papers*, No. 5 (July), <http://www.medreset.eu/?p=13424>

Görgülü, Aybars (forthcoming), “Towards a Viable EU–Gulf Engagement: Qatari Perceptions of the EU and Its Policies in the Region”, in *MEDRESET Working Papers*

Goulordava, Karina and ASI-REM (forthcoming), “Lebanese Elites’ Views on Lebanon and Its Relations with the EU”, in *MEDRESET Working Papers*

Gülöz Bakır, Zeynep and Patrick P. Parks (forthcoming), “An Outlook on Tunisian Elite Stakeholders’ Perspectives on the EU and Its Policy Preferences in Tunisia and the Mediterranean”, in *MEDRESET Working Papers*

Gülöz Bakır, Zeynep et al. (forthcoming), “Revisiting the Role of the EU in the Neighbourhood: Moroccan Elite Perceptions on the EU and Its Policy Impact in the Mediterranean”, in *MEDRESET Working Papers*

Huber, Daniela and Maria Cristina Paciello (2016), “MEDRESET. A Comprehensive, Integrated, and Bottom-up Approach”, in *MEDRESET Methodology and Concept Papers*, No. 1 (June), <http://www.medreset.eu/?p=13169>

Jalilvand, David Ramin (forthcoming), “EU–Iran Relations: Iranian Perceptions and European Policy”, in *MEDRESET Working Papers*

Senyücel Gündoğar, Sabiha (forthcoming), “Saudi Arabia’s Relations with the EU and Its Perception of EU Policies in MENA”, in *MEDRESET Working Papers*