A HALF-EMPTY GLASS: LIMITS AND DILEMMAS OF THE EU'S RELATIONS TO THE MENA COUNTRIES

Silvia Colombo and **Eduard Soler i Lecha**, with contributions from **Marc Otte**

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ABSTRACT

The decades' long relationship between the European Union and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has gone through different stages and phases in response to regional events, developments in the EU and broader global geopolitical trends. While navigating through often troubled waters, the EU has fallen prey to three main false dilemmas or perceived dichotomies regarding its role in the region. These dilemmas have taken on a life of their own and have impinged on the EU's ability to realize its full potential. As such, the promotion of democracy has been perceived in opposition to the stability and security of the MENA countries and ultimately of the EU; the need to cooperate with the MENA governments has come at the expense of true engagement with their societies; and multilateralism and bilateralism have often been portrayed and pursued not as complementary but as alternative choices.

INTRODUCTION

The relations between the European Union and the countries of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have been the object of an endless string of discussions and analyses from different standpoints. This report falls within this category, although it does not aspire to be fully comprehensive and detailed in all aspects. What it tries to do is to contextualize, explain and assess the evolution of these relations both from the temporal perspective (hence it adopts a sort of chronological order of the events) and most importantly from the thematic one. It focuses on the narratives, drivers, debates, policies and tools the EU has developed over the course of recent decades to cooperate with the MENA region. The reference to the Euro–Arab Dialogue of the early 1970s represents the lower temporal limit of the time frame covered by the report, while the transformative impact of the Arab uprisings and the changes and continuities that have taken place in the EU's approach vis-à-vis the region following those events are the upper temporal limit, thus making it relevant and timely. In this regard, the report makes an effort to conceptualize whether the Arab uprisings have represented a turning point for the EU's engagement with the MENA without focusing on these events too much as a watershed (or not), as changes and continuities in the EU's role in the region are only partially related to the events of 2011.

Since the goal of the report is to be both descriptive and analytical, it does not dwell on country-by-country details. Case studies are used here to illustrate broader trends that go beyond specific national or sub-regional contexts. These trends point to the existence of not-so-hidden false

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dilemmas or perceived dichotomies regarding the EU's role in the region. These dilemmas have taken on a life of their own and have impinged on the EU's ability to realize its full potential. As such, the promotion of democracy has been perceived in opposition to the stability and security of the MENA countries and ultimately of the EU; the need to cooperate with the MENA governments has come at the expense of true engagement with their societies; and multilateralism and bilateralism have often been portrayed and pursued not as complementary but as alternative choices. By exploring these trends, the report also paves the way for a thorough reconceptualization of the EU's narratives, policies and tools towards the MENA region that will allow the EU to better satisfy its potential and the region's needs.

1. FRAMING THE MENA REGION

1.1 NARRATIVES, GEOGRAPHICAL SCOPE AND POLICY ENTREPRENEURS

Regions are mental and social constructions. This is why the concept of "regions" and their geographical limits are not given facts. Nowhere is this more true than in the MENA, a region whose limits are not well defined and for which there are alternative conceptualizations such as the Arab world or the Mediterranean (Malmvig et al. 2016). External actors are also engaged in the process of constructing the region and establishing its limits. European countries played and continue to play a major role in this respect. Arguably, the EU "has been the prime actor in constructing the Mediterranean as a region" (Bilgin 2004: 34) in what has been interpreted as both an attempt to reproduce itself (Bretherton and Volger 1999: 249) and a boundary-drawing exercise (Cebeci and Schumacher 2017: 5-6). Evolving conceptualizations of the "self" and the "other" have materialized in different cooperative projects with evolving geographical scopes.

The way in which the EU has imagined and approached this region has also given rise to different narratives. During recent decades, the Mediterranean and, by extension, the MENA have been framed as a threat – mainly due to their geographic proximity and the proliferation of crises; as a challenge – that is, as a space increasingly interconnected with Europe in which the EU's contribution could generate positive spillover; as a European "responsibility" – due to historical relations and the persistent legacy of colonialism; or as an opportunity – understanding the Mediterranean as an avenue to reaffirm Europe's international actorness, with the Middle East Peace Process as a litmus test (Morillas and Soler i Lecha 2017).

Some of these narratives have coexisted over time and have distinctively been adopted by political, economic and institutional agents. Yet we can identify five critical junctures in which the debate on Mediterranean and Middle East affairs became more prominent. The first was in the early 1970s coinciding with the oil shock and the launch of two parallel initiatives: the Euro–Arab Dialogue – perceived as an affirmation of European political autonomy vis-à-vis the United States and an acknowledgement of Europe's interests and priorities in the MENA region – and the Global Mediterranean Policy, which was the first attempt to provide a common framework to structure relations with neighbouring countries and which was largely focused on trade (see among others Khader 1997, Isaac and Kares 2017).

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The second juncture was in 1995 with the launch of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, also known as the Barcelona Process. This framework projected a renovated political ambition onto the EU and the belief that there had occurred changes in the regional context (mainly the Oslo Accords but also the instability in Algeria) that either created new opportunities or accentuated the threat perception (see among others Barbé 1996, Bicchi 2007).

The third juncture was 2008 with the launch of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM). The preparatory phase triggered an EU-wide heated debate about the risk of de-Europeanization and re-nationalization of the EU's Mediterranean policy due to France's initial (and unsuccessful) attempt to emancipate this initiative from the EU framework. Another hallmark of the UfM was its (this time successful) attempt to underline the opportunities for functional cooperation, thus de-politicizing the EU's cooperation with the Mediterranean countries and the Balkan states (see among others Bicchi and Gillespie 2012, Cebeci and Schumacher 2017).

The Arab uprisings in 2011 and the fall of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak in Egypt forced the EU to recognize the need to update its policies and instruments and adapt them to the new political realities and, to some extent, to re-politicize its strategy towards this region. The Communications published in March and May of 2011 stressed the narrative depicting the region as a challenge but also framed the new scenario as an opportunity (European Commission and EEAS 2011a, 2011b). It was also a more or less open acknowledgement of the fact that the previous approach had failed, in the sense that it did not foster political openings in the countries of the region but rather strengthened authoritarian governments. Stefan Füle, at that time Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), later expressed a more explicit *mea culpa* when he said:

> The EU has always been active in promoting human rights and democracy in our neighbourhood. But it has often focused too much on stability at the expense of other objectives and, more problematic, at the expense of our values. Now is the time to bring our interests in line with our values. Recent events in the South have proved that there can be no real stability without real democracy. (Füle 2011)

In contrast, in 2015 EU leaders, but also European societies, started to understand that the consequences of mounting instability in the MENA region were impacting them directly in the form of terrorist attacks as well as hundreds of thousands of refugees trying to reach Europe through the Aegean and the Strait of Sicily. This realization contributed to the region being given a higher priority but also fed a narrative of threats and risks. Those concerns became visible in the review of the ENP published in November 2015 – which put all the emphasis on stabilization and differentiation. In parallel to this, and as the result of a process that did not take the 2015 ENP revision into account, the EU tried to mitigate this focus on stability by unveiling the EU Global Strategy on Foreign and Security Policy in June 2016, which built on the concept of state and societal resilience as one of the EU's key foreign policy goals.

The changing political and security context in the MENA region, but also internal changes in the EU and the evolving levels of ambition with regard to its relations to the MENA, were not only reflected in the narratives used and reproduced when approaching this region. They also modified

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the perimeter of the region from the EU perspective. For instance, the oil shock prompted the Europeans to frame a bi-regional (Euro–Arab) dialogue, and the Oslo Accords allowed the EU to believe that instead of building a Euro–Maghreb partnership (as initially conceived by the 1992 Portuguese presidency) it was possible to extend the offer to the whole Mediterranean region. The war in Iraq in 2003 also prompted the EU to look at the broader Middle East through the approval of a "Strategic Partnership with the Mediterranean and the Middle East" by the European Council in June 2004, which was a first attempt to integrate into the equation the relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Iraq, Iran, Yemen and the Arab League.

Changes in the political context both in Europe and the MENA region were also reflected in the changing nature of the relations and the terms used to label them. Formulations such as "dialogue" and "partnership" stressed the idea of equality and co-ownership among the members and the attempt to build multilateral frameworks. In contrast, the terms "neighbours" and "policy" as used in the European Neighbourhood Policy of 2003–04 expressed a conception of this relationship in terms of centre vs periphery and subject vs object, which also favoured bilateralism and differentiation.

The process in which the region (and the policies towards it) has been framed as Arab, Mediterranean or the MENA, as well as the different ambitions and interests associated to these conceptualizations, have been the result not only of changes in the political landscape but also of the differentiated involvement of key policy entrepreneurs. In this respect we can identify four types of players: (1) the European Commission and in a later stage the European External Action Service (EEAS) next to it; (2) the Mediterranean countries of the EU; (3) some non-Mediterranean countries of the EU that decided to invest in this region as a priority, such as Germany and Sweden; and (4) the countries in the MENA region that had a particular interest in strengthening their ties to the EU, either due to the perception of regional isolation or because they count on the EU's support to modernize their economies or introduce some political reforms.

1.2 THE PLACE OF THE MENA WITHIN BROADER EU DEBATES: MATERIAL AND IDEATIONAL STAKES

As testified by the excursus above, the narratives and approaches the EU has adopted vis-à-vis the MENA over the course of decades have been underpinned by, and at the same time have contributed to advancing, key stakes linked to the perception of the EU's identity and interests. A first distinction can be made between material and ideational stakes, pitting material interests and gains in the security, economic and commercial, and energy realms against non-material interests and concerns related to the promotion of certain values, norms, *modi operandi* and (cultural) frames. Nowhere has this distinction been more emphasized than in the literature that speaks of the normative power of the EU (Manners 2002, Youngs 2004, Barbé and Johansson-Nogués 2008). What is meant by that is the willingness and the ability of the EU to project and pursue in its external relations the same values and norms that make up its own identity and *raison d'être*. These all-encompassing values and norms usually refer to "democracy", "peace", "justice" and "order". However, the extent to which they are opposed to the pursuit of non-normative interests such as security, stability and economic gains has been severely tested and criticized from different theoretical perspectives (see among others Tocci 2007, Pace 2009). It thus makes sense to go

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back to the discussion of material vs ideational stakes informing the EU's approaches and policies vis-à-vis the MENA, bearing in mind that this represents a simplification of much more complex dynamics.

In this respect, a second distinct dichotomy can be mentioned in terms of the stakes the EU has traditionally pursued in the MENA, namely the one between possession goals and milieu goals. This dichotomy was spelled out in the following terms: "[o]ne can distinguish goals pertaining, respectively, to national possessions and to the shape of the environment in which the nation operates. I call the former 'possession goals,' the latter 'milieu goals'" (Wolfers 1962: 73). In other words, it makes a difference whether nation-states – although this applies to the EU as well – directly pursue their interests, such as those already mentioned above – including both material or ideational ones – or they try to act upon the context in a way that is ultimately beneficial to them. In this sense, milieu goals are not completely detached from possession goals as the former can be regarded as contextual variables or tools to achieve the latter. Speaking about the EU via-à-vis the MENA, the attainment of key goals such as energy security, economic gains, and security and stability for its own states and citizens has sometimes passed through the pursuit of milieu goals such as the promotion of multilateral cooperation instruments, of regionalism as a force for good and of a range of domestic and regional reforms. However, in order to be defined as "milieu goals" they have to be pursued consistently over time and not only at the time when they also represent immediate possession goals (Tocci 2007: 7). We thus go back to the idea of normativity, namely to the fact that the EU has quite consistently tried to project its image, norms and values as the normal and the model in its cooperation patterns. This applies in particular to policies pursued by the EU as a promoter of democracy, economic growth and development, and crisis management and conflict prevention on the basis of its own experience and past history. These issue areas are analysed in detail in the second part of this report.

2. ACTING UPON THE REGION

2.1 THE EU'S TOOLBOX

The EU's attempt to activate formal cooperation mechanisms with the countries in the Mediterranean and the MENA region dates back to the 1970s, when the Euro–Arab Dialogue was established as a way of improving bilateral relations between Europe and the Arab world in the wake of the October 1973 Arab–Israeli War and the subsequent global energy crisis. It was led by the European Economic Community (EEC), which failed, however, at that time to turn its first ever attempt at structured cooperation with the countries of the region into a sustainable exercise (Miller 2014). Two main shortcomings have beset the Euro–Arab Dialogue from the very beginning. The first concerned the internal divisions and competition among alternative frameworks with which the Dialogue was met. Perceived as a France-led initiative, the initial communitarian impulse behind the Euro–Arab Dialogue did not translate into long-lasting and effective cooperation, mainly because of the competition from the Global Mediterranean Policy of the EEC that was launched in 1972. This "global" framework was supposed to offer a general umbrella to all previous bilateral agreements for development assistance and trade cooperation, ultimately aimed at increasing European trade in the Mediterranean while opening the European market to industrial and agricultural goods (Tsoukalis 1977). This created a sense of cacophony and competition from alternative frameworks

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that impinged on the implementation of the Dialogue. Linked to this, the second shortcoming had to do with the regional and international constraints that were placed on the European countries that launched the Euro–Arab Dialogue. On the regional front, given the very tense situation caused by the 1973 Arab–Israeli War, it appeared impossible to shield this cooperation framework from its politicization, which ultimately led to its unravelling. Meanwhile, at the international level, the open hostility shown by the United States vis-à-vis the initiative constituted another level of constraints placed upon it at the time in which the EEC was in the process of taking the first steps in shaping its foreign policy.

These constraints have constituted a recurring factor also in the subsequent cooperation frameworks the EU has implemented vis-à-vis the Mediterranean and the MENA between the 1990s and the present. When in 1995 the Euro–Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) was launched in Barcelona, there were many doubts that the fate of this framework would be different from that of the previous initiative (Marks 1996). The high expectations that Europe tried to turn into reality through the so-called Barcelona Process were connected to the EU's normative drive to act as a force for good in the region that stood closest to its own interests. Once again, the regional and the international frameworks did play an important role in raising these expectations against the backdrop of the hopes unleashed by the 1991 Madrid Conference and, even more so, by the 1993 Oslo Accords, which provided a framework to reach a negotiated solution of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Equally, regional and international dynamics were instrumental in shattering them. Despite some continuities with the Euro–Arab Dialogue template, the launch of the EMP represented a true watershed for Europe's multilateral and coordinated projection onto a region that "has functioned historically much more as a crossroads than as a coherent political or economic entity" (Gillespie 1997: 2). Hence there was a need to help foster the sense of and to structure the politics of the Euro-Mediterranean region by combining "carrots" and "sticks" to fulfil Europe's transformative potential. The articulation of the EMP into three "baskets" or pillars, that is, security and political cooperation, economic cooperation and integration, and social and cultural affairs including mobility, demonstrated the extent of the ambition that characterized the EMP from its very beginning.

Conceptually, the EMP focus was comprehensive and closely knit. Nevertheless, the way in which the EMP was conceived meant it suffered from one major tension, namely the one between the promotion of democracy and economic development, on the one hand, and stability and security, on the other. The rationale for attempting to achieve these seemingly contradictory goals at the same time was linked to the traditional dichotomy between value- vs interest-driven foreign policy. Firstly, by putting the emphasis on the economic agenda and cooperation with the ultimate aim to launch a free trade area (FTA), the EMP has promoted reforms centred on accelerated economic liberalization, privatization and harmonization that have created even more structural imbalances and greater instability in countries that were already in the throes of constant economic recession, rising debt and growing inequalities (Marks 1996, Kienle 2016). This clashed with the main proffered goal of the partnership, which was to create a shared area of peace, security and prosperity in the Mediterranean in line with Europe's own values. Secondly, the very structure of the cooperation within the EMP revealed strong tensions between the promotion of region-wide, multilateral cooperation, on the one hand, and of preferential, bilateral relations between the European institutions and each individual country in the MENA, on the other. The tension between

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multilateral and bilateral approaches and instruments has since become one of the constant features of Europe's engagement with the Mediterranean and the MENA. On the one hand, Europe has mildly attempted to foster cooperative security practices, region-building strategies and integration in the region modelled on its own experience (Fawcett and Hurrell 1995, Adler and Crawford 2004), hence the development of a common framework of cooperation at the multilateral level by leveraging the participation of all the countries involved in the EMP as a means to ensure ownership. On the other hand, preferential, bilateral relations have taken precedence over the multilateral framework when it comes to concretely implementing the cooperation agenda on issues such as trade liberalization, economic modernization and the support of specific country-based reforms.

As already mentioned, both structural and contextual factors have contributed to eroding the expectations and hopes that underpinned the EMP and its foundations, leading to it being subsumed under a new cooperation framework. Contextual factors, including at the European, regional and international levels, were particularly important in prompting the launch of the European Neighbourhood Policy in 2003–04 and the abandonment of the region-building effort by the EU. At the European level, the prospects for enlargement to include ten new member states in 2005 strengthened the EU's resolution to seek new forms of engagement with the new neighbours in the East and – by extension – in the South too (Kelley 2006). As far as the MENA region itself was concerned, the emergence of what were perceived as security threats in the form of Islamist activism and politics following the enactment of formally democratic reforms and the holding of elections (in countries such as Egypt and Lebanon, or in Gaza) made it necessary for the EU to revise its approach. In particular, the balance between the EU's reformist approach, which had been sought in the framework of the EMP, on the one hand, and the need to assuage the MENA governments' fears and to prop them up by increasing the political and financial support to them, on the other, came under discussion. The new approach enshrined in the ENP was much more sensitive to the latter than the former, in reality picking up on and strengthening a trend that had already started around the turn of the millennium in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the transatlantic responses to them. All in all, the introduction of the ENP was a response to the new security circumstances that came to characterize the perception of the MENA and of its contribution to securing or impinging on the EU's key interests. To complement this and in terms of implementation, the ENP was also supposed to assist in EU efforts to realize the goals of the European Security Strategy (ESS), which saw the light in 2003 (European Council 2003). Against this backdrop, fostering security and stability featured very much at the centre of the EU's approach to its neighbours. To achieve its goals, the ENP has made use of a wide range of conditionality-related instruments, the most important of which was money in exchange for reforms (Delcour and Soler i Lecha 2018). Fostering reforms was indeed regarded as the tool through which threats to security and stability in the MENA countries, with the associated risks of spillover to Europe, could be reduced. In particular, poor governance – manifested through corruption, weak state institutions and lack of accountability – was regarded as a key threat to EU security. Nevertheless, democracy promotion, human rights and the rule of law did not feature as the key motivations or objectives pursued in the framework of the ENP due to a large rhetoric–practice gap. This was a major limitation of the whole ENP framework, which to a significant extent contributed to jeopardizing the attainment of the cooperation objectives. By putting democracy and human rights on the back burner, the EU adopted a realist approach that indirectly contributed to the maintenance of an

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unsustainable status quo in the countries in the region, eventually leading to the outbreak of the Arab uprisings in 2011. Another limitation of the ENP was that despite the fact that this framework in its early design was meant to offer an enhanced and more nuanced approach to cooperation with some of the MENA countries compared with the "one-size-fits-all" paradigm of the EMP, the 2011 uprisings made evident that "despite some commonalities, no country in the region is the same" (European Commission and EEAS 2011a: 2), which in turn entailed the "need for greater flexibility and more tailored responses in dealing with rapidly evolving partners" (European Commission and EEAS 2011b: 1).

These events forced the EU to respond quickly to the perceived new challenges by partially revising its top-down approach towards the MENA. In addition to reinforcing conditionality ("more for more" but also the opposite, "less for less"), the revision of the ENP focused on two principles and three thematic areas that have become the new pillars of the EU's bilateral engagement with the MENA. As far as the two underpinning principles are concerned, "differentiation" and "mutual accountability" introduced an incentive-based approach that was supposed, on the one hand, to generate positive competition for EU resources among the partner countries, and on the other hand, to produce a sense of joint ownership vis-à-vis the cooperation agenda. Turning to the thematic areas, they have been defined as democratic transformation and institution building, stronger partnership with the people particularly in the realm of mobility, and sustainable and inclusive growth (European Commission and EEAS 2011a: 3). Despite the acknowledged need to put human aspects (with the emphasis on deep democracy, sustainability, inclusive economic development and people-to-people contacts) at the core of the EU's new approach towards the MENA, the implementation side has continued to underscore a number of problems due to the bureaucratic inertia of EU policies and the tendency to limit cooperation to state authorities with little engagement with civil society, in its different expressions from trade unions to non-registered non-governmental organizations (NGOs), in the consultations framework.[2] At best, the engagement with civil society organizations (CSOs) has been declaratory or symbolic, leading to frustration and disillusionment (Youngs and Michou 2012: 50-52).

These shortcomings have become even more visible and acute in the light of the 2015 revision of the ENP framework. In that context, a disenchanted EU recognized the limitations of its "more for more" approach and its miscalculation of the democratic potential of the Arab uprisings, stating that "differentiation and greater mutual ownership will be the hallmark of the new ENP" along with the recognition that "not all partners aspire to EU rules and standards" (European Commission and EEAS 2015b: 2). In view of the sweeping changes occurring at the regional and international level, whereby in roughly a decade the "ring of friends" of 2003 had become the "ring of fire" of 2015 (Koenig 2016), the optimistic tones of the inaugurating documents of the ENP as well as the enthusiastic welcoming of the events of 2011 were replaced by a pervasive sense of threat fed by multiple crises, including migrants and refugees, terrorism and energy. As a result, the EU's existing cooperation framework with the countries in the MENA has veered even more dramatically towards the pragmatic or even realist turn on the basis of the acknowledgement that "the EU cannot alone solve the many challenges of the region, and there are limits to its leverage" (European Commission and EEAS 2015b: 2). Launched in parallel with the work done on the EU Global Strategy, the 2015 ENP revision once again did not represent any veritable shift away from

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2   Authors' interviews with EU officials, Brussels, June and September 2018.

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the logic and structure of the previous bilateral cooperation framework. What is remarkable is the yawning rhetoric–practice gap. On the one hand, in the 2015 Joint Communication specific reference was made to the need to reinforce the principles of differentiation and of joint ownership and to broaden the scope of the cooperation between the EU and MENA countries to areas such as crisis management, conflict prevention and security sector reform. On the other hand, upon implementation, marked precedence was given to the EU's objectives and priorities with very limited involvement of and consultation with the beneficiary MENA countries.[3] In addition, the broadening of the cooperation agenda went hand in hand with the dilution of the conditionality and of the benchmarks to verify progress in the reform agenda in the context of very broad multiannual programming documents and assessments (European Commission and EEAS 2017).

2.2 RESETTING GEOPOLITICS, WIDENING THE SCOPE

The cooperation frameworks discussed above have been the structural skeleton of the EU's relations with its MENA partner countries with particular focus on the Mediterranean dimension. However, as argued from the onset, the definition of the MENA region, both in its geographical scope and as a player in EU-initiated cooperation frameworks, has been flexible and has undergone several changes. All the research conducted in the framework of the MENARA Project has striven to uncover, describe and assess these geopolitical transformations by looking at the interplay between the domestic/local, the regional and the global levels. When it comes to the way in which the EU's approaches and policies have contributed to shaping – and have ultimately been impacted upon by – these geopolitical dynamics, three key issues emerge as the most interesting ones for discussion. The first could be labelled as "the Gulf as the new centre of gravity", meaning that one of the most significant transformations at the geopolitical level in the MENA in recent years has been the rising to the fore of the Gulf countries as proactive foreign players. While this trend was significantly accelerated by the Arab uprisings of 2011 and by the shocks they created throughout the region, its first signs more accurately date back to the post-2003 period. The US-led military invasion of Iraq – which among many things also caused internal rifts among the EU's member states and in transatlantic relations – and the ensuing conflict contributed to altering the geopolitical features of the Middle East once and for all (see among others Wherey 2014). Among its repercussions, both sides of the Persian Gulf have acquired new salience and leverage in dictating the regional agenda, for better or for worse. This coming to the fore of countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has represented both an opportunity and a risk for the EU. On the one hand, the EU has had to revise its approach towards these countries and the Gulf region in general in the light of their previous exclusion from the EU–MENA cooperation frameworks discussed above, from the EMP to the UfM (Colombo 2014). With regard to the countries of the GCC, the set of multilateral EU–GCC relations in place since 1981 did not live up to its expectations and was increasingly but steadily eroded from within and then abandoned in favour of more fruitful bilateral relations between individual EU member states and each country in the GCC. Turning to Iran, the engagement opportunities that arose with the negotiations of the nuclear deal and the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in July 2015 have not translated into anything concrete, mainly due to the transatlantic crisis on the Iranian file during the Trump administration. On the other hand, in addition to these shortcomings the newly acquired centrality and leverage of the Gulf in MENA geopolitical dynamics has brought with it

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3   Authors' interview with a civil society activist, Tunis, January 2018.

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more conflictuality, both among those countries that used to define themselves as allies or even as part of the same regional grouping, that is, the GCC countries, and between Saudi Arabia and the UAE, on the one hand, and Iran on the other. This has entailed many risks for the EU and for its effort to broaden the geographical scope of its engagement in the Middle East to include the Gulf region.

The second issue concerns the special place that Turkey – at the crossroads of Europe, the Middle East and Asia – has occupied vis-à-vis the construction and the enactment of the EU's foreign policy towards the MENA. Turkey is the only country that falls under the framework of the enlargement policy. Since 1999 Turkey has officially been a candidate for accession, and negotiations started in 2005. The implications of this process for the EU's policy towards the MENA region are threefold. Firstly, the accession process was often depicted as a sign that the EU was not hostile to the Muslim world, while its paralysis, or the voices critical of Turkey's potential membership, were accused of being Islamophobic and aiming at keeping the EU as a Christian club. Secondly, in order to become a member of the EU, Turkey was expected to gradually harmonize with EU positions on foreign policy. Ankara did so when there were still hopes for the accession process, but as those hopes faded away, its efforts to converge with the EU on issues of foreign and security policy, particularly on sensitive issues such as the Middle East, disappeared. Finally, any possibility of integrating Turkey into the EU was seen as a game-changer for the EU's role in the region. If it happened, the EU would have borders with Syria, Iraq and Iran. While some voices in Europe presented this as a geopolitical asset, others considered it too risky in terms of getting involved in Middle Eastern rivalries and conflicts. All in all, the increased levels of violence in the region have heightened the reluctance of many European leaders to integrate Turkey in the EU but it has also given Ankara some leverage on the EU, particularly when it comes to cooperation on migration and counter-terrorism.

Finally, the third issue has to do with the growing attention devoted by the EU and its foreign and security approaches to adjacent areas, the so-called "neighbours of the Neighbours". In this framework, the Sahel occupies an important place as a bridge between Europe, North Africa and the wider African continent. Seen from Brussels, the MENA region is increasingly subsumed into a broader category, the "Southern Neighbourhood", which has gradually expanded – on some occasions, as far as taking in the whole of the African continent. The EU Global Strategy is once again highly indicative of this policy turn. It groups all these regions into the category of "the Mediterranean, the Middle East and Africa" and announces that "in light of the growing interconnections between North and sub-Saharan Africa, as well as between the Horn of Africa and the Middle East, the EU will support cooperation across these sub-regions" (EEAS 2016: 35). Consistent and significant increases in the efforts devoted to the Sahel countries to address the (in)security nexus have been made in the last decade. First Mali, and later Niger, have become EU priorities beyond what the member states are already doing there in terms of stabilization and counter-terrorism. This is an area epitomizing many of the features of the EU's involvement in the broader neighbourhood: the critical role played by member states (France in this particular case) and the emphasis on the security agenda, including the securitization of migration and development policies.

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Palestinian conflict, but also in terms of the EU's largely failed attempts to prevent the escalation of tensions at the intra-state level. The lack of adequate strategies and tools to tackle conflicts in the MENA region has become even more acute in the framework of the ENP and of the UfM. On the one hand, the transformative agenda of the ENP only indirectly addressed the issue of conflicts in the Neighbourhood. Economic development goals, democracy, human rights and civil society promotion, and good governance were regarded as structural long-term preventive actions to be pursued through the instrument of conditionality, which was ultimately not used in a coherent and convincing way as a conflict-prevention tool (Joffé 2011, Seeberg 2018). On the other hand, as already mentioned, the UfM totally sidelined political and security cooperation in favour of functional cooperation projects targeting six priority areas, ranging from civil protection and higher education and research to alternative energies and reducing pollution. On the eve of the Arab uprisings in 2011, the EU seemed to have thus further diluted its crisis-management and conflict-prevention capabilities and tools. As a result, the intensification of intra-state conflicts in the MENA from 2011 onwards and the interdependence and transnationality of risk factors within the region and between it and Europe were not matched by a coherent set of security policies on the side of the EU.

Before delving into the EU's responses to the intra-state conflicts following the Arab uprisings, it is important to focus on the EU's stances vis-à-vis the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, which has been a key issue in EU foreign policy since the European Community tried to assume a common foreign policy role. It was the Yom Kippur/Ramadan War that, in 1973, pushed the nine foreign ministers of the European Community to attempt to explore common foreign policy values in a shared document (Bulletin of the EC 1973). Thus, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict has been from the beginning one of the key drivers of a shared European foreign policy. While the EU's position on it has never been unequivocal, the EU member states' attempts to define a shared lowest common denominator and milestones in this endeavour resulted in the 1977 London Declaration that called for a "Palestinian Homeland" and the 1980 Venice Declaration that recognized the Palestinian right to self-determination and declared settlements illegal under international law and an obstacle to peace. Indeed, as Elena Aoun has pointed out, if the EU has played a role in the conflict, it has been in its relative success in creating a certain normative framing of the conflict in the international arena (Aoun 2003). The EU's role in the conflict was boosted with the Oslo Accords and the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (PA), as the EU committed itself to build up the institutional structure of a future Palestinian state. At present, the EU and its member states remain the biggest donors to the PA, which is therefore highly aid-dependent on the EU as a key financial provider for the functioning of its quasi-state and the provision of common goods. From a number of standpoints, this aid is problematic as it can be seen as financing the occupation. In addition, this aid is not matched by a coherent conditionality policy and supports a government that lacks democratic legitimacy, as dramatically testified by the – even geographical – split between Fatah and Hamas since the elections in 2006. These shortcomings notwithstanding, the EU took the bold decision to include Palestine as a full member of the EMP in the mid-1990s. The main idea was to anchor Israeli–Palestinian peace talks in a regional forum to discuss broad security issues. In the same framework, the EU signed an association agreement with both Israel (1995) and the Palestine Liberation Organization (1997). As the peace process deteriorated, however, the regional dimension of the EMP became increasingly stuck (Makdisi 2018). At the same time, the EU succeeded in being included in the main diplomatic forum established in 2002 during the second

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Intifada – the Middle East Quartet. It also started to engage more (albeit still in a limited form) in crisis-management practices through two civilian missions, EUPOL COPPS, based since 2005 in the West Bank, and EUBAM Rafah, established in 2005 to monitor the border crossing between the Gaza Strip and Egypt and temporarily suspended in 2007 when Hamas took over control of the Gaza Strip. Most recently, the proliferation of conflicts in the MENA has overshadowed the Arab–Israeli conflict in general, and the Palestinian issue in particular, as the cornerstone of the regional security complex. Specific dynamics within the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, including the prolonged deadlock of peace talks, the unabated growth of Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories that are making the two-state solution supported by the EU increasingly unfeasible, and the shift of Palestinian tactics from the local towards the international arena, are making this trend even more acute. However, it would be wrong to assume that the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, with its ramifications for intra-Arab relations, could not return to a central position in the regional conflict dynamics in the MENA (Dessì and Kamel 2018).

The Israeli–Palestinian dispute aside, the EU's responses to intra-state conflicts in the MENA demonstrate how, on the one hand, the EU's crisis-management effort was further diluted in the last years of the 2000s and then, quite surprisingly, following the outbreak of the Arab uprisings. The EU's responses to the Libyan civil war, to the unabated violence and conflict in Syria, and to rising tensions in Egypt in 2013 show that the EU has largely failed to make use of its (limited) crisis-management toolbox, mainly due to political divisions among its member states and to bureaucratic shortcomings related to the difficulty in mobilizing some instruments.[4] On the other hand, the EU's responses show that the EU has opted for an indirect role in conflict prevention through the mildly transformative agenda enshrined in the ENP – which may well be the result of the EU working on a lowest-common-denominator basis between the interests of all its member states. In the case of the conflict in Libya, this lowest common denominator was reached upon the outbreak of the popular revolution on 17 February 2011 but then it quickly dissolved. The EU responded to the flaring of violence with a combination of actions, measures and instruments in the fields of diplomacy, humanitarian aid, trade and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). High Representative Catherine Ashton made her voice heard with strong diplomatic declarations condemning the use of violence against civilians and urging the regime to refrain from any further repression. An extraordinary European Council meeting was convened on 11 March 2011, where heads of state and of government spoke in a similarly unequivocal manner, asking Muammar Gaddafi to step down (European Council 2011). On this occasion, they also legitimized the National Transitional Council (NTC) by recognizing it as the sole "political interlocutor" (Koenig 2014: 264). However, the picture started to change when the prospects for military intervention in the Libyan conflict became more concrete and diverging internal demands and visions for a European role in the conflict became evident among the member states. The result of these internal differences was that the only actions pursued by the EU in the domain of crisis management in Libya were civilian training and border control, following a division of labour with the United Nations that put the latter in charge of the country's political process and reconstruction.

Similar differences and competing narratives among the member states have surfaced also in the case of the conflict in Syria. These divisions became most evident in August 2013, when proof of the use of chemical weapons in the civil war seemed to make international action increasingly

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4   Authors' interview with an EU official, Brussels, September 2018.

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unavoidable. The EU3 (UK, France, Germany) were divided on the issue, with France and the UK pushing for military action, while Germany was in favour of greater involvement by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). All in all, the EU's response to the conflict has been based on three main goals: (1) to support a political solution to the crisis on the basis of UNSC Resolution 2254 of December 2015 calling for a Syria-led process based on negotiations between the Syrian government and the opposition and leading to a transition government; (2) to prevent regional destabilization; and (3) to address the dramatic humanitarian situation and the consequences of the conflict for the EU. From the security point of view, the EU adopted a Counter-Terrorism/ Foreign Fighters Strategy for Syria and Iraq in October 2014, which was then enshrined in its regional strategy for Syria, Iraq and the Daesh threat adopted in March 2015. On the political side, the EU has repeatedly expressed its full support to the efforts of the UN Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, to de-escalate violence in preparation for a broader, sustainable political process. However, the EU has arguably not been a driver in finding a political solution to the conflict by engaging itself at the regional level, not least since it remains internally divided on the al-Assad issue (Colombo and Huber 2015). The EU's limited leverage in crisis management and the fact that conflict-prevention measures – entailing democracy promotion, good governance, respect for human rights and the healing of societal tensions – cannot be implemented when conflicts are in full swing have translated into the fact that the single most important contribution of the EU to managing the Syrian conflict has been on the humanitarian front. By leading the international response to the refugee crisis that has swept the MENA region and Europe, the EU has tried (not so successfully) to shield itself from the consequences of the conflict. In spite of this, the impact of the Syrian conflict has been felt dramatically in the EU as a whole and in the member states to the point that internal politics in the EU has fallen prey to MENA dynamics more than was widely anticipated, as demonstrated – among other things – by the resonance of the migrant and refugee crisis among European public opinions and by the rise of populist-nationalist forces.

2.4 THE EU–MENA COOPERATION AGENDA

Against these changing geopolitical dynamics, it is interesting to assess the extent to which the EU–MENA cooperation agenda has undergone transformations or has instead tended to remain stable. Two issues stand out as the most enduring ones: the first corresponds to political engagement and the second to economic cooperation. In addition, along the way new issue areas have been added to advance specific parts of the EU–MENA cooperation agenda in the light of the project-oriented, functional methodology introduced by the UfM. Firstly, democracy promotion has traditionally occupied a prominent place in the articulation of the EU's political engagement with the MENA countries as part of its external relations (Pace et al. 2009, Pace 2009). The very idea of spreading democracy to the EU's surroundings is based on a flawed assumption, namely the fact that the norms and values the EU aspires to spread are universal and "acceptable" to everyone, even in different social and cultural contexts such as those of the MENA countries. In this regard, Manasi Singh argues that by "holding up democracy as an unquestionable value and as end in itself, the EU takes for granted that democracy and political reform is external to the region, and thus can be successfully exported" (Singh 2016: 32). This – in addition to the lack of coherence in EU policy – has meant that the implementation and results of EU democracy promotion efforts in the MENA region have been meagre, inconsistent and unsustainable at best (Bremberg 2016). EU policies in this domain can be assessed on the basis of the linkage vs leverage distinction, whereby

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linkage is represented by the bottom-up support to democratic forces in the partner countries and leverage on the contrary refers to the top-down inducement of political elites to adopt democratic reforms through political conditionality (Lavenex and Schimmelfennig 2011). An example of the former is the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), often considered the "jewel in the crown" of the EU's democracy promotion (Kurki 2013). According to the same author, however, in practical terms its implementation has sponsored an approach to democracy promotion that is very much in line with the neo-liberal framework, which ultimately is far from the locally owned democracy promotion discourse. Turning to the latter, that is, the top-down conditionality, this has been embedded into all the policies the EU has implemented in the region since the mid-1990s up to the present, although to different degrees and with mixed results. All in all, political conditionality by the EU has not performed well in the MENA, particularly in the domain of democratic reforms, as what has been lacking has been the prospect of membership.[5] Other incentives such as economic cooperation have not been strong enough to make up for the absence of the offer of membership when promoting democracy in the MENA (Schimmelfennig and Scholtz 2008). The fact that linkage and leverage are more often than not considered as a couple and not as a dichotomy reveals a lot about the balance the EU has failed to strike when cooperating with the states in the region, and thus working towards the negotiation and implementation of top-down reforms on the one hand, and in support of the societies in the name of democracy, human rights and the promotion of rule of law on the other. The failure of this approach, or of part of it, has opened the way to a third model that is centred on the fostering of "good governance", measured as transparency, accountability and participation at the level of state administration. The good governance model in EU–MENA relations has had numerous incarnations, particularly in the context of the ENP and – most recently – of the EU Global Strategy, and has led the way to functional cooperation between administrations away from the purely political and normative messages of previous cooperation frameworks and instruments. It is also very close to the idea of pursuing a certain type of milieu goals as a means to attain possession goals.

Much debate has followed the outbreak of the Arab uprisings in 2011 regarding the fate of EU democracy promotion. Most studies have observed minimal to non-existent changes in this domain due to the continuous prioritization of security and stability over (deep) democracy. As already noted, the 2014 ENP progress report underscored the uneven pace of implementation in the area of democracy and human rights, eliciting criticism of the EU's persistent lack of strategy with regards to these issues (European Commission and EEAS 2015a). This inconsistency has been explained by some scholars with reference to the coexistence of different declinations of the democratic/democracy promotion paradigm within the member states, from more "liberal" readings to social-democratic ones (Gómez Isa et al. 2018). Perhaps more convincingly, the fact that in 2015 "stabilization" was explicitly mentioned as the new priority of the revised ENP demonstrates that the EU had come full circle in terms of the prioritization of security and stability over the search for "commonly identified shared interests" on the basis of the EU's values (European Commission and EEAS 2015b: 4). However, the whole discussion of the prevalence of the security–stability nexus over democracy promotion in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings obscures more than it reveals. As testified by a more fine-grained analysis of empirical cases, for example those countries that have experienced uprisings-related political changes, such as Egypt and Tunisia, democracy promotion in practice, and less so in theory, has undergone a moderate transformation as a result of power

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5   Authors' interview with an EU official, Brussels, June 2018.

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dynamics both within and outside the EU. On the one hand, the non-monolithic nature of the EU's foreign policy has been further emphasized by the way in which the different EU institutions, the member states and also the web of Euro-Mediterranean NGOs and research institutes have conceptualized and pursued democracy promotion in the MENA following 2011 (Balfour 2012). On the other hand, a multitude of local actors, away from a rather simplistic and reductive vision of and relationship to the state authorities of each and every country, have contributed to shaping the implementation of the EU's policies and the promotion of political reforms. They include the new and old party elites, the representatives of the various groups of civil society, transnational NGOs active in the MENA, business groups, the security apparatuses and the judiciary (Dandashly 2018). The result has been moderate change in the EU's democracy promotion agenda in the name of differentiation and pragmatism.

The second issue area around which EU priorities, goals and policies have been framed is the promotion of economic growth and development. Arguably, this has represented a *fil rouge* in the way in which EU–MENA relations have been structured and implemented since the launch of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. The very idea and practice of fostering reforms by providing material inducements that stand at the basis of conditionality has traditionally been the mechanism through which the EU has attempted to attain its goals. Thus, the EU has consistently made use of financial packages – from the MEDA instrument and the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (2007–2013, ENPI) to the recent European Neighbourhood Instrument (2014–2020, ENI) – to stimulate economic reforms that would ultimately be responsible for socio-political changes. By drawing from the modernization literature positing a link between the attainment of economic growth through liberalization, on the one hand, and political liberalization and democracy, on the other, many of the EU's efforts towards the MENA have focused on the attempt to change the economic structures and policies in the partner countries by following the example of the EU as such (Tovias 2004). The EMP is a perfect example of the way in which the economic dimension has been embedded into the EU–MENA cooperation frameworks since the very beginning. The second pillar or basket of the EMP was meant to foster economic growth and interconnections between the two sides of the Mediterranean through the creation of a Euro-Mediterranean free trade area that would encompass the largest number of consumers globally speaking (around 600–800 million consumers) through both bilateral and multilateral means. The former were embodied by the Association Agreements negotiated by the EU with each individual country in the region that entered into force between 1998 (in the case of Tunisia) and 2006 (in the case of Lebanon). The latter were represented by the multilateral (annual) meetings at the level of the heads of state and of government. All in all, not only was this approach expected to generate economic dividends on the basis of the stepping up of trade relations, the dismantling of barriers and the harmonization of rules, but the most important expectation was that these economic gains would trickle down to the social and political levels, by creating the necessary conditions for the emergence of a home-grown middle class who would call for liberalizing reforms at the political level too. What was completely disregarded was the fact that both liberalization and structural reforms have been among the causes of growing inequalities, with no measures applied to tackle the side effects of market opening. A second goal of the Association Agreements negotiated between each MENA country and the EU was to encourage regional integration since "regional trade and integration is a recognised objective of the EU's Mediterranean policy, not least because of the positive effects on regional political and economic stability that will result from the creation

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of a larger Mediterranean market" (European Commission 2003: 5). Given that membership was off the table, economic integration had to be offered as an appealing incentive by the EU vis-à-vis its MENA partners. This misleading assumption and logic was kept in the framework of the ENP and of the reform packages that have been negotiated with each and every country in the context of the Action Plans. However, results have failed to manifest themselves both in terms of the improvement of economic conditions per se and with regard to the socio-political implications of this focus on economic cooperation as the means to address the numerous challenges facing the MENA countries (Pace 2009). The major flaw in this logic and cooperation pattern was the fact that economic growth in pure GDP terms was mistaken for development, even in studies by some of the most authoritative institutions sponsoring economic structural reforms in the name of liberalization and privatization (El-Said and Harrigan 2014). Meanwhile, other statistics pointed to the deterioration of other socio-economic indicators, such as employment (particularly among the youth), poverty and inequality. The accumulation of these grievances has today been largely acknowledged as among the major structural causes of the Arab uprisings, alongside – or more accurately in combination with – political disenfranchisement, repression and lack of participation opportunities.

It is difficult to identify any changes in this overall logic following the outbreak of the Arab uprisings and the sweeping away of some of the longest-entrenched authoritarian regimes in the MENA. The EU has largely continued to offer recipes and opportunities for cooperation based on the de-politicization of relations with its partners in the name of conditionality or "more for more". After 2011 the economic flank of the ENP has been translated into the injection of investments through the European Investment Bank (EIB) and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and a focus on the role of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in job creation. This series of measures "should form part of a broader comprehensive package in support of democratic and economic reforms" and, provided legal and regulatory approximation to the EU acquis is undertaken, lead to a major liberalization of the MENA economic sectors (European Commission and EEAS 2011a: 9). All in all, while economic incentives appear to be meagre, to say the least, leading some scholars to talk about "less of the same" to describe the approach followed by the EU post-2011, aid relations have tended to prevail over veritable EU–MENA trade liberalization and integration (Bicchi 2014). Furthermore, even fewer incentives for reform in the financial and banking sector have been put on the table by the EU, thus exacerbating some of the existing rigidities (for example, as far as access to credit is concerned) and shortcomings (Roccu 2018). The negotiations for the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTAs) in the context of the revised ENP did represent a partial attempt to redress this logic in theory by insisting on the need to promote economic reforms and forms of integration that are sensitive to the interconnections between them, on the one hand, and the level of social welfare provision and political stability, on the other (Völkel 2014). However, in practice this attempt has so far largely failed due to negotiation-related imbalances, technical limitations and political sensitivities. The tortuous negotiations of the EU–Tunisia DCFTA stands as a striking example of this (Van der Loo and Ghanmi 2018). Furthermore, reservations remain concerning the social sustainability of these economic agreements and practices, which do not differ much from their predecessors. As argued by a group of civil society activists,

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while the economic situation in countries like Egypt and Tunisia might have witnessed certain set backs in the time of the transition, there is a need to consider that the long term economic and development transition necessitates a vision for re-establishing the economic and development model and not to re-stabilizing the model drawn by previous regimes, which clearly did not serve the development rights and needs of the people, and under which poverty, unemployment, and inequalities continued and deepened in many areas. (ANND et al. 2012)

Other areas of the EU–MENA cooperation agenda have developed in parallel to the broader framework centred on political and security dialogue, on the one hand, and economic cooperation and integration, on the other. Ranging from agriculture and energy to mobility and people-to-people contacts, these functional cooperation areas have often been the most fruitful avenues to advance the EU's reformist agenda beyond the purely declaratory level. With regard to agriculture, since the mid-1990s this issue had been mainly addressed as a trade-linked matter, until the uprisings in the MENA proved the danger of persisting regional disparities, food insecurity, youth unemployment and rural poverty in the countries of the region, which are all connected to the challenges facing the agricultural sector. Hence, an agricultural and rural support programme was envisioned in the framework of the new ENP under the auspices of ENPARD South with the aim to improve living conditions in rural areas, increase agricultural productivity and consolidate professional organizations' and institutions' skills to "strengthen the overall governance of agricultural and rural issues"[6] (see European Commission and EEAS 2011a). While in the past the increase in agricultural production and exports was considered a sufficient variable for improving social conditions in the countryside, ENPARD South tables a multilayered approach that includes the involvement of small farmers as a means to decentralize the decision-making process in agricultural policies and to ensure fair rewarding and capacity-building of minor and non-state related stakeholders. In fact, while the agricultural exports of countries such as Tunisia and Morocco towards the EU member states grew until 2010, just a small percentage of the revenues effectively reached rural areas. One of the main shortcomings of this more cooperative and bottom-up approach entailing consultation meetings with and the empowerment of local actors is the fact that solutions and policies are still discussed at the level of technocrats and epistemic communities such as the Centre International de Hautes Études Agronomiques Méditerranéennes in Montpellier, with little involvement of the target rural communities (Kourtelis 2018). Furthermore, by rewarding projects tailored to the international market, the programme excludes non-commercial crops and local cooperatives. Finally, by strictly implementing the principle of conditionality, those countries or businesses that joined the programme at a later stage or that develop more slowly are penalized, while not enough funds are made available to them to catch up.

Turning to mobility, it is safe to argue that migration and refugee issues have become the single most important area of cooperation – or, more accurately, of non-cooperation and conflicts – both among the EU member states and between the EU and the MENA countries. Even if mobility and migration have been part of the EU cooperation agenda towards the MENA since the beginning, any reference to "refugees" as a challenge or even a threat emerged only in 2011, and particularly after 2015, with the resort to often hyperbolic terms such as "major refugee flows", "growing numbers of refugees" and "uncontrolled movement of people" (European Commission and EEAS 2015b:

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6   ENPARD South website: *Goals and Values*, https://www.enpardmed.org/goals-and-values.

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2, 4). Interestingly, this was not the case in the context of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, which relegated mobility issues to the third basket as the residual category under the heading of promoting people-to-people contacts and dialogue. Following the outbreak of the conflict in Syria and the increase in the number of refugees trying to reach Europe, alarm bells started to ring across the EU countries, exposing the fragmentation of the Union along national priorities and galvanizing the securitized posture that resonated well with the stabilization approach of the 2015 ENP review. The need was reiterated to implement socio-economic policies able to tackle the "root causes of irregular migration" and discourage it by implementing actions that can "make partner countries places where people want to build their future, and help tackle uncontrolled movement of people" (European Commission and EEAS 2015b: 17, 4). Moreover, terrorist attacks in Europe have nurtured a linkage between migration and terrorism, while the humanitarian rhetoric and emphasis mentioned above have served as a sweetener of mostly security-grounded practices vis-à-vis the mobility issue and its regional spillovers. In doing so, the EU has progressively externalized mechanisms of control to manage migration from the MENA countries. In particular, externalization and security concerns can be identified in the format of the Mobility Partnerships introduced in 2011 as "the most complete framework for bilateral cooperation between the EU and its partners, based on mutual offers of commitments and project initiatives covering mobility, migration and asylum issues, within the Global Approach to Migration and Mobility".[7] The rationale embedded in this cooperation framework is that a dialogue on visa facilitation, labour mobility and short-term stay permits should be bound to some conditions, including the negotiation of "voluntary return arrangements", "readmission agreements", "a working arrangement with Frontex", "integrated border management", "joint surveillance in the Mediterranean sea", "police and judicial cooperation […] for purposes of readmission and extradition", "ratification and implementation of the UN Convention on Transnational Organised Crime" (European Commission 2011: 11). Not only does this long list disregard the structural difficulties facing some MENA countries in managing migration through and from them by imposing excessive burdens onto them, but is also contributes to fuelling securitized approaches to migration both within the EU member states and in the MENA countries themselves.

The energy dossier has been relevant in EU–MENA cooperation given Europe's dependence on the import of energy supplies from the energy-producing countries in the South. Initiatives such as the Association of Mediterranean Energy Regulators (MEDREG) and the Association of Mediterranean Transmission System Operators (Med-TSO) were set up to facilitate technical integration and the negotiation of common grid codes, but the overall level of energy and energy-related infrastructure integration between the EU member states and the MENA countries and – even more so – within the region has remained low. Thus, with the 2011 ENP revision the idea of a Euro–South Mediterranean Energy Community was launched. However, as is evident from the different positions of the stakeholders involved in the debate, the main weakness of the project was its political implications embedded in the idea of "convergence" as a gradual adoption of the EU regulatory framework. This top-down and Europeanizing approach was criticized by both sides as well as by the private sector and the public authorities in search of more bottom-up, technical and apolitical energy cooperation and integration (Tholens 2014). This idea has found no place in the 2015 ENP even though there is a call "to give energy cooperation a greater place in the ENP, both

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7   See the European Commission website: *Mobility Partnerships, Visa Facilitation and Readmission Agreements*, https://europa.eu/!Bb34gm.

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as a security measure (energy sovereignty) and as a means to sustainable economic development" (European Commission and EEAS 2015b: 11). On the contrary and as a positive note, the need for the MENA countries to adopt policies to guarantee safe production and transportation of energy, diversify their production or import to meet increasing internal energy demand and guarantee compliance with the environmental goals of the United Nations Paris Agreement is emphasized.

Finally, one of the outstanding features of the 2011 uprisings has been the participation of the youth and the widespread use of social media as a tool for popular mobilization. This has renewed the interest of European policy-makers in generational dynamics and the role of youth as fundamental engines of change in the MENA. However, the emergence of ISIS in the region and the terrorist attacks in Europe since 2014 have made this perspective more complex, drawing attention to the youngest cohorts and the Internet as a vehicle for extremist propaganda both in Europe and in the MENA (Paciello and Pioppi 2017). Therefore, even if in 2015 cultural exchanges were still depicted as a fundamental way to exercise public diplomacy, to foster skill-building and education, to tame youth unemployment and to ameliorate the mutual perception of different cultures, it is also true that emphasis was added to the necessity to tackle the threat of radicalization among the youth in the region. At the forefront of the latest initiatives related to cultural exchanges in EU–MENA cooperation, particularly targeting the youth, there is the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange (EVE), which aims to extend the reach of "informal learning" in order to "contribute to the development of a more inclusive climate among cultures, which would lead to fewer young people being drawn to violent extremism" (PPMI and Demokratie & Dialog Youth Policy Labs 2017: 20). The basic idea is to involve users between 18 and 30 years old in online thematic conversations with the help of facilitators that would ensure that a constructive and respectful dialogue takes place.

CONCLUSIONS: OF COMPASSES, MAPS AND LIGHTHOUSES

After almost fifty years since the inception of the Euro–Arab Dialogue and with the upcoming twenty-fifth anniversary of the launch of the EMP in 2020, it is time to take stock of the past and to ask whether the initial objectives have been fulfilled. Given the fact that they have changed to a non-negligible extent over the course of the years – both in response to changes in the EU itself and in its bureaucratic, administrative and political capabilities and as a result of developments in the MENA region – the relative degree of flexibility demonstrated by the EU's cooperation frameworks and policies to accommodate changing objectives should not be discounted. One example of this flexibility – or, more accurately, the way in which some cooperation objectives and policy tools have been given priority over others depending on the circumstances – is the reinforced focus on stabilization that has come to dominate EU–MENA relations following the 2015 ENP revision. However, this supposed flexibility could also be read as the EU's inability to keep a steady direction in its relations to the MENA amid both centrifugal and centripetal pressures.

While a certain degree of adaptability is needed, the perception of the EU's relations to the MENA among both practitioners and scholars is akin to a vessel that has successfully sailed through troubled waters and often storms but whose sense of disarray and lack of effectiveness mainly derives from the fact that it has lacked a robust compass, a clear map and a trustworthy lighthouse during its time at sea. And the vessel is still on the high seas. Firstly, to start with the compass, the EU has oscillated between two main directions and objectives: the first has been embodied

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in the promotion of democracy and of its transformative agenda in general, while the second has been the preservation of the status quo as the best guarantor of the MENA countries' stability and security and ultimately of the EU's own. In the ambitious context of the EMP, the attempt was made to reconcile these objectives by promoting political and security cooperation at large. However, more often than not these two objectives have been conceptualized and concretely pursued as a dichotomy, entailing the need to choose between two alternatives, thus preventing the EU from developing a steadfast sense of direction. On the one hand, the EU has tried to uphold the values and norms upon which it is based by projecting them onto the MENA countries with which it has developed cooperative relations. On the other hand, when circumstances in the MENA region as well as external pressures (such as that exercised by the United States in the context of the "War on Terror") have made it increasingly difficult, unfeasible or simply ineffective from the standpoint of the protection of European interests to pursue democracy, human rights and the rule of law, the EU has veered towards stability and security as the most immediate concerns and objectives. Thus, the promotion of democracy, on the one hand, and stability and security, on the other, have been framed as an unbridgeable dichotomy and perceived as an intricate dilemma.

Similarly, the EU vessel has lacked a clear map with all the necessary information to navigate the troubled waters of EU–MENA cooperation. These waters have been full of pitfalls and obstacles, and not having a detailed map has often led the EU ship to head in the wrong direction or caused unexpected turbulence. The EU has had a map, but this map is only partial and not sufficiently detailed. For example, the EU has often lacked information and knowledge about societal dynamics in the MENA countries beyond what was readily made available to it by the governments in the partner countries. This has prevented it from developing a true level of engagement with civil society actors, particularly with those representing the most independent and sometimes vocal forces among the opposition in each country. Once again, the cooperation with state institutions and actors – which has traditionally taken precedence as a result of the information available on the EU's map – and the EU's contribution to state–society relations in the MENA countries have been framed as a dichotomy and dilemma in which the EU has been trapped. This has also contributed to fostering the perception of conflicting priorities and goals depending on the interlocutors, whether they be at the state or the civil society level. As a consequence, discursive practices have also been adapted to match these different targets, thus heightening the EU's inconsistency and lack of coherence between its discourses and some practices. Ultimately, the reification of the state and the projection of a growing distance between the state and society in the MENA countries have also been by-products of this false dilemma, which is not matched by the concrete and complex realities in the region.

Finally, not only has the EU vessel lacked a robust sense of direction and a clear map but it has also found itself without reliable partners, that is lighthouses, shedding light upon its path and joining forces with it all along the way. The image of the lighthouse applies, for example, to multilateralism, traditionally one of the key driving forces and principles of the EU's common foreign policy action, including vis-à-vis the MENA. The EU has relied on multilateralism both internally and externally to strengthen its position and impact. However, it has not always succeeded in this because multilateral governance and tools have sometimes suffered from multiple attacks both by the EU member states' autonomous stances and as of late by the new course of US foreign policy under President Donald Trump. As a result, bilateralism has tended to prevail. The same can be said

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of the extent to which the EU has found fertile terrain in the MENA region to foster multilateral cooperation initiatives, which it has tried to do at the onset of structured EU–MENA relations in the framework of the EMP. More recently and particularly after the Arab uprisings, and in the light of the growing fragmentation of the region, the EU has preferred to fall back on purely bilateral relations not as a complementary tool to the regional and regionalizing dimension but rather as an alternative to it. The images of the lack of the compass, the map and the lighthouse point here to some of the most acute weaknesses and shortcomings in the EU's relations to the MENA, namely the fact of having been trapped in perceived dilemmas that have prevented the EU from developing effective, responsive and sustainable cooperation patterns with its MENA partners. These false dilemmas or perceived dichotomies need to be discarded if the EU wants to develop a new approach towards the MENA. The search for stability and security needs to be reconciled with the promotion of democracy. Cooperating with the MENA governments cannot be an alternative to engaging with societies at all levels. And the defence of multilateralism and the practice of bilateralism should be complementary and reinforce one another. Not only do we suggest that this is the preferred course; it is also possible.

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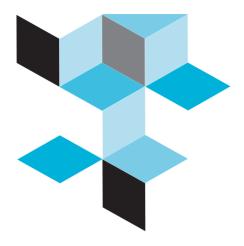
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