



The EU-Arab Summit: A chance to reset relations with the Arab world?

James Moran

Leaders of the 50 countries that comprise the EU and the Arab League, together with the European Institutions, are set to meet in Egypt's Sharm el Sheikh on 24-25th February in an unprecedented summit encounter. Chaired by Presidents Abdel Fatah El-Sisi and Donald Tusk, the event marks the first time these close neighbours have come together in this format. As such, this is something of a breakthrough, although there is a risk of failure.

Efforts to arrange such a meeting have been made for over 20 years, without success until now. Indeed, given that the EU has held regular summits for years with all manner of partners, from Latin America to Asia, this exchange has long been conspicuous by its absence.

Why now?

So why do it now? On the EU side, the growing concerns about irregular migration and terrorism and the need to raise the level of engagement on these issues have certainly played a part, and both will feature on the Sharm agenda. EU High Representative Federica Mogherini has also played a key role – she has worked for this for some time and doubtless considers it an important part of her legacy.

On the Arab side, which has traditionally been the main *demandeur* for the summit, there has been a strong push for it from President Sisi, eager to restore Egypt's regional prominence after years in the political doldrums following the Arab spring, together with support from Saudi Arabia. But the kingdom, contrary to initial plans, will not take a high profile at the event in the aftermath of the death of Saudi journalist Jemal Khashoggi.

Israel, which in past years has worked to hinder the idea, is also much less worried about it these days, given its improved relations with Arab players. By extension, this has also allayed US scepticism.

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The state of play

In the event, there are worries about the turnout, notably on the European side. There are doubts about the attendance of France's President Macron, who was just last week in Egypt on a long visit and Brexit-hobbled Prime Minister Theresa May of Britain, while German Chancellor Angela Merkel has yet to confirm her presence. As ever in these matters, participation on the Arab side will be influenced by who turns up from Europe.

Preparations have not been easy. For one thing, the date for the event was only finally decided last September, during a visit to Cairo by European Council President Donald Tusk and Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz. Summits like this generally require at least a year of work before any success can be assured. For another, the EU-Arab Foreign Minister's meeting of 4 February, charged with setting things up, was not well attended and failed to produce a joint statement. A draft summit declaration remains in suspense.

Indeed, it is not sure at this late stage whether there will be such a document, and this uncertainty is one of the reasons for doubts about European attendance. Sharm el Sheikh may have its attractions, but it will take more than sunshine and photo-ops to attract them there.

On the other hand, the Arab side appears more concerned with the cosmetics of the event, and since Egypt as the host holds the pen, some wonder whether they will take the necessary initiative and produce an acceptable statement (see below).

That said, Mogherini in her press conference after the ministerial meeting made clear that "90-95%" of the substance of a declaration had been agreed. This includes significant common ground on most of the main issues of the day, notably countering terror, human rights, regional conflicts, the two-state solution in the Middle East, climate, trade and investment, development, and financial and technical cooperation.

The 5-10% that remains seems to mostly concern language on migration, with some EU member states, Hungary in particular, unhappy with mention of processes like the UN Global Compact for Migration. There are those on the Arab side who are equally unhappy with the migration pact, or indeed other aspects, and probably find it convenient to hide behind these objections.

Egypt's key role

So, if the summit is to fulfil its potential, much will depend on efforts by the Egyptians to find acceptable solutions to the logjam on the declaration.

As noted, this summit means a lot to President Sisi. The more so, as he is embroiled in a debate at home about amending the Egyptian constitution, in the name of 'stability'. Top of the list is the proposed revision of presidential term limits, which would allow him to remain in power for another 15 years (he would normally be obliged to step down in 2022). The proposals would also allow him greater influence over the appointment of judges and give the military even more authority as the guardian of the state.

While opposition in parliament and the country at large is currently muted, little of this finds favour with mainstream Egyptian civil society or with his allies in the West, on whom, regardless of the recent warming of relations with Moscow, Egypt continues to depend for investment and security cooperation. Pushback can be expected, since many in Europe and the US see the amendments as a backward step and recall how the authoritarian rule of Hosni Mubarak ended with anything but stability.

With this in mind, Sisi has every interest in boosting his international prestige and showing that he is a reliable and influential partner on the international stage. One would therefore expect Cairo to pull out all the stops to ensure the summit goes well, and achieve positive outcomes.

Prospects for success

The region certainly needs them. While the absence of players like the US, Russia, Iran and Turkey means that the summit's influence on solving regional conflicts is bound to be limited, it could help to give a push to the fragile hopes of progress in Yemen, help to pave the way on how to deal with the coming post-war challenges in Syria (whose chair in the Arab league remains empty at this event but may soon be taken by Bashir al-Assad) and to counter ill-advised efforts by the US and Israel to cajole the Palestinians into accepting an unrealistic peace plan that could very well end up with fanning, rather than dousing, the flames in the region.

Better cooperation on counter terror is also a priority. The military defeat of Daesh in Syria does not solve the problem of extremism. Indeed, it could rear its head again in Europe and elsewhere as IS retreats underground. And with the ever present threat of another toxic migration crisis, the EU needs to work closely with many of the Arab League states to keep things under control.

The region's economy is also in need of a boost. There is much that can and should be done to improve EU/Gulf cooperation on investment, both public and private, in the struggling economies of North Africa, not least Egypt itself. Apart from anything else, Cairo should invite the Presidents of the major European development banks, such as the EIB, and their Arab counterparts to Sharm as observers. Having the UN in the room would also be good, bearing in mind its peacemaking role in Yemen, Syria and Libya.

At the end of the day, the summit has one major thing going for it: it is a first, and breaks new ground. The problem is that if it ends up consisting of little more than a high level talk shop, it may also be the last. With the stakes as they are, neither Europe nor the Arab world can afford a failure.