



# THE MEDITERRANEAN RESET:

Geopolitics in a New Age

Editors: Anoushiravan Ehteshami,  
Daniela Huber and Maria Cristina Paciello



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**The Mediterranean Reset: Geopolitics in a New Age**

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## Contributors

Anoushiravan Ehteshami is Professor of International Relations and the Nasser al-Sabah Chair, Director of HH Sheikh Nasser al-Sabah Research Programme, and Director of the Institute for Middle Eastern & Islamic Studies, School of Government and International Affairs at Durham University.

Ariabarzan Mohammadi is Research Fellow in the School of Government and International Affairs at Durham University.

ASI-REM (Arab Studies Institute – Research and Education Methodologies) is an independent, non-profit research and pedagogical organisation based in Beirut, Lebanon.

Aybars Görgülü is Projects Manager at the Center for Public Policy and Democracy Studies (PODEM), Istanbul.

Daniela Huber is Senior Fellow at the IAI in the Mediterranean and Middle East Programme and Gerda Henkel Guest Researcher at LUISS University.

Gülşah Dark is Project Officer at the Center for Public Policy and Democracy Studies (PODEM), Istanbul.

Haidi Esmat Kares is Assistant Lecturer of Political Science (International Relations) at the Faculty of Economics and Political Science, Cairo University, Egypt.

Jordi Quero Arias is Researcher in the Middle East Department at the Barcelona Centre for International Affairs (CIDOB) and Lecturer in International Relations at the Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona.

Maria Cristina Paciello is Senior Fellow at the Mediterranean and Middle East Programme of the International Affairs Institute (IAI) and Adjunct Professor at the University Ca' Foscari of Venice (Political Economy of Islamic Countries and Economic Policies of Arab countries).

Nicolás de Pedro is Research Fellow at the Barcelona Centre for International Affairs (CIDOB).

Sally Khalifa Isaac is Associate Professor of Political Science (International Relations) at the Faculty of Economics and Political Science, Cairo University, Egypt.

## INTRODUCTION

Anoushiravan Ehteshami, Daniela Huber and Maria Cristina Paciello

The Mediterranean waterway has acted as both a bridge and a barrier between continents for millennia. History is riddled with examples of empires and emerging powers seeking to project their power in and around the Mediterranean, and all have made use of it as a communications and transmission route. The Mediterranean has facilitated access to different continents, and those entities with the means and the will have used it to project power and to secure a comparative advantage against their adversaries. One must also be mindful of the reality that much of the political landscape of the Mediterranean – its geopolitical reality – was shaped by European interventions, and in this the “local external” is in fact a dialectical relationship. Indeed, without taking into account the colonial period, one might overlook the fact that historically the Mediterranean has also been imagined as a bridge allowing the projection of European power into Africa and West Asia.

At the height of the Cold War the Mediterranean was a central zone of conflict between the superpowers, and the Sea’s riparian states found it difficult to maintain their space between the NATO alliance on the one hand and the Warsaw Pact on the other. Inevitably, some Mediterranean states veered to the West while others stayed close to the Soviet bloc. But, as the example of Egypt demonstrates, these relationships proved to be far too transient to provide either superpower with a firm strategic footing in the Mediterranean. The region thus has its own unique dynamics engendering significant inter-state conflicts which included a rather substantial region-external component, as the 1956, 1967 and 1973 wars show. Conflicts and securitized tensions of a more ‘local’ nature are also in evidence: the Turkish occupation of Cyprus, Israel’s invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and the simmering tensions between Greece and Turkey are good examples of these, all of which cause fissures between states and communities of this area.

In the immediate post-Cold War period the European Union entered into a first attempt at forging comprehensive Euro-Mediterranean relations through the Barcelona Process in a global environment where the West called the shots. The geopolitics of the Mediterranean region has, however, changed in the twenty-first century, partly as a result of local state dynamics and partly as a product of transformational changes at the international and broader regional levels. As opposed to the early 1990s, the EU today is no longer the dominant or key actor in the Mediterranean and it now has to balance its policies and interests against the perceptible influence of a range of major and regional powers. The major powers exhibiting clear influence are the **United States**, **China** and the **Russian Federation**, each pursuing its own set of interests in this area. Alongside them are a number

of regional powers, several of which are relative newcomers that bring with them very different priorities for and narratives about the Mediterranean region: **Iran, Qatar** and **Saudi Arabia**. And then there are the ‘resident regional powers’ of **Turkey** and **Israel** which have considerable presence in the Mediterranean and which also have longstanding relations with the European Union.

As the EU seeks to open a new chapter in its foreign policy in the Mediterranean and beyond – as evident in its new Global Strategy – it needs to understand how these eight powers perceive the Mediterranean, interact with and within it, and conduct themselves in pursuit of their identity and interests. **This volume is the first of its kind which aims at shedding light on how these powers have been constructing, or at least attempted to construct, different geopolitical imaginations of what the EU has labelled the Mediterranean as part of their foreign policy and geopolitical considerations, and analyses which actors, methods, and policy areas they have focused on.** In so doing, it aims at staking out the areas of divergence, competition and conflict, as well as the basis on which the EU can cooperate with one or more of these influential states.

### **Conceptualizing the Mediterranean**

The invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the Arab uprisings in the 2010s have led to instability on the geopolitical level which link Iraq, Iran, the Persian Gulf, and key international actors such as the US, Russia, and China closely to the region the EU has defined as the Mediterranean. New conflicts in the Mediterranean do not have clear boundaries, spreading into the wider region, also causing a massive movement of population so that migration and mobility is becoming a cross-regional issue which transits the Gulf-Horn-Libya-Europe link. Furthermore, the Arab uprisings have led the proliferation of new political ideas from a variety of state and non-state actors that not only challenge domestic and regional structures, but have also led to a growing influence of Persian Gulf countries on regional developments. Fearing the spread of new political ideas in the region, they have largely supported counter-revolutionary and military forces to take power from elected governments as, for example, in Egypt. New political ideas are not only challenging domestic and regional structures, but might also conflict, compete, or converge with the EU understanding of issues such as democracy, civil liberties and that of human rights. Similarly, the policy area of agriculture and water is key for the geopolitical stability of the region. It is a source of conflict, specifically as it is crucial for food security, environmental sustainability, and the everyday existence of people in the region. Southern Mediterranean countries, which are strongly dependent on food imports for their food security, not only have Europe as their agricultural geo-economic partner, but two-thirds of their supply comes from Russian, Ukrainian, and US grain (Lacirignola 2014: 252). In the case of water, there are links between Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia on one hand, and Turkey, Iraq, and Syria on the other. Finally, industry and energy are key issues in the Mediterranean as they

are concerned with the prospects for sustainable and inclusive development. Energy is a particularly contentious issue as energy resources are concentrated in the MENA and used for income generation but local energy demand is growing, which is putting pressure on the sustainability of the countries' energy models, potentially impacting future economic development, social stability, and security across the region as well as putting at risk the region's traditional role as an energy supplier for European consumers. Furthermore, a shift in power dynamics combined with the economic crisis in Europe have accelerated a trend already visible in several Southern Mediterranean countries, namely the diversification of trade partners outside the EU and particularly in promotion of South-South cooperation. While progress in trade negotiations between EU and Southern Mediterranean countries has stalled, with the exception of Morocco, many Arab countries such as Tunisia and Egypt have deepened economic relations with Iran, Gulf Arab countries and Turkey. In the case of Tunisia, for example, over the last two years Qatar has become the first foreign investor in the country to supersede France. With Europe facing serious economic difficulties, Morocco is also increasingly turning towards Africa in the hope of strengthening economic ties.

These brief examples highlight the importance of a broad regional focus that acknowledges the interconnection of different policy issues and the influence of a multitude of actors. In order to enhance the relevance of EU policies in a divided, multi-power and conflictual Mediterranean, its geometry needs to become more inclusive in terms of a variety of relevant partners, more flexible in terms of its policy instruments, and more responsive to diverse but deeply inter-linked policy issues. To be able to assess the full obstacles and potentialities of EU policies in the region, this volume conceptually redefines the region through an approach which is actor-driven. It acknowledges that the Mediterranean widely defined might include besides the EU member states also its accession candidates, the Mediterranean tier states, as well as Jordan, Iraq, Iran, the Gulf Cooperation Council states, the Horn of Africa, Sudan, and the Sahel; but rather than pre-defining the region, it will observe how its multiple stakeholders perceive the region, and talk and practice it into being on the geopolitical level.

Geographical definitions or claims, as the literature associated with critical geopolitics has shown, "are necessarily geopolitical, as they inscribe places as particular types of places to be dealt with in a particular manner" (Kuus et al. 2013:6). This applies also to the concept of 'the Mediterranean' which has been constructed in a specific way by the EU, first in the 1970s and then more comprehensively from the 1990s onwards as the result of a political process driven by European economic and security interests (Bicchi 2007), rather than identity concerns (Behr et al. 2012: 16). Its narrow geopolitical construction of the Mediterranean has led the EU to engage with a small number of state actors (a group of southern neighbours) and, with its emphasis on bilateral methods, has limited its own range of action, thus seriously compromising its capacity to deal with policy issues that are



strongly interconnected in an increasingly fragmented, multi-polar, and conflictual regional context (Behr 2012).

The European literature on Euro-Mediterranean relations has to a substantive degree adopted the EU's definition of the Euro-Mediterranean area, so marginalizing the multitude of contending perspectives/constructions of regional security and geopolitical views by state and non-state actors. Broader geopolitical dynamics which deeply influence this strictly defined Mediterranean region – including from areas such as the Persian Gulf, the Horn of Africa and the Sahel, but also from the global level – have thus been tendentially blended out of the analysis. Importantly, this lacuna also applies to the study of EU bilateral and regional strategies which have not been contextualized in these emerging geopolitics, despite having an important bearing on their feasibility and effectiveness. While the EU is losing influence in the Mediterranean region, there is an increased competition from other international players, old and new. Notably, the literature on EU-Gulf relations has been hardly linked to the literature on EU-Mediterranean relations. There is a paucity of studies dealing with EU-GCC relations, especially with a view to Euro-Mediterranean relations, and there is a tendency to look at the Persian Gulf subregion from an energy viewpoint only, as well as at the Gulf as a coherent whole rather than a number of distinct countries that have differences and rivalries (Legrenzi 2011, Colombo 2014, Nonneman 2006). In sum, neither EU policies nor the literature examining it are currently prepared to deal with such a complex geopolitical context that is very different from the 1990s when the Barcelona Process was created (Behr et al. 2012: 11).

To move away from this Euro-centric approach, this special issue starts from a different proposition. It considers the region as including but not being limited to the EU's definition; the Mediterranean is not a "pre-given geographical fact", but the result of interests, identity, narratives, practices, and interactions (Kuus et al. 2013). The Mediterranean exists through the various imaginations of its stakeholders. Thus, the region may include other geographies and geopolitical dynamics which are currently excluded from the EU's construction, but are of key importance for the future effectiveness and potential of EU policies in the region.

### **Theoretical and methodological framework**

EU policies have frequently been characterized as monologues which have marginalized the perspective of the other. The literature has repeated this trend. The key concepts with which the Mediterranean region has been studied have relied on Western International Relations and Comparative Politics approaches which have not spoken to local perspectives and perceptions (Ferabolli 2014). To move away from this Euro-centrist tendency, guiding theoretical framework of this volume is constructivism which seems particularly adequate for its specific research design. Constructivism's common ground, as

Stefano Guzzini (2000: 147) has argued, is “epistemologically about the social construction of knowledge and ontologically about the construction of social reality”. Constructivism so defined allows us to take account of the diverse constructions of the Mediterranean region which are emerging on both shores, being able to integrate multiple and area-crossing perspectives.

This theoretical approach is accompanied with a more reflexive methodology which identifies alternatives to prevailing structures (Hopf 1998: 180). Discourse analysis is used by all authors to investigate the different constructions of the Mediterranean by the eight key regional and external players (China, Russia, US, Israel, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar). Discourse analysis is both a theory and a transdisciplinary method which has gained in prominence in IR since the 1990s. A variety of diverse approaches exist (Dijk 2011; Wodak and Meyer 2009), whose common ground is that discourse is not just a description of reality, but “the layer of reality where meaning is produced and distributed” (Waever 2009: 199). We specifically relied on the approach of Jennifer Milliken, who has highlighted three dimensions of discourse: Discourses as ‘structures of signification which construct social reality’; discourses as ‘being productive (or reproductive) of things defined by the discourse’, highlighting how a discourse constructs reality (who is authorized to speak, the process of production, etc.); and the study of ‘dominating or hegemonic discourses, and their structuring of meaning as connected to implementing practices and ways of making these intelligible and legitimate’ (Milliken 1999).

In order to inquire into how other stakeholders in the Mediterranean perceive and practice ‘their’ Mediterranean into being on the geopolitical level and in respect to geopolitically relevant and contentious policy areas, the following questions guided the research in this volume:<sup>1</sup>

How do alternative discourses construct/predicate the Mediterranean – perhaps in resistance to the dominant knowledge produced by the EU? What are the oppositions, exclusions and silences that their discourses/practices regarding the region entail? How can they be compared to those of the EU? How do their discourses regarding the Mediterranean overlap with each other and with those of the EU? How do the other stakeholders construct the EU’s role in the Mediterranean? How do these powers frame the four policy areas (political ideas, agriculture and water, industry and energy, and migration and mobility) with regard to the Mediterranean? Which priorities do they set in this respect?

To explore these questions, all the official documents including policy documents of the key powers on European initiatives, the ‘Arab Spring’ (e.g., declarations, communications, common strategies, Action Plans and Strategy Papers) and specific key policy sectors (political ideas, agriculture and water, energy and industry, and migration and mobility) and key speeches by the governmental leaders of the above states were analysed. All

authors also pursued a literature review of relevant scholarly books and articles, as well as documents produced by the key think tanks which also help the key states shape their policies or which criticize the EU and its role in the Mediterranean, notably the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, the Aljazeera Center for Studies and the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies in Qatar; the Emirate Center for Strategic Studies and Research and the Future Center for Advanced Researches and Studies in the UAE; the al-Ahram Centres' al-Siyasiyya al-Dawliyya ('International Politics') and al-Ahram Strategic File in Egypt; the Center for Arab Unity Studies in Lebanon; the Institute of Diplomatic Studies and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Saudi Arabia; the Gulf Research Center (GRC), Shanghai Institute of International Studies, the Institute of West Asian and African Studies and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in China; the Centre for Strategic Research, Majlis Research Center, the Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS) and the Iranian Journal of Foreign Affairs in Iran; the Israel Democracy Institute (IDI), the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs and the Begin–Sadat Center for Strategic Studies (BESA) in Israel; the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO), the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies (RISS), the Institute of World Economy and International Relations and International Affairs (journal) in Russia, and others including review of the grey literature in the local language not usually taken into account by Western authors.

### **Book overview**

The contribution by **Khalifa Isaac** and **Esmat Kares** demonstrates an obvious divergence in the priorities that the **United States** and the EU assign to various Mediterranean sub-regions and affairs, whereby the US focuses almost exclusively on the Eastern Mediterranean, while the EU has a more comprehensive approach to the region. At the same time, the authors also denote a remarkable similarity and complementarity in both actors' approaches to rising security threats, democracy and governance efforts, and economic development projects in the Mediterranean. Particularly, they highlight the consistency in both actors' practices in the securitization of weapons of mass destruction and energy issues, as well as the politicization of democracy promotion and economic development in the Mediterranean for the sake of stabilization.

**de Pedro** shows that the Mediterranean does not constitute the basis for defining and conceptualizing a region in the strategic thinking of the **Russian Federation**. As the US, also Russia mainly focuses on the Eastern Mediterranean. Mainly related to Russia's aspiration to enjoy a great Power status, the region has regained a central role in Moscow's calculus. Russia's official discourse does not coincide with that of the European Union. There are some potential complementarities when it comes to security and stability, but strategic distrust will prevail in the foreseeable future. Moscow presents itself as a stability-provider confronting the West. Hence there is a limited ground for effective and meaningful

cooperation despite apparent shared goals of fighting terrorism or preventing further destabilization.

**Quero** examines the mental maps of the major **Chinese** foreign policy decision-makers in relation to the Mediterranean region, also alternatively referred as the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). There is no single mental map or geopolitical cartography used by Chinese officials to refer to the focus region. Rather, Quero identifies at least four major geopolitical maps used by the Chinese officials to approach the MENA region, namely the “Arab countries/states”, the “Middle East”, the “Eurasian continent” and the broader category of “developing countries”. Thus, China does not conceive of the region as a coherent unit, hence the multiple geopolitical cartographies existing side by side. Most of them seem triggered by Beijing’s economic interest in the region and are used alternatively only depending on finalist considerations. However, as Quero also points out, China is increasingly distancing itself from its traditional constructions of the Mediterranean and embracing the highly securitized conceptions repeatedly used by global actors – not only the EU but most significantly the US – might be in the process of materializing.

**Ehteshami** and **Mohammadi** show that the term and concept of the Mediterranean as a region is absent in **Iran**’s discourse. Rather, the emphasis as indicated in its discourse rests on a set of Muslim countries which are part of the Islamic Ummah. This is in line with Iran’s claim to leadership in the Muslim world. What is important in the region for Iran is its counter-hegemonic Axis of Resistance, with supporting the Palestinian cause and upholding an anti-Israeli position as one of the main principles of its foreign policy. This contrasts hugely with the EU’s position which regards Israel as an associate member of the European Union. However, with the re-election of moderate Hassan Rouhani as president in Iran in May 2017 and his election promise that all the sanctions against Iran including the ones not related to the nuclear issue would be removed (in order to achieve this Rouhani has indicated that his government will use the 5+1 negotiation example as a model for resolving Iran’s longstanding issues with the West), it seems that there is an opportunity for negotiations between the EU and Iran aimed at finding ways of de-escalating tensions between Iran and Israel.

The Mediterranean as conceived by the EU does not really figure much in the **Saudi** and **Qatari** discourse, which instead tends to concentrate on the Arabic and Islamic world.

**Ehteshami** and **Mohammadi** point out that Saudi Arabia and Qatar see the Mediterranean either as part of Islamic/Arab world or as a space between two significant regions, the EU and the Middle East. Saudi Arabia’s and Qatar’s priorities vis-à-vis the Mediterranean are geopolitical and security-oriented as evident in their interferences in the region, in particular following the Arab Spring. However, in some areas such as business development, which brings high profit return, the priorities of Saudi Arabia and Qatar overlap with EU policies. Yet in social and civil affairs, whereas the EU’s policy is to

support civil society in the Mediterranean, the two countries' activities in the Arab Mediterranean are more towards securing their own geopolitical interests and safeguarding their security. The authors argue that geopolitical considerations, especially safeguarding the security of the state against perceived threats from Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood, are the most decisive factors that could explain Saudi Arabia's and Qatar's framing of the Mediterranean. Yet, this by no means suggests that all of their foreign policy decisions can be explained from this perspective. In fact, these decisions are usually multicausal.

**Görgülü** and **Dark** demonstrate that the Mediterranean does not exist as an individual region in **Turkey's** foreign policy, although the country has implemented several initiatives to widen its sphere of influence. The adoption of a proactive foreign policy towards the region indicates that Turkey tries to leverage its strategic role there while addressing the global challenges at the same time. Turkey's self-image vis-à-vis the Mediterranean is built on having an impact in the region through better economic and political relations as well as its soft power instruments. In this context, Turkey's relations with the EU are crucial. The future of EU–Turkey relations appears gloomy and there exists a growing risk that Turkey's EU accession process will break down. If Turkey's membership process is suspended, it is quite probable that we will witness less cooperation between the two, in the context of the Mediterranean.

**Israel**, as ASI-REM points out, constructs the Mediterranean according to a Manichean schema whereby it classifies the countries which constitute the area as either nations it considers allies or nations and socio-political movements it considers threatening. Furthermore, in certain cases, this construction leaves space for attempting to move countries from the latter category to the former. For the former, the Israeli construction of security discourse consists of trading and military compacts, as well as friendly diplomatic ties. For the latter, Israeli construction of the Mediterranean is based on a discourse of deterrence – preventing such countries from threatening Israeli interests, as Israeli planners understand them – as well as attempting to weaken such countries when possible. ASI-REM also identifies four departure points crucial for appreciating how Israeli construction of the EU mediates Israeli construction of the Mediterranean as a securitized space – as well as a space whose substance and stability rest on an EU friendly to Israel, namely Israel's management rather than solution of the conflict, the EU's formal but not substantive position on the two state solution, the EU's formal and substantive commitments to Israel in the realms of political relations, defence and commerce, and the sharp and mounting disjunctures between popular opinion in the EU states and elite activity, which call into question the endurance of the first three points, and perhaps threaten to reverse their polarity in the long run.

In the **conclusion** to this volume, **Ehteshami** and **Mohammadi** present four key findings, namely that, firstly, security drives policy of all key powers; secondly, the definitions of ‘security’ by these powers is incompatible and at times competing; thirdly, these powers do not conceive the Mediterranean as a single space, let alone a shared space. Which, fourthly, leads to dramatic divergences in their approaches and priority areas. With all actors securitizing the region, but under different parameters, it is difficult for the EU to develop a single comprehensive approach towards them. It is suggested that a way forward would be to widen the Euro-Med contact group to include non-Mediterranean states in order to facilitate discussion of some initially very limited issues of common concern. Furthermore, by desecuritizing its own approach the EU could contain the other parties’ securitized approach as well and identify pathways towards a more cooperative interaction with the emerging actors.

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## Notes

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