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# THE EU AS A GLOBAL ACTOR IN SUSTAINABILITY POLICY: ANALYZING THE EU'S LIMITED BUT POTENTIAL INFLUENCE IN IRAQ AND SYRIA

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**Abstract:** *The role of the EU in sustainable development has been generally seen as influential so far. The EU has proven its commitment to promoting sustainability abroad, and the EU has embarked on a transition to a low-carbon society at home. The Middle East lags behind all regions regarding sustainability due to ravaging economic, security, and social challenges, particularly in Iraq and Syria. As the economic nature of the petro-states, the petroleum price influences the GDP and economic growth not only for Iraq and Syria but the majority of resource-based economies. This creates fragile economies that are less resistant to international financial crises. Moreover, petro-states have few economic characteristics, including; high capital intensity, centralization and control of revenues, and low demand for labor. At the same time, oil has special effects on domestic conditions like authoritarianism and the temptation for civil war. This study focuses on the role of the EU in sustainability policy towards Iraq and Syria. This study highlights how the European Green Deal (EGD) influences the path to sustainability in the Middle East, specifically in Iraq and Syria. In line with this, the analytical framework discusses the logic of social actions (consequentialism and appropriateness), which are at play in EU-Middle East relations. Thus, it contributes to the role of the EU as a leading actor in global sustainability governance, focusing on a region that has been largely neglected.*

**Keywords:** *European Green Deal; European Union; Iraq; Syria; Climate Change*

## INTRODUCTION

Mitigating the negative effects of climate change requires sustained innovative political leadership by a wide range of actors at different levels of governance. Climate change is a threat and an opportunity for innovative technologies to mitigate climate change (Wurzel and Connelly 2011). Making the European energy transition an opportunity for all might not be impossible, as European action influences conditions in petro-states. In general, petro-states generate income from oil and gas because these commodities dominate their economies; thus, the “petro-states are vulnerable to severe boom-and-bust cycles” (Campbell 2012).

Most importantly, the European Green Deal (EGD), introduced by the European Commission in 2019, aims to decarbonize Europe. Climate policies have regressive effects on resource-based economies such as Middle Eastern oil producers. The speed of the energy transition is far slower to mitigate climate change, yet very fast for the fossil-fuel industry to adapt (Hafner and Tagliapietra 2020).

Not only the European Union (EU) but almost all advanced economies, including China, have started focusing on adjusting their infrastructure to adapt to the green transition. While oil-producing countries might handle the economic challenges in the short run, enduring the long-term economic challenges will cost them a lot. Fossil fuels are the primary source of income for governments in the Middle East, particularly in Iraq. The EU has been affected by crises in the Middle East; thus, the EU has focused on working on potential threats to the energy supply shortages, especially with the recent Russian-Ukrainian war, in which the European Commission proposed a REPowerEU plan that aims to diversify gas supplies, and import from non-Russian suppliers (Morrow 2022).

Before climate change concerns, oil price and supply security have been the main challenges for European economies for many decades, while XXI century initiatives are rather associated with ending fossil fuel legacy. According to Lovins (2011), fossil fuel is drawing to a close; it is time for something different, where transportation and electricity are transformed, and the world no longer relies on fossil fuels. Among the seven main reasons behind energy, the transition to “less energy dependency” has been a long-term carbon strategy. That is beside the main goal of decarbonization lead, which has made the EU economy 20% less carbon-intensive than in 2000 (European Investment Bank 2019).

Align with all this, implementing the EGD will bring out serious economic challenges for petro-states in the Middle East. The main concern for the major oil producers such as Iraq is not just losing the European market. However, transitioning to renewable energy would shift global energy consumption from fossil fuels to renewable commodities. Thus, the EGD is a significant turning point in changing the future of the petroleum industry in the Middle East as it causes economic difficulties for major oil producers like Iraq, Iran, and Saudi Arabia (Bianco 2021). Meanwhile, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)<sup>1</sup> is more concerned than the other Middle Eastern countries, even though the EU receives just 4% of GCC oil and gas exports. Meanwhile, there is hope that the EGD can contribute to the constructive development of the Middle East and create opportunities for sustainable development in the region (Bianco 2021).

The EU as an important global player has pushed for strong international and regional agreements regarding climate change. Indeed, the EU has been pictured positively in global climate governance, and most countries expect support from the EU regarding climate governance (Torney 2015). However, expecting a win-win situation for each country in climate governance would be impossible, and the EU’s influence is also rather limited in the Middle East. However, the EU has good trade and economic relations with the Middle East, and many Middle Eastern countries accept the EU’s leadership in international climate governance. The acceptance is structured by EU consistent aid, investment, and support which has been high in quality and quantity. While the EU needs to improve, strategic communication with the Middle Eastern states to achieve regional and mutual goals can strengthen the EU’s role in the context of EGD in the Middle East (Dacey and Lovatt 2022).

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<sup>1</sup>Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is political and economic alliance of six Middle Eastern countries: Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman. The GCC was established in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, in May 1981.

## CONCEPTS AND CASE SELECTION

This study highlights how the EU and, more specifically, the aims of the EGD influence the sustainability transition in the Middle East and specifically in the two selected countries, Iraq and Syria. Focusing on fossil fuel-dependent economies, the researchers ask: will the logic of consequentialism or appropriateness sway these countries towards the EGD, which implies tilting from fossil energy to renewable energy? Which logics of social action are at play in EU-Middle East relations?

This study concentrates on the attempts of the EU with the two Middle Eastern countries to focus on the EGD and consider sustainability in the region. There are several reasons for limiting the scope of this study only to Iraq and Syria. The EU's sustainability policies and foreign policy towards these two countries differ from the other Middle Eastern countries. The EU has specific partnerships and initiatives towards each of these countries for fostering peace and sustainability, which we outline in more detail in the following section, where the logic of appropriateness and consequences conflicts with the interests of Iraq and Syria as conflict-affected countries with strong ties to Europe.

## EUROPEAN GREEN DEAL AND THE MIDDLE EAST

The most relevant effect of EGD is that it shrinks oil demand in the European markets, affecting the GDP of oil-producing countries. Indeed, oil phase-out is also consistent with the main goals of the Paris Agreement's 1.5-2°C temperature limits (Gerasimchuk et al. 2018). Therefore, the EU plans the transition to renewable energy resources, while oil-producing countries need to launch plans for reducing the economic, political, and social impacts of fossil fuel phase-out. Another aspect of approaching renewable transition is an increase in oil price, while the opposite is true for oil producers as a decline in oil price adversely affects their economy. From an economic perspective, the challenges for imposing climate change measures are centered on economic disadvantages for which even European economies are not ready yet. In the Middle East, the focus is on the present challenges, not future concerns (Peeters and Deketelaere 2016). The expected impacts of the EU's EGD will be uneven across the Middle East. While the economic impacts of EGD will be more severe for Iraq and Syria and even other countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Yemen, it can be said that overall, the economic and geopolitical impacts are costly across the region. Besides, the EU partners will be differently affected depending on how they are related to the EU (Leonard et al. 2021).

### The Case of Iraq

Climate change has become a reality for Iraq. Recently, the country has suffered from drought, extreme temperatures, frequent dust storms, and water quality and scarcity, contributing to economic activities. Like other countries, Iraq needs to take serious measures at the local level that align with the EGD. From a climate perspective, Iraq needs an EU guide to diversify its economy, and economic diversification has been a call in the EU-Iraq Partnership and Cooperation Agreement.

As European Green Deal aims at a carbon-free economy, it calls for decoupling economic growth from resources. Transitioning to a circular economy will directly affect the oil-producing countries globally, specifically the Middle Eastern countries. Through the European Neighbourhood Policy, the European Union has been committed to peace, stability, security, and economic growth within and around the EU, where it targets the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and countries (Hussein 2022). In this context, Iraq's undiversified economy is vulnerable to the transition towards decarbonization and zero-emission. Though the level of concern and awareness concerning climate change in Iraq is not as serious as in Europe, Europe can support Iraq in various aspects, including the implementation of the National Development Plan 2018-2022 (NDP), the Iraqi Vision 2030, a White Paper for Structural Reform, the ratification of Paris Agreement on Climate Change, EU Gender Action Plan III for 2021-2025.

The EGD implications for Middle Eastern countries are multifaceted, as the decline in oil demand affects oil-dependent economies in the region. Thus, Iraq and Syria, like other Middle Eastern countries, must prepare for an oil phase-out, especially by 2050. The EU needs to consider the Middle East as a priority partner, as since the Arab uprising, the relations between the EU and some Middle Eastern countries have deteriorated. Meanwhile, the EGD pursues green diplomacy to support neighbors transitioning to green and more sustainable economies. However, this picture is not fully drawn regarding the Iraqi case regarding green transition, yet the EU has a positive role in Iraq's stability and economic recovery (Akcali et al. 2022).

Based on the existing evidence, the EU and the Middle East have not had any concrete plans for climate and energy policy, as the EU climate neutrality deadline is 2050, compared to the Iraqi and other Middle Eastern ambitions of increasing oil production, while the motive from one sense is that Europe is still a heavy fossil fuel dependent market (Rau 2022). In the context of EGD and energy security at the heart of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Russian actions have reminded Europe of the importance of the Middle East, especially Iraq and Iraq. Therefore, European Council has realized a joint communication of "a strategic partnership with the Guild" (Mills 2022). Meanwhile, Europe has concluded that being dependent on Russian gas is a mistake; under the logic of consequences, European countries need to diversify energy resources to avoid the impending energy crisis in Europe because of the recent tension between Russia and Ukraine (Business Standard 2022). There is an exact fit for the logic of appropriateness in the Iraqi case, in which the relationship between Iraq and Syria also affects and results in various consequences for Europe. Since Syria is a vital energy transit country for the region to Turkey and possibly Europe (Baconi 2017). For the EU, it is time to rethink the logic of the consequence of curbing Russian oil and gas. Middle Eastern partners are trapped in long-term contracts, especially with Asia, and building the infrastructure, for instance, for gas, takes time (Dourian 2022). Indeed, a clear policy complication for the EU regarding gas lies at the heart of the logic of appropriateness on the one hand and the logic of consequences, as energy disruption or cut-off will have serious geopolitical and economic reality (Bouzarovski et al. 2015).

The problem regarding climate and sustainability in Iraq is exacerbated by certain factors such as; years of wars like the 1980 Iran-Iraq war, followed by the 1991 first and second Gulf wars, the United Nations sanctions on Iraq, the 2003 US invasion, and very recently the 2014 Islamic State war. The World Bank (2017) confirmed that Iraq's environment is subjected to

serious pressures from population growth, the impact of a few wars and their aftermath, and poor land planning.

There have been few international initiatives in Iraq since 2003 on environmental sustainability and rebuilding Iraq. One is a collaboration between the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) Regional Office for West Asia and the UN Development Programme in Iraq to accelerate the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda implementation in Iraq. The memorandum aims at supporting Iraq in the post-Covid-19 phase by focusing on environmental sustainability, climate change, environmental policy, etc. (Reliefweb 2020). At the same time, natural resources play a significant role in mitigating climate change. Iraq is rich in fossil fuels, but water is a scarce resource. Thus, the water level in the Tigris and the Euphrates rivers is expected to decrease dramatically by 2030. Another misfortune is that almost 91% of Iraq's water supply flows from Turkey, Syria, and Iran (Karasik and Depretto 2019).

There are a handful of small projects that the EU has started in EU that have contributed to climate change; the most recent example is the EU project for improving the quality of water in Basra, which has environmental and human effects in the city. This is besides the European Joint Investment Initiatives, which help the urban areas improve service delivery and get prepared to take rural migrants.

## **The Case of Syria**

A series of extreme events in recent years has influenced the Syrian economy and the environment. Back in 2011 onward, people's livelihoods deteriorated due to the Arab uprising, which resulted in conflict and instability in Syria. Since the Syrian crisis has become global, the EU has supported the Brussels conference on "Supporting the future of Syria and the region". Despite the difficulties, the EU and its Member States have decided to provide €20 billion (\$22.5 billion), in humanitarian, stabilization, and resilience assistance since 2011 - for Syrians in Syria and in support of the neighboring countries (European Union 2020). Since the crisis in Syria, European Union has contributed to supporting UN-led intra-Syrian negotiations for political transition, saving lives, and providing humanitarian aid for refugees and communities in Syria and host countries (European Union 2019). Due to the conflict in Syria, since 2011, EU relations with Syria have been scaling down. Nevertheless, the main focus of the EU through the European Neighbourhood Policy has provided humanitarian support to the affected people in Syria (European Commission 2014).

The main risks associated with climate and sustainability in Syria are of enormous significance because conflict and intra-state wars have already doubled the depletion of resources and the climate in Syria. According to this logic, Syria's sustainability situation has worsened due to the nation's ongoing war and strife for the past ten years. That is to say, prior to 2011, it was claimed that climate change was not at the forefront of the mind of people in Syria. The initial breakout of the conflict in Syria can be traced back to a lack of available resources and access to water and food (Kelley et al. 2014). Besides the political factors, water scarcity and drought have caused human suffering in Syria, fuelling the conflict. Whether climate change has driven the conflict in Syria or not, climate change has been the main driver of the conflict, as people's demands were due to severe drought and food insecurity (Swain and

Jägerskog 2016). Since the outbreak of civil war in Syria, millions of Syrians have been internally displaced, refugees in neighboring countries, or have fled to Europe (Swain and Jägerskog 2016).

Nevertheless, many scholars confirm the link between the Syrian crisis and climate change, especially with the lack of governmental capacities to manage the five years of severe drought during 2006-2010 and poor agricultural policies that have further deteriorated water security in Syria (De Châtel 2014). Based on his analyses, Daoudy (2020) has addressed structural and vulnerability factors regarding climate change and conflict in Syria. As he analyzed, the structural factors are context-specific preconditions for political, social, economic, and climate vulnerability and human insecurity. The second type is vulnerability factors, counted as development conditions of water, agriculture, employment and poverty, policies as corruption and subsidies, lastly environmental variables.

While the EU launched EGD, Syria was in the worst humanitarian crisis. The EU has continuously contributed to providing support across Syria, not only in Syria but also in the neighboring countries (European Union 2019). Regardless of the EU's commitment to international pledges for climate change and decarbonization, the energy transition results in severe economic challenges for oil and gas-producing countries, especially the Middle East and North African countries with less diversified economies (Hafner and Tagliapietra 2020).

Thus, it can be said that Syria is late in catching up with EGD and focusing on sustainability and climate change. Meanwhile, for the European Green Deal, the external fit for Syria is another case that needs to explore the future of gas diplomacy with Europe, especially in the current gas crisis in Europe due to the war in Ukraine. Syrian economy, since the 1990s, has become a net importer of oil and petroleum products accounting for 40 percent of government revenues and 25 percent of exports. It accounts for 15 percent of the GDP, which makes the Syrian economy vulnerable to commodity prices, such as the oil price shocks of 2020 and 2014, the most recent price declines (Verner and Breisinger 2013).

Meanwhile, the Green Deal has strong regional and international implications; therefore, European Union needs to use its influence, expertise, and financial resource to support its neighbors and partners to join it on a sustainable path. Yest, EGD aims to buy in all partners to contribute to zero carbon emission and green development. However, these goals in the context of Syria are so far difficult to achieve (OECD 2021).

The European Commission Factsheet indicated the EU's financial support for Syria, for instance, just in 2021 was €130 million in humanitarian aid to provide vital assistance to millions of people inside Syria, in addition to the support the commission has provided to Syrians in neighboring countries. Since the civil war outbreak in Syria in 2011, the EU has mobilized €24.9 billion to support the most vulnerable Syrians inside the country and across the region. While discussing the role of Europe, it is worth focusing on the diplomatic tools and means that European Union induces in its relations with the neighboring countries, including Mediterranean countries, the Middle East, and Africa. Right during the crisis in Iraq, European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) was launched in 2004 to support and foster stability, security, and prosperity in the EU's neighborhood. The review of the ENP in 2015 changed the cooperation framework and proposed approaches to building fruitful partnerships with the neighborhood. ENP focuses on promoting democracy, the rule of law, protecting human rights, and social cohesion. More

importantly, economic development for stabilization, security, migration, and mobility were the main priorities of ENP (European Commission 2020). In line with this, the Mediterranean and Syria as transit countries are important for the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP). That is to say, the EU, through ENP, promotes economic and political reforms in Syria and the broader Mediterranean. For European relations with other nations, bilateral collaboration is still essential. Syria was one of Europe's most important neighbors before 2011, but since the start of the civil war, there has been a breakdown in the close ties between the EU and Syria. According to European Commission, the Union has suspended all its bilateral cooperation with Syria since May 2011.

Meanwhile, the EU has adopted targeted restrictive measures, including sanctions, and further support through the European Investment Bank (EIB) was ceased (European Commission n.d.). Nevertheless, the EU continues to support Syrian refugees and those displaced. Even during critical phases of the Syrian civil war, the EU, through United Nations agencies, tried to reach people in need in Syria. The European Commission has provided €615 million in humanitarian aid since the start of the crisis (Politico 2014). As the EU has suspended and introduced restrictions against Syria, the EU developed close ties with Syrian opposition through the Friends of the Syrian People Group, supported by the French initiative in 2012 (CRU report 2021).

Furthermore, bilateral cooperation regarding the Green Deal and climate change ensures the mutual commitment of involved countries. In response to the Syrian crisis, the European Union joined the Global Coalition against Da'esh' in 2014 as a non-military party (CRU report 2021). Worth mentioning here is that the EU leadership is oriented on humanitarian support for Iraq and Syria while in crisis. Thus, European Neighborhood Instrument (ENI) 2014 established the "Madad" Regional Trust Fund to implement the UN Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan priorities in response to the Syrian crisis. In addition, in 2015 EU allocated €300 million under the ENI to the Madad Fund and redirected €200 million to form the Instrument for Pre-Accession (Demmelhuber 2018).

## DISCUSSION

Concerning the logic of consequences, the EU has not considered the implications of the Middle East crises in nations like Syria and Iraq and their impact on climate change and sustainability. That is to say, the situation in Iraq seems more fertile for the Green Deal and energy transition. At the same time, the EGD economic implications for Iraq and Syria are severe due to a lack of adequate economic diversification.

Regardless of the EU's financial support, the current circumstances of Iraq and Syria are not fertile for focusing on the elements of the EGD. Therefore, the right conditions must be in place to re-address the necessity of climate change and the EGD implications on Iraq and Syria. In light of energy security and climate change, Europe, before Russia invaded Ukraine, aimed to make Europe independent from Russian energy before 2030 (European Commission 2022). In response to the Russian offense against Ukraine, the European Commission presented REPowerEU to enhance EU energy independence and tackle the climate crisis. The logic of consequences in the energy dependency scenario makes the EU green transition necessary;

however, the logic of appropriateness indicates the importance of Ukraine as a potential energy hub and transit country to support the EGD's short-term goals to achieve the green transition goals (Lanoszka et al. 2022).

The war in Ukraine might bring a necessary shift in EU-Middle East relations and the EU energy policy. Though short-term solutions are impossible, the EU has the Middle East as an alternative gas provider by tankers which is difficult but can prevent a supply crisis in winter 2022. While pipeline projects from the Middle East and other regions are only viable in the long term (Cwalina 2022).

Energy security positions European Union into a critical phase during a crisis such as the Ukraine war. At the same time, European Green Deal endangers energy demand from Russia to fully decarbonize the economy by 2050. The main target for EGD is a 55% reduction in carbon emissions by 2030. While diversifying the energy supply reduces EU energy dependency and Russian monopoly on energy security and transport routes. It appears to be impossible to quickly and completely decarbonize the EU economy at this point in the Ukraine war. At the same time, Middle Eastern energy producers are more reliable and secure alternative energy suppliers than Russia.

In this respect, Iraq is an appropriate option for the EU energy supply, as natural gas will bridge the transition phase from heavy oil dependence to renewable energy sources. Thus, Iraq, Iran, and Syrian alliance for building natural gas corridor to Europe can be an option, as Iraq has strategic gas resources, and Syria can be the transit route for assuring the security of supply to Europe. Some scholars refer to natural gas as a bridge fuel between the fossil fuel economy and a low-carbon future. Based on BP's statistical data, the Middle East is home to some 43 percent of known conventional gas reserves (Kuzemko et al. 2016). At the same time, Iraq is ranked No. 13 for world gas reserves (World Energy Outlook 2012).

Furthermore, BP statistical data shows that Iraq's current proven gas reserves are estimated at 126.7 Tcf, representing 1.7 percent of total global gas reserves. The EU attempts to diversify the energy supply in light of the current expectation. It keeps the EU's dependency on Turkey and gas producers, including Iraqi Kurdistan, Iran, and Syria. In this scenario, Turkish bargaining power is vital as a transit country for European gas supplies (Webb 2009). Iraq has a significant position globally as it has total gas reserves as high as 280 Tscf, placing Iraq among the world's top five holders of conventional gas reserves (Integrated National Energy Strategy Final Report 2012).

## CONCLUSION

Concerning the logic of consequences, the EU has not considered the implications of the Middle East crises in nations like Syria and Iraq and their impact on climate change and sustainability. That is to say, the situation in Iraq seems more fertile for the Green Deal and energy transition. At the same time, the EGD economic implications for Iraq and Syria are severe due to a lack of adequate economic diversification.

Over the past months, the war in Ukraine has repeatedly indicated the importance of energy security for the European Union. Thus to achieve the EGD ambitions EU needs to prioritize supply diversification because the transition is a long-term process.



There are essential preconditions for Iraq and Syria to consider while tackling the European Green Deal effects, particularly the economic aspects and the future of energy. Based on the logic of appropriateness to kick-start the change process, the EGD can induce and re-address the energy challenges while considering the position of Syria and Iraq because the infrastructure operation and building it in the energy sector has political and economic aspects. Thus, the EGD is affected, and it affects Syria and Iraq (Bouzarvoski et al. 2015).

Based on researchers' observations, the Green Deal is an opportunity to transform the Iraqi and Syrian economies towards a better future, at least partially free from fossil fuel dominance and a window to economic diversification. While through REPowerEU investments in renewable energy will lead to a long-term influence on green transition globally (Medinilla 2022). While the EU approaches EGD, energy security is a serious challenge at the forefront of Europe. Thus supply diversification is the only governance mechanism that can guarantee energy security and assures energy supply by reducing dependency on Russia (Heshmati and Abolhosseini 2017).

To conclude, the role of the EU is fundamental for promoting sustainability and helping Iraq and Syria to mitigate the effects of EGD in advance. As the EU has a historical record of supporting both countries, it is expected that the EU will provide further support for Iraq and Syria associated with EGD implementation in the near future. Syria and Iraq are facing various challenges, and the pressing needs push governments to pay less attention to climate change and green transition. Meanwhile, the region could also become a solar hub that can provide renewable energy to the region and Europe. In the wake of global awareness regarding climate change, governments and stakeholders should stress the transition to decarbonization. Meanwhile, the direct implications of the decarbonization transition for the entities in energy production, carbon-intense actions, and infrastructure development are to be taken seriously (Shree 2019). Thus, in the future, the EU should contribute to green transition and economic diversification in the Middle East to achieve EGD objectives and secure more renewable energy resources.

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