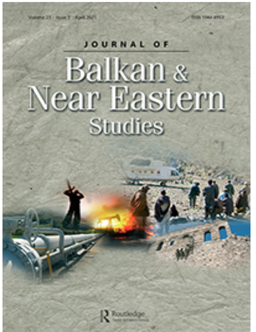

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Europe and the 'New' Middle East

Geopolitical shifts and strategic choices

Silvia Colombo [a] and Eduard Soler i Lecha [b]

[a]Istituto Affari Internazionali, Rome, Italy; [b]Barcelona Centre for International Affairs, Barcelona, Spain

ABSTRACT
The Middle East has witnessed major geopolitical shifts since 2011 that range from the growing influence of the Gulf states, the pivot to Africa of many of the region's countries and the new dynamics of global penetration, to the proliferation of regional cleavages and intra-state conflicts, as well as more volatile alliances and rivalries. This article assesses the implications of those shifts for the European Union and its capacity to shape or adapt to new realities. In the past continuities have tended to prevail in the EU's strategies, policies and toolbox vis-à-vis the region. The intensity of the transformations the Middle East is going through as well as their impact on Europe itself may oblige the EU to make a move now. Europe's leverage and credibility are at stake.

Introduction

When it comes to changes in the regional order of the countries and societies in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), Europe is among the most interested actors for several reasons. First and foremost, being a direct neighbour of the region means any process leading to further destabilization is likely to reach Europe. Secondly, Europe is also a stakeholder when it comes to any discussion on changes in the regional order because of strong historical and people-to-people connections. Colonialism and decolonialism, on the one hand, and migration and diasporas, on the other, are still very much present in any European discussion of the contours of the regional order in the MENA.

The dominant vision in Europe over the last decades conceptualized this region as *the Mediterranean* and later as *Europe's Southern Neighbourhood* and tried to promote cooperation as a way to prevent conflicts spilling over into Europe. Pinar Bilgin argues that this vision reflected Europe's 'own societal security concerns that have less to do with the Gulf than the geographically closer Southern Mediterranean'.[1] Scholarly work focusing on the European Union (EU)'s role in the MENA after the Arab uprisings has tended to focus on the extent to which the EU has or has not been able to project its influence onto the region by discussing the predominant frames[2] and the available toolkit.[3] Little consideration has been given to the strong interdependence between the EU's responses and key geopolitical changes that have taken place at the regional and domestic levels in the MENA countries. It is high time to discuss whether transformations in the region and

CONTACT Silvia Colombo s.colombo@iai.it

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the awareness that they have an impact on Europe itself are prompting a policy review, whether through a widening of the regional scope or a different approach to conflict and cooperation and Europe's role in them.

Traditionally, the region has been depicted as a 'near perfect example of a classical, state-centric, military-political type RSC [regional security complex]'.[4] It is also one characterized by multipolarity due to the presence of at least five states that claim to be or tend to act as regional powers—Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Israel, Iran and Turkey. This trend has been reinforced by the growing ambition and resources of smaller Gulf states, namely Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. This fragmented and competitive multipolarity, as qualified by Raymond Hinnebusch and Kristina Kausch,[5] has been made more acute by the absence of a dominant or hegemonic regional power in the MENA region.[6] This fact, coupled with the ambition of global powers to penetrate the region,[7] has led to the generation of various forms of insecurity.[8]

This is not the first time analysts have referred to a 'New Middle East' to describe the region undergoing fundamental changes. However, since 2011 this discussion has intensified and countless articles and books reproduce the idea that this is, once more, a new region or a new regional order.[9] Is the EU's approach also new, and if so, since when and in which respect? While the Arab uprisings in 2011 and the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 are the two sets of events with the deepest and most far-reaching impacts on the transformation of the existing regional order, Europe's approach to this region has changed mainly due to other events that directly affected it in 2015. Terrorist attacks in various European capitals and the refugee crisis awoke EU leaders who had paid little attention to the tectonic shifts in their southern vicinity until that point. By 2015 it had become clear that instability in Europe's neighbourhood could put the free movement of people in the EU in jeopardy. The rise of anti-migration and Islamophobic political forces in several European elections also indicated that regional conflicts, mainly those in Syria and Libya, were altering domestic and regional dynamics in Europe.

This article starts by identifying the implications for Europe of some geopolitical shifts such as the growing influence of the Gulf states, the pivot to Africa of many of the region's countries, new global penetration dynamics related to Russia's renewed ambition, the proliferation of regional cleavages and the volatility of alliances and rivalries. It then assesses how the EU has positioned itself in response to domestic and regional conflicts, exploring the circumstances in which it has tried *engagement strategies*, using a range of instruments to shape events on the ground, and those in which it has opted for *containment* and *damage control strategies*. This article argues that the EU has made several choices since 2011 and will be called upon to make many more in the coming years. The result of these choices will shape Europe's strategies, policies and tools and will elucidate what kind of player the EU can and wants to be vis-à-vis the MENA.

Geopolitical shifts: implications for Europe

More conflicts, more rivalries, new alignments

Overlapping cleavages have shaped the geopolitics of the Middle East and projected instability towards North Africa: Arabs against non-Arabs, Sunni against Shia, pro-West against anti-West, and advocates of the status quo against revisionist powers. The main

novelty of the post-2011 context is the eruption of a region-wide rivalry between actors sympathetic to the Muslim Brotherhood, on the one hand, and those aiming to eradicate the movement's political and social influence, on the other, in what is occasionally referred to as the intra-Sunni rivalry.[10] This confrontation has manifested itself in the different strategies pursued by regional players towards several conflicts. Libya is the clearest example, but the support for different rebel groups in Syria is part of the same dynamic. This confrontation can also be observed in the competing responses towards the political transitions in several countries in the region. The domestic reverberations of this ideological confrontation are what make this rivalry salient.[11]

Intersecting conflicts and cleavages, which imply the diversification of the actors and issues that can be perceived as threats, have made alliances even more volatile than before.[12] Alliances between Middle Eastern actors and between them and global powers were never stable to start with. The concept of 'shifting alliances' is recurrent in most accounts of the regional order.[13] Alliance formation has been altered in various ways since 2011. Plenty of examples show that alliances are less cohesive and consistent: the divergence between Hamas and the rest of the 'axis of resistance' during the first years of the Syrian conflict, the Egypt–Saudi spat in 2016, the GCC crisis in 2017, the sporadic tensions between Morocco and Saudi Arabia and the sudden ups-and-downs in Turkey's relations with the United States and Russia. Moreover, countries that are in the same camp in one of the regional conflicts may support rival groups in another. One-off events with regional repercussions have been changing the threat perception and the hierarchy of threats. This is how short-lived alliances limited to single issues proliferate. These fear-driven alliances, rapidly changing and constantly adapting to a different landscape, can be conceptualized as 'liquid alliances'.[14]

The European Union and most of its member states are not a primary actor in this new dynamic. Europeans tend to be perceived as partners or even as donors but not as allies or rivals. The exceptions to this trend are France, with a more assertive regional policy often at odds or in competition with Turkey, as well as Greece and Cyprus. Since the 2014 tripartite summit with Egypt in Cairo, both Athens and Nicosia have been fully embedded in the alliances and counter-alliances in the Middle East, particularly through the growing cooperation with Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and also France.

The displacement of the region's centre of gravity: the Gulf at the centre

The collapse of what was referred to as the 'Arab order' is one of the elements facilitating the rise of non-Arab powers and has also moved the region's centre of gravity towards the Gulf.[15] The power vacuum left by the relative decline of Egypt and the neutralization of Syria and Iraq as regional powers, the proliferation of regional conflicts that overshadow the Arab-Israeli one, Iran and Turkey's regional ambitions, the US policies of 'intervention first and disengagement later' and the abundance of resources available in several Gulf capitals have increased the ambition and assertiveness of the Gulf monarchies. According to Marc Lynch, the events that unfolded after the Arab uprisings in 2011 confirmed the collapse of the old order and set the conditions for a new balance of power in which 'the wealthy Gulf states (…) were almost ideally suited to the region's new structural realities'.[16]

Two parallel rivalries have gradually placed the Gulf at the centre of regional geopolitics. The first is the confrontation between Iran and Saudi Arabia, which goes well beyond the notional Sunni–Shia sectarian clash, and is rather a clash between two opposing and mutually exclusive visions of the regional order. The second is the confrontation between countries that are somewhat sympathetic to the Muslim Brotherhood —Qatar plays a major role in that camp—and those like the UAE and less consistently Saudi Arabia that see this movement as a major domestic and regional threat. Although these rivalries have ostensibly manifested themselves in the Gulf, for instance, in the repression of the Bahrain demonstration in 2011 and the GCC crisis of 2017, they have region-wide influence and have put pressure on external players to take sides.

The EU is no exception but it has consistently tried to escape this pattern of being forced to side with one camp or the other. For instance, the European Global Strategy of 2016 maintained that the 'EU [would] pursue balanced engagement in the Gulf. It will continue to cooperate with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and individual Gulf countries. Building on the Iran nuclear deal and its implementation, it will also gradually engage Iran on areas such as trade, research, environment, energy, anti-trafficking, migration and societal exchanges'.[17] When the 'Arab Quartet' called for the boycott of Qatar, the EU did not endorse it, but neither did it offer any particular support to Doha or publicly reject the conditions for lifting it set by its promoters. As a bloc, and as individual member states, the EU preferred to keep a low profile and backed Kuwait's mediation efforts. France was the exception to this trend, as Paris appointed Bertrand Besancenot, the former ambassador to Riyadh, to 'appease tensions between Qatar and its neighbours'.[18]

The EU is concerned by these developments for several reasons. First and foremost, these rivalries are perceived as infusing the whole region with instability, including countries in Europe's immediate vicinity. One of the novelties in the post-2011 context is that the Gulf countries increasingly approach North Africa as a pre-eminent stage on which to project their competition and conflicts. The surge in the volume of aid and investment to the region from the Gulf has also reduced the influence and conditionality of other players, such as the EU. What is more, the support of the Gulf countries for rival political groups further polarizes political transitions. Tunisia is a good example of where several Gulf states have backed rival political groups and have indirectly contributed to the polarization of the country.[19] Gulf rivalries are also an obstacle to resolving conflicts like that in Libya, whose effects are felt in Europe much more strongly than in the Gulf. Some of Europe's partners in North Africa are under increasing pressure to take sides in the Gulf rivalries and any attempt to preserve autonomy or declare their neutrality makes their creditors uneasy.[20] Interestingly, this could provide an opportunity for the EU, because some governments (and societies) in the Maghreb may perceive European support as a counterweight to increased Gulf influence.

The new centrality of the Gulf in regional geopolitics is also challenging the design of EU policies and instruments. Traditionally, there has been a clear distinction between the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries, on the one hand, and the rest of the MENA region including the Gulf, on the other. While this may remain suitable in terms of structuring cooperation and channelling support mechanisms, this division no longer responds to the new geopolitical realities in the region. This realization has not yet translated into any specific policies or instruments tackling the region as a whole.

Additionally, relations between the EU and the Arab countries of the Gulf—at least prior to 2013—were structured around the EU–GCC multilateral cooperation scheme, favouring a region-to-region framework rather than a web of bilateral agreements with individual countries. The spat between GCC states, which Kristian Coates Ulrichsen called an 'exclusionary turn in GCC politics', called into question the basic principles on which the organization was founded and prompted a discussion on the risks of disintegration of the GCC or, at best, its transformation into an empty shell.[21] As a result, the EU is increasingly working with individual member states in the Gulf rather than with the GCC, a trend that began in 2008 when the negotiations for an EU–GCC free trade agreement were unilaterally suspended by the GCC.

The pivot to Africa: the Maghreb and Europe look south

North Africa is key to Europe's approach and policies towards the MENA region. This is due to geographic proximity and strong historical, economic and social bonds. Seen from Brussels, the MENA region is subsumed into a 'wider neighbourhood' category, which has gradually expanded—on some occasions, as far as taking in the whole of the African continent. The EU Global Strategy is once more highly indicative of this framing. 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'.[22] 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.[23] Going a step further, the new President of the European Commission has fixed Africa as one of the priorities for the new term and stated that she 'would like Europe to have a comprehensive strategy on Africa, our close neighbour and our most natural partner'.[24]

Not only is Europe pivoting towards Africa, its main partners in the MENA region are following the same path. This is particularly the case in the Maghreb, where Algeria and Morocco, and to a lesser extent Tunisia, have all devoted additional economic and diplomatic resources to their African policies. The respective pivots to Africa of Algeria and Morocco can also be seen as the projection of their long-lasting rivalry. Two factors have increased the interest of the countries in the African continent: first, the instability in the Sahel and the subsequent proliferation of security threats emanating from this territory; and, second, the removal of Gaddafi, which left a vacuum in African politics that could be filled by Algiers and Rabat.

As Nizar Messari explains, Morocco's Africa policy is characterized by an emphasis on the economy, a conscious attempt to reach far beyond traditional francophone circles and the personal involvement of King Mohamed VI.[25] The most meaningful decision was Rabat's request to reintegrate the African Union, which was granted in 2017. Algeria could not impede Morocco's membership of the African Union but it did attempt to exclude it from security cooperation initiatives involving the Sahel countries, such as the Nouakchott Process. Despite significant continuity before and after 2011 on this issue, the delicate health of the former president, Abdelaziz Buteflika, followed by the Algerian popular protests starting in February 2019 and the uncertainty surrounding the future of the country, have tarnished Algerian foreign policy ambitions.[26]

The EU has strong relations with both Morocco and Algeria and Africa-related affairs are becoming more prominent in the political dialogue with these countries. Several contentious issues remain on the table but engagement with Africa is unanimously perceived as a rising priority due both to demographic trends that may trigger additional migratory pressures and because the continent offers major economic opportunities. What is more, the EU's attempts to strengthen its Africa policy and develop a 'continent-to-continent' partnership are often perceived as efforts to counter China's influence in this region. What remains to be seen is the way the EU articulates its renewed interest in Africa in relation to its long-lasting partnerships with the countries of its Southern Neighbourhood. Will Africa be the driver of a more robust policy towards the MENA region or will it divert the EU's interests and further fragment EU strategies towards this region? It is also unclear whether the countries of the Maghreb will articulate their African policies independently from their relations with Europe or try to connect the two dots. Finally, countries and societies from the Maghreb may perceive the EU–Maghreb–Africa nexus as an attempt to delink themselves from the geopolitics of the Middle East. But for them to do so, the other two vertices of the triangle need to respond positively to this idea and to do that Algiers and Rabat may need to compromise.

New dynamics of global penetration

Carl Brown depicts the Middle East as a penetrated region to emphasize its subjection to exceptional influence and intervention by foreign powers.[27] Bassel Salloukh and Rex Brynen referred to the regions' permeability to transnational influences.[28] For many centuries European imperial powers competed to expand their influence in North Africa and the Middle East and by the mid-20th century the region had become a secondary but still relevant scenario in the bipolar confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union. More recently, the region has also been one of the theatres where Washington has projected its unilateral moment. The US intervention in Iraq represented the height of US global hegemony. What is new post-2011 is the diversification of global powers aiming to project their influence into this particular region, one of the consequences of which may be increased autonomy of the countries of the MENA themselves.[29]

The United States remains the single most powerful global actor but its influence and ambitions in this region are perceived to be retreating. This is due to structural factors such as the United States becoming less dependent on oil produced in the region, conflicting priorities (Asia rather than the Middle East being depicted as the area where US interests could be most compromised), and circumstantial factors such as the frustration that followed the Iraq invasion of 2003 and the erosion of trust between the United States and its traditional allies, particularly during the Obama administration. However, the ties with Israel and animosity vis-à-vis Iran are still powerful magnets keeping the United States attached to Middle East geopolitics. In contrast, the United States plays a secondary role in the Maghreb, as confirmed during the civil war in Libya, when two European actors, the United Kingdom and France, were in the driving seat.

The unsatisfying results of this operation have not increased Europe's appetite for further interventions.

While there may have been some competition between the EU and the United States in terms of trade and investment interests in the region, the EU has always welcomed a strong US presence in the Mediterranean region, directly or through NATO. The United States was generally seen on this and many other fronts as a security provider and its perceived retreat was understood as a signal that the EU would be asked to step up its commitment to the region. One of the peculiarities of the EU's perception of this phenomenon is increasing concern about Russia's attempt to fill some of the gaps left by the United States. As long as Russia's Middle East policies are seen in Brussels and other European capitals as a medium for pursuing its geostrategic interests at global scale, it will push some actors in Europe such as Poland and the Baltic republics, which were not particularly interested in this region, to devote more attention to it.[30]

Finally, China is starting to be perceived as a relevant actor in the region but also as a different kind of power. China is often depicted as a pragmatic player with a depoliticized foreign policy strategy and, so far, it has acted accordingly. As in the case of Russia, the Middle East is more a tool than a goal. China's priority is not only to seek status (portraying itself as a responsible global superpower), it also aims to sustain its economic model in terms of having access to substantial oil supplies, importing raw materials and securing maritime routes. Europe has mixed feelings about China's role in the MENA region. It does see Beijing as a systemic rival and a competitor in terms of economic influence but several EU countries do welcome and to some extent expect to be involved in some of the major infrastructure projects China is putting in place in the Mediterranean.

Despite all the difficulties, the EU is still trying to convince the United States to work together in this region and attempts, often unsuccessfully, to soften some of Washington's most disruptive actions. One of the clearest examples was Macron's effort to persuade the United States not to withdraw from the Iranian nuclear deal.[31] On Russia, Europe's possibilities of cooperating with Moscow will be limited unless there is a U-turn in their respective policies towards Ukraine. As for China, cooperation and competition dynamics will manifest mainly in the economic sphere but there is the potential for greater security cooperation if, following the experience of the anti-piracy missions in the Indian Ocean, China is willing to contribute to the stabilization of the MENA region.

Domestic and regional conflicts: the EU's stance

Challenged domestic orders in the MENA countries

Domestic political orders in the MENA have undergone a phase of profound crisis in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings. Since mass protests spread from Tunisia and Egypt to other countries in the region in 2011, a number of endogenous trends have affected the interrelated capabilities and functions of states, regimes and societies, while also prompting reactions from other regional and global players and meddling by transnational networks of non-state actors. In different shapes and to varying degrees since 2011 the region has seen a trend of decreasing capabilities of state institutions to effectively control their borders and administer their territories and populations. In some countries central

authority structures are no longer able to perform functions such as 'the provision of security, legitimacy, and wealth and welfare' to the same extent they did prior to 2011.[32] This applies, for example, to Syria, Iraq and—to a lesser degree—the Sinai in Egypt, where protracted rebellion and civil war have challenged the territorial integrity of the states, leading to non-state actors proclaiming chunks and parts of the territory independent fiefdoms. In other places like Libya and Yemen a multiplicity of factions and power centres have succeeded in their attempts to use the process of rebuilding state institutions as a means to secure control over power and authority to the detriment of their competitors. In such places the intense competition for control arising from the existence of multiple or parallel institutions and their competing claims has further weakened the nascent state institutions.[33]

In parallel, the initial push towards democratic transitions after the wave of popular demonstrations has given way to a trend of restoration of authoritarianism and autocratic government, on the one hand, and to illiberal turns in formal democracies, on the other. In the former, the trend has ranged from the gradual adaptation and reconfiguration of power networks to adjust to the new conditions of post-conflict institution building, as in the case of Libya, to the full or partial restoration of the authoritarian regimes that used to govern through repression, exclusion and co-optation of competitors and challengers, as in the case of Egypt.[34] In other countries, where incumbent governments resisted or adapted to the street protests in 2011 in Morocco, Jordan and the monarchies in the Gulf, the prevailing of this trend has seen the further increase of authoritarian governance practices with further restrictions being forcibly imposed on some categories of citizens and their activities, namely journalists, academics and activists. The latter trend—the illiberal turn observed in formal democracies—particularly concerns countries such as Israel and Turkey that have experienced a sliding trajectory towards illiberalism couched in heightened nationalistic and neo-revisionist terms, respectively.[35] Both these trends fuel conflicts between the state and society or between different strands of society often defined in terms of majority vs minority (e.g., anti-Islamist forces vs Islamists, Turkish vs other ethnic groups, Jewish ethno-religious groups vs Arab Palestinian minority).

Finally, societies in the MENA region have undergone processes of change and have become more complex. This is mirrored in the acknowledgement and the new reading that Europe makes of MENA societies following the Arab uprisings.[36] First of all, consistent with the literature that sees no clear-cut division between states and societies,[37] growing attention has been focused on the activism of non-state actors (civil society individuals or groups, local militias, transnational violent or non-violent groups) that are not necessarily regarded as an alternative to or in opposition to state actors but which often perform state-related functions that are left vacant, such as the provision of security or of key services particularly at the local level.[38] As already mentioned, growing tensions exist at society level in the MENA region as a result of two trends. On the one hand, the mass mobilization of unarmed political activists, which dominated contentious politics in several MENA countries for shorter or longer periods between 2011 and 2013, has since given way to a multiplicity of forms of protracted militarization in the form of armed rebellion against incumbent regimes such as, for instance, in Egypt and in the processes of militarization in civil war-torn countries like Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Libya, where armed contentious actors fight each other as much

as the weakened regimes and their regional and international allies.[39] On the other hand, intra-societal conflicts are also increasingly fuelled by the existence of alternative conceptualizations and practices of citizenship on the basis of different collective identities. This trend encompasses the pluralization of collective identities through the coming to the fore of new, previously dormant, forms of collective identification, for example, those based on gender and generational identities throughout the region. This pattern also underscores the increased fragmentation of previously existing identities and the entrenchment and polarization of dominant collective identities and narratives to the detriment of plurality.[40]

Recent developments in the domestic orders in this region are clearly the result of internal dynamics and agency, although international and regional actors also share responsibility for the current domestic conflicts and uncertainties. They have seen the transformation of domestic political orders in the MENA countries at times as opportunities and at other times as threats to their ability to project influence in the region and ensure their own stability and security. Generally speaking, the security–stability nexus has been the master frame informing, in different ways, all EU policies towards the region.[41] Running in parallel with the construction of European identity, the EU has tended to perceive itself—and to project an image of itself—as a model of liberalism, both politically, as supportive of pluralism, civil and political liberties, and democracy, and economically, as a promoter of market-friendly policies in its external relations, including its foreign policy vis-à-vis the MENA.[42] For a long time until the Arab uprisings, the EU regarded political developments to its south as a potential challenge to its ontological security. This was largely due to disproportionate relations with the authoritarian regimes in power with little or no consideration for the aspirations and needs of societies. Because of their secular traits and their willingness to share the EU's neoliberal agenda, such regimes were seen as less threatening to the EU's identity, despite their illiberal stances and autocratic nature. Against this backdrop, the EU's approach before the Arab uprisings centred on the promotion of modest and gradual reforms and cooperative relations with the incumbent regimes on issues ranging from the control of migration, anti-terrorism, energy and economics both at multilateral (in the context of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership launched in 1995) and bilateral levels (with the launch of the European Neighbourhood Policy in 2003–2004). Implemented in the name of top-down conditionality (by the EU), such practices acquired a purely instrumental dimension when upheld by member states in their bilateral relations with MENA countries.[43]

With the upsetting of (the remnants of) past domestic and regional orders, the EU's policies suffered their final blow. Since then the EU has navigated troubled waters, partly due to the domestic and regional geopolitical shifts recalled above but also to a great extent due to its own internal predicament. After the initial optimism and boost towards democratization from 2011 to 2013, the situation in the MENA region and the EU's policies towards it have fallen under a gloomy blanket that has led to the re-prioritization of stability and security (with the 2015 ENP revision) as the key goals to be pursued no matter what other opportunities open up, for example those concerning engagement with civil society or Islamists.[44] Lastly, the unveiling of the EU Global Strategy in June 2016 has parachuted in yet another frame the EU is now trying to more or less consistently refer to when dealing with the MENA. Instead of the stability–security nexus, or the promotion of democracy or differentiation, the new catchphrase of the

EU's foreign policy is 'state and societal resilience'. Described as 'the ability of states and societies to reform, thus withstanding and recovering from internal and external crises', the concept of resilience and its pursuit as a policy goal introduces a new dynamic relationship between the EU, the governments and the societies in the MENA.[45] On the one hand, the EU has clearly taken a step back with regard to its willingness and ability to shape the futures of the countries in the region. On the other hand, more attention is now being devoted to the creation of the necessary domestic and regional conditions for reforms and changes to be initiated than to the reforms themselves.[46] Fostering state and societal resilience as a way to prevent conflict situations is one of the key goals of the EU in the MENA. Yet, the eruption of a new wave of protests in 2019 (Algeria, Sudan and Iraq) and the timid response of the EU to those developments indicate that the 2015 paradigm remains the dominant one among EU top decision-makers.

Old and new conflicts in the MENA and the EU's responses

Conflicts and instability in the MENA are interrelated with and derive their raison d'être from comparatively high levels of poverty, uneven distribution of wealth, weak political institutions often as a result of war or prolonged authoritarian rule and corruption, religious and ethnic heterogeneity, and a sharp difference in wealth compared to its neighbour to the Mediterranean north, that is, the EU. All of this multiplies diffuse and interdependent risk factors throughout the region. These structural features of MENA (in)security are aggravated by more proximate causes, such as the link between conflict dynamics, demography and migration, the spread of unconventional weapons and the regional impact of long-standing internal and external conflicts.[47] What is meant by the latter are more traditional forms of conflicts, also defined as inter-state wars or 'old wars'. The former, by contrast, are intra-state conflicts that have always been present in the MENA, but have arguably been on the rise since the outbreak of the Arab uprisings in the region. The state represents the point of reference in this distinction: statehood is contested in the case of inter-state conflicts, and has often failed in the case of intra-state fighting.

When compared to the traditional interpretation of old wars provided by Tilly with regard to Western countries,[48] new wars present contrasting features in terms of context, belligerent actors and purposes. The context is often of disintegrating states (typically authoritarian states feeling the impact of globalization and contentious politics), where conflicts result from or accelerate processes of state failure and loss of legitimacy. Wars are fought by constellations of state and non-state actors, while the distinction between combatants and non-combatants breaks down as civilians are often the main victims of such conflicts. The line separating legitimate violence from criminality also blurs, as looting, illegal trading and other war-generated revenues mostly fuel the conflict. In terms of purpose, these wars exploit and construct new identities, be they religious, ethnic or tribal, which undermines the sense of a shared political community. These sectarian division lines are accentuated and new friend–enemy distinctions are created.[49] All in all, intra-state conflicts often coincide with civil wars in which insurgency and counter-insurgency, uprisings, mass-killings and the general loss of the internal monopoly over the legitimate use of force create a situation of heightened violence. In other words, new conflicts in the MENA can be defined as belligerent situations in which

groups of state and non-state actors fight for power and resources against the backdrop of collapsed state structures. Sometimes intra-state conflicts have the capacity to spill over beyond the confines of a state—because similar cleavages manifest themselves at the regional level—or to give rise to proxy wars, as is the cases of Syria and Yemen .

With the substantial increase in the rate and deadliness of intra-state conflicts compared to inter-state ones in the MENA, one of the main and most evident repercussions is that some of the EU's stances and policies towards conflicts in the region are out of touch with the evolving realities on the ground.[50] The EU's crisis management and conflict prevention strategies appeared from the very beginning—in the context of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP)—to be rather underdeveloped if not totally non-existent.[51] This deficiency was further aggravated in the frameworks of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), which gradually but relentlessly sidelined cooperation in the realms of politics and security in the pursuit of governance-related or technical aspects. An additional consideration is that from the beginning, Euro-Mediterranean relations explicitly excluded any form of intervention in intra-state dynamics and conflicts.[52] As a result, today's conflicts and the interdependence and transnationality of risk factors in the Mediterranean region are not matched by a coherent set of security policies on the part of the EU. The EU has overall pursued limited engagement with selected players (civil society activists, ministries, external patrons) to shape events on the ground. More often than not it has opted for containment and damage control strategies by negotiating ad-hoc agreements (for example in the migration dossier), contributing to humanitarian assistance from a leadership position or assisting the work of other external players, such as the United Nations (UN), for the sake of multilateralism. A brief examination of the EU's role in the major MENA conflicts since the Arab uprisings will help illuminate this point further.

The Israeli–Palestinian conflict has been a key issue in EU foreign policy since the European Community began attempting to take on a foreign policy role and as such has been a major driver of a shared European foreign policy.[53] While the EU's position on the matter has never been unequivocal, the EU member states' attempts to define a shared lowest common denominator 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, then it has been its relative success in creating a certain normative framing of the conflict in the international arena.[54] In addition to that, a bold decision taken by the EU was to include Palestine as a full member of the EMP in the mid-1990s. The main idea was to craft a regional forum that would surround and anchor Israeli–Palestinian peace talks in an envisaged regional security community. In the framework of the so-called Barcelona Process, the EU signed an association agreement with both Israel (1995) and the PLO (1997). As the peace process deteriorated, however, the regional dimension of the Barcelona Process also became increasingly stuck.[55] More 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 be back again in the centre of gravity of regional conflict dynamics.[56]

Among the new conflicts that have been raging in the MENA since 2011, the Syrian one occupies a special place in light of the regional and global ramifications linked to the direct or indirect (through proxies) involvement of a multiplicity of players. For the EU, the civil war and the humanitarian crisis in Syria has had a tremendous impact for two main reasons: first, the waves of refugee that left the country and partly reached some Eastern and Central European countries until March 2016, when the EU-Turkey deal was signed for containment purposes; and second, the spread of violent extremism to the European continent through the participation in the conflict of European foreign terrorist fighters. Against this backdrop, the Syrian conflict has represented a test of Europe's ability to deploy crisis management tools. This test has squarely failed if we are looking for something more than the common—although robust—humanitarian support. As an immediate response to the regime's repression of the popular rebellion in the country, the EU suspended all bilateral cooperation programmes, froze the draft association agreement that had been negotiated in 2004 but never entered into force, and imposed an arms embargo, travel ban and an asset freeze in May 2011. As a leitmotif for Europe's stance vis-à-vis the MENA conflicts, EU member states were divided over key issues. This became most evident in August 2013 when the proof of the use of chemical weapons in the civil war seemed to make international action increasingly unavoidable. The EU3 (UK, France and Germany) were divided on the issue, with France and the UK (at least until restrained by a vote in the House of Commons) pushing for military action, while Germany pressed for greater United Nations involvement. In June 2013, the EU adopted a joint communication outlining three goals regarding the civil war: support a political solution, prevent regional destabilization, and address the dramatic humanitarian situation and the consequences of the conflict for the EU. Since that moment, the EU has not altered its political stance on the conflict and has repeatedly expressed its full support for the efforts of the UN-led Geneva process to de-escalate violence in preparation for a broader, sustainable political process leading to a transition government. However, the EU has arguably not been a driver of finding a political solution to the conflict by engaging itself at the regional level, not least since it was and partially still is internally divided on the Al-Assad issue, as well as the reconstruction of the country. What the EU has been able to do collectively, however, is to lead the international humanitarian response to the refugee crisis, particularly by supporting the host states and communities in the MENA (Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey) through the creation—among other things—of the EU Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian Crisis, the 'Madad Fund'.

When compared to the EU's involvement in the Syrian civil war, its multilateral role in the case of Yemen appears even more modest. Due to the greater geographical distance from the battleground and the fact that Yemen has never been a partner country for the EU as a whole, the only European actors that have indirectly been part of the conflict have been certain member states. Countries such as France and the United Kingdom have not been impartial between the two belligerents, namely the Saudi-led coalition that supports the Yemeni government, on the one hand, and the Houthi rebels that are helped and

trained by Iran, on the other. Both Paris and London openly provided military and diplomatic support to the Saudi-led coalition in 2016 and 2017 in the name of their important economic relations with Riyadh. This form of European indirect engagement in the Yemeni conflict has of course been detrimental in the attempts to find a solution to it. In 2018, the semblance of a debate began in some European capitals over the sustainability of relations with Riyadh and in particular the possibility of taking strong measures against the violations of human rights both inside Saudi Arabia and in the context of the war in Yemen.[57]

Finally, the Libyan civil war and the EU's role in it deserve a detailed account in light of its important ramifications both for Europe's external and internal politics. Three aspects should be mentioned here. First, when the popular revolution broke out in Libya on 17 February 2011, the EU responded 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 violence. An extraordinary European Council was convened on 11 March 2011 where heads of state and government spoke in a similarly unequivocal manner, asking Gaddafi to step down. On this occasion, they also legitimized the National Transitional Council (NTC) by recognizing it as the only 'political interlocutor'. This initial unity of intent, however, quickly dissolved when the prospects for military intervention in the Libyan crisis became more concrete and diverging internal demands and visions for a European role in the conflict became evident among the member states.[58] Second, the EU has since the beginning of the crisis tried to coordinate and cooperate with other supranational bodies active in mediation efforts. This was the case with the African Union and the League of Arab States, particularly in the first phase of the civil war (2011–2012), and then more significantly with the United Nations. A division of labour between the EU and the United Nations, which is in charge of overseeing the political negotiations process, has gradually taken shape. This process has unfolded in the framework of the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), led by the UN Special Envoy for Libya, which also enjoyed the full support of the EU's diplomacy. It could be argued, more critically, that this division of labour with the United Nations has been both a sign of the EU's preference for multilateralism and burden-sharing and—on a more negative side—an indication of the EU's continued inability to pull its weight and play a more proactive and autonomous role when it comes to crisis management and security issues. Third, and related to that, the most important lens through which the EU looks at the Libyan conflict is migration and in particular the potentially and seriously explosive interlinkages between the smuggling and trafficking practices that take place in Libya (and the Sahel) in its role as a transit country for mixed migration flows directed to Europe.[59] In light of the growing salience of these issues in the European debate since 2015, it is not a surprise that the EU has reacted to this dynamic in a purely securitized manner.[60] As a collective measure, on 18 May 2015, High Representative Federica Mogherini announced the creation of an EU Naval Force (EUNAVFOR Med)— renamed Operation Irini in 2020 —aimed at breaking the business model of smugglers and traffickers in the Southern Central Mediterranean region. Three years later, what had originally appeared a modest, albeit welcome, proactive move by the EU was entirely taken over by the unilateral and

often conflicting interests and stances of the member states vis-à-vis the management of migration, with relations between Italy and France deteriorating into open competition and occasional tensions during the first six months of 2019.

In light of the changing conflict realities in the MENA region, the EU does not seem to have lived up to the expectations of fostering peace and security in its own 'neighbourhood' through engagement, which has always featured as one of its key declaratory foreign policy objectives. What has been missing, particularly since the outbreak of the Arab uprisings in 2011, is a comprehensive and coherent approach to tackling conflict realities in the region apart from the somewhat limited conflict prevention tools now centred on the fostering of state and societal resilience for the sake of containment and damage control. As important as it is, resilience cannot however be fostered when conflicts are in full swing. Furthermore, if the EU wants to play a more prominent geopolitical role, particularly in its own 'backyard', it should equip itself with the right strategies, policies and tools.

The way forward: making choices about strategies, policies and tools

Geopolitical shifts in the MENA since 2011 have had and will continue to have a significant impact on Europe. They tend to highlight the nexus between internal and external tensions, as instability, conflicts and deteriorating governance in Europe's Southern Neighbourhood are more or less directly related to the spread of violent extremism, terrorism, migration and populist narratives in Europe itself. This is further aggravated by the geopolitical competition between regional and global players in and over the MENA. This is not meant to suggest that the MENA is simply exporting problems. On the contrary, Europeans are partly responsible for the challenges confronting the MENA and the region's problems spill over into Europe due to past European policies towards it, as well as its internal predicament. Hence, Europe's policies towards the MENA must be revised. Traditional forms of cooperation centred on the dichotomies of multilateralism vs bilateralism or democracy vs security and stability will not be the blueprint for sustainable relations at a time in which regional and global complexities and uncertainties prevail. That would run the risk of endangering the EU's little remaining credibility and leverage in the region. However, while these dichotomies have been framed as old dilemmas for the EU's engagement with the MENA, new realities are presenting the EU with a deeper existential question: what kind of actor it intends to be. The way the EU revises its strategies, policies and tools will provide the answer to this question.

To start with the strategies: geopolitical changes in the region and the competition within it between regional and global players, together with the systemic effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, require the EU to revise its strategies by first and foremost widening the regional scope to adequately factor in the new centrality of actors such as the Gulf states in the context of MENA geopolitics. Strategies are the result of framing. As such, framing the region as the Mediterranean or the 'Neighbourhood', on the one hand, or as a much broader and porous geopolitical space made of different sub-regions (North Africa, the Middle East, the Gulf), on the other, makes a substantive difference. This framing and the changed strategic outlook on the MENA may have direct implications on policymaking, provided some institutional inertia is overcome. A clear example is the

articulation of the new European interest in the African continent as the terrain from which most of the future challenges and opportunities will originate. This is also in line with the EU's interest in focussing on developing cooperation schemes with its North African partners towards the broader African continent. This strategy articulation could begin with a new, clear framing of the interconnections between Europe, North Africa and the rest of the continent, ranging from socioeconomic (very much centred on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, SDGs) to security dimensions, under which the issues of migration flows and their management fall.

With regard to policies, a general question the EU should provide an answer to is what kind of supra-national player it intends to be. To put it differently, to what extent is the EU prepared to turn its call for strategic autonomy into new forms of partnership and cooperation towards the Mediterranean and the Middle East? Is the EU willing and able to take a leading role on specific dossiers (energy, climate change, migration, cyber security, freedom of navigation) or issues (such as crisis management in the MENA, de-escalation in the Gulf) in the region? Or does it content itself with playing the part of the coordinator while leaving it to others to be the main players? This applies both internally to relations between the EU and its member states and to the EU's relations with external players such as the United States, Russia and China, which have direct stakes in the region. It certainly makes a major difference for future policies if the EU decides to selectively take the lead or instead prefers to let others go ahead and follows suit.

Finally, concerning tools, as has already been made clear when discussing conflicts in the MENA and the EU's responses to them (particularly in the case of Libya, Yemen and Syria), the EU needs to make a choice on the extent to which it should upgrade its toolkit to be able to play a stronger geopolitical role and not only containment. This would be in line with Von der Leyen's willingness to lead a 'geopolitical Commission'[61] and could mean, for example, equipping itself with instruments to contribute to crisis management in its different dimensions. So far, in addition to the humanitarian tools, most of the available assets for the EU have to do with purely technical cooperation in the domain of domestic reforms and governance in the framework of the bilateral relations that exist under the ENP. To go back to the example of conflicts, these assets can be deployed for conflict prevention but there are certain contexts in which this is not possible because a full-fledged conflict is already raging. These are the cases in which the EU has so far risked being cut off from regional and international developments in the MENA—as the case of Syria dramatically demonstrates. Leaving aside the often misplaced discussion about a 'European army' in relation to the progress made in defence cooperation with the Permanent Structured Co-operation (PESCO), the EU is called upon to foster its capabilities in multilateral diplomacy at the cultural, political and economic levels. In the age of multipolarity, it has the potential to engage with a broad range of regional, sub-regional and international players that have a stake in MENA security and progress. More concretely, investing in locally formed regional and sub-regional platforms and dialogues as well as making full use of the opportunities offered by inter-regionalism frameworks could strengthen Europe's constructive and proactive agency in the region. In conclusion, advancing a reflection at multiple levels concerning what kind of player Europe can be and wants to be in this particular region requires rethinking the EU's strategies, policies and tools. Needless to say, this is a long and complex journey and it is

safe to expect that due to the volatility of regional and international geopolitics more than one reality check will be needed by the EU along the way.

Notes

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ORCID

Silvia Colombo http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0242-5323
Eduard Soler i Lecha http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8865-6810

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Notes on contributors

Silvia Colombo is Head of the Mediterranean and Middle East Programme at the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) in Rome. Email address: s.colombo@iai.it; Twitter: @silvius_colombo.

Eduard Soler i Lecha is a senior Senior researcher Researcher at CIDOB (Barcelona Centre for International Affairs). Email address: esoler@cidob.org; Twitter: @solerlecha.

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