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Policy Paper Feb. 2025

Europe's Strategic Dilemma: Responding to MENA's Transformations

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Introduction

Regarding the EU's 'strategic dilemma,' the tentative conclusion appears to be that there is little dilemma left: the EU has moved from a foreign policy of dialogue in the 1990s to one called 'principled pragmatism' in [2016](#), to a policy that appears to be mostly driven by pragmatism and self-interest, particularly in the domains of security, migration, and energy.

While this new European policy may be required by today's geopolitical developments, it also carries certain risks. First, if the geopolitical merits of human rights and multilateralism (as still proclaimed by the EU) are not sustained in any form, they risk losing their relevance. Second, not adhering to the self-proclaimed European values of international law and humanitarian and democratic principles may be detrimental to the EU's image. Finally, the EU has, in the past decade, repeatedly been criticized for too little self-reflection on past failed efforts in that region.¹ Therefore, it runs the distinct risk to maintain that attitude when effecting new policies in the region.

1. EU's Evolving Policies Towards the MENA Region

a. Gaza War

The Gaza War that started in October 2023 has left the EU divided. On the one hand, are the states that have criticized Israel's policies in Gaza², Ireland and Spain, who are the only EU member states that have joined South Africa in its [case against Israel](#) before the ICJ, and who (together with Slovenia and Sweden) are the only EU states that have recognized the State of Palestine.³

On the other side of the spectrum are countries like Austria, Czechia, Germany, and Hungary, which argue that Israel's actions are justified. Austria and Czechia were among the 10 states (on a total of 193 states) that voted in the United Nations General Assembly on 12 December 2023 against a ceasefire in Gaza, and seven other EU states were among the 23 states that abstained in that vote (Germany, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Netherlands, Romania and Slovakia). In the vote one year later, on 12 December 2024, 5 EU member states were among the total of 11 states that abstained in expressing support for UNRWA (Austria, Bulgaria, Czechia, Hungary, and Netherlands).

Austria, Czechia, and Germany were also highly critical of the ICJ provisional ruling on genocide in January 2024. In the case of the [ICC arrest warrants](#) against Israel's Prime Minister Netanyahu, Hungary has stated that it will defy the ICC order, while France, Germany, and Italy have responded in a non-committal manner.

¹ See, e.g., Sylvia Colombo, "Principled Pragmatism" Reset: For a Recalibration of the EU's Diplomatic Engagement with the MENA Region', *IAI Papers*, Vol.21, No.39, 2021; P.M.J van Houwelingen, *Material and Ideational Drivers in EU Policy towards the MENA, 1995-2010*, PhD dissertation, 2014, pp. 300-303.

² It should be noted that there are also many private initiatives against Israel's policies: see <https://www.thepipd.com/resources/accountability-map/>

³ By 2025, 146 of the 193 UN member states have recognized the state of Palestine.

This divide also showed in the countries that suspended UNRWA funding immediately after Israel's accusation in January 2024 that "10 percent" of UNRWA's Gaza employees had links to Hamas or Islamic Jihad: Ireland and Spain did not suspend their aid, but Austria, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, The Netherlands, Romania, Sweden (and also the EU) did. Together with the United States and Japan, these EU countries form the largest donors of UNRWA. All these countries reinstated their funding shortly before or after the UNRWA investigation into the matter had been completed (resulting in 9 UNRWA employees being sacked because they "may have been involved" in the 9 October attacks).

These different positions on Israel's military actions, the situation in Gaza, and the position of international law and international tribunals have practical and political consequences. The practical consequence is the EU's inability to reach the unanimity necessary to come to decisions. As a result, the EU merely continues its decades-old policy of providing humanitarian aid and calling for a two-state solution. The political consequence is that the EU's traditional position as an upholder of humanitarian principles and international law is eroding. Crucial at this juncture will, therefore, be the EU's position in the anticipated initiatives of annexation of Gaza and the West Bank, especially in the light of the ICJ's advisory opinion of 19 July 2024 on the illegality of the Israeli occupation.

b. Syria

The EU High Representative, the President of the European Council, and the President of the European Commission have all expressed the EU's support for the toppling of Asad's regime. On 17 December 2024, the EU announced to reopen its delegation to Syria and engage with the new regime of HTS. In these statements, three themes were stressed (although not equally by everyone): reconstruction, territorial integrity, and migrants.

Reconstruction involves the material rebuilding of a destroyed country. By the end of 2019, it was estimated that about a third of all homes in Syria had been destroyed, with 15 million tons of debris only in Aleppo, adding all up to a total of 120 billion US\$ cost of material destruction. But reconstruction also involves the rebuilding of a society. Here, the EU has come up with a long list of ambitious desirables, including the rule of law, gender and ethnic and religious equality, human rights, and the like. While all these are needed, prioritization of these aims may be more effective given the completely dismantled state of Syria.

Territorial integrity is a European desire that is as pertinent as it is politically volatile. Pertinent because various armed actors are claiming or occupying Syrian territory: Turkey has a 'buffer zone' along the northern border; Kurdish militants held since 2012 the autonomous region of Rojava across the Euphrates in the north-east of Syria which encompasses more than a quarter of Syrian territory; Israel has shortly after the take-over by HTS descended from the Golan Heights and occupied territory at the foothills below the Heights (including vital water resources) claiming it to be a new permanent 'buffer zone'⁴; and the United States still maintain strongholds in the south and the east with approximately 2,000 military personnel. The EU's desire for Syria's 'territorial integrity' is also politically volatile since it will require substantial diplomatic or military efforts.

⁴ Confirmed by prime minister Netanyahu on 17 December 2024 (various news outlets).

Migrants are the most practical and possibly urgent aim on the EU's wish list. This showed already in the fact that the EU was prepared in late 2024 after a 13-year anti-Assad policy (the EU and all European countries except the Czech Republic broke off diplomatic relations with Syria.⁵), to [re-engage with the Assad regime](#), with the distinct aim of repatriating Syrian refugees to the EU. After the victory by HTS, Ursula von der Leyen, the president of the European Commission, in her speech, made clear that migration is one of her top priorities in a new EU-Syria policy. From that perspective, the rebuilding of Syria is not merely a humanitarian endeavor but serves the interests of the EU (houses are to be rebuilt for the Syrian refugees to return to; a stable Syria will incite Syrian refugees from the EU to return; a state infrastructure with functioning policing forces is needed to stop migration from elsewhere coming through Syria): this will require substantial EU involvement in Syria's near future.

c. Morocco

In subsequent cases before the European Court of Justice (2016, 2018, 2024), the EU was given a severe dressing down in the way it handled the situation of Morocco and the Western Sahara. Since 1976, Morocco has claimed this region as part of its territory and annexed it in 1979. Both the United Nations [General Assembly](#) and [Security Council](#) and the [International Court of Justice](#) have condemned this annexation, and the international community has not recognized this situation since.

The rulings of the European Court of Justice (ECJ) regarded bilateral agreements between the EU and Morocco. The ECJ ruled in [2016](#) and [2018](#) that such agreements are invalid because Morocco cannot contract on behalf of Western Sahara since it does not legally administer it. By consequence, if such agreements included the territory of Western Sahara, they are only allowed when the people of the territory have consented thereto. When the EU conducted a survey among the people of Western Sahara and concluded that such consent existed, the ECJ in [2024](#) declared this not sufficient since the EU should have consulted the official representative of the people, which is the Front Polisario.

While these proceedings were taking place, two political decisions breached the international unanimity on the status of the Western Sahara. In 2020, Morocco signed one of the so-called 'Abrahamic' accords with Israel, and in exchange, [the United States](#) "recognized Moroccan sovereignty over the entire Western Sahara territory." In 2024, four weeks after the ruling of the European Court of Justice, [France followed suit](#) and recognized Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara during the same state visit where the two states concluded numerous commercial deals worth approximately 10 billion euros.

d. Migration

Countries in the Middle East have been hosting large numbers of refugees because of the civil wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria. The brunt is on [Lebanon](#) (population 5 million), which hosts approximately 2 million refugees, the vast majority being Syrians, and where Israel's

⁵ Since 2021, Greece, Bulgaria, Cyprus and Hungary have re-opened their diplomatic missions in Damascus.

bombing in the fall of 2024 caused the displacement of over 1 million people. [Jordan](#) (population 11 million) hosts approximately 1.3 million refugees, the vast majority being Syrians.

Since migration has become a top priority for most EU member states, and most migrants are coming from or through the MENA region, the MENA has obtained unprecedented leverage over the EU. This change started with the EU-Turkey 2016 'migrant deal' whereby a large sum of money was paid to keep the borders towards the EU closed for irregular migration. Since then, similar agreements have been made with Egypt, Tunisia, and Mauretania. Jordan is the most recent, with a '[Strategic and Comprehensive Partnership](#)' comprising a € 3 billion financial package that, among others, is to be used for 'border management' and 'durable solutions' for refugees and migration.

The pragmatism-over-principle in these agreements is illustrated in the case of Egypt: in 2013, the Egyptian military under the leadership of General Sissi staged a coup, ousting the democratically elected president Morsi and [killing 1,000 demonstrators in one day](#), but the EU clearly felt that migration should take priority, resulting in formal visits by the leaders of the EU, Germany, France, Italy. The result was large annual payments to Egypt to stop the thoroughfare of any migrant from Africa, starting with 60 million in 2017 and a 4-year € 7.4 billion [aid package in 2024](#).

2. The Influence of Far-Right Politics on European Policies Towards the MENA Region

Far-right politics may be defined as the call for a return to national authenticity and opposition to perceived restrictions of the rule of law, whether nationally or internationally. Given the increasing popularity of these politics and their [latest electoral victories](#) in Europe, this will have several effects on EU policies towards the MENA region.

Firstly, the call for a return to a national authenticity has found its main expression in anti-migrant rhetoric, with the claim that non-Western migration poses a threat to the social fabric of European societies. The resulting national anti-migration policies in most EU member states have also become a top priority for the EU. Consequently, 'migration' is seen as a security issue rather than as a demographic and economic issue. The combination of these two - migration as a top priority and migration as a security issue - has become dominant in EU policy towards the MENA region.

Secondly, far-right politics regards the rule-based order as restrictive to their political agenda. This also translates into the international domain: humanitarian principles or international law are considered invasive to national interests. This puts pressure on the EU foreign policy to be more pragmatic, aggressively self-interested, and less principled. This is shown in the aforementioned migration agreements with MENA countries.

Thirdly, far-right politics have a distinct anti-Muslim and Islamophobic discourse which, once it permeates EU politics more than it already does, may have a negative impact on the quality as well as quantity of any EU initiatives vis-a-vis the MENA region.

3. Energy Security Concerns and Economic Interests in European Decision-Making

As trade statistics show, the EU is more important to the MENA region than the other way around. The [total trade volume](#) of the EU has, in the past decade, risen from 4 to 6.5 trillion euros. The average [trade volume with the MENA region](#) is 300 to 500 billion euros, which is 0.07 percent of the total EU trade volume.

An exception is energy resources. While the reduction of oil is foreseen in the near future, the European demand for gas is increasing. After Russia, the largest gas reserves known today are to be found in the Gulf, with Iran and Qatar ranking number 2 and 3 and Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates ranking 5 and 7 on the [list of world reserves](#). The MENA region, in particular the Gulf, is estimated to hold 41 percent of the world's natural gas reserves. According to most analysts, one of the reasons for Russia to get militarily engaged in the Syrian civil war was to thwart Qatar from building a pipeline to Europe (which would inevitably lead through Syria) and hence maintain the Russian monopoly on supplying gas to Europe. With the EU's boycott of Russia, Qatar has gained a prominent position as a gas supplier, as showed in the large presence of EU leaders during the 2022 soccer World Cup in Qatar, regardless of mounting criticism at home of human rights violations in Qatar. But while Qatar may be among the largest holders of gas reserves, [North Africa exported 2023](#) more gas to the EU (14.1%) than Qatar (5.3%).

Also, gas reserves have been found in the Eastern Mediterranean, including the maritime territories of Turkey, Lebanon, Israel, and Palestine. Confrontations have already taken place in 2020 between EU member states Turkey and Greece, prompting France to [alert its navy](#). Israel made use of the Gaza situation to award [gas exploration licenses](#) to foreign companies in regions that are said to belong to the maritime territory of the State of Palestine, causing said State to issue [legal threats](#) against these companies.

Another commodity that the MENA region does have to offer is the workforce: more than half of the population is [younger than 22 years](#), from a European perspective, that can either be considered a (migration) threat that needs to be contained or a potential that needs to be tapped into. Investments into labor-intensive projects may then be an area of interest.

Recommendations and Policy Options

In implementing their policies in the MENA region, the EU, as well as MENA governments, will make use of NGOs. For them, this policy brief offers the following recommendations:

- It is recommended that the EU is made aware that its position towards Israel and, to a lesser extent Morocco, is not merely regional politics but may have a global impact since the EU has always positioned itself as the upholder of the international legal order, a contrary position can be detrimental, not only to the image of the EU but also to the prestige of international law and international courts.
- With the latest developments over Ukraine (February 2025 summits and meetings in Munich, Paris, and Ryad), it has once more become clear that the EU is primarily focused on Ukraine and much less on Gaza. It is recommended that efforts be made to keep the political, legal, and humanitarian situation in Gaza and other Occupied Palestinian Territory tabled in Brussels.
- The EU and the MENA region have a history of entering accords whereby both sides have very different interests, resulting in a lack of reciprocity, which may be the reason that these arrangements often do not work out. It is recommended that the EU is made aware of the benefits of a more long-term strategy based on constructive and mutually beneficial cooperation with the MENA region.
- Both the EU and the MENA are facing crises, albeit of a very different nature. It is recommended that both sides are well-informed about the backgrounds of each other's crises so that policies can be understood and anticipated.
- There is a trend of 'securitization' in the EU's foreign policy towards the MENA region: a variety of issues, as diverse as migration, health, democracy, and economy, are often discussed in terms of security. It is recommended that NGOs, in their dealings with the EU, make an effort to disengage basic humanitarian needs and rights from security issues to avoid needless complications of the issue at hand.
- The EU's foreign policy towards the MENA region is increasingly characterized by 'nexuses,' that is, the linkage of ostensibly different issues: migration with security, education with democracy, etc. It is recommended that NGOs that are engaged to work on a particular topic are aware that their collaboration may be part of a larger nexus.

