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Strengthening Civil Society in Euro-MENA Relations Amid a Changing Global Order

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Introduction

In 2016, Volker Perthes, a German foreign policy expert on MENA, predicted that Donald Trump's first presidency would weaken liberal values, cause a decline in multilateral cooperation, and a shift towards economic nationalism. Eight years later these anticipated shifts have materialized, with the U.S. prioritizing transactional diplomacy, sidelining allies in key negotiations, and embracing protectionist trade policies. President Trump's return to office is challenging the foundations of the post-Cold War international order and compelling Europe to redefine its global role.

In this evolving context, the EU's foreign policy faces a critical choice: continue a securitized, pragmatic approach that prioritizes stability at the expense of governance reforms and human rights promotion; or reinvest in rights-based partnerships that uphold European influence and credibility as a global advocate for human rights and the rule of law.

This policy brief argues that supporting civil society in MENA, and more broadly across the Global South, is not only a moral imperative but a strategic shift for the EU's long-term security and diplomatic influence. Over the past two decades, the EU's approach to MENA has moved from a foreign policy centered on democracy promotion and civil society engagement to one dominated by migration control, counterterrorism, and energy security. This shift has deepened the EU's credibility gap in the Global South, particularly in MENA, where perceptions of European double standards have eroded trust. The EU's divided and contradictory approach to the war in Gaza, in contrast to its firm stance on Ukraine, has reinforced long-standing grievances about the selective application of international law and human rights.

As the global order fractures and new power alignments emerge, the EU must go beyond rhetoric and demonstrate a genuine commitment to a rights-based order. Rebuilding credibility requires prioritizing justice, human dignity, and inclusive partnerships, not just in words but through concrete policy shifts that align with its foundational principles.

This brief reviews the EU foreign policy shifts in its Southern Neighborhood, the challenges facing civil society in MENA, and the policy options available to the EU for restoring a balanced and strategic approach that integrates security and economic interests with democratic governance and human rights protections.

The Evolution of EU Foreign and Security Policy (2003–2024): Implications for Civil Society

Over the past two decades, the European Union's approach to the MENA region has evolved from a focus on democratization and civil society engagement to a more transactional, security-first strategy. Initially, the EU prioritized multilateralism, human rights, and economic integration as key pillars of its engagement, but by 2024, it had largely shifted toward pragmatic state partnerships centered on migration control, counterterrorism, and energy security. As a result, civil society organizations (CSOs) in MENA have been increasingly marginalized, facing reduced financial support and fewer opportunities to influence policymaking. This shift has had long-term consequences for governance, stability, and human rights in the region.

2003–2016: From Democratization to Stability-Driven Engagement

In 2003, the European Security Strategy (ESS) established a vision for EU external relations based on UN-led multilateral cooperation, democracy promotion, and economic integration. Building on the Barcelona Process (1995), the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP, 2004) sought to create a structured framework for EU-MENA relations, encouraging economic reforms while promoting political liberalization and good governance. These initiatives integrated civil society into policy discussions, supporting independent media, judicial transparency, and human rights advocacy.

However, despite these ambitions, global developments since 2003, including rising instability in the Middle East and challenges posed by global terrorism, forced the EU to reassess its strategic outlook. By 2008, the Report on the Implementation of the European Security Strategy acknowledged the shifting geopolitical landscape, emphasizing the need for the EU to adapt its foreign policy tools to new security challenges, including energy security, cyber threats, and regional instability. Despite these adjustments, the EU continued to position soft power, strategic partnerships rooted in human rights, and the principle of human security at the core of its external action. The EU's emphasis on multilateralism and conflict prevention remained central, reflecting its broader commitment to stability through diplomacy rather than coercion.

However, tensions between normative aspirations and pragmatic security concerns increasingly shaped EU policies, creating a growing between rhetoric and practice. Governments in MENA remained key EU partners, receiving substantial economic aid and security cooperation despite poor governance records.

The Arab uprisings of 2011 momentarily shifted this dynamic. Initially, the EU expressed strong support for democratic movements, increasing funding for election monitoring, judicial reform, and grassroots civic organizations. However, as democratic transitions faltered and instability spread, the EU's approach changed. By 2014, the collapse of Libya, Syria's ongoing civil war, and the rise of ISIS had created a security crisis that overshadowed the EU's commitment to political reforms. The 2015 refugee crisis further reshaped EU priorities, as concerns over migration management, counterterrorism, and border security overtook the focus on governance reforms.

As a result, the 2016 EU Global Strategy (EUGS) redefined its approach by adopting "resilience" as a guiding principle for external action. Rather than actively promoting a transformative agenda, the EU then implicitly acknowledged that states and societies needed to show a willingness to reform. As a result, support for CSOs became less about fostering political change and more about service delivery, particularly in refugee assistance and counter-extremism programs. While funding for civil society remained, its political role was increasingly constrained, as governments in MENA tightened legal restrictions on NGOs.

2016–2024: Security and Economic Pragmatism Over Rights-Based Engagement

By 2024, the EU's engagement in MENA has been shaped by security concerns, energy dependencies, and migration pressures. The EU's evolving foreign policy has prioritized economic and military partnerships over human rights and democratic governance, further marginalizing civil society actors in the process.

One of the most significant shifts has been the externalization of migration control, and the intensification of security practices.¹ The 2015-2016 wave of migration, with over one million migrants from MENA, tested the EU's operational and technical capabilities, as well as solidarity among Member States. The EU forged bilateral migration agreements with MENA countries, offering financial incentives in exchange for stricter border controls and enhanced security cooperation to curb irregular migration. These agreements, negotiated at the state level, funneled resources directly to security agencies, with minimal to no engagement from civil society organizations advocating for migrant rights and humanitarian protections. Critics argue that, instead of pursuing a long-term, comprehensive strategy based on balanced partnerships, as the

¹ The Securitization Framework (Ole Weaver and Barry Buzan) contends that security issues do not exist as *such*, but that there are issues that are socially constructed as security threats. In this framework, securitization is a process of constructing a shared understanding of what is to be considered and collectively responded to as a threat. In Léonard, S., and C. Kaunert. 2020. "The Securitisation of Migration in the European Union: Frontex and Its Evolving Security Practices." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*.

Barcelona Process once did, this reactive securitization approach risks damaging the EU's credibility.²

Simultaneously, with Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 disrupting global energy markets, the EU has sought to diversify its energy sources, leading to increased investment in North African gas reserves and Gulf-state hydrogen projects. This shift in economic priorities has also deprioritized governance reforms, as Europe has become more reliant on MENA partners for energy security.

Another critical development during this period has been the expansion of the European Defense Union and counterterrorism cooperation. As concerns over terrorism and hybrid warfare grew, the EU deepened its security engagement with MENA governments, increasing military assistance, intelligence-sharing agreements, and surveillance technology transfers. Funding once allocated to human rights initiatives was redirected to state security forces, reducing civil society's role in shaping security policies. In many cases, EU-backed counterterrorism measures were used by governments to justify crackdowns on political opposition, independent media, and human rights defenders.

Last but not least, the Global Gateway Initiative has cemented the EU's political shift with an economic instrument. While not explicitly a democracy promotion tool, the EU presents it as a vehicle for upholding democratic standards through investment. Launched in 2021 as Europe's alternative to China's BRI, the initiative has faced scrutiny for prioritizing EU corporate and geopolitical interests over development objectives. With a target of €300 billion in investments by 2027, more than 60% of projects benefit European corporations, raising concerns over aid misallocation. Its sectoral focus skews toward climate (49%) and transport (22%), while health (9%) and education (7%) receive significantly less attention, underscoring a disconnect from poverty reduction efforts. The initiative's reliance on loans risks deepening debt burdens in vulnerable countries, while human rights and environmental issues, such as water-intensive hydrogen projects in arid regions, further challenge its credibility. Civil society remains largely excluded, with limited transparency and participation in decision-making, raising questions about the initiative's long-term sustainability and inclusivity.

This shift from a rights-based approach to security and economic pragmatism has significant long-term risks. While it has provided short-term political stability and economic gains, it has weakened the EU's credibility as a defender of human rights and democratic governance. Moreover, excluding civil society from policy discussions has reinforced non-democratic governance in MENA, increasing the likelihood of future social unrest.

Civil Society in MENA: Current Challenges and Risks

Civil society in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has long played a crucial role in advocating for human rights, transparency, social justice, and sustainable development. However, sociopolitical transformations in the region have led to a shrinking space for civil society organizations (CSOs) to operate. This section outlines the major challenges facing civil society in MENA, particularly in the context of EU-MENA relations.

Political and Legal Restrictions on Civil Society in MENA

One of the most significant barriers to civil society engagement in MENA is the increasingly restrictive political and legal environment in which these organizations operate. Governments across the region have enacted laws and regulations that limit the ability of CSOs to receive foreign funding, organize politically, or engage in human rights advocacy.

Governments across MENA have enacted restrictive NGO laws that impose tight state oversight on civil society organizations. These legal frameworks heavily regulate or outright criminalize

² Pavia, A. (2024). *Beyond the Mediterranean: EU policy on North African migration*. Wilson Center. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/uploads/documents/Future-Euro-MENA-Final.pdf>

foreign-funded NGOs, requiring government approval for funding applications, restricting foreign partnerships, and creating bureaucratic obstacles that hinder registration and operations.

At the same time, vague and broadly defined laws on cybercrime, national security, and counterterrorism are frequently weaponized to prosecute activists and silence dissent, turning civil society engagement into an increasingly risky endeavor.

Beyond legal barriers, state co-optation of civil society is a growing concern. Many governments favor and finance government-aligned NGOs (GONGOs) that act as extensions of state power rather than independent advocates for citizens' rights.³ As a result, genuine civil society organizations are sidelined from policymaking and governance, limiting their ability to influence reforms or hold authorities accountable. This exclusion also extends to grassroots mobilization and protest movements, which are often heavily restricted or outright criminalized. In countries where mass protests have historically challenged governments, authorities deploy security forces to suppress demonstrations, frequently using excessive force to intimidate activists and deter public participation.

As governments tighten control over civil society, mobilization becomes increasingly difficult, forcing many activists and organizations to self-censor, operate underground, or go into exile. These political and legal constraints not only erode democratic engagement but also accelerate the broader decline of civic freedoms across the region.

Economic and Structural Barriers

In addition to political and legal hurdles, declining international support, restrictive financial regulations, and worsening economic conditions have placed CSOs under immense pressure, limiting their ability to operate independently and advocate effectively.

One of the most significant challenges is the shift in donor priorities. The EU and other Western donors, once key supporters of governance and democracy programs, have redirected funding towards security cooperation and migration control, drastically reducing available resources for civil society. This shift has left many organizations struggling to maintain their operations, particularly those advocating for human rights, transparency, and political reforms, which no longer align with the dominant funding agenda.

Beyond shrinking donor support, banking restrictions pose another major hurdle. In recent years, financial regulations aimed at preventing terrorism financing have disproportionately impacted independent CSOs, making it difficult for them to access banking services or receive foreign grants. Governments often use these restrictions as a pretext to freeze accounts or deny financial transactions, further crippling civil society efforts.

Economic instability across the region has also forced many activists and civil society workers to abandon their work in search of financial stability. High unemployment rates and inflation have made it increasingly difficult to sustain long-term engagement, especially for those who rely on civil society work as their primary livelihood. In Lebanon, Tunisia, and Egypt, economic crises have triggered a brain drain, as many skilled activists migrate abroad due to the lack of economic opportunities and worsening living conditions.

Another significant challenge lies in the disconnect between localization efforts and the realities of development funding structures. Despite EU and other donors' commitments to shift resources to local actors, bureaucratic grant processes continue to favor large INGOs and government-affiliated agencies, making it difficult for local independent and grassroots organizations to access direct funding. At the same time, short-term, project-based funding cycles prioritize donor-driven priorities

³ Toukan, D. M. (2024). *Improving the effectiveness of EU democracy assistance in the MENA: Supporting civil society in Jordan*. Wilson Center. Retrieved from <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/uploads/documents/Future-Euro-MENA-Final.pdf>

over long-term, locally led development, forcing CSOs to constantly pivot their focus to secure financial stability rather than invest in sustainable, community-driven initiatives.

As financial pressures intensify, civil society in MENA remains trapped in a cycle of dependency and precarity, unable to access the consistent, flexible, and independent funding needed to function effectively. This undermines their role in promoting democratic governance and human rights, further weakening their ability to drive meaningful reform.

Social and Cultural Challenges Facing Civil Society in MENA

Beyond legal and financial constraints, civil society organizations (CSOs) in MENA face deep-seated social and cultural challenges that further limit their effectiveness and legitimacy. One of the most pervasive obstacles is public distrust, fueled by government propaganda. Governments in the region actively portray CSOs as agents of foreign interference, using state-controlled media and official rhetoric to delegitimize their work and erode public trust. In some cases, religious and nationalist narratives are deployed to frame civil society as anti-national or Western-imposed, reinforcing suspicions that these organizations serve external agendas rather than local communities. This systematic vilification not only isolates CSOs from the populations they seek to support but also makes it easier for governments to justify restrictive policies and repression against them.

Women-led CSOs and feminist movements face even greater barriers, as gender-based restrictions limit their participation in civil society. In many MENA countries, legal constraints, cultural opposition, and state repression make it particularly difficult for women to operate safely. Women activists and leaders are often targeted by both state and non-state actors, facing harassment, threats, and violence as a means of silencing their advocacy efforts. These gendered challenges further restrict the diversity and inclusivity of civil society, weakening its ability to represent and address the needs of all segments of society.

As a result, CSOs in MENA must not only navigate restrictive legal frameworks and financial hardships but also overcome societal skepticism and gendered obstacles that limit their reach and impact.

Why Civil Society Matters for Euro-MENA Relations

The European Union stands at a crossroads, facing global realignments that threaten its strategic relevance and credibility. Military expansion is neither financially viable nor a sustainable response to these challenges. Instead of mirroring the hard power strategies of other global actors, Europe's strength lies in reinforcing its foundational values, democracy, human rights, and multilateralism. To reaffirm its role as a credible global actor, the EU must shift away from securitized, reactive policies and embrace instead a rights-based foreign policy that fosters alignment with democratic forces in the Global South. A step in this direction is strengthening civil society in MENA, ensuring that the EU's external engagements not only reflect its values but also build lasting partnerships rooted in governance, accountability, and local empowerment.

- This approach entails more than financial assistance. It requires the EU to engage in **genuine partnerships with local actors**, ensuring that aid aligns with the specific needs and contexts of MENA societies. Such collaboration not only empowers communities but also enhances the EU's credibility as a partner committed to sustainable development and human rights.
- A key step in this strategic realignment is to **balance security with governance priorities**, ensuring that counterterrorism and migration policies do not come at the expense of civic freedoms. Embedding governance reforms into security partnerships and including civil society in EU-MENA security and migration dialogues will be essential to preventing a purely transactional approach that sidelines human rights concerns.

- Politically, the EU must **elevate civil society** as a key actor in EU-MENA relations, embedding CSOs in policy dialogues and using diplomatic leverage to push back against restrictive NGO laws.
- Addressing social and cultural barriers will be essential for rebuilding trust with democratic actors in the Global South. Expanding independent media and digital literacy programs to counter disinformation, supporting gender-focused civil society initiatives, and investing in localized trust-building efforts will reinforce the legitimacy of civic engagement and demonstrate Europe's commitment to human rights and democracy.

By placing civil society in MENA at the center of its foreign policy, the EU can rebuild its credibility as a values-driven actor on the global stage. A genuine commitment to human rights and democratic governance has the potential to strengthen its alliances in the Global South and build long-term stability and sustainable partnerships in MENA and beyond.

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