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Euro-MENA Initiative for Democracy and Development
ARDD Europe



مركز النهضة الاستراتيجي
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The MENA Region and Europe after 7th October, 2023: Impact and Policy Options

Strategic Directions for Euro-MENA Initiative for Democracy and Development



Introduction

The events following the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, and Israel's massive military response have upended long-standing assumptions that the conflict can be indefinitely managed. The prevailing strategy of accommodating Israeli policies while sidelining Palestinian rights has collapsed under the weight of unprecedented violence in Gaza and the West Bank, driven by Israel's most hardline government to date and backed by U.S. and Western support. Regionally, the fallout has extended beyond Palestine, with political implications in Lebanon due to escalating confrontations involving Hezbollah, rising tensions with Iran, and mounting friction between Israel, Turkey, and Syria over attacks on Syrian territory against its transitional government.

In Europe, the war exposed sharp divisions. While many states continue to offer unconditional support to Israel, a growing number are voicing concern over its blatant disregard for international law, prompting broader questioning of Western double standards. For the MENA region, the war has rekindled widespread opposition to normalization with Israel in the absence of a just resolution to the Palestinian question, which remains central to Arab political consciousness. At the same time, the crisis has reignited debate over Palestinian political representation and the deepening Fatah-Hamas divide.

The return of President Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency adds a layer of unpredictability, with implications for transatlantic relations, regional alignments, and U.S. policy toward Israel and its neighbors. In this context, the Arab Renaissance for Democracy and Development (ARDD) convened a workshop in Amman on February 25–26, 2025, titled *The MENA Region and Europe after 7 October 2023: Impact and Policy Options*, to examine the broader geopolitical implications and identify pathways for renewed Euro-MENA cooperation. The event marked the launch of ARDD's new Brussels-based affiliate, the Euro-MENA Initiative for Democracy and Development. This report captures key insights from the two-day workshop. It sets out strategic recommendations to guide the new organization's work within a more inclusive, rights-based, and forward-looking framework.

Key Challenges in Euro-MENA Relations

1. Geopolitical Shifts and the Crisis of Multilateralism

Erosion of Multilateralism and the International Law-based Order. The global multilateral system is under increasing strain, with rising power rivalries and selective enforcement of international norms eroding the international law-based order. Within the EU, internal divisions and conflicting national interests have weakened its ability to act cohesively in foreign policy, as revealed by the war on Gaza, which has exposed deep fractures over Israel's military actions, humanitarian aid, and accountability, prompting accusations of double standards, especially when contrasted with the EU's unified stance on Ukraine. Simultaneously, the rise of far-right politics has shifted European foreign policy toward national security and economic pragmatism, often at the expense of multilateral values. In the MENA region, many governments have shown limited capacity or political will to uphold international legal norms, with responses to the war on Gaza ranging from symbolic gestures to strategic silence and little evidence of coordinated regional action.

In parallel, the growing number of states recognizing Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara reflects a broader trend of selective engagement with international law, echoing the double standards evident in the response to Israel-Palestine. An assessment of the current landscape must therefore acknowledge the failures and inconsistencies on both sides of the EU-MENA partnership, as well as the broader global trend away from principled multilateral engagement.

A Shifting Global Order. Global power dynamics in the MENA region are shifting as new and returning actors, including China, the US, Israel, and the Gulf states, reshape regional alliances and influence. China has deepened its economic engagement in the region through infrastructure investments and trade agreements, offering an alternative to traditional European partnerships. Under President Trump's administration, the US has once again reoriented its MENA policy to prioritize transactional diplomacy, disengaging from traditional multilateral efforts while securing bilateral deals that favor its interests. This shift was particularly evident during the first Trump administration in the Abraham Accords, which formalized diplomatic relations between Israel and several Arab states, marking a significant restructuring of regional power dynamics without significant European involvement that has now been revived. Meanwhile, Israel has become more assertive in shaping regional policies, particularly in relation to security and intelligence cooperation with Gulf states, further sidelining Europe's influence. Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar have strengthened their positions as regional power brokers, engaging in diplomatic initiatives and economic ventures that operate independently of Western influence. The influence of the Iran-led "Axis of Resistance" appears to have been shrinking since October 7. The EU's inability to adapt to these changes has led to a steady decline in its strategic leverage as MENA countries increasingly diversify their international alliances.

EU's Securitized Approach. Over the last decade, the EU's focus in MENA has narrowed to security and migration control, shifting away from broad economic and political cooperation. Policies initially designed to manage the Arab uprisings and the Syrian refugee crisis have evolved into restrictive border control agreements with Turkey, Egypt, Tunisia, and Jordan, prioritizing containment over addressing the root causes of displacement. This securitized approach, aggravated by the rise of far-right politics in Europe, has further marginalized civil society engagement, deprioritized governance reforms, and weakened democracy promotion efforts.

Risking Relevance. As a result, the EU's influence in shaping political reform has diminished. While once a key driver of socio-economic development programs, European aid is now largely directed toward counterterrorism and border security, leaving civil society and local actors with reduced agency over development efforts. Many in the MENA region see Europe as an unreliable partner, focused on crisis management rather than long-term resilience. Without a recalibrated strategy that integrates economic cooperation, governance reforms, and multilateral diplomacy, the EU risks losing further relevance in the region, ceding space to emerging global powers offering alternative political and economic frameworks.

2. Political Transformations & Regional Instability

The MENA region is undergoing significant political shifts, with countries facing internal crises that threaten regional stability. While some governments are attempting to consolidate power, others remain locked in political deadlock or violent conflict, exacerbating humanitarian crises and inviting external influence. These ongoing transformations highlight the urgent need for a long-term, strategic approach to governance and regional cooperation.

The question of **Israel-Palestine** has reached a critical juncture. The war on Gaza has led to an unprecedented humanitarian catastrophe and political crisis. Displacement, destruction, and escalating violence against Palestinians in the West Bank have heightened tensions in neighboring countries. The International Court of Justice's 2024 advisory opinion, backed by the UN General Assembly, marks a shift in the global approach, calling not for negotiated compromise but for an unconditional end to occupation and apartheid, and obliges states not to recognize or support it. Yet, nearly a year later, enforcement remains absent. Meanwhile, the Abraham Accords, boosted by a returning Trump administration, have realigned regional diplomacy in Israel's favor, as European governments remain divided and hesitant. Civil society and legal activism are gaining momentum, pushing for accountability and humanitarian action, even as many states intensify repression by targeting activists and criminalizing solidarity with Gaza.

Syria remains highly volatile, with violent sectarian strife marking perhaps a bloody episode during the current transitional government. The new government, led by Ahmed al-Sharaa, aims to stabilize the country while facing resistance from various factions, including Kurdish and Druze, who are seeking their place in the emerging state while exploring autonomy and negotiating with regional and international actors for security guarantees. The economy remains devastated, with inflation and collapsing infrastructure worsening conditions for millions. Syria's instability continues to affect its neighbors, particularly Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq, which face security and economic spillover effects.

Lebanon is trapped in a deep economic and political crisis, with government paralysis and financial collapse fueling public unrest. The presence of nearly two million Syrian refugees has become a political flashpoint, with increasing pressure on return despite unsafe conditions in Syria. Hezbollah is recalibrating its military and political strategies in response to shifting regional alliances while Lebanon's economy continues to deteriorate, further straining social cohesion and stability.

Iraq is navigating internal and external pressures as it balances its relationships with Iran, the Gulf states, and the United States. While seeking to position itself as a stabilizing force, Iraq faces persistent security threats, economic struggles, and sectarian divisions. The evolving power dynamics in Syria and Lebanon further complicate Iraq's regional strategy as it works to manage border security and economic instability while preventing the resurgence of extremist groups.

Jordan, traditionally seen as a stable actor in the region, is facing growing economic and social challenges. High unemployment, rising public debt, and increased strain from regional conflicts are testing the government's ability to maintain stability. The refugee crisis continues to impact Jordan's economy, while the war in Gaza has intensified domestic pressure on the government to take a stronger stance on Palestinian issues. Despite these challenges, Jordan remains an active diplomatic player, advocating for political solutions in Syria and Palestine while maintaining strong security ties with Western and Gulf partners.

The **Maghreb** region is experiencing its own set of political and economic upheavals, shaped by internal governance struggles, social unrest, and shifting regional alliances. Once the success story of the Arab Spring, Tunisia is now grappling with democratic backsliding, economic distress, and growing

political repression. While external actors, including the EU, initially supported Tunisia's democratic transition, recent developments and a lack of commitment have strained relations with European partners. Meanwhile, Libya remains fragmented, with competing factions fighting for power and foreign and regional influence further complicating the prospect of national reconciliation. The absence of a unified government and ongoing militia activity continue to destabilize the country and its neighbors. Sudan's ongoing conflict, marked by internal divisions between military factions and civilian forces, supported by regional actors, threatens regional stability, fueling displacement and humanitarian crises that spill over into North Africa. Across the region, economic stagnation, youth unemployment, and migration pressures are compounding political instability, requiring a strategic recalibration of EU-Maghreb relations to move beyond security concerns and towards economic partnerships, governance reforms, and civil society engagement.

3. The Role of Civil Society & Diminishing Democratic Space

Diminishing Space. Civil society across the MENA region is facing mounting restrictions that hinder its capacity to advocate for human rights, democratic governance, and social justice. In many countries, authorities have tightened legal and administrative frameworks to control NGOs, criminalize foreign funding, and expand the surveillance of civic actors. These measures are often justified in the name of national security or counterterrorism, creating a hostile environment that forces many organizations into self-censorship or informal operations. European policies have, at times, exacerbated this trend, particularly through the externalization of migration control and security cooperation with authoritarian regimes, which prioritize state stability over civic freedoms. Meanwhile, in Europe itself, civil society actors working on Israel-Palestine face increasing pressure, with NGOs and individuals critical of Israeli policies subjected to censorship, funding cuts, or legal threats.

Challenging Environment. Despite playing a crucial role in mobilizing social movements and advocating for reform, youth and women-led initiatives face systemic challenges that limit their impact. Many grassroots organizations struggle with access to funding, as international donors increasingly prioritize state-led projects over direct support for civil society. Additionally, youth activists face generational barriers in decision-making processes, where traditional political structures remain dominated by older elites. Women-led organizations, in particular, face not only financial difficulties but also social and legal constraints that limit their ability to operate. Gender-based restrictions and targeted repression against female activists create additional hurdles, further marginalizing their role in public discourse. Without targeted support, these movements risk losing their momentum and effectiveness.

EU's Shifting Priorities. MENA civil society actors remain underrepresented in European policy discussions as the EU shifts from direct engagement with independent organizations to a state-centric model focused on security and diplomatic partnerships. Funding for human rights and democracy programs has declined, redirected toward migration control and counterterrorism, weakening civil society's role in advocating for governance reforms. The Global Gateway is one example reflecting this shift, prioritizing state-led infrastructure and corporate investment over grassroots engagement, leaving local organizations sidelined from decision-making. This growing disconnect between European policymakers and MENA civil society limits the EU's influence in promoting democratic governance and human rights in the region.

4. Europe's Role & Policy Dilemmas

Security-Driven Approach. The European Union's approach to the MENA region has been increasingly defined by short-term security concerns, migration management, and economic partnerships, often at

the expense of long-term governance and human rights considerations. While the EU remains a significant actor in the region, its responses to key MENA challenges have been fragmented and inconsistent.

Balancing Conditionality and Engagement. A central tension in EU-MENA relations lies in the balance between political conditionality and pragmatic engagement. While there have been calls for a revised EU strategy for the Southern Mediterranean, particularly emphasizing democratic governance and human rights, the reality on the ground suggests that economic interests and migration control remain primary drivers of EU policy. This has led to an approach that marginalizes civil society actors, limiting their role in shaping policy discussions and contributing to sustainable governance solutions. Moreover, while sanctions and restrictive measures have been applied to regimes violating international law, there is often a lack of clear enforcement mechanisms and coordinated diplomatic engagement to ensure meaningful political change.

Meaningful Localization. EU humanitarian and development assistance also faces growing scrutiny, particularly in relation to the balance of power between donors and local communities. In many cases, aid flows are directed through government-controlled mechanisms or large international organizations, reducing the ability of local actors to exercise agency over rebuilding and development efforts. This has fueled frustrations within MENA civil society, which sees European engagement as increasingly transactional rather than transformative. Calls for greater local ownership of aid programs and a recalibration of the EU's development assistance model highlight the need for a more inclusive approach that prioritizes governance reforms, human rights protections, and economic sustainability.

A Shifting Europe. Europe's internal political shifts, including the rise of far-right parties and increasing public skepticism toward foreign aid, have influenced its external engagement with MENA. Debates over migration and security dominate European policy discussions, often overshadowing broader strategic interests such as economic cooperation, regional stability, and democratic governance. As a result, European policies have, at times, contradicted stated commitments to human rights and international law, weakening the EU's credibility as a normative power in the region.

This contradiction is evident in the EU Commission's latest proposal to externalize migration and asylum claims, part of the 2023 Migration and Asylum Pact. While the EU presents itself as a champion of high asylum standards, this initiative, which involves outsourcing rejected asylum seekers to third countries, marks a significant regression in the Union's commitment to international protection. It reflects a worrying shift toward restrictive migration policies, reinforcing a transactional, security-first approach rather than upholding the EU's self-proclaimed leadership in human rights and asylum protections.

Policy Pathways and Opportunities for Renewed Euro-MENA Cooperation

The challenges facing Euro-MENA relations, ranging from geopolitical realignments and shrinking civic space to inconsistent European policies, highlight the need for a more strategic and inclusive approach. While these obstacles have widened the gap between European institutions and MENA civil society, they also present opportunities for renewed engagement. Strengthening civil society networks, amplifying alternative narratives, fostering intergenerational dialogue, and reinforcing rule-of-law initiatives can help bridge this disconnect.

To achieve this, there is merit in facilitating direct engagement between civil society and policymakers, ensuring that perspectives from local actors shape aid distribution, governance reforms, and

diplomatic relations. The rise of digital activism and youth-led movements further underscores the need for a more intergenerational dialogue and innovative advocacy approach that leverages social media and new political engagement models. Additionally, addressing EU policy dilemmas, such as fragmented responses to conflicts, migration, and reconstruction, requires a recalibrated strategy focused on sustainable partnerships and mutual accountability. By emphasizing governance reforms, human rights protections, and strengthened research collaborations, stakeholders can move beyond crisis management toward a long-term Euro-MENA partnership.

1. Strengthening Civil Society Networks

Building stronger connections between civil society organizations in MENA and Europe is essential for advancing shared advocacy, research, and policy engagement. Strengthening these networks would enable joint initiatives, coordinated advocacy, and knowledge exchange to push for policies that prioritize good governance, human rights, and sustainable development rather than just security and migration control. To achieve this, MENA civil society actors must transition from a reactive to a proactive role in European policy-making spaces, increasing their participation in EU consultations, parliamentary discussions, and research collaborations.

2. Developing Alternative Narratives

Shifting from one-sided narratives to dialogue based on mutual respect for engagement is essential for fostering a more balanced and inclusive EU- MENA relationship. Traditionally, European institutions have dictated the terms of engagement with MENA, often marginalizing local voices. The dominant security-driven framing of MENA in European policy and media must also be countered with alternative narratives that highlight governance, human rights, and local agency rather than reducing the region to migration management and security threats.

Beyond policy circles, civil society actors must engage proactively with media, think tanks, and public institutions to challenge the securitization of migration and governance in EU discourse. Reframing migration as a structural phenomenon rather than a crisis and showcasing civil society as a stabilizing force rather than a threat are key steps in shifting perceptions. Additionally, social media and digital activism provide an opportunity to amplify alternative perspectives, particularly among younger audiences shaping political discourse. Expanding digital advocacy and fostering collaborations with journalists, academics, and influencers will help counter misinformation and promote nuanced, locally-driven narratives.

3. Advancing Intergenerational Dialogue

Younger generations in MENA and Europe have distinct priorities and reference points, shaped by their lived experiences, access to digital platforms, and engagement with social and political issues. Social media, digital activism, and online networks have created new spaces for youth to mobilize, advocate, and shape public discourse, often outside traditional institutions. However, this digital-first approach contrasts with established policy-making structures, where older generations continue to hold decision-making power. Bridging this generational gap is essential to ensuring that youth perspectives are not only acknowledged but also actively influence policy discussions. Understanding these different political and social reference points will allow for more effective engagement, policy innovation, and long-term advocacy strategies that reflect the evolving needs of both regions.

4. Promoting Universal Principles & Localization

Upholding universal principles of justice, accountability, and the rule of law is essential to fostering a more equitable and stable regional order. However, global responses to conflicts in MENA have

frequently been marked by double standards, weakening trust in international legal mechanisms. Promoting models where human rights commitments remain central to policy discussions and civil society voices are actively involved in advocating for legal accountability and governance reforms requires sustained engagement with European and MENA policymakers, international institutions, and human rights organizations to reinforce the credibility of international law and prevent political considerations from undermining legal commitments.

5. Strengthening Collaborations

Strengthening partnerships and cross-regional knowledge production presents a key opportunity for enhancing policy research and informed decision-making on MENA issues. Collaborating with universities and academic centers can bridge gaps in governance, peace-building, and development research, ensuring that studies are informed by local realities rather than external policy assumptions. These partnerships can also serve as a resource for policymakers and civil society actors, equipping them with evidence-based insights to navigate complex regional challenges.

There is also an opportunity to broaden academic and professional training by developing specialized courses, lectures, and research projects that explore critical topics in regional governance, peace-building, and economic development. Expanding access to policy-oriented learning and research initiatives can create pathways for scholars and practitioners from both regions to engage in meaningful discourse, exchange knowledge, and shape future collaboration. Currently, research collaborative schemes such as Horizon Europe with the inclusion of MENA countries as of 2022 is a positive step. Beyond these, establishing internships, fellowships, and joint publications provides emerging researchers and professionals with the chance to contribute to policy discussions while benefiting from academic mentorship and institutional networks.

Beyond academia, policy exchange and youth collaboration present further opportunities for strengthening EU-MENA relations. Creating platforms for engagement between European and MENA policymakers can help translate research into practice, ensuring that insights from scholars and civil society actors inform governance strategies. Additionally, peer networks between MENA and European youth leaders can foster long-term relationships, enabling young professionals to engage in cross-regional discussions on governance, human rights, and sustainable development. These exchanges can help cultivate a new generation of leaders who are better equipped to navigate the evolving dynamics of EU-MENA cooperation.

Strategic Actions for the Euro-MENA Initiative

This section outlines strategic actions for the Euro-MENA Initiative to engage through civil society empowerment, advocacy strategies, intergenerational cooperation, rule-of-law enforcement, and knowledge collaboration.

1. Expanding Civil Society Engagement & Advocacy

The Euro-MENA Initiative in Brussels presents a key opportunity to institutionalize MENA-Europe civil society engagement, serving as a hub for advocacy, policy dialogue, and strategic networking. By facilitating regular exchanges, policy briefings, and partnerships with European institutions, the office can ensure that MENA voices are actively represented in EU decision-making. Strengthening civil society diplomacy through this office will help bridge the gap between grassroots organizations and policymakers, ensuring that civil society-led initiatives gain traction in European discussions on migration, development, and governance. To maximize impact, these efforts must be integrated into

broader civil society networks, leveraging European allies and advocacy groups to push for a more inclusive and equitable EU- MENA relationship.

This can be achieved through:

Facilitating sustained engagement with EU institutions: Establish regular policy briefings, consultation meetings, and advocacy campaigns in Brussels to represent MENA civil society voices in EU decision-making.

Creating a Euro-MENA Civil Society Forum: A recurring platform (virtual or hybrid) where civil society actors from both regions can exchange ideas, coordinate advocacy, and collaborate on joint projects.

Promoting local agency in EU funding: Advocate for funding models that prioritize direct support for MENA civil society organizations rather than state-controlled aid mechanisms.

2. Strengthening Alternative Narratives & Public Engagement

The Euro-MENA Initiative seeks to serve as a platform for dialogue on equal standing and reciprocity, ensuring that MENA perspectives actively shape discussions on policy, governance, and human rights rather than being treated as passive recipients of external decisions. By working with the media, the Euro-MENA Initiative can ensure that local perspectives play a central role in public debates rather than being overshadowed by state-centric narratives.

Strategic actions to this end include:

Develop a strategic communications plan: Invest in dialogue, media engagement, and digital campaigns that challenge dominant security-driven narratives and highlight governance, human rights, and social justice in MENA.

Launch a Euro-MENA Media Hub: Work with journalists, academics, and activists to provide analysis, fact-checking, and alternative reporting on regional developments, ensuring MENA perspectives reach European audiences and vice versa.

Create a cross-regional public initiative: Organize public discussions, cultural exchanges, and citizen dialogues that foster understanding and solidarity between European and MENA societies.

Leverage social media and digital activism: Strengthen youth-led digital campaigns, equipping young activists with skills in media literacy, advocacy, and strategic communication.

Create a digital knowledge hub: Develop an online platform that centralizes research, advocacy materials, and multimedia content on EU- MENA relations, making resources accessible to a broad audience.

3. Fostering Intergenerational & Intercultural Collaboration

The Euro-MENA Initiative seeks to go beyond traditional youth programs by fostering intergenerational exchange through spaces where younger generations engage with and contribute to governance, diplomacy, advocacy, and societal change while drawing on the experience of those before them. As social media and digital culture reshape how youth mobilize and interact with global issues, generational gaps have widened, affecting engagement in areas such as climate action, digital rights, economic inclusion, and social justice. By encouraging the co-development of cross-generational and cross-cultural initiatives in media and civil society and providing platforms for structured dialogue, the Euro-MENA Initiative can help bridge these divides, allowing younger voices to contribute while benefiting from institutional knowledge and historical context.

Launch mentorship programs: Connect experienced civil society leaders with emerging activists, policymakers, and researchers to facilitate knowledge transfer and strengthen advocacy networks.

Develop a Youth & Civil Society Task Force: A structured mechanism for young leaders in MENA and Europe to contribute actively to the Euro-MENA Initiative's programming and advocacy efforts.

Facilitate intergenerational dialogue spaces: Organize structured discussions that bridge generational and cultural divides in policymaking, activism, and governance.

4. Promoting Human Rights and Localization

The Euro-MENA Initiative is committed to advocating for the consistent application of international resolutions and human rights protections in EU-MENA relations, ensuring that human rights protections remain central to diplomatic, development, and security policies. This includes engaging with European and MENA policymakers to uphold commitments to UN treaties, international humanitarian law, and refugee protections while countering selective or inconsistent enforcement.

Supporting grassroots legal advocacy is one strategic action where the Euro-MENA Initiative can provide resources, networking opportunities, and strategic guidance to organizations working on legal empowerment, human rights protection, and justice initiatives.

Beyond legal advocacy, the initiative stresses the importance of localization in humanitarian assistance and reconstruction efforts, ensuring that aid strategies are shaped by local agency rather than external donor priorities. The Euro-MENA Initiative promotes and advocates a localized approach to reconstruction and aid distribution that strengthens governance structures, empowers local actors, and ensures transparency in the design and implementation of humanitarian efforts. By fostering inclusive decision-making in aid and recovery processes, the initiative seeks to move away from dependency-driven assistance toward sustainable, community-led development, ensuring that international aid contributes to long-term stability while reinforcing local ownership and resilience rather than perpetuating cycles of external control.

5. Building Institutional and Research Partnerships

Strengthen collaborations with academic institutions: Work with universities such as Leiden University and other European and MENA institutions to develop policy research, knowledge-sharing platforms, and fellowships.

Develop joint research projects: Focus on themes such as governance, peace-building, digital rights, and migration to ensure evidence-based and locally informed policy debates.

Expand training and internship opportunities: Create professional development pathways for young professionals in civil society organizations, offering fellowships, workshops, and practical learning experiences.

