

MENA and the EU: Contrasting approaches to region, power and order in a shared neighbourhood¹

Introduction

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is an unstable and contested region with high levels of conflict. Given its geopolitical importance, promoting regional order is an international security priority. All regional and external powers profess to share a common commitment to regional order, but have very different views of the region; of order (Hurrell, 2007); how order might be achieved, and which regional powers might be best placed to assist in the process. This is illustrated in the current Syrian conflict where regional powers like Saudi Arabia and Iran profoundly disagree on the origins, nature and possible solutions to the crisis while the EU and external powers (US, Russia) also have different views of the Assad regime, the opposition to that regime and the possible ways forward to stabilise the country. Hence, how major powers behave and interact matters greatly for regional order and a better understanding of the conditions that govern relations between such powers is helpful for scholars and policy makers alike. This article approaches the problem from the perspective of major MENA powers and EU member states. In responding to the three questions guiding this special issue, regarding the strategic objectives, types of interaction and modes of cooperation of different players, it argues that MENA and EU states, historically and at present, have different priorities and understandings of regional order and this poses an obstacle to realizing common objectives and policy coordination. The article identifies the different areas of tension and cooperation among regional powers in the light of attempts to design common strategies, suggesting that where interests align cooperation is likely, where they diverge, a state of relative indifference, competition, or tension prevails.

The article first looks at different understandings of the shared MENA-EU neighbourhood space, showing how these different understandings have complicated the pursuit of regional order among major powers; second it considers the major MENA powers themselves, including the EU as MENA power; finally it analyses joint interactions between the EU and MENA in their shared space before offering

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some concluding recommendations. Given the varied settings and activities that characterize inter-regional relations, the article uses different examples to explore patterns of power relationships across the region over time. It highlights some key theoretical points - drawing from International Relations and regionalism studies - that emerge from the analysis and then concludes with some policy-related suggestions. The article is not intended as a study of the European Union's policies towards MENA – a topic has been the subject of a considerable literature. Rather it offers a reflective analysis of the dynamics governing the regional powers' policies and priorities in their shared space. As such it is directed both towards the behaviour of MENA and EU players, in an attempt to give these equal weight and thus shed light on a less-studied aspect of the neighbourhood relationship.

Whose regional order?

Regional states and the EU have different visions of region and order and how regional order might be achieved. Arab, non-Arab and EU states have all cast their regional policies in normative and liberal institutionalist language – whether in terms of Arab or Islamic solidarity, European integration, or the pursuit of economic and political reform. Yet all have different expectations regarding desired outcomes. For the Arab states, characterized mainly by authoritarian regimes, for whom regime stability is a priority, it is security and material concerns, often expressed bilaterally or through multilateral fora like the Arab League, that take precedence. Despite the influence of identity politics in informing Arab behaviour (Telhami and Barnett 2002), it is ultimately state capabilities and the resulting regional balance of power, established by the major MENA powers, with the support of external allies, that remains the fundamental ordering mechanism. This is borne out by responses to the Arab uprisings which have seen the triumph of individual state interest over collective behaviour.

Individual EU member states share similar concerns about the regional power balance reflecting their historic, economic and strategic interests, though these do not always align with regional states. They also have important relations with non-Arab states, like Iran, which operate outside institutional frameworks. The EU perspective, particularly since the establishment of new foreign policy instruments in the 1990s, emphasises regional priorities in normative and institutional terms, and has sponsored

collective responses accordingly. Hence there are competing and overlapping neighbourhood perspectives to consider: those of MENA and individual European states and those of the EU collective. The resulting mismatch of languages and expectations regarding regional order is sub-optimal for policy coordination. Major powers frequently pursuing their interests in non-institutional, mini-lateral or bilateral settings. Despite instances of cooperation and region-building, the tendency for all parties –despite the collective rhetoric - has been to pursue distinctive pathways: sometimes overlapping, sometimes competitive, in pursuit of particular interests. In the MENA space therefore neighbourhood major powers act in self-serving fashion – talking past rather than to each other. This is a key finding of the article and one that highlights possible areas for improvement as discussed in the conclusion.

A contested neighbourhood

If regional order is a slippery concept so is that of the MENA region itself. There is no denying the Middle East's high geopolitical significance, whether historically or at present (Brown, 2001). However, it is defined differently by insiders and outsiders and these definitions have changed over time. This is important in considering strategic objectives, since if understandings of the neighbourhood – the shared physical space - by local and external actors are neither constant nor coincide, this will constrain effective interactions and policy coordination and helping perpetuate a realist image of the region – of a self-help 'anarchical society' type in English school term (Buzan and Gonzalez Pelaez, 2009).

There have been multiple attempts to define the parameters of the region known as the Middle East. Drawing on the Ottoman legacy, early understandings incorporated the post-Ottoman Arab territories and adjacent areas, parts of which were temporarily controlled by the colonial powers, Britain and France, under the League of Nations mandate system. This contradicted Arab notions of an Arab region based around former Ottoman domains. The term 'Middle East', first used in the late nineteenth century, slipped into use after WW2, suggesting how the region is externally denoted: neither 'near' nor 'far' in relation to Western interests. This definition is therefore, a political statement – one devised by external powers and adopted by the international community and institutions. From Ottoman times it has been locally contested with alternative formulations and understandings conceiving variously of an Arab or

Islamic region, reflecting the culture and religion of its populations rather than geopolitics (Bilgin, 2004). Islamic thinkers have advanced different formulas to maintain the integrity of Islamic peoples (Andraoui, 2017). Barnett (1998) argues the case for a 'dialogue' between Arab states thereby making Arabism an important component of regional identity and purpose. But the Western vision has prevailed: since independence, a common understanding of the MENA region is one that includes the band of 22 Arab states (all members of the League of Arab States) and the non-Arab States of Turkey, Iran and Israel (Fawcett, 2016:3).

This definition is wide and inclusive, incorporating a geographically contained, but otherwise untidy space, including disparate states in terms of size, religion, language and culture. It arguably conforms to the definition of a region based upon the idea of a common 'security complex' (Buzan and Waever, 2003) or a group of states that are geographically proximate and interdependent (Nye, 1968: vii). It does not constitute, however, a security community (Adler and Barnett, 1998: 3-28), a more demanding institutional term, which implies common security understandings and policies.

There is little sense of 'regionness'. Revealingly, it is a region that lacks common institutions, making it hard to imagine it as a unified space and hard to theorise and explain in regional cooperation terms (Aarts, 1998). In contrast with other regions like Africa, Europe and the Americas, there is no pan-regional organization. The League of Arab States (LAS) is exclusively Arab; the Islamic Conference Organization (ICO), comprises Islamic states, but unrestricted to MENA; other Arab organizations are sub-regional – the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), for example; indeed many interactions that take place in MENA are precisely focused upon such sub-regional spaces.

The absence of any overarching institutional framework, as argued here, is important for understanding interactions between regional powers and regional order. It has reinforced the role of outside or neighbouring powers: whether the EU or its constituent member states, the United States and Russia and their propensity to intervene in regional affairs. All have introduced alternative concepts of the region and its hinterlands to suit their interests and policies: hence the Middle East Peace Process or Greater Middle East Initiative became vehicles for US policy; while the European Mediterranean Policy (EMP), Mediterranean Union, and European

Neighbourhood Project (ENP) introduced new axes of engagement between EU and MENA as discussed in a later section. Indeed the modern ‘neighbourhood’ idea of a shared EU-Mediterranean-MENA space addressed here is rather new, deriving from changes in Europe’s foreign and security policy following the Cold War and reflecting new priorities of the southern members. Russia, for its part, has consolidated its regional position on a different axis, partly through the Central Asian regional architecture, but particularly in bilateral settings, through long-standing links with Syria and Iran, and recent relations with states like Saudi Arabia and Israel (Danreuther, 2012). All such arrangements envisage new formulations for the region, though arguably without displacing older patterns and practices, leaving a criss-crossing web of complementary and competitive regional interactions, which tend to work against the realization of any functioning regional system. Hence part of the shared-neighbourhood problem in MENA is precisely how the region and its neighbourhood is defined and instrumentalised; by whom; and for which purpose. Here again, is it argued that absence of alignment among major players remains an obstacle to effective cooperation.

Major powers in MENA

Just as region and order are contested concepts when applied to MENA, so is the question of identifying its major powers, and how power – a ‘troublesome’ concept in International Relations (Gilpin: 1981: 13) - is expressed. Power involves material capabilities, a relationship to others and the ability to influence and others’ policies by either hard or soft power means (Baldwin, 2012). As set out in the introductory article to this special issue, it implies an ability and willingness to lead, and requires others to follow that lead (XXX). Before considering MENA’s major powers and their leadership credentials, two further points should be noted. First, power relations in the region are not constant. From the demise of the Ottoman Empire and the creation of new states after WW1 through to the present, there have been different power configurations in the region and on its periphery. Egypt, following independence in 1922, emerged as major power with a large regional following, and then declined in relative importance. Saudi Arabia, at the time of independence in 1932 was a minor power, but by the 21st century enjoyed a commanding position in the regional power hierarchy, assisted by further changes in the regional power balance introduced by the Iraq War (2003), and the Arab uprisings which disrupted

regional power relations. The non-Arab states of Turkey, Iran and Israel similarly occupy important positions in the regional power hierarchy. Since the Arab uprisings, the power balance has been particularly volatile such that any degree of certainty that existed about the major regional powers in the 20th century has given way to a fluid and fast moving regional environment characterized by rising and falling powers and different contenders for power (Gerges, 2015:17).

Second, partly because the regional environment is competitive and fluid, it has been argued that the Middle East has lacked dominant powers or hegemons (Lustick, 1997). Colonial and Cold War policy was aimed at balancing regional powers and preventing any one state from becoming too dominant. European states wanted to retain their predominance against the competitive aspirations of local and external actors. This competition did not prevent the emergence of major powers, even if it curbed their aspirations to leadership. Indeed Middle Eastern powers, like Saudi Arabia, Iran, Israel and Turkey all have significant capabilities and are often named as 'rising' powers.

Against this background, some contenders for regional power and leadership may be further considered (Fawcett, 2011). Egypt overcame Arab competitors to emerge as a core regional state after independence, one central to regional politics and economics. Unlike some of the newer 20th century state constructions, Egypt is a large, relatively homogeneous state, one that had experienced nationhood from an earlier period. Despite Britain's efforts to tame Egyptian nationalism, and to securitize a 'northern tier' of states in the Baghdad Pact, Egypt under President Nasser assumed a dominant regional role under a Third World and Arab nationalist banner. He challenged British authority over control of the Suez Canal in 1956 and survived two unsuccessful wars with Israel in 1967 and 1973. Egypt was gradually dislodged from this position of predominance after the Nasserite period, with the declining appeal of Arab nationalism, and the Camp David accords with Israel (1979), signed by his successor Sadat, which alienated other Arabs.

Other Arab challengers emerged: notably Iraq and Syria both of whom had pretensions to regional leadership in the wake of Egypt's isolation. Despite their respective bids to assume the mantle of Arab leadership, neither succeeded in building

a cohesive Arab bloc; rather rivalries developed around both Iraq and Syria's regional ambitions. The protracted and ultimately unsuccessful Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988); Iraq's failed bid to annex Kuwait in 1990-91, followed by UN sanctions and the US-led intervention in 2003, not only disabled Iraq as a major power, but also paved the way for significant changes and fractures in the regional balance of power whose effects continue (Fawcett, 2013). Syria, despite its decisive influence in the Lebanese civil war and subsequent Taif Accords, and friendship with post-revolutionary Iran, similarly failed to provide an alternative axis. The Syrian uprising, which started in 2011, continuing civil conflict and external intervention has significantly weakened its capabilities. Smaller states like Jordan and Lebanon have not been in serious contention for regional leadership, yet play a role in any regional balance. In contrast, the oil-rich Gulf states, notably Saudi Arabia, by far the largest of the Arab Gulf monarchies, and one which never experienced direct colonial rule, have had the opportunity to develop leadership roles - both individually, and as part of the GCC - through regime stability, large oil revenues and security arrangements supported externally (Furtig, 2014). Despite tensions arising, for example, over the Saudi origins of some of those implicated in the 9/11 attacks and a perceived absence of Western support in the face of growing regional threats, relations with the West have been more or less continuous, a fact that has assisted their leadership ambitions.

What is interesting about the above power relations is not the *absence* of great powers, but their competitive relations, which militate against leadership or followership. Though aspiring regional leaders sought to generate a consensus about regional norms and shared identity, most states, including Egypt, Iraq, Syria and later Saudi Arabia were interested in projecting their power and used institutions like the LAS, UAR or GCC, for that purpose, not as vehicles for inter-state cooperation. This picture is further complicated when one considers the non-Arab neighbourhood players: Iran, Israel and Turkey. Each impacts on the regional power balance and external relations in important ways.

Nineteenth century Iran was a relatively weak state, subject to the predatory aims of Britain and Russia, but one with considerable potential, given its large territory, population and resources. The Pahlavi Shahs (1925-1979) sought to position Iran as an important regional power particularly during the Cold War. This aspiration

continued despite the revolution and regime change after 1979, but placed Iran on a new, anti-Western axis. The Islamic Republic of Iran today is a vital state to consider in terms of any regional power equation – a potential veto player – in the sense that Iran's actions condition and constrain the actions of other powers. It is the second largest economy in MENA (after Saudi Arabia) and has the second largest population (after Egypt)² and has been a critical element in the regional balance of power over time. It has experienced revolution, war and internal unrest, most recently in the Green Revolution of 2009, but remains relatively robust in comparison to some Arab neighbours. However, any leadership credentials are widely contested by both regional and extra regional powers (Fawcett, 2015).

Turkey, the modern state that emerged from the rump of the Ottoman Empire, quickly became a significant state in an otherwise turbulent region, straddling MENA and Europe. It has been called a bridge state for its pivotal regional position and links to both East and West, and one that has been widely promoted as such until recent domestic unrest, combined with its political outlook has undermined some previous assumptions about Turkey as a regional stabiliser and partner of the West (Larrabee and Lesser, 2003). Turkey was also institutionally stronger than its Arab neighbours, building on the Ottoman legacy, and through the twentieth century cultivated links with Europe and international institutions as well as key MENA powers. Turkey during the 20th century became a major economic power, a NATO member and, until 2016, an aspiring EU one. Turkey, like Iran, is a key player in any regional power equation, mostly well regarded by other powers in the post-Cold War era though its popularity waned somewhat in 2012 in the light of its mixed, even contradictory responses to the Arab Spring. Its relationship with Syria has vacillated, for example, between support and opposition to the Assad regime, though relations with Iran, bolstered by important energy dependence have remained good.

Israel is a regional outlier. Though small it is an obvious regional 'great power' in a material sense: it possesses the economy and military capacity to influence regional outcomes and has frequently exercised it, but Israel is no regional leader (Beck, 2010: 136). Its support base is largely extra-regional – Israel is reliant on US aid and EU

² Iran Overview - World Bank: www.worldbank.org/en/country/iran/overview

trade – though it has bilateral relations with regional states like Egypt and Turkey. Israel’s position makes it another regional veto player. In sum, the current power configuration in MENA sees Saudi Arabia, part of the GCC bloc, as one emerging regional leader, in competition with Iran and those states with ‘friendly’ or Shi’i-led governments forming an alternative axis; Israel as a relative outlier, but a state with whom a number of Arab states are quietly doing business; and Turkey as a state still aspiring to a bridging role, but one which has become harder to play in the midst of its own domestic difficulties and at times ambiguous and contradictory relations with regional players like Syria and Iran.

Regional relations are therefore highly competitive and largely unregulated by any common organization. Despite the presence of a number of regional organizations (see Table 1), these have tended to play secondary roles and have been dominated by the key players named above. Some regional initiatives, like the United Arab Republic, or the Arab Cooperation Council were short-lived; others like the Greater Arab Free Trade Area remain incomplete. Many the region’s interactions with other states take place at the bilateral rather than the inter-institutional level. This is not to say that regional organizations, the LAS, GCC, AMU or ICO, do not matter, or that they do not provide frameworks for policy discussion or functional cooperation (Fawcett, 2016). The LAS has been an important framework for the articulation of Arab interests, though less effective in implementing common policies. It has nonetheless played a role in conflict resolution, for example in Lebanon; and in 2002, endorsed an Arab Peace Proposal in respect of the Israel-Palestine conflict, which remains on the table; both the LAS and GCC offered support to UN Resolutions in respect of intervention in Libya. But, in contrast to the EU, none of the relevant regional organizations, with the possible exception of the GCC, an effective sub-regional organization based on functional intergovernmental cooperation, may be considered as a major power proxy, independent of their powerful member states.

Table 1: Regional groupings/initiatives in MENA

1945	The League of Arab States
1955-79	The Baghdad Pact

1958-61	The United Arab Republic
1971	The United Arab Emirates
1971	Federation of Arab Republics
1971	Islamic Cooperation Organization
1981	Gulf Cooperation Council
1985	Economic Conference Organization
1989	Arab Maghreb Union
1989-91	Arab Cooperation Council
1997	Greater Arab Free Trade Area
2004	Arab Parliament
2011	GCC-LAS support for Libyan intervention
2012	GCC 'Union'

What of the EU as a major regional power, one capable of restructuring the regional space? And should we understand the EU as one or many powers? As noted, it was certain European states, at the time of the break-up of the Ottoman Empire that enjoyed a commanding position in the region. Effectively, these were the major powers, even if the concept of a common neighbourhood did not then apply – this was a hierarchical relationship of power and leadership was provided externally. It was a relationship written into the Versailles Settlement and successor treaties, and a reflection of Europe's global power and standing. France, and particularly Britain, were the dominant regional powers, but other European states, including Italy and Spain, and non-European powers Russia, and further afield the US, were also influential in determining regional outcomes. US President Wilson's message about self-determination, prominent in his 'Fourteen Points' speech, though not designed as a formula for MENA, was nonetheless influential as a counterpoint to colonialism in framing debates about how independent states and their neighbourhoods should be governed.

The above is no historical footnote and had wider implications for emerging regional order, since Britain and France's legacy of power, its imperial connotations and the expectations of (unrealized) Wilsonian ideals, have cast a long shadow and still influence ways of thinking about the region, whether in terms of continuing bilateral

or EU relations (or aspirations to Kurdish independence). It is no coincidence that France, Britain, and to a lesser extent Spain and Italy, independent of collective EU commitments, remained major players in regional politics, visible in respect of the Gulf Wars, relations with Iran and the Arab uprisings. Aspects of this imperial legacy, visible in contemporary relationships, means that Europe remains ‘an empire of sorts’ (Del Sarto, 2015). This fact impacts upon inter-regional relations in different ways and arguably complicates and dilutes the EU’s position as a regional power.

Finally, what of other major powers who impact upon the MENA-EU neighbourhood? The policies of the US, Russia, to a lesser extent China and other so-called ‘rising powers’ all intersect with and impact upon the region’s international relations in multiple ways, and not necessarily in alignment with the EU or the interests of the major local powers. In respect of the US and Russia, what was called ‘superpower overlay’ in the Cold War (Buzan, 1991: 219-20) is now expressed not only by the continuing (if diminished) roles of the US, but also by the post-Soviet regime of Vladimir Putin whose regional interests make Russia, like some of the major powers noted above, a veto-player in the region’s international relations. Russia, like the EU, could be regarded as a neighbourhood power, though its relations with MENA are less institutionalized. Without Russian involvement, two recent multilateral agreements in respect of MENA – the UN-brokered deal to remove and destroy Syria’s chemical weapons in 2013-14 and the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran - might not have been achieved. Meanwhile emerging powers like India, China and Brazil enjoy increasing regional links – China for example is a major player in the MENA energy sector.

The presence of these external actors highlight the extent to which MENA-EU space is a cluttered one in terms of great powers and their interests. It remains a deeply ‘penetrated’ regional system (Carl Brown 1984: 3), a fact that impacts significantly upon neighbourhood relations.

Tracking and explaining MENA-EU interactions

It is against this set of background conditions, and the cross-cutting interests and agendas of major regional and external powers that EU interactions in the MENA neighbourhood should be evaluated. How have such relations evolved; what have been their major characteristics and how effective have they been? And, moving forward, how can or *should* a major power, like the EU, more effectively engage with such a disparate group of states?

A distinction has been drawn already between individual European states and the EU as an institution. Just as there are many possible 'Middle East's' and constituent major powers, there are many 'Europe's'. These different Europe's are interlinked, of course, and individual state preferences invariably inform any common foreign policy position – in MENA as in other regions - but suggest diverging axes of engagement. One example is East-West European divide with the former being comparative late-comers to the region with different interests and priorities. Since the development of a Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) there has been an attempt to portray Europe as a united actor in respect of Middle Eastern policy, particularly in respect of its southern, Mediterranean-focused agenda. But this builds upon a legacy of different historical interests and policies, and the question of how to balance the interests of individual states against the demands for a CFSP remains central and one that has been brought into focus by the crisis within Europe and the Arab Spring respectively (Hadfield et al, 2017: 1).

Individual European states, notably Britain and France, but also Italy and Spain (with colonial interests in North Africa), entered the modern MENA equation as major, indeed defining powers in the early twentieth century, sketching out future territorial, economic and political arrangements for the region. They cast a long shadow. In 2016, the centenary of the infamous 'Sykes-Picot' agreement between Britain and France, outlining a post-war scheme for dividing the Ottoman domains, there were multiple negative references to the role of European powers in laying the foundations for the modern Middle East, disregarding the interests of major regional actors. Without laying the blame for the construction of artificial, and indeed many of today's 'fragile' states entirely at Europe's feet (Fromkin, 2000), it would be no exaggeration to state that the development of all MENA powers, whether inside or

outside Ottoman domains, was directly or indirectly impacted upon by the policies of major European states and this legacy continues to inform contemporary policy.

Britain, independent of its role in the post-war settlement, for historic and strategic reasons retained significant relationships with countries in and around the Gulf area despite the growing presence of the United States (illustrated by Britain's role in Iran, the 1991 Gulf War and then the 2003 Iraq War). Mediterranean Europe, for historical and geographical reasons, has a particular interest in North Africa and those states bordering the Mediterranean (illustrated by Spain's role in the Barcelona Process; or France's role in the Union for the Mediterranean). Similarly, France's relations with Lebanon, Italy's with Libya, Spain's with Morocco, Germany's with Israel are all governed by particular political, historical and geographical contingency. All these historically-informed relationships are important to understanding the legacy carried forward by the EU from the late 20th century and continue to inform and complicate neighbourhood politics.

Table 2: Major EU/shared initiatives in MENA

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|-------------|---|
| • 1974-1979 | Euro-Arab Dialogue |
| • 1988 | EU-GCC Cooperation |
| • 1991 | Madrid Conference leading to Oslo Accords in 1993 |
| • 1995 | Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (Barcelona Process) |
| • 2002 | Quartet (US, UN, EU and Russia) road map for Middle East Peace |
| • 2003 | US invasion of Iraq (support from some EU states) |
| • 2003 | EU3 (UK, France and Germany cooperate to engage Iran) |
| • 2004 | Greater Middle East Initiative (US) |
| • 2004 | European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) enhanced cooperation with a ring of countries to East and South |
| • 2008 | Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) EU plus 15 southern states |

- 2011 New ENP strategy follows start of Arab Spring
 - 2012 Cairo Declaration: relaunch EU-LAS relations
 - 2014 EU-LAS 'strategic dialogue' launched
 - 2015 ENP review
 - 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran
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Prior to the 1990s, marking the start of attempts to apply its new foreign policy framework to MENA, bilateral relations tended to dominate within an informal policy framework. European Political Cooperation was a loose formula, in which the concept of European security was undeveloped; the Western European Union and NATO were the two relevant security providers. In respect of MENA, the Euro-Arab Dialogue initiated after the 1973 Arab-Israel war, was an attempt to foster inter-regional cooperation. As a 'dialogue' its results were limited in scope; the expectations of both sides differed, with Arab states hoping to gain political capital from the dialogue in their conflict with Israel. The initiative was abandoned after the Egypt-Israel peace treaty in 1979.

Political cooperation, however, was high on the EU's post-Cold War security agenda, as reflected in institutional reforms to strengthen foreign, security and defence coordination, from the development of the CFSP in the 1990s, the European Security Strategy developed in 2003 and then in further changes introduced after the 2007 Lisbon Treaty, leading to the establishment of a European External Action Service.

Such institutional reforms had particular relevance in a region of obvious geographical, historical and strategic importance. Indeed MENA was ideal site to apply Europe's 'normative' power (Manners, 2002) in a post-Cold War order where both economic and political liberalization were prioritized. Further, the EU's policies assumed a more targeted regional focus. The EMP and later ENP, through a series of economic and political initiatives, had the intention to create a buffer of friendly neighbourhood states.

The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership or so-called 'Barcelona Process' was initiated in 1995. It was linked to wider international developments post-Cold War and regionally to the US-brokered Oslo accords. This was an opportunity for Europe to show regional leadership and become a stakeholder in the peace process and related multilateral negotiations. A novel aspect, following the model set by the US-led Middle East Peace Process (MEPP), was the involvement of both Israel and Arab partners - an attempt thereby to break the existing deadlock over the exclusion of Israel from regimes of regional cooperation (Hollis, 2016: 390-91). Another feature was democracy promotion. In a region where democracy was little practiced outside Israel and Turkey, the EU's newfound roles promised democracy assistance to Arab states on Europe's periphery (Youngs, 2002: 47). This is not the place to provide a detailed account of the EMP. It did not fail, like the MEPP (Shlaim, 2016); but results were patchy and fell short of initial expectations (Del Sarto and Schumacher, 2005: 17-18). If trade relations with a number of countries remained strong, the political dividends of the EMP were slight: MENA states had other priorities and bypassed the political conditionalities which European leaders were anyway reluctant to enforce on their neighbours (Youngs, 2002: 75-77). Subsequent events leading to the Arab uprisings revealed the absence of any real democracy dividend.

The 21st century brought new challenges, curtailing the achievements of the 1990s, whether in respect of Europe's capabilities or of the 'new world order' promoted by US President GW Bush. Following the dramatic events of 9/11 and subsequent terror attacks in European capitals, EU members duly upgraded their security provision, though without accepting the logic of Bush's 'axis of evil' speech. Indeed, three major European powers (France, Germany and the UK) chose to engage with Iran in the 'EU3' process to limit its nuclear programme – an initiative later expanded to the E3+3 as other powers joined the process in 2006. However, the EU did not behave as a united actor in the face of new security threats, leading to the observation that any European security and defence policy is the work of a small number of member states (Bickerton, 2015: 192). Only a few EU countries participated in the US-led 2003 Iraq War, a decision that revealed further divisions in European ranks, and Spain later defected after the Madrid attacks.

The lukewarm response to the EMP, however, did not dampen enthusiasm for further initiatives. A second, more ambitious European agenda, the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) was unveiled in 2004. Like the EMP it was reactive to multilateral developments, following the Iraq War, including US-led Greater Middle East Initiative. President Bush envisioned a 'forward strategy of freedom', engaging a wider group of MENA and peripheral states, to extend right into the former Soviet space. The ENP similarly expanded the arena of cooperation to include both Europe's Mediterranean partners to the South and its neighbours to the East. It also embraced a 'freedom agenda' - an ambitious programme of democratisation and socio-economic reforms. Despite the security logic of wider engagement in a revised neighbourhood concept, there was still a disjuncture between EU expectations and local ambitions and priorities. A few years later, in the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), French President Sarkozy, refocused attention on the southern Mediterranean. This was innovative in introducing higher profile ministerial-level meetings and in promoting more equal participation and 'co-ownership' between European and Southern Mediterranean partners. However, subsequent analyses of the UfM, like its predecessors, record only 'modest' improvements in the terms of engagement with southern neighbours among whom a sense of inequality in relationship prevails (Johansson-Nogués, 2011). Any developing relationships would soon be disrupted by the impact of the Arab uprisings.

As detailed above, the much-publicised set of European initiatives towards MENA dating from the mid-1990s and 2000s, did not produce any consistently applied set of policies, let alone a durable 'region-building' strategy (Bicchi, 2011) whether in the Mediterranean or in the wider MENA. An exception is the sustained EU commitment to a two-state solution to the Israel-Palestine question, involving extensive engagement with civil society actors on both sides, though this remains a distant aspiration; another is engaging Iran. Though the ENP was regarded as a defining moment in European policy where Europe could showcase its normative role as a 'force for the good', there has been little sustained evidence of success and early scepticism and fatigue among stakeholders long before events in the Arab Spring revealed how partial and ill-judged many EU policies – say on the issue of democratization - had been (Barbé and Johansson-Nogueés, 2008). Europe's own internal difficulties, sparked by the 2008 financial crisis, didn't help.

The Arab Spring, triggered in Tunisia late in 2010, intervened in the above processes, posing new and unfamiliar challenges both to MENA and the EU, testing the limits of neighbourhood relations. Europe, like the rest of the world not only failed to predict, but also adequately respond to the dramatic events that swept the region, and were wrong-footed by their support for regimes, like Tunisia's President Ben Ali, whose democratising credentials were evidently weak. Indeed, the EU's early actions came under critical scrutiny, raising serious questions about Europe's present commitments and future roles in MENA, with Štefan Füle, the ENP Commissioner, admitting that the EU should 'show humility' in the light of past mistakes and omissions (Peters, 2012: xiii). There was a necessary adjustment in priorities post-Arab Spring to address ongoing challenges, but a notable absence of European leadership as regards the transformative processes sweeping the Arab world. The centrality of the Israel-Palestine issue shifted, as European leaders grappled with the ongoing effects of unrest in the Arab world and its impact on local allies - unrest extending to non-Arab countries like Iran and Turkey. Support for international intervention in Libya led by France and Britain, non-support for Bahrain's reform movement, then qualified support for engagement in Syria's civil unrest, revealed once more of the EU's divided stance on foreign policy issues. This, compounded with the EU's continuing crises, leaves open many questions about its inter-regional relations.

Some post-Arab Spring initiatives have resulted, including the 2012 Athens Declaration leading to the launch of the EU-LAS Strategic Dialogue, and a major review of ENP in 2015. The first aimed to regularize high level meetings and discussion about common security issues including terrorism. It shows how the practices of 'inter-regionalism' remain important as arenas for policy coordination (Telò et al 2015). The second offered a critical reappraisal of Europe's neighbourhood policies in the light of continuing economic difficulties and pressing security challenges on Europe's borders, tacitly acknowledging the limits to EU leverage (Hadfield: 2017: 183)

The post-Arab Spring legacy remains a disappointing one, however, with multiple obstacles in the way of any neighbourhood concept, or indeed of any wider set of coordinated strategies to engage the region. In 2017, the EU's external action page

duly lists the ENP, UfM, MEPP, relations with the GCC, and Iran, Iraq and Yemen as the main arenas of EU policy in the Mediterranean, Middle East and Gulf regions respectively.³ These are longstanding priorities. Yet the region (and the EU) has undergone such turmoil in recent years such that the EU's stated commitment to MENA 'to encourage political and economic reform in each individual country in due respect for its specific features and regional cooperation among the countries of the region themselves and with the EU', rings increasingly hollow. The European Union has aspired, but failed to lead in the MENA region or to redesign the neighbourhood to mutual advantage. The response of both Arab and non-Arab powers to Europe's post-Cold War roles has been skeptical. To be sure, Europe has other issues to deal with, but MENA remains a priority neighbourhood, not least in respect of pressing security questions related to international terrorism, migration and refugees, which are of concern all member states. The turning back and (in some cases) detention of migrants and refugees from war-zones, the resecuritization of borders and general absence of coordinated policies, has hollowed out any concept of Europe as a normative power.

In short the Arab Spring acted as a stark reminder of the limits of EU power and the difficulties of neighbourhood management. It showed the EU to be out of touch with regional dynamics. While an advertised aspiration of the Europe's role in MENA was to bring liberal norms and institutional experience to bear on a complex and contested region, the EU has arguably disappointed as a collective actor and simply reflected back the region's own difficulties and competing approaches to the management of regional order. Rather than co-ownership and promoting shared norms, it is narrower sets of interests that dictate policy. As such, it is the region's major players, and external actors like the US and Russia - rather than the cooperative potential of regional institutions - that hold the regional balance and will determine outcomes.

Conclusion: MENA, the EU and the elusive search for regional order

³ https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/336/middle-east-and-north-africa-mena_en (accessed August 2017)

If the above is a wake-up call as regards the EU's foreign policy aspirations, it also invites some general conclusions about the region, power and order questions posed in this article. Based on the claim that major powers can provide leadership and thereby shape and reorder regions, this article has considered the roles of major MENA and EU actors in their shared neighbourhood. It has discussed the challenges posed by alternative conceptions of the region; the roles of major regional powers; and the different policies that MENA and EU powers have pursued in their shared space. It finds that, in general, these policies have been poorly aligned to mutual advantage. The EU has sought to provide leadership by reshaping neighbourhood dynamics through its common policy initiatives and applying normative ideals, whether the EMP or ENP; its engagement with Iran and GCC states; or its long standing commitment to a two-state solution for Israel and Palestine. Its efforts, however, have had only partial success.

First, a number of 'European' initiatives and multiple trade and security links operate outside these frameworks and reflect longstanding interests and priorities of different EU states. Second, local states and actors pursue separate agendas and have evidently not shared the EU vision whether in terms of common policies, priorities and norms and even of the region itself: what is good for Europe is not necessarily good for MENA. Meanwhile, external actors, notably the US and Russia, but also China and other rising powers, pursue separate and sometimes contradictory agendas, which do not always mesh with the contours of EU policy. In short, there are multiple state (and non-state) actors, alongside regional and international organisations, involved in the MENA region and multiple possible levels of engagement: bilateral, multilateral, inter-regional. Any effective policy must therefore be crafted in the light of the constraints provided by the domestic, regional and international environments and a realistic appraisal of Europe's own capabilities.

In the light of the EU's current internal difficulties this could require a further downgrading of collective ambition and a refocusing on core priority issues in the trade and security area (Zielonka, 2014). This is not to say, however, that the EU, or its member states, cannot participate in major multilateral initiatives like the JCPOA on Iran, for which EU persistence, or the persistence of certain EU members, has produced rewards. Indeed, Europe's role in keeping the lines of communication open

to Iran – partly for good economic reasons - may be seen as playing a modest part in its overall success. Similarly, the EU's position on the Israel-Palestine conflict, and commitment to a two-state solution, however fragile that prospect now looks, has shown a degree of consistency of purpose that other parties to the conflict have often lacked.

There are major powers in MENA and there is a shared neighbourhood of sorts, albeit variously understood, but the goal of leadership has proved remarkably elusive. Though some Arab (and non-Arab) states, formerly Egypt, today Saudi Arabia, have assumed leadership roles with some success, regional relations are highly competitive. Even within the once cohesive GCC bloc, the Saudis and Qataris have fallen out, for example, over support for Egypt's former President Morsi, and over alleged links to extremist groups. Still, the Saudis represent an important regional pole, as does Iran, Israel and to some extent Turkey. As another major pole in the MENA neighbourhood, the EU has aspired to exercise its political and economic influence as well as its much-advertised normative power: to act as a 'force for the good', whether in terms of supporting good governance, regional security or through the provision of aid. However as Del Sarto (2016) has cogently argued, the uses of Europe's power on its borderlands has retained an imperial aspect, which contradicts its own normative narrative. Hence, the aspiration to lead or to act as the benign hegemon remains largely unrealized. At times of crisis, European leadership appears particularly endangered, as witnessed by the contemporary challenges posed by migration and refugees.

The potential economic and security benefits to all parties of greater interdependence and policy alignment among major regional powers are not in question: the EU remains the most important trading partner for many MENA states including the globally-connected GCC members. This is no small achievement. Trade is a central element of any relationship: in international relations trade is a core ingredient of peaceful relations. Yet trade alone is not enough – and trade with the EU is not matched by inter-regional trade, where levels have been historically low. In terms of promoting regional peace and security – regional order - the conclusion of this paper supports the view that ambitions and rhetoric on all sides have not matched outcomes: neither regional powers nor the EU have successfully advanced cooperative security

formulas or succeeded in designing effective institutions. The fact that core interests diverge is not helpful – major powers speak past rather than to each other and pursue separate agendas with different partners. As such, neither a liberal-institutionalist argument, which highlights the mutual advantages of cooperation, nor a norms-based argument which demonstrates the transference of EU norms of good governance, proves particularly helpful in explaining EU-MENA interactions. Normative and institutional elements are in play, but judged by its own high standards as a normative power – whether in the areas of democratisation, peacemaking, human rights or social reform (Youngs, 2002), the EU has fallen short of its expectations and those of others. Further, European institutions and practices, despite some institutional emulation (as in FTAs or the Arab Parliament), have not proved to be appropriate models for MENA, as the LAS and GCC cases reveal. Arab states feel increasingly empowered to dismiss European models and policies when it suits them.

There are some achievements, as noted above, but these are best understood within a framework that prioritises the interests of the important regional players. For the major MENA states therefore, institutions perform secondary roles to the pursuit of their regional interests and/or regime security. For the EU, the presence of an overarching institution does not guarantee regional leadership or prevent the pursuit of individual states' agendas. Singly and collectively, the major powers in the MENA space have failed to agree on a formula to promote regional order. They have not agreed on any set of shared parameters and principles that might govern the shared neighbourhood. There have been important moments of cooperation, but also of competition, mistrust and inertia, such that they often work at cross-purposes. At no time has this been more apparent than today when, some six years after the start of the Arab uprisings, multiple challenges confront both European and MENA governments which demand creative and cooperative solutions. It remains to be seen whether a more streamlined and honest European policy, better aligned to regional realities, will be effective in enhancing the shared regional space, or whether the rising regional powers and major external players like the US, Russia and China will continue to impose their own agendas, reducing Europe's roles accordingly.

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