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EU SEEN FROM THE OUTSIDE:
LOCAL ELITE PERCEPTIONS ON THE
ROLE AND EFFECTIVENESS OF THE EU
IN THE MEDITERRANEAN REGION

Gülşah Dark



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ABSTRACT

The global and regional contexts surrounding EU–Mediterranean relations have substantially changed since the 1995 Barcelona process, and the EU’s strategic view of the Mediterranean has correspondingly changed with them. The current setting of the Mediterranean appears to necessitate a reset on the understanding of the region from the perspective of local societies and also of the EU, which is one of the principal objectives of the MEDRESET project. The aim of this work is thus to reflect the results of the Elite Survey that addressed nine Mediterranean countries, and to offer a policy-oriented analysis for a renewed EU–Mediterranean partnership. Subsequently, the report (1) provides a detailed description of the survey and its execution; (2) shows how the Mediterranean is constructed in the narratives of local elite stakeholders and (3) how they see and evaluate the EU’s actorness in the region as well as its substance and policy instruments. The report concludes with policy recommendations to the EU at the regional and country-specific level.

INTRODUCTION

With the 1995 Barcelona Conference, the European Union positioned itself with a “foreign policy ambition” (Pierini 2017: 111) for the Mediterranean region, where its engagement has evolved through different frameworks, be it the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) or the more recent Union for the Mediterranean (UfM). Since then, the EU’s relations with the Southern neighbourhood and its policy mechanism have been subjected to a changing geopolitical context with unfolding developments like the Arab uprisings, civil wars in Syria, Yemen and Libya, shifting power constellations, the growing presence of terrorism, destructive weapons proliferation and migration flows, among others.

At a time when the Mediterranean region is of an increasingly fragmented nature in terms of political, social and economic linkages, the question emerges how different global and regional players, including the EU, approach the region in their discursive and policy practices. In this context, the MEDRESET project has attempted to rethink Euro-Mediterranean relations through a “non-Eurocentric perspective” (Huber and Paciello 2016: 5). To reach its objective, the project deployed a robust methodological tool – an Elite Survey – in its Work Package 3, to explore elite perceptions of EU policies in the Mediterranean (Gülöz Bakır and Dark 2017).

1 Gülşah Dark is Project Officer at the Center for Public Policy and Democracy Studies (PODEM), Istanbul. The author would like to express her thanks to Danielle Doubt of the Johns Hopkins University SAIS, for her contribution to the preparation of this report.

The respondents were asked to analyse their country's resistance to or adoption of the EU conceptualization of the Mediterranean, assess European policies in the region and identify current regional issues they consider of crucial importance.² In particular, the Elite Survey addressed three main sets of research questions:

1. Is the elite discourse in the MENA [Middle East and North Africa] region resisting or reproducing the EU's construction of the region? How do elites perceive European policies in the Mediterranean area? How has their perception towards the EU changed over the years?
2. How do elites perceive the Mediterranean region? Who are the most important stakeholders on the domestic, regional and international levels? How are the 'structure' and the nature of interactions changing in the region? What are the current main geopolitical challenges?
3. What major policy issues do the elite deem most pressing? In which particular areas would substantial cooperation with the EU and/or other MENA countries prove beneficial? More broadly, in which policy areas would a regional/bilateral approach hinder/yield success? (Gülöz Bakır and Dark 2017: 4)

The Elite Survey, a lynchpin in the MEDRESET project, was pursued in all four country cases of MEDRESET (Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco and Tunisia), as well as five key powers in the region (Iran, Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Israel). The counties were selected based on geographic distribution and for their political relevance, with all actors holding material or normative weight: Israel, Egypt, Iran, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey are all regional powerhouses that decisively influence the course of the region in many aspects. Lebanon has embraced a critical position in the region with the Syrian civil war. Tunisia is the only state that has been able to transform its political system – albeit with certain challenges and debates – among the countries that witnessed the Arab uprisings, while Morocco has been an important partner for the EU ever since the beginning of its Mediterranean policies.

This paper sets out to introduce the results of the Elite Survey³ with a policy-oriented discussion in light of regional and country-based data in the following sections, including this section providing details on the data collection and sampling, followed by the analytical section, and a final section presenting policy recommendations on the regional and country-specific level.

DATA COLLECTION AND SAMPLING

Methodologically, the survey aimed to move beyond "the Euro-centric nature of the EU's attempts at region building in the Mediterranean" (Cebeci 2017: 6) in order to cover the domestic reflections of the EU perception and policies as conveyed by local elites from diverse political and societal segments as well as the points of divergence in their approaches towards the region.

Researchers from the Center for Public Policy and Democracy Studies (PODEM) in Turkey and Arab Studies Institute – Research and Education Methodologies (ASI-REM) in Lebanon, which

² A total of 169 respondents were involved in the fieldwork study that targeted nine countries. See the section "Data Collection and Sampling" for further details.

³ The findings reflected in this report are based on the forthcoming MEDRESET Elite Survey reports (see References).

are two member institutions for MEDRESET WP3, were involved in the Elite Survey detailed in Tables 1 and 2.⁴ The researchers conducted qualitative and semi-structured in-depth interviews with respondents in the countries named above, except Saudi Arabia, where the Gulf crisis as well as the turmoil in Saudi domestic politics necessitated cancelling a fieldtrip to the country. Instead, the researchers interviewed non-Saudi respondents in London and Brussels with specialization on the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) or Saudi foreign/domestic affairs. It should be further noted that the data compilation phase in Iran was done in full anonymity due to the sensitivities there, and the interviews planned for the fieldwork were arranged as discussions, not in-depth interviews, with elite respondents.⁵ Also, in Egypt, the researchers experienced difficulties in reaching out to relevant respondents mostly due to their reluctance, which prolonged the duration of the fieldwork. Overall, all interviews for the Elite Survey took place between July 2017 and May 2018; and a total of 169 respondents participated in the fieldwork.

Table 1 | Overview of interviewees*

Country	Male	Female	Total	Fieldwork period
Egypt	15	15	31**	August–November 2017
Iran	10	2	12	February–April 2018
Israel	10	10	20	February–May 2018
Lebanon	15	15	30	July–September 2017
Morocco	19	3	22	January–May 2018
Qatar	11	1	12	January 2018
Saudi Arabia	8	4	12	February–April 2018
Tunisia	9	2	11	February 2018
Turkey	15	4	19	November 2017–March 2018
Total	112	56	169	July 2017–May 2018

Notes: *Aged between 20 and 70; **One unidentified.

Table 2 | Types of stakeholders

Governmental actors/public institutions
Scholars/academia/experts
Media professionals
Civil society actors
NGO representatives
Business people
Graduate students

⁴ The in-depth interviews were carried out by 14 researchers in total. Among the researchers, 10 of 14 were involved in the phase of report writing. PODEM, as the leader of WP3, commissioned local experts when necessary for the fieldwork and the report writing.

⁵ The researcher, who prepared the report on Iran, also referred the insights of certain experts in Europe.

The preparations for the Elite Survey kicked off in Spring 2017, and during Summer 2017 the fieldwork in Lebanon and Egypt commenced, while preparations for the fieldwork in other countries continued. A mapping of relevant interlocutors was made through online and desk research as well as the institutional network of the involved researchers. In view of the research design proposed in the related Methodology and Concept Paper, a purposeful sampling method was incorporated in this research, meaning that selection of the interviewees depended upon (1) their influence over the social, political and civil networks and (2) their experiences and/or current and past official roles, as well as (3) their accessibility (Gülöz Bakır and Dark 2017: 14).

Prospective interviewees were first contacted via email or phone. The general level of responsiveness of interlocutors was satisfactory although the researchers came across instances of non-responsiveness or unavailability of potential interviewees. A good majority of the interviews were conducted face-to-face, except a very few cases that were conducted via phone or Skype. The duration of interviews ranged between 30 minutes and 1 hour. To obtain in-depth knowledge on specific issues, the researchers conducted follow-up interviews in certain cases as recorded during the Lebanon fieldwork.

The Elite Survey used a semi-structured questionnaire format to produce detailed qualitative data, and was designed through consultations among the researchers and the project coordinators. The questionnaire is comprised of three main sections: (1) questions on perceptions of the EU including its effectiveness at the state and civil society level, and cooperation at the country level; (2) questions on the Mediterranean addressing key stakeholders/actors; geopolitical challenges; and the EU's Mediterranean policies; and (3) country-specific questions to understand the internal dynamics of the target country as well as demands and future prospects – including those from the EU.

Finally, on the representativeness of the survey sample, the sample size and the data retained from the interviews do not attempt to generalize the results to the overall target population, yet try to provide answers to the research questions given above and introduce main themes for discussion. In terms of gender representation, one main shortcoming is the smaller proportion of female respondents achieved in the sample size. The observation gained from the fieldwork demonstrated that male dominance is present notably among governmental actors and public institutions in the region (see Section 5).

1. FRAMING THE MEDITERRANEAN AS A SPACE, AND ITS GEOPOLITICAL LOOK

The Mediterranean, as a concept and in its physical representation, is characterized by the surveyed local elites as a *heterogeneous territory*, which harbours different social, economic and political realities developing at varying paces. Given its heterogeneity, the interviewees reveal a *fragmented representation of the Mediterranean* in their narratives.

On one side, the Mediterranean emerges a space that retains close links to Europe for surveyed countries such as *Tunisia* and *Morocco*, due to the geographical and cultural proximity as well as the common historical baggage. In both countries, the regional integrity of the Mediterranean is discussed over the vision of a *united Maghreb*, where Tunisia sees itself as a leading regional actor in active cooperation with Morocco and Algeria.

In the elite discourse of *Lebanon*, *Egypt* and *Turkey*, the imagination of the Mediterranean appears to be associated with geopolitical dynamics and how the three countries have been affected by the ongoing regional developments. It would be possible to conclude that the Mediterranean region is perceived as a tense space with threat of conflict fuelled by political, economic and social instability, and also, a junction point of migration, energy and trade.

On the other side, the Elite Survey demonstrated that the term and concept of the Mediterranean does not occupy a significant place in the discourse of the elite respondents in the surveyed countries of *Qatar*, *Iran* and *Saudi Arabia*. Especially in Qatar and Saudi Arabia, the Gulf region – specifically the GCC countries – and Iran have a visible priority in the framing of the Mediterranean. Furthermore, according to the respondents, economic interests shape the way both countries approach the broader Mediterranean region in their relations.

Finally, as for the *Israeli elites*, Israel's engagement with the Mediterranean particularly continues over the commercialization of natural gas discoveries. As it was put in the report on Israel, "[The country] does not feel welcomed in the relevant organizations in the region, and consequently the Mediterranean as a region is not a primary concern or a source of expectation, since the ultimate focus is on immediate opportunities or internal and external threats". Interestingly converging with perceptions in Tunisia and Morocco, Israeli respondents also see that "North Africa has turned into a union of its own" in the Mediterranean (Bayburt et al. forthcoming).

On another level, the transforming geopolitical scene of the Mediterranean starting from the 21st century, and more importantly after the 2011 Arab uprisings, has shaped the local elites' narratives towards the region. As the research on Lebanon demonstrates, *the Mediterranean is seen to serve "as an effective physical barrier between its northern and southern shores"* (Goulordava and ASI-REM forthcoming), particularly with the growing perception of "*Fortress Europe*" with reference to the EU's mindset on securitization.

In view of the fact that the Mediterranean has become an epicentre of continuous geopolitical tensions, it was possible to trace common challenges and risks that derail the region's stability among the surveyed respondents in each country. Table 3 provides the key observations obtained from the narratives of the interviewees, when they were asked to describe the key problems the region is facing, showing that *regional security, conflict (e.g., Syrian civil war)*, the *migration/refugee issue* and *economic/social imbalances* surface as some of the most pressing challenges in the current context of the region.

Table 3 | Geopolitical Challenges by Country

Egypt	Regional conflicts; extremism; presence of jihadist groups; refugee crisis
Iran	Regional insecurity; fear of US and US allies (Israel, Saudi Arabia) and potential increase of their influence in the region to the detriment of Iran
Israel	Heterogeneity of the Mediterranean; Iran expansionism; Israeli–Palestinian conflict; clash of cultures, values and political interests between EU and Mediterranean countries
Lebanon	Syrian conflict; refugee crisis
Morocco	Regional security (including illegal migration; drug/human trafficking; transnational crime); Western Sahara issue; lack of democratic development; China's growing economic engagement in the region; Israel–Palestinian conflict; Economic disparities
Qatar	Limited intra-Arab dialogue; economic imbalances in North African countries; weapons flow; inefficiency of cooperation platforms (GCC)
Saudi Arabia	Iran expansionism, notably in Syria and Iraq; very critical of Arab uprisings; Muslim Brotherhood a perceived threat
Tunisia	Terrorism and conflicts across the region, notably in Libya; economic and social challenges; youth unemployment (Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco); poverty and exclusion
Turkey	Syrian war and migrant influx; proliferation of terrorism (e.g. DAESH); proxy states; demographic challenges and women and youth problems in North Africa; lack of democracy; sectarian conflicts; war economy

2. PERCEPTION OF EU ACTORNESS IN THE REGION AND OTHER KEY STAKEHOLDERS

In the surveyed countries, perception of the EU was recorded as generally positive in the narratives of the interviewees, yet certain cases (Qatar, Saudi Arabia) seemed to lack a unified notion about the EU. This observation appears to be closely related to the consensus among the respondents that the EU's collective role is overshadowed by the interests and national policies of the individual member states, thus diminishing the Union's impact as an actor in the region. The stakeholders commonly mentioned that the political and economic presence of member states is higher than that of the EU itself. In the words of an NGO researcher in Turkey, "Whenever a crisis triggers, EU actors focus on their national interests, which is the main factor behind the existing discrepancies. They might have legitimate concerns, yet to face the challenges, they need to compromise" (Dark forthcoming).

Addressing the *EU's actorness*, the survey findings suggest that the Union remains unlikely to exercise regional influence and respond to a deteriorating security environment; and that it has adopted a self-securing mode when approaching its neighbours. The Elite Survey further points out that the EU, which has long depended on its normative and soft power, is struggling

to adjust to a multipolar region driven by power politics especially after the 2003 US-led Iraq War and the 2011 Arab uprisings. Among the region's key actors, respondents named the US, Russia and China at the global level, and Saudi Arabia and Iran at the regional level.

To start with *Saudi Arabia*, the country is a regional hegemon and global economic power as the world's current number one oil producer. The country's domestic politics are currently going through a process of change, with the economic and political reforms of its Vision 2030 yet to be fully revealed. Saudi Arabia considers the US its most important ally and stakeholder, and pursues *sui generis* bilateral relations with specific EU member states such as the UK, France and Germany, in order of priority. However, Saudi Arabia has more recently begun to seek closer diplomatic and economic ties to the EU, an approach that is attributed to the Kingdom's increasing desire to enhance ties with the West and also the economic agenda of Vision 2030. The report on Saudi Arabia states, "because the dialogue with the EU has mostly taken place within the GCC–EU framework, the future shape of the GCC would have great significance for Saudi Arabia" (Senyücel Gündoğar forthcoming), leading the country to review its institutional relations with the EU. Riyadh's move to open an embassy in Brussels in 2016 could thus be an example of the progressing ties.

A similar observation was retained during the fieldwork with *Qatari elites*, mentioning that the Gulf crisis has led both the EU and Qatar to consolidate mutual interests. This is especially so for Qatar which has begun to place more emphasis on its relations with the West including the EU (Görgülü forthcoming). While economic relations dominate the course of Qatar–EU relations, the EU is not yet perceived as a sufficiently influential actor to successfully address regional challenges, particularly the security issue.

Iran increasingly views the EU as a key international actor, in large part due to the Union's entrepreneurial efforts towards the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) negotiations. While ties with the EU were never completely cut after the 1979 Revolution, Iran–EU relations were not significant until E3/EU+3⁶ pushed for negotiations towards what is now the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, an international agreement on Iran's nuclear programme. However, the current US administration's decision to exit JCPOA has led Tehran to seek expanded relations with Russia and China as well. This move has also put focus back on Iran's nuclear capacity, drawing attention away from much-needed efforts to address Iran's regional behaviour.

For Saudi Arabia and Qatar, which are not traditionally included in the EU's Mediterranean policies, the Elite Survey results showed that more emphasis was given to relationships with specific member states than to the EU as an institution. Rather, these respondents' emphasis as indicated in their respective discourses rests on interactions with a set of Muslim and/or Arab countries in the region. According to survey results, these countries view the EU as a "soft power" on the international stage that could provide economic benefits through increased trade and business relationships, yet the Union does not hold satisfactory political weight. Respondents also noted that the EU was often perceived as secondary to the US as an international influence and actor at the regional level, particularly in the broader Middle East. Bilateral relations with the EU have recently shown more progress, indicating that the Union appears to have an opportunity to develop successful policies with these countries.

6 France, Germany, the UK and the EU plus China, Russia and the US.

The EU is perceived as a strategic stakeholder by *Israel* which sees the US its closest ally; and historically the Union has been an asset to Israel's existence as well as to its economic development. However, as claimed by an Israeli official, "the EU is not contributing by repeating the decades-old version of the two-state solution and consequently, the Israeli bureaucracy constantly experiences frustration" (Bayburt et al. forthcoming). Although Israel's relations with the EU are perceived as permanent, the country has opted for collaboration more with individual member states, especially those positive about Israel's policies in recent years. As for the EU's leverage in the Mediterranean, its soft power strategies were said to prevent the Union from becoming an influential agent within the region's chaotic atmosphere.

Perceptions of the EU in *Turkey* are unique for various reasons but most importantly, the country has been pursuing EU membership for more than half a century. Among the surveyed countries, Turkey is the only state with candidate status. Survey respondents argued that public perception was highly supportive of the Union and it was seen as an anchor for reform notably between 2002 and 2005, during which time Turkey officially became an EU candidate. With the changing nature of the relations, however, the centre of focus appears to be moving to bilateral relations with individual member states, primarily Germany, France and Brexit-hit UK in view of international and regional developments. At the regional level, the EU is not seen as a "game changer" in the Mediterranean, and is also said to be diplomatically absent in the conflict-ridden region, while Russia and the US are seen as the key powers on the ground.

In *Lebanon, Egypt, Morocco* and *Tunisia*, survey results demonstrate familiarity with the EU as an institution. Across the Elite Surveys conducted in these four countries, there was an overwhelming consensus that the EU's rhetoric of promoting normative values abroad in its Mediterranean policies was not fully implemented due to unique structural constraints within each country. These constraints include authoritarian rule, corruption and lack of infrastructure. Respondents expressed that the Union is seen as an important ally, and understood that increased relations with the EU could yield benefits for economic growth and institution building as well as the educational and health systems. The Elite Survey results demonstrate a desire for partnerships with the EU that entail development in these areas. The EU is also perceived by the respondents in these countries as shifting from an international role as a normative institution to a realist actor whose policies increasingly address migration and security.

3. PERSPECTIVES ON THE SUBSTANCE OF EU POLICIES FOR THE MEDITERRANEAN

3.1 NEIGHBOURHOOD POLICY, EU RESPONSE TO ARAB UPRISINGS AND SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

In the countries already included in the EU's Mediterranean policies, Elite Survey results revealed a shared sentiment that the Union's goals and policies in the region have not been fully realized. The EU's promotion of normative values has not always aligned with domestic needs or interests. It was also stated that rhetoric used by the EU has not always translated into its policies, and further can be discordant with the Union's recent migration and security efforts notably in the aftermath of the 2011 Arab uprisings.

The US-led Iraq War and the Arab uprisings dramatically changed power dynamics in the broader Mediterranean region. The year 2011 saw political upheavals in Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen, Bahrain, Syria, Libya and to an extent in Morocco as well. The ensuing domestic instability and regional power vacuums have affected MENA countries' relations with one another as well as with the international community. The EU's response to and involvement in the Arab uprisings was viewed negatively by many elites in the Mediterranean. Among the countries already involved in the EU–Mediterranean initiatives, there was the sentiment that the Union had an opportunity as a normative actor to promote democracy, human rights, rule of law and respect for human dignity, but many political transitions have not seen these values realized. In the words of an interviewee from Egypt:

The first response of the EU to the Arab Spring was very positive, but it got tuned down because Europe felt it is affecting its social integrity and security with the influx of migrants and the instability in those countries of the Arab Spring. [...] The priorities for the EU were supporting the democratic transition, and people's aspiration to freedom and a better life, then those priorities got changed to security and anti-radicalization and preventing illegal migration. (ASI-REM forthcoming)

Another criticism was levelled at the disparities in the EU's response which did not hold a consistent nature due to the diverging attitudes of the member states as well as continued cooperation with autocratic regimes where the motivation remained (as in the case of Egypt) to ensure the security of the region and the economic benefits to the EU.

In view of the fact that the broader Mediterranean region has been encapsulated by deepening conflictual dynamics, the EU-driven policies, particularly the *European Neighbourhood Policy* (ENP), are seen as increasingly less capable of responding to regional and domestic challenges as well as the emerging needs. It should be noted beforehand that the level of awareness concerning ENP initiatives was low in some of the surveyed countries such as *Lebanon* and *Egypt*, where the respondents spoke more generally of their perceptions of the EU. In *Morocco* and *Tunisia*, the two frontrunners of the ENP programme, the interlocutors described the ENP as "a policy of defence" which was perceived as unable to address root causes of social and economic instability in the region, even though one of its main objectives is to promote stability. According to the Moroccan elites, there are three elements that the EU should think of when improving its neighbourhood policy: "consistency", "integrity" and "parity".

Particularly on the ENP's perceived lack of consistency and integrated approach, the narratives of the *elites in Turkey and Israel* revealed that overall success in changing the reality on the ground is also related to the disconnect between EU bureaucracy and member states. Despite the EU's efforts to assume a greater geopolitical role in the region, the EU bureaucracy is seen as a major burden in terms of following a flexible policy route, a factor also reiterated by the experts on Saudi–Europe relations.

Across the nine countries in which Elite Surveys were conducted, the perception of the EU's *security policies* and response to the *migration crisis* in its southern neighbourhood is overwhelmingly negative. Many Elite Survey responses noted the EU's increased emphasis on border control, stability and migration deterrence particularly in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings and the enlarged presence across the region of violent non-state actors, notably the Islamic State. This has led many countries to speculate on the ideological direction of

the Union's future policies in the Mediterranean, which is described "*securitizing*" at present. "The EU is perceived as approaching the southern Mediterranean as an integrated part of European security arrangements yet prioritizes its own national security at the expense of development and fostering democracy in the region," states the report on Morocco (Gülöz Bakır et al. forthcoming).

For countries that share a border with the Union and/or the Mediterranean Sea, and especially *Turkey*, *Tunisia* and *Morocco*, migration and security have provided unique leverage in negotiations with the EU and have become two of main policy areas shaping the direction of the bilateral dialogue. Also, in *Lebanon*, although the EU's financial support to the refugee crisis is appreciated, the substance of its policy is perceived as weak, signalling the need for a more regional approach to effectively tackle the problem.

3.2 RESPONSE TO REGIONAL ISSUES: GULF CRISIS, JCPOA, SYRIAN WAR AND ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN ISSUE

Having attracted the attention of the international community with emerging questions on the future of the GCC zone, the *ongoing Saudi-led blockade of Qatar* has been a test case for regional and global actors on exercising their political leverage in a changing regional order. According to the Qatari elites, the EU was seen as initially hesitant to openly take sides in the dispute particularly due to the region's geopolitical sensitivity and also to protect its economic interests in the Gulf. Still, the Union's mediation efforts to encourage de-escalation, and especially foreign affairs chief Federica Mogherini's constant call to all parties to engage in a political dialogue, were overall appreciated. The Gulf crisis is seen as an opportunity for the historically limited progress of EU-Qatar relations, and also for Qatar's image within the international community. On top of this, the standoff has deepened the political confrontations in the Gulf, and as rendered by a senior Qatari expert, the future of the region will presumably be driven by "*new alliances cutting across the traditional factions*" (Görgülü forthcoming), leading all actors including the EU to reposition themselves in response to changes on the ground.

Against this backdrop, *Saudi Arabia* was perceived as contented with the EU's limited mediating role in the dispute. In the words of an analyst specialized on the GCC region:

The battle inside the Gulf is a family one. The EU got that and did not want to be involved more than it needs to be. A split in the GCC is not of that much importance to the EU. The GCC does not mean much politically, it matters economically and that's why now there is a trend in the EU to develop diverse relations with the countries of the Gulf. (Senyücel Gündoğar forthcoming)

Besides, Saudi Arabia has seen the JCPOA as a "destabilizing factor" for the Middle East from the very beginning, even though the EU promotes the JCPOA as a move to bring balance to the region. The respondents noted that the Kingdom, apprehensive about Iran's regional goals and intention, sees the agreement as the "worst ever policy of the EU in the region". Despite its concerns notably that lifting sanctions would mean the end of Iran's isolation from the international scene, the Saudi Kingdom now appears to have the *de facto* support of the US, which is following its anti-Iranian direction, and also of Israel, another critic of the JCPOA.

On the other side, *Iranian elites* saw the JCPOA as a diplomatic success of EU foreign policy, mentioning the EU's improved leverage as an actor independent from the US. The report on Iran reflects that

Europe now has both a crucial responsibility and political weight: Whatever steps Europe ends up taking, the actions of Brussels and EU member states are likely to have great importance when it comes to the future of the nuclear deal and, as such, the nature of Iran's engagement with the international community. (Jalilvand forthcoming)

By doing so, the deal would also help Iran to reassert itself as a regional power in the Middle East. With US President Donald Trump being an outspoken critic on the nuclear agreement, followed by his decision to withdraw from it entirely, the importance of Europe was perceived as heightened, due to its role in facilitating implementation, and particularly as European companies were allowed to continue to trade with Iran.

In all surveyed countries, the *Syrian conflict* is seen as one of the top reasons for the region's continuing instability and insecurity, affecting each state with varying severity. The discussion on the Syrian civil war occupies a particular place in the narratives of the stakeholders from *Turkey* which shares its largest border with Syria. The interlocutors stressed the EU's diplomatic absence from the conflict and perceived lack of a unified and tangible policy towards a resolution. Indeed, the EU and its member states were said to be revolving around the US orbit, implying that they cannot move outside of an already determined sphere. Subsequently, the EU is not counted among the regional players where the Syrian conflict is concerned, in contrast to the US or Russia – due also to a certain extent to its lack of the required military power on the ground.

Lastly, on the *Israeli–Palestinian issue*, the EU's stance was perceived in a complicated manner by the Israeli officials. According to the respondents, Israeli politicians are not content with the EU insisting on the decades-old two-state solution as they believe that it needs to be updated. Israel welcomes the monetary contributions of the EU to Gaza and West Bank; however, they think that the EU needs to utilize its institutional power to bring Palestinians to the table and become a “player” not “payer”. Furthermore, the deadlock on the peace process to terminate the conflict is also believed to have an adverse impact on Israel's international image and a new diplomatic breakthrough is of utmost necessity, with European assistance.

4. APPROACHES TO EU INSTRUMENTS ON CIVIL SOCIETY, DEMOCRACY PROMOTION AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

To promote *civil society* action in Euro-Mediterranean relations, the EU has been implementing various policy instruments such as the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights and funding mechanisms to stimulate the development and consolidation of CSOs in the countries of the region. Looking at the responses by the elite interviewees, it is understood that the EU's leverage in the civil society sector is comparatively more visible in the countries of *Lebanon, Egypt, Turkey, Tunisia, Israel and Morocco*. Civil society can also be counted among the sectors where the EU has begun to seek more involvement in the post-2011 period.

The perception of the EU's civil society instruments was overall positive, however respondents felt that CSOs selected by the EU to receive funding support do not generally have knowledge of the local population or even national context and were therefore ineffective change-makers, as clearly observed in Tunisia and Lebanon. The findings suggest that the EU is pursuing a *technocratic* and selective approach in its relations with CSOs, seeing them only as service delivery agents, and not actors of political and social change (also see Gómez and Muñoz 2016). As rendered by a CSO representative in Tunisia: "Another problem is that the EU grants are offered to certain groups, who do not know Tunisia well. European NGOs are opening branches in Tunis, but they should prioritize others already present in the country" (Gülöz Bakır and Parks forthcoming).

The political context also affects CSOs' contribution to policy-making within their countries as well as their interaction with the EU. According to the respondents in *Egypt*, the civil society finds itself operating in an increasingly restricted space where cooperation with the EU has been reduced in view of the limitations on implementing civil society programmes through foreign funding, including that of the EU. On the other side, in the wake of the JCPOA, *Iran's* exchanges with Europe have flourished notably in the areas of civil society, education and tourism. *Turkey* is another country where civil society dialogue with the EU has positively facilitated the coordination culture within CSO actors. Even so, the Union is expected to adopt a more inclusive approach while engaging with the civil society in Turkey, without pursuing political and identity-oriented priorities.

On another level, the elite respondents across the Mediterranean region also expressed frustration with aid policies, citing the lack of results. Respondents raised issues such as inability to access aid funding – also in the area of civil society – due to EU-imposed bureaucratic hurdles placed on local governments, universities and civil society groups. The lack of technical knowledge also negatively affects these institutions' capacity to negotiate with the EU and its strongly technocratic apparatus.

As for the *EU's democracy assistance* in its southern neighbourhood, boosted in the aftermath of the uprisings through instruments of democracy promotion at the bilateral level, respondents from the civil society sector as well as public institutions pointed to the political conditionality whereby the Union has been trying to export its own model of democracy to a region that should instead be addressed within its own local context and actors when forming a coherent human rights and democracy promotion strategy. An interesting example came out during the fieldwork in *Tunisia*, where civil society actors claimed that because EU dialogue programmes are mostly conducted in English or French, it is hard to effectively attract the Arabic-speaking local population into such activities.

In *Egypt*, the stakeholders expected a broader and dynamic support from the Union towards efforts on democratization. Noting that the EU appears to have made peace with Egypt's autocratic regime, the respondents concluded that the democracy promotion agenda has been quietly extracted from the scene. In addition, the Egyptian elites think that in relations with the Egyptian government, member states themselves are also turning a blind eye to the agenda of democracy and social equality. In both cases, the interlocutors stressed the change in policy priorities of European and Egyptian authorities in the post-2011 period.

Throughout the fieldwork the commentators, notably in *Morocco and Tunisia*, raised the view that the EU's economic development instruments – such as the *Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement* (DCFTA/ALECA), which aims to bring economic benefits to the partner country including duty-free access to the European market and a better domestic investment climate – are imposing EU norms and standards together with local elites, offering little room for manoeuvre during the negotiations. Even more striking was that socio-economic challenges in these countries – such as informal economy, social polarization, youth unemployment as well as regional disparities and lack of good governance – were not given adequate attention in the economic instruments that the EU is devising for its southern neighbourhood.

5. GENDER PERSPECTIVE AND VIEWS ON THE EU'S STRATEGY ON GENDER EQUALITY

The Elite Survey attempted to adequately integrate the gender dimension in its design and research; and throughout the fieldwork, the researchers tried to balance female and male representation in the respondent sample, although overall (see the section "Data Collection and Sampling") the number of male respondents was higher than that of female interviewees. Within the research limitations, one indication would be that women's representation in decision-making circles was not observed to be high, with fewer female respondents in governmental positions.

The data retained from the surveyed countries indicate that gender is a *cross-cutting subject* in the narratives of the respondents. Interviewees were observed to form direct links between the gender issue and separate policy areas such as the *role of the state, economic advancement, civil society, environmental awareness and labour rights*. It is interesting to note that this was observed more among the female respondents as in *Tunisia, Turkey and Qatar*. Especially in Tunisia, the female respondents were more vocal about societal challenges while the narratives of male respondents were more politics-oriented.

As far as the role of the EU is concerned, especially in the countries of *Lebanon, Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia*, the EU enjoys a good reputation regarding its leverage on the promotion of gender equality, albeit with certain expectations. In Lebanon, the respondents pointed to a lack of general human rights, including gender rights, with the expectation that the EU should impose more leverage over the government to better facilitate gender reforms, while emphasizing their concern on LGBT rights and the status of migrant workers. On the other side, Moroccan elites expressed their appreciation for the EU's efforts through civil society against the discriminatory laws and violence against women as well as its support for the recognition of homosexuality and the decriminalization of consensual sexual relations.

There is also the view that, as recorded in the narratives of the Egyptian respondents, the EU should engage more with the local population in formulating its gender policies for the Mediterranean countries. It was noted that policies formed within European circles without directly contacting the local people and the civil society are not seen as effective.

The research data also demonstrate that for countries such *Qatar and Saudi Arabia*, where social reforms are underway to address the challenges in areas such as human and labour rights, collaboration with the international community including the EU can be a good option

to progress on resolving gender-related problems, notably social inequality and gender gaps, and create positive societal change.

6. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE EU ON REGIONAL AND COUNTRY-SPECIFIC LEVELS

Major take-aways on the regional level

The EU can work towards a single comprehensive approach to the Mediterranean. This comprehensive approach should serve as an umbrella under which member state relations with Mediterranean states are conducted. Member state policies can align themselves within this EU policy umbrella to complement and strengthen overarching policy goals in the Mediterranean region.

While the EU has well established economic and political relations with countries such as Turkey, but also Tunisia, Morocco, Israel, Lebanon and Egypt, it has the opportunity to define new, clear-cut policies with Iran, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. The Union is expected to build a regional policy in MENA that protects domestic security interests and further improves current relations with its expanded southern neighbourhood.

In terms of its current security policies, the EU can work to shift its rhetoric to one that disentangles migration from security. Elite Survey respondents discussed the need for international mediation to resolve political disputes throughout the region, and additional support to combat growing terrorist threats. However, respondents believe that immigration, while perceived by Europe as a security threat, is not only a security issue, but a global crisis that requires economic, political and humanitarian solutions. Elites urged the EU to provide additional aid to support refugee populations and expressed hope that the EU can adjust policies to provide economic, diplomatic and political incentives to governments, businesses and civil society groups that support refugee and immigrant populations in the Mediterranean.

Elite Survey respondents across the Mediterranean expressed the desire for aid policy reform. The respondents however see existing EU aid policies as Eurocentric and ineffective within their Mediterranean country-specific context. The EU is perceived to imitate its own practices in its Mediterranean policies without fully considering the needs and expectations of the societies there.

Development is a key term. The EU is expected to give more space to green energy investments, water conservation, waste management and agriculture technologies in its development agenda especially when targeting Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt and Lebanon.

The EU should ease bureaucratic/technical difficulties for civil society exchanges with the Mediterranean countries. The Union is expected to act more inclusively towards civil society groups and to be open to knowledge exchange for their improvement.

Strengthening institutional mechanisms and promoting good governance, accountability and transparency are all areas where the EU can provide support in the region.

Major take-aways on the country-specific level

Egypt

Economic collapse, particularly mass unemployment and inflation-driven price rises dominate as major concerns where the EU could take concrete actions.

Long-term investments in the fields of education, job creation and economic activities are among the general expectations.

Consolidation of authoritarianism, greater repression of human rights and absence of democracy in Egypt are anticipated among those surveyed.

Civil society is a critical actor in the implementation of development programmes; the EU could adopt a more inclusive approach in its relations with the Egyptian civil society, which is already encountering restrictions on the part of the state.

Gender is no longer seen a safe topic for discussion within Egyptian society, indicating the need for more awareness vis-à-vis gender equality and culture.

Iran

The full implementation of JCPOA is expected to reduce tensions in the Middle East and also is in the interest of global non-proliferation. Europe is seen as a central actor on JCPOA and is expected to further remove nuclear-sanctions-related obstacles to European-Iranian trade, especially on finance.

It is seen as of utmost necessity to improve institutionalized exchanges regarding the human rights situation in Iran, which is of great concern to Europe. A constructive dialogue should be sustained between both sides with concrete steps to improve human rights in Iran.

Europe could support the economic reform process in Iran in such a way that its assistance can also contribute to improving social welfare and advancing labour rights.

There is a great interest in enhancing civil society exchanges with Europe. The bureaucratic barriers imposed by the EU and its member states are stated as the main factors hindering progress on each side.

Israel

Israel needs to find new diplomatic breakthroughs for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, possibly with the assistance of the EU.

Discoveries of natural gas along the Eastern Mediterranean constitute a potential area of cooperation since Israel is reluctant to work with Turkey. Israel plans to build a pipeline to Cyprus, into Greece and ending in Italy because commercializing natural gas through liquefaction (LNG) is a very expensive process. This can be a major area of cooperation with the EU.

To address economic disparity in terms of the "dual-economy" problem; expanding areas of economic cooperation with the Union would serve as a way of improving social welfare.

Despite the extensive debate on the active engagement of the EU within Israeli domestic politics, civil society expects more EU involvement due to an increasing sense of restricted democratic space recently.

Lebanon
Greater economic cooperation and the promotion of good governance are the two main expectations for the EU on the part of the Lebanese, with an agenda aligned with the interests of the people.
Corruption is described the country's number one problem. Working with municipalities and grassroots organizations is encouraged for the EU to localize its actions when addressing the country's domestic problems.
Strong commitment is expected from the EU to tackle the refugee crisis and prevent the Mediterranean Sea from acting as a border.
Visa policies are seen as crucial for the Lebanese economy and there is the expectation of flexibility on acquiring Schengen visas.
Morocco
The EU can work jointly to enable "social dialogue" between the government and trade unions actors to achieve "social peace", which would benefit the state, the trade unions and workers.
The Moroccan development model was said to lack a political basis, and the need to link economic development with democracy was highlighted. The development model should also encompass "geographical equity".
Successful fight against drug trafficking and transnational organized crime is believed to require joint strategies with the Union.
Gender equality along with women's and youth empowerment are the two other areas where further development is deemed necessary.
The EU can help by promoting governance, transparency and competitiveness in the Moroccan economy.
Qatar
Qatari elites think that the Gulf region faces an uncertain future and international actors such as the EU can be a window of opportunity for cooperation and trade that would make the country more autonomous, stable and less vulnerable against the political uncertainties.
The reform agenda in Qatar is anticipated to develop the country's relations with the West and especially with the EU. Qatar is seen to engage in strategic diplomacy in its relations with both regional and global actors.
One expectation for the EU is to diversify cooperation on specific areas of mutual interest such as private sector development and research and innovation.
There is demand for reforms that advance women's rights in order to create positive societal change.

Saudi Arabia
Economy is foreseen to dominate Saudi–EU relations. With the Saudi Vision 2030, the Crown Prince is seen to be willing to sustain economic ties with Europe, and if possible to expand them.
The divergence between Saudi Arabia and the EU on the nuclear deal will remain as a major area of concern. While Iran will remain a critical threat for the Kingdom, the EU's mediation efforts appear to continue to challenge Saudi Arabia's regional interests.
The EU is recommended to adopt a more flexible approach its relations with the Kingdom. To progress on the political dialogue and bilateral exchange, one recommendation for the Union would be to appoint a Gulf representative to the region.
Tunisia
Tunisian elites demand a more concrete presence of the EU to address the challenges in democratic transition as well as the social and economic problems underlying the regional disparity and political reforms.
One of the main criticisms directed at the EU's engagement in Tunisia is centred on the EU's securitizing stance and the conditionality in bilateral agreements with the Union.
Since the Union is perceived as selective and elitist in its approach to the Tunisian civil society, the Union should adopt more inclusive and less technocratic strategies in its civil society instruments.
Tunisia sees itself as a regional player in North Africa and has the ambition to deal with regional challenges together with the international community instead of solely receiving guidance from them.
Turkey
There is an immediate need to clear up the ambiguous nature of Turkey's membership deal with the EU, which will require mutual efforts.
Together with the international community, the EU should improve upon sharing the responsibility for refugee protection through long-term solutions that would also consider the economic dimension of the migration crisis.
Keeping up the good work with the EU at the technical level is expected to act as leverage to maintain a positive rhetoric on political dialogue. In this the two major technical negotiations – modernization of the Customs Union and visa liberalization – can play an essential role.
Fostering close cooperation on regional stability and security with Turkey is believed to serve the mutual interests of the EU and Turkey at home and also in the region.

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مِد ريسټ



Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)
Via Angelo Brunetti 9
I-00186 Roma

Tel. +39-063224360
Fax +39-063224363

iai@iai.it | www.iai.it



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