

# A MULTIPOLAR SOUTHERN MEDITERRANEAN: THE EU IN SEARCH OF A ROLE

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## The changing politics of North Africa and the Middle East

**The growing heterogeneity of the EU “southern neighbourhood” since the Arab revolutions of 2011 is becoming an acquired notion.**

The growing heterogeneity of those parts of the world which the EU calls its “southern neighbourhood” has become an acquired notion since the 2011 Arab revolutions. This does not mean that the North African and Middle Eastern states were homogeneous prior to 2011, given their diversity, their conflicts, unequal socioeconomic development and distribution of resources and inability to cooperate with each other as a region.

Yet the domino-effect turmoil brought about since the fall of the Ben Ali regime in Tunisia has intensified the diverse challenges across this region of the world. While some countries, through revolution (Tunisia) or elements of reform (Morocco and Jordan), have embarked on consolidating more or less pluralist governments seeking closer relations with the EU, states have collapsed into civil and regional war (Syria), with such serious implications for neighbouring countries (Lebanon) that the conflict has become a region-wide one. Libya too appears on the brink of a civil war along tribal rather than sectarian lines. The hopes for Egypt’s Spring were dashed first by President Mohammed Morsi’s non-democratic style of government and then by the military coup which ushered in the new regime of President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi, accompanied by a widespread and violent repression of the opposition. Palestinian-Israeli relations, despite renewed efforts from the US and the EU, do not seem to be heading towards a solution to the longest standing conflict of the area.

**An “arc of instability” is making the MENA region vulnerable to incursions that are undermining its own internal stability.**

The Southern Mediterranean itself is challenged by exogenous pressures perhaps unprecedented in scale. The war in Syria and in Libya in 2011 and instability in Mali and the Horn of Africa have made the regions south of North Africa an attractive space for al-Qaeda infiltrations and various jihadist groups. From Mali all the way to Afghanistan and Iraq, a so-called “arc of instability” is making North Africa and the Middle East vulnerable to incursions undermining its own internal stability. The region has become more important as a route for transiting refugees from Sub-Saharan Africa (with recent latent conflicts in South Sudan, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo) and from Syria and Afghanistan, as well as a destination for immigration. In short, alongside the internal demographic and socio-economic fragilities and internal political discontent which the Arab revolutions and movements in the region brought to the fore, these states are also vulnerable to unprecedented external challenges which are making the international relations of these governments more global and less singularly focused on Europe.<sup>1</sup>

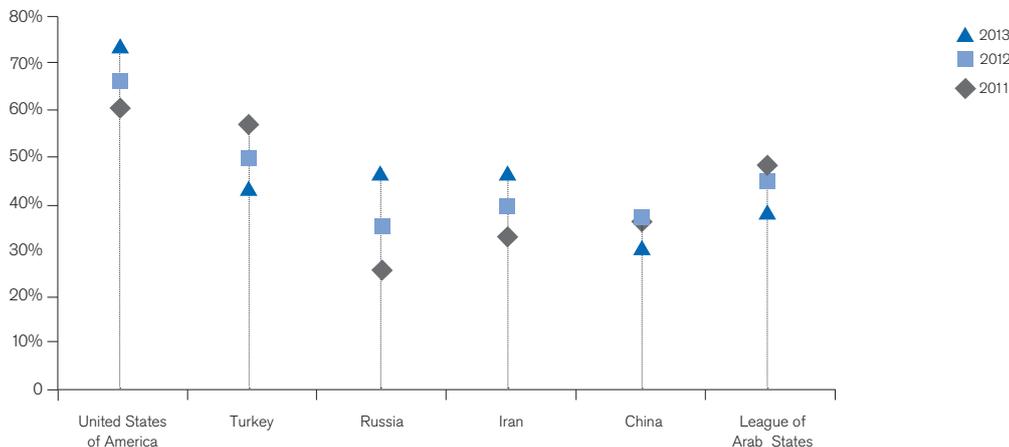
1. For a synthetic picture of the situation in the region, see G. Grevi, D. Keohane, B. Lee and P. Lewis, *Empowering Europe’s Future: Governance, Power and Options for the EU in a Changing World*, Annex 1 on “The Strategic Neighbourhood”, Chatham House, ES-PAS and FRIDE, 2013. For an analysis of population movement patterns, see International Centre for Migration Policy Development, MTM i-Map Project (Interactive Map on Migration in Africa, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean Region) by P. Fargues (ed.), *EU Neighbourhood Migration Report 2013*, Florence, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, Migration Policy Centre, European University Institute. Presentation by Egypt FM, Egmont Institute, Brussels, 1 April 2014.

This multipolar focus of the MENA states is mirrored in the growing role of other actors. In recent years, the Gulf States and Turkey have made efforts to play a bigger political role in North Africa and the Middle East, alongside economic and financial involvement. Migration patterns have changed showing that Middle Eastern citizens are increasingly moving to the Gulf in search of work opportunities. China has stepped up its presence in the region alongside other Asian players. As the graph 1 shows, the present Survey and past ones indicate how the role of other regional and non-regional actors has become perceived as growing in recent years, even if the US continues to be seen as the primary external actor shaping regional politics, making up a far more multi-polar region.

**The unprecedented external challenges facing MENA countries make their international relations more global.**

**Graph 1: Assessing the EU's future role in MPCs compared to other regional and international actors.**

**Comparing 2011 and 2013 survey results.** (The graph below displays the answers assessing the actor's capacity to have more influence on regional developments than the EU.)



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 3rd, 4th and 5th Euromed Survey

## EU responses and the challenges of engagement

The EU's response to the Arab Spring came soon after the events in Tunis, Cairo and Tripoli. In March, the EU published its "Partnership" and in May the scheduled ENP Review included upgraded policies reflecting the Partnership proposals.<sup>2</sup> Essentially, these entailed sharpening the existing tools underpinning engagement across the Mediterranean: enhancing trade and aspects of economic integration, making aid more tailor-made to conditions, and identifying new forms of cooperation on migratory patterns. The EU summed these efforts up into the "3 Ms" (more market access, more money, more mobility), seen as incentives available to those countries willing to get closer to the EU and embark on political reforms to reflect the demands for pluralism and good governance coming from the uprisings. The EU thus refined the way it exercises its conditionality, aimed at adopting a more "differentiated" approach to better target specific countries, in an effort to give more meaning to the notion of "partnership".

**As a response to the Arab Spring, the EU refined the way it uses conditionality, adopting a more "differentiated" approach.**

2. European Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, "A Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean", COM(2011) 200 final, Brussels, 8 March 2011a; European Commission and High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, "A New Response to a Changing Neighbourhood. A Review of the European Neighbourhood Policy", COM(2011) 303, Brussels, 25 May 2011b.

**Despite admitting the need to engage in dialogue with a wider variety of partners, the EU's action remains limited and of uncertain consequences.**

In parallel to this approach, which essentially revised the ENP without changing its content,<sup>3</sup> the EU also started to use a broader range of tools to engage in the region's democratic processes as well as in its security. Since 2011, it has sent six Election Observation Missions (EOM) to the region to support free and fair electoral processes and/or to support capacity-building in the electoral field. The EU contributed to the creation of the European Endowment for Democracy (EED), an EU Member State and Commission-funded non-governmental organisation conceived to provide financial support to political actors working for democracy in the EU's neighbourhood. It has stepped up assistance to civil society actors and NGOs with the aim of focusing on local capacity-building.

If these tools potentially could respond to the need to support the positive trends of people's empowerment and self expression which have exploded over the past few years, other tools are conversely aimed at playing a role in containing the security risks emanating from the region. In the spring of 2011 France and Britain were the two leading EU Member States at the head of a NATO military operation in Libya. The Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) was also used to deploy missions in Libya (a border control mission – EUBAM). Further south, following another military intervention led by France in Mali, since 2011 the EU has deployed CSDP missions in Mali, Niger, Somalia, and the Central African Republic. In addition, the EU approved two strategies – for the Sahel and for the Horn of Africa –, appointed EU Special Representatives for the Mediterranean (since the spring of 2014 Special Envoy for Libya) and the Horn of Africa, and adopted a “comprehensive approach” towards Syria.<sup>4</sup>

The EU also tried to devise approaches which reflected the growing relevance of forms of multilateralism as a means of dealing with the multipolarity of the region. The special task forces organised with Tunisia (November 2011), Jordan (February 2012) and Egypt (November 2012) were efforts to mobilise EU financial and economic support, international organisations, the private sector and other donors and investors to address the deep economic crises in the countries, but it achieved limited results in reaching out towards non-European donors and businesses.

The EU's position on the Syrian crisis consistently underlined the need for dialogue with the other regional actors – Turkey, the Gulf States – as well as the UN Security Council members. But it kept the non-proliferation talks with Iran separate from discussions over Syria. The breakthrough with Iran may vindicate this position, and there is no reason to believe that engaging Iran over the Syrian crisis would have produced better outcomes in the war. For the purpose of this analysis, the observation is that whatever discussions were carried out with regional partners over Syria, the EU does not seem to have made any particular inroads in its broader cooperation with the Gulf countries, Turkey or Iran over North Africa and the Middle East. Despite the acknowledgement of the multipolarity of the region and the need to engage in dialogue with a wider variety of partners, the EU's track record remains limited to a few initiatives of uncertain consequence.

3. For a critique, see R. Balfour, in S. Biscop, R. Balfour and M. Emerson, *An Arab Springboard for EU Foreign Policy?*, Brussels, Egmont Institute, 2012.

4. European Union External Action Service, “Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel”, no document number or date, 2011, available at: [http://eeas.europa.eu/africa/docs/sahel\\_strategy\\_en.pdf](http://eeas.europa.eu/africa/docs/sahel_strategy_en.pdf); Council of the European Union, “Council Conclusions – Horn of Africa, 16858/11”, Brussels, 14 November 2011; European Commission and High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, “Towards a Comprehensive EU Approach to the Syrian Crisis, JOIN(2013) 22 final”, Brussels, 24 June 2013.

## A deeper look at the assumptions: how to move towards a paradigm shift in a multipolar region?

The EU's overall response to the regional turmoil suggests that there is a willingness to engage and that the toolbox has expanded to make it more capable of getting involved in a broader range of issues. Alongside the ENP framework, CSDP and EOMs have been mobilised to target specific issues. Methodologically, the “comprehensive approach” is intended to connect the dots between the different EU tools and approaches, from development to military tools, to make them work better in unison.

The developments in the region, however, further challenge many of the assumptions upon which the EU has based its policies towards this part of the world – whereby by further it is understood that plenty of conceptual flaws in the EU's policy set up pre-dated the Arab Spring.

The path dependency between the EU's regional approach towards the Southern Mediterranean and the Middle East Peace Process is sometimes forgotten. Among the key objectives (at that time innovative) of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership was the notion of contributing to building a region which was preparing for the peace to be heralded by the Oslo Accords. Although regional cooperation has been one of the most outstanding non-achievements of two decades of efforts, the MEPP has not produced the expected results, and now its centrality in Euro-Mediterranean relations is challenged by competing tragic events in other parts of the Arab world.

The concept of “differentiation” implies flexibility from a standard template rather than tailor made approaches towards individual situations. While this may appear an academic remark, the implication of a single template is that the degree of engagement with one country, the principles upon which such engagement will be based and the mobilisation of resources that such engagement will require will be evaluated by comparison with the policies devised towards other countries. Put differently, the question is whether the EU can justify the fact that in its relations with Tunisia it expects the accomplishment of reforms in line with its conditionality policy (on the basis of which financial commitments are disbursed), while with Egypt it does not exert the same pressure, given the weight of that country and the contribution expected from Cairo to Europe's broader security aims. It also implies that the template (in this case the ENP) is the most appropriate approach if accompanied by some flexible additional tools. In other words, it reinstates the ENP's overarching principle of alignment to EU norms as the advantageous policy for the receiving country.

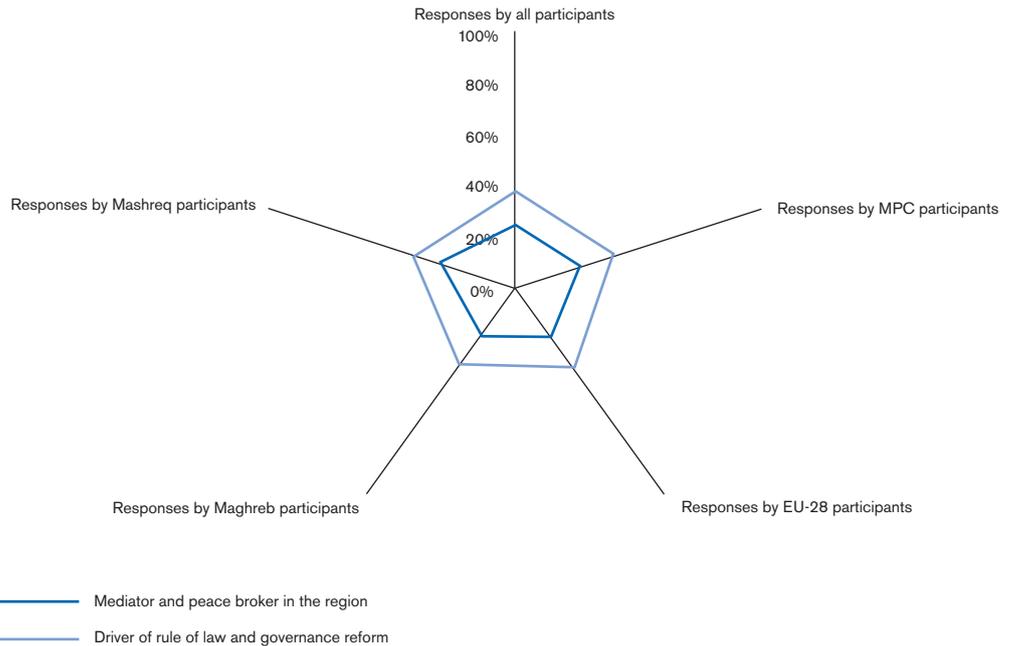
This, in turn, rests on the gravitational model of EU attraction which, in a multipolar region, is not necessarily competitive, with implications for the appropriateness of the conditionality-based model as well as the partnership principle.

**The EU policies designed to target a broader range of issues are challenged by the developments in the region.**

**The concept of “differentiation” implies flexibility from a standard template rather than tailor-made approaches towards individual situations.**

**The EU should consider whether the principles of conditionality and partnership continue to be appropriate in the multipolar MENA region.**

**Graph 2: Influence of the European Union in the present framework of a multipolar scenario**  
 (% of answers considering that the EU has a high or very high influence as a mediator and peace broker in the region and as a driver of rule of law)



This graph shows that, in the frame of the present multipolar scenario, only around 20% of respondents (both North and South, Maghreb or Mashreq) consider that EU influence as a peace broker in the region is high or very high. This rises to 40% when the EU as a driver of rule of law and governance reform is assessed.

Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 5th Euromed Survey

**The new toolbox should be understood rather as a means and not as an end in itself.**

Finally, the changes in the region and the responses (differentiation, conditionality) pose the more normative dilemma again: how can the EU reconcile aims of creating security, restoring stability and supporting aspirations towards greater democratic principles in an increasingly contested and often hostile environment with multiple push and pull factors when the EU's overall influence is declining?

In strategic terms, the core dilemma for the EU is about engagement: the degree of engagement, how far this engagement should go, who to engage with, and on what grounds. The template of the European Neighbourhood, however much revised, has not addressed this,<sup>5</sup> nor does the "comprehensive approach" or the CSDP missions in the region and beyond offer many clues about the EU's review of the strategic challenges to Europe coming from North Africa and the Middle East and beyond.

**The EU needs to design a platform around which it could build alliances with other partners to achieve commonly agreed aims.**

While the additional basket of tools and the institutional capability to manage them are welcome developments, these processes will be of little consequence if they are not understood as means rather than ends in themselves. What continues to be lacking in the EU's engagement with the rest of the world is the shared purpose of such engagement, a common agenda towards which EU tools, institutions, and its Member States, can be mobilised, and a platform around which to build alliances with other partners to achieve commonly agreed aims.

5. For critiques of the ENP, see R. Balfour and A. Missiroli, *Reassessing the European Neighbourhood Policy*, EPC Issue Paper, No. 54, June 2007; Rosa Balfour, *Political Conditionality after the Arab Spring*, PapersIEMED, 2012; Kristina Kausch, *The End of the (Southern) Neighbourhood*, PapersIEMED, No. 18, 2013; and S. Lehne (2014), *Time to Reset the European Neighbourhood Policy*, Carnegie, February 2014.

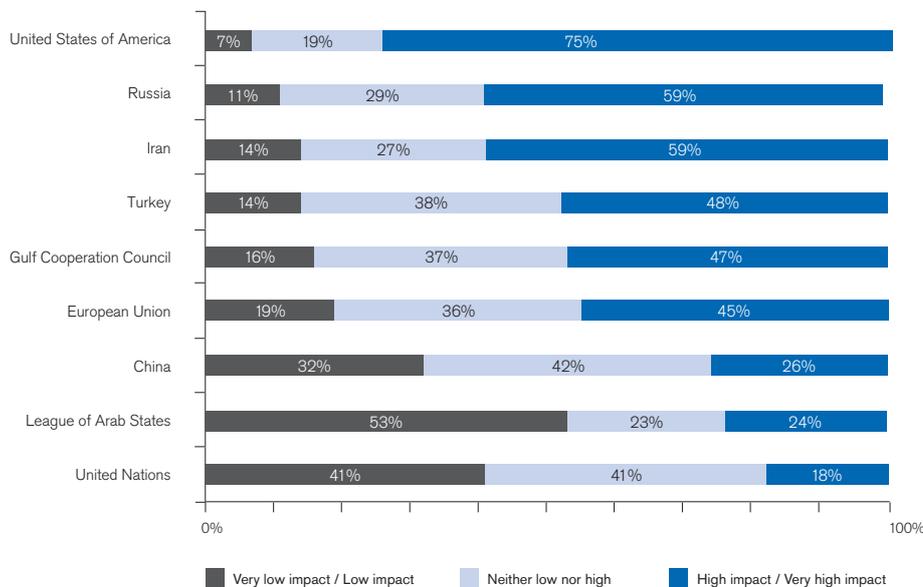
### Perceptions and expectations: the search for an EU role

The mismatch between potential and achievements seems to be a constant feature of evaluations of the EU's performance in international affairs. The famous formula of the "capabilities-expectations gap" developed by Christopher Hill in the early 1990s<sup>6</sup> is probably the most commonly used framework to assess the EU's policy output compared to its stated goals. In addition to asking a set of questions measuring the satisfaction with EU policies and initiatives (to which responses are largely negative), this year's Euromed Survey also asks other relevant questions on the impact of the EU on the region and the role of international actors, including the EU, in the region.

**The mismatch between potential and achievements seems to be a constant feature of the evaluations of the EU's performance.**

The results show a clear perception of greater multipolarity in the region. As seen in graph 3, even if the US continues to be seen as the most influential actor, a number of others also play an important role, with Russia and Iran seen as increasingly important (60% of respondents see these two countries as having a "very high" or "high impact"), while the EU is seen as having such impact in 46% of responses, alongside Turkey and the Gulf Cooperation Council.

**Graph 3: Assessing the impact of the following international players in the Southern Mediterranean countries**

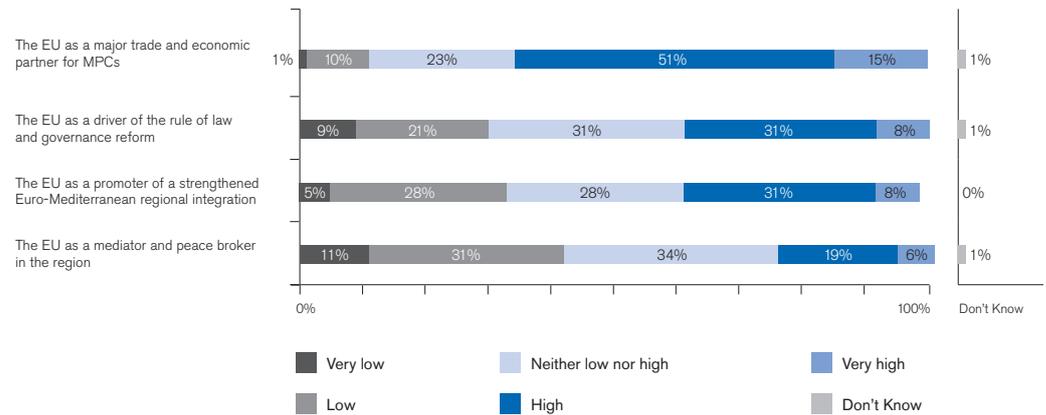


Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 3rd and 5th Euromed Survey

6. C. Hill, "The Capabilities-Expectations Gap, or Conceptualizing Europe's International Role", *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 3, 1993, pp. 305-328.

This is somewhat at odds with an overall expectation that the EU can play an important role in the region which emerges clearly from the Survey of experts. The EU is uncontroversially recognised as a major trade and economic partner (see graph 4), while one third of respondents also see a role in promoting regional integration and the rule of law and governance.

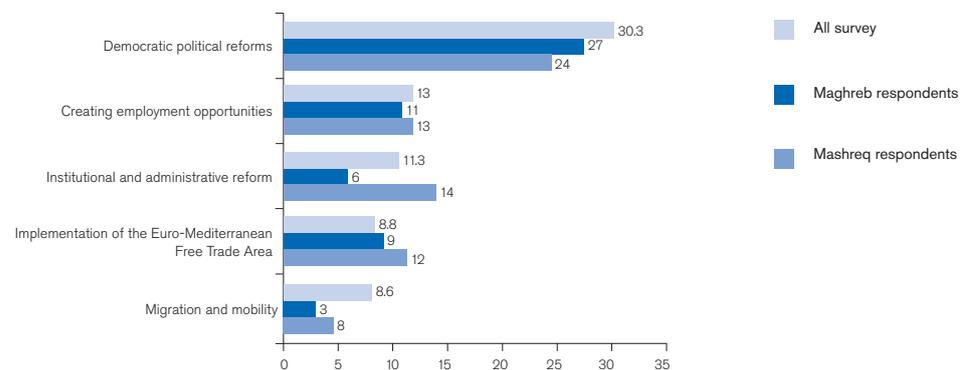
**Graph 4: Influence of the European Union in the present framework of a multipolar scenario**



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 5th Euromed Survey

Yet there is an expectation that the EU could play a stronger role in some of these areas, with democratic political reforms emerging as the top priority for the EU according to 30% of respondents (the second priority being creating job opportunities with 13%), see graph 5.

**Graph 5: EU's policies in the near future for the region: selecting policy areas according to its priority (5 areas considered to be 1st priority)**



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 5th Euromed Survey

These results based on expert surveys do not clash with the Eurobarometer surveys carried out during the autumn of 2013. Despite the criticism of the EU's performance and concrete impact, it still enjoys a benign view in North Africa (62% of Maghreb interviewees have a positive image) and partially in the Mashreq (with a much lower 42% and, notably, an extremely low 12% in Egypt). Here too, alongside the perception of the EU as an economic and commercial actor, many see the EU as potentially playing a role in peace and security and human rights.<sup>7</sup>

In twenty years since the conceptualisation of the capabilities-expectations gap, it can be argued that successive foreign policy reforms have done much in terms of capabilities. But the expectations continue to fall short of the performance, with the sum of the tools not corresponding to an overall strategy: there appears to be scope for the EU to perform better in the Southern Mediterranean, notwithstanding the current turmoil and uncertainty. Or, perhaps because of the uncertainty, the EU could even be seen as a potential “force for good”, helping the region with its key factors of instability. The decision about which course of action to pursue will be for the next EU leaders to take.

**Despite the current turmoil and uncertainty the EU could perform better and be seen as a “force for good”.**

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7. “Baromètre du voisinage de l'UE. Sud de la Méditerranée”, autumn 2013.