Since most Arab countries gained independence, structured Euro-Arab partnership has been characterized by a pattern of discontinuity to the extent that the EU has never held a Summit of Heads of State and Government with the Arab group. In contrast, the EU conducts international summity,¹ both bilaterally and interregionally, with all world powers and regions, notably with the US, China and Japan or through the Asia-Europe Summit, the EU-Latin America Summit or the African Union-EU Summit, among others.

The biggest problem of a multilateral Euro-Arab exercise is that it has always encountered political difficulties, or, otherwise, has been overlooked entirely, amidst the constant fragmentation of the Arab regional system and little appetite from Europe's side to antagonize a United States which has traditionally conducted its own policy towards the Middle East and the Arab region at large. Unlike with the other interregional dialogue exercises, EU-Arab cooperation has been dominated by purely political and security questions, and not economy and trade.


It would be simple – and somehow unmistaken – to present the Euro-Arab Dialogue (EAD) as the story of a failure. Nevertheless, if the EAD is to be recalled as a milestone in Euro-Arab relations, it is because it engendered an unprecedented attempt, within a longstanding relationship, to undertake an interregional discussion. Behind that turning point lay the Arab need for support in the Palestinian cause and European reliance on Arab oil resources. Against the backdrop of the oil embargo, the European Economic Community (EEC) and Arab Countries would agree in the 1970s to settle a bilateral discussion that overcame the boundaries of national interests. Indeed, the challenge of the EAD was not only dictated by the difficulty in achieving mutually satisfying compromises through bilateral conversations. It was also given by the difficulty for each interlocutor to speak with one voice. In the aftermath of the Yom Kippur war, the balance of power in the Mediterranean was built on a complex system of dependencies. The Arab region, endowed with abundant oil resources, was the EEC's main trading partner, especially for France and Italy. For its part, the EEC had recently declared its endeavour to strengthen its role as a political actor, particularly in the Mediterranean. The circumstances were such that, whereas Arab countries held the economic means to force political negotiation, Europeans had the opportunity to use their political influence for achieving their economic goals.²

Three years before, instability in the Mediterranean and the lack of a coherent roadmap in the region raised European awareness on the urgency of comprehensive solutions. The launch of the European Political Cooperation (1970) responded to the need for a common foreign approach beyond communitarian borders. Indeed, the ‘Global Mediterranean Policy’ (1972) would be the first articulated attempt by the EEC to give coherence to the wide array of bilateral agreements coexisting in the Mediterranean. Within this framework, the EEC sought to strengthen its commitment in the area through economic and technical cooperation. However, Arab countries expected greater political involvement from the European side.

Since most Arab countries gained independence, structured Euro-Arab partnership has been characterized by a pattern of discontinuity to the extent that the EU has never held a Summit of Heads of State and Government with the Arab group.

On 6 November 1973, in Brussels, the foreign ministers of the nine EC Member States expressed their intention to renegotiate their ties with the southern Mediterranean countries and manifested their support to Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338 regarding the occupation of Palestinian territories by Israel since 1967. A few days later, an Arab Summit in Algiers called for European cooperation on behalf of their “deep affinities of civilization and by vital interests which could not be developed except in a situation of trusting and mutually beneficial cooperation.” In the Copenhagen declaration of December, Europeans would acknowledge the message and assert their will to negotiate comprehensive agreements with oil-producing countries comprising cooperation for economic and industrial development in exchange for stable energy supplies. Unexpectedly, four Arab ministers had attended that gathering to express their desire for long-term cooperation in economic, technical and cultural fields. In this regard, there is no consensus on who started the EAD, but it seems evident that both parties had numerous reasons for pursuing dialogue.

The EAD was formally established in Paris on 31 July 1974 with the foreign ministers of France and Kuwait as representatives of each part. It was agreed that a general committee and several working groups would be further constituted to handle the discussion. Notwithstanding, the first plenary session would be postponed for months due to the tensions nourished by the Arab-Israeli conflict. The signing of an association agreement with Israel, on the one hand, and the request by the Arab League (LAS) for the participation of a PLO delegation in the EAD, on the other, complicated the conversations. The ‘Dublin formula’ (1975) would solve the latter concern by establishing two homogenous delegations that blurred the links between representatives and nations.

The first plenary sessions took place in Cairo in June 1975, where the working committee structure was divided into seven categories: industrialization, infrastructure, agriculture and rural development, financial cooperation, trade, scientific and technical cooperation, as well as cultural-social-labour issues. Nevertheless, political divergences appeared during the subsequent gatherings of the working committees in Rome and Abu Dhabi. The European counterpart was perceived by the LAS as too ambiguous regarding the Palestinian issue. In fact, the approach of the European delegation in sessions of the EAD’s committee were restricted to policy statements already made at higher levels by the Nine as a group. Indeed, the Brussels Declaration on the Middle East had been the farthest-reaching commitment they had been able to endorse. Beyond that border, there were evident internal divergences on the approach towards Israel.

Political and economic differences were even more visible among the members of the LAS, whose only subject of consensus lay precisely in their total opposition to the Arab-Israel status quo. In a nutshell, at the level of foreign policy towards the Middle

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3 http://aei.pitt.edu/7824/1/31735055281335_1.pdf
4 According to Taylor (1978, p. 431): “The Foreign Ministers of Algeria, Tunisia and Sudan and a Minister without Portfolio from the United Arab Emirates arrived in Copenhagen without invitation on this occasion.”
East, the main source of agreement among Arab countries coincided exactly with the main subject of controversy among the Nine. This reveals the extent to which the EAD was hampered by the shadow of a conflict that precipitated both its birth and death. Also, in both sides of the dialogue, the degree of commitment was diverse among countries. If, among Europeans, only the Mediterranean countries showed a strong involvement throughout the whole process, within the Arab region resource-poor countries were significantly more engaged than resource-rich ones. The latter, together with the harsh reaction by the US to the EAD, which Nixon’s Administration interpreted as a sort of European interference into its Middle East affairs, weakened the project from its very beginning.5

EU-Arab cooperation has been dominated by purely political and security questions, and not economy and trade

Only four meetings6 were held during the 1970s by the General Committee, which paradoxically left aside the two main topics, having unleashed the dialogue. Meanwhile, the working committees tried to define potential areas of economic cooperation. In this regard, Arab partners prioritized requests on industrialization and technology transfer, particularly concerning their petroleum refining facilities. This, however, was a sensitive point for their European counterparts. The same can be said about financial cooperation and labour relations, where the requests of Arab countries were too close to the Community’s red lines.

Yet, a couple of events in 1977 revived hope on the possibilities of the EAD. The meetings held in Tunis and Brussels seemed particularly fruitful because they agreed on the implementation of several specific projects7 and the commitment by both parties to invest in the EAD. Moreover, at the London summit in June, the Nine Heads of State and Government of the EC took a further step in their support to the Arab cause. They asserted the necessity of “giving effective expression to Palestinian national identity” and called for a “homeland for the Palestinian people.” However, the start of the Camp David process with the visit to Israel of the Egyptian President Sadat would bring the EAD to a stalemate. After the expulsion of Egypt from the LAS in 1979, Arab countries suspended the dialogue.

During the following years, the EEC would try to re-launch the initiative by committing itself, through different means, to deeper political involvement in the area. The Venice Declaration (June 1980) was the greatest of these attempts. Notwithstanding, any intent would prove unsuccessful until the return of Egypt to the LAS in 1989. However, once more, delicate circumstances would soon bring the dialogue to another deadlock. The outbreak of the Gulf War in 1990 brought a definitive close to the conversation.

Towards a Euro-Arab Summit

Since the last Euro-Arab Ministerial Conference convened in Paris in December 1989 by then French President François Mitterrand, Euro-Arab cooperation has been conducted through an increasingly more structured dialogue enhanced by EU institutions and the Secretariat of the Arab League (LAS). The capacity and powers of EU institutions to politically relate with other external regions has evolved in accordance with the EU Treaties modifications. Likewise, it was not until 2007 that the 19th Arab League Summit held in Saudi Arabia mandated the LAS Secretary General to pursue efforts and contacts with the Presidency of the Council of the EU and the European Commission to develop collective Arab-European relations.8

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5 As Eleonora Guasconi recalls, the impasse spurred by the US reaction was overcome with the ‘Gymnich Compromise.’ Under this German initiative, a compromise was found by allowing for consultation with the US on a case-by-case basis.
7 Among those projects, a Euro-Arab centre for the transfer of technology, a multilateral Euro-Arab convention for protection and promotion of investments or improved conditions for Arab workers employed in Europe were foreseen.
8 Arab League Summit decisions, Riyadh 2007 English Text, in The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: An Interactive Database, Economic Cooperation Foundation (ECF), http://ecf.org.il/media_items/519
With a view to structure a cooperation format that could effectively address common and regional threats that both sides were facing, one year later, in February 2008, a first EU-LAS Ministerial Meeting on Foreign Affairs was held in Malta following the so-called ‘Malta initiative’ launched in 2006. Similarly, this first ministerial meeting was followed by three other meetings at the level of ministers of foreign affairs in Cairo in 2012, in Brussels in 2014 and in Cairo in 2016. Ministerial meetings on foreign affairs are expected to be held alternatively in either one of the two regions every two years.

In particular, after the appointment of the EU High Representative Mogherini, bilateral cooperation between the European External Action Service and the Secretariat of the Arab League has been reinforced. In 2015, a strategic dialogue was launched and a MoU was signed between the two institutions, which has entailed the establishment of more avenues of discussion on priority issues, as well as the activation of some working groups on political and security matters, particularly in the fields of conflict prevention, early warning and crisis management, humanitarian assistance, counterterrorism, transnational organized crime and the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and arms control. In addition, the traditional invitations addressed to the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs to attend the LAS Summits have been consolidated, and, in return, official meetings of the LAS Secretary General with the EU Foreign Affairs Council have also taken place. Upon the initiative of the LAS, in March 2017, the EU joined the so-called Libyan ‘Quartet,’ an initiative pushed forward by the latter along with the United Nations and the African Union.

The prospects for a steady, reinforced cooperation were reflected in the conclusions of the last EU-LAS Ministerial Meeting on Foreign Affairs, held in Cairo in December 2016, whereby the idea of calling for a joint Euro-Arab Summit was made explicit, along with the possibility of holding sectoral ministerial meetings. In spite of clear indications from the Arab side to move forward in the organization of the joint summit as endorsed by the LAS Summit in Jordan in March 2017 in the presence of HRVP Mogherini, the EU should now take the initiative and fix the forthcoming meeting in its calendar. It is up to the presidency of the European Council to decide when preparations should begin.

With part of the Arab region in disarray, autocracy or even war, Europe is and will continue to be in the future the main source of foreign investment, trade and development aid in the Arab region and has a vital self-interest to promote state and societal resilience, as well as human and sustainable development. Despite new internal divisions that emerged in 2017 on the Arab side, namely the crisis over Qatar, which severely hit most of the countries in the LAS, the time has come to move forward and organize a summit.

In the light of an existing summit fatigue within the EU, this meeting should bring concrete results and avoid the typical vacuous declarations. To this end, the purpose of this summit is to enhance political dialogue and intensify security-related issues amongst the 50 states that take part in this exercise. Consequently, it is of paramount importance that, first, the summit is planned with a view to being convened again in the future following a certain pattern of regularity, as is the case with other inter-regional dialogues that the EU conducts worldwide. Secondly, it would be desirable that the exchanges at regular meetings of the EU’s Political and Security Committee and the Arab Permanent Representatives could be densified and held twice a year at least.

Thirdly, it is also relevant to properly engage the existing multilateral framework of cooperation in which EU Member States partner with part of the Arab group, namely the Union for the Mediterranean, which encompasses 10 of the 22 Arab states. This is what happened at the last EU-LAS Ministerial Meeting on Foreign Affairs held in Cairo in December 2016, where the UfM Secretary General was invited to attend the meeting and some of the regional projects and results of the organization

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9 These working groups gather in between meetings of senior officials, which are held twice a year between the representatives of both institutions
11 Notwithstanding the fact that Syria’s membership has been suspended since December 2011 and Libya has observer status
were reflected in the final declaration. The long-forged Euro-Mediterranean cooperation has produced an *acquis*, which could bring value added to the EU-Arab partnership, without mixing or replacing processes whose nature and objectives are intrinsically different.

A Euro-Arab Summit in itself would certainly not bring peace to the Middle East, but it could give momentum to efforts in finding solutions.

With the aim of densifying and widening the scope of this strategic dialogue, the latter cannot be limited to purely security matters, and should also address whether the current state of the region is also an effect of the discouraging lack of progress on regional integration. In spite of the LAS being one of the oldest regional institutions, the organization lacks leadership capacity, both internally and externally, as well as internal cohesion. Closer cooperation with the EU could reinvigorate the credibility of the organization with its own membership and Arab citizens at large. Furthermore, the EU, by upgrading the political dialogue with the LAS and, thereby, promoting greater interregional and, particularly, intraregional integration with more impetus, would unequivocally help build and strengthen the region, but also its own interests. Intraregional economic links, especially in trade, remain very weak. Finally, sectoral ministerial meetings complementing the political dialogue by addressing the key strategic thematic priorities in interregional cooperation should become an important asset of the political dialogue. Without necessarily launching too many ministerial formats, it seems conspicuous that many of the common challenges that the partnership faces in areas that range from mobility, energy, job creation, terrorism, sustainable development, investment and arms control require an upgrade of the existing mechanisms of cooperation between the EU and the LAS secretariat.

A Euro-Arab Summit in itself would certainly not bring peace to the Middle East, but it could give momentum to efforts in finding solutions. Focusing on cross-cutting matters of shared concern would certainly help overcome two major setbacks that have long hindered cooperation and mutual understanding: the prevalence of national interests over regional goals and the lack of a coherent roadmap towards balanced relations with a long-term vision.