

Dossier: Reconfiguration of International Order and Territorial Wars in the Middle East

The Role of EU International Policy in the Face of the Russian Threat, the Rise of Trump and the Reconfiguration of the Middle East

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Already in 2016 – at the height of the Syrian crisis but still before Donald Trump's first mandate as President of the United States, before the Covid-19 pandemic as of 2020, the Taliban takeover of Kabul in 2021, the large-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2022 and before Trump's re-election in November 2023 – the *EU Security Strategy* (EUSS) – still the official EU security doctrine today, although now largely out of sync with the present international realities – had famously stated: "We live in an ever more connected, contested and complex world."¹

This recognition was the clear expression of the fact that Fukuyama's 1989 vision² of the end of history and the final triumph of Western liberalism had definitely failed to become the new paradigm of international relations in the first decades of the 21st century. Instead, the global threat of Islamist extremism, the return of authoritarianism, a perceived decline of US dominance and the rise of China as an economic, military and also increasingly diplomatic power, populism and democratic backsliding in established democracies, and the emergence and growth of new political formats of international cooperation such as the BRICS, reflecting the growing economic weight

and political ambition of a number of Asian, Latin American and also African nations, all came together to defy the idea that liberal democracy was inevitable or unchallenged. It was an acknowledgement of the fact that the world was not only becoming increasingly multipolar, both politically and economically, but also that the body of international law, the set of values and the multilateral order that had been considered the basic norm of international politics for decades – since the end of World War II and definitely since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 – were no longer deemed to be globally and uncontestedly accepted. For the European Union in particular, whose cohesion, internal market system and international influence as a non-state depends even more on the respect of international norms and law, this meant it had to be ready to step up its defence of its role as a "normative power" in the global system.

Against this background, when presenting the *Political Guidelines* for her first European Commission³ on 16 July 2019, President-designate Ursula von der Leyen endeavoured to define the future position and ambition of the European Union under her leadership: "Today's world feels ever more unsettled. Existing powers are going down new paths alone. New powers are emerging and consolidating. Changes in climate, technology and demography are transforming our societies and way of life... In the next five years, we have to work together to allay fears and create opportunities. Europe must lead the transition to a healthy planet and a new digital world. But it can only do so by bringing people together and

¹ EEAS. "Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy.": www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/global-strategy-european-unions-foreign-and-security-policy_en#:~:text=Shared%20Vision%2C%20Common%20Action%3A%20A%20Stronger%20Europe%20The,reports%20describe%20the%20Strategy%27s%20visions%20turning%20into%20action.

² FUKUYAMA, Francis. "The End of History?" *The National Interest* 16: 3-18, 1989.

³ EUROPEAN COMMISSION. "A Union that strives for more. My agenda for Europe." 2019. www.purple-eu.org/uploads/ROBUST/EU%20Framework%20Strategy/political-guidelines-next-commission_en_0.pdf.

upgrading our unique social market economy to fit today's new ambitions." (p.2). Consequently, and famously, this led her to label her administration, when presenting her Commission to the European Parliament on 27 November 2019, a *Geopolitical Commission*: "This is the geopolitical Commission that I have in mind, and that Europe urgently needs," she said to Parliament.⁴

2025 Harsh Realities: Geopolitical Rivalries

Six years on and the international situation looks even more complex, unpredictable and, to an extent, confused. Multipolarism has developed further at an astounding speed. The multilateral order is not only contested but even openly threatened regarding its rules base, its legitimacy and its institutions. Interstate war and the use of force are back internationally, in Europe and in its neighbourhood, as tools for implementing and defending national interest in open defiance of international law. Where the use of force has not become the rule of the day, transactionalism is increasingly replacing rules-based multilateralism as the new normal in international relations. In her new *Political Guidelines* presented on 18 July 2024, as a sort of government manifesto aiming to win the European Parliament's support for her re-election as President of the European Parliament, von der Leyen therefore stated: "We have entered an age of geo-strategic rivalries." In response, there was the need for a *global Europe* that would leverage power and partnerships. "In a world as dangerous as it has been for generations, Europe needs to be more assertive in pursuing its strategic interests." (p.25)⁵

Harsh new realities are forcing Europeans to not only review their foreign relations and trade policy strategies but also to redefine their interests, re-examine their international alliances and create new ones, review long-cherished approaches and guidelines governing their international action and modernize or complete the toolbox of instruments with which the EU operates in the world and in its own neighbour-

hood. To paraphrase Robert Kagan's famous verdict in 2002⁶: When it's not only Americans who are from Mars, but also Russians, Chinese, Turks, Iranians, Israelis and many others, can Europeans carry on being from Venus – if what is at stake is not only the defence of their interests, but also the European model itself, the existence of freedom, peace, wealth and cohesion, and union on the European continent at large?

- The European Union recognizes Russia's war of aggression on Ukraine as part of a wider, systematic attack on Europe, its values and on the rules-based international order. Russian propaganda leaves no doubt that Russia opposes not only OSCE-recognized borders but also Western societal values and the order on the European continent.
- The rules-based international order and its institutions are seen as increasingly undermined by a wide variety of international actors, not least also the United States and China (e.g. WTO, international judiciary such as the ICC, etc.); bodies of international law such as International Humanitarian Law are openly disregarded, declared irrelevant, or violated with a presumption of impunity.
- The United States under the Trump II administration is no longer regarded as a fully trustworthy and loyal ally in security matters, a reliable partner to the EU in trade and investment and a world leader of liberal democracy and rule of law. The US withdrawal from multilateral arrangements, its somewhat erratic behaviour in negotiations and the Trump administration's highly transactional America first (or better: America only) approach send brutal wake-up messages across the Atlantic that force Europeans to think seriously about strategic autonomy, not only in the economic field, but also politically and in defence matters.
- This does not only encourage Europeans – both at Union level and in the 27 Member States – to

⁴ https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/speech-president-elect-von-der-leyen-european-parliament-plenary-occasion-presentation-her-college-2019-11-27_en.

⁵ EUROPEAN COMMISSION. "Europe's choice. Political guidelines for the next European Commission 2024–2029.": https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/e6cd4328-673c-4e7a-8683-f63ffb2cf648_en?filename=Political%20Guidelines%202024-2029_EN.pdf.

⁶ KAGAN, Robert. "Power and Weakness: Why the United States and Europe See the World Differently." *Policy Review* 113: 3-28, 2002.

push for rapid growth in order to meet the requirements of an enhanced political, military and economic autonomy and reprioritize their budgets accordingly. It also forces them to redefine their interests – together as a grouping –, while in the past, EU external action has mainly been seen as an expression of common “European” values.

While it still looks like a rather straightforward exercise to establish and implement a common European position that is both values and interest-based in the case of the Russian attack against Ukraine, the same effort seems considerably more complex in other policy areas, such as with respect to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Gaza war, the fight against irregular migration or the future orientation of EU trade policy. Defining interest in a number of conflict situations and, where necessary, re-orienting EU policies in many cases – and Gaza is a case in point here – becomes a particular challenge in a union of 27 states whose history, governance systems, perception of the world, security interests and economic profiles differ significantly. Creating a level of congruence between liberal values and *realpolitik* interest to the extent that concrete political action can follow in this scenario does not only require considerable debate, effort and leadership, but also bears a constant risk for the cohesion of a Union of 27 countries, for its policy consistency and credibility and for foreign policy effectiveness.

Consequences for EU Foreign Policy

For decades, the display of EU influence in external relations has essentially rested upon two pillars:

- The economic might of the EU single market, the world’s largest integrated market and trading block of more than 450 million consumers, worth a GDP of EUR 20 trillion in 2025.
- The European Union’s “normative” soft power,⁷ endeavouring to promote internationally, through its foreign, human rights, development and hu-

manitarian policies, as well as its trade policy of late, the values enshrined in the Lisbon Treaty (Art. 2 and 3): “*The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities... The Union’s aim is to promote peace, its values and the well-being of its peoples.*”⁸

On the other hand, the European Union cannot avail itself of the same sovereign rights as a nation state under international law. Partly because of this, the Union’s interest and capacity in developing hard power, particularly military capacities, has so far remained rather limited, despite some 25 years of efforts to build up EU international crisis management tools.

Harsh new realities are forcing Europeans to modernize or complete the toolbox of instruments with which the EU operates in the world and in its own neighbourhood

However, in the present international environment the EU must recognize that it is no longer enough to rely almost exclusively on these two pillars alone:

- The EU’s stance as a norm-setting trade power faces increasing pressure, both as a consequence of international trade dynamics and radical changes in the global regulatory environment. After having followed a widely recognized free-trade paradigm for several decades, international politics is now increasingly marked by several other large players’ open disregard of multilateral rules and arrangements (e.g. WTO), recourse to customs duties (US) and increasing use of restrictive economic measures, such as export limitations or the exclusion of foreign bid-

⁷ MANNERS, Ian. “Normative power Europe: A contradiction in terms?” *Journal of Common Market Studies* 40(2): 235-258, 2002.

⁸ TREATY ON EUROPEAN UNION: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:2bf140bf-a3f8-4ab2-b506-fd71826e6da6.0023.02/DOC_1&format=PDF.

ders from public tenders (China). Moreover, while the EU is still a formidable trade block in its own right, its share of global GDP has gradually declined over the last four decades – from nearly 30 % in 1980 to around 15 % today – and its population, which in 2010 still made up 7.1% of the global population, now accounts for no more than 5.5%.

- Against this background, and with the emergence of new economic powers, particularly in Asia and Latin America, the EU is finding it increasingly difficult to garner support abroad for its priorities, values and interpretation of just and fair trade and international relations patterns. Examples of this are the difficulties to impose the EU Supply Chain Act (more formally: the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive) internationally, a major EU law adopted in 2024 that sets out due diligence obligations for large companies regarding human rights and environmental impacts throughout their global supply chains, or the problems in convincing major trade partners, such as India or Indonesia, to accept EU-inspired social labour and environmental standards in bilateral agreements with the European Union.
- EU normative power, which seemed to be at an unrivalled height in the 20 years after the demise of the Soviet Union and following the Arab Spring, making the EU a reference for peace building, rule of law, democracy and an efficient market order in accession countries such as the Western Balkans, Turkey, eastern Europe and among many of the EU's southern neighbours in the MENA region, is jeopardized not only by international economic developments, but also an increasingly strong perception of EU double standards in international relations: Critics accuse the EU of:
 - Condemning human rights abuses in some countries (e.g., Russia, Belarus or Iran), while simultaneously maintaining close economic or energy ties with others, like Saudi Arabia, Egypt or China, when it serves EU interest, despite the existence of similar concerns.
 - A selective application of values for strategic or economic interest, where the EU is seen to be quicker to condemn Russia's actions in Ukraine than Israeli policies in the Palestinian territo-

ries, and, in particular, the way it has conducted its war against Hamas in Gaza since the Hamas attack of 7 October 2023.

- Outsourcing border control to countries with poor human rights records, in particular in the MENA region, which runs counter to EU humanitarian principles.

EU normative power, is jeopardized not only by international economic developments, but also an increasingly strong perception of EU double standards in international relations

In 2025, the European Union finds itself on the back foot in different areas more than at any point since its emergence as a foreign policy actor in the mid-1990s, regarding:

- (1) Defence, through the Russian attack (backed by China, Iran, North Korea and others) against Ukraine, and Russia's increasingly intensive hybrid warfare against EU targets and interests.
- (2) Security, through irregular immigration from the global south and international organized crime, which create a sense of a loss of state authority among many EU citizens and has become a problem for the political cohesion of the 27 Union members.
- (3) Trade and economics, where tensions are on the rise with the EU's major trading partners, the US (17% of external EU trade), following the Trump II administration's aggressive trade and customs policies, and China (15%), which is accused of increasingly unfair trade patterns, a disregard for rules and blockages of market access.
- (4) Social affairs, through growing social decline and fears among parts of the European population stemming from economic difficulties and the perception that states and European authorities are underperforming when it comes to addressing urgent social, economic and security issues.

The 2021 strategy did not do too much to leverage fresh political energy and financial means for enhancing EU-Mediterranean relations

And in the MENA Region?

Regarding its Southern Neighbourhood – the largest part of the MENA region –, the new global scenario presents a number of particular challenges to the European Union, which it is still struggling to find adequate responses to:

- The Mediterranean region is marred by an important number of interstate or armed conflicts, in most cases ongoing for decades, that deeply compromise the humanitarian situation of the people affected, create fragility at state and regional levels, stand in the way of effective regional cooperation and trigger challenges from terrorism to irregular migration and organized crime, which do not only affect the southern and eastern Mediterranean region: Israel-Palestine, Syria, Libya, Cyprus and Western Sahara. To different degrees, all of these conflicts are of direct concern to the European Union itself. Although over the past decades the EU has deployed enormous diplomatic and financial resources to help contain and possibly identify solutions to these conflicts, in none of them has the EU taken a direct leading role in conflict management. Rather than opting for a more resolute and active stance, it has supported UN-led or other international processes set up for the same objective, though the Union is much more directly affected by those conflicts and their consequences than most other international players. This has often been the consequence of a) the EU's relatively late appearance on the international scene as a political actor when other conflict resolution processes had already been es-

tablished; b) internal difficulties in developing a common EU perspective in a given conflict and problems convincing all of its Member States to commit to a common view rather than pursue their own national interests; and c) the EU's incapacity or unwillingness to mobilize and use hard power to enforce and guarantee a conflict settlement. It does not help that in many Mediterranean conflicts (e.g. Israel-Palestine, Libya or Western Sahara) there are considerable rifts, diverging interpretations or even divergencies between individual EU Member States, despite the fact that there are well-established political and, in some cases, legal common EU positions on those conflicts, that make it challenging for the EU to operate credibly as a whole on the relevant matter.⁹

- During the past two decades the Mediterranean has turned increasingly into an area of transit. Conflict and state failure in parts of sub-Saharan Africa and Asia, demographic growth paired with economic hardship and a lack of rule of law and good governance, and, not least, the social and environmental consequences of global climate change are spilling over to the Mediterranean and add to its own problems. This has made the region a conduit for the spread of phenomena such as irregular mass migration, organized crime, in the form of drugs and arms trafficking, and terrorism, which is also reaching Europe. This trend has changed the nature of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership over the past 15 years. From a comprehensive political and economic development partnership scheme, it has developed in great part into a defensive framework to address security, instability and migration threats of various sorts.
- While in the times of the Cold War, the Mediterranean region had been the theatre of proxy wars and hefty political, military, economic and ideological rivalries between the two major blocs, for about 25 years (1990~2015) the European Union was unrivalled as the leading economic and political, and in some cases security

⁹ HANELT, Christian-P. & WEBER Alexander. "The EU and the Conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa: How to Build a New Relationship between Old Neighbors." Bertelsmann Stiftung, Trilogue Salzburg 2022: 103-121, 2022: www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/fileadmin/files/Projekte/84_Salzbunger_Trilog/Salzbunger_Trilog_2022/6_The_EU_and_the_Conflicts.pdf; EUROPEAN COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS. "Mapping EU Leverage in the MENA Region." 2023: https://ecfr.eu/special/mapping_eu_leverage_mena.

(though not military), partner – and sometimes even a role model – to (most of the) countries in the region, from North Africa and the Western Balkans to the Levant and Türkiye. This provided the basis for the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership launched in Barcelona in 1995, the southern dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy as of 2004, and the creation of the Union for the Mediterranean in 2008. During the past decade, however, several external powers have made inroads to extend their influence to different parts of the Mediterranean region. While the United States, despite its much-touted alleged withdrawal, remains a dominant military factor and ally to Israel, Egypt and Türkiye in the eastern Mediterranean, China is increasingly gaining leverage with its *Belt and Road Initiative*, as well as through diplomatic means; Russia is using its military presence again (initially for years in Syria, and now focusing on Libya) and its role as an energy power to sustain allies; the Gulf monarchies Saudi Arabia, UAE and Qatar are increasing their influence from the Maghreb to Libya; Lebanon and Syria are using their diplomatic, financial, religious and in some cases military assets to support – in several cases opposing – groups and interests in the region; and Türkiye is adeptly putting on an increasingly assertive display of its foreign policy and economic interests, not only in Syria and Libya but also in the Sahel and parts of East Africa.

How Is the European Union Trying to Address the New International Situation?

In her *Political Guidelines 2024-2029* published on 18 July 2024, Ursula von der Leyen presented her vision on how to reposition the European Union with a view to the new international situation (p.13-16, 25-28). Her approach can be summarized in two points:

1. Investing in European hard power through the establishment of a *European Defence Union* that would be accompanied by non-military measures

such as civil protection preparedness, enhanced internal security and strengthened border management, with a distinct Mediterranean dimension. This has led to immediate action: following the appointment of a European Commissioner for defence, the EUR 800 bn *Readiness 2030/Re-arm Europe* programme proposed on 4 March 2025 and the new *EU Preparedness Union Strategy* presented on 26 March 2025 covering the civilian protection dimension have become the first serious attempts to enhance both EU and Member States' capacities in territorial defence and develop hard power assets on the basis of EU coordination and financial contributions.

2. Addressing the new geopolitical challenges represented by Russia's aggressive posture, rivalry with China and a weakening of multilateral institutions and the rules-based world order, through an assertive foreign and security policy with the following four approaches at its core: a) resolute continued support to Ukraine; b) a more strategic approach to the EU neighbourhood; c) a new economic foreign policy with a focus on Asia, but also on the Mediterranean, proposing an integrated offer to EU partners, ranging from infrastructure investment to trade deals and macro-economic support; and d) enhancing multilateralism and supporting the reform of the international system.

The European Union's Rediscovery of the Mediterranean?

There is, therefore, a distinct Mediterranean dimension to the EU's new repositioning as an international player. Since the launch of the European Neighbourhood Policy in 2004 the designation *neighbourhood* had increasingly replaced the term *Mediterranean* in official EU documents, where the region was mainly referred to as the Southern *Neighbourhood*. When, on 9 February 2021, the European Commission and the EU High Representative published their strategy paper entitled "*A New Agenda for the Mediterranean*"¹⁰ – backed by EU Member States in the Council con-

¹⁰ EUROPEAN COMMISSION, HIGH REPRESENTATIVE FOR CFSP. "Renewed partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood. A new Agenda for the Mediterranean." JOINT (2021) 2 final, 9.2.2021/ www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/joint_communication_renewed_partnership_southern_neighbourhood.pdf.

clusions of April 2021 –, this was a first sign of a new European awareness of the need to revitalize the EU-Mediterranean partnership through the tools of the twin green and digital transitions, the development of post-Covid economic prospects and an integrated policy engagement covering human development, good governance, peace and security, migration and mobility and investment in climate resilience, energy, water, education and environmental sustainability.

Though the 2021 strategy promised to catalyze up to EUR 30 billion in public and private investments via the European Fund for Sustainable Development Plus (EFSD+) and the Neighbourhood Investment Platform, thus announcing substantive EU socioeconomic support and engagement, it neither offered a new geo-strategic vision for the region, nor did much to offer a credible partnership approach. The agenda rather reflected a largely Eurocentric approach, with some partners contesting its level of ownership and alignment with Mediterranean neighbours' priorities. While European migration policy and energy and climate interests ranked high among the list of priorities, trade, regional integration, demographic challenges and minority rights received comparatively less focus.

Apart from extending to a selected group of Mediterranean countries and EU investment promotion facilities under the *Global Gateway*¹¹ agenda, the 2021 strategy did not do too much to leverage fresh political energy and financial means for enhancing EU-Mediterranean relations. The EU activated its financial and diplomatic instruments to help partners address economic difficulties resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic and the worldwide increase of food prices following the Russian aggression against Ukraine, and it continued its humanitarian and development support in the Syrian and Gaza conflicts. However, the EU did not undertake any major actions on the regional level, and in the major conflicts of the region the EU largely reduced its role to that of an interested observer and commentator, leaving space to others to intervene in one way or the other (US, China, Qatar,

Russia, Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, UAE and Iran). Major EU initiatives towards the region were only launched based on growing EU concerns regarding irregular migration across the Mediterranean Sea, notably the much disputed migration and border management deals that President von der Leyen, together with various EU Member States' prime ministers, struck with Tunisia (July 2023), Mauritania (March 2024), Egypt (March 2024) and Lebanon (May 2024) – largely loan-based political declarations promising massive EU border management and financial assistance in exchange for the respective partner's reinforcement of border control measures and efforts to stem irregular migration. Added to this list is further EU financial support for border management measures in Morocco and Libya. Criticized by many from a human rights perspective and for the vagueness of their financial packages, these deals – though often officially named “partnerships” – are nothing more than the external transposition of EU domestic policy issues, and fall short of a comprehensive relaunch of the EU-Mediterranean partnership.

The 2024 Euro-Mediterranean Rebound: A New European Commitment to the MENA Region

However, when preparing for her second mandate at the helm of the European Commission, President von der Leyen recognized that a new partnership approach towards the South had to be an integral part of her administration's future foreign policy. It was understood that a collection of rather ephemeral migration deals would not do enough to pursue Europe's interest and build stable interest-based partnerships in the region. Furthermore, the humanitarian disaster caused by Israel's response to the 7 October 2023 massacre by Hamas was starting to trigger a severe political backlash, with the EU and its majority pro-Israeli leaning members being accused with increasing intensity, both internally and on the international scene, of following a double-standards

¹¹ EUROPEAN COMMISSION. *Global Gateway*: https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/stronger-europe-world/global-gateway_en; EEAS. “*Global Gateway and the Economic and Investment Plans – North Africa, Middle East & Gulf*.”: https://north-africa-middle-east-gulf.ec.europa.eu/what-we-do/global-gateway-and-economic-and-investment-plans_en; VARVELLI, Arturo. “The Global Gateway Initiative as a New Cooperation Paradigm in Euro-Mediterranean Relations.” *IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook 2024*: www.iemed.org/publication/the-global-gateway-initiative-as-a-new-cooperation-paradigm-in-euro-mediterranean-relations/.

policy in outright contradiction with European values and legal norms.

Consequently, as already announced in her *Political Guidelines 2024-2029*, von der Leyen decided her second administration would have a distinct Mediterranean and MENA focus by:

- Appointing Dubravka Suica of Croatia as a dedicated Commissioner for the Mediterranean mandated to work on building comprehensive partnerships focused on investment, economic stability, jobs, energy, transport, security, migration and other areas of mutual interest and to deploy an integrated approach that brings together economic, humanitarian, development, peace and security policy elements. Commissioner Suica is supported by the European Commission's newly created Directorate General MENA, which covers relations with North Africa, the Levant/Near East, and the Gulf. This is an important deviation from the traditional EU neighbourhood approach, which de facto excluded the Gulf while tying together in one single scheme, organizationally and through its instruments, relations with the EU's eastern and Mediterranean neighbours.
- Claiming a more *strategic* approach in developing Europe's relations with its southern neighbours through:
 - The launching of the idea of a *Pact for the Mediterranean*, currently foreseen for September 2025.
 - Setting up comprehensive partnerships to operationalize the external aspects of migration policy, notably covering border controls and the fight against smugglers, and cooperation on security, fighting organized crime and terrorism and critical infrastructure protection.
 - Contributing to a *Wider EU Middle East Strategy*, including more aid for the Palestinian Authority to support the two-state solution, and working with partners on a Gaza rehabilitation plan.

- Pushing ahead with the implementation of the EU Gulf Strategy and advancing work on strategic partnership agreements with the six Gulf countries.¹²

Are We in for a New Euro-Mediterranean Deal?

The new organizational set-up and policy announcements, by and large welcomed by the other major two EU institutions – the Council of the EU and the European Parliament –, indicate a new EU turn towards the Mediterranean (and the Gulf) in recognition of both the EU's interdependence with the region and the multiple risks – but also opportunities – that arise from the changes in the region and its emerging reconfiguration.

There can be little doubt that the initial motivation for this new EU Mediterranean policy ambition has again been largely migration-focused

There can be little doubt that the initial motivation for this new EU Mediterranean policy ambition has again been largely migration-focused: the *Political Guidelines 2024-2029* clearly set out that the new *Pact for the Mediterranean* was initially mainly conceived as a key tool for developing strategic relations on migration and security with non-EU countries, especially countries of origin and transit (p.17). Cooperation on investment in education, infrastructure and the wider economy, just as much as forming talent partnerships and legal pathways for migration, is described as an element that is supposed to play an instrumental role in a policy approach designed to prevent illegal migration, fight human smuggling and return illegal migrants.

¹² EUROPEAN COMMISSION. "Europe's choice. Political guidelines for the next European Commission 2024–2029.": https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/e6cd4328-673c-4e7a-8683-f63ffb2cf648_en?filename=Political%20Guidelines%202024-2029_EN.pdf; EUROPEAN COMMISSION. "Mission Letter Dubravka Šuica.": https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/24039223-f92e-40a0-a440-a27d9715051a_en?filename=Mission%20letter%20%C5%A0uica.pdf.

There is a changing environment, in which the European Union could find a new role in the Middle East crisis and post-conflict management efforts – an environment much more conducive to using EU soft power economic, financial and advisory tools, which is still the central asset in the EU arsenal of cooperation instruments

At present, the contours of the proposed EU *Pact for the Mediterranean* are still fuzzy.¹³ Time pressures have not allowed for a truly comprehensive and inclusive international consultation effort, and focus has largely been on internal reorganization linked to the creation of the new Directorate-General, and intensive internal debates in the EU Council, Commission and Parliament on the European position in the Gaza war and its consequences for the Union's relations with the State of Israel. Consequently, it is hardly likely that the proposal for a future *Pact* becomes much more than just a new EU strategy paper for relations with the Mediterranean, i.e. an update of the 2021 *New Agenda* enriched by some additional elements, illustrating a higher level of ambition than in the past five years. Nothing indicates at this stage that it could in fact lead to the establishment of a *pact* in the true sense of the word, i.e. a regional, co-owned agreement between partners in the North and the South of the Mediterranean, or that the European Union would be ready to complete its toolbox and develop further political resolve to assume a lead role in addressing and, where possible, solving the region's crises and armed conflicts. However, in the first half of 2025 the eastern part of the Mediterranean – the *Levant* in old terminology – has witnessed substantive changes that might stimulate and impact the reconfiguration of the Middle

East, providing also for an increased EU role in the process:

- (a) The fall of the Assad regime in Syria on 8 December 2024, the Russian withdrawal from Syria and the establishment of a Syrian transitional government on 29 March 2025.
- (b) The Israeli killing of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah in Lebanon on 4 December 2024 and destruction of many of Hezbollah's military assets, making it possible in March 2025 for the Lebanese Army and UNIFIL to enter major Hezbollah weapon camps south of the Litani River, enforcing UN Security Council Resolution 1701.
- (c) The reduction of Iran's influence in the Middle East due to the changes in Syria, Lebanon and Israel's "Operation Rising Lion" in June 2025, including the massive US bombardment of four Iranian nuclear sites on 18 and 19 June 2025.
- (d) And, finally, the Israeli war against Hamas since the 7 October 2023 massacre, which has led to a massive humanitarian disaster in Gaza, human rights violations by both parties to the conflict and serious accusations of a disproportionate use of violence and disregard for important clauses of international law by Israel. In response to a Spanish/Irish request to review the EU-Israel Association (and free trade) Agreement of 1995, on 29 July 2025 the European Commission proposed a partial suspension of Israel's participation in the *Horizon Europe* research programme, particularly affecting the *European Innovation Council's* accelerator grants. While this proposal has not yet found a qualified majority, it would represent the first targeted action under the Agreement's Article 2 framework, making respect for human rights an essential condition, signalling political disapproval while avoiding full suspension of the trade agreement.¹⁴ This would be a revolution in EU-Israel relations and Europe's positioning in the Middle East Peace Process. Against the same background, there is new momentum among EU

¹³ SIDLÓ, Katarzyna. "New Pact for the Mediterranean: The Future of Euro-Mediterranean Relations on the 30th Anniversary of the Barcelona Process." IEMed 2025: www.iemed.org/publication/new-pact-for-the-mediterranean-the-future-of-euro-mediterranean-relations-on-the-30th-anniversary-of-the-barcelona-process/; CEPS. "A New EuroMed Pact Could Reinvigorate EU-MENA Relations." 2025: www.ceps.eu/a-new-euomed-pact-could-reinvigorate-eu-mena-relations/.

¹⁴ www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/ireland-spain-ask-eu-for-urgent-review-of-israel-trade-over-gaza-human-rights-compliance/.

Member States – though not yet a common EU position – towards recognizing Palestinian statehood as a step to express support to the two-state-solution, oppose Israeli annexation of territory in the West Bank and Gaza, and against possible Israeli plans to resettle the Gaza population to other parts of the world (NB: France’s announcement on 24 July 2025 that it will officially recognize the State of Palestine at the UN General Assembly¹⁵).

There is a changing environment, in which the European Union could find a new role in the Middle East crisis and post-conflict management efforts – an environment much more conducive to using EU soft power economic, financial and advisory tools, which is still the central asset in the EU arsenal of cooperation instruments. The fact that, after the 9th Brussels Conference on Syria and the Region on 17 March 2025¹⁶ (where the EU and its Member States pledged EUR 2.5 bn of support in 2025/26 for Syria and the affected neighbouring countries), on 4 and 5 June 2025, Commissioner Suica became the first senior EU representative in decades to visit Damascus is an interesting indicator. In her meetings with the new Syrian authorities, she announced a EUR 175 million aid package for Syria, with a focus on reconstruction in sectors like energy, education, health and agriculture, in addition to reopening the EU’s ERASMUS students exchange programme to young Syrians.¹⁷ The EU commitment to supporting reconstruction and inclusive governance efforts is a first game changer in the EU’s outreach to the region. At the same time, there is renewed ambition on the European side to invest in partnership with the Gulf under the 2022 EU-GCC Strategic Partnership proposal. The first EU-GCC Summit meeting on 16 October 2024 in Brussels was a symbol of this new ambition.¹⁸ Beyond trade, investment and energy discussions, regional security, Iran, Syria, Israel/Palestine and concrete economic and humanitarian cooperation options in the region have by now become a regular content of EU-GCC high-level meetings.

The Jury Is Still out...

The changing geopolitical situation is creating both challenges and opportunities for the European Union to act on the international scene. New instruments are being prepared to be added to the EU tool box, and the re-born awareness of the need to invest in partnership with Mediterranean neighbours and extend relations with the Gulf are signs that could promise more EU engagement and commitment.

However, many of the flaws that have been hampering a more decisive and effective EU policy in the region do still persist, such as:

- Divergencies of analysis, opinion, interest and approach between EU Member States that, against the background of the unanimity requirement in *EU Common Foreign and Security Policy* (CFSP) decision-making, stand in the way of earlier, joint and more resolute EU action beyond the use of soft power aid tools (e.g. Gaza, Western Sahara, Libya).
- The perception of EU double standards and the vanishing of much of the EU’s former normative power and moral authority.
- A lack of strategy, clear positioning and policy leadership with respect to several countries and crises in the region (e.g. Iran after the de-facto end of JCPOA).
- A questionable political will to use existing or even create new high and senior-level consultation formats more consistently to solicit partners’ views on the development of the partnership, both bilaterally and regionally, and also to enhance civil society and university cooperation and policy dialogue.

The year 2025, therefore, marks a transition period. While some indicators and the changes in the Middle East show how the EU could position itself and regain influence, while pursuing its own legitimate interests in the region, in partnership with others, it is

¹⁵ www.reuters.com/world/europe/french-plan-recognise-palestinian-state-draws-fire-israel-us-2025-07-25/.

¹⁶ www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/03/18/brussels-ix-conference-on-standing-with-syria-meeting-the-needs-for-a-successful-transition-joint-press-statement/; www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/standing-with-syria-conference_en.

¹⁷ https://north-africa-middle-east-gulf.ec.europa.eu/news/eu-announces-eu175-million-support-recovery-syria-2025-06-04_en.

¹⁸ www.consilium.europa.eu/media/k3wf2ewp/eu-gcc-joint-statement-final-2.pdf.

too early to say whether the European Union would in fact do so. More has to be done. The Union would be well advised to, *inter alia*:

- Address politically and legally the long-recognized weaknesses of its CFSP policy and decision-making system and form operational joint political positions to the crises in the region, which it would commit to implementing in a spirit of leadership, ready to use the entire EU policy toolbox, including, if necessary, military assets.
- Consider the launching of the new *Pact for the Mediterranean* not an end in itself, but rather as a starting point for continuous bilateral and regional dialogue and consultation of partners.
- Double efforts to unroll political and economic partnership initiatives with the GCC regarding the economic development of Mediterranean partners, crisis management (Gaza, Palestine, Iran) and reconstruction (Syria, Gaza).
- Develop a new approach on the Maghreb, which arguably, next to the Western Balkans, is the non-EU region most closely linked to the EU, where EU soft power instruments can be harnessed best to establish partnerships, dynamize socioeconomic development, tackle conflict and consolidate people-to-people relations.
- Undertake a serious reflection on how to come up with a more attractive trade and investment partnership proposal, taking into account both partners' needs and economic structures and EU market and industrial development strategies: an essential field of cross-Mediterranean cooperation which has been largely left void since the flopping of the 2011 offer to Arab re-

form countries to conclude Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTA) with the EU.

- Consider replacing, or completing, the currently-in-force generation of EU-MED Association Agreements with a modernized and more comprehensive set of legally binding arrangements, taking full account of political cooperation options, crisis management requirements, the changes in Mediterranean partners' economic structures, including present value chains, and the booming services sector, AI and digitalization, and climate change adaptation needs.
- Put aside relevant financial resources for the partnership in the future EU Multiannual Financial Framework 2028-2034, not only on a grants basis but by adapting the *EU Global Gateway* approach (facilitating investment through a variety of financial and guarantee instruments coupled with technical assistance, training and governance advice) to the specific needs of Mediterranean partners.

The Russian threat, the rise of Trump and the reconfiguration of the Middle East are symptoms of a new and more unpredictable, multipolar global system full of rivalry, in which rules count less, economic and military power counts more, but partnerships are still important.

The European Union and its Mediterranean partners have the choice: they can either suffer the new situation or shape this new age together. If vision, a sense of urgency and will come together, the European Union would be in a great position to shape a cooperative partnership in the Mediterranean and the Middle East. Is there any better alternative?