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## CAN EUROPE MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST?

*Khaled Emam and John O'Rourke*

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# IE Med.

The **PapersIE Med.** collection seeks to approach the study of key issues on the current Euro-Mediterranean agenda. Its objective is to provide a new and original view of these issues through the publication of painstaking analyses by recognised experts and researchers in this field.

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Khaled Emam\* and John O'Rourke\*\*

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## Foreword

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The year 2025 marks the 30th anniversary of the Barcelona Declaration - a moment when the countries of the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe committed to placing their relations on firmer and more constructive foundations. It is a time for stocktaking, and while I continue to believe in the historical significance of that effort, I also recognise that it has not lived up to all the hopes invested in it. One of the main reasons for this situation is related to the Middle East conflict, with its multiple ramifications, which remains unresolved after nearly eighty years. Although responsibility for this is not - or not primarily - European, it must be acknowledged that European engagement, both in the Middle East and in the wider Mediterranean region, has been insufficient.

Europe's history in the region is long and complex. Yet too often we have failed to translate our proximity, our resources, our institutions, and our ambitions into a constructive influence. In the course of my public service, I have witnessed - from both Brussels and Madrid - the many ways in which our continent has sought to project influence, only to be overtaken by events, constrained by internal divisions, or outpaced by more assertive regional actors.

The tragedy of the most recent chapter of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the betrayed promise of the Arab Spring, and the erosion of the rules-based international order that emerged after the Second World War are stark reminders that Europe has become increasingly divided in its positions, increasingly partial toward Israel, and increasingly reactive rather than proactive - proclaiming that the principles of international law and international humanitarian law must be respected, yet doing nothing to verify whether Israel complies with these principles, or to act accordingly when it does not.

In short, Europe has too often been a chronicler of events rather than a shaper of outcomes. In recent years, it has also lost credibility in the eyes of much of the world by aligning itself with the positions of the United States and the European Union (EU)'s Germanic bloc in the face of the dramatic situation in Gaza.

I trust that, in reading the analysis that follows, the reader will appreciate both the structural constraints that have limited our influence and the opportunities that must be seized if Europe is to play a more coherent role - one grounded in the principles it proclaims and translated into effective, principled action that is consistent with the realities of the region.

## Introduction

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The momentous and dreadful events that have unfolded in the Middle East since 7 October 2023 - culminating in the US-Israel war on Iran in February 2026 - have highlighted Europe's<sup>1</sup> inability to shape or influence the evolution of a region on its doorstep. Beginning with a brief historical retrospective, this article explores the various factors that have led to Europe's dwindling influence and the risks that this poses, both for Europe and for the Middle East itself. While our focus is on the Middle East, we also consider relevant developments in the broader Mediterranean region that contribute to this marginalisation.

European involvement in the Levant goes back at least to the Roman Empire.<sup>2</sup> The Crusades, the secular rivalry with the Ottoman empire, and, in the modern period, the colonial projects of European powers - Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798, French rule in Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco, British control of Egypt and Sudan, Italy's colonisation of Libya, the French Protectorate of Syria, and the British Protectorates of Iraq and Palestine - have left a legacy of deep mistrust of European intentions among the inhabitants of the region.<sup>3</sup> Europe's history of antisemitism additionally feeds mistrust among Israelis.

The origins of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which in many ways defines the Middle East and is central to the present article, are rooted in Europe. In 1897, the First Zionist Congress was held in Basel, Switzerland, led by journalist and lawyer Theodor Herzl.<sup>4</sup> This marked the beginning of a political movement aimed at establishing a state for the Jewish people in Palestine.

Two decades later, the British foreign secretary issued a formal promise of support for this goal. The Balfour Declaration of 1917 stated that "His Majesty's Government views with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people."<sup>5</sup> This conferred international legitimacy on the Zionist project. Far from being a unilateral British decision, the declaration was supported by most major European powers, particularly the Allied nations, including France, Russia, and Italy. Simultaneously, the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement, a secret arrangement between Britain and France, divided Ottoman Arab provinces into spheres of influence.<sup>6</sup> This agreement contributed to the fragmentation of the Arab world into small states, often

<sup>1</sup> In this article, "Europe" refers collectively to European countries; "EU" refers to the institutions of the European Union and its Member States.

<sup>2</sup> "Map of the Roman Rule in the Levant c. 200 CE," *World History Encyclopedia*, accessed 1 December 2025, <https://www.worldhistory.org/image/19754/map-of-the-roman-rule-in-the-levant-c-200-ce/>.

<sup>3</sup> KHOURI, Rami G., "Muslim World and West: Why Such Hostility and Mistrust?" *Arab News*, 18 October 2004. <https://www.arabnews.com/node/256726>.

<sup>4</sup> STANISLAWSKI, Michael, 'Theodor Herzl and the creation of the Zionist movement, 1897–1917', *Zionism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York, 2016; online edition, Oxford Academic, 15 Dec. 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780199766048.003.0003>, accessed 1 Dec. 2025.

<sup>5</sup> Arthur James Balfour to Lord Rothschild, *The Balfour Declaration*, Foreign Office, 2 November 1917.

<sup>6</sup> DONALDSON M. "Textual Settlements: The Sykes–Picot Agreement and Secret Treaty-Making". *AJIL Unbound*. 2016;110:127-131. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S2398772300002932>.

ethnically and religiously divided, while facilitating British support for a future Jewish state.

This support was called into question on the eve of the Second World War. In May 1939, in response to the Arab Revolt (1936–1939) and increasing tensions between Arabs and Jews in the Palestinian Protectorate, the British government issued a White Paper that restricted Jewish immigration to Palestine, imposed limitations on Jewish land ownership in certain areas, and supported the establishment of a unified independent state with an Arab majority and Jewish participation within ten years. It stated: “the independent State should be one in which Arabs and Jews share Government in such a way as to ensure that the essential interests of each community are safeguarded.” These promises directly contradicted the Balfour Declaration but provided a more equitable alternative that could lead to a just resolution of the nascent conflict. The Zionist movement strongly opposed the declaration and continued to advocate for an independent Jewish state and unrestricted Jewish immigration to Palestine.

However, the outbreak of WW2 caused the implementation of the White Paper's provisions to be abandoned, first because the British government shifted its focus to the prosecution of the war and then, after the end of hostilities in Europe, because the horror of the Holocaust made restrictions on Jewish migration to Palestine politically untenable. In 1947, having achieved neither the promise of the Balfour Declaration nor the halt to Jewish migration foreseen in the White Paper, unable to manage tensions between Arabs and Jews as well as attacks on British forces from both sides, Britain handed over the Palestine question to the United Nations (UN). On 29 November 1947, the UN General Assembly passed Resolution 181, which terminated the British Mandate over Palestine and proposed the partition of the territory into two independent states: one Arab state (covering roughly 42% of historic Palestine) and one Jewish state (comprising about 56% of the land), with Jerusalem placed under an international regime.<sup>7</sup>

While the Jewish community accepted and celebrated the plan, the Arab nations and the Arab community in Palestine rejected it, viewing an allocation of 56% of the land to a population that made up only some 30% of the inhabitants as unjust. On 14 May 1948, the State of Israel was proclaimed, leading to the outbreak of war between the new Jewish state and neighbouring Arab countries on the following day. The war ended with an Israeli victory, resulting in the expansion of Israeli control to over 77% of the territory of Mandatory Palestine. More than half of the Palestinian Arab population fled or were expelled in what came to be known as the Nakba. To this day, most of the refugees and their descendants have not been able to return. European nations broadly backed the partition plan of 1947, and, in the following years, many of them became Israel's strategic

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<sup>7</sup> United Nations General Assembly Resolution 181 (II), 29 November 1947.

allies, turning a blind eye to the plight of Palestinians. This put them on a collision course with the Arab world and contributed to their marginalisation from Middle Eastern affairs.

European policy-makers thus face a persistent moral and political tension: balancing historical responsibility toward Israel with the imperative to uphold Palestinian rights. This dilemma not only shapes diplomatic stances but also informs domestic political debates that will later influence Europe's capacity to act coherently in the Middle East.

It is a bitter irony that the creation of Israel and the Nakba coincided with the early stages of European integration. Even as Europe pursued a logic of cooperation and peace-building within its borders, it supported developments that put Israeli-Palestinian relations on a path of confrontation and conflict.

Europe's historical involvement in the creation of Israel and the arbitrary division of the Arab world has left lasting doubts regarding its neutrality and credibility. Its early support for Zionist aspirations, followed by inconsistent policies and the gap between its stated policies and real actions, has contributed to scepticism among Arabs about Europe's capacity to mediate fairly, complicating European attempts to reassert influence in the region.

Today, there are indications that Europe is starting to address the skewed nature of its relations with the parties to the Middle East conflict. Following months of massive pro-Palestinian and anti-war protests across Europe and the world since October 2023 and reflecting a major shift in European public opinion,<sup>8</sup> on 21 September 2025, Britain, Belgium and France announced their recognition of the State of Palestine.<sup>9</sup> However, for this shift to translate into tangible influence in the region, Europe must also confront the structural and political factors that continue to undermine its credibility. These are discussed in the following sections.

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<sup>8</sup> A YouGov survey published on 3 June 2025 revealed that public support and sympathy for Israel have dropped to their lowest levels in history in countries such as the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Spain, and Italy. The survey showed that only 13-21% of respondents in these countries held a favourable view of Israel, compared to 63-70% who opposed Israel and its conduct of the war in Gaza.

<sup>9</sup> Spain recognised the State of Palestine on 28 May 2024; Ireland on 22 May 2024; and Belgium on 22 September 2025.

Europe's structural infighting

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From the outset, and by design, the process of European integration initiated after the second world war has been incremental: a series of achievable steps rather than the unfolding of a grand design.<sup>10</sup> Unsurprisingly, the sovereign functions of the State have been the most difficult to integrate, and none more so than those in the sphere of foreign affairs. While EU member states have succeeded in pooling their sovereignty on numerous economic, monetary and trade issues – and have benefited substantially from doing so – to this day, the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) remains a largely declarative, inter-governmental exercise.<sup>11</sup>

On issues on which there is a broad consensus among EU member states, this weakness matters less, and the EU's influence on third countries can be considerable. The dynamic of reforms and political alignment with EU positions required of countries applying for EU membership has been significant.<sup>12</sup> Even without a clear accession perspective, the far-reaching Association with Ukraine, proposed by the European Commission in 2008 and signed in 2014, contributed to cementing Ukraine's European orientation.<sup>13</sup> Today, despite the uncertain support of the United States, the EU's response to Russia's military aggression against Ukraine is significant, if not yet decisive.<sup>14</sup>

However, when there is no clear consensus among EU member states, the cacophony of the intergovernmental process reduces rather than enhances the influence of individual EU member states. The EU's voice in foreign affairs is sometimes less than the sum of its parts. Even when a consensus is nominally forged on domestically sensitive issues, EU member states frequently use the tactic of blaming Brussels for a position that those same states supported in the European Council.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, the lack of resilience to “asymmetric shocks” in EU external relations (developments that have very different impacts on individual EU member states) leads to a deficit of geopolitical significance that is proving to be the Achilles' heel of the European project. This deficit is particularly apparent when it comes to EU policy in the Middle East.

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<sup>10</sup> European Union, “Schuman Declaration May 1950”, European Union, accessed 2 December 2025, <https://www.robert-schuman.eu/en/european-issues/595-the-declaration-of-9-may-1950>.

<sup>11</sup> KEUKELEIRE, S., & DELREUX, T. (2014). *The Foreign Policy of the European Union*. Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>12</sup> GRABBE, H. (2006). *The EU's Transformative Power: Europeanization through Conditionality in Central and Eastern Europe*. Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>13</sup> EU–Ukraine Association Agreement (2014). *OJ L 161*, 29.5.2014. [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:22014A0529\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:22014A0529(01)). Also: Van der Loo, G. (2016). *The EU–Ukraine Association Agreement and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area: A New Legal Instrument for EU Integration Without Membership*. CEPS. <https://www.ceps.eu/ceps-publications/eu-ukraine-association-agreement-and-deep-and-comprehensive-free-trade-area-new-legal/>.

<sup>14</sup> COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION. EU response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eu-response-ukraine-invasion/>.

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.politico.eu/article/commission-surprised-by-german-criticism-of-eu-us-trade-deal/>.

For Germany, the largest EU member state, its commitment to Vergangenheitsbewältigung makes unconditional support for Israel's security an axiom of its foreign policy<sup>16</sup>, framed as a moral responsibility and a reason of state<sup>17</sup> that is "unchanging" in nature<sup>18</sup>. Such an unconditional and permanent political commitment is highly problematic - and indeed reckless - for at least two reasons. First, it introduces, a priori, the primacy of Israel's security over all other considerations and implicitly absolves Germany of responsibility for any human rights violations that this commitment could facilitate.<sup>19</sup> Second, following the formal establishment of the EU in 1993, Germany is treaty-bound to place European cooperation and joint EU action at the centre of its foreign policy.<sup>20</sup> This commitment conflicts with an "unconditional" commitment to Israel.<sup>21</sup>

Several other EU member states, while less burdened by guilt, are loath to antagonise Israel because Israel's leadership has instrumentalised the Holocaust as a foreign policy tool, making opposition to Israel's actions equivalent to antisemitism.<sup>22</sup> Military-economic cooperation, reflected in the purchase of weapons from and sale to Israel, also leads some European states to shield Israel from criticism.<sup>23</sup>

Other EU member states, particularly those with strong economic links to Arab countries, or with large minorities of Arab origin, are increasingly reluctant to disregard domestic public opinion, which broadly sympathises with the plight of Palestinians,<sup>24</sup> whether because it resonates with their own history of oppression by a stronger neighbour (e.g., Ireland) or simply because the ongoing colonisation and ethnic cleansing of Palestinian territory and the perpetration of increasingly glaring war crimes and crimes against humanity by Israel<sup>25</sup> are impossible to ignore.

<sup>16</sup> FELDMAN, Lily Gardner, (2012) *Germany's Foreign Policy of Reconciliation: From Enmity to Amity*. Rowman & Littlefield.

<sup>17</sup> JERUSALEM CENTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS. (2018). *Germany and Israel: Truth and promises*. <https://jcfa.org/mission-impossible-repairing-the-ties-between-europe-and-israel/germany-and-israel-truth-and-promises/>.

<sup>18</sup> GERMAN FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (2025). *Germany stands by Israel*. <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/support-israel-2228294>.

<sup>19</sup> RISSE, Mathias "On the Occasion of the Death of Jürgen Habermas—Distinguished German Political Philosopher, Pathbreaking Thinker on Democracy and Human Rights", Carr-Ryan Center for Human Rights, March 16, 2026, <https://www.hks.harvard.edu/centers/carr-ryan/our-work/carr-ryan-commentary/occasion-death-jurgen-habermas-distinguished-german>.

<sup>20</sup> GERMAN FEDERAL FOREIGN OFFICE, "Advocate of European Integration," *Facts about Germany*, <https://www.tatsachen-ueber-deutschland.de/en/germany-and-europe/advocate-european-integration>.

<sup>21</sup> EUROPEAN UNION, "Foreign and Security Policy," [https://european-union.europa.eu/priorities-and-actions/eu-priorities/european-union-priorities-2024-2029\\_en](https://european-union.europa.eu/priorities-and-actions/eu-priorities/european-union-priorities-2024-2029_en).

<sup>22</sup> FINKELSTEIN, Norman G. (2000) *The Holocaust Industry: Reflections on the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering*. London: Verso. Also: ZERTAL, Edith. (2005) *Israel's Holocaust and the Politics of Nationhood*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>23</sup> STOCKHOLM INTERNATIONAL PEACE RESEARCH INSTITUTE (SIPRI), "SIPRI Arms Transfers Database," accessed December 2, 2025, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers>.

<sup>24</sup> "Public Support for Israel in Western Europe Lowest Ever Recorded – YouGov," *The Guardian*, June 3, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/jun/03/public-support-for-israel-in-western-europe-lowest-ever-recorded-yougov>.

<sup>25</sup> OFFICE OF THE PROSECUTOR OF THE INTERNATIONAL CRIMINAL COURT, "Statement of ICC Prosecutor Karim A. A. Khan KC: Applications for arrest warrants in the Situation in the State of Palestine," May 20, 2024, <https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/statement-icc-prosecutor-karim-aa-khan-kc-applications-arrest-warrants-situation-state>. Also: UNITED NATIONS SECURITY COUNCIL, Resolution 2334, S/RES/2334 (2016), December 23, 2016, [https://undocs.org/S/RES/2334\(2016\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/2334(2016)).

These internal divisions translate directly into a lack of decisive action on Middle Eastern issues. When EU member states fail to present a unified front, even minor crises become opportunities for other global actors to shape outcomes without meaningful European intervention.<sup>26</sup>

The compromise (on this, as on other thorny external relations issues) has been to fall in behind the lowest common denominator, often represented by the UN position.<sup>27</sup> Thus, the French initiative to mobilise support within the UN forum for the diplomatic recognition of the State of Palestine<sup>28</sup> can be seen as an adroit manoeuvre to strengthen the UN baseline in a way that could pave the way for a more assertive EU position.

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<sup>26</sup> EUROPEAN UNION, (2016) *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe — A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy*. Brussels: European External Action Service, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eugs\\_review\\_web\\_0.pdf](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eugs_review_web_0.pdf). Also: Leonard, Mark and Popescu, Nicu (2007) *A Power Audit of EU–Russia Relations* London: European Council on Foreign Relations, [https://ecfr.eu/publication/a\\_power\\_audit\\_of\\_eu\\_russia\\_relations/](https://ecfr.eu/publication/a_power_audit_of_eu_russia_relations/).

<sup>27</sup> NUTTALL, Simon (2000) *European Foreign Policy* Oxford: Oxford University Press,. Also: KEUKELEIRE, Stephan and Delreux, Tom (2022). *The foreign policy of the European Union*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

<sup>28</sup> UNITED NATIONS – Meetings Coverage and Press Releases, <https://press.un.org/en/2025/pal2251.doc.htm>.

The impact of domestic policies and politics

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## The price of energy dependence

The oil shocks of the 1970s provided a stark demonstration of the vulnerability of Europe's economy to external energy supplies. Nevertheless, with the exception of France's vast civil nuclear energy programme, little was done to address this threat, and Europe largely failed to diversify its energy sources. The United Kingdom and the Netherlands turned to their (limited) offshore gas reserves; Germany doubled down on electricity generation from lignite, and became ever more dependent on hydrocarbon supplies from the Soviet Union (later Russia). Other European economies, encouraged by a protracted period of low energy prices starting in the 1980s, also maintained their existing dependence on external suppliers.<sup>29</sup>

By the beginning of the 21st century, the North Sea gas reserves were running out; lignite had to be phased out due to its deleterious environmental and climatic impact; Germany initiated an accelerated phase-out of its nuclear reactors in the wake of the Fukushima disaster, while the development of renewable energies proceeded at a snail's pace. Europe as a whole focused essentially on only three gas suppliers (Algeria, Norway and Russia), with Germany blithely relying on gas supplies from Russia to insulate it from any shortfall in power production capacity. France and Italy proved unable to coordinate their positions and their actions in post-Qaddafi Libya, to the detriment of the security of their energy supplies.<sup>30</sup> It is only belatedly, with the wake-up call of Russian aggression on Ukraine and the accelerated development of renewable energy alternatives, that Europe has moved to put its energy sources and suppliers on a more sustainable and diversified footing.<sup>31</sup> However, its sanctions on the sale of Russian oil remain ineffectual and are frequently circumvented by derogations<sup>32</sup>

Europe's reliance on external energy suppliers has undermined its capacity to pursue an assertive foreign policy, notably in the Middle East with its huge reserves of hydrocarbon resources, and has nurtured the perception that Europe is unable to stand up for its own interests, let alone those of other countries. In the wake of the Arab Spring, Europe failed to meaningfully confront Qatar in its support for terrorist groups in Syria and Iraq;<sup>33</sup> Saudi Arabia in its propagation of radical Islam;<sup>34</sup> or the

<sup>29</sup> HÖGSELIUS, Per (2013). *Red Gas: Russia and the Origins of European Energy Dependence*. Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>30</sup> MEGERISI, Tarek (2019). *Libya's Global Civil War*. London: European Council on Foreign Relations, [https://ecfr.eu/publication/libyas\\_global\\_civil\\_war/](https://ecfr.eu/publication/libyas_global_civil_war/)

<sup>31</sup> EUROPEAN COMMISSION (2022), *REPowerEU Plan*. Brussels: European Commission, [https://commission.europa.eu/publications/repowereu-plan\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/publications/repowereu-plan_en). Also: INTERNATIONAL ENERGY AGENCY, *Renewables 2023*. Paris: IEA, <https://www.iea.org/reports/renewables-2023>.

<sup>32</sup> COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION, "EU Sanctions against Russia Explained," Council of the European Union, accessed December 2, 2025, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions/restrictive-measures-against-russia-over-ukraine/>. Also: INTERNATIONAL ENERGY AGENCY (2023), *Oil Market Report: October 2023*. Paris: IEA, <https://www.iea.org/reports/oil-market-report-october-2023>. Also: Reuters, "Shadow Fleet Grows to Ship Russian Oil Despite Western Sanctions," REUTERS, accessed December 2, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities>.

<sup>33</sup> COATES ULRICHSEN, Kristian (2014), *Qatar and the Arab Spring*. London: Hurst.

<sup>34</sup> SHANE, Scott "Saudis and Extremism: Both the Arsonists and the Firefighters," *New York Times*, 25 August, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/26/world/asia/saudi-arabia-islam.html>.

United Arab Emirates (UAE) in its role in the brutal war waged against the Houthis in Yemen.<sup>35</sup>

### The migration and security nexus

The 21st century also saw the explosion of two phenomena: Islamic terrorism and uncontrolled migration. Both of these are problematic on their own, but their conjunction has had a truly poisonous effect on domestic politics in Europe.

It may be said that the United States did more than any other country to promote the emergence of Islamic terrorism, through its support for discredited autocratic rulers in the Middle East (Reza Pahlavi in Iran, the Al Sauds in Saudi Arabia, Hosni Mubarak in Egypt), its financing of Al Qaeda jihadists in Afghanistan, its neo-colonial war in Iraq, and its aid to Israel throughout the various Israeli occupations, annexations and colonisations of Palestinian territory. However, it is Europe, by virtue of its geographic proximity, the porosity of its internal and external borders, and the size of its populations vulnerable to radicalisation, that has borne the brunt of this scourge. In the 20 years that followed the 9/11 attacks on the United States, there were 80 jihadist attacks on the territory of the EU.<sup>36</sup>

While Europe's public authorities cannot be held responsible for the emergence of the terrorist threat or the failure to prevent this large number of attacks from taking place, the same cannot be said about their failure to address illegal migration and to ensure the successful integration of migrant communities.

European states showed considerable wisdom and foresight by accompanying their plans for the establishment of a single market and monetary union with financial instruments ("structural funds", "regional development funds" or "cohesion policies") to assist the economic development of regions of the EU that would not otherwise have been able to compete when protectionist barriers within the EU came down.<sup>37</sup> However, comparable planning and support mechanisms for external migration management were largely overlooked when the EU's Schengen area was established. Instruments to help the most exposed states manage the common external border of the EU, such as the FRONTEX agency,<sup>38</sup> came as an afterthought and were insufficient and under-resourced. Schengen

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<sup>35</sup> UNITED NATIONS SECURITY COUNCIL, *Final Report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen*, S/2021/79, 25 January, 2021, <https://undocs.org/S/2021/79>.

<sup>36</sup> EUROPOL (2024), *European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2024*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-events/main-reports/european-union-terrorism-situation-and-trend-report-tesat>. Also: "Islamic Terrorism in Europe," *Wikipedia*, accessed 2 December, 2025, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamic\\_terrorism\\_in\\_Europe](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamic_terrorism_in_Europe).

<sup>37</sup> Council Regulation (EC) No 1260/1999 of 21 June 1999 laying down general provisions on the Structural Funds, *Official Journal of the European Communities* L 161, June 26, 1999, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/1999/1260/oj>.

<sup>38</sup> Council Regulation (EC) No 2007/2004 of 26 October 2004 establishing a European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States of the European Union, OJ L 349, November 25, 2004. Also: EUROPEAN COMMISSION, "A European Border and Coast Guard and Effective Management of Europe's External Borders," COM(2015) 671 final, 15 December 2015.

visas, valid for travel within the entire Schengen area, were introduced but, nearly thirty years on, the Entry-Exit System needed to keep track of visa over-stayers is still not fully operational.<sup>39</sup>

By the start of the century, it was also clear that the system for dealing with persons entering the EU without a visa was dysfunctional. Most such persons apply for asylum pursuant to the Convention on Refugees, a treaty that did not foresee the modern phenomenon of economic migration. With the rate of execution of re-admission orders at about 20% (and less than 10% for some Mediterranean neighbours of the EU), a substantial proportion of the net migration to the EU is attributable (a) to illegal entries, (b) tourist visa overstays, or (c) to family reunification visas granted to relatives of persons having been granted asylum following an illegal entry or a visa overstay. In a literal sense, migration to the EU is out of control.<sup>40</sup>

Finally, sufficient provisions are not in place to ensure that migrants integrate in their host countries. Although there are many examples of successful integration, there is also undeniable evidence of systemic failures. For example, the proportion of young persons (20-24) with low levels of education is 3 times higher for migrants than for natives. Employment rates are 10% lower, and their risk of poverty or social exclusion is twice as high. Migrants are strongly over-represented in the crime statistics of several EU countries.<sup>41</sup> Increasingly, host country populations feel their culture is being eroded, although the evidence for this is disputed.<sup>42</sup>

It is legitimate to wonder why it took so long for centrist political parties in Europe to recognise that these issues, and the perceptions that stem from them, need attention. With the ageing of the European population,<sup>43</sup> its economy needs migration in order to maintain growth.<sup>44</sup> This may have contributed to a complacent attitude to irregular

<sup>39</sup> EUROPEAN COMMISSION, "Entry/Exit System (EES)," 13 October 2025, [https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/schengen/smart-borders/entry-exit-system\\_en](https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/schengen/smart-borders/entry-exit-system_en).

<sup>40</sup> O'ROURKE, John, (2023) "L'Europe face aux migrations," *Politique étrangère* 3/2023.

<sup>41</sup> EUROPEAN COMMISSION (2020) *Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021–2027*. Brussels: European Commission, [https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/legal-migration-and-integration/integration/action-plan-integration-and-inclusion-2021-2027\\_en](https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/legal-migration-and-integration/integration/action-plan-integration-and-inclusion-2021-2027_en). Also: BUNDESKRIMINALAMT (BKA) (2024), *Kriminalität im Kontext der Zuwanderung: Bundeslagebild 2023* Wiesbaden: Bundeskriminalamt, <https://www.bka.de>. Also: SWEDISH NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR CRIME PREVENTION (Brå) (2021), "Crime among Persons Born in Sweden and Abroad: A Register-Based Study of Suspected Persons 2015–2018," *Report 2021:11* Stockholm: Brå, <https://bra.se>. Also: EUROPEAN COMMISSION (2018) *Special Eurobarometer 469: Integration of Immigrants in the European Union*. Brussels: European Commission, <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2169>. Also: ORGANISATION FOR ECONOMIC CO-OPERATION AND DEVELOPMENT (OECD) /EUROPEAN COMMISSION (2023), *Indicators of Immigrant Integration 2023: Settling In*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/1d5020a6-en>.

<sup>42</sup> GOODHART, David (2017). *The Road to Somewhere: The Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics*. London: Hurst.

<sup>43</sup> EUROPEAN COMMISSION (2020), *Report on the Impact of Demographic Change*. Brussels: European Commission, [https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/new-push-european-democracy/impact-demographic-change-europe\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/new-push-european-democracy/impact-demographic-change-europe_en).

<sup>44</sup> ORGANISATION FOR ECONOMIC CO-OPERATION AND DEVELOPMENT (OECD) (2014), "Is Migration Good for the Economy?" *Migration Policy Debates* No. 2. Paris: OECD Publishing, <https://www.oecd.org/migration/OECD%20Migration%20Policy%20Debates%20Number%202.pdf>.

migration on the part of centre-right parties, mindful of the need for cheap labour to maintain a competitive edge.<sup>45</sup> Centre-left parties have seen in economic migrants the source of a potentially sympathetic electorate; they may thus have had an interest in minimising the concerns raised by mismanaged migration and to tolerate a lax response to border security.<sup>46</sup> Certainly, political correctness impeded a rational public debate of the issues.<sup>47</sup> Collectively, these policy failures by parties on both sides of the political spectrum have led to domestic polarisation and empowered populist movements promoting xenophobic narratives and isolationist foreign policies,<sup>48</sup> further limiting Europe's influence abroad.<sup>49</sup>

The domestic political consequences of uncontrolled migration have had a profound impact on European foreign policy. The positions taken in regard to conflicts in the Mediterranean region, by governments wary of public backlash and the rise of populist parties, are influenced by considerations of the migration flows these could create.<sup>50</sup> Thus, domestic constraints - from energy dependence to migration pressures - combine with structural and political fragmentation to leave Europe reactive and easily outmanoeuvred by more agile regional and global powers.

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<sup>45</sup> MENZ, Georg (2009), *The Political Economy of Managed Migration: Nonstate Actors, Europeanization, and the Politics of Designing Migration Policies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>46</sup> GEDDES, Andrew and SCHOLTEN, Peter (2016) *The Politics of Migration and Immigration in Europe*, 2nd ed. London: SAGE. Also: DANCYGIER, Rafaela M. (2010) *Immigration and Conflict in Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>47</sup> COLLIER, Paul (2013), *Exodus: How Migration Is Changing Our World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>48</sup> NORRIS, Pippa and Inglehart, Ronald (2019). *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Also: Mudde, Cas (2019) *The Far Right Today*. Cambridge: Polity.

<sup>49</sup> DENNISON, Susi and PARDIJS, Dina (2016) "The World According to Europe's Insurgent Parties: Putin, Migration, and People Power." London: European Council on Foreign Relations, [https://ecfr.eu/publication/the\\_world\\_according\\_to\\_europes\\_insurgent\\_parties7036/](https://ecfr.eu/publication/the_world_according_to_europes_insurgent_parties7036/).

<sup>50</sup> EUROPEAN COUNCIL, "Malta Declaration by the Members of the European Council on the External Aspects of Migration: Addressing the Central Mediterranean Route," February 3, 2017, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2017/02/03/malta-declaration/>. Also: Tsourapas, Gerasimos (2017) "Migration Diplomacy in the Global South: Cooperation, Coercion and Issue-Linkage in the Middle East," *International Studies Quarterly* 61, no. 2: 266–280.

Outpaced by stronger and nimbler players

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## In the shadow of the United States

In the post-WW2 world, European states pursued their foreign policies under the umbrella of the United States. While the West was in an existential struggle with the Soviet Union, it mattered little, at least as far as the Middle East was concerned, that the policies of European states were overstated in rhetoric and underwhelming in practice, and that European engagement was more symbolic than decisive. European and American interests were fundamentally aligned, and European states were content to let the US do the heavy lifting.

However, with the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s, European and US interests began to diverge. The US military-industrial complex was quick to confront new foes<sup>51</sup> – Khomeini’s Iran, Gaddafi’s Libya, Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, the Afghan Taliban; in parallel, it continued to provide unquestioning support to Israel<sup>52</sup> (even as it gradually instituted a de facto apartheid regime) and the petro-monarchies of the Gulf<sup>53</sup> (despite their egregious human rights offences and the barely covert support some of them provided for the spread of radical Islam). While Europe could not disavow its principal ally, its immediate interests lay elsewhere, principally in the EU’s eastward enlargement, made possible by the dissolution of the Soviet empire. Because of geographic proximity and because many European countries have significant Muslim minorities, Europe also had an interest in pursuing appeased relations with the Muslim world at its borders, as well as countering the emergence of Islamic extremism. Furthermore, it judged (and was proved right) that indiscriminate violence on the part of the West would only beget more terrorism.

This implied a foreign policy stance that, unlike the US’s, was not bellicose by default. To this end, the Barcelona Process<sup>54</sup> (which morphed subsequently into the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM)) was launched in 1995 as a multilateral initiative in which all the countries of the Mediterranean region (including Israel) participate to this day. Europe’s engagement relied on soft power – development aid, humanitarian support, and diplomatic advocacy. As a major donor to the Palestinian Authority, the EU funded infrastructure, social services and governance capacity-building programmes.

By the beginning of this century, Europe’s support for US action in the Middle East was reactive, often half-hearted and disparate. In return, American-led peace initiatives largely relegated Europe to a supportive role (“a payer, not a player”).<sup>55</sup> The EU criticised Israel’s

<sup>51</sup> LAKE, Anthony (1994) “Confronting Backlash States,” *Foreign Affairs* 73, no. 2 (March/April 1994): 45–55.

<sup>52</sup> U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE, “Memorandum of Understanding between the United States and Israel on Security Assistance, 2019–2028,” September 14, 2016, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2016/09/261904.htm>.

<sup>53</sup> GAUSE III, F. Gregory (2009). *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>54</sup> “Barcelona Declaration adopted at the Euro-Mediterranean Conference,” 28 November 1995, [https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/euromed/docs/bd\\_en.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/euromed/docs/bd_en.pdf).

<sup>55</sup> “Euro-Mediterranean Interim Association Agreement on trade and cooperation between the European Community, of the one part, and the Palestine Liberation Organization (for the benefit of the Palestinian Authority of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip), of the other part,” OJ L 187, 16 July 1997, [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:21997A0716\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:21997A0716(01)).

brutal repression of the Intifadas and Israeli colonisation of the West Bank,<sup>56</sup> but was manifestly unable to prevent either. Nor was it able to leverage aid to influence policy outcomes. Britain and Poland supported the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, while France and Germany opposed it.<sup>57</sup> It would be euphemistic to say that collective leverage was limited. Pursuing ambiguous policies that were neither fully supportive of US policy nor fully opposed to it, Europe was respected neither for its might nor for its pursuit of peace; its criticism irritated allies and its billions did not placate detractors.

Europe also pursued a policy steering a middle course between coercion and appeasement in the “EU3 + 3” negotiations of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).<sup>58</sup> This approach succeeded in establishing credible monitoring of Iran’s commitment to limiting its nuclear enrichment activities, but it was torpedoed by President Trump during his first term in office. Similarly, the EU’s consistent (if mostly symbolic) defence of the Palestinian right to statehood was dealt a serious setback when Trump recognised Jerusalem as Israel’s capital, and brokered the Abraham Accords.<sup>59</sup>

The Arab Spring that erupted in 2011 could have been an opportunity for Europe to reset its relations with its Arab neighbours, and for once, the US, under President Obama, was openly encouraging Europe to take responsibility for its “backyard”.<sup>60</sup> Europe made it clear that it would shed no tears at the demise of the region’s autocratic regimes,<sup>61</sup> although it was hesitant to lend support to the (sometimes radical) Islamist movements that opposed them. This too led to prevarication. In the end, the regimes mostly prevailed, sometimes with a new face (Al Sisi in Egypt) but unchanged in essence. Not one of the region’s monarchies was toppled. Unsurprisingly, the regimes that had weathered the Arab Spring did not trust European intentions in its aftermath. The Arab Spring offered Europe a rare opportunity to assert leadership, yet hesitation and lack of coordination

<sup>56</sup> EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, “Resolution on the Situation in the Middle East,” 10 April 2002, accessed 2 December, 2025, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-5-2002-0173\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-5-2002-0173_EN.html).

<sup>57</sup> THE WHITE HOUSE, “Coalition Members,” press release, 27 March 2003, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/03/20030327-10.html>. Also: UNITED NATIONS SECURITY COUNCIL, 4701st meeting, S/PV.4701, February 14, 2003, statement by Mr. Dominique de Villepin (France), <https://undocs.org/S/PV.4701>. Also: FEDERAL GOVERNMENT OF GERMANY, “Government Policy Statement by Federal Chancellor Gerhard Schröder on Iraq,” statement to the German Bundestag, Berlin, 13 February 2003. <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/search/government-policy-statement-by-federal-chancellor-gerhard-schroeder-on-iraq-466292>. Also: José-María Aznar, Václav Havel, Tony Blair, Silvio Berlusconi, José Manuel Durão Barroso, and others, “United We Stand,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 30, 2003. Also: Gordon, Philip and Shapiro, Jeremy (2004) *Allies at War: America, Europe, and the Crisis over Iraq*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.

<sup>58</sup> UNITED NATIONS SECURITY COUNCIL, Resolution 2231 (2015), S/RES/2231 (2015), 20 July, 2015, [https://undocs.org/S/RES/2231\(2015\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/2231(2015)). Also: PARSI, Trita (2017) *Losing an Enemy: Obama, Iran, and the Triumph of Diplomacy*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

<sup>59</sup> U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE, “The Abraham Accords,” September 15, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/the-abraham-accords/>.

<sup>60</sup> Obama, Barack “Remarks by the President on the Middle East and North Africa,” Washington, DC, 19 May, 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/19/remarks-president-middle-east-and-north-africa>. Also: GROUP OF EIGHT (G8), “Declaration of the G8 on the Arab Spring,” Deauville Summit, 27 May, 2011, [https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/21448/2011\\_g8\\_declaration\\_on\\_the\\_arab\\_spring](https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/21448/2011_g8_declaration_on_the_arab_spring).

<sup>61</sup> EUROPEAN COMMISSION AND HIGH REPRESENTATIVE OF THE UNION FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND SECURITY POLICY, A Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean, Joint Communication COM(2011) 200 final. Brussels, 8 March 2011.

meant that Europe's influence was marginal, allowing other actors, including Turkey, Qatar, and the UAE, to fill the vacuum.<sup>62</sup>

Libya and Tunisia were exceptions to Europe's stance of encouragement from the sidelines of the Arab Spring. An initiative spearheaded by Britain and France (with NATO backing) toppled Muammar Gaddafi in October 2011. However, the European powers had not planned the stabilisation of post-Gaddafi Libya any better than the US had planned for post-Hussein Iraq. The country sank into an anarchy from which it has yet to emerge. Turkey and Qatar on one hand, and Egypt and the United Arab Emirates on the other, backed opposing factions, leading to Libya's de facto partition. In eastern Libya, Russia established a springboard for its mercenary activities in the Sahel. Not only were the Europeans outpaced, but they could not even agree among themselves the objectives to be pursued: Italy backed Tripoli, while France backed Benghazi.<sup>63</sup> In Tunisia, the EU mobilised an unprecedented volume of aid for the one uprising that might have led to a functioning parliamentary democracy. With technical support from the EU, a constituent assembly produced a liberal Constitution, and free and fair elections were held. Nevertheless, Europe proved unable to press home its advantage. Tunisian politicians proved too venal and self-interested; the fledgling institutions too weak. In 2019 a population disenchanted with the democratic experiment elected Kais Saied on a populist ticket.<sup>64</sup> Using emergency decrees, Saied replaced the parliamentary system with a "super-presidential" constitution.<sup>65</sup> In the Tunisian case, Europe was not only marginalised, but instrumentalised. Fearing a wave of uncontrolled migration from Tunisian shores, the EU agreed in 2023 an aid package of over €1bn for its no-longer-so-democratic partner. Whereas EU incentives for reform and democratisation at the outset of the Arab Spring had been proposed under the slogan "more for more", this deal is referred to by despondent EU civil servants as "more for less", a landmark of normative failure.

This pattern of marginalisation is repeating itself in the US-Israel war against Iran. The reluctance of European countries to be drawn into a conflict that is prejudicial to their economic interests and at odds with international law is progress of sorts, but they remain powerless to influence US policy and - with the exception of Spain - even to criticise it.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>62</sup> HOUSE OF LORDS, EUROPEAN UNION COMMITTEE, *The EU and the Arab Spring*, 1st Report of Session 2012-13, HL Paper 88. London: The Stationery Office, 2012, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201213/ldselect/lducom/88/8802.htm>. Also: LYNCH, Marc (2016) *The New Arab Wars: Uprisings and Anarchy in the Middle East*. New York: PublicAffairs.

<sup>63</sup> PACK, Jason (2021) *Libya and the Global Enduring Disorder*. London: Hurst.

<sup>64</sup> INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP (2022), "Stemming Tunisia's Authoritarian Backslide," *Middle East & North Africa Report*. Brussels: International Crisis Group. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/tunisia/stemming-tunisias-authoritarian-backslide>.

<sup>65</sup> This is a cautionary tale, also, for the US.

<sup>66</sup> EUOBSERVER (2026), *Stunned, sidelined and disunited: The EU response to Iran war*. Available at: <https://euobserver.com/206048/stunned-sidelined-and-disunited-the-eu-response-to-iran-war/>.

Yet there are indications that Arab states, even if they are themselves loath to voice criticism of the US, generally view Spain's reaction to the war as principled and courageous, strengthening its reputation as a diplomatic partner and mediator in the region. In what is widely seen as a gesture of approval, Algeria has agreed to boost its gas deliveries to Spain by 12.5%.<sup>67</sup>

### Upstaged by newcomers

For Europe, much more damaging than being sidelined by its erstwhile protector and ally was being outmanoeuvred by foes and rivals. Russia's post-Cold-War return to Middle Eastern affairs - with its military intervention in Syria, in support of the Assad regime, followed, in a seamless transition, by an overture to the Al Shaara-led government; its involvement in Lebanon and Israel-Syria negotiations; and its military-industrial cooperation with Iran in the war it is prosecuting against Ukraine - has outpaced European engagement and influence.<sup>68</sup> Regional actors have filled the space that Europe once occupied. The Gulf states and Iran (at least until the setbacks it suffered in 2025) project their influence through proxies and exercise economic and diplomatic leverage across the region. The volume of European aid can hardly compete with that from the wealthy Gulf states, particularly as their aid comes with fewer normative constraints. Turkey pursues unilateral military and political ambitions in Syria, Libya, and the Eastern Mediterranean. Egypt continues to act as a regional mediator in Palestinian affairs. In the area of trade, too, Europe is steadily losing market share to China and Turkey.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> The Olive Press (2026), *Algeria boosts gas to Spain while Iran allows passage through Strait of Hormuz*. Available at: <https://www.theolivepress.es/spain-news/2026/03/26/algeria-boosts-gas-to-spain-while-iran-allows-passage-through-strait-of-hormuz/>.

<sup>68</sup> TRENIN, Dmitri (2018) *What Is Russia Up To in the Middle East?* Cambridge: Polity.

<sup>69</sup> INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES, *Strategic Survey 2024: The Annual Assessment of Geopolitics*. London: IISS.

Europe's multilateral engagement in the Middle East

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Europe has long seen multilateral institutions as the cornerstone of its external action, particularly in the Middle East. The EU consistently frames its diplomacy around international law, UN legitimacy, and collective action; principles that reflect both Europe's post-war identity and its limited means of applying hard power.

At the UN, Europe has been a consistent supporter of resolutions advocating a two-state solution and condemning human rights violations. However, European influence in this arena is often circumscribed by geopolitical realities - above all, the US veto in the Security Council. Repeated Europe-backed resolutions critical of Israeli settlement policy, though symbolically significant, rarely translate into binding measures. This is not purely a structural failure of the UN: it also reflects Europe's limited coordination, with EU member states frequently issuing statements in different capacities - as the EU, as individual states, or in ad hoc groups. The disparate messages diminish the continent's collective weight. A more unified diplomatic line, coupled with strategic coalition-building among non-Western states, could modestly strengthen Europe's capacity to shape outcomes even within constrained institutional frameworks.

Europe's participation in UN peacekeeping missions, such as UNIFIL in Lebanon, where sixteen EU member states, including Italy, France, and Spain, send their own soldiers on the ground, similarly reflects a commitment to stability and security through multilateralism. Yet, while European contingents and funding are significant, their strategic impact remains limited. European governments often treat peacekeeping as a tool for risk management aimed primarily at containing conflicts rather than resolving them, and therefore rarely capitalise on their presence to advance diplomatic initiatives with local or regional actors. This strategic limitation was starkly evident during the recent conflict between Israel and Hezbollah, when Israel ignored or openly undermined EU warnings, including those related to attacks inside Lebanon and strikes that endangered the UN peacekeeping mission - most recently, the Israeli attack on a UNIFIL detachment on 26 October 2025.<sup>70</sup>

The International Criminal Court (ICC) provides another channel through which Europe seeks to project its normative agenda, emphasising accountability and international justice both globally and in the Middle East. To the EU's credit, all 27 EU member states are parties to the ICC, and the EU is a major financial, diplomatic, and technical supporter of the Court. However, Europe's commitment to international justice was put to the test when the ICC issued arrest warrants in November 2024 against senior Israeli officials, including the prime minister and minister of defence, as

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<sup>70</sup> COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION. "Statement by the High Representative on behalf of the European Union on recent attacks against UNIFIL." Press release, 13 October 2024.

well as a Hamas leader. Josep Borrell, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, stated clearly that ICC decisions are binding on all states which were Parties to the Rome Statute, including every EU member state. Yet, several EU governments subsequently issued conflicting and even contradictory statements, signalling that they would not enforce the ICC's decisions in this case.

The ICC's limited jurisdiction in the Middle East, compounded by US opposition to the Court's authority in general and its jurisdiction over Israel in particular, as well as the non-membership of most Arab states, such as Syria, Yemen, Sudan, Iraq, and Libya, further constrains its reach. While Europe offers strong rhetorical support for the ICC, this often exceeds its willingness to operationalise the Court's decisions when they become politically costly.

These examples illustrate a broader dilemma: Europe's multilateralism is principled but more focused on maintaining institutional legitimacy than on adapting to shifting realities of power. This cautious approach reflects both domestic constraints, including the need for consensus among EU member states, and a deep-seated belief that international law provides Europe's best guarantee of relevance in a system dominated by stronger powers. Yet, by emphasising process and restraint, Europe often limits its own agency within the very institutions it values most.

Multilateral engagement remains an indispensable vehicle for European diplomacy, but its effectiveness depends on whether Europe can transform normative presence into strategic influence. The issue, therefore, is not that Europe participates in multilateralism, but that it has yet to develop the political will and coherence to use it as a genuine instrument of power.

Normative power and missed opportunities

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The EU stands as a remarkable achievement of the 20th century: a project that pacified a continent torn apart by war, brought unprecedented economic prosperity through cooperation between states that had been rivals, strengthened the bonds among its nations, and, to a large extent, eliminated borders between them, making it the most connected region in the world, where citizens enjoy high mobility and freedom across borders. In essence, this success is built on legislative approximation and regulatory harmonisation in the spheres of governance and economy. Inspired by the success of this approach, in the waning years of the 20th century, the question arose whether this normative influence (the EU's "soft power") could be projected beyond the EU<sup>71</sup> and whether Europe's integration process could be replicated by other regional groupings of countries (Mercosur, ASEAN, the African Union, Arab League, etc.).<sup>72</sup>

The enlargement process, which concluded in 2004 with the accession of 10 new member states to the EU, bore eloquent witness to the EU's capacity to promote and guide reforms in 3rd countries.<sup>73</sup> Admittedly, the acceding countries had incentives to harmonise with the EU that are not on offer to non-candidate countries. So, how influential is the EU's soft power for countries without an accession perspective? Here the record is more ambiguous and, unsurprisingly, depends on what is on offer in exchange for undertaking the effort to harmonise with the EU.

In the economic sphere, the EU's influence is considerable and has led to the observation that the EU is a normative giant. This is because there is a clear choice for third countries: accept EU norms in exchange for access to the EU market.<sup>74</sup> EU-funded exchange programmes such as Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps, in addition to hundreds of European universities offering scholarships for students to travel and study in Europe, have played a significant role in strengthening the EU's soft power in the Southern Mediterranean by fostering meaningful people-to-people connections.<sup>75</sup> This is important because soft power is not limited to values, norms, and institutions; it is also rooted in people, culture, and the human relationships that connect societies across regions. However, a similar projection of EU influence in the area of governance and human rights has not succeeded because the political calculus is different. For the groups holding power in non-democratic countries,

<sup>71</sup> MANNERS, Ian (2002) "Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?" *Journal of Common Market Studies* 40, no. 2: 235–258.

<sup>72</sup> MATTLI, Walter (2006) *The Logic of Regional Integration: Europe and Beyond*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>73</sup> GRABBE, Heather (2006) *The EU's Transformative Power: Europeanization through Conditionality in Central and Eastern Europe*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>74</sup> EUROPEAN COMMISSION, "Global Europe: Competing in the World — A Contribution to the EU's Growth and Jobs Strategy," COM(2006) 567 final (Brussels, 4 October 2006), [https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2006/october/tradoc\\_130376.pdf](https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2006/october/tradoc_130376.pdf).

<sup>75</sup> EUROPEAN COMMISSION AND HIGH REPRESENTATIVE OF THE UNION FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND SECURITY POLICY, *Renewed Partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood: A New Agenda for the Mediterranean*, JOIN(2021) 2 final. Brussels, February 9, 2021, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52021JC0002>. Also: ICF and PPMI, *Study Supporting the Evaluation of the International Dimension of the Erasmus+ Programme in Higher Education (2014–2020)*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2023.

harmonising governance standards with those of the EU represents costs without immediate benefits.<sup>76</sup> Even for would-be reformers and their populations, the EU governance model is not necessarily attractive.

Perhaps most importantly, the EU's standards are seen to be inconsistent and their application hypocritical. Examples are rife: powerful countries with deplorable human rights records (like China) are largely shielded from criticism, while partners of lesser economic or geopolitical weight are subjected to more exigent demands and a variety of sanctions; the EU voices criticisms (e.g., the devastation wreaked on Yemen by the KSA and UAE), but individual EU member states continue weapons sales; the European Parliament adopts resolutions castigating human rights abuses, but the European Commission continues to implement Association Agreements or Partnership and Cooperation Agreements with countries where these abuses occur. The weakness of the EU's approach to Human Rights is evident in the case of the Arab-Israeli conflict, with violations by Palestinian organisations and armed groups being unambiguously - and rightly - condemned as terrorism, while criticism of egregious Israeli violations of international norms is voiced with circumspection and accompanied by reminders about Israel's right to defend itself. The double standards evident when the Arab-Israeli context is compared with the EU's response to Ukraine have led many in the Southern Mediterranean to lose trust in Europe's defence of international norms.<sup>77</sup>

Beyond double standards, the intellectual foundation of the EU human rights doctrine is shaky.<sup>78</sup> The EU's definition of Human Rights evolves with time, and does not make a sufficient distinction between rights that are universally accepted as such and those that the EU has recognised but that other countries have not. Thus, the EU undermines its credibility and lays itself open to the charge of cultural imperialism when it promotes its own list of rights or its interpretation of these rights,<sup>79</sup> rather than focusing on the rights enshrined in UN conventions to which the countries concerned have adhered. In practice, insistence on the "indivisibility" of human rights<sup>80</sup> tends to confuse the distinction between rights that represent, for states, an obligation of results - such as freedom of speech or the prohibition of torture - and rights that represent qualitative objectives and an obligation of means - such as the right to education.

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<sup>76</sup> LAVENEX, Sandra and SCHIMMELFENNIG, Frank (2009) "EU Rules beyond EU Borders: Theorizing External Governance in European Politics," *Journal of European Public Policy* 16, no. 6 (September 2009): 791–812.

<sup>77</sup> AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL (2023), *Amnesty International Report 2022/23: The State of the World's Human Rights*. London: Amnesty International.

<sup>78</sup> HYDE-PRICE, Adrian (2006) "'Normative' Power Europe: A Realist Critique," *Journal of European Public Policy* 13, no. 2 (2006): 217–234. Also: YOUNGS, Richard (2001) *The European Union and the Promotion of Democracy: Europe's Mediterranean and Asian Policies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Also: ALSTON, Philip and WEILER, J. H. H. (eds.), (1999) *The EU and Human Rights*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>79</sup> Such as holding that the right to life does not extend to a foetus.

<sup>80</sup> COMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS, General Comment No. 3: The Nature of States Parties' Obligations (Art. 2, para. 1, ICESCR), UN Doc. E/1991/23, annex III (1990), <https://www.refworld.org/docid/4538838e10.html>.

In the wake of the Arab Spring, the EU hoped to export its model of governance to the countries of the Southern Mediterranean. Faced with the lack of incentives and contradictions described above, neither the erstwhile autocrats nor the Islamist reformers were persuaded. Nor did any constituency of the western liberal kind emerge. The EU's normative power was not up to the task.

Conclusions

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Europe's geographic proximity to the Middle East, deep economic and energy interdependence, and significant institutional and financial capacity place it in a position of strategic responsibility. Yet this potential remains under-utilized. Rather than continuing to react to crises or align reflexively with U.S. positioning, the EU must define and pursue a coherent Middle East policy grounded in its own long-term interests and normative commitments.

At a moment when transatlantic priorities are diverging and traditional power structures are shifting, the EU faces a structural choice: remain marginal to regional developments or assert itself as a principled and coherent actor. Doing so requires both strategic autonomy externally and greater political cohesion internally. Without this shift, Europe risks not only irrelevance in the Middle East, but deeper fragmentation within the Union itself.

For Europe to make a meaningful and lasting difference in the Middle East, the EU should:

**I. Integrate the inadequacy of the transatlantic alliance into its Middle East policy.**

Europe's proximity to the Middle East, the interdependence between the two in areas such as trade, migration, or energy supply, and the EU's institutional and financial resources, place it in a unique position to impact the region. For Europe to realise this potential, it must pursue a foreign policy that is in line with its own values and interests rather than one that is subordinated to US positioning. The Trump administration has brought the divergence of EU and US objectives into sharp relief, but the rift has been developing since the end of the Cold War, and it is unlikely that a different administration will pursue a diametrically different course. The EU's partnerships and alliances must be forged on the basis of objectives, not vice-versa.

**II. Stick to its constitutive principles**

Although the United States has never truly been viewed as a neutral mediator in the conflict in the Middle East, the stance of the Trump administration further widened this trust gap, particularly among Palestinians. Moreover, as the US retreats from the role it once assigned to itself, namely that of placing democracy and human rights at the core of its foreign policy toward the region, Europe is confronted with a strategic vacuum it can choose to fill. The EU is a construct of International Law and it has an existential interest in its preservation. It gains in credibility when it does so, because, despite deficiencies in their domestic governance, many regional actors in the greater Middle East also have an interest in preserving a rule-based world order. The recognition of a Palestinian state by several European countries is a crucial step in this direction, but it

remains insufficient. The EU's long-term engagement strategy must be more, not less, firmly grounded in International Law.

### **III. Continue to reject zero-sum logic**

A peace imposed by Israel and the US, if it fails to address legitimate Palestinian aspirations, as seems likely, will be short-lived. The question facing the EU is not one of choosing between cynical realism and unrealistic idealism. Its own history demonstrates that peace and prosperity can be achieved through small steps and win-win compromises. Although this logic is unlikely to prevail in the near future, the EU and its member states are correct to stand back from participation in Trump's Peace Board until it is clear that it is not driven by zero-sum thinking. In fact, this is one form of marginalisation that the EU should actively seek. Similar considerations apply to resisting involvement in the US-Israel war on Iran. The example of Spain shows that the EU credibility in the region would benefit from a more assertive and principled policy stance. On the other hand, initiatives such as France's partnership with the Palestinian Authority to establish a joint panel for drafting a future Palestinian constitution demonstrate what constructive engagement can look like.

Particularly for powerful EU member states such as Germany, this approach carries additional weight. The special nature of Germany's relationship with Israel, and the resulting commitment to support the security and rights of the Jewish people in light of their historical persecution, also entails a responsibility to support the legitimate rights aspirations of the Palestinian people, given injustices they have endured since the establishment of the State of Israel.

### **IV. Give itself the institutional tools to act coherently on the world stage**

In its own interest, as well as that of its neighbourhood, the EU must take further steps in its integration to ensure that member states do not pursue divergent foreign policies. As the analysis here demonstrates, the EU's principal weakness lies in its incapacity to act coherently. Failure to remedy this - if necessary, by shedding member states that are unwilling to further pool their sovereignty - will not only result in the EU's continued marginalisation in international affairs but, potentially, its fragmentation and, ultimately, dissolution.



# IEMed.

The European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed), founded in 1989, is a consortium comprising the Government of Catalonia, the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation and Barcelona City Council. It incorporates civil society through its Board of Trustees and its Advisory Council formed by Mediterranean universities, companies, organisations and personalities of renowned prestige.

In accordance with the principles of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership's Barcelona Process, and today with the objectives of the Union for the Mediterranean the aim of the IEMed is to foster actions and projects which contribute to mutual understanding, exchange and cooperation between the different Mediterranean countries, societies and cultures as well as to promote the progressive construction of a space of peace and stability, shared prosperity and dialogue between cultures and civilisations in the Mediterranean.

Adopting a clear role as a think tank specialised in Mediterranean relations based on a multidisciplinary and networking approach, the IEMed encourages analysis, understanding and cooperation through the organisation of seminars, research projects, debates, conferences and publications, in addition to a broad cultural programme.

