



The EU Global Strategy and the MENA Region: In Search of Resilience

Andrea Dessì

Research Fellow, Mediterranean and Middle East Programme, IAI

Abstract

Europe has made some progress in implementing the EU Global Strategy (EUGS) since its unveiling in June 2016. Yet, when it comes to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), implementation has been less straightforward. While the EUGS itself acknowledged the EU's limited leverage in the region, a number of key developments between 2016 and 2018 could have provided the EU with important opportunities to strengthen its image and credibility. That being said, three dimensions of EU policy deserve praise: the EU's continued support for Tunisia and Europe's principled opposition to the Trump administration's unilateral moves towards Iran and the Palestinians are no doubt positive, but should be accompanied by more forceful efforts in the realm of public diplomacy.



Aside from the undeniable progress made in the security and defence domain, developments in the other four priority areas identified by the EU Global Strategy (EUGS) – fostering state and societal resilience to the east and south; adopting an integrated approach to conflicts and crises; favouring the emergence of cooperative regional orders; and support for rules-based global governance – are less easily quantifiable.¹

Nowhere is this as true as in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), a key region of strategic importance for Europe and yet one in which the EU has traditionally struggled to make much headway, particularly in the political and security domains. The EUGS itself acknowledged the EU's limited leverage over many Middle East developments, and counselled for increased prioritization and a lowering of expectations associated with EU policy.² In this respect, the EU has continued to prioritize the North African dimension over that of the Middle East, seeking to direct resources and influence towards the Mediterranean while accepting that Europe enjoys more limited leeway over the Gulf and Middle East, where the US (and Russia) remain the most important external actors.

The EU's limited leverage in the MENA has also led EU policy to place much emphasis on the resilience dimension of the EUGS. While subject to some debate given the general permeability of the term, the EU's ambition to foster state and societal resilience in the MENA has been prioritized in light of its avowed promise to strengthen long-term stability as well as prevention, assisting regional states and societies to develop local coping mechanisms capable of enhancing their ability to withstand new and unforeseen crises and challenges.

It is this hardship of simultaneously fostering state *and* societal resilience in what are generally authoritarian settings in the MENA that the EUGS implementation has met the most resistance. It is also for this reason that EU policy must adopt a more proactive and courageous dimension of public diplomacy to accompany these efforts, particularly when it comes to the top-level political relationships with certain key states. This would help shield against accusations of double standards or an excessive embrace of realpolitik, helping to strengthen EU credibility and coherence when it comes to the ever more challenging task of balancing interests with values in the EU's action towards the MENA. In this respect, the spread of instability, violent and frozen conflicts and the active military presence of multiple competing foreign and regional actors may help to explain – but it *cannot excuse* – the EU's marginal role on a number of key regional developments between 2016 and 2018.

Missed Opportunities and Enduring Divisions

Of course, individual member states, such as France, the UK and Germany, have played important roles in certain contexts. Yet such action often stems from their individual interests rather than a concerted effort to maintain a united EU stance. Meanwhile, the role of the EU's External Action

¹ European External Action Service (EEAS), *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy*, Brussels, 24 June 2016, https://europa.eu/globalstrategy/sites/globalstrategy/files/regions/files/eugs_review_web_0.pdf

² See, Eduard Soler i Lecha and Nathalie Tocci, "Implications of the EU Global Strategy for the Middle East and North Africa," *FUTURE Notes 1*, MENARA Project, July 2016, http://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/menara_fn_1.pdf.

Service (EEAS) has tended to be side-lined, lacking in visibility and impact on numerous key Middle Eastern dossiers.

In Libya, France and Italy continue to promote different approaches, causing considerable confusion on the ground and in the context of UN mediation efforts between Libyan actors.³ More distant countries such as the US and Russia play these European divisions off against each other, advancing their own narrower interests – largely limited to anti-terrorism or the use of Libya as a geopolitical bargaining chip on other dossiers – in such a manner that often ends up harming those of Europe. Europe's lack of unity over Libya continues to undermine the EU's political and economic leverage over Libyan actors and their foreign sponsors, leaving Libya in a dangerous stalemate that only furthers the security risks for Europe.

Looking beyond Libya, the EU was broadly absent from the Qatar crisis that began in June 2017 and has largely been on the side-lines of international diplomatic efforts regarding the Syrian conflict. Europe has also failed to coordinate a united EU stance on the war in Yemen, to forcibly criticize Saudi Arabia's mass arrests of activists⁴ or to limit European arms sales to Riyadh, notwithstanding the approval of a non-binding resolution by the EU parliament on 25 October 2018 in the wake of the brutal murder of Jamal Khashoggi in Istanbul.⁵ While criticism of Saudi Arabia has increased in the wake of the murder, EU member states continue to be driven by the key goal of protecting and expanding economic interchanges with all Gulf actors, as demonstrated by the refusal by states such as France, the UK, Italy and Spain to end arms exports to Riyadh even as Germany, Norway and Denmark implemented such a ban. Instead, reaction to the Khashoggi murder in Europe has thus far been limited to a Schengen-wide travel ban for 18 Saudi citizens suspected to be involved in the murder, mirroring a similar reaction from Washington.⁶

Clearly, the EU remains an important, even vital, actor financially in the MENA region. Coupled with the 10.8 billion euros provided by the EU and its member states in response to the Syrian crisis and its regional implications since 2011,⁷ the launch of the EU Trust Fund for Africa, which includes a significant North African dimension (465.6 million euros⁸), is another example of Europe's financial sup-

³ Nicola Pedde, "The Unknowns of the Libya Stabilization Conference," *MENA Source*, The Atlantic Council, 7 November 2018, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/the-unknowns-of-the-libya-stabilization-conference>.

⁴ Alberto Nardelli, "The EU Dropped Plans to Release A Statement Backign Canada in its Diplomatic Fight with Saudi Arabia," *BuzzFeed News*, 13 August 2018, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/albertonardelli/saudi-arabia-canada-eu?bftw=world>.

⁵ European Parliament, "MEPs demand end to EU arms exports to Saudi Arabia," Press Release, 25 October 2018, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20181018IPR16536/meps-demand-end-to-eu-arms-exports-to-saudi-arabia>.

⁶ See, "Berlin imposes travel ban, arms freeze over Khashoggi killing," *Reuters*, 19 November 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-khashoggi-ban/berlin-imposes-travel-ban-arms-freeze-over-khashoggi-killing-idUSKCN1NO18C>; Paul Cochrane, "EU countries approve arms sales to Saudi, UAE worth 55 times aid to Yemen," *Middle East Eye*, 13 November 2018, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/perverse-cycle-european-arms-sales-saudi-and-uae-worth-sixty-times-aid-yemen-356882718>.

⁷ EEAS, "The EU and the Crisis in Syria," Updated 24 September 2018, https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/22664/eu-and-crisis-syria_en

⁸ Worth of projects approved for North Africa as of September 2018. See, European Commission, "EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa", Factsheet, Updated 11 September 2018,

port. In this respect, Europe continues to be a “payer but not a *player*” when it comes to the MENA, providing ample resources and technical assistance in numerous contexts yet often failing to translate these engagements into political capital and influence.

With regards to the Trust Fund for Africa, a careful examination of projects approved will demonstrate how the key priority of EU actors remains tied to migration, anti-terrorism and border control, rather than long-term support for economic development or governance reforms, themselves key ingredients for resilient states and societies.⁹

All of these efforts are classified by the EU under the heading of support for state and societal resilience in the MENA.¹⁰ Yet, it is extremely hard to link such efforts and disbursements to precise benchmarks of progress, making appraisals and oversight somewhat complicated. If these are to be measured according to the EU’s key interests and concerns – energy security, anti-terrorism, migration and economic and trade interests – then an appraisal of the two years of implementation of the EUGS may result in a rather positive assessment. If, however, we are to measure the success of the EUGS on the basis of its four key principles (and particularly that of fostering resilience and long-term prevention), assessments will necessarily be less positive, given the difficulty in measuring “success” in the realm of state and societal “resilience” and the broader trends of a resurgence of authoritarianism across the region.

Moreover, EU policy towards the MENA continues to be governed through the EU’s Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), and much remains to be done to clarify interlinkages and complementarity between the EUGS principles and the ENP. The 2015 review of the ENP indeed placed much emphasis on stabilization and yet it is unclear how stabilization relates to the EU’s priority of fostering state and societal resilience in the MENA as advised by the EUGS. Indeed there is a risk that by prioritizing stabilization, EU policy may simply end up fostering authoritarian resilience in the MENA, supporting the authoritarian status quo in the region in much the same way as it did in the pre-Arab uprisings period.¹¹

Positive Engagement

That being said there are three dimensions of EU policy that deserve praise. Europe’s principled stance of opposition to Trump’s unilateral moves vis-à-vis Iran and the Palestinians and the support it

https://ec.europa.eu/trustfundforafrica/sites/euetfa/files/eu_emergency_trust_fund_for_africa_11-09-2018.pdf.

⁹ Luca Barana, “The EU Trust Fund for Africa and the Perils of a Securitized Migration Policy,” IAI Commentaries 17/31, 18 December 2017, <http://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaicom1731.pdf>; Jorge Valero, “EU Will spend more on border and migration control than on Africa,” *EurActive*, 1 August 2018, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/africa/news/for-tomorrow-eu-will-spend-more-on-border-and-migration-control-than-on-africa/>.

¹⁰ EEAS, “Implementing the EU Global Strategy Year 1,” https://europa.eu/globalstrategy/sites/globalstrategy/files/full_brochure_year_1.pdf; EEAS, “Implementing the EU Global Strategy Year 2,” https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/eugs_annual_report_year_2.pdf.

¹¹ See, Silvia Colombo, Andrea Dessì and Vassilis Ntousas, *The EU, Resilience and the MENA Region*, Brussels, Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS) and Rome, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), December 2017; Ana E. Juncos, “Resilience as the New EU Foreign Policy Paradigm: A Pragmatist Turn?,” *European Security*, Vol.26, Is.1, 2017, pp.1-18.

continues to provide to Tunisia can be singled out as positive developments tied to European policy towards the MENA since 2016.

EU engagements with Tunisia – identified early on as a key priority of EU policy in light of its progress on the political transition since the Arab uprisings – do represent something of a bright spot in EU action towards the MENA. EU leaders have repeatedly sought to support Tunisia, establishing a privileged partnership with the country in 2012 and launching negotiations for a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA).¹² Yet, even with regards to Tunisia, efforts to prioritize border control, migrant readmissions and anti-terror training have dominated EU approaches. Other areas, such as agricultural liberalization or support for legal migration routes are largely side-lined, even though it is precisely these dimensions that could result in providing much-needed respite for the Tunisian economy.

On the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Europe deserves praise for its opposition to Washington's unilateral recognition in May 2018 of Jerusalem as Israel's capital. EU representatives boycotted the opening ceremony of the new US embassy in Jerusalem and have refused to modify their public recognition of East Jerusalem as occupied territory under international law. Moreover, in the wake of the US ending its funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) dealing with Palestinian refugees, the EU and a number of member states stepped in with emergency funding to allow the UNRWA to continue its education, health and emergency operations in the Gaza Strip and the broader region.¹³

Such actions are important indications of the EU's continued commitment to a negotiated Israeli-Palestinian agreement and do reflect an abidance to EU principles and values. Yet, they are far from representing a proactive strategy by the EU to break the perennial stalemate over Israel–Palestine, let alone implement accountability and compensation measures for non-compliance with EU rules and regulations or international law. In this respect, Europe has been silent with regards to the killing of largely unarmed Palestinian protesters in Gaza since the beginnings of weekly protests tied to the "Great March of Return" in March 2018, with over 200 dead and thousands wounded by Israeli live fire thus far.

Significantly, as the EU continues its criticism of Israeli actions and settlement enterprise, trade with Israel – particularly in the high tech, defence and cyber domains – has grown considerably. European states and Israel have also signed a gas pipeline deal that could lead to the exporting of East Mediterranean gas through Cyprus, Greece and Italy into Europe, another indication of Europe's prioritization of material interests in the Middle East and of the Israeli government's success in strengthening its bargaining power over Europe.¹⁴ Israel's policy of seeking to widen divisions among EU member

¹² See, E. Cohen-Hadria (ed.), *The EU-Tunisia Privileged Partnership – What Next?*, EuroMeSCo Joint Policy Study 10, April 2018, https://www.euromesco.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/EuroMeSCo-Joint-Policy-Study_EU-Tunisia-Partnership.pdf.

¹³ UNRWA, "Ministerial Meeting on UNRWA Raises Remarkable US \$122 Million," Press Release, 28 September 2018, <https://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/press-releases/ministerial-meeting-unrwa-raises-remarkable-us122-million>.

¹⁴ Andrew Rettman, "EU states and Israel sign gas pipeline deal," *Euroobserver*, 6 December 2017, <https://euobserver.com/energy/140183>.

states – particularly though close relations with the group of Visegrad countries – has indeed borne fruit, limiting the EU’s ability to develop common approaches to the conflict.

Moving to Iran, the EU’s defence of the nuclear deal following the US’s unilateral withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in May and its blanket re-imposition of sanctions on Iran this November is perhaps the single most significant development tied to EU policy towards the MENA.

Having failed to deter Trump from exiting the JCPOA, Europe has since moved to adopt a number of policies aimed at shielding European companies and businesses involved in Iran from the threat of secondary US sanctions. The EU’s blocking regulation, special purpose vehicle (SPV) and other efforts are no doubt welcome, and yet it is still too early to tell if these will succeed in providing enough incentives for Iran to continue its abidance to the deal.¹⁵ Ultimately, European businesses and small and medium enterprises will be hard pressed to accept the considerable risks associated with investing in Iran, and indeed a number of major EU companies have already halted or withdrawn from Iran altogether, seemingly weakening Iran’s cost/benefit calculus to remain in the deal.¹⁶ The failure by EU states to find a host nation for the SPV demonstrates the continued difficulties facing the Union as it seeks to enhance its strategic autonomy from the US while simultaneously pursuing its political and economic interests towards the region. Should Europe fail to preserve the JCPOA following the US’s withdrawal, the EU’s credibility will be severely damaged, potentially even undermining the broader EUGA project and ambitions.

Conclusion

Clearly, the MENA region was never going to be an easy test case for EUGS implementation. The fact that EU policy towards the MENA has previously been the object of much criticism helps to lower the bar in terms of concrete expectations. Yet Europe would be naïve to believe that it can continue to outsource Middle East and North African diplomacy to external actors, whether these be in Washington, Moscow or eventually Beijing. MENA instability impacts Europe’s interests in a more direct and potentially destabilizing fashion than it does those of the US or even Russia. This necessitates a more proactive and courageous EU policy approach, both in the public diplomacy domain and in the more technical areas of trade and assistance that have long been Europe’s forte in the region.

Against this backdrop, stepping up Europe’s proactive engagement on a number of key dossiers where Europe is best placed to make concrete contributions – Libya, Tunisia, Israel–Palestine and Iran – should be considered the bare minimum of a more coherent and functional EU MENA policy. In conjunction with this prioritization of resources and policy, the EU should also enhance its visibility in the region through public diplomacy, making sure that Europe and the EEAS are proactive in denouncing violations of international law or of human rights, as part and parcel of the EU’s support for

¹⁵ Andrea Dessì and Vassilis Ntousas, “Can Europe Salvage A Future For the JCPOA?,” LobeLog, 4 November 2018 <https://lobelog.com/can-europe-salvage-a-future-for-the-jcpoa/comment-page-2/#comments>.

¹⁶ “How Companies Around the World are Reversing Course on Iran Business,” Iran Watch, 5 November 2018, <https://www.iranwatch.org/our-publications/policy-briefs/how-companies-around-world-are-reversing-course-iran-business>.

resilience in the region. Pragmatism and a dose of realpolitik are no doubt necessary, given Europe's limited leverage and never-ending internal troubles, yet these should not come at the expense of European principles, as it is those fundamental values that have made Europe what it is. Without these, Europe itself will be less resilient, struggling to adequately navigate the “predictable unpredictability”¹⁷ that lies ahead while gradually undermining the very ideals and priorities that EU leaders embraced with the unveiling of the EUGS in June 2016.

¹⁷ EEAS, *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe*, pg. 46.



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