

PROMOTING EUROPEAN STRATEGIC SOVEREIGNTY IN THE SOUTHERN NEIGHBOURHOOD

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November 2020

SUMMARY

- Events in the Middle East and North Africa strongly affect Europe, but other global and regional powers are determining the course of events in the region.
- Europe's interests include migration, counter-terrorism, and open trade routes, but its larger goal should be to promote greater stability in the region.
- To achieve greater sovereignty, Europe needs to push back against rival powers, build leverage in armed conflicts, and be more effective in supporting reform.
- The EU should work towards greater European unity in the region, including through the use of flexible and open coalitions of member states.

INTRODUCTION

Turmoil in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) directly affects Europeans. Yet their influence there has never been weaker. Instability in the region has serious implications for Europe on issues such as migration, security, energy, trade, and the threat of cross-border conflict and lawlessness. Covid-19 is having profound ramifications across the MENA region, posing significant health and economic challenges. Despite its economic and political partnerships with regional players, the European Union has been unable to influence the major shifts that have taken place there. The EU's inability to shape developments in a region that has a major impact on Europe is a failure of strategic sovereignty.

There is widespread disorder in the MENA region. Internationalised civil wars rage in Syria, Yemen, and Libya, while the central authorities of several other countries look increasingly shaky. Popular discontent has provoked large-scale public protests in Algeria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Sudan – even if the coronavirus has led to their suspension – and simmers elsewhere in the region. Even before the arrival of covid-19, the MENA region appeared destined for further discord and upheaval in the coming years, as the political, economic, and social drivers of the 2011 Arab uprisings remained as strong as ever.

The coronavirus looks set to worsen the region's problems and lead to increased instability. The number of infections continues to rise across the region, threatening to cause a humanitarian disaster in war-torn societies and crowded refugee camps, and to exacerbate several countries' economic problems. Wider upheaval has created openings for increased external interference and fed the forces of extremism and destabilisation. European states should not succumb to the illusion that regional instability has bottomed out: there is a real prospect that the situation will significantly deteriorate.

The MENA region's interlinked crises have powerful effects on European interests. Chief among these has been the displacement of millions of people caught up in violent conflict, many of whom have sought refuge in Europe. This has been accompanied by terrorist operations across European cities carried out by the Islamic State group (ISIS), an organisation that grew out of conflict and state collapse in Syria and Iraq. Together, these factors have contributed to the rise of populist nationalist parties that have shaken the foundations of Europe's political systems.

In the absence of a significant European role, other powers are determining the course of events in the

region. Russia, Turkey, Gulf monarchies, and Iran have asserted their influence through direct military engagement in regional conflicts. Some will hope that Joe Biden's recent victory in the US presidential election will create opportunities for renewed US-EU alignment on regional issues. But the transatlantic split that opened up under President Donald Trump will remain to some extent, with the US continuing to disengage from the MENA region. Regional powers, meanwhile, pay little attention to European positions, convinced that the EU is incapable of decisive and effective action. This perception has been reinforced by events in Libya, where a regional and global proxy conflict has flared up as Europeans fail to come up with a coherent and united response. While European countries retain influence in other North African states, they have not found a way to address the increasing economic and social problems in the region. Yet the EU's lack of strategic sovereignty in the MENA region need not be permanent. The EU can gain greater agency in the region if it clarifies its political objectives, makes better use of its assets, and overcomes its internal divisions by building intra-European coalitions.

EUROPEAN INTERESTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

In recent years, Europe has primarily framed its interests in the MENA region in defensive terms: broadly speaking, to prevent disorder there from affecting Europe in the form of refugees, migrants, or terrorism. The EU has had some success in this effort. But, so long as it lacks a greater role in shaping long-term stability in the region, the EU will largely remain at the mercy of events and other actors. To fully protect its interests, Europe needs to balance short- and longer-term considerations.

Migration and refugees

In 2014 and 2015, refugees and migrants crossing the Mediterranean to Europe created a political crisis within the EU. More than a million people arrived in 2015 alone. Most of them were refugees fleeing the conflict in Syria, as well as other wars in the wider region. The EU stemmed the flow largely by making arrangements with gatekeeper countries: a deal with Turkey in 2016, and a series of cooperation agreements with Libya to prevent departures and stop boats at sea. These arrangements, along with continuing cooperation with other North African countries, have reduced the number of migrants and refugees arriving in Europe. But they remain in a precarious position, subject to fluctuating political relationships and conditions on the ground. Following a military setback in

northern Syria in February 2020, Turkey temporarily halted cooperation with the EU on refugees, leading to a surge in the number of people seeking to enter Greece. And there is growing concern in Europe that instability in Libya could displace more people, as could economic and political problems in other North African countries. Europe's limited ability to influence the course of conflicts and economic decline, and its vulnerability to blackmail by gatekeeper countries, weaken its strategic sovereignty in a region it views as crucial.

Counter-terrorism and security

The growth of transnational jihadism since 2001 has given rise to a series of attacks in Europe, as well as killings of Europeans based in the MENA region. The spectacular ascent of ISIS in Syria and Iraq led to high-casualty attacks in several European cities. Thousands of European citizens travelled to the region to join ISIS or were encouraged by the group to strike at home. European countries were actively involved in the anti-ISIS coalition that recaptured territory from the group, and supported the operation that dismantled one of its major outposts in Libya. But ISIS and other jihadist groups remain active in the region. The clear lesson of recent history is that conflict, state breakdown, and failures of governance allow jihadist groups to establish themselves. There are already signs that ISIS is regaining strength in Iraq and Syria, even if it is far weaker than it was a few years ago. Deepening economic crises in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq could lead to broader state breakdown, creating a vacuum that could be filled by extremists. And, so long as regional actors continue to engage in proxy conflicts across the Middle East (sometimes by exploiting sectarian identities), the threat of militant mobilisation will remain very real. Europeans' security will be at risk until there is a resolution of the problems in the Middle East that facilitate the rise of terrorism.

Energy, trade, and investment

Europe relies on the MENA region in energy and trade. While the region does not supply most of Europe's oil and gas imports, countries there are important suppliers to some EU member states, providing an alternative to Russia and helping set global oil prices in a fashion that affects European economies. Moreover, attacks on tankers in the Gulf of Hormuz have a direct impact on the global economy. Accordingly, the free flow of oil and trade through sea lanes in the Middle East is important to European prosperity. And European companies are heavily involved in oil and gas exploration and production in the region – activity that is imperilled by both conflict and sanctions. More broadly, the value of trade between the EU and the MENA region averaged \$636 billion per year between 2014 and 2017. France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom collectively sold weapons worth \$12

billion to Middle Eastern countries between 2014 and 2017.

Humanitarian concerns and international law

Conflict in the region affects not only Europe's economic and security interests but also its commitment to limiting human suffering and upholding international law. The EU and its member states contributed an average of \$52 billion in development assistance per year to the region between 2014 and 2017. The bloc is heavily invested in providing support to refugees and displaced people. As part of their backing for a rules-based international system, the EU and its member states work to limit violations of international humanitarian law, which have been widespread in the conflicts in Syria, Libya, and Yemen. The EU's engagement with the Middle East Peace Process (MEPP) is also shaped by its commitment to support international law, which prohibits annexation and the transfer of people into occupied territory. Europe's limited capacity to shape the course of conflicts and peace settlements weakens its ability to create the kind of regional order that it favours.

Stabilisation and development

Underlying all these concerns, the EU's fundamental interest in the MENA region is in the promotion of lasting stability. The de-escalation of conflicts and the construction of more resilient and legitimate state structures would provide the best foundation for the EU's objectives: it would address the drivers of migration and terrorism, and facilitate free trade. Development in the region would create an economic hinterland for the EU, increasing its scope for offshored production and for investment in areas that could meet future European needs, such as those in renewable energy.

Given the current state of the region, the idea of bringing about stability may seem utopian; nevertheless, the EU's underlying interest lies in the search for more stability and, at least, ending current cycles of violence, economic collapse, and state breakdown. The main challenge for the EU is to find a realistic way of advancing these goals in current conditions without sacrificing its short-term interests – which often depend on cooperative relations with state actors that stand in the way of the bloc's longer-term objectives. Short-term fixes – including refugee deals, counter-terrorism operations, and other activities driven by realpolitik – have undoubtedly protected Europe's short-term interests and, at times, been the best of a bad set of options. But, unless the region reverses its decline, these fixes will start to unravel. At worst, this approach threatens the EU's longer-term strategic interests. So long as it fails to promote better and more legitimate governance, and to reduce the level of conflict and social unrest in the MENA region, Europe will be forced into a defensive

posture, trying to limit the spillover effects on its territory. Europe should work towards meaningful and lasting regional stabilisation. This would provide Europe with greater means to protect its core interests related to refugee flows and cross-border terrorism.

THE DYNAMICS OF EUROPEAN MARGINALISATION

Looking across the MENA region's diverse crises and hotspots, one can see how the EU's ability to promote its interests is hampered by other actors and by its failure to use its assets effectively.

Syria and Iraq

Europe's focus on Syria and Iraq is driven by the twin challenges of refugee flows and terrorism, given the emergence of ISIS amid the flames of conflict in the two countries. Both issues prompted a concerted European response in the form of the refugee deal with Turkey and participation in the US-led anti-ISIS military coalition. But it is Iran, Russia, and Turkey that are now determining the course of the conflict in Syria – the outcome of which will be critical to Europe's interest in lasting stability in the country. Developments in Iraq are heavily influenced by Iran and the US, leaving Europe with a very limited role. Both Syria and Iraq require profound reform to address the vulnerabilities of their states; the challenge for Europe is to find a way of pushing this process forward when it does not participate in the military conflict that drives developments on the ground – and when key actors involved in the conflict are often pushing in the opposite direction. The economic tools European countries have used in Syria and Iraq – be they support for the Iraqi government or coercive pressure on the Assad regime – have had, at best, a marginal impact on securing their desired outcomes.

Europe's principled end goal in Syria, which to all intents and purposes remains a short-term political transition, is increasingly disconnected from the reality on the ground. The Syrian government is now under intense economic strain, largely due to the Assad regime's governance failings but also as a result of Trump's "maximum pressure" campaign – which has been as much, if not more, focused on weakening Russian and Iranian regional influence than on securing political reform in Damascus. There seems little chance that this campaign – which the Biden team is unlikely to quickly recalibrate – will secure President Bashar al-Assad's departure, given the Syrian regime's commitment to its own survival and the backing it continues to receive from Iran and Russia. But, set alongside economic collapse in neighbouring Lebanon and Iraq, there is a real risk of wider state implosion across the Levant – which would severely imperil European interests, clearing the way for larger migration flows and an extremist resurgence. This trajectory originates in, first and foremost, Assad's brutal and

corrupt mismanagement (as well as similar dynamics among the Iraqi and Lebanese elites), but the imposition of broad US sanctions on Syria only exacerbates these problems. Although Europeans have only a limited ability to affect either issue, US extraterritorial sanctions directly impinge upon Europe's sovereign economic policy on these states.

Libya

Ever since renegade general Khalifa Haftar attacked Tripoli in April 2019, events in Libya have been dictated by, above all, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, and Russia. The UN mediation process has faltered in the face of intensified manoeuvring by these key external players, but has lacked meaningful EU support, given that some of the bloc's member states have implicitly aligned themselves with the warring parties (despite strong German backing for the United Nations, centred on the January 2020 Berlin summit). Movement towards further political negotiations in late 2020 provides some new hope, but Europeans will need to adopt a more coherent approach to the conflict if they are to shape developments in Libya.

Europe's disjointed policymaking and recent indecision are the result of disagreements between states such as France and Italy over how to address Libya's political divides, Haftar's role, and access to energy resources, as well as their competing positions on broader regional issues. Europe's influence has been further limited by a lack of pan-European backing for Germany's Libya mediation efforts (which sought to align international actors in support of a political process), deeper splits caused by Turkey, Russia's dramatic intervention in Libya, and disputes over the eastern Mediterranean. The launch in March 2020 of Operation Irini – designed to enforce the UN arms embargo on Libya – has been undermined by European disagreements over its operationalisation, as well as the widespread perception that it is more focused on countering Turkish support for the UN-recognised government in Tripoli than on preventing Haftar's regional backers from supplying him with weapons. This can be seen in the growing tension between France and Turkey. Europe's marginalisation in Libya leaves rival powers in a position to shape the country's future, despite the fact that important European interests are at stake there (particularly those in migration, security, and energy).

The eastern Mediterranean

Recent disputes over maritime boundaries and energy resources in the eastern Mediterranean intersect with the conflict in Libya, pitting Turkey against several EU member states, including Cyprus, Greece, and France. Turkey has stepped up its maritime exploration activity in disputed

waters, increasing the risk of a military clash with Greece and France. While EU member states are united in condemning Turkish actions as provocations, they are divided over how forcefully to respond and have not sufficiently connected the dots between the overlapping conflicts. The confrontation highlights the EU's need for a wider framework for relations with Turkey that balances the protection of European interests in energy, territorial sovereignty, and the rule of law with the need to maintain dialogue and cooperative relations with an important regional actor.

Israel-Palestine

On paper, the EU and its member states are just about holding together their collective positions on the MEPP. This is a success in itself, given the deep divisions between member states on the issue and a concerted push by the US administration to undermine long-standing pillars of the EU's support for the two-state solution. All EU countries, with the exception of Hungary, have indicated their opposition to Israeli de jure annexation of parts of the occupied West Bank.

Yet, while the EU has maintained a formal consensus in defence of its long-held positions, internal divisions have prevented it from advancing measures to achieve its goals in Israel-Palestine, such as recognising Palestinian statehood or banning settlement products. The EU was also unable to agree on a policy response to proposed Israeli moves towards annexation (even if this process appears to be on hold now following a recent deal between Israel and the UAE).

The EU and its member states have been reluctant to directly oppose the United States, let alone carve out a more independent political role for themselves. Nor have they advanced concrete measures to defend what is left of the two-state solution or develop their policy positions. Instead, the EU seems to have fallen back on a short-term response: attempting to minimise the damage done by American and Israeli policies while running down the clock on the Trump administration – in the hope that a Biden administration will rescue the MEPP.

Gulf monarchies

Europeans have not found a way to respond to the rise of Gulf monarchies as geopolitical actors – as potential partners or spoilers with game-changing capabilities in the many conflicts playing out across the MENA region. While the UK and France retain some limited influence on these monarchies, all European countries have prioritised the development of economic ties with the Gulf, neglecting much-needed strategic positioning – including increased pressure on these states – in zones of instability.

Crippled by competition between member states, the EU has struggled to gain political agency in its relations with Gulf monarchies. European capitals have struggled to deal with the perception in the Gulf that they support Tehran, given their sustained efforts to salvage the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). While Gulf monarchies sometimes exploit intra-European divisions, Europeans have hesitated to navigate intra-Gulf politics and manoeuvre within the available space.

Iran

Europe's one regional success story, the nuclear agreement with Iran, has morphed into a failure of strategic sovereignty. While the EU has responded to the United States' withdrawal from the agreement and maximum pressure campaign against Iran, Europe has failed to muster either the political capital or the economic resources to sustain Iranian compliance with the JCPOA. The bloc's attempt to demonstrate economic sovereignty in the face of US secondary sanctions has also been hampered by long delays in the operationalisation of the Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges (INSTEX). However, in light of the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on Iran, the EU has pledged to provide the country with €20m in aid and facilitate Iranian humanitarian trade disrupted by US financial sanctions. Meanwhile, the escalating rivalry between Iran and a regional coalition led by Trump has had a direct impact on European interests – as demonstrated by the potential threat to energy flows and shipping routes posed by attacks on tankers in the Gulf of Hormuz. Europeans have struggled to push Iran and the US-led alliance onto a political track that would avoid dangerous escalation, and have shown themselves to be divided on the issue: following the attacks in the Gulf of Hormuz, some EU states joined the US-led maritime mission there while others launched a separate European enterprise. A Biden presidency raises the prospect of a positive turn in this – including a revival of the JCPOA and regional de-escalation – but it will not be easy to overcome the deep divisions between the sides, which have become entrenched in the past four years.

North Africa

The EU retains greater influence than other regional powers in North Africa (excluding Libya), particularly the countries of the Maghreb. Nevertheless, even there, Europe's policy often seems to fall short of achieving the kind of influence it might aspire to. In recent years, cooperation between the EU and North African countries has focused heavily on migration and counter-terrorism. While these relationships have largely worked well (again, excluding Libya), they have only addressed short-term problems, creating the perception among countries in the region that Europeans see them as merely an external line of defence. At the same time, as is evident in Egypt, the EU weakens itself by acting as

a demandeur: its need for cooperation on these politically explosive issues makes it reluctant to criticise the more problematic aspects of its partners' policies.

The EU's long-term goal of supporting economic and political reform often comes second to short-term migration and security concerns, even though the lack of economic opportunities and social justice in North African countries increases emigration and radicalisation. These dynamics will only become more apparent with the economic impact of the coronavirus, which is having particularly severe effects on North Africa's tourism- and trade-dependent economies.

Moreover, the EU's support for reform often emphasises the promotion of free trade agreements. This provokes suspicion among its partners such as Tunisia. There is a broad consensus among European policymakers that the lack of inclusive and job-generating growth across North Africa stems from structural problems with the region's political economy, including corruption, a lack of access to capital, and an unequal playing field. The challenge for the EU is in finding a way to address these problems when local elites often have only a weak commitment to doing so. Europe must do this at a time when North African countries increasingly resist the EU's attempts to dictate the terms of their agreements – and when powers such as China and Russia are expanding their involvement in the region, providing local governments with a chance to diversify their relationships.

The Sahel

The EU and its member states have spent billions of euros on aid and development programmes in the Sahel; direct budgetary assistance, training, and capacity-building under the EU Training Mission in Mali and EU Capacity and Assistance Programmes in Mali and Niger; and the Sahel Alliance, for which the EU is a major convener. Nevertheless, the region's security and governance problems remain unresolved, and the influence of jihadist groups is, if anything, expanding.

Events in the Sahel illustrate the difficulty of combining short-term and long-term goals. Despite long advocating an integrated approach to the Sahel, the EU has sometimes been hamstrung by its member states' lack of shared commitment to the region, and their reluctance to push for more significant interventions (beyond investment) to increase pressure on regional governments to improve their human rights records and governance strategies. The EU has too frequently paid lip service to concerns about governance – particularly with regards to the Sahel Alliance – while continuing to increase investment and funding for development programmes that do not fully respond to the depth of the crisis in the region.

STRENGTHENING EUROPEAN SOVEREIGNTY IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

As this paper's assessment of regional trouble spots and challenges shows, Europe needs to make a greater effort to protect its interests in several ways. It needs to push back against rival powers more effectively; find a better way to exert influence over conflicts when it does not believe that armed intervention will be constructive; develop clear and realistic strategies that balance its short- and longer-term interests; and build greater European unity in policy on its southern neighbourhood.

Pushing back against rival powers

One of the EU's biggest handicaps in trying to protect its interests in the Middle East and North Africa is its tendency to look to US leadership in a manner that precludes an independent policy. During Trump's presidency, most European countries have experienced a growing divergence with the US. Across a range of regional issues, there has been a sense that the EU is vulnerable to the US suddenly changing its position without consulting the bloc or accounting for its interests. However, on everything from the Iran deal to the MEPP and Syria, European capitals shy away from charting an independent path, let alone confronting Washington.

On the few occasions that it has sought to articulate an independent foreign policy in recent years, the EU has proved ill-prepared to deal with US pressure. Washington has used secondary sanctions to threaten European countries' interests over their support for the Iran nuclear deal, highlighting their unwillingness to deploy the necessary political capital to defy the US administration effectively.

This dynamic could change under Biden, as the new US administration will re-engage with multilateral initiatives in support of shared US-European interests. But the transatlantic split will remain to some extent, and the US will continue to disengage from the MENA region. This means that Europeans will need to take greater responsibility for protecting their own interests. While Europe should make an effort to renew its partnership with the US under the Biden administration – with a particular emphasis on re-establishing a shared approach to Iran and the MEPP – it is clear that European governments can no longer rely on Washington in the way that they did prior to the Trump administration. The EU must establish its own positions and stand up for them rather than instinctively falling in line with the US.

Europe should look for new opportunities to cooperate with the US, but it also needs to be prepared to challenge the US position and chart an independent path where their interests diverge. Given that the Trump administration could still step up its efforts to pressure Iran before leaving office, Europeans should be guided by their own calculations rather than those of Washington in the coming months. Even if they are broadly in alignment with US policy across the Levant, European states need to recognise that US extraterritorial sanctions challenge their ability to protect their sovereign interests. Here, Europeans will likely need to deploy an independent financial vehicle, modelled on INSTEX, that can channel sufficient humanitarian and stabilisation support to recipients across the Levant, despite the obstacles created by US sanctions. They should also resist US pressure to cut contact with actors such as Hizbullah in Lebanon, which would only lead to further destabilisation.

As part of a regional approach that looks beyond the US, Europeans should be willing to assume greater responsibility for dealing with other key external actors. Russia is clearly an important player in both Syria and Libya – opportunistically building up its presence there, often to the detriment of European interests. Europe needs to use a range of tools, deployed in a coherent fashion, to demonstrate strength and coercive leverage over Russia. But it also needs to be prepared to engage with the country in a pragmatic dialogue designed to protect their shared interests.

In Libya, for instance, Russia has bought influence relatively cheaply by deploying a small number of private military contractors (PMCs) and acting as an interlocutor between Turkey and Haftar's backers. Here, Europe should try to replace Russia's brokering role with more active diplomacy with regional actors, while working with the US to pressure Gulf actors to stop financing Russian PMCs.

In Syria, Europeans should test a more pragmatic track with Russia that has greater viability than previous approaches. This would recognise that they have some degree of shared interest in stabilising

Syria but that, so long as European incentives are tied to unrealistic demands for a political transition, there is little prospect that Russia will play ball. The EU should outline low-level steps that Russia would need to take to trigger reciprocal measures from Europe. These initiatives could relate to important and still-principled issues such as stabilisation, humanitarian assistance, and detainees, which would all be in Europe's interests given that they would facilitate some stabilisation efforts and serve as confidence-building measures in a wider process. The measures should not include reconstruction and normalisation, which should remain tied to the UN political process.

The EU's perception of Turkey is characterised by frustration and ambivalence. Years of inertia in Turkey's EU accession process were followed by severe democratic backsliding in the country, leaving the EU with little option but to freeze negotiations on the issue. Yet the move has not changed anything in Turkish-EU relations or Turkey's vision of its role in the world. A newly resurgent Turkey is less interested in EU membership than it once was and is increasingly willing to flex its muscles, deploying its military in Europe's backyard and territorial waters. Turkey is now a more significant player than Europe in Syria and Libya, and has pursued an aggressive and ambitious agenda in the eastern Mediterranean.

All of this means that, at some point, Europe will have to define its relationship with Turkey in the intensifying great power competition of the twenty-first century. Currently, it is a "frenemy" with which Europe has struck a migration deal – an agreement that exemplifies the transactional nature of their relationship. To achieve strategic sovereignty in the eastern Mediterranean and the MENA region, the EU needs to define the parameters of its relationship with Turkey. This does not have to be an either/or scenario, where Europe has to categorise its neighbour as an ally or a competitor. But Europe should define its goals in the eastern Mediterranean, Syria, and Libya – and should establish a policy on Turkey based on those goals. In the eastern Mediterranean, the EU is right to defend its sovereign interests, but needs to press for an urgent renewal of Greek-Turkish talks. And the bloc should develop a plan to demarcate and divide energy resources in the area, in a fashion that is clearly not focused on the exclusion of Turkey.

In Libya, meanwhile, Europeans may now have a window of opportunity with the emergence of a renewed political process. They need to adopt an approach that not only presses Turkey to engage at the negotiating table but also asks the same of Haftar's external backers – particularly the UAE, which in many ways bears greater responsibility than Turkey for the last round of escalation. This should reflect a greater European willingness to challenge Gulf states on regional issues where their interests do not align, be it in Libya, Yemen, or elsewhere.

On Iran, the E3 (France, Germany, and the UK) need to continue their diplomatic efforts to create a pathway to a full restoration of the JCPOA under a Biden administration. Here, they need to increase their efforts to provide Iran with economic and humanitarian assistance – and to resist intensified pressure from the Trump administration designed to prevent the US from rejoining the JCPOA. The E3 can press for an interim agreement to freeze Iran’s nuclear activities and should support diplomatic tracks between Iran and the US once Biden takes office, aiming to restore the JCPOA to full mutual compliance and to open up a wider security dialogue on regional issues. The focus on the nuclear issue should not force Europe to ignore Iran’s missile programme or its destabilising activities across the MENA region. But it is important for European actors to understand that political optics in Tehran severely restrict the Iranian authorities’ room for manoeuvre on either front. So long as there is no serious economic quid pro quo involved in the nuclear negotiations, modernisers in Iran have little ammunition or willingness to press the supreme leader to accept significant concessions on other security matters. European diplomats will have a much better chance of addressing these issues if Iran and the West at least partially ease tensions over the nuclear programme and sanctions.

Establishing European leverage in armed conflicts

Regional dynamics in the MENA region revolve around, above all, armed conflict. Accordingly, states that are directly or indirectly engaged in the wars in Syria, Libya, and Yemen are those ablest to shape developments there. Beyond the wars themselves, the region is riven by geopolitical rivalries that create proxy conflicts and heighten tension in multiple theatres. The EU needs to take a new approach to these problems, but not one that involves military intervention – which would only intensify the cycle of escalation. The central element of Europe’s approach should be to deploy its assets in a more focused way that promotes de-escalation and reinforces the role of international law, in line with the interests detailed above.

Europe has tools that would give it more influence in these conflicts if it deployed them better. The first is diplomatic gravity. France’s permanent membership of the UN Security Council (and, potentially, the UK’s), as well as the collective weight of the EU, could give Europe significant influence if it were to develop a combined and independent European political position. This influence is tied to Europe’s capacity to confer a degree of legitimacy on MENA states, some of which value European governments’ endorsements as a source of international credibility. The leverage that Europe gains through this dynamic may be limited, but one should not discount it entirely. One (negative) example of this is France’s and the UK’s de facto endorsement of the Saudi-led military

intervention in Yemen. Conversely, the EU's lukewarm response to the US plan for the MEPP has been a factor in preventing it from gaining international traction.

Another of the EU's key assets is its perceived neutrality at a time of regional polarisation, one in which the US appears to be increasingly partisan and erratic in its policymaking. Generally, MENA countries are less sensitive about European engagement with the region than that of other actors. This could give the EU the credibility to advance mediation processes and promote security mechanisms in line with its core interests, given the manner in which conflict has exacerbated migration and terrorism challenges. Even among Iranian policymakers – who have taken an increasingly dim view of European power in recent years – there was some hope during the 2019 UN General Assembly that French President Emmanuel Macron would de-escalate the confrontation between Washington and Tehran. If senior European leaders are willing to throw their diplomatic weight behind similar future political initiatives, this could be welcomed by key regional players.

Across the region, the EU should position itself as a mediator that will invest in de-escalation efforts, particularly in the conflict between Iran and an alliance that includes the US, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, as well as the emerging Turkey-UAE confrontation. With MENA countries increasingly wary of the US – due to both the uncertainty of Trump's approach and the sense that the Biden administration will not reinvest in support of their interests – there may be an opportunity for European actors to carve out a more independent and influential role for themselves. The EU should look for opportune targets in this. For example, while Saudi Arabia and the UAE are not ready for a regional dialogue on a new security architecture in the Gulf, they are hotly pursuing an exit from the Yemen conflict. Europeans should step up their involvement in the region by helping Riyadh find a lasting diplomatic solution to the war – one that involves Oman and Kuwait, to build on these countries' past diplomatic efforts. Europeans could explore how they can use their ties with Tehran to reach a sustainable solution.

Here, individual European states should play to their strengths. The UK could use its partnership with Saudi Arabia to press for greater Saudi outreach to Iran, as well as further movement towards a sustainable ceasefire and an inclusive political process in Yemen. France could take a similar approach to the UAE, given Macron's close relationship with Emirati leaders. This should be accompanied by a push – again, one likely led by France, but supported by other member states – to persuade Iran to commit to meaningful de-escalatory measures. In some cases, other member states could support these efforts. For example, Sweden has shown a valuable ability to play a coordinating role in the UN-led Yemen process – as has Germany in North Africa, with its attempts to facilitate a new political process in Libya. For its part, the EU could try to coordinate the regional security

proposals now in circulation – including those from Iran and Russia – with the aim of drawing them into a shared diplomatic and security effort that avoids duplication and competition.

Europe also has economic weight to support its engagement with the MENA region. Its humanitarian aid budget for the region is second only to that of the US. The European Investment Bank made loans of more than \$2 billion per year to the region between 2014 and 2017. None of the regional powers behind military escalation in the Middle East can offer anything comparable, potentially giving the EU leverage in plans for post-conflict reconstruction.

Nevertheless, the effective use of these assets will require a realistic strategy. The question now confronting Europeans concerns whether they are willing to deploy the tools available to them with a degree of principled pragmatism that helps them achieve their goals.

This can also be seen in Syria. Europeans might be able to play their economic cards to secure a better outcome in this conflict – but only if they do so in a coherent fashion tied to a realistic goal.

Europeans should remain committed to core goals – the need to address underlying drivers of instability emanating from the Assad regime – but should shift away from a narrow focus on a short-term political transition. This means embracing a broader agenda focused on strengthening Syrian societal resilience, even as they use higher-level leverage – such as reconstruction support – to push for a more substantive political process. This will require enhanced humanitarian support on the ground, improved aid packages, and a presence on the ground that can help Syrian society sustain itself. It should be an all-of-Syria stabilisation approach, with the EU looking for openings in the north-east of the country – perhaps including conditional engagement with Turkey – and in the north-west, through attempts to work around Hayat Tahrir al-Sham or even engage with the more moderate elements of the group.

Finally, European military power, although often dismissed, can also play a role in increasing the EU's strategic sovereignty – if the bloc uses it coherently and wisely. Recent cooperation between eight EU governments to form the European-led mission in the Strait of Hormuz demonstrates how, as part of a coalition of the willing, they can act with greater coherence on security matters and enhance their influence among regional players. They could use the mission as a platform for dialogue on soft security issues of concern on both sides of the Gulf, including trafficking and environmental security. European efforts to increase training cooperation or the interoperability of maritime security hardware would be more controversial, but most MENA countries would welcome them.

Members of the EU may have little desire to increase their military capabilities in the region, but they can do more in the area by working through a series of existing European military missions. Those such as the British and French military deployments in the Gulf, as well as several advisory operations under the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy, could serve as umbrellas for joint operations to protect common interests, including freedom of navigation in key waterways.

Balancing short-term priorities with long-term support for reform

If it is to strengthen its sovereignty across the MENA region, the EU must also pursue a smarter set of policies designed to balance its short-term goals – such as reducing migration and terrorism – with the long-term interest of promoting lasting stability and societal resilience. There is often a conflict between the EU's need to work with authoritarian regimes to protect its interests and its ambition to encourage much-needed reform, but there are ways to balance these concerns. Again, the EU's strengths as a comparatively non-partisan actor and a significant economic donor give it influence as a partner in economic and political reform – if it chooses objectives that are realistic yet calculated to achieve tangible gains.

Governments and civil society groups in the MENA region continue to see the EU as a key potential supporter of domestic governance and economic reform programmes. Europeans have long recognised that the region needs more efficient and representative governance systems if it is to address public discontent and provide stability. Europe has a strong interest in stepping up its engagement with such reform efforts. The EU is, for example, well positioned to be the leading partner of North African countries in pursuing reforms that have a broad impact on state effectiveness and the rule of law, in areas such as education, the climate, and the economy.

Elsewhere, the EU may have untapped potential in linking increased stabilisation and reconstruction assistance in Iraq to necessary reform efforts, steps that would also help fend off an ISIS resurgence and prevent the country from being further caught up in the crossfire from the US-Iran rivalry. Such measures are essential to restoring stability in Iraq, where European support has been underwhelming to date. But this will require Europe to scale up its provision of aid, enhance its internal coordination, and make the country more of a common political priority. In Syria, meanwhile, Europeans should look to channel support into the country that serves their short-term interest in preventing total state collapse, while also protecting the societal groups that are best placed to wage a longer-term battle for reforms against the Assad regime.

Across the region, the EU should focus on developing programmes of engagement that are better tailored to its capabilities and its long-term interests. While it is unfeasible to drive substantive reform from the outside without the support of domestic political and economic elites, the EU can do more to support local efforts. Whether it be in Tunisia, Morocco, Iraq, or Lebanon, the EU should identify and increase its support for the domestic initiatives and actors that seem most likely to achieve meaningful reform. In Tunisia, President Kais Saied and the government of Hichem Mechichi will need to urgently provide greater economic opportunities to the country's people, which will require a new push to combat corruption and reduce the power of entrenched elites. In Morocco, the high-profile commission charged with devising a new development model may make recommendations on economic inclusion that Europe could endorse and help the government implement.

The covid-19 crisis may also provide a unique opportunity for Europe to increase its economic leverage across the region. The dramatic fallout from the pandemic, which has significantly exacerbated long-standing structural deficiencies, could push many Levantine economies into the abyss. Europe should use economic tools to both shore up these states and press for much-needed governance reforms, such as those Macron is now pushing for in Lebanon.

Europe could make a similar effort in other parts of the MENA region. These include North Africa, where the desire for a European role will be heightened by a decline in support from traditional patrons in the Gulf. Europeans need to carefully calibrate their response so that conditionality does not get in the way of preventing humanitarian and political implosion, seizing the opportunity to take on a more constructive role across the region.

Build greater unity, including through the use of European coalitions

To achieve all this, Europeans will firstly need to establish greater unity in their engagement with the MENA region. On nearly all regional issues, a lack of European consensus has prevented the EU from acquiring the influence it could otherwise have had. This reflects both a tendency towards unilateralism among key actors such as France and the intransigence on key issues of blocs such as the Visegrád group. While France is the most proactive EU member state on MENA issues and often the only one to highlight what Europeans could achieve in the region, the country has often trodden a lonely path, to the detriment of a wider EU approach. The European External Action Service (EEAS), meanwhile, is often marginalised by member states on, or has struggled to become involved in, key regional issues.

The EEAS could do more to forge a consensus between member states rather than merely seeking to reflect one. To fulfil this role, the high representative for foreign and security policy needs to feel more confident in implementing political mandates from the European Council. The EEAS should push for enhanced consultations between member states, aiming to overcome the internal divisions that prevent the EU from playing a more influential role.

The EU could also explore the use of smaller and more agile coalitions of member states that have a particular interest in specific issues, as spearheaded by the efforts of the EEAS and the E3 on the Iran nuclear deal. To facilitate a faster and more nimble policy response, core groups of member states could develop and operationalise EU policy, while being careful to act in line with agreed EU principles and allowing other member states to join the process at a later stage.

Given that nearly all member states see France as the pivotal European actor on MENA issues, Paris will need to show a greater willingness to work with its European partners and moderate its tendency towards unilateralism in Middle Eastern affairs – if the EU is to establish more coherent policy positions. French officials tend to argue that they act unilaterally because EU processes have failed to produce a coherent policy in line with European interests, but France must be careful not to opt for unilateralism simply because the EU does not endorse its preferred position. There is also increased space for Germany to assume a greater leadership role, particularly in view of Brexit. Elsewhere, smaller states should look to build active coalitions on relevant issues, in partnership with the EEAS.

This approach would build on the past successes of small European coalitions. Such coalitions need

not undermine European unity. Rather, they can ensure that the EU becomes forward-leaning on its core interests, providing a basis for individual states to take the lead on particular issues and develop common positions.

Europeans face a daunting series of threats to their strategic sovereignty across the MENA region. And things are only likely to worsen, given the likelihood that covid-19 will hit the region's economies particularly hard. Against the backdrop of a rapidly shifting global environment – one in which the US-led liberal order is weakening due to rising geopolitical competition – it is imperative that Europeans learn to act for themselves.

Despite Europe's long-running marginalisation in the MENA region, this is an achievable goal. If Europeans are willing to change course and start using their levers of influence – perhaps not military ones, but certainly their political and economic assets – in a coherent fashion and in support of core interests rather than short-term goals, regional players may well begin to take them seriously. As argued by the EU's foreign policy chief, Josep Borrell, the bloc has “the instruments to play power politics. Our challenge is to put them together at the service of one strategy.” This will require key actors such as the EEAS and France to work together within coalitions that strengthen Europe's strategic sovereignty in its southern neighbourhood.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper is part of a wider ECFR project on strategic sovereignty and benefited greatly from the comments on an earlier draft from the project's reference group. It draws heavily on contributions of

all members of ECFR's Middle East and North Africa programme, especially Cinzia Bianco, Ellie Geranmayeh, Hugh Lovatt, and Tarek Megerisi. The authors would also like to thank Susi Dennison, Gustav Gressel, Mark Leonard, Janka Oertel, Nicu Popescu, and Jeremy Shapiro for their helpful suggestions on the shaping and content of the paper in a series of internal workshops, and to Chris Raggett for many improvements in editing it.

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