

• GLOBAL POLITICS AND SECURITY •

Aybars Görgülü & Gülşah Dark Kahyaoğlu (eds)

The Remaking of the Euro-Mediterranean Vision

Challenging Eurocentrism with Local
Perceptions in the Middle East and North Africa



PETER LANG

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The Remaking of the Euro-Mediterranean Vision

This edited collection is a timely and in-depth perception analysis of Euro-Mediterranean relations and the EU policy actions towards the Mediterranean region.

The book takes as its departure point the recent geopolitical developments in the Middle East and North Africa, urging the renewal of a Euro-Mediterranean partnership while challenging the 'Eurocentric orientation of EU policies' – a critical factor which explains why the EU has been unable to adjust its policies to the region's fast-changing complexities. The volume subsequently introduces the findings of an elite survey conducted between 2017–2018 with local stakeholders in 9 countries in the Mediterranean. The findings and policy recommendations aim to contribute to making EU policies more responsive to major challenges in the region, more flexible on the multilateral and the bilateral level, and more inclusive of key stakeholders.

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The Remaking of the Euro-Mediterranean Vision

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Edited by

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University of Turin's History Department,
and Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)



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Abbreviations

AK Party	Justice and Development Party (Turkey)
AMU	Arab Maghreb Union
AQIM	Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
BDS	Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions
CBC	Cross-border cooperation
CHP	Republican People's Party (Turkey)
CoE	Council of Europe
CMRAP	Moroccan Centre for Research and Policy Analysis
CSO	Civil society organization
DCFTA	Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area
E3	EU Triumvirate or EU Trio
EBRD	European Bank for Reconstruction and Development
ECJ	European Court of Justice
EIDHR	European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights
ENI	European Neighbourhood Instrument
ENP	European Neighbourhood Policy
ENPI	European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument
EU	European Union
EUBAM	EU Border Assistance Mission
EU-MEFTA	Euro-Mediterranean Free Trade Area
FDI	Foreign direct investment
GCC	Gulf Co-operation Council
GDP	Gross domestic product
GRECO	Group of States against Corruption
HDP	People's Democratic Party (Turkey)
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency
IBM	Integrated Border Management
IMF	International Monetary Fund
INGO	International non-governmental organization
IPA	Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance

IS	Islamic State
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
JCPOA	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
KSA	Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
LAF	Lebanese Armed Forces
LGBT	Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender
LNG	Liquefied natural gas
MBS	Mohammed bin Salman
MEDRESET	Mediterranean Reset Project
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MHP	Nationalist Movement Party (Turkey)
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	Non-governmental organization
OECD	Organization for Co-operation and Development
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party (Turkey)
PLO	Palestine Liberation Organization
PP	Partnership priorities
PPP	Purchasing power parity
PYD	Democratic Union Party (Syria)
QIA	Qatar Investment Authority
SCAF	Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (Egypt)
SNSC	Supreme National Security Council (Iran)
SP	Felicity Party (Turkey)
TBMM	Grand National Assembly (Turkey)
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UDC	Union of Unemployed Graduates (Tunisia)
UfM	Union for the Mediterranean
UGTT	Tunisian General Labour Union
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
US	United States

UTICA	Tunisian Union of Industry, Trade and Handicrafts
VAT	Value added tax
WEOG	Western European and Others Group
WP	Work Package
YPG	People's Protection Units (Syria)

AYBARS GÖRGÜLÜ

Preface

Between July 2017 and May 2018, a team of researchers led by the Center for Public Policy and Democracy Studies (PODEM), an Istanbul-based think-tank established in 2015, working in collaboration with the Arab Studies Institute – Research and Education Methodologies (ASI-REM) within the MEDRESET project funded under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 Programme for Research and Innovation, conducted an extensive field research in the Mediterranean, a region substantially changing in terms of geopolitical dynamics and drivers.

This edited book is a compilation of nine country reports—on Egypt, Lebanon, Israel, Iran, Morocco, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, and Turkey—where the qualitative fieldwork (i.e. Elite Survey) took place as part of the MEDRESET project. Each report respectively presents and discusses the findings of the field research, investigating how the policies of the European Union (EU) in the region are perceived and assessed by various stakeholders at the elite level. Respondents were asked to analyse their countries’ resistance to or adoption of the EU conceptualization of the Mediterranean, evaluate EU policies addressing the region, and identify current geopolitical issues they consider of crucial importance.

Since its inception in 2016, the MEDRESET Project has functioned as a research consortium bringing together academic institutions and think-tanks of Europe and the Middle East and North African region, focusing on a broad spectrum of disciplines in the Mediterranean region to develop alternative visions for a new regional partnership and corresponding EU policies. The primary objective of MEDRESET has been to think and understand the definition of the Mediterranean by means of mapping a region which has changed considerably in terms of geopolitical dynamics and in key policy sectors; identifying the old and new stakeholders, while shedding light on their interaction; and determining the major policy issues around which this interaction flows.

As PODEM, we would like to extend our sincere gratitude to Daniela Huber and Maria Cristina Paciello of the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), the scientific co-ordinators of MEDRESET Project, for all their generous efforts, contributions, and constructive insights throughout the duration of the project. We also wish to express our thanks to Elie Haddad of ASI-REM and his colleagues for their continuous assistance in the project implementation.

Additionally, we would like to thank each of the independent researchers we collaborated with for the field research, who worked whole-heartedly and showed great patience and consideration throughout the process. Their contribution is an invaluable part of the efforts exerted in this book.

PODEM would also like to acknowledge the support of Peter Lang for their efforts in the realization and publication of this book, and Prof. Lorenzo Kamel of University of Turin as the series editor.

Finally, we would like to thank everyone including the MEDRESET Project management team and copy-editors, who participated in the research process and the preparation of the reports.

It is our hope and expectation that this book will make a meaningful contribution to the literature on Euro-Mediterranean relations and offer tangible policy recommendations to the relevant stakeholders, most specifically the European Union, on advancing its relations with the countries in the region through a renewed approach, while remaining in pursuit of regional prosperity, stability, and development at various levels.

Introduction

1. Research motivation

Today, at the crossroads of the European, African, and Asian continents, the Mediterranean region is a scene of changing political, economic, and social realities—all occurring within a contested and conflictual geopolitical context. The region is now being challenged by the sheer complexity of forces shaping its territory and embroiled in the dynamics of migration influx, religious, and ethnic heterogeneity; prolonged authoritarian rule and weapon flow, among several others.

In light of the consequent regional emergencies, Euro–Mediterranean partnership does not seem to have lived up to the expectations of societies in the region, and thus, lost some of its drive. When looking back at the history of the European Union’s (EU) engagement with the Mediterranean—notably beginning from the 1995 Barcelona Process—the Union pursued foreign policy objectives to resolve inter-state conflicts in the region, like the Israeli–Palestinian issue. However, as the security concerns escalated, so did the problems

1 This chapter incorporates relevant parts from two papers prepared for the MEDRESET project. See Zeynep Gülöz Bakır and Gülşah Dark, ‘Review of Surveys on Euro–Mediterranean Relations, and an Introduction to the Elite Survey in MEDRESET’, in *MEDRESET Methodology and Concept Papers*, No. 5 (July 2017), <http://www.medreset.eu/?p=13424>; and Gülşah Dark, ‘The EU Seen from the Outside: Local Elite Perceptions on the Role and Effectiveness of the EU in the Mediterranean Region’, in *MEDRESET Policy Papers*, No. 5 (November 2018), <http://www.medreset.eu/?p=13672>.

facing Mediterranean and European states in developing a sustainable partnership through mutual dialogue.

The 2011 period of Arab uprisings has thus been a notable case of how the EU acknowledged its *mea culpa* in its approach towards its southern neighbour, as frankly reflected in an early statement of Stefan Füle, former EU Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), accentuating EU's failure in not being 'vocal enough in defending human rights and local democratic forces in the region' and falling 'to the assumption that authoritarian regimes were a guarantee of stability in the region'.²

Against this backdrop, the MEDRESET project takes as its departure point the geopolitical developments urging a renewal of Euro-Mediterranean partnership, while most importantly, challenging the 'Eurocentric orientation' of EU policies—a critical factor as to why the EU has been unable to adjust its policies to the erratic status-quo in the Mediterranean.³ Adopting an exclusively European standpoint in defining actors, policy instruments, and issues, the EU approach has marginalized the perspectives and needs of regional states and subsequently, exacerbated this deficiency.⁴

Reviewing the existing academic literature briefly, more particularly the regional surveys, the perception of the EU being unable to respond to southern partners' expectations and that it should 'address security and

2 Štefan Füle, *Speech on the Recent Events in North Africa*, Brussels, 28 February 2011, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-11-130_en.htm.

3 Nathalie Tocci, 'Can the EU Promote Democracy and Human Rights Through the ENP? The Case for Refocusing on the Rule of Law', in Marise Cremona and Gabriella Meloni (eds), 'The European Neighbourhood Policy: A Framework for Modernisation?', in *EUI Working Papers Law*, No. 2007/21 (2007), pp. 23-35, <http://hdl.handle.net/1814/6976>; Rosa Balfour, 'EU Conditionality after the Arab Spring', in *Papers IEMed/EuroMeSCo*, No. 16 (June 2012), <https://www.euromesco.net/publication/eu-conditionality-after-the-arab-spring>; Claire Spencer, 'Middle East: Western "Soft Power" Re-Visited', in *IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook 2015*, pp. 217-219, <http://www.iemed.org/publicacions/historic-de-publicacions/anuari-de-la-mediterrania/sumaris/iemed-mediterranean-yearbook-2015>.

4 Daniela Huber and Maria Cristina Paciello, 'MEDRESET: A Comprehensive, Integrated, and Bottom-up Approach', in *MEDRESET Methodology and Concept Papers*, No. 1 (June 2016), p. 3, <http://www.medreset.eu/?p=13169>.

economic challenges more forcefully’ is shown in the results of the 6th Euromed Survey.⁵ What stands out in the survey is that the respondents identified migration/mobility and addressing security threats as two priorities that should be addressed by the European Neighbourhood Policy framework. The majority of respondents (56 percent) have identified ‘working with partners on the prevention of radicalisation, the fight against terrorism and organised crime’ as the main areas to be further developed in addressing security threats.⁶

Similarly, the 5th Euromed Survey carried out in 2014, with over 800 stakeholders from the Mediterranean, demonstrated that ‘the influence of the EU as a peace broker’ is considered low or very low.⁷ The results indicate that the positive impact of the EU actions showed a slight downturn compared to 2012, while negative (low) impact increased by 13 percent.⁸

Starting from late 2010, the Arab uprisings formed a turning point for relations between the EU and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Measuring the political, economic, and social attitudes in six MENA countries including Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia, and Libya in the post-Arab Spring period, the ArabTrans survey identified a disconnection ‘between what the EU may believe it is achieving in the MENA region, and local perceptions of the failure of its influence and impact’.⁹ As the project summary reports:

‘The research shows that it [the EU] has failed to respond to popular demands and has instead produced greater economic polarisation, ongoing political

5 IEMed, ‘General Review of the ENP’, in *6th Euromed Survey of Experts and Actors*, Barcelona, IEMed, 2016, p. 86, <https://www.iemed.org/publicacions/historic-de-publicacions/enquesta-euromed/euromed-survey-2015/contents-of-the-6th-euromed-survey>.

6 IEMed, *Preliminary results of the 6th Euromed Survey*, Barcelona, IEMed, December 2015, <http://www.iemed.org/actualitat-en/noticies/avancament-de-resultats-de-la-sisena-edicio-de-lenquesta-euromed>.

7 IEMed, ‘Synthesis of Results’, in *5th Euromed Survey of Experts and Actors*, Barcelona, IEMed, 2014, p. 21, <https://www.iemed.org/publicacions/historic-de-publicacions/enquesta-euromed/euromed-survey-2013/euromed-survey-2013>.

8 Ibid, p. 22.

9 ArabTrans, *The Arab Transformations Project: Executive Summary*, 2016, p. 2, http://arabtrans.eu/documents/ArabTrans_Executive_Summary.pdf.

marginalisation and *de facto* support for authoritarian regimes. [...] These failures have been a deeper undermining of the EU's reputation as well as increasing pressures on migration.¹⁰

This criticism is further linked to the EU's security-centric approach in the migration crisis, where the focus is on border control, return, and re-admission instead of ensuring the practice of fundamental human rights. Also, on the EU's role on democratization, the findings of the earlier studies demonstrate that people in MENA 'have a low opinion of the EU's claims to be a "normative actor", to facilitate democratization and development, or even to be a force for stability in their region'.¹¹

The ongoing challenges are apparently not limited to the problems in governance but extend to the social sphere, as reported by the region's youth. An annual youth survey exploring the attitudes of Arab youth in MENA countries reveals that 'confidence among Arab youth that the Arab Spring would bring positive change across the region is declining' and as a result, they 'are uncertain whether democracy could ever work in the Middle East'.¹² In the 2016 edition of the survey, the respondents singled out the biggest obstacles sweeping the region as unemployment, lack of democracy, rising cost of living, and civil unrest. A significant portion of the respondents want 'their leaders to do more to improve their personal freedom and human rights'.¹³ The survey findings also suggest that the lack of jobs and opportunities is the main recruitment driver for terrorist groups like Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).¹⁴

These surveys subsequently suggest the need for a change in approach towards the varying interrelated threats in the region. There is an underlying assumption that the EU should be one of the international

10 Ibid.

11 ArabTrans, 'What do "The People" Want? Citizens' Perceptions of Democracy, Development, and EU-MENA Relations in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Libya, and Morocco in 2014', in *European Policy Briefs*, May 2016, p. 7, http://ec.europa.eu/research/social-sciences/pdf/policy_briefs/arabtrans_pb_062016.pdf.

12 ASDA'A Burson-Marsteller, *Arab Youth Survey 2015*, Dubai, ASDA'A, 2015, p. 8, <http://arabyouthsurvey.com/pdf/whitepaper/en/2015-AYS-White-Paper.pdf>.

13 ASDA'A Burson-Marsteller, *Arab Youth Survey 2016*, Dubai, ASDA'A, 2016, p. 29, <http://arabyouthsurvey.com/pdf/whitepaper/en/2016-AYS-White-Paper.pdf>.

14 Ibid, p. 13.

actors taking a better stance on regional security crises, migration, and preventing radicalization.

Thus, the MEDRESET project aims to study how the EU and South Mediterranean countries perceive each other, in an attempt to develop alternative visions for a new Euro–Mediterranean partnership and corresponding EU policies. The findings are investigated to design a future role for the EU to become an ‘inclusive, flexible and responsive actor’.¹⁵

This section lays the foundation of the project’s Elite Survey which fundamentally addresses the local stakeholders at the elite level in nine countries of concern¹⁶—Egypt, Iran, Israel, Lebanon, Morocco, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, and Turkey—and their own understanding of the ‘Mediterranean region’ or the ‘Arab World’ as well as how they assess Euro–Mediterranean partnership and the impact of EU policies in the region. The following chapters present in-depth country reports on each country that the Elite Survey covered.

2. Research scope

In dedicating critical consideration to Euro–Mediterranean relations, the Elite Survey within the MEDRESET Project’s Work Package 3 (WP3) addresses three main sets of research questions:

- (1) Is the elite discourse in the MENA region resisting or reproducing the EU’s construction of the region? How do elites perceive European policies in the Mediterranean area? How has their perception towards the EU changed over the years?
- (2) How do elites perceive the Mediterranean region? Who are the most important stakeholders on the domestic, regional, and international levels? How are the ‘structure’ and nature of interactions changing in the region? What are the current main geopolitical challenges?

15 Daniela Huber and Maria Cristina Paciello, ‘MEDRESET...’, cit., p. 3.

16 The countries were chosen based on their geographic and geopolitical relevance and the methodological categorization of the project.

- (3) What major policy issues do the elite deem most pressing? In which particular areas would substantial co-operation with the EU and/or other MENA countries prove beneficial? More broadly, in which policy areas would a regional/bilateral approach hinder/yield success?¹⁷

Through an investigative look at the region's geopolitical dynamics and how the EU responds to them, the Elite Survey focuses on five central themes. The first theme is security. The survey tries to answer how and to what extent the EU should handle the security crises and conflicts in the region through response mechanisms. The Elite Survey seeks to examine what kind of regional security architecture local experts envisage to manage the security threat facing the region. It also determines the extent to which the EU should intervene in domestic conflicts, and encourage further thoughts on policy design.

The second theme investigated by the Elite Survey is migration and mobility. As the previous studies suggest, the key drivers behind migration include concerns over economy and security. The EU's policies (the perceived lack of policies) on migration seem to be the main criticism directed at its foreign policy, which is perceived as mostly concerned with safeguarding its own national security. This is a good example of the side-effects of EU policies in the region which is examined throughout the Elite Survey interviews. The survey, therefore, seeks to offer a comprehensive insight into the EU's foreign policies in the region.

The third theme explores the debates on democratization; the interviews aim to introduce a detailed examination to understand how elites construct democracy and what they think of the challenges that need to be addressed from that perspective. Apart from the individual understanding of democratic values, in-depth interviews open space to assess the appeal of democracy at a country and regional level.

The fourth theme surveys local elites' expectations of further co-operation initiatives, described as crucial for the countries in the region. Trade partnerships, economic co-operation, and integration projects have all become essential for the progress and stability of the countries in the region, considering the slowing economic development and decrease

17 Zeynep Gülöz Bakır and Gülşah Dark, 'Review of Surveys on Euro-Mediterranean Relations, cit., p. 4.

in foreign direct investment rates since 2011 due to ongoing migration crises, concerns over energy resources and environmental threats, as well as sectarian conflicts.

And finally, the fifth theme probes specific policy areas including energy/industry and agriculture/water through an integrated approach to generate data on issues that have been less examined in surveys, although covered to a certain extent.

In all cases, the survey implements an integrated approach, addressing each issue from the vantage point of varied social segments such as youth, migrants, and women through, as much as possible, a gender-balanced perspective.

3. Research methodology: Data collection and sampling

A review of the existing surveys and studies on Euro–Mediterranean relations reveals two major strands of research design. While one group of research relies on the data drawn from experts' views, either through in-depth interviews or structured questionnaires, another group aims to reach citizen-level data, mostly through quantitative opinion polls.

Fitting within the former strand, the Elite Survey is designed as a *qualitative* questionnaire that will allow the project researchers to carry out in-depth interviews. Compared to the previous surveys, this study attempts to provide new insights into the subject by referring to the assessments of selected interviewee profiles from the MENA region and inquiring about their expectations from the EU—something crucial for the policy-making process. The survey provides data at a regional and country level with an attempt to address certain policy issues like migration, mobility, and political ideas, as well as agriculture/water and energy/industry—which could be described as an added value of the project. In addition, the Elite Survey will further define the priority areas for near-future co-operation.

The survey utilized a semi-structured questionnaire format to generate detailed data. The researchers employed qualitative interviewing, which

is more appropriate for opinion surveys, as it makes it possible to acquire insights on future plans, expectations, and motives. The questionnaire format was largely the same for each country, to allow for comparisons between countries.

Within the research scope, local experts from varying political and social segments were targeted in each country to provide inclusive and qualitative assessment of perceptions. The research intended to cover a wide spectrum of opinions that goes beyond the official rhetoric in order to focus on domestic reflections of the EU policies, as well as the points of divergence in approaches towards the region.

Researchers from the Center for Public Policy and Democracy Studies (PODEM) in Turkey and Arab Studies Institute – Research and Education Methodologies (ASI-REM) in Lebanon—which are two member institutions for MEDRESET WP3—were involved in the Elite Survey detailed in Tables 1 and 2.¹⁸ The researchers conducted qualitative and semi-structured, in-depth interviews with respondents in the aforementioned countries, except Saudi Arabia, where the Gulf crisis coupled with the turmoil in Saudi domestic politics necessitated cancelling a fieldtrip to the country. Instead, the researchers interviewed non-Saudi respondents in London and Brussels with specialization on the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) or Saudi foreign/domestic affairs. It should be further noted that the data compilation phase in Iran was done in full anonymity due to the sensitivities there, and the interviews planned for the fieldwork were arranged as discussions—not in-depth interviews—with elite respondents.¹⁹ Also, in Egypt, the researchers experienced difficulties in reaching out to relevant respondents, mostly due to their reluctance, which prolonged the duration of the fieldwork. Overall, the interviews conducted for the Elite Survey took place between July 2017 and May 2018; and a total of 169 respondents participated in the fieldwork.

18 The in-depth interviews were carried out by 14 researchers in total. Among the researchers, 10 of 14 were involved in the report-writing phase. PODEM, as the leader of WP3, commissioned local experts when necessary for the fieldwork and the report-writing.

19 The researcher who prepared the report on Iran also referenced the insights of certain experts in Europe.

The preparations for the Elite Survey kicked off in spring 2017, and during summer 2017 the fieldwork in Lebanon and Egypt commenced, while preparations for the fieldwork in other countries continued. A mapping of relevant interlocutors was made through online and desk research as well as the institutional network of the involved researchers. A purposeful sampling method was incorporated in this research, meaning that selection of the interviewees depended upon (1) their influence over the social, political, and civil networks and (2) their experiences and/or current and past official roles, as well as (3) their accessibility.

Table 1: Overview of interviewees

Country	Male	Female	Total	Fieldwork period
Egypt	16	13	31*	August–November 2017
Iran	10	2	12	February–April 2018
Israel	10	10	20	February–May 2018
Lebanon	15	15	30	July–September 2017
Morocco	19	3	22	January–May 2018
Qatar	11	1	12	January 2018
Saudi Arabia	8	4	12	February–April 2018
Tunisia	9	2	11	February 2018
Turkey	15	4	19	November 2017–March 2018
Total	113	54	169*	July 2017–May 2018

Notes: *Two unidentified / aged between 20-70.

Table 2: Types of stakeholders

Governmental actors/public institutions
Scholars/academia/experts
Media professionals
Civil society actors
Representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGO)
Business people
Graduate students

Prospective interviewees were first contacted via email or phone. The general level of responsiveness of interlocutors was satisfactory although the researchers came across instances of non-responsiveness or unavailability of potential interviewees. A good majority of the interviews were conducted face-to-face, except very few cases, which were conducted via phone or Skype. The duration of interviews ranged between 30 minutes and 1 hour. To obtain in-depth knowledge on specific issues, the researchers conducted follow-up interviews in certain cases as recorded during the Lebanon fieldwork.

The Elite Survey was designed through consultations among the researchers and the project co-ordinators. The questionnaire is comprised of three main sections: (1) questions on perceptions of the EU including its effectiveness at the state and civil society level, and co-operation at the country level; (2) questions on the Mediterranean addressing key stakeholders/actors; geopolitical challenges; and the EU's Mediterranean policies; and (3) country-specific questions to understand the internal dynamics of the target country as well as demands and future prospects—including those from the EU. Overall, the questionnaire includes a standard set of questions applicable to all target countries, along with particular questions pertinent to each country to capture the intricate context of the country in question.

Finally, on the representativeness of the survey sample, the sample size and the data retained from the interviews do not attempt to generalize the results for the overall target population, yet try to provide answers to the research questions given above and introduce main themes for discussion. In terms of gender representation, one main shortcoming is the smaller proportion of female respondents achieved in the sample size. The observation gained from the fieldwork demonstrated that male dominance is present notably among governmental actors and public institutions in the region.

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Chapter 1: An Outlook on Tunisian Elite Stakeholders' Perspectives on the EU and Its Policy Preferences in Tunisia and the Mediterranean

In view of the large-scale transition to a functioning democracy after the Jasmine Revolution in 2011, understanding the stance of Tunisian 'elites' towards the recent developments in domestic and regional affairs proves very significant in analysing the course of relations between the EU and Tunisia and the changing dynamics in the Mediterranean region overall. With a strong historical background on civil society movements—especially the labour uprisings which date back to the 1970s—Tunisia has followed a different course of conduct compared to the neighbouring countries on the northern shores of Africa. Adding to its geographical position as the closest door to the EU, Tunisia has been of strategic importance to the EU and the neighbouring countries in the region.

The present chapter introduces the findings of the elite survey carried out in Tunis, the capital of Tunisia, during the month of February 2018. The aim of this field study is to map out the perceptions of Tunisian elites towards the European policies in the Mediterranean area with a focus on analysing the current expectations and potential areas of co-operation in the near future between Tunisia and the EU. The study attempts to provide a multi-dimensional analysis on the country's perception of the

1 Robert P. Parks authored the background section of this chapter and was commissioned by PODEM, as Work Package 3 leader for the MEDRESET Project. Zeynep Gülöz Bakır authored the section of Elite Survey analysis with contributions of Gülşah Dark Kahyaoğlu. Zeynep Gülöz Bakır, Gülşah Dark Kahyaoğlu and Aybars Görgülü were among the research team carrying out in-depth interviews in Tunisia.

EU and the Mediterranean region as well as the overall European policies in the region.

Looking at the main findings in short, perceptions of Tunisian elites towards the Union's policies in the Mediterranean region cluster around the criticisms directed at the EU's securitizing and stability-first approaches towards the region. From a constructive point of view, the senior-level experts from diverse professions highlighted the need to build an integrative approach towards the regional challenges. Rather than adopting a defensive position against the security threats present in the region, the interviewees emphasised the need to cooperate in addressing the origin of problems underlying these regional challenges.

Based on the Tunisian experience in democratic transition, a successful co-operation between the EU and Tunisia is considered as a must to push the countries in the region towards democratic governance practices. In that sense, Tunisian elites highlighted the need for their country to be considered not as inferior to the EU in its conduct, but as a co-partner sharing common concerns and observing mutual interests. However, as frequently mentioned during the interviews, the conditionality principles enforced by the EU and the priority put on the migration and readmission issues—without addressing poverty, exclusion, youth unemployment, and economic opportunities in the region—are considered as destined to fail in bringing regional and domestic prosperity. From that perspective, Tunisian elites' remarks centred on the need to adopt a developmentalist stance towards the challenges at stake and create a platform where relevant regional and local stakeholders would be able to voice their demands and contribute to the policy-making processes.

This chapter is comprised of three main sections: the first is a brief country profile on Tunisia; the second section, an overview on the historical background of EU–Tunisia relations; and finally, the findings of the elite survey are detailed in the third section with a concluding part on the prospects for co-operation in the Mediterranean region.

1. Country profile of Tunisia

1.1 Demographics

Tunisia has a population of 11.53 million inhabitants.² Ninety-eight percent of the country is Arab, with remnant Berber communities in the south-east of the country. Ninety-nine percent of Tunisians come from historically Sunni-Muslim households, small Ibadi-Muslim, and Jewish communities largely based on the Island of Jerba and in major urban agglomerations. The population is largely urban; in 2015, close to one-fifth of the population resided in the Greater Tunis metropolitan area (17.68 percent), 49.16 percent in mid-sized cities, largely massed on the Eastern coast, or Sahel, and a remaining 33 percent in rural communities. Tunisia's annual population growth rate is stable, and has hovered at close to 1.2 percent for the past decade.

Access to education is free and the public healthcare system is subsidized. In 2017, the government expended 6.2 percent of annual GDP on education, and 4 percent on healthcare. Unsurprisingly, Tunisia's Human Development Index rating is high (97), ranked between its hydrocarbon-producing neighbours Algeria (83) and Libya (102). Eighty-two percent of the adult population is literate: 88.2 percent of the school aged population is enrolled in secondary school, and 35 percent in higher education. Despite these positive indicators, unemployment is high. In 2017, 68 percent of the population is of workforce age, of which 14.8 percent is unemployed. That figure, however, masks the 22.2 percent of the workforce that has vulnerable employment, the 4.6 percent of the workforce that earns less than PPP 3.10 dollars per day, and the 34.5 percent of unemployed Tunisians between the ages of 15 and 24. Part of the structural weakness of the economy is linked to relatively high levels of income inequality. Tunisia's GINI coefficient is currently around 36.1, compared to 27.6 in Algeria, and 31.8 in Egypt. Perceptions

2 Unless otherwise indicated, all figures are taken from the World Bank and the UNDP online databases. See World Bank Data: *Tunisia*, <https://data.worldbank.org/country/tunisia>; and UNDP, *Human Development Indicators: Tunisia*, <http://www.hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/TUN>.

of chronic unemployment, lack of opportunity for a skilled workforce, and social inequality were important triggers of the 14 January 2011 revolution that overthrew former dictator Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali,³ and remain key points in the continued social unrest dually affecting economic performance and institutional development in the current multi-party regime.⁴

1.2 Relevant stakeholders at the domestic, regional, and global levels

There are many stakeholders concerned with the outcomes of the current economic and political debates taking place in Tunisia. At the domestic level, Tunisia is currently embroiled in a series of protracted conflicts pitting (1) groups that support the return to a more authoritarian model of government centralized on the presidency (business and political elites close to the former regime);⁵ (2) groups that are happy about the political opening, but that are content with the economic status quo or that call for further economic liberalization (business people and political leaders excluded from the former system);⁶ (3) groups that support greater political decentralization and income redistribution

3 For a discussion on income inequality as a measurement tool or as an argument for the Arab uprisings, see Facundo Alvaredo and Thomas Piketty, 'Measuring Top Incomes and Inequality in the Middle East: Data Limitations and Illustration with the Case of Egypt', in *CEPR Discussion Papers*, No. DP10068 (July 2014), <http://piketty.pse.ens.fr/files/AlvaredoPiketty2014MiddleEast.pdf>.

4 See Hamza Meddeb interview with Malek Lakhali, 'The System Keeps Youth at the Margins of Society', in *Nawaat*, 27 January 2018, <https://nawaat.org/portail/2018/01/27/interview-with-hamza-meddeb-the-system-keeps-youth-at-the-margins-of-society>.

5 Especially members of the Ben Ali's former ruling party, Democratic Constitutional Rally, and business and political elites closely linked to the former ruling family. See Bob Rijkers, Caroline Freund and Antonio Nucifora, 'All in the Family. State Capture in Tunisia', in *World Bank Policy Research Working Papers*, No. 6810 (March 2014), <http://hdl.handle.net/10986/17726>; International Crisis Group (ICG), 'Stemming Tunisia's Authoritarian Drift', in *ICG Middle East and North Africa Reports*, No. 180 (11 January 2018), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/5915>.

6 Specifically, Islamist Ennahdha, secularist Nidaa Tounes, and liberal Afek Tounes ['Tunisian Aspirations'], three parties in the current ruling coalition.

(political and economic outsiders);⁷ and (4) groups that violently oppose the Tunisian state and political order enshrined in the 2014 Constitution (i.e., jihadists). While the current ruling coalition is composed of the first two groups, and holds close to 70 percent of the seats in parliament,⁸ proponents of a more radical reordering of the former regime, especially in the economic sphere, are vocal in the parliament, and are supported by a number of well-organized civic associations and loosely organized movements that have played an active role in street mobilization against liberalizing economic reforms.⁹

Tunisia's historically strong unions continue to be key stakeholders in the political and economic reform debate. Noteworthy are the Tunisian Union of Industry, Trade, and Handicrafts (UTICA) and Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT)—two of the four organizations that received the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize for the role they played in negotiating a path through the fierce rivalry between former enemies and now partners in the ruling coalition: secular Nidaa Tounes ['Call of Tunisia'] and Islamist Ennahda [Renaissance], in late 2013.¹⁰ Both organizations seek to actively promote their broad organizational interests—economic reform for UTICA, worker rights for the UGTT—while, at the same time, seeking to broaden their hold over the corporate bodies they represent. While UTICA's capacity to project business interests is proscribed to the elite level, the ability of individual businessmen

7 Parties and movements outside of the ruling coalition and in direct opposition with the government's current policies. Especially former President Moncef Marzouki's political party, Congress for the Republic; Marzouki's current Al-Irada ('The Will'); and the communist Popular Front.

8 After the 2014 parliamentary elections, the current ruling coalition held 81 percent of parliamentary seats. Since then, the coalition has seen a number of parliamentary defections, primarily linked with a schism in President Beji Caid Essebsi's former party, Nidaa Tounes, in November 2015, following an internal party leadership conflict.

9 See Nadia Marzouki and Hamza Meddeb, 'Tunisia: Democratic Miracle or Mirage?', in *Jadaliyya*, 11 June 2015, <http://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/32181>.

10 For a good historical analysis on the evolution of those two organizations during Tunisia's authoritarian period, see Eva Bellin, *Stalled Democracy. Capital, Labor, and the Paradox of State-Sponsored Development*, Ithaca/London, Cornell University Press, 2002.

to receive political or administrative intervention in their favour or to financially support political movements, groups, or parties has increased since the revolution—this especially among businesspeople engaged in the significant informal economy.¹¹ UGTT has the capacity to organize nationwide strikes and its force is most potent in heavy, concentrated industry, such as hydrocarbons and phosphates, and within the state administration, making the union a key veto player in not only in the economy, but also in public-sector reform.

Formal and informal civic groups are also closely watching the political debates and have actively taken to the streets to voice their opinion since the 2011 Revolution. A number of registered associations played an active role in surveilling the constitutional reform process (2011–2014) in the National Constituent Assembly. The NGO Al Bawsala, for example, maintained a permanent presence in the proceedings of those discussions, posting on its website in real-time the debates and votes of elected representatives.¹² Informal movements like the Union of Unemployed Graduates have implanted cells throughout the country and regularly work with local populations to organize wildcat strikes, sit-ins, and other forms of loud claim-making against perceived injustices by national and international business interests, as well as calling for more populist employment schemes that integrate educated unemployed youth. Another group, *Manish M'sameh* ['I Will Not Forget'], led a very active campaign against the current government's proposal to give amnesty to political and economic elites for crimes they might have committed during the *ancien régime*, forcing the government to restrict its project.¹³ Finally, in January 2018, the *Fech Nestanneh* ['What Are We Waiting for?'] movement took to the streets to protest the 2018 Finance Law, leading to nationwide demonstrations and government proposals to alleviate economic stress among the poorest of Tunisian families. While the

11 See International Crisis Group (ICG), 'Blocked Transition: Corruption and Regionalism in Tunisia', in *ICG Middle East and North Africa Reports*, No. 177 (10 May 2017), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/5455>.

12 See Al Bawsala official website: <http://www.albawsala.com>.

13 See Laryssa Chomiak, 'The Revolution in Tunisia Continues', in *MEI Articles*, 22 September 2016, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/revolution-tunisia-continues>

regime has passed a number of laws to reduce public protests, the power of formal and informal associations and movements to stall government plans is non-negligible.

Regional and global stakeholders in Tunisia include neighbouring Algeria,¹⁴ the European Union—especially France, Italy, and Germany—the United States, as well as Turkey, and the Gulf States. While interests vary, three main themes hold the attention of foreign powers: the success of the Arab world’s only democracy; economic liberalization; and security. Algeria has a clear stake in promoting security in Tunisia, and actively participates in high-level security co-operation as well as joint military operations on its border, along the Tebessa–Kasserine axis, where fears that operators in informal economic activity¹⁵ and armed terrorist groups with links to both Algeria and Libya are joining forces. Algeria views the security of Tunisia as a key arena for preventing the expansion of groups linked with Islamic State (IS) and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) along its eastern border. While investing in the symbolism of a successful democratization, the European Union and the United States are also pushing the Tunisian government to deregulate its economy and revisit tariff barriers. Within the EU, France is Tunisia’s primary trading partner, followed by Italy, Germany, and Spain,¹⁶ and leader in foreign direct investment.¹⁷ The EU as well as

14 While Libya too is concerned, the division of that state into mutually hostile concurrent governments excludes discussion of Libyan interests in this chapter.

15 E.g., untaxed gasoline and cigarette smuggling from Algeria to Tunisia. See Hamza Meddeb, *Young People and Smuggling in the Kasserine Region of Tunisia. Stories of Dispossession and the Dynamics of Exclusion*, London, International Alert, May 2016, <https://www.international-alert.org/node/13799>.

16 France runs a negative trade balance with Tunisia, making access to its market crucial to the Tunisian economy. For a breakdown of trading partners and relative trade balances, see WITS website: *Tunisia Exports, Imports and Trade Balance by Country 2016*, <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/TUN/Year/LTST/TradeFlow/EXPIMP/Partner/by-country>.

17 From 2013 to 2017, the Austria, France, USA and Spain led investment in Tunisia. See Arab Investment and Export Credit Guarantee Corporation, *Investment Climate in Arab Countries 2018*, November 2018, <http://dhaman.net/en/?p=2619>. In 2017, 38.1 percent of FDI went to the energy sector followed by electricity and electronics (26.4 percent). See Santander TradePortal, *Tunisia: Foreign Investment*, <https://en.portal.santandertrade.com/establish-overseas/tunisia/foreign-investment>.

the United States are vested stakeholders in the security of the country, paralleling Algerian fears of an expansion of IS- and AQIM-linked groups from Libya that could cripple economic exchange, damage the Tunisian economy and possibly result in an increase in undocumented migration to Europe.¹⁸ Finally, the ongoing proxy battles between the GCC states over regional domination has spilled into Tunisian politics. While unconfirmed rumours that the Ennahda party was bankrolled by Qatar in the 2011 elections and that rival-cum-coalition partner Nidaa Tounes was financed by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in 2014, it is clear that the UAE is currently unhappy with Tunisia's unwillingness to support its position on a number of issues including the 2013 Egyptian military coup that ousted President Mohamed Morsi and banned the Muslim Brotherhood, Tunisia's unwillingness to break ties with Qatar following the June 2017 decision by the UAE and Saudi Arabia to sever diplomatic relations, and Tunisia's official position to tie its Libya strategy to Algeria's policy of dialogue between rival governments, rather than to support the UAE's preferred strongman, Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar. In late December 2017, the UAE banned Tunisian women from entering or transiting through its airports, ostensibly for security reasons.

2. Overview of Tunisia–EU relations

Tunisia–EU relations date back to 1976, accelerating most prominently following the 1995 Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (Barcelona Process), which removed tariffs on industrial products over a 12-year period, with a progressive reduction in tariffs on agricultural, agro-food, and fisheries projects. While a 2007 study shows the agreement had little effect on overall FDI flows into Tunisia but has diverse impacts on

18 See Stefano M. Torelli, 'Escaping from Tunisia', in *ECFR Commentaries*, 10 November 2017, https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_escaping_from_tunisia_7236

other areas¹⁹—similar lacklustre trends are also seen elsewhere in the EU neighbourhood—relations were nevertheless further strengthened in 2006, with the implementation of the 2004 Agadir Agreement. That agreement set in place the Euro-Mediterranean Free Trade Area (EU-MEFTA), removing tariffs on trade between the EU, Tunisia, Jordan, Egypt, and Morocco. In July 2008, representatives of the EU-Mediterranean zone agreed to launch the Union for the Mediterranean. In 2011, a 2009 trade dispute settlement mechanism between the EU and Tunisia entered into force. And in April 2016, the EU and Tunisia held the first round of discussions to implement a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) to build on existing FTA protocols.

While Tunisia was the EU's 34th trade partner in 2017, the EU has been Tunisia's largest trading partner for two decades. In 2003, 13.4 billion euro in goods and services were exchanged between the two entities,²⁰ increasing to 20.5 billion euro in 2017.²¹ In 2017, the EU market accounted for 63.2 percent of Tunisian trade. In 2003, 79.2 percent of Tunisia's exports and 73.7 percent of its imports came from the EU.²² While access to more competitively priced Chinese and Turkish consumer products appears to have decreased Tunisian importation of EU products (down to 53.5 percent of imports in 2017) the EU continues to be Tunisia's major export market, holding at 78 percent.²³ The EU has a declining, but positive balance of trade with Tunisia in goods (1.3 billion euro in 2015, 1.2 billion in 2016, and 1.7 billion in 2017), while its balance of trade in services has been negative (-2.4 billion euro in 2014, -1.9 billion in 2015, -1.9 billion in 2016), likely reflecting the

19 Hakim B. Hammouda, Mohammed A. Chemingui and Mohammed H. Bchir, 'Ten Years after Implementing the Barcelona Process in Tunisia: A New Growth Regime or Improving the Efficiency of the Existing One?', in *ATCP Work in Progress*, No. 60 (January 2007), p. 23, <http://hdl.handle.net/10855/13479>.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

21 European Commission DG Trade, *European Union, Trade with Tunisia*, 6 November 2018, p. 2, https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb_results/factsheets/country/details_tunisia_en.pdf.

22 Hakim B. Hammouda, Mohammed A. Chemingui and Mohammed H. Bchir, 'Ten Years after Implementing the Barcelona Process in Tunisia', *cit.*, p. 3.

23 European Commission DG Trade, *European Union, Trade with Tunisia*, *cit.*, p. 8.

dynamism of new Tunisian services available post-Revolution. In 2016, EU member states invested 4.4 billion euro in FDI in Tunisia.²⁴

2.1 *The changing structure and nature of interactions with the EU*

Prior to the January 14, 2011 Revolution, EU–Tunisian relations were primarily economic. Tunisia was vaunted as a ‘good pupil’ for the moderate successes it had in liberalizing targeted sectors of the economy, following the collapse of the co-operative movement and import substitution industrialization in the 1970s. During the 1980s, the Tunisian government partially opened the agricultural sector, promoted foreign direct investment in textile manufacturing, and partially liberalized its banking system. Economic reforms were accelerated in the 1990s, and in 1993, the government created special zones for foreign manufacturing.

Not surprisingly, under Ben Ali, the EU and its member countries—and especially France, Tunisia’s former colonizer—prioritized economic exchange and security co-operation, overlooking an increase in political, civic, and human rights violations in the country. While one of the 2005 Euro-Mediterranean Summit Annual Action Programme commitments was to promote peace, security, stability, good government, and democracy, EU mechanisms to support civil society and democratization in partner states were rarely applied to Tunisia. This has been attributed to multi-directional interests present in the EU’s various commissions, representative assemblies, and pressure from member states.²⁵ Created in 2006 to fund civil society groups, the case of the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) underscores this nicely. EIDHR programmes were managed under two institutional levels: EIDHR headquarters in Brussels, and EU Delegations in Tunisia. Between 2007 and 2010, the Tunis-based

24 Figures taken from the European Commission DG Trade website: *Countries and Regions: Tunisia*, <https://europa.eu/!jM63HN>.

25 Leila Mouhib, ‘EU Democracy Promotion in Tunisia and Morocco: Between Contextual Changes and Structural Continuity’, in *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (2014), pp. 351-372.

EU delegation resisted implementing programmes in Tunisia that would upset the Ben Ali government. To counter this, EIDHR-Brussels proposed integrating Tunisian groups into larger, region-wide programs. Those programmes were ultimately blocked by the Tunisian government, with no resistance from the local EU delegation, which apparently let these projects slowly die.²⁶

Following the Revolution, the EU allocated monies for EIDHR programmes, targeting democratization, electoral transparency, and media freedom (i.e., watchdog groups, election observation training) in 2011. Programme priorities shifted to tolerance, minorities, and marginalized groups in 2012, and then to democratization and supporting women's rights in 2013. Currently, the EU Delegation in Tunisia supports 70 projects worth 58.5 million euro to support NGOs and civil society organizations (CSOs).

Despite increased special funding to programmes that create democratic depth, the bulk of EU co-operation assistance targets key infrastructural sectors. The EU's co-operation assistance to Tunisia for the 2011–2017 period amounted to 2.4 billion euro: 1.6 billion euro in grants and 800 million euro in macro-financial assistance, much of it not only targeted but also with obligations. Under a new scheme, the 'umbrella fund', aid is distributed as a reward for administrative and economic reform. Tunisia received 50 million euro from this fund in 2014, 71.8 million in 2015, 90.5 million in 2016 and 95 million in 2017. The 2016 programme focuses on four areas: (1) modernization of public administration (73.5 million euro); (2) integrated regional development (60 million euro); (3) education reform (60 million euro); and (4) healthcare access to impoverished zones (20 million euro).²⁷

Given the intense level of economic and co-operative assistance exchange in the last two decades, the EU–Tunisia relationship is likely to grow even stronger in the near future. With this in mind, the EU should attempt to use monies from its 'umbrella fund' to specifically tackle the key issue of transitional justice and justice reform. Doing so would not only enhance the democratization process in Tunisia, but would put into

26 Ibid.

27 Figures taken from the European Commission website: *European Neighborhood Policy: Tunisia*, last updated 6 December 2018, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/neighbourhood/countries/tunisia_en.

place a platform for a more equitable form of social distribution—if only by applying the rule of law.

3. Elite Survey: Research findings on Tunisia

3.1 Methodology

Building on the methodological framework presented in the Introduction, the present chapter aims to ascertain the stance of diverse and local stakeholders vis-à-vis EU policies in Tunisia and the Mediterranean region. From that perspective, the interviewees were selected among the featured local civil society, public, and professional actors based on their outreach and influence over policy-making processes or institutions at the social, economic, and political level. The civil society members selected for interviews were able to represent the diversity of views among different civil society groups inside Tunisia. The professional researchers and academic respondents were also experienced experts in their fields of study and able to address a wide spectrum of developments taking place in EU–Tunisia relations and dynamics between civil society and government in the country. The areas of expertise among the interviewees comprised youth studies, economics, democratization, social policy, journalism, foreign policy, and EU affairs.

Three researchers from PODEM were involved in this field research and a total of 11 interviews were conducted during the month of February 2018, in Tunis. The questionnaire designed for the survey included Tunisia-specific questions in addition to the main research questions of MEDRESET WP3,²⁸ used in other countries in this research. Country-specific questions were mainly focused on Tunisian domestic affairs and the country's bilateral relations with its neighbours.

28 Zeynep Gülöz Bakır and Gülşah Dark, 'Review of Surveys on Euro-Mediterranean Relations...', *cit.*, p. 4.

During the field research conducted in Tunis, face-to-face in-depth interviews were carried out with senior-level academics, researchers, experts, and professionals from diverse social and political backgrounds. The interviewees who agreed to take part in this research were aged between 30 and 60 and were all informed beforehand about the objective of the MEDRESET project. During the arranging of the interviews, there were instances when potential interlocutors either did not respond or expressed their unavailability at the time of the interview arrangements. One methodological limitation was encountered in reaching female respondents at the senior level. Only two female interviewees were able to provide in-depth interviews (see Annex for the anonymized list of interviewees).

All interviews were conducted so as to provide anonymity, and the research team only took notes during the interviews. The following sections present and analyse the research findings under four subsections: the first provides analysis on how the EU and the Mediterranean region are perceived; the second delves into details of geopolitical issues highlighted during the interviews, and the third discusses policy issues between Tunisia and the EU. The fourth part focuses on expectations and prospects for future co-operation between the EU and Tunisia in the eyes of local elites.

3.2 Perceptions of the EU and the region

When asked about the EU's presence and policy impact in Tunisia as well as in the Mediterranean region, perceptions towards the Union were split, encompassing both positive and negative. There was an established sense of strategic partnership between the two parties mainly in politics and economy. The elite actors count the Union a key stakeholder in trade, with its political support to Tunisia's democratic transition to be further detailed in the following sections. These two main areas seem to have a shaping force on EU–Tunisia relations and Tunisia's perception of the Union. Throughout the interviews, the local elites also gave the impression that since the post-2011 period, the Union is seen to be more involved in the country's political and economic landscape, and increased its political and financial support with the 2014 constitutional reform promulgated after the Troika regime. An interviewee remarked

that, ‘Since 2011, the EU’s financial support to Tunisia has almost tripled compared with the previous budget. The unconditional aid is mostly to support the reform process in the country.’²⁹

Perception of the EU in the Tunisian elite discourse indicates a clear division between the member states and the EU as an institution, which was stressed by almost all respondents. Tunisia’s bilateral ties with Southern European countries were mentioned along with varying interests of the member states, adding that the EU is viewed as ‘a composition of different voices’.

‘The EU is composed of 28 different countries; but our relations with the Southern Mediterranean are different. Bilateral relations are more with France, Italy, and Spain; there is more engagement with them.’³⁰

‘The EU is not one voice; member states have different aspects in their relations to Tunisia.’³¹

‘It is important to distinguish [between] the EU and Europe. Once we say Europe, it mainly means France and Italy.’³²

Subsequently, France is seen as a key partner in trade relations. With historical baggage going back to the colonial period, France and Tunisia are considered to be strategic and strong allies in Euro-Mediterranean trade relations. In contrast to its strong presence in the economy, France is falling short in its support to Tunisia’s democratic transition, notably at the public level.

‘France and Italy are the two featured European countries for the Maghreb region. In the eyes of the people in the region, France means the EU. Tunisia’s relations with France are more at the forefront compared with those with the Union.’³³

Italy and Germany are the next two countries with specific areas of interest in building their relations with Tunisia. Whereas perceptions of Italy’s presence were mostly limited to trade activities, the improving visibility of

29 Interviewee 1: Senior public official, male, Tunis, February 2018.

30 Interviewee 9: Senior public official, male, Tunis, February 2018.

31 Interviewee 2: CSO director, male, Tunis, February 2018.

32 Interviewee 3: CSO representative and research director, female, Tunis, February 2018.

33 Interviewee 4: Senior academic and researcher, male, Tunis, February 2018.

Germany was much more emphasized and prioritized, notably with regard to its increasing support to the transition period (political dialogue) and the recently rising trade volume between the two countries,³⁴ as well as its interest in the energy sector.

‘Germany is taking a big role in Tunisia’s transition; is important with its institutional capacity and technical expertise; as well as political foundations and economic initiatives.’³⁵

‘In recent years, Tunisia has expanded its relationship with other European countries like Germany as well. Germany is interested in the energy field and doubled its trade with Tunisia. It is perceived as generally positive at the state and public level.’³⁶

Despite the very limited number of female experts joining the elite survey, slight differences were still observed in perception between the female and male respondents. On one side, the responses of the male stakeholders mostly revolved around the political discourse of the EU and the economic outlook. On the other hand, the female respondents specifically pointed to the EU’s influence on youth, emphasizing that the Union has a significantly positive image, almost like a benchmark, in the eyes of Tunisian youth. According to the female respondents from the civil society sector, more young people are eager to learn English in the last few years and the Union is penetrating more into their daily lives.

‘Among the youth, the EU is seen a benchmark in terms of governance, human, and social rights, the rule of law and so on. Through emigrants a cultural link is there between them.’³⁷

‘EU has a presence in everyday life; more young Tunisians are learning English today.’³⁸

Similar to the EU, the perception towards other Western actors such as the US or Canada, as well as the countries in the Mediterranean, is also

34 For trade volume statistics see World Bank data. For more detailed information on Germany–Tunisia energy partnership see GIZ website: *The German-Tunisian Energy Partnership*, <https://www.energypartnership-tunisia.org>.

35 Interviewee 11: Researcher at an institute, male, Tunis, February 2018.

36 Interviewee 6: CSO director, female, Tunis, February 2018.

37 Interviewee 3: CSO representative and research director, female, Tunis, February 2018.

38 Interviewee 6: CSO director, female, Tunis, February 2018.

dependent on their support to the democratic transition in Tunisia. A civil society expert argued that there are different positions on the process, and while the EU, the US and Canada show their support, certain Arab countries like Algeria or Yemen do not favour seeing Tunisia as a success story.³⁹

3.3 *Tunisian perspective on geopolitics, Arab uprisings, and EU response*

In the Tunisian elite discourse, one major question and an important concern that directly relates to the Mediterranean countries (and also the EU) is ‘how to install democracy in the region’. Tunisia is viewed as a potential role model for the region with its efforts in democratic transition, and the stakeholders generally argued the need to push other neighbouring countries to go in the same direction. Subsequently, the lack of democratic governance is perceived as the underlying reason for socioeconomic problems in the region.

According to a Tunis-based academic, terrorism, youth unemployment, and rising poverty—notably in Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco—along with other formidable economic and social problems, are counted as the most visible geopolitical challenges faced in the region.⁴⁰ The insecurity continuum in Libya,⁴¹ which has heightened with the activities of jihadi organizations, is said to be a real political and social problem for the whole region, with smuggling and the lack of border security as the two factors further pushing terrorism.⁴²

Assessing the EU’s role and policy impact in addressing the regional issues, almost all respondents mentioned the Union’s securitizing approach towards the Mediterranean as a point of criticism. Themes such as security, fight against terrorism, illegal migration, and fragility dominate the discourse on how the EU views the Mediterranean.

39 Interviewee 2: CSO director, male, Tunis, February 2018.

40 Interviewee 5: Senior academic and researcher, male, Tunis, February 2018.

41 Interviewee 8: Journalist, male, Tunis, February 2018.

42 Interviewee 5: Senior academic and researcher, male, Tunis, February 2018.

‘There are high concerns for the EU such as security; yet we should note that this is not only the EU’s concern. Tunisia itself is also concerned about this. We have common concerns to stabilize the region, this is a common challenge.’⁴³

In that respect, the ENP is criticized for its security and migration policies that cater for EU interests notably since the post-2011 period. An academic described the current status as the new *modus operandi* of the EU’s engagement in the region.⁴⁴ The interviewed experts share the perception that the Union’s securitizing policies have won out over its democratization concerns for the region. The ENP’s approach to stability was further criticized in that rather than focusing on stabilization *per se*, the root causes of instability—both economic and political—should be addressed first:

‘Since 2011 the ENP’s focus has been [entirely] on stabilization. It is totally understandable, but it is a negative message to the region at the same time.’⁴⁵

On top of that, the Arab uprisings provide a major point of reference while describing the shift in the EU policies towards the region and Tunisia.

‘Before 2011, the EU supported its partners and expected more co-operation. After 2011, this has changed. Now the Union waits for its partners to ask for its support, and helps them under specific conditions. The logic of conditionality is fully in action, especially with Morocco.’⁴⁶

The interviewee further underlined that the EU adopted a prudent attitude towards the uprisings at the beginning, yet has used the developments as an opportunity to put pressure on mobility partnership. According to the respondents, the ‘more for more’ principle in the revised ENP is now echoed in the EU’s relations with the Mediterranean countries. As for Tunisia, the elite actors noted the changing nature of the relations with the EU after the revolution:

43 Interviewee 9: Senior public official, male, Tunis, February 2018.

44 Interviewee 5: Senior academic and researcher, male, Tunis, February 2018.

45 Interviewee 3: CSO representative and research director, female, Tunis, February 2018.

46 Interviewee 5: Senior academic and researcher, male, Tunis, February 2018.

‘The Union’s stance to Tunisia was very soft before 2011. The Union did not do much in Tunisia. But after 2011, it has become more vocal and started to put its finger on many issues.’⁴⁷

‘During the Ben Ali regime, the EU did not intervene much. However, after the revolution, the EU made a shift in its relations with the civil society and began to engage more with them. Now the EU has its own network among civil society groups here.’⁴⁸

While the EU’s support to Tunisia following the revolution is appreciated among the local actors, most of the interviewees mentioned that the Union’s assistance remains rhetoric and it is unable to address the country’s underlying political, social, and economic problems.

‘The Union perceives Tunisia as a success story. They always say it, and claim that Tunisia should be treated differently within the ENP, especially in line with its democratic reform agenda. Although the EU politically supports the democratic transition process, its support is not sufficient.’⁴⁹

‘There are Arab countries that see Tunisia as “a hope”, “a model for the region”. There is still an imbalance between the EU’s rhetoric and actual support. Morocco and Jordan receive more financial support from the EU. Tunisia comes 3rd or 4th. The EU has substantial capital and can make a better impact in Tunisia.’⁵⁰

‘The EU has an inspirational power. It should not see Tunisia as a fragile country but a developing one. The EU’s support should not remain in discourse. Actually, this would also work for their interest.’⁵¹

Finally, on Tunisia’ role in addressing the geopolitical challenges in the region, the elite actors emphasized its interlocutor role as a country trying to sustain balance in conflictual cases. According to a senior-level official, Tunisia has been a Western-leaning country in its policies since gaining independence, and this is why building balance between diverse power groups is a strategy that the country pursues in its relations

47 Interviewee 10: CSO director, male, Tunis, February 2018.

48 Interviewee 5: Senior academic and researcher, male, Tunis, February 2018.

49 Interviewee 1: Senior public official, male, Tunis, February 2018.

50 Interviewee 6: CSO director, female, Tunis, February 2018.

51 Interviewee 3: CSO representative and research director, female, Tunis, February 2018.

with regional actors.⁵² To push for a solution in Libya, where the crisis has been threatening Tunisia's political and economic stability⁵³, Tunisia assumed the role of political facilitator between the Libyan authorities.⁵⁴

'Tunisia has a long history in putting itself in the middle to balance relations in the region and it has done fairly good job even today.'⁵⁵

'Relations with Algeria and Morocco are good, yet certain problems exist with Libya. We think that a solution to the conflict can only be reached through political means. The Carthage Initiative is not an action in the sense of intervening, but aims to facilitate dialogue for the reconciliation in Libya.'⁵⁶

3.4 Policy issues in Tunisia–EU relations

The responses by the elite actors indicate that the pillars of Tunisia–EU relations are formed over four main policy areas: (1) security, migration, and mobility; (2) democratic and political transition; (3) economy and trade; and (4) civil society.

It is understood that, from the perspective of the respondents, the pressing domestic problems in Tunisia are reflected in almost all areas of EU–Tunisia relations. Socioeconomic difficulties and precarious living conditions are mentioned as the underlying causes of the challenges in Tunisia. It should also be noted that these challenges, which are briefly addressed in the following paragraph, are inter-sectional and brought to the table in all four dimensions detailed under the subheadings below.

Regarding the domestic challenges, most of the respondents drew attention to the issue of unemployment, especially the high rates of

52 Interviewee 7: Senior public official, male, Tunis, February 2018.

53 See Lamine Ghanmi, 'Tunisia Engages in Diplomatic Push to End Libyan Crisis', in *The Arab Weekly*, 22 July 2018, <https://theArabweekly.com/node/40308>.

54 Interviewee 9: Senior public official, male, Tunis, February 2018.

55 Interviewee 8: Journalist, male, Tunis, February 2018.

56 Interviewee 1: Senior public official, male, Tunis, February 2018. On the Carthage Initiative, see: Noura Ali, 'Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt Declare a Five-Point Initiative to Resolve the Libyan Crisis', in *Middle East Observer*, 21 February 2017, <https://www.middleeastobserver.org/2017/02/21/tunisia-algeria-egypt-declare-a-five-point-initiative-to-resolve-the-libyan-crisis>.

unemployment among the young and educated population.⁵⁷ In relation to this, regional disparities and poor living standards accompanied by high poverty rates were stated as the most challenging economic problems needing to be resolved.⁵⁸ On the political side, the democratic transition process occupies a large space; and to sustain political and institutional stability, the respondents stress the urgency of fighting against corruption on the domestic front, as well as legal reforms.⁵⁹ One criticism rendered by the civil society respondents was that the government seems to overemphasize economic progress at a time when the transition process is still underway, noting that more focus should be placed on the political structure and reforms at this time to implement strategies for economic development.⁶⁰

Security, migration, and mobility: The security issue is a two-sided debate in the perception of the elite actors; while it is described as a featured area of co-operation with the Union, the EU's securitizing stance is also a point of critique. Reflecting the divergences between Tunisia and the EU, the parallel negotiations on readmission and visa facilitation are seen to portray a 'clash of interests'.⁶¹

'Looking at the EU's mindset, security, migration, and mobility are correlated and directly relate to the issue of readmission. The EU's readmission clause is, however, hindering further progress in negotiations.'⁶²

'The EU's securitizing approach also affects how the EU looks at the region and regional issues as a whole.'⁶³

On the other side, the officials prioritize security co-operation with the EU, pointing to the Union's assistance to Tunisia, and positing that

57 For detailed info on youth unemployment rates, see World bank Data: *Unemployment, youth total (% of total labor force ages 15-24) (modeled ILO estimate)*, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.1524.ZS?locations=TN>.

58 Interviewees 1 and 4.

59 Interviewee 2: CSO director, male, Tunis, February 2018.

60 Interviewee 4: Senior academic and researcher, male, Tunis, February 2018.

61 Interviewee 11: Researcher at an institute, male, Tunis, February 2018.

62 Interviewee 5: Senior academic and researcher, male, Tunis, February 2018.

63 Interviewee 2: CSO director, male, Tunis, February 2018.

without sustaining security, economic development is not possible.⁶⁴ The respondents further indicate that Tunisia, Morocco, and Libya are the three countries helping the EU resolve the asylum problem.

As further retained from the interviews, Tunisia does not want to give concessions to the EU on free movement and readmission, which is also strongly supported by the local civil society groups.⁶⁵ At the same time, the EU is seen to be highly concerned about the readmission issue, especially the return of illegal migrants, and is not in favour of concessions to Tunisia on visa facilitation as long as the readmission clause is fully implemented. While negotiations on mobility partnership and migration continue at the diplomatic level, the respondents reported a level of tension around this issue, stressing that Tunisia is neither a migrant nor a transit country and thus, should not be treated as such.

According to the respondents, the EU–Tunisia dialogue on migration and mobility is also in the public eye. A higher awareness among female civil society respondents on how the mobility issue affects the public perception was observed during the interviews. The respondents pointed out Tunisia’s designation as a ‘non-co-operative’ country due to tax haven blacklisting by the EU in 2017.⁶⁶ Although the EU withdrew its accusation with no explanation, the experts argued that the EU’s decision had a negative impact in public discussions.

Democratic and political transition: Not surprisingly, the political transition process occupies a significant part of the agenda and the perception of the Tunisian elite actors. The respondents agree that democratic and political transition is the most urgent topic in the country, and an area where EU support is much-needed.

Here lies an important divergence between the official discourse and expert-level perception. According to the officials, the political transition has been accomplished, and it is time to concentrate on economic development. The experts, however, insist that more work should be done to improve the

64 Interviewee 1: Senior public official, male, Tunis, February 2018.

65 Interviewee 5: Senior academic and researcher, male, Tunis, February 2018.

66 Dania Akkad, ‘Why Tunisia Landed on the EU’s Tax Haven Blacklist – And How It Got Off’, in *Middle East Eye*, 16 February 2018, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/why-tunisia-landed-eus-tax-haven-blacklist-and-how-it-got>.

reform agenda in order to tackle the diverse challenges on human rights, corruption, institutional stability, decentralization, and accountability.

The interviewed experts from the civil society sector put specific emphasis on transparency of governance and building monitoring mechanisms as two crucial requirements of a well-built transition to democracy. Great significance is also accorded to building trust between the local community and local governance, with a functional decentralization mechanism to reinvigorate the democratic transition, eliminating corruption.

‘Without institutional stability you cannot introduce reforms or resolve social problems. And you need reforms to stabilize the political system; only afterwards can you find a solution to the issues.’⁶⁷

‘The people are evolving through democracy as well. Now they are becoming more interested in rendering their opinions; not just electing but monitoring the process and creating agendas. Accountability is getting more important.’⁶⁸

‘Corruption is present in Tunisia and has resulted in tension at the local level. There is a lack of trust between local authorities and local people.’⁶⁹

In the elite discourse, there appears to be a tendency to differentiate Tunisia from other countries in the region, saying that the country should be treated as a developing country, not a fragile one, by the international institutions including the EU.⁷⁰ Further co-operation with the EU at the institutional level is thus seen as necessary to strengthen the democratic process and proceed with political and economic reforms. There is subsequently an expectation that the EU should become more involved in Tunisia’s political transition through sharing its institutional experience on good governance and providing financial support. An academic, however, did express some doubt about whether the Union would genuinely be willing to support the process, mainly due to its persistent approach on the migration/mobility issue.

67 Interviewee 10: CSO director, male, Tunis, February 2018.

68 Interviewee 6: CSO director, female, Tunis, February 2018.

69 Interviewee 8: Journalist, male, Tunis, February 2018.

70 Interviewee 3: CSO representative and research director, female, Tunis, February 2018.

‘The EU has said the readmission agreement will adhere to the human rights standards, and also says they have a new strategy now. Tunisia has shifted to a democracy regime and is obviously in need of democratization and human rights reforms. However, the EU’s hidden agenda is migration. If there is no mobility partnership, then it means no support to your democracy.’⁷¹

Economy and trade: Where economic relations are concerned, the EU is viewed by the interviewed officials and experts as the major financial actor, by virtue of being Tunisia’s largest trade partner. The dialogue on economy mostly centres on advancing the DCFTA⁷² within the Euro-Mediterranean free trade framework, EU-MEFTA. Currently negotiations on terms continue, through consultation meetings organized with multi-stakeholders such as civil society and the private sector in Tunisia.

The main criticism on the DCFTA comes from local civil society groups, pointing to the agreement’s unfavourable impact on Tunisia’s already-wounded economy due to the EU’s broad concessions at the expense of the country’s social and economic conditions.

‘What the civil society groups say is that priority should be given to economic and social issues and political reforms, but the EU prioritizes security. The civil society does not want Tunisia to negotiate or make an agreement on readmission. For the trade sector, the EU is also trying to put pressure on the Tunisian government not to conclude the DCFTA agreement.’⁷³

On the other side, as stated by another interviewee, Tunisia is dependent on the EU and other international funds for its economy today, drawing attention to Tunisia’s IMF debt and the accompanying public protests against the IMF measures. Economic challenges are thus viewed as urgent, and great emphasis is placed on the importance of creating employment opportunities and remedying income inequalities.

Also on the EU support to Tunisia’s agriculture and industry sectors, the presence of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) appears significant, notably in relation to the investment in green economy. The EU’s efforts in supporting the development of the private sector in renewable energy are said to be an important step to

71 Interviewee 5: Senior academic and researcher, male, Tunis, February 2018.

72 See the dedicated website: <http://www.aleca.tn/en>.

73 Interviewee 5: Senior academic and researcher, male, Tunis, February 2018.

address regional development in Tunisia. During the interviews, a higher awareness was observed among the female respondents on environmental concerns. ‘The EU gives particular importance to invest in green economy. This distinguishes the EU from other organizations. They say they will support development but in an environmentally friendly way.’⁷⁴

As a final point, the rapid growth of Tunisia’s informal economy is described as a shortcoming of the state, yet it is also a way to survive for many citizens who have no choice other than joining the informal economy, because the state is incapable of providing economic opportunities for its people.⁷⁵ An oligarchic structure of big companies was mentioned by the same respondent, notably in the agriculture and trade sectors. In the respondent’s view, there is no room for newcomers to the Tunisian market in these areas and ‘they have their own empire’.

Civil society: It was understood that the civil society sector stands in a critical place as an actor in EU–Tunisia relations, mainly because of its impact on the future of the country and its governance.

A director of a civil society institute noted that, ‘civil society in Tunisia has literally fought for its actorship and has succeeded.’⁷⁶

According to the respondents, the increasing level of co-operation between the EU and Tunisian civil society demonstrates itself at various levels, such as youth partnership within the framework of the Erasmus Programme or scientific collaboration through the Horizon 2020 Programme, programmes which also show the EU’s commitment to support Tunisian civil society.⁷⁷ The EU’s increasing engagement with civil society is also discussed as part of its support to the transition process.

‘The EU’s civil society initiatives centrally target the issues of law-making and centralization at the moment. Maybe afterwards, they will start to support decentralization.’⁷⁸

74 Interviewee 6: CSO director, female, Tunis, February 2018.

75 Interviewee 8: Journalist, male, Tunis, February 2018.

76 Interviewee 2: CSO director, male, Tunis, February 2018.

77 Interviewee 7: Senior public official, male, Tunis, February 2018.

78 Interviewee 2: CSO director, male, Tunis, February 2018.

On the other hand, both the EU and the Tunisian government receive immense criticism due to their approach towards Tunisian civil society, for several reasons. The civil society experts argued that the government is trying to keep civil society activities limited and is putting pressure on CSOs.

‘The government has the habit of not dealing with CSOs and treats them as an ordinary public service. In the last few years it has pushed back.’⁷⁹

‘Old habits die hard [...] Before the revolution, CSOs were under government control. After the revolution, now there are “satellite CSOs” that the government tries to attract, as they appear distant from the government.’⁸⁰

Furthermore, the government’s support to civil society is also criticized due to its ineffectiveness. A senior-level academic mentioned that civil society is generally against the DCFTA agreement and in case of pressure from the EU side,⁸¹ the government makes use of its civil society card to slow down the negotiation process to gain more time.

‘The Tunisian government is playing with the EU. Once they see the EU putting pressure on them, they make use of civil society groups to slow down the process. However, their action remains [at the level of] rhetoric and is used as a showcase. It is not really effective.’⁸²

Critique of the EU’s approach towards civil society in Tunisia rests on the argument that the EU is selective in its support to civil society groups and only provides financial support to those that are close to its own ideologies and principles. It is claimed that the EU is intentionally very limited and selective in its capacity to support civil society in Tunisia and therefore does not genuinely aim to broaden its support to diverse and local groups.⁸³

‘Neither the EU nor the member states are willing to widen their network of Tunisian CSOs. They have a selective stance.’⁸⁴

79 Interviewee 10: CSO director, male, Tunis, February 2018.

80 Interviewee 2: CSO director, male, Tunis, February 2018.

81 Interviewee 5: Senior academic and researcher, male, Tunis, February 2018.

82 Ibid.

83 Interviewee 2: CSO director, male, Tunis, February 2018.

84 Interviewee 10: CSO director, male, Tunis, February 2018.

'Another problem is that the EU grants are offered to certain groups, who do not know Tunisia well. European NGOs are opening branches in Tunis, but they should prioritize others already present in the country.'⁸⁵

To engage with more local civil society groups especially in the southern regions of Tunisia, the interviewed CSO experts pointed to the need for the EU to reach the poorest and the most disadvantaged areas. The language barrier and the lack of technical knowledge support to manage EU-funded projects were highlighted. Among the CSO representatives, more awareness was observed among the female respondents, particularly on accessing the larger segment of civil society.

'Dialogue channels are mostly in French. It is a quite elitist perspective to push people to submit proposals in French or English; to reach farther they need to do work in Arabic. Also, for events, Arabic should be used so more local people can be involved in the civil society work.'⁸⁶

3.5 Expectations and prospects for co-operation in the Mediterranean

The insight provided by senior-level officials and experts demonstrates that the Tunisian case may offer a chance to come up with a regional stance in the southern Mediterranean to push the countries one step forward to democratic governance. This is why, based on the elite perception, instead of attending only to the EU and what it should achieve in the region, it is necessary to figure out what Tunisia should and is able to do about the regional challenges, mostly on democratic deficits, together with the EU and neighbouring countries. This point of view is in accord with Tunisia's vision for a united Maghreb, including Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria, which could be an important co-operation platform for regional integrity with EU support.

Based on such reasoning, the respondents criticized the EU's securitizing approach towards the region, pointing out that this concern is not unique to the EU but is shared by the countries of the region. As understood from the interviews, the common concerns over terrorism,

85 Interviewee 2: CSO director, male, Tunis, February 2018.

86 Interviewee 6: CSO director, female, Tunis, February 2018.

migration, and regional stability are also in the agenda of Tunisia and are seen as the priority areas of co-operation with the EU at the regional level. The Libya conflict is especially perceived as an urgent challenge to be addressed, both for Tunisia and the EU.

In relation to regional stability, not only the security perspective but also the social and economic challenges at the societal level are mentioned as key policy issues to be addressed in the region. As emphasized by the respondents, policies dealing with security and migration alone, without addressing poverty, exclusion, youth unemployment, and economic opportunities in the region, are destined to fail in bringing regional prosperity. The region should not be seen as a source of trouble or fragility, and a country like Tunisia—which is at least perceived to be making better progress on its path to democracy—deserves significant support from international institutions, and policies should be tailored accordingly. There is a common expectation that the EU should establish a more effective and target-oriented engagement towards the underlying social and economic problems in Tunisia.

Conclusion

This chapter set out to provide a brief analysis on how Tunisian elites perceive the EU policies in their country and in the Mediterranean region. Based on the findings of the interviews conducted there, despite criticisms aimed at the EU's engagement in the country and the region, the EU is perceived as a significant actor in Tunisia's political and economic transition.

As understood from the interviews, the major criticisms directed at the EU's engagement in Tunisia are centred on the EU's securitizing approach and the conditionality in bilateral agreements with the EU. In the eyes of public and senior-level professionals of academia and civil society, this approach results in an atmosphere of suspicion towards the EU's real ambitions in Tunisia and the Mediterranean region as well.

While the EU has put greater emphasis on issues like readmission and migration, which are described as ‘sensitive issues for Tunisians’, Tunisian experts expect and indeed demand a more concrete presence of the EU in dealing with the most pressing issues of democratic transition and the social and economic problems underlying the regional disparity and political reforms. In that regard, the elites emphasized that rather than being described as a ‘fragile’ country, Tunisia should be considered as a developing country and treated as such.

In the elite discourse, Tunisia is described as a country which is largely dependent on international funding to address its domestic problems. This is why a successful co-operation between the EU and this country is said to be a necessity, especially in the areas of economic development and civil society support. Particularly regarding political and economic transition, the EU’s support to strengthen the civil society component is depicted as a key to mutual co-operation. Criticizing the EU as being selective and elitist—and thus technocratic in its relations to civil society groups in Tunisia—respondents agreed upon the need for a more diversified and genuine support from the Union.

From a regional perspective, Tunisia is seen as an important regional player in North Africa on a number of levels. Based on the insights derived from the interviews, Tunisia is seen as an important regional player and a model in the Mediterranean region to push the countries towards democratic governance. Regarding its domestic outlook, its workforce is relatively educated, and its citizens have access to subsidized health care. In addition to its mediator stance in the regional conflicts, it is a small, though growing investor in Algeria and Libya. And, its GDP per capita increasingly makes it an interesting market for EU producers. Its position could nevertheless be strengthened with greater economic integration not only with the EU, but also with Algeria and Libya in the future. Should greater co-operation between the countries of North Africa occur in the cadre of the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), Tunisia’s concurrent ties with the EU would significantly increase its economic role in the region and create more space to address the socioeconomic problems in the country. Finally, as the only Arab democracy, citizens in neighbouring Morocco,

Algeria, and Libya will continue to observe its progress (and failures), which will likely be used as a baseline for evaluating support for moves toward greater political, economic, and social liberation in their own countries. From a regional outlook, instead of expecting only support and guidance from the EU, the interviewees highlighted Tunisia's position in the region and emphasized the importance of working together with the EU in dealing with regional challenges. In that regard, the insights derived from the elite survey in Tunisia demonstrate that any co-operation with the EU based on mutual interests around socio-economic and political terms will prove highly beneficial, not only for Tunisia and the region, but also for the EU itself.

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Annex: List of Interviewees

- Interviewee 1: Senior public official, male, Tunis, February 2018
- Interviewee 2: CSO director, male, Tunis, February 2018
- Interviewee 3: CSO representative and research director, female, Tunis, February 2018
- Interviewee 4: Senior academic and researcher, male, Tunis, February 2018
- Interviewee 5: Senior academic and researcher, male, Tunis, February 2018
- Interviewee 6: CSO director, female, Tunis, February 2018
- Interviewee 7: Senior public official, male, Tunis, February 2018
- Interviewee 8: Journalist, male, Tunis, February 2018
- Interviewee 9: Senior public official, male, Tunis, February 2018
- Interviewee 10: CSO director, male, Tunis, February 2018
- Interviewee 11: Researcher at an institute, male, Tunis, February 2018

Chapter 2: Attitudes towards the EU and Its Presence in the Mediterranean: Perceptions of Elite Actors in Turkey

The relationship between Turkey and the EU is of a peculiar nature not only due to the length and breadth of the engagement between the two entities, but also its mix of convergence and divergence over decades.

The evolution of this relationship has been greatly affected by changing political and economic circumstances in both the EU and Turkey, as well as international and regional dynamics. Despite the volatile nature of the relationship, Turkey is of paramount interest to the Union due to its strategic position, acting as ‘a buffer between the EU and a region whose instability might easily spread to Europe’.²

This is why Turkey–EU relations and their future direction are decisive for addressing the common challenges and threats emerging from the recent developments shaping the regional and global order including the Mediterranean area, where the implications of the post-2011 period are still visibly felt.

This chapter thereby attempts to offer a perceptual analysis on the EU, its relations with Turkey, as well as its policies in the Mediterranean by using the findings of the elite survey conducted in Turkey.

Among the countries in which the elite survey was conducted, Turkey appears to hold a distinct position as the only country having candidate status, since 1999. As a previous report has argued, the Mediterranean ‘does not exist as an individual region’ in Turkey’s foreign policy discourse with a well-defined and structured policy

1 Emir Bayburt contributed in the preparation of the country profile section.

2 Nilgün Arisan Eralp, ‘Quo Vadis Turkey-EU Relations?’, in *Orient*, Vol. 58, No. 3 (2017), p. 24, <https://www.tepav.org.tr/en/haberler/s/4223>.

framework.³ In a similar vein, this chapter shows that while discussing the EU's role, the respondents tended to engage more on country-specific issues compared to those relevant to the larger Mediterranean region. Overall, the EU is seen as among the region's main stakeholders, yet its presence as a 'political player' is under question. There are also clear references to the EU's 'interest-motivated' approach towards the Mediterranean region in the elite discourse, which often noted a shift from a 'normative' to a 'realist' actor. In the context of Turkey–EU relations, the perception mainly revolves around the age-long membership deal, yet the centre of focus appears to be moving more to bilateral relations with individual member states in view of international and regional developments.

The structure of this chapter takes the form of three main sections, the first of which introduces a short country profile on Turkey including a brief history of EU–Turkey relations and their changing dynamics under the influence of domestic and regional developments. The second part is devoted to the findings and analysis of the elite survey, which sought to investigate the principal research question of 'how do elites perceive European policies in the Mediterranean area' including towards Turkey.⁴

In light of the findings, the chapter ends with a set of policy recommendations that could contribute to the navigation of the future relationship between the EU and Turkey as well as the future of Euro-Mediterranean relations. The entire chapter aims to foster informed public considerations and policy-making efforts related to Turkey–EU relations, and also the EU's policy efforts in the Mediterranean.

3 Aybars Görgülü and Gülşah Dark, 'Turkey, the EU and the Mediterranean: Perceptions, Policies and Prospects', in *MEDRESET Working Papers*, No. 7 (June 2017), p. 15, <http://www.medreset.eu/?p=13395>.

4 Zeynep Gülöz Bakır and Gülşah Dark, 'Review of Surveys on Euro-Mediterranean Relations, and an Introduction to the Elite Survey in MEDRESET', in *MEDRESET Methodology and Concept Papers*, No. 5 (July 2017), p. 4, <http://www.medreset.eu/?p=13424>.

1. Turkey in brief

1.1 Demographics

With an estimated population of 80.8 million⁵ Turkey ranks as the eighteenth-largest population in the world. Although Turkey's rate of population growth fell in the beginning of 2010s from 1.4 to 1.3 percent, it is now 1.6 percent.⁶ According to the UN Data, as is the case in most industrial countries, Turkey's society mostly resides in large cities, with urban residents making up 73.4 percent of the total population. Turkey is a very young country since approximately 88 percent of the population are below the age of 60, 63 percent are between the ages of 14 and 60, and 25 percent are younger than 14.

Geographically, Turkey acts a natural bridge between Europe and Asia, making it part of the Middle East, the Mediterranean, Asia, and Europe. Turkey's predecessor, the Ottoman Empire, lasted for 600 years and spanned three different continents: Southeast Europe, East Asia, and North Africa. This historical geographical location engendered and continues to develop potent bonds with culturally-different neighbouring regions, while offered the privilege of hosting a rich cultural mosaic.

Reflecting a vast and intricate ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity, the population in Turkey include Turks, Kurds, Caucasians, Balkans, Armenians, Greeks, and Jews, among others. Considering their number and geographic concentration, Kurds, by far, compose the most significant ethnic minority.⁷ With the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, the official language was determined as modern Turkish. In addition to the official language, Kurmanji (a dialect of Kurdish), Arabic, Zazaki (a dialect of Kurdish), Abkhaz, Adyghe, Georgian, Laz,

5 Turkish Statistical Institute, 'Population Projections, 2018-2080', in *TurkStat Press Releases*, No. 30567 (21 February 2018), <http://www.turkstat.gov.tr/PreHaberBultenleri.do?id=30567>.

6 See UN CountryStats website: *Turkey: Social Indicators*, <http://data.un.org/en/iso/tr.html>.

7 According to the estimations by earlier studies, Kurds make up between 15 and 25 percent of Turkey's population.

Albanian, Bosnian, Armenian, Greek, Ladino (Judeo-Spanish), and Coptic are still living languages within Turkey.

Turkey's population has a large Muslim majority, most of whom are Sunnis, with a small portion of other religious communities, including Christians and Jews. The Alevi, a long-persecuted Shia sect, constitute the second-largest religious group in Turkey right after the Sunni Muslims.⁸

Long being a country of emigration and immigration, Turkey has also become a crossroads of migratory movement, especially after the civil war broke out in Syria in 2011. Turkey now hosts over 3.6 million registered Syrian refugees within its borders,⁹ providing them access to basic services along with employment and education opportunities.

1.2 Turkey's main stakeholders

Turkey has distinct stakeholders at the domestic, regional, and global levels and they play a significant role in the formation of the country's political, economic, and social power structures.

With the Constitutional Referendum in April 2017 and later the June 2018 presidential and parliamentary elections, the governance system in Turkey transformed into an 'executive presidency' from the parliamentary regime that had functioned since the formation of the Republic of Turkey in 1923. In the new system of government, the executive power is vested in the incumbent president, who is the head of both the government and the state, embracing all responsibilities and authorities of the prime minister and authorized to issue executive

8 The official number of Alevi population is a matter of contention. According to information provided by the Minority Rights Group, estimates range from 25 to 30 percent of the total population. See more at Minority Rights Group website: 'Minorities and Indigenous People in Turkey: Alevi', in *World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples*, updated June 2018, <https://minorityrights.org/?p=4940>.

9 For up-to-date figures, see the website of the Turkish Ministry of Interior-Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM), *Migration Statistics: Temporary Protection*, http://www.goc.gov.tr/icerik6/temporary-protection_915_1024_4748_icerik.

decrees. While the premier's office has been abolished, the new post of vice president has been established, with cabinet members assigned by the president.¹⁰

The constitutional amendments are largely related to the government system with modifications in the judiciary and legislative branches. There are however two major changes regarding the parliament. With the new system, the number of MPs at the Grand National Assembly (TBMM) increased from 550 to 600, and the minimum age to run for the parliamentary election has been reduced from 25 to 18.¹¹

In this setting, political parties still have a significant potency to influence the political dynamics as domestic stakeholders in Turkey. At present, the political parties represented in parliament include the Justice and Development Party (AK Party), the Republican People's Party (CHP), the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), the People's Democratic Party (HDP) and the İyi [Good] Party, which was the most recent addition to parliament.

The AK Party has been leading politics in Turkey since 2002 and the incumbent president is popularly elected from within. In the June 24 elections, AK Party received 42.6 percent of votes, losing the majority in the parliament, yet through its 'People's Alliance' with the main nationalist party MHP, which had 11.1 percent of the vote, the two parties reached 53.7 percent.¹²

On the other side, the 'Nation's Alliance'—including CHP, İyi Party and Saadet [Felicity] Party (SP)—had 33.9 percent of the votes. CHP had 22.6 percent, and its allies İyi Party and SP took 10 and 1.3 percent respectively. Finally, HDP, the mainstream political party representing the rights of the Kurdish community in Turkey, received 11.7 percent of the votes.

Civil society is Turkey's next most-considerable stakeholder at the domestic level. These actors are significantly involved in the areas of

10 Serdar Güleler and Nebi Miş, 'Constitutional Framework of Executive Presidency in Turkey', in *SETA Analysis*, No. 29 (April 2017), pp. 10-15, <https://www.setav.org/en/constitutional-framework-of-executive-presidency-in-turkey/>.

11 Ibid., p. 10.

12 See 'Turkey Elections 2018', in *TRT World*, 27 June 2018, <https://www.trtworld.com/elections/>.

business, environment, human rights, politics, economy, and academia. During the last decade, however, the impact of the civil society elements has dissolved to a certain extent due to the volatile nature of Turkish politics.¹³ At the economic level, on the other hand, business associations can be considered as another domestic stakeholder since they have the capacity to influence policy-making mechanisms in Turkey.

At the regional level, there are certain observable powerhouse states in the Middle East of today: Saudi Arabia as an Arab power, and Turkey, Iran, and Israel as non-Arab powers. While most of the Middle Eastern countries have been subjected to uprisings and political erosions, the three non-Arab states have continued to function with their solid governmental structures and institutions. In the evolving geopolitical struggle in the region, Turkey has opted for sustaining a balanced position between Israel and Iran. With economic and political co-operation overshadowing the crises, Turkey has tried to pursue a balancing act with these two countries. Moreover, Turkey sustains a warm relationship with Qatar both diplomatically and economically. From the onset of the Saudi-led blockade against Qatar, Turkey has shown its support to the country not only through its reconciliation efforts but also through military and economic aid.

Finally, on the international level, besides the EU, the US and Russia are considered as Turkey's main stakeholders. Regional dynamics, notably the Syrian conflict, have been shaping the course of relations between Turkey and these two major powers. Although unable to bring a concrete political solution to the conflict, the Astana Talks first initiated by Russia and Turkey, and later joined by Iran, in January 2017 represented a significant attempt towards implementation of a ceasefire and de-escalation zones. As part of the agreement under the Astana Talks, Turkey has also undertaken efforts to establish security posts in Idlib, located in north-western Syria on Turkey's border, to monitor the truce between the Syrian regime and the opposition.

13 For possible indications on this topic within different societal segments in Turkey, see: Ulaş Tol, 'The Alevi Agenda from July 15 to the Present', in *PODEM Publications*, April 2017, <http://podem.org.tr/?p=4141>; Vahap Çoşkun, 'From July 15 Coup Attempt to the Referendum: Impressions from Diyarbakır', in *PODEM Publications*, April 2017, <http://podem.org.tr/?p=4132>.

1.3 Turkey–EU relations: A snapshot

Among the countries on the line to EU membership, Turkey is singled out as the country with the longest history of accession. The country's elongated history of relations with the EU took a major step when the accession negotiations began 14 years ago, however, over time the relations have had substantial rises and falls.

Although the commencement of accession negotiations is presumably the major achievement of the milestones in Turkey's relations with the European community,¹⁴ the current picture looks different from what was initially anticipated. Currently, only 16 chapters have been opened and one has been provisionally closed.¹⁵ The debate over Turkey's accession process has revolved around certain factors and foreign policy issues like the unresolved Cyprus dispute, European countries that are not in favour of Turkey's inclusion in the Union, and also the perception of Turkey vis-à-vis the EU as well as member states, which has been prone to change.¹⁶

Indeed, the dynamics of EU–Turkey relations have been constantly shaped according to domestic and regional developments both in and outside of Turkey and Europe. In the current picture, as also became evident in our elite survey, the main areas of discussion between the EU and Turkey can be classified as the visa liberalization process, revision of the Customs Union (in a way that the agreement would benefit Turkey more than its current state), the rise of rightist political groups within the Union, and the refugee crisis.

By 2016, relations had become significantly challenging for both parties. In 2017, from the EU's perspective, there were a number of complicated issues within Turkey, and the points of critique touched

14 See the website of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs: *Turkey-EU Relations*, <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/relations-between-turkey-and-the-european-union.en.mfa>.

15 See the website of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs-Directorate for EU Affairs, *Current Situation in Accession Negotiations*, updated 6 June 2017, https://www.ab.gov.tr/current-situation_65_en.html.

16 On Turkey–EU relations, see: Çigdem Nas and Yonca Özer, *Turkey and EU Integration. Achievements and Obstacles*, London/New York, Routledge, 2017; Çigdem Nas *et al.*, 'IKV Report on Turkey-EU Relations: Keeping Together in the Face of Multiple Challenges', in *Economic Development Foundation Publications*, No. 288 (June 2017) <https://www.ikv.org.tr/ikv.asp?id=1922>.

upon the following: the extension of the State of Emergency, which was put into action following the failed coup attempt in 2016; the freedom of press and expression; the supremacy of the rule of law and the separation of powers; and transparency. Another significant issue between the sides was the migrant crisis. On 18 March 2016, the third EU–Turkey Summit took place,¹⁷ and both parties came to mutual terms regarding the issue of irregular migration through a readmission agreement. On the other hand, the acceleration of the visa liberalization process for Turkey was a part of this agreement, which has yet to be realized and is affected by the strained relations between the parties.¹⁸

The position of individual EU member states regarding Turkey, as well as Turkey’s bilateral relations with these countries, is equally decisive in the push and pull dynamics of Turkey–EU relations. Turkey’s relations with member states do not appear to develop on a parallel course in line with the Union’s approach as an institutional entity. Seeing that openness towards Turkey and its partnership varies from one member state to another according to political, economic, and social factors, Turkey pursues different levels of relationships with EU member states. Relations with Germany have, for example, experienced crises, as Germany not only asked for the complete suspension of the negotiation talks in September 2017, but also affected by the diplomatic tension over election campaigns, while Germany, at the same time, pushed for a specific role of Turkey in terms of migration.

1.4 Regional issues and interactions with the EU

At the beginning of the 2010s, the EU displayed the strategy of intensifying, ‘bilateral relations with all countries in the region, particularly through trade agreements and reform programs under the ENP, but also by

17 See *EU-Turkey Statement*, 18 March 2016, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/03/18/eu-turkey-statement>.

18 See Nathalie Loiseau, Ömer Çelik and Jean Yves Le Drian, ‘EU to Send Team to Turkey for Visa Exemption Talks’, in *Hürriyet Daily News*, 4 April 2018, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/eu-to-send-team-to-turkey-for-visa-exemption-talks-129754>.

investing in region-building endeavors such as the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM).¹⁹

Europe had the expectation that these institutions would transform the region into a more peaceful, stable, and prosperous neighbourhood. Similarly, Turkey's former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu devised a 'zero-problems with neighbours' policy. At that time, Turkey's trajectory had already changed from pro-Western and military-enforced secularism to a nation embracing its past and welcoming more religious identities while increasing its engagement with the Muslim and Arab countries in the region.²⁰ However, both the European and Turkish strategies appear to have been unable to realize their prospects as the Middle East was inundated with conflicts following the events of the Arab uprisings.

Turkey was directly influenced by the conflict in Syria, with which it has a 900-kilometer-long border. In the beginning, Turkey 'was well positioned to play a guiding role'²¹ as 'Ankara first urged the Syrian leadership to carry out meaningful political reforms, and then when that failed cut its ties with the regime'.²² Due to its ties with parts of the Syrian opposition, Turkey had higher stakes in Syria than did the EU. Ankara thus participated in the Astana talks, together with Iran and Russia. In late 2017 and early 2018, Turkey's attention shifted to the Democratic Union Party (PYD)/People's Protection Units (YPG) forces, which are linked to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a designated terrorist organization located in northern Syria. Turkey struggled and continues to combat against the expansion of ISIS and the formation of an the Democratic Union Party (PYD)/People's

19 Eduard Soler i Lecha and Melike Janine Sökmen, 'Turkey and Its Transatlantic Partners in the Wider Mediterranean: The European Perspective', in Sasha Toperich and Aylin Ünver Noi (eds), *Turkey and Transatlantic Relations*, Washington, Center for Transatlantic Relations, 2017, pp. 149-150, <https://archive.transatlanticrelations.org/?p=3048>.

20 Ziya Öniş, 'Turkey and the Arab Revolutions: Boundaries of Regional Power Influence in a Turbulent Middle East', in *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (2014), pp. 203-219.

21 Malik Mufti, 'Turkey's Choice', in *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Winter 2017), p. 73.

22 Ibid.

Protection Units (YPG) corridor within northern Syria, with operations including the Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch.²³

The refugee influx which escalated with the Syrian conflict has become another issue of strategic importance between the Union and Turkey. The migrant crisis has created division in the EU over how to best deal with resettling people. Turkey has been shouldering a great responsibility by hosting a massive number of Syrians under temporary protection²⁴ and took a series of steps including legislation on migration management not only to provide humanitarian aid, but also to protect these peoples' fundamental rights and address their social and economic needs. On the other side, the refugee crisis has become a major challenge for the EU with increasing rightist trends, which has appeared to make it harder for European countries to accommodate the migrants.²⁵ To enhance migration co-operation with Turkey, the Re-admission Agreement—signed in 2013 and fully applicable in 2016—intended to reduce the flow of migrants and asylum seekers moving from or through the country to the EU. The 2018 Turkey progress Report by the European Commission highlights the decrease in irregular crossings and in saving lives in the Aegean Sea since the implementation of the Action Plan, as well as Turkey's good progress on migration and asylum policy.²⁶

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- 23 See Merve Seren, Murat Yeşiltaş and Necdet Özçelik, 'Operation Euphrates Shield Implementation and Lessons Learned', in *SETA Publications*, No. 97 (2017), <https://www.setav.org/en/?p=7306>.
- 24 Temporary protection is granted to Syrians within the framework of Article 91 of Law No. 6458 of 4 April 2013 on Foreigners and International Protection and Temporary Protection Regulation of 22 October 2014.
- 25 See Krisztina Than, 'Hungary Seeks Broader Anti-Migrant Alliance after Austria, Italy Elections', in *Reuters*, 12 March 2018, <https://reut.rs/2p4epOW>.
- 26 European Commission, *Turkey 2018 Report*, SWD(2018)153, 17 April 2018, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52018SC0153>. According to the European Commission, the EU–Turkey agreement reduced irregular arrivals by 97 percent, while the number of lives lost at sea has diminished also. See European Commission, *EU–Turkey Statement Two Year On*, April 2018, https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/20180314_eu-turkey-two-years-on_en.pdf.

Another regional point of discussion between the EU and Turkey has been the historical conflict over Cyprus.²⁷ Cyprus has been going through an on-and-off peace process with uncertainties on the future of the reunification talks. In 2016, two summits took place which remained ineffective due to Turkey's shifting its foreign policy focus to Syria and the rising importance of the migration crisis in the Middle East. In 2017, the Cypriot leaders met in Geneva for a new negotiation process, but this meeting did not result in a significant impact on relations.

The next agenda item between Turkey and the EU at the regional level is energy security in the Eastern Mediterranean, where the natural gas discoveries in recent years have introduced new trade opportunities as well as disputes over drilling rights and maritime borders. Turkey has further shown its opposition to gas exploration by Greek Cyprus—with its argument resting on the violation of Turkish Cypriots' rights—mainly due to the politically-unresolved Cyprus issue.

Taken together, it could be underlined that the issues—notably the Cyprus question, the relations with Greece over the Aegean Sea, the natural gas discoveries in the Mediterranean as well as the repercussions of the Arab uprisings including the migration crisis—are not treated under a unified or single Mediterranean policy but are distinct foreign policy issues in Turkey's agenda.²⁸

2. Elite Survey: Research findings on Turkey

2.1 Methodology

The methodology of this study is based on a qualitative interviewing method to provide a deeper understanding and assessment on (1) elites' perceptions of EU policies in Turkey and the Mediterranean; (2) geopo-

27 On the background of the Cyprus issue, see: Çigdem Nas and Yonca Özer, *Turkey and EU Integration*, cit.

28 Aybars Görgülü and Gülşah Dark, 'Turkey, the EU and the Mediterranean', cit., p. 5.

litical challenges and policy issues; and (3) the EU's impact in the region and (4) the effectiveness of its policies. The chapter further aims to acquire insights on expectations from the Union, and future steps for Turkey–EU relations that would contribute to the EU's policy-making efforts.

To this end, the elite survey was conducted in three cities of Turkey—Istanbul, Ankara, and Diyarbakır—between November 2017 and March 2018 with 19 interviewees²⁹ (see anonymized list of interviewees in the Annex). In line with the research objectives, which target the 'local actors at the senior level' through a top-down approach,³⁰ the selection of interviewees involved purposive methods. While selecting the local elites, their knowledge on and potential in analysing social dynamics and politics in Turkey and influence over policy-making processes were taken into consideration.

The researchers carried out in-depth interviews with senior state officials; academics and researchers at universities and NGOs; professionals from business and media sectors; and CSO representatives with different social and political leanings. Despite the limitations, the researchers tried to maintain a balanced approach in the selection of interviewees, aged between 30 and 60, in terms of gender and social identity.

In three main parts, this section first explores the perception of the EU in Turkey and the effectiveness of EU policies at the state and public level; the second section delves into the cooperation and policy areas with the EU and the third section focuses on the EU's regional role and presence in the Mediterranean.

All interviews were anonymous and not recorded, and the interviewees were informed about the interview and the project content beforehand. The interviews were between 30 and 45 minutes in duration, and were carried out either in person or, as in two cases, by Skype and phone. The interviews were conducted by the author together with two researchers at PODEM, and the researchers only took notes during the interviews.

29 Preliminary meetings for research arrangements took place before the actual interviews.

30 Zeynep Gülöz Bakır and Gülşah Dark, 'Review of Surveys on Euro-Mediterranean Relations...', *cit.*, p. 3.

Before moving to the following part, it should be noted that the chapter does not claim that the survey findings presented here form a general depiction of the views of the elite actors in Turkey, but are illustrative of the major themes.

2.2 Perception of the EU as an institution, and of its member states

In view of the multi-pronged nature of Turkey–EU relations, there is a high awareness and knowledge on the EU as an institution and its policies, along with individual EU states, at the elite level in Turkey. Although counted an important stakeholder for Turkey, the EU is not interpreted as an ‘influential’ political actor in the Mediterranean region, and is mostly referred to as a soft-power practitioner and trade partner. It was further observed at the time of the interviews that the perception of the EU is closely linked to Turkey’s EU membership deal and relations with certain member states, primarily Germany, France, and the UK as reflected in this section.

The cyclical moments of conflict in Turkey’s relationship with the EU were said to be an important factor, which has resulted in attitude change towards the Union at the official level. To this end, it was argued that the public perception was highly supportive of the Union and it was seen as an anchor for reform notably between 2002 and 2005, during which the accession negotiations were officially opened with Turkey, and a series of legislative reforms were introduced to meet the accession criteria.³¹

‘Turkey has been knocking on the EU’s door for more than fifty years, and during this time, there are countries that joined the EU within a relatively shorter period. This ‘on-hold’ situation has surely shaped the public opinion.’³²

The recent growth of the far-right movements across Europe, as well as the politicization of Turkey in European electoral debates, were seen with concern. ‘Looking at the last five years, instead of an inclusive approach, observing anti-

31 European Commission, *Turkey 2005 Progress Report*, SEC(2005)1426, 9 November 2005, https://www.ab.gov.tr/files/AB_Iliskileri/Tur_En_Realitons/Progress/Turkey_Progress_Report_2005.pdf.

32 Interviewee 13: Academic, male, Diyarbakır, January 2018.

Turkey sentiments along with the rising Islamophobia has had a decisive role on the attitudes of the public opinion in Turkey to Europe and the Union.³³

From the side of Turkey, the perception was that despite their severity and intensity, these cyclical moments have not reached the point of turning one's back on Europe entirely. This is due to the dense economic, cultural, and societal exchanges between the two sides over decades, as well as the presence of a sizable Turkish diaspora residing in Europe,³⁴ which was viewed as adding a further dimension to the relations that cannot be disregarded.

One point which resonated in the interviews was that either the EU or its member states have already come to the table with alternative proposals to shape the continuation of Turkey's accession process. These are (1) privileged or strategic partnership; (2) long-term gradual steps towards membership; (3) freezing the talks and choosing a wait-and-see approach; and (4) the cancellation of the accession deal altogether. According to senior officials, such scenarios keep the relations in limbo, stressing that the root of Turkey–EU relations has a '*supra-state*' nature:

'Thinking of its geopolitical position, Turkey has always been a strategic point of the region. Rather than keeping the rhetoric on strategic partnership, there is the need to look at the possible gains of Turkey's accession to the Union with a win-win scenario, especially in addressing common problems.'³⁵

'The EU is a commonly-recognized goal; this view has not been abandoned, no matter that Turkey has been under the administration of different governments.'³⁶

On Turkey's road to EU membership, the decades-long Cyprus issue was described as 'a deadlock' by both officials and experts. One official commented that the resolution of the Cyprus conundrum would open the door of progress on EU–Turkey relations, while a senior academic

33 Interviewee 16: Researcher at an NGO, male, Istanbul, February 2018.

34 According to figures provided by the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Turkish people living abroad exceeds 6 million, and around 5.5 million of whom live in Western Europe. See the website of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs: *Turkish Citizens Living Abroad*, <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/the-expatriate-turkish-citizens.en.mfa>.

35 Interviewee 14: EU affairs counsellor, male, phone, February 2018.

36 Interviewee 2: Specialist on EU affairs, male, Ankara, November 2017.

pointed to the row on oil and gas reserves and the drilling rights in the eastern Mediterranean region, a contentious issue between Turkey and Greek Cyprus that has been ongoing for years. The instruments that the EU Council put into force for the economic development of northern Cyprus prior to the Greek Cypriot accession to the EU—including the Green Line Regulation, Direct Trade Regulation and Financial Aid Regulation—were also said to be unable to fulfil their prospects.

‘The Cyprus issue is what has brought us to the current scene in Turkey–EU relations. It is one of the underlying reasons and the starting point of the political disagreements. The dispute has created a kind of erosion on the bilateral relations. Both sides have been so far unable to propose an effective solution.’³⁷

‘On the side of the EU, the Cyprus issue has become a “convenient excuse” to refer to whenever a delay in the negotiation process is put on the table.’³⁸

Furthermore, the EU’s absorption capacity—which was originally expressed in the 1993 Copenhagen Criteria and exacerbated with the ‘big bang enlargement’ of 2004 and 2007 that paved the way for the membership of 12 countries in Central and Eastern Europe—was perceived to influence Turkey’s accession deal and its position vis-à-vis the EU. The implications of the EU’s enlargement—for its institutions, finances, and cultural identity—are claimed to make EU policy-makers as well as the public wary about additional expansion, including to Turkey.³⁹

‘There is a problem of absorption from the side of the EU—the problem of Turkey’s absorption into the Union, which contributes to scepticism towards Turkey.’⁴⁰

37 Interviewee 3: Senior academic, researcher in CSO sector, male, Istanbul, December 2017.

38 Interviewee 11: Researcher on EU affairs, female, Istanbul, January 2018.

39 Aslı Toksabay Esen, ‘Absorption Capacity of the EU and Turkish Accession: Definitions and Comments’, in *TEPAV Policy Briefs*, 9 May 2007, <https://www.tepav.org.tr/en/haberler/s/1076>.

40 Interviewee 8: Academic, female, Ankara, December 2017.

‘The EU and Turkey are sitting at the same table, but to leave off, neither part wants to take the responsibility. The EU is still struggling to get ready for the inclusion of Turkey.’⁴¹

On the other side, the regional and domestic problems—most notably the Syrian civil war, the refugee crisis, and the fight against terrorism—that Turkey is facing were perceived as ‘not independent from the relations with the EU in general’. During the interviews, particular importance was attached to the EU’s attitude and lack of support on Turkey’s counterterrorism efforts and the 2016 coup attempt. The Union was also observed to adopt a similar attitude while considering Turkey’s national interests and sensitivities in the security of its borders, notably in relation to the military operations in Syria against the PYD/YPG that it acknowledges as the offshoot of the outlawed PKK. One comment was that the EU’s conditional stance at critical times poses a handicap on ensuring mutual trust and collaboration.

Among the member states, three countries—namely Germany, France, and the UK—appear to occupy more space in perceptions at the elite level. Starting with Germany, the prevailing view was that Germany—one of the ‘big four’ of the EU together with France, Italy and, the UK (on its way to leaving the Union)—is a central actor when it comes to EU decision-making, thus steering the direction of Turkey’s accession process, especially with its public call to terminate the talks. It was perceived that whenever German governments were supportive, relations moved forward, otherwise the progress remained in stalemate. ‘Germany and France interpreted Turkey’s accession to the EU as a “civilization problem”. This developed a cumulative reaction in Turkey.’⁴²

‘Germany’s position to Turkey seems complicated as it has not made up its mind on how it should approach Turkey. This is a rivalry of a developed and a developing country; especially from the side of Germany. Despite the disputes, Germany considers Turkey an important partner.’⁴³

41 Interviewee 13: Academic, male, Diyarbakır, January 2018.

42 Interviewee 3: Senior academic, researcher in CSO sector, male, Istanbul, December 2017.

43 Interviewee 1: Senior official on EU affairs, male, Ankara, November 2017.

‘While the pragmatic pattern of German and Turkish relations was accentuated during the interviews in terms of the traditionally dense political, societal, and economic linkages, 2018 is seen a recovery period for both sides, which are dependent on each other on the issues of migration and security.’⁴⁴

France is perceived to be placing more priority on its relations with Turkey compared to the time of the Sarkozy (2007–2012) and Hollande (2012–17) administrations, despite President Emmanuel Macron’s statement on ‘no prospect’ for Turkey’s EU accession.

‘Thinking of Macron’s political gesture, France appears to take a warmer stance towards Turkey now, yet his move may not bring about significant changes in Europe’s attitude unless Germany is in.’⁴⁵

‘If France can keep itself distanced from populist rhetoric, this will help make progress on averting anti-Turkey sentiments in Europe.’⁴⁶

Particular emphasis was put on co-operation with France on the migration crisis and counterterrorism efforts, notably against ISIS. The defence sector is another field where Turkey and France are trying to boost collaboration, one example being Turkey’s 2018 deal with the French–Italian joint venture Eurosam on air and missile defence systems.⁴⁷ It was however noted that the improving relations are not expected to bring progress on Turkey’s membership, but merely influence the bilateral ties.

Among European actors, the UK, whose days as an EU member state are numbered, has historically been open to Turkey joining the EU. The UK’s position to Turkey is generally viewed positively, including its acknowledging stance on Turkey’s move to secure its borders from the perceived security threats: ‘The UK is a good ally of Turkey in Europe, sharing Turkey’s concerns especially on security and terrorism.’⁴⁸

44 Interviewee 13: Academic, male, Diyarbakır, January 2018.

45 Interviewee 11: Researcher on EU affairs, female, Istanbul, January 2018.

46 Interviewee 16: Researcher at an NGO, male, Istanbul, February 2018.

47 See Cyril Altemeyer and Leigh Thomas, ‘Turkey Awards Missile System Study to Franco-Italian Group, Turkish Firms’, in *Reuters*, 5 January 2018, <https://reut.rs/2CE9IUf>.

48 Interviewee 16: Researcher at an NGO, male, Istanbul, February 2018.

The Brexit process is understood as an important factor in future relations with Turkey, as the UK is now in need of ‘more friends and trading partners outside of Europe’⁴⁹ and is seen to prioritize bilateral relations on regional security and trade. Being the second largest export market for Turkey,⁵⁰ the UK is expected to remain in the spotlight as far as economic partnership is concerned.

Despite the volatility in relations, the ‘organic bond’ between Turkey and the Union was underscored, which was said to constitute a solid basis to develop mutual confidence, as well as the continuous diplomatic dialogue, which is believed to add vitality to the relations and accelerate progress on main policy areas such as foreign policy, trade, security, and migration.

‘Sociologically-speaking, breaking ties with the EU would be difficult for Turkey. A certain part of people in the country is in favour of Europe for specific motivations, mostly education and tourism.’⁵¹

‘Despite the fact that the EU has been convulsed with its own problems, there is still a demographic which sees the EU a threshold to sustain stability.’⁵²

Referring to the possible gains of the integration process from the side of the public, it was put forward that the EU’s leverage can be reinforced as long as the Union is willing to take steps towards advancement in certain policy areas, especially on visa liberalization, which is further detailed in the following sections. This tendency was also said to exist among the business community with the expectation of improvement in Turkey–EU relations as well as in relations with EU member states, in line with the economic considerations.

However, the interviewees also pointed to the psychological ground of the public attitude with reference to cultural identity, more

49 Ayşe Üstünel Yırcalı, ‘Europe and the Syrian Conflict: Policies and Perceptions’, in *PODEM Publications*, September 2017, p. 35, <http://podem.org.tr/?p=4552>.

50 Turkish Statistical Institute, ‘Foreign Trade Statistics, November 2018’, in *TurkStat Press Releases*, No. 27794 (31 December 2018), <http://www.turkstat.gov.tr/PreHaberBultenleri.do?id=27794>. See also Margarethe Theseira, *Bilateral Trade between Turkey and the UK*, DAC Beachcroft, March 2017, <https://www.dacbeachcroft.com/media/823304/bilateral-trade-between-turkey-and-the-uk.pdf>.

51 Interviewee 7: Journalist, author, male, Istanbul, December 2017.

52 Interviewee 11: Researcher on EU affairs, female, Istanbul, January 2018.

specifically the debate on the impact of Turkey's EU membership on European identity and multiculturalism.⁵³ The argument was that at the very beginning, accession to the EU was perceived as an asset for Turkey to achieve its foreign policy objective of 'Westernization', which in return triggered the question of 'Are we European?' among the public.⁵⁴ Considering the fact that the changing international and regional context surrounding Turkey has led it to strengthen ties with its neighbours and function as a regional actor, Turkey's inclusion in the EU is now expected to be perceived to be a possible gain for the Union, especially addressing the challenges on cultural and religious diversity.

2.3 *Co-operation and policy areas with the EU*

The dynamics of the relations have evolved over a number of policy areas under the influence of the changing political and economic situation in both Europe and Turkey along with international and regional dynamics. In the elite survey the most highlighted policy issues for co-operation between the EU and Turkey can be discussed under four categories, namely trade and economy, visa liberalization, migration and security, and civil society.

Trade and economy: In broad terms, Turkey and the EU rely on solid economic and commercial ties, with Turkey being the EU's fourth-largest export destination and fifth-largest import source, respectively with 84.5 billion euro and 69.8 billion euro worth of trade, according to 2017 figures.⁵⁵ Because economic relations are subject to political influence, the nature of the business environment in both Turkey and the EU is seen to play a vital role vis-à-vis perceptions. Given the current outlook of EU–Turkey relations, although trade relations with individual

53 See Meltem Müftüleri Baç, 'The European Union and Turkey: Democracy, Multiculturalism and European Identity', in *RECON Online Working Papers Series*, No. 2011/20 (July 2011), <http://www.reconproject.eu/projectweb/portalproject/AbstractRECONwp1120.html>.

54 Interviewees 7 and 8.

55 See European Commission DG Trade website: *Countries and Regions: Turkey*, <https://europa.eu/!Kr48Jd>.

EU states are continuing, these bilateral economic relations are seen as unable to provide any added value to the future of EU–Turkey relations.

It was further commented that European companies adopt a relatively principled attitude to Turkey whenever the relations are strained, while Turkish companies have a ‘pro-business’ approach, setting political and economic interests apart from each other.⁵⁶ ‘There is a high level of economic rationality in Turkey, and the EU is aware of this.’⁵⁷

The ‘pro-business’ attitude within Turkey’s business community was also mentioned as a factor facilitating the ‘resilience’ of Turkish companies. It was understood that Turkish companies opt for diversifying the market place and explore new investment areas if the political climate poses a challenge against their operational zones, as previously witnessed in the Russia–Turkey jet crisis.⁵⁸

Looking at the current challenges for economic relations, the modernization of the Customs Union constitutes one of the primary areas of concern. Officials pointed to the ‘mutual benefits’ of the renewal of the agreement by extending its scope to include public procurement, services, and agricultural sectors (i.e., beyond the processed agricultural products) with possible economic growth for both sides.⁵⁹ The commentators indicated the lack of consensus within the EU on whether to start the talks or not, especially with the opposition of Germany, linking the start

56 The foreign trade figures provided by the Turkish Statistical Institute appear to support this argument. Despite the fact that Turkey’s relations with the EU and major EU member states, notably Germany, have undergone a period of high tensions in the last three years, exports to the EU showed a 10.9 percent increase in 2018 compared to the previous year, while the main partner for exports was Germany with over 1.4 billion dollars, followed by the UK and the Italy as the second and third. See Turkish Statistical Institute, ‘Foreign Trade Statistics, November 2018’, cit.

57 Interviewee 15: Businessman, male, Istanbul, February 2018.

58 See ‘Russia Drives Turkey to Seek out New Markets’, in *Daily Sabah*, 9 February 2016, <http://sabahdai.ly/nQzqhh>.

59 See BKP Development, Panteia and AESA, *Study of the EU-Turkey Bilateral Preferential Trade Framework, Including the Customs Union, and an Assessment of Its Possible Enhancement. Final Report*, Brussels, European Commission DG Trade, 26 October 2016, <http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/html/155240.htm>.

of the negotiations to the decline in democratic norms and the human rights situation in Turkey.

On the other side, the deepening of the Customs Union is seen as an advantage for Turkey's regulatory and legal harmonization to the EU *acquis* on trade, especially on attracting more European investors to the Turkish market.

'Whenever a European company partners with a Turkish one, coherence between the companies' legal and trade legislations is pretty crucial to quickly familiarize with each other's business environment and facilitate future collaboration. Therefore, Turkey's harmonization to EU trade legislation could grow investments.'⁶⁰

Visa liberalization: During the interviews, the comments on the visa liberalization issue were mostly provided by officials, mentioning that Turkey has fulfilled 65 of the total of 72 benchmarks and is pushing for dialogue with the EU on visa-free travel within the Schengen area. As the migrant deal between Turkey and the EU (further discussed in the following sections) promised the acceleration of the visa exemption issue, Turkey expects the EU to take the necessary steps in this direction.

At the time of the interviews, officials stated that a technical committee was preparing a position paper to be submitted to the EU on the progress of the visa dialogue, with a roadmap for the remaining benchmarks yet to be fulfilled.⁶¹ To secure visa-free travel, the remaining benchmarks include the expectations on reforming the country's anti-terrorism legislation, data protection law, law enforcement, and anti-corruption measures in line with the EU recommendations. One expert comment was that to address the benchmark on anti-corruption measurements, a package covering the articles that would conform to the EU's GRECO recommendations might be a possible solution for Turkey.

According to the officials, it is possible to make necessary arrangements for most of the remaining benchmarks, yet the benchmark on the better alignment of Turkey's legislation on terrorism with the EU should be carefully handled considering that the current trajectory of

60 Interviewee 15: Businessman, male, Istanbul, February 2018.

61 See Sevil Erkuş, 'Turkish, EU Leaders to Meet in Bulgaria's Varna', in *Hürriyet Daily News*, 24 March 2018, <http://www.hurriyetaidailynews.com/turkish-eu-leaders-to-meet-in-bulgarias-varna-129232>.

security threats is changing the dynamics of counterterrorism efforts, also from the side of Turkey.

Migration and security: The findings retained from the elite survey demonstrate that the migration issue is where the Union's switch from 'deeper EU integration' to 'realpolitik behaviour' can be observed in its relations with Turkey. To that end, the re-admission agreement between Turkey and the EU—which was put into force in 2016 to curb the strong flow of refugees trying to cross into Europe—was given as a significant example.

Commentators pointed out that the EU constructs the migration issue in the region as a basic 'security threat' against its stability. It was stated that the EU has been unable to offer good living conditions to the refugees taking shelter in certain member states.

'The cumulative impact of migration is politically destabilizing the EU.'⁶²

'On the migration issue, the EU has failed; the hosting conditions of refugees, as witnessed in Greece, are rather bad.'⁶³

While the migration deal has significantly discouraged the flow of refugees in the Mediterranean,⁶⁴ experts argued that Turkey, which is hosting the largest population of Syrian refugees of more than 3.6 million, will continue to be on the front line of the refugee crisis with its commendable efforts on humanitarian aid and support for the Syrian people in the country.⁶⁵

62 Interviewee 9: Senior academic on EU affairs, male, Istanbul, January 2018.

63 Interviewee 12: Research fellow at a think-tank, male, Skype, January 2018.

64 See European Commission, *EU–Turkey Statement Two Year On*, cit.

65 To provide humanitarian aid and access to accommodation, healthcare, education, food, and social activities, Turkey has spent more than 30 billion on the Syrian refugees since the civil war in Syria broke out in 2011. See 'Turkey Spends \$30 Billion on Syrian Refugees: FM', in *Hürriyet Daily News*, 6 November 2017, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-to-continue-responding-to-humanitarian-crises-121982>. As for the EU, the Facility for Refugees committed 3 billion euro, out of which more than 1.93 billion has been disbursed. The EU announced an additional tranche of 3 billion euro at the EU–Turkey leaders' meeting in Varna. See European Commission, *EU Facility for Refugees in Turkey. List of Projects Committed/Decided, Contracted, Disbursed*, Status on 4 October 2018, <https://>

‘As long as the regional conflicts continue, co-operation between the two sides will have to remain over security and migration. Turkey acts as a ‘station’ for migration and security.’⁶⁶

At the official level, it was noted that although this agreement has additional action points including acceleration of the fulfilment of visa liberalization and re-energizing Turkey’s accession process by opening new chapters, these two commitments have yet to be realized.

Aside from these, some commentators raised the lack of an efficient border management system by the EU and the disintegration of a common EU response to the migration issue.

‘The Union has not found a durable solution to the refugee crisis. Border management is a crucial security matter for the EU, however an effective regulation has still not been put into force.’⁶⁷

There is a common expectation that the EU should act more through development projects and budget support to raise the living standards of refugees in the host countries including Turkey.

Civil society: With the proliferation of civil society discourse in Turkey in 1990s, the EU became one of the stakeholders in this particular field, assuming ‘the role as a contributor to [Turkey’s] democratic consolidation’.⁶⁸ Accordingly, the Union has supported the programmes on public–civil society co-operation as well as civil society capacity-building through the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA)⁶⁹

ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/facility_table.pdf; and Georgi Gotev, ‘Varna to Become Permanent Venue for EU-Turkey Talks’, in *EUROACTIV*, 27 March 2018, <https://www.euractiv.com/?p=1225251>.

66 Interviewee 13: Academic, male, Diyarbakır, January 2018.

67 Interviewee 6: Academic, female, Istanbul, December 2017.

68 Emre Toros, ‘Understanding the Role of Civil Society as an Agent for Democratic Consolidation: The Turkish Case’, in *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (2007), pp. 395-415. See also Ayhan Kaya and Raffaele Marchetti, ‘Europeanization, Framing Competition and Civil Society in the EU and Turkey’, in *Global Turkey in Europe Working Papers*, No. 6 (February 2014), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/1594>.

69 The total allocation for Turkey under IPA II between 2014 and 2020 amounts to 4,453.9 million euro. The priority sectors include ‘Democracy and governance’, ‘Rule of law and fundamental rights’, ‘Environment and climate action’, ‘Rural

or direct funds from the EU Delegation in Turkey, which also targets programmes on specific areas ranging from human rights to education and agriculture to gender rights.

As far as the Union's initial impact on Turkey's civil society environment is concerned, an EU affairs official commented that the EU facilitated the co-ordination culture and operations of associations through legislative reforms, which were put into effect in line with Turkey's membership deal. This was followed by the establishment of national development agencies, which helped Turkey to form its own strategies in the civil society sector. Some of the commentators, however, shared the view that the Union has increasingly diverted from its inclusive approach while addressing civil society groups in Turkey:

'The Union seems to pursue political and identity-oriented priorities while supporting civil society. However, this approach contradicts with the needs and realities of Turkey.'⁷⁰

'The EU's civil society initiatives no longer represent the Union's core ideals or its identity of Europeanization. The civil society collaboration with Turkey could be better than its present status. More activity channels can be created.'⁷¹

Here, the main criticism lies in the EU's selective attitude, which was said to fail in reaching varied social groups within Turkey, and therefore appears to be unable to contribute to the larger segment of the society.

It was further understood from the interview discussions that EU support to civil society in Turkey is among the main priorities of its financial aid, which is seen a legitimate involvement. Since 2006, Turkey has received 54 million euro in financial aid from the EU for the EU–Turkey Civil Society Dialogue.⁷²

Within the IPA regulatory framework, the EU aid is implemented through decentralized management; however it was noted during the

development', 'Innovation', and 'Energy'. See European Commission website: *Turkey – Financial Assistance under IPA II*, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/instruments/funding-by-country/turkey_en.

70 Interviewee 1: Senior official on EU affairs, male, Ankara, November 2017.

71 Interviewee 2: Specialist on EU affairs, male, Ankara, November 2017.

72 See IPA I and II Programming: https://www.ab.gov.tr/ipa-i-amp-ipa-ii-programming_45627_en.html

interviews that there is an ongoing negotiation to centralize the fund management by directly assigning the EU Delegation in Ankara as sole authority. According to the officials, this change could reduce the state's level of involvement and impact on the EU-backed civil society activities, especially in those aiming to contribute to public policies. Regarding the IPA funds to Turkey, some commentators pointed to the cut in the 2018 budget,⁷³ mentioning that this move has a symbolic importance and is being used as political leverage by the EU.

Throughout the interviews, the sustainability of CSO activities between the EU and Turkey was highlighted with the expectation of keeping away from politicization, and instead strengthening Turkey's capacity to absorb funds, achieve results and implement CSO projects in a timely manner—an important shortcoming also raised by the officials. Commentators similarly mentioned the need to improve the efficiency of civil society groups in Turkey, which has been affected by politically volatile times in recent years: 'In a working democracy, civil society brings fruitful results, otherwise it may become a target. Civil society should play a greater role in shaping the dynamics between society and the state in Turkey.'⁷⁴

In terms of gender perspective, female respondents were generally more enthusiastic on the advancement of CSO initiatives especially on environmental issues and women's rights, hinting at the relational context between gender equality and environmental development.

'There is a more visible unity among women in Turkey, which enhances social development. The unity over environmental concerns and animal rights has also heightened. These areas do not directly challenge established political interests, so they can more easily flourish.'⁷⁵

73 See European Parliament, *EU Budget 2018 Approved: Support for Youth, Growth, Security*, 30 November 2017, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20171127IPR88936>.

74 Interviewee 10: Expert, academic on EU affairs, female, Istanbul, January 2018.

75 Interviewee 8: Academic, female, Ankara, December 2017.

2.4 *Perceptions on the Mediterranean region and the role of the EU therein*

At the elite level, the Mediterranean region is perceived as a junction point of migration, energy, and trade, as well as a tense space fuelled by political, economic, and social instability. As further retained from the interviews, the outbreak of Arab uprisings left a power vacuum and a proxy struggle in the region, and there was a spread of rampant disinformation that further provoked the developments.

When asked about the concrete geopolitical challenges the region is facing, the commentators raised the following: (1) demographic challenges in the North African countries pushing migration, along with women and youth problems; (2) lack of democracy; (3) proliferation of terrorist groups; (4) continuation of proxy states; (5) the Syrian crisis; (6) sectarian conflicts; and (7) fragile domestic economies and war economy.

Particular emphasis was placed on the lack of opportunities for youth in the Mediterranean: ‘The youth in this region is a big potential on its own. Together with income equality, being unable to meet the expectations of the youth is fuelling the problems.’⁷⁶

With the dissolution of power in the region, notably following the Arab uprisings, three types of actors are seen to have a say in the region’s future: (1) major global powers including Russia and the US; (2) the current monarchies and authoritarian regimes; and (3) the dissatisfied society with potential to effect change.

According to the respondents, the uprising showed that the EU is not an actor with a capability to change the direction of developments in the region on its own. The Union is not counted among the ‘game changers’, and instead two global powers, the US and Russia, are often mentioned as actors shaping the regional dynamics. ‘The US, Russia and also Saudi Arabia maintain political leverage in the region. For the US and Russia, it is to count them [within the alliances of] US–Israel and Russia–Iran as these countries have strong bilateral relations.’⁷⁷

Some commentators drew attention to the lack of military defence power within the EU member states, which has led them remain out of

76 Interviewee 5: Researcher in CSO sector, male, Istanbul, December 2017.

77 Interviewee 1: Senior official on EU affairs, male, Ankara, November 2017.

the scene, particularly in the Syrian crisis. It was further acknowledged that the EU was diplomatically absent and unable to form a tangible policy on Syria with the outbreak of the civil war because of the lack of a unified position among the member states; and that its policies remained within the orbit of the US at the time of the Arab uprisings.⁷⁸

Furthermore, the interviews support the argument that the Union's discourse towards the region 'has shifted from a normative/transformational region-building approach to a more interest-driven, pragmatic and bilateral one'.⁷⁹

According to the commentators, this has shown itself particularly within the context of the refugee influx and the Arab uprisings. A senior expert stated that when it comes to the Mediterranean countries, the EU follows the manifesto of 'stop migration to boost trade'.

Almost all commentators shared the view that the EU adopted an interest-driven approach during the uprisings, and lost its credibility by adopting a favouring attitude to autocratic regimes for the sake of its security interests. It was further noted that human rights and democracy issues have become marginalized items in the Union's foreign policy agenda.

'The EU's narrative on Arab uprisings initially focused on democratization efforts, yet the Union diverted from its strategy later. In the case of Egypt, what the EU did went down as a demerit in its history.'⁸⁰

'From a certain point of view, the Arab uprisings would 'crown' the Western values, however it was realized that the region's needs were different from a Western-style democracy promotion.'⁸¹

'The EU showed a different level of commitment to its neighbourhood policy. It was first willing to change the scene, but failed to achieve its goals, [like] stability,

78 See Ayşe Üstünel Yırcalı, 'Europe and the Syrian Conflict: Policies and Perceptions', cit.

79 Münevver Cebeci and Tobias Schumacher, 'The EU's Constructions of the Mediterranean (2003-2017)', in *MEDRESET Working Papers*, No. 3 April 2017), p. 2.

80 Interviewee 3: Senior academic, researcher in CSO sector, male, Istanbul, December 2017.

81 Interviewee 18: Senior official on MENA affairs, male, Ankara, February 2018.

modernization, and capacity-building. The Arab Spring created another room, yet this time the EU left its initial approach.⁸²

The national interests of EU member states were also seen as another factor that obstructs the Union in finding middle ground, and acting in coherence towards the Southern countries. One expert pointed to France's unilateral diplomatic intervention last year over the Libyan crisis when it bypassed Italy, the co-ordinator of Libya's diplomatic actions at the EU and the UN level.⁸³ 'Whenever a crisis triggers, EU actors focus on their national interests, which is the main factor behind the existing discrepancies. They might have legitimate concerns, yet to face the challenges, they need to compromise.'⁸⁴

Most of the commentators referred to the ineffectiveness of the ENP or the UfM, criticizing that the Union has imitated its own practices in the partner countries without anticipating the needs and expectations of the societies there.

'The aim of the EU's neighbourhood policy was to create "a friendship circle," yet the region is in a circle of fire now. The EU's neighbourhood policy did not prove efficient to eliminate the regional threats.'⁸⁵

'The EU seems to be unable to address the larger population in the Mediterranean; for example it appears much closer to secular groups in Tunisia. The Union is not a power for change in MENA as it was once in Eastern Europe.'⁸⁶

To address the current problems more effectively, the EU is also seen as lacking a 'holistic approach' to the region:

'EU countries regularly gather to discuss the Mediterranean, yet they always express all too common concerns, which are important, but they are unable to look at the region as a whole. And because the region is huge, sub-regional divisions can be formed with relevant countries on specific themes.'⁸⁷

82 Interviewee 12: Research fellow at a think-tank, male, Skype, January 2018.

83 See Crispian Balmer, 'Italy Upset over French Diplomatic Intervention in Libya', in *Reuters*, 24 July 2017, <http://reut.rs/2uRiRo5>.

84 Interviewee 16: Researcher at an NGO, male, Istanbul, February 2018.

85 Interviewee 11: Researcher on EU affairs, female, Istanbul, January 2018.

86 Interviewee 19: Researcher at an NGO, male, Istanbul, March 2018.

87 Interviewee 9: Senior academic on EU affairs, male, Istanbul, January 2018.

With respect to Turkey's involvement in the Mediterranean region, senior officials noted that as a member of the UfM, Turkey regularly joins the committee meetings and efforts to strengthen co-operation among the countries in the region. It was further observed that Turkey's engagement with the Mediterranean region, notably the North African countries, is constructed at a country-specific level, which could be attributed to the lack of an inclusive policy approach to the region.⁸⁸ A senior official stated that the level of Turkey's diplomatic dialogue with the North African countries varies, with Algeria and Tunisia appearing to be higher than the others, yet Turkey has established trade relations with the North African countries, where the relations are seen to go beyond political interests due to the cultural legacy of the former Ottoman Empire in most of the region.

Conclusion: Future steps on EU–Turkey and Euro-Mediterranean relations

This chapter set out to investigate the perception of the elite actors in Turkey towards the EU and the effectiveness of its policies in the Mediterranean region by the use of an elite survey.

To recap the main points of the survey findings discussed above, according to the elite perception, the Union occupies an established space in the political agenda of Turkey despite cyclical ups and downs which are shaped not only by the direction of the relationship between Turkey and individual member states, but also the regional and international developments affecting both sides.

It is thus possible to argue that despite the challenging journey of EU–Turkey relations, there are major themes like the issues of regional stability and security—under which the migration/refugee crisis and counterterrorism can be mentioned—where the EU and Turkey can strive for joint action to manage the problems in their mutual neighbourhood.

88 Aybars Görgülü and Gülşah Dark, 'Turkey, the EU and the Mediterranean', cit.

In terms of the EU's presence in the region, however, the common view is that the EU is seen as an 'introvert actor' and not a 'game-changer', with less political leverage than the US and Russia as stakeholders.

In light of the findings, the following recommendations based on the interviewees' responses can contribute to the EU's policy-making efforts on its relations with Turkey and the Mediterranean region by highlighting policy priorities for future collaboration in areas where interests are converging.

Expectations on Turkey–EU relations

Reaching an agreement on a precise roadmap for Turkey's EU membership deal: Despite the cyclical nature of Turkey's relationship with the EU, there is an immediate need to settle the ambiguous nature of Turkey's path to membership, which will require mutual efforts. To recommit to the process, while Turkey is expected to revive political reforms along with improvements in the area of the rule of law and fundamental freedoms, the Union is expected to move on the negotiation process by re-opening the blocked chapters.

Encouraging joint efforts for an efficient burden-sharing system to tackle the refugee crisis: As understood from the elite survey findings, the EU should help shoulder the responsibility for refugee protection through long-term solutions that would also consider the economic dimension of the migration crisis, which has been putting a burden on host countries including Turkey.

Fostering close co-operation on regional stability and security: The next recommendation would be ensuring further steps in security co-operation with Turkey, which could also serve the EU's interests at home and in the Mediterranean, where the Union is seen to require a politically-stable neighbourhood. When asked about Turkey's domestic and regional challenges, almost all commentators acknowledged terrorism within the country and across the borders, an issue where Turkey expects support from its European allies for counterterrorism and conflict resolution.

Enhancing knowledge and experience exchange at the bureaucratic level: Senior officials interviewed for this research expressed the need to improve bureaucratic functioning and decision-making process in state institutions through further collaboration with EU institutions, especially on excelling in project management (e.g., for civil society programmes). This recommendation was also heard from the business-sector professionals, indicating that the expert training programmes for ministerial specialists to become familiar with trade legislation contribute to the harmonization process at a technical level, and boost communication between both sides.

Promoting constructive political discourse: The findings retained from the elite survey demonstrate that the political discourse of EU member states shapes the direction of public perception towards the Union and the related countries. While the interviewees highlighted the politicization of Turkey in the European Parliament and the domestic agenda of specific EU member states, further steps are expected from both sides to improve bilateral relations—which would positively influence the direction of the political discourse towards Turkey without disproportionate politicization.

Pushing efforts on mutual achievements in technical negotiations: Keeping up the good work with the EU at the technical level is expected to act as a leverage to maintain a positive rhetoric on political dialogue, for which the two major technical negotiations, modernization of the Customs Union and visa liberalization, play an essential role. An additional recommendation is to concentrate on non-political chapters, most of which address reforms on trade and economy. Facilitating the implementation of technical negotiations could foster high-level dialogue initiatives between the two parties.

On the broader Mediterranean region

Eliminate internal challenges to addressing fast-changing international and regional conditions: To balance its short- and long-term approaches to the Mediterranean region, experts argued that the EU should first resolve its internal problems: (1) the need for sustaining solidarity within

the member states; (2) resolving economic challenges; and (3) regaining the required capacity to solve the internal crisis it faces. The EU should further increase its capability to absorb crises and sustain resilience within itself.

Conflict mediation: To adequately address its Southern neighbourhood, the EU should remain involved in high-level diplomacy in the region and exert efforts to open diplomatic channels within regional powers. Some commentators pointed to the EU's mediator role in the Iran nuclear talks, which was seen to be a promising approach to improve its leverage on foreign policy and conflict mediation in the broader region.

Place more focus on the societal dynamics and expectations in the region: Commentators put forward that while forming its policies addressing the region, the EU is expected to give greater consideration to the societal dynamics as well as the demands and expectations of varying demographics, including youth and women.

Strengthening civil society in the region: This recommendation was particularly linked to the EU's role in the Syrian crisis. Considering the EU's weakened political influence in the Middle East, the Union is expected to be more active in Syria's reconstruction and economic development in the post-war period. To achieve this, the Union could strengthen and improve the capacity of the local civil society groups, which will be an important stakeholder of the reconstruction process.

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Annex: List of Interviewees

- Interviewee 1: Senior official on EU affairs, male, Ankara, November 2017
Interviewee 2: Specialist on EU affairs, male, Ankara, November 2017
Interviewee 3: Senior academic, researcher in CSO sector, male, Istanbul, December 2017
Interviewee 4: Academic, researcher in CSO sector, male, Istanbul, December 2017
Interviewee 5: Researcher in CSO sector, male, Istanbul, December 2017
Interviewee 6: Academic, female, Istanbul, December 2017
Interviewee 7: Journalist, author, male, Istanbul, December 2017
Interviewee 8: Academic, female, Ankara, December 2017
Interviewee 9: Senior academic on EU affairs, male, Istanbul, January 2018
Interviewee 10: Expert, academic on EU affairs, female, Istanbul, January 2018
Interviewee 11: Researcher on EU affairs, female, Istanbul, January 2018
Interviewee 12: Research fellow at a think-tank, male, Skype, January 2018
Interviewee 13: Academic, male, Diyarbakır, January 2018
Interviewee 14: EU affairs counsellor, male, phone, February 2018
Interviewee 15: Businessman, male, Istanbul, February 2018
Interviewee 16: Researcher at an NGO, male, Istanbul, February 2018
Interviewee 17: Senior official on EU affairs, male, Ankara, February 2018
Interviewee 18: Senior official on MENA affairs, male, Ankara, February 2018
Interviewee 19: Researcher at an NGO, male, Istanbul, March 2018

Chapter 3: Egyptian Elite's Views on Egypt, and Its Relations with the EU

This chapter provides a summary of the elite survey pursued in Egypt, where a total of 31 interviews were conducted in accordance with the concept paper for this particular research.¹ Of the interviewees, 16 were male, 12 were female and two individuals chose not to provide any demographic information. Access problems were experienced at the official level, in regard to anonymity and as people are wary of internationally-funded projects in Egypt since the passing of the new law with respect to foreign funding. Questions focused on perceptions of the EU, its member states and their policies; perceptions of the Mediterranean and key issues in this region; as well as issues specifically related to Egypt.

Regarding methodology, the initial list of interviewees was compiled by the researchers with oversight and approval. The list was later amended with new names as some individuals who were contacted either did not respond or stated that they did not wish to participate in the interview. The compiling of names was in accordance with categories of the types of individuals which were desired to be interviewed. These categories included: policy-makers, activists, artists, journalists, designers, business and banking professionals, start-up sector professionals, humanitarians, and academics. Individuals were contacted by email primarily, with full information on the purpose of the interview and the consent form. At the interview, individuals first received information on the purpose of

1 See Zeynep Gülöz Bakır and Gülşah Dark, "Review of Surveys on Euro-Mediterranean Relations, and an Introduction to the Elite Survey in MEDRESET", in *MEDRESET Methodology and Concept Papers*, No. 5 (July 2017), <http://www.medreset.eu/?p=13424>

the interview. The interviews lasted one hour and followed the interview structure and questions that were provided.

As mentioned in the concept paper, the three main questions of the project focus on how elites perceive European policies in the Mediterranean area, how they perceive the Mediterranean region, and the major policy issues that they see.²

To briefly summarize the findings, our interviews reveal that in Egypt, the elite holds a mixed perception of the EU, as an area of the world with a high standard of living, but also as an entity with increasingly pragmatic, security-oriented policies, including toward Egypt. In Egypt, the interlocutors mentioned the refugee crisis as a key representative factor of the Mediterranean currently. They also saw the Mediterranean as an area in conflict, with threats of extremism and terrorism. Within Egypt, the interlocutors saw the ongoing instability which results in unemployment, lack of human rights, a more oppressive regime, and the ongoing threats and realities of terrorism. Given this context, they mentioned economic development and civil society as key areas for co-operation with the EU.

In the first section, background data is provided on the demographics, history, politics, and economy of the country. The history of relations between the EU and Egypt is provided as a timeline. In the second section, we discuss our data pertaining to: perceptions towards EU policies in the MENA; an analysis of the challenges confronting Egypt; expectations for the EU's future role in Egypt; and co-operation areas with the EU. A list of anonymized interviewees with interview dates is provided. In the conclusion, we summarize the findings of the interviews.

2 Ibid.

1. Country profile of Egypt

1.1 Demographics

The Arab Republic of Egypt, a country of just over one million square kilometres situated at the north-eastern corner of the African continent abutting the Mediterranean and Red Seas, is dominated by the Nile River, its valley and delta. It is in these confined regions that the vast majority of its population lives. According to the Egyptian Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics, this is estimated at 98 million, and with a median age of 24.8, continues to expand rapidly.³ Approximately 40 percent of the population is urban, and the majority of the remainder rural. Egypt is about 90 percent Sunni Muslim and 10 percent Coptic Christian, the latter forming the largest Christian community in the Middle East.

1.2 Relevant stakeholders at domestic, regional, and global levels

The Egyptian republic was established in 1952, and the military that seized power that year continues to be the dominant force in the country's political system.⁴ The internal security forces are also an important player in their own right. In recent decades the business community has become increasingly influential, often on the basis of intimate ties to the state and political leadership.⁵ The bureaucracy and clerics represent subordinate rather than independent sources of power,

3 Egyptian Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics (CAPMAS), *Statistical Yearbook – Population*, September 2018, https://www.capmas.gov.eg/Pages/Publications.aspx?page_id=5104&YearID=23188.

4 A. Bernard Knapp, *The History and Culture of Ancient Western Asia and Egypt*, Chicago, Dorsey Press, 1988; Selma Botman, *Egypt from Independence to Revolution, 1919-1952*, Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 1991.

5 Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2002; Steven Heydemann (ed.), *Networks of Privilege in the Middle East. The Politics of Economic Reform Revisited*, Basingstoke and New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

but are not without influence. Whilst organized political opposition has been proscribed by law or otherwise undermined for most of the republic's existence, the Muslim Brotherhood is considered the leading such force although it has been unprecedentedly persecuted by Egypt's current rulers.⁶

At the regional level, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are considered the leading stakeholders in Egypt, primarily on account of their political sponsorship of the current regime, and heavy financial investment in it. Qatar, and to a lesser extent Turkey, which supported the previous government led by the Muslim Brotherhood, have by contrast experienced a deliberate eradication of their influence. Although Egypt concluded a formal peace treaty with Israel in 1979, relations were initially slow to develop. In recent years they have however reached exceptional levels of co-ordination, particularly in the security sphere.

Internationally, the US has been Egypt's closest ally since the late 1970s. The US is Egypt's largest trade partner. The EU is also a key partner, particularly in economic terms. EU–Egypt trade has more than doubled from 11.8 billion euro in 2004 to 27.9 billion euro in 2017. The EU's main imports of goods from Egypt in 2017 were fuel and mining products (3.2 billion euro), chemicals (1.3 billion euro), and textiles and clothing (8.6 billion euro). The EU's main exports to Egypt were machinery and transport equipment (6.9 billion euro), chemicals (3.1 billion euro), fuel and mining products (2.6 billion euro), and agricultural products (1.3 billion euro).⁷

Egypt has more recently also experienced significant improvements in its relations with Russia, from which it imports a large amount of wheat. Egypt is the largest buyer of Russian goods, more than China at 1.8 billion euro, according to reports from the Russian Export Center

6 Abd al-Monein Said Aly and Manfred W. Wenner, "Modern Islamic Reform Movements: The Muslim Brotherhood in Contemporary Egypt", in *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (Summer 1982), pp. 336-361; Eric Trager, "The Unbreakable Muslim Brotherhood", in *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 90, No. 5 (September/October 2011), pp. 114-126.

7 European Commission DG Trade, *European Union, Trade in Goods with Egypt*, 16 April 2018, <http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/html/113375.htm>.

in 2017.⁸ Russia is also planning to begin exporting more construction materials to Egypt.

1.3 A chronology of key events since the start of the Arab uprisings

Egypt has played a central role in the region's upheaval virtually from the outset. On 25 January 2011, several weeks of sustained mass protests inspired by the successful uprising in Tunisia commenced in Cairo and elsewhere in the country, forcing the resignation of President Hosni Mubarak on 8 February and forestalling the succession of Security Chief Omar Suleiman. Power was assumed by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), which ruled by decree pending parliamentary and presidential elections in 2012, then won by the Muslim Brotherhood.

The Morsi administration which subsequently assumed office appeared to herald the emergence of the Brotherhood from opposition to regional power. Although fiercely criticized by its detractors, it also represented the most democratic period in Egypt's history since 1952. The Muslim Brotherhood was elected in democratic elections in Egypt in 2012. They came into power both through parliamentary and presidential elections. Yet less than a year later, in July 2013, the popular-supported military removal of Morsi took place; a month later the events of Rabaa of perhaps 800 Brotherhood supporters in one of Cairo's squares presaged a brutal crackdown on the movement, and thereafter on opposition and dissent in any form.⁹ This also led to the strengthening of a jihadist threat in Sinai which has extended into periodic attacks in Cairo and elsewhere in the Egyptian mainland. Sisi has since replaced his uniform with a suit and tie, and conducted two elections that lacked strong candidates of opposition and had a very low voter turnout, most recently in March 2018. It is generally recognized that regional powers are more heavily invested in the outcome of Egypt's political transition (and its reversal)

8 "Egypt Becomes Biggest Market for Russian Goods", in *RT*, 21 February 2018, <https://on.rt.com/8z mh>.

9 Shadi Hamid, "The Massacre That Ended the Arab Spring", in *The Atlantic*, 14 August 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/08/arab-spring-rabaa-massacre/536847>.

than elsewhere in the Arab world on account of the country's influence on others in the region.

1.4 Main geopolitical challenges

Egypt faces a variety of geopolitical challenges, some of which are perceived to be existential in nature. Potentially the most important derives from Ethiopia's construction of the Renaissance Dam, which could significantly reduce the downstream flow of the Nile providing Egypt with virtually all of its already increasingly-scarce water resources. Climate change threatens to erode not only the Nile Delta, vital to Egypt's economy, food supply, and infrastructure, but also to make a 'northern passage' from Asia to Europe viable and thus reduce reliance on the Suez Canal which is a key source of revenue for the Egyptian state. More immediately, Egypt is facing a determined jihadist threat in the Sinai Peninsula that at times extends into the Egyptian mainland and which it has thus far been unable to bring to an end.

To the east, the Gaza Strip adjoining Egypt's Sinai Peninsula ensures that Cairo will continue to have direct influence—and therefore be continuously involved in—on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. To the west, Libya's descent into anarchy and hosting of various jihadist groups pose a significant security concern to Egypt. Egypt has been accused of supplying weapons to armed factions in Libya. Other regional powers are accused of similar actions. To the south, Egypt has yet to resolve longstanding challenges in its relationship with Sudan.

1.5 An overview of EU–Egyptian relations

2001: Conclusion of EU–Egyptian Association Agreement.

2004: At the bilateral level, within the framework of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, the Association Agreement entered into force in June 2004, forming the legal basis for EU–Egypt relations.¹⁰

10 Hélène Michou, "EU-Egypt Bilateral Relations: What Scope for Human Rights Advocacy?", in *EuroMed Rights Reports*, June 2016, <https://euomedrights.org/publication/eu-egypt-bilateral-relations-scope-human-rights-advocacy>.

2007: Adoption of EU–Egypt Action Plan, resulting in EU assistance of 1 billion euro during 2007–13 within the framework of the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI).

2011: EU reviews its policies with Egypt due to the Arab Spring. Final review of the neighbourhood policy was published in 2015.

2013: The EU expressed strong concern during the removal of Morsi, holding internal meetings with EU Ambassadors to discuss the event and its repercussions. The EU expressed disapproval of Morsi but was wary in its wording, not meaning to express support for Morsi.

2013: The EU expressed strong concern about the events of Rabaa. Subsequently, the EU suspended aid and arms sales to Egypt; however, individual EU member states were still able to sell arms to Egypt during this time.¹¹

2014: ENPI replaced by European Neighbourhood Instrument.

2017: EU–Egypt Partnership Priorities adopted by EU–Egypt Association Council, superseding 2007 Action Plan.

2017: New Egyptian law on oversight of NGOs prevents many Egyptian organizations from receiving foreign funding, including from the EU.

1.6 The changing structure and nature of interactions with the EU

The EU forms a significant trading partner for Egypt in terms of both exports and imports. Specific numbers were mentioned in the first part of this chapter. EU priorities in its relationship with Egypt have been the promotion of economic development, trade, stable governance, and more recently counter-terrorism and the refugee crisis. Supporting Egyptian–Israeli peace and the Middle East Peace Process are also important rationales for EU relations with Egypt. Enhancing human rights and strengthening civil society have been consistent themes for the EU in its relationship with Egypt but were prioritized only in the immediate aftermath of the 2011 revolution. Since the 2013 removal

11 Human Rights Watch, *All According to Plan. The Rab'a Massacre and Mass Killings of Protesters in Egypt*, August 2014, <https://www.hrw.org/node/256579>.

of Morsi, these have been all but formally overtaken by the gradual normalization of relations with the Sisi regime and co-operation with Cairo's rulers on matters of more immediate interest to the EU and its member states.¹²

These various challenges are complicated by the diminution of Egypt's regional role. Formerly the unquestioned leader of the Arab states and their primary representative in international fora, it today holds this status symbolically at best and has thus seen a dramatic decline in influence in regional and international affairs.

2. Elite Survey: Research findings on Egypt

2.1 *Perceptions towards the EU and its policies in MENA*

Within Egypt, the EU is generally viewed positively by elites, though this as often as not has little to do with perceptions of EU policies in Egypt.

'Socially and economically, the EU has a very positive perception amongst Egyptians, as a representation of high standard of living, wealth, culture, arts, and freedom of practice in general. On the other hand, politically, it is up to the political elites and the government to view and transfer this perception to the public on how they take the EU. This 'take' comes regarding anti or pro its policies, especially if the EU or any of its member states have criticized the government or [withhold] some development of military aid.'¹³

A surgeon who is outside of general political involvement stated the following,

'I personally see the EU as a successful example of economic and political co-operation between countries, despite the recent failings at both. To name three countries: UK (not for long, though), France, Germany. They are generally

12 Judy Dempsey, "Germany Welcomes Egypt's Sisi", in *Judy Dempsey's Strategic Europe*, 1 June 2015, <http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/60260>.

13 Interviewee 1: Communications consultant, male, 2 September 2017.

perceived as examples of democracies, economic opportunities, financial aid, and by some as a source of conspiracy and political interference.¹⁴

Secondly, the EU benefits from not being the US, World Bank, or International Monetary Fund, which are often seen in a more nefarious light.

‘The Egyptians don’t have the same hostility against the EU as they have for the USA. On the contrary, the EU is the greatest example of the successful unity of the developed countries, and the place where all people are trying to travel to, for work or studies.’¹⁵

The cloud to this silver lining is however that it is perceived as a substantially less influential body that plays a much smaller role in Egypt, and that its efforts are, at least in perception, more concentrated on elites than on other actors.

While individual member states are on the whole ranked very highly by Egyptians and for many are aspirational destinations for migration as well, the EU as such is somewhat overshadowed in the Egyptian public consciousness by the more visible policies of key member states, particularly Germany, the UK, France, and—on account of its proximity—Italy. Furthermore, the EU and its member states are often perceived mainly as donors.

‘As workers in the civil society organizations, we see the EU as just donors. In the past few years, the EU became more influential, and this is a good thing. Ordinary people do not exactly know what the EU is doing and what is its job and purpose, or even how many countries are in it. I believe the most important three countries are Germany, Belgium because most of the meetings to take decisions are held in Brussels, and France.’¹⁶

Those more familiar with the EU point out that there are often contradictions between the positions it holds and those of individual member states; Brussels proclaims an agenda of democracy, human

14 Interviewee 26: Surgeon, male, 28 August 2017.

15 Interviewee 6: Journalist and researcher in political economy, male, 6 November 2017.

16 Interviewee 2: Programme manager and monitoring and evaluation officer at major CSO, gender not given, 5 November 2017.

rights, and social equality, while member states conduct relations with the Egyptian government seemingly independently of these values and objectives. The following quote came from an individual well aware of EU workings.

‘During the past 25 years, and after the new European foreign policy, the Middle East had high expectations regarding the co-operation with Europe, and the common policies that emerged in the early 2000s were expected to strengthen the relationships, expand the economic co-operation and solve the illegal immigration problem among others. However, the last ten years witnessed a state of depression; since 2005, the European reactions towards the protests were different. There was no united voice of the EU. There are many problems in the structure of the EU itself. The idea that the individual countries have a powerful voice rather than the EU is very obvious in the leading countries of the EU such as the UK, Germany, or France. After the Arab Spring, this problem became bigger and more complicated as the EU has to deliver common reactions towards the events in 2011/2012, such as guiding reactions; on the other hand, the other countries are reacting like independent countries with their own foreign policies and adapted some reactions towards the Islamists and the old regimes. [...] I believe that, generally, the EU is now in the phase of redefining itself, especially after the separation of the UK. The individual countries are still strong as regards the foreign policies and their direct benefits. As a result, the policy of interests and governments dominates the common interest.’¹⁷

Given the momentous developments Egypt has experienced in recent years, many respondents perceived changes in both the priorities of European policies towards Egypt and the attitude of the Egyptian authorities towards EU programmes during this period. Prior to the 2011 revolution, the EU—in addition to its primary focus on maintaining economic and security relations with the Mubarak regime—also sought to promote civil society and its various democratization agendas and was able to utilize the space available to it to do so.

The EU response to the upheaval in the Arab world is seen by Egyptian elites as having undergone a significant shift. In the initial phase, it was seen as one of promoting and supporting a democratic transition, particularly in Egypt which played a critical role in these events. In the aftermath of the 2013 removal of Morsi, the 2014 expansion

17 Interviewee 4: Editor-in-chief at a local newspaper, male, 20 August 2017.

of the IS movement and the Syrian refugee crisis, EU policy is seen as having shifted decisively towards counter-terrorism, security, and control of migration. One consequence is that Europe is seen as having made its peace with Egypt's new rulers and other authoritarian regimes, and quietly dropped democracy promotion. Largely on this basis, many respondents would like the EU to more energetically adopt an agenda of democracy promotion, and re-engage with Egyptian civil society, over the next decade. Continued support for economic development enjoys even broader support. In the words of a public relations professional at a hotel, who is also involved in politics:

'I don't have any information about these issues. But I can tell you that when it comes to the EU, they are working a lot with Egypt on anti-terrorism and I don't see their policy as effective. I don't think that terrorism exists for any other reason than people feeling needy or deprived. For example, people in Sinai are really deprived of everything, if we give them good living conditions and, for example, give them their own football team, this would be a reason for them not to turn to terrorism. They will be focused on their work and they will have good spaces to socialize. These people literally have nothing, we should help them, so they won't become terrorists.'¹⁸

A recent graduate also stated,

'Between 2011 and 2013, the EU policies toward the popular uprising in Egypt were very constructive and seemed promising in enhancing and supporting the democratic movements. But with the setback of the democratic Intifada, the rise of ISIS and other transnational terrorist groups, [and] the Syrian humanitarian crisis, the EU policy starts to become more pragmatic and realistic. Supporting democratic movements and civil society retreats, the co-operation and the rapprochement with new-born authoritarian regimes increased. This policy, in my opinion, could be helpful and fruitful in the short term, but it seems useless in the long term since the causes and the grievances the led to the outbreak of the revolutions and the re-emergence of terrorism in the region are still present and expanding. Yes, there is wider co-operation in civil society activities between my country and the EU. Since the mid-1990s, the EU was one of the largest humanitarian, developmental donors to the Egyptian civil society organizations, especially in the Upper Egypt region. The EU aid helps thousands of poor Egyptians and improves their life standards.'¹⁹

18 Interviewee 13: Hotel employee in the PR department and political party member, female, 15 August 2017.

19 Interviewee 31: Recent graduate, male, 28 August 2017.

At the same time, European priorities, with respect to both Egypt and the region, became dominated by the prioritization of security and stability, and stemming migration to Europe in particular.

‘The first response of the EU to the Arab Spring was very positive, but it got tuned down because Europe felt it is affecting its social integrity and security with the influx of migrants and the instability in those countries of the Arab Spring that resulted in the rise of Islamic terrorism. The priorities for the EU were supporting the democratic transition, and people’s aspiration to freedom and a better life, then those priorities got changed to security and anti-radicalization and preventing illegal migration.’²⁰

An individual who preferred total anonymity also expressed concern,

‘In my opinion, the refugee situation the EU is dealing with right now is causing an extreme panic, and most of the EU policies—either in terms of economic, political, or developmental—are coming from this place. From my interactions and knowledge, I feel although it is coming from a state of panic it is not causing any harm, but I am honestly worried about EU collaborations with governments and how this can be misused by countries around the neighbourhood to oppress their citizens.’²¹

Similarly, an engineering lecturer expressed concern regarding the intentions of EU policies,

‘I know a little about this, but my impression is that it is negative in general. The main EU policy is to co-operate with the Mediterranean countries to curb illegal immigration. This doesn’t meet the expectations of the people in the region.’²²

‘The EU today is seen as a much more self-interested, pragmatic actor than in previous years, pursuing “business as usual” to a greater extent than before. This may also help explain why those who have not specifically studied or engaged with the European Neighbourhood Policy seem completely unaware of it. I believe they are mainly self-serving and inconsistent with the entity’s rhetoric.’²³

Additionally, at the regional level, respondents mentioned European support for authoritarian regimes as an impediment to improved Euro-

20 Interviewee 1: Communications consultant, male, 2 September 2017.

21 Interviewee 27: S.K. no further description, gender not given, 2 September 2017.

22 Interviewee 28: Engineering lecturer, male, 1 September 2017.

23 Interviewee 7: Translator and news editor, male, 1 September 2017.

Mediterranean relations, viewing terrorism and the migration crisis as symptom rather than cause. A greater focus on human rights, economic development, and clean/renewable energy in the coming years could thus help redress this imbalance, even as those advocating such a course of action express scepticism that it will come to pass.

2.2 Challenges confronting Egypt and expectations

Looking at their own country, Egyptians tend towards pessimism if not outright fear. Economic collapse—particularly mass unemployment and inflation-driven price rises—as well as the potential for widespread civil strife (including terrorism) dominate their concerns, even if these are not necessarily expectations. A further consolidation of authoritarianism, greater repression of human rights, and absence of democracy are widely anticipated.

‘The situation is scary. I didn’t believe that it would be that bad especially after the end of the Muslim Brotherhood reign. I know that Sisi is bad, but better than the Muslim Brotherhood. It’s like shooting the bullet into your leg not your head! At least you’re still alive and can think. It’s getting worse now. There’s no vision and planning for anything such as education. The military is dominating everything, and the president doesn’t accept the other opinion, so people fear to speak up. In addition to restrictive laws on the NGOs and others. We have to keep on working, however the impact we leave is very minor. We don’t have another option.’²⁴

A journalist and talk show editor, who is also a self-identified Arab nationalist, stated the following:

‘I believe that this dictatorship will remain until 2020. I think that the regime is here to do the Americans’ bidding in certain files, such as the Palestinian cause. The Egyptian people will suffer economically. But I have hope that the situation will change. Egyptians need the political powers to reform themselves. The opposition in Egypt needs to be prepared with plans and alternative policies for the future.’²⁵

24 Interviewee 2: Programme manager and monitoring and evaluation officer at major CSO, gender not given, 5 November 2017.

25 Interviewee 11: Journalist and talk show editor and Arab nationalist, male, 21 August 2017.

The conflicts in Syria and Libya are identified as the primary external threats, along with extremism, terrorism, and the refugee crisis, which are viewed as closely-related to these conflicts. Notably, a number of respondents also perceive benefits in the refugee crisis, pointing for example to the inflow of Syrian capital and entrepreneurship into Egypt. The regional situation at large is seen as affecting Egypt directly.

‘All the developments happening in the world affect Egypt directly, such as the current situation in Saudi Arabia as it is the main country that supports the Egyptian economy. Also, the unstable situation in Libya affects the safety of our borders, and the continuous feeling that we’re always exhausted to secure our borders with Libya. When the US decides to take hard decisions towards the Arab world, it affects the situation in Egypt.’²⁶

At the same time, some Egyptians also see opportunities for their country. This is based on its natural resources, tourist facilities, and human capital. But for these to be realized will require political and economic stability, development of the rule of law, and significant investment in the education sector. Each of these are seen as areas where the EU can make a significant contribution to Egypt, whether through different policies vis-à-vis the Egyptian authorities or greater co-operation with Egypt. As put by a professional in the field of social development:

‘It really depends! I believe that the economy is the key here. If we manage to recover economically, then we may stand a chance in democracy and political openness. However, I believe that this will not happen on its own, it needs good policies from the government. To be honest, I sometimes cannot stop myself from believing that the economic crisis was made up by the government to corner the middle class in Egypt. The current economic policies are mainly targeting this social class and sometimes I can’t find any reason for them. So, the government aims at shutting up the middle class because this is the most educated class that talks a lot about political reform and the need for democracy and so on. Consequently, it was better for the government to adopt bad economic policies to make the middle class think about nothing else than how to survive and cope with the current economic situation instead of the constant headache about democracy and human rights. The richer classes in Egypt have no problem with the State or the ruling elite, and the lower classes can be bought—as was the case before—with goods and services before the elections. The middle class is—as far as I believe from some

26 Interviewee 3: Researcher, female, 5 November 2017.

development theories—the avant-garde of development in a country. In Egypt, everyone I know now from highly-qualified and educated people want to flee the country for one reason or another. This is a major problem, because if we lose these people, who will stay behind and help build the country?’²⁷

Many other interviewees did not see any opportunities. Either they felt that there were no opportunities, or they did not answer the question. Responding to a follow-up question on the next 5 to 10 future years of the country, most expressed negativity. In the words of a researcher and media platform professional:

‘What a question! I am not very sure what I can say! I am not even sure the presidential elections will take place in 2018! I believe the future is quite obscure in Egypt, we are faced by many very dangerous scenarios. I believe we are way past the last hope of peaceful reform/transition without bloodshed and major damages in Egypt. This moment was in 2011 and it’s way past us now. The remaining options are: 1) a continued deterioration of both the economic and political situation under the military rule, which will eventually lead to a huge build-up and then a massive and violent social explosion. This is similar to what happened in Argentina in 2001; 2) or the deterioration can last even longer, with a political instability by frequent changes in the regime façades, without any real change in policies. This buys more time for the regime and slows down the struggle and the deterioration a little bit. But I don’t think this will happen! There is no way to prevent these radical endings from happening, because we are way past that now.’²⁸

A recent graduate also expressed belief in the people but not in the government:

‘I always believe in the abilities and the will of the Egyptian people. But with the draconian authoritarian regime in Cairo, the future is not that promising. The massive human rights violations, corruption, and suppression will restrain any sustainable reform and mobilization.’²⁹

Similarly, this same individual stated that opportunities are only those that are coming from abroad: ‘The continuation of foreign aid from the GCC, the EU, and the USA represents a good opportunity for Egypt.

27 Interviewee 10: Professional in the social development field, male, 28 August 2017.

28 Interviewee 30: Researcher and professional at media platform, male, n.d.

29 Interviewee 31: Recent graduate, male, 28 August 2017.

However, such assistance is temporary and not solving any serious economic or social problems.’³⁰

2.3 *Co-operation areas with the EU*

Within Egypt, the EU and European states are widely recognized for their active role in supporting the agricultural and energy sectors, and additionally their focus on environmental agendas such as clean energy, water conservation, and the like. Civil society can play a key role in all of these issues, but their reduced footprint is not solely attributed to the new restrictions introduced by the government in Cairo.

The available space for programmes previously pursued by the EU and its member states was substantially restricted by Egypt’s present leaders, for example, through a new NGO law that made it increasingly difficult for local civil society to acquire foreign funding and implement many of their programmes.

‘There used to be [co-operation between the EU and civil society] but currently it has decreased drastically. This shift is because of the political situation in my country and the government’s crackdown on the work of the civil society organization and limiting this sector from securing foreign funds including from the EU. The government, in general, doesn’t approve of the EU agenda to support civil society actions within its borders.’³¹

‘Before the Revolution, there was a huge impact of the EU, as it wanted to play that important role. After the rule of the Military Council until the last year, the role of the EU has decreased very much. It was very hard to start funding new projects. At some point, the EU wanted to merge the Egyptian government and the civil society organizations within the projects. One of the main challenges is the restrictions, not all the organizations can stick to the requirements, terms, and conditions set by the EU. For instance, the EU prefers project with partnerships, because when you have many partners, this strengthens your project. However, not all organizations are able to find partners or prefer that. Usually, many organizations have problems with partners regarding the implementation of the projects. The other challenge is that the EU connects the probability of implementing projects with the political conditions in Egypt. So, if there is any clash between the EU

30 Ibid.

31 Interviewee 1: Communications consultant, male, 2 September 2017.

and Egyptian government, it has the power to stop funding the project, which has already happened from 2013 to 2016. At that time, the EU froze its role in Egypt until knowing what the situation would be like.³²

Another researcher who focuses on politics stated:

‘Generally, I believe that the EU had a negative effect on the civil society in Egypt as it only focused on the political cases, that would cause problems and direct confrontations with the state; and did not focus on the human rights side overall, such as prisons, torturing, and these thorny issues. However, human rights includes other issues like development and others; this was not considered by the EU. They only focused on the big political figures and specific organizations to which they gave out money.’³³

Onerous bureaucratic requirements imposed by European funders, in some respects viewed as inapplicable to the Egyptian context, are also cited as impediments. While there is broad appreciation for European support for Egyptian civil society, this is in some cases tempered by a view that the policies and priorities of such programmes—in for example the gender field—are formulated within Europe rather than in partnership with Egyptians, and thus not always properly calibrated to the local context. Similar observations were made regarding EU support to Egyptian industry.

‘I think there are trends to focus on, it’s good to collect opinions to design the proposal, but we need to cope with the current situation as it is changing every moment in Egypt. Sometimes when we design a project on a specific call, we’ve got to make sure that the cause and call are the same, to avoid the gap between the design and the reality. I think this is because of bureaucracy in the EU and the difficult forms for written proposal rather than the real negotiations to make sure that the ideas are sustainable and will be successful. The EU is one of the main donors in the region and their projects can make a huge change if they’re implemented in different methods on both the policy and implementation level, because the delegation here is playing an essential role. In the last few years things are better.’³⁴

32 Interviewee 3: Researcher, female, 5 November 2017.

33 Interviewee 5: Political researcher, female, 2 November 2017.

34 Interviewee 2: Programme manager and monitoring and evaluation officer at major CSO, gender not given, 5 November 2017.

Some of those more supportive of the EU gender programme argue that it should be integrated into every EU programme rather than continue separately. ‘It has a positive effect. I believe that all the projects related to gender equality and culture, especially in Upper Egypt, were only funded by the EU. It worked on women’s empowerment, gender equality, supporting women, and others.’³⁵

‘Programmes such as gender and sexuality—mostly funded by the EU and its member states—were really great during the revolution. Now, no one can start a workshop on these topics, civil society organizations like Nazra for Feminist Studies or others are under attack at the moment. Sexuality topics are being kept as a taboo. Gender is not a safe topic anymore. Organizations like Nazra used to speak about sexual harassment and from my readings and training courses I know there were waves of the feminist movements. We are in the third wave of feminist movement, which is mostly preoccupied with sexuality and the body in general. Sexual harassment is an important topic because the society sees it and feminists managed to put pressure on the government to change their stance. This issue managed to get huge support from all classes and categories of the Egyptian society. Any man can be sexist but would work on fighting sexual harassment, but for example my right to control my body or determining my sexual orientation are still taboos. If I talked about those topics, I will be in jail. It was always like that but for three years after 2011, people were talking in closed rooms about these topics. After 2013, people are being arrested and gender and sexuality are no longer safe topics. I know people who got arrested for working on a project related to awareness and protection against HIV.’³⁶

Finally, interviewees urged more investment in education, as it has a long-term impact. As put by an editor-in-chief of a local newspaper:

‘I think that the economic pressures in Egypt would encourage the EU to invest in such a substandard country in culture and education. That would result in bearing a higher cost. Whenever the problems are getting bigger, the funds are directed to the initial needs of the inhabitants, not in culture and education. This can be helpful in defeating extremism and radicalism with a complete cultural project run by the EU and in co-operation with the government and the civil society organizations, to increase the awareness of the importance of culture in a country such as Egypt.’³⁷

35 Interviewee 3: Researcher, female, 5 November 2017.

36 Interviewee 6: Journalist and researcher in political economy, male, 6 November 2017.

37 Interviewee 4: Editor-in-chief at a local newspaper, male, 20 August 2017.

Conclusion

Most of the interviewees were wary about the future of their country, many stating that their hope was low. They were also unsure about how the country would change, grow, or progress. Many interviewees expressed a strong sense of uncertainty. However, they did not look to the EU or any other outside power to serve as a saviour. Instead, they were mostly concerned with the ongoing political and government developments which are impeding progress within their country. Further, the interviewees were acutely aware that the EU is in some ways less powerful than individual member states, especially Germany and France. Finally, although many recognized the positive work done by the EU and funds provided, they were aware of what some called hypocrisy, in that the EU continues to collaborate with the Egyptian government.

In regard to areas where the EU could directly engage, interviewees mentioned education, job creation, and supporting the economy. However, they also looked at long-term investment and suggested initiatives that work in the fields of education and culture. Interviewees expressed concern about sexual harassment in the country, and perhaps this is another area of possible intervention. Finally, interviewees stated that there was previous EU engagement with Egyptian civil society, but now this is limited due to new government policies. Interviewees believed that work with civil society is still necessary.

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Annex: List of Interviewees

- Interviewee 1: Communications consultant, male, 2 September 2017
- Interviewee 2: Programme manager and monitoring and evaluation officer at major CSO, gender not given, 5 November 2017
- Interviewee 3: Researcher, female, 5 November 2017
- Interviewee 4: Editor-in-chief at a local newspaper, male, 20 August 2017
- Interviewee 5: Political researcher, female, 2 November 2017
- Interviewee 6: Journalist and researcher in political economy, male, 6 November 2017
- Interviewee 7: Translator and news editor, male, 1 September 2017
- Interviewee 8: Political activist and engineer, male, 17 August 2017
- Interviewee 9: Executive director of a research centre, male, 28 August 2017
- Interviewee 10: Professional in the social development field, male, 28 August 2017
- Interviewee 11: Journalist and talk show editor and Arab nationalist, male, 21 August 2017

- Interviewee 12: Economic researcher involved in politics, female, 21 August 2017
- Interviewee 13: Hotel employee in the PR department and political party member, female, 15 August 2017
- Interviewee 14: Documentary filmmaker, male, 20 September 2017
- Interviewee 15: Human rights defender, female, 6 September 2017
- Interviewee 16: Accountant, male, 1 September 2017
- Interviewee 17: Civil society professional, female, 16 September 2017
- Interviewee 18: Lecturer, female, 4 September 2017
- Interviewee 19: Researcher and co-ordinator for research centres, male, 2 November 2017
- Interviewee 20: Professor, female, 7 August 2017
- Interviewee 21: Industry and import professional, male, 28 August 2017
- Interviewee 22: Bookstore manager, female, 21 August 2017
- Interviewee 23: Lecturer and research associate, female, 4 September 2017
- Interviewee 24: Professor in Economics and Political Science, female, 7 August 2017
- Interviewee 25: Writer and filmmaker, female, 7 September 2017
- Interviewee 26: Surgeon, male, 28 August 2017
- Interviewee 27: S.K. no further description, gender not given, 2 September 2017
- Interviewee 28: Engineering lecturer, male, 1 September 2017
- Interviewee 29: Writer and filmmaker, female, 4 September 2017
- Interviewee 30: Researcher and professional at media platform, male, n.d.
- Interviewee 31: Recent graduate, male, 28 August 2017

DAVID RAMIN JALILVAND¹

Chapter 4: EU–Iran Relations: Iranian Perceptions and European Policy

Relations between the EU and Iran have substantially improved since the conclusion of the nuclear deal in July 2015.² In fact, as much as several issues continue troubling relations between the two sides, European–Iranian exchanges at the levels of politics, economics and civil society have increased and improved substantially in the recent past. In important ways, Iran also matters to Europe’s relations with the broader Mediterranean region —through its considerable influence, stretching from Iraq over Syria to Lebanon.

In light of this, the chapter seeks to provide an assessment of the current state of affairs between the EU and Iran. The chapter delves into how the EU and its policies are perceived and interpreted in Iran, while elaborating on stakeholders and the changing nature of the relations between the two sides in line with the conceptual framework.³ The chapter draws from first-hand insights gained during regular encounters with dozens of foreign policy experts and professionals from the Iran, the EU, and EU member states. During these encounters, the perspectives of both sides, respectively, were discussed extensively.

The chapter consists of three sections. In the first one, a country profile is presented. This comprises a discussion of Iran’s demographics, important stakeholders, relevant events for Iran since the Arab Spring, Iran’s main

1 The author was commissioned by PODEM, as Work Package 3 leader for the MEDRESET Project.

2 The manuscript of this chapter was prepared in early 2018, i.e., before the US exit from the JCPOA. It draws from expert discussions in Iran.

3 See Zeynep Gülöz Bakır and Gülşah Dark, ‘Review of Surveys on Euro–Mediterranean Relations, and an Introduction to the Elite Survey’, in *MEDRESET Methodology and Concept Papers*, No. 5 (July 2017), <http://www.medreset.eu/?p=13424>.

geopolitical challenges and a brief overview of European–Iranian relations. In the second section, relations between Europe and Iran are examined in more detail. The third section includes a discussion of Iranian perceptions towards the EU and its Iran-related policies, challenges for Iran and Europe’s role, Iranian expectations towards Europe, co-operation areas with Europe and finally several general policy recommendations for the EU.

1. Country profile of Iran

1.1 Demographics

Iran is a large and diverse country. At 81 million, its population is the world’s eighteenth largest. Unlike a few decades ago, however, population growth has decreased and now stands at 1.2 percent. The Iranian population is mostly urban with three-quarters (73.4 percent) living in cities. While almost 70 percent of the Iranian people are below the age of 35, life expectancy at birth is at 76 years for women and 74 years for men.⁴

Iran finds itself at the crossroads of several regions. As such, the country is Middle Eastern, Caspian, and Central Asian. Moreover, through its neighbours there are strong links to both the Mediterranean and Europe in the West and Asia in the East.

This exposure to different cultures and civilizations is reflected inside the country, too: Iran is a multi-ethnic and multi-lingual country. Some 61 percent of the population is Persian, and Farsi (the Persian language) is both *lingua franca* and official language of the country. However, other languages are also spoken and Iran takes pride in bringing together several ethnic groups. Azeris constitute the second largest group (16 percent), followed by Kurds (10 percent), Lurs (6 percent), Arabs (2 percent), Baloch (2 percent), Turkmens (2 percent) and others (1 percent).⁵

4 See UN Data website: *Iran (Islamic Republic of)*, <http://data.un.org/en/iso/ir.html>.

5 Bijan DaBell, ‘Iran Minorities 2: Ethnic Diversity’, in *The Iran Primer*, 3 September 2013, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/node/828>.

The vast majority, between 90 and 95 percent of all Iranians, are Twelver Shiite Muslims. Sunni Muslims comprise the bulk of non-Shia Iranians, at between 5 and 10 percent. In addition, there are three officially-recognized religious minorities: Christian, Jews, and Zoroastrians. Iran is home to the largest Jewish community in the Middle East outside Israel and Palestine.⁶

1.2 Relevant stakeholders at the domestic, regional, and global levels

The political system of the Islamic Republic of Iran is characterized by a myriad of stakeholders. Institutionally, a very broad distinction can be made between republican and theologically legitimized institutions. The former resemble, by and large, European-style republican institutions and feature separate legislative (Parliament) and executive branches (President and Government) as well as a council of religious experts (Assembly of Experts, charged with choosing the leader of the revolution, the Islamic Republic's highest office). Members of these institutions are directly elected by the people. Among the latter institutions, the Supreme Leader—who is the head of state—is chosen by the Assembly of Experts. In turn, the Supreme Leader appoints the Heads of Judiciary and Armed Forces as well as the members of the Expediency Discernment Council (a body charged with advising the Supreme Leader and de facto having oversight of the legislative process). The Guardian Council—whose task is to interpret the constitution of the Islamic Republic (approving/rejecting laws) and oversee all elections (including the approval of candidates)—is elected half by the Parliament and half by the Supreme Leader.⁷

This institutional complexity is reflected in the decision-making process for Iran's foreign and security policy. Obviously, the government assumes a leading role with regard to the articulation and

6 Bijan DaBell, 'Iran Minorities 1: Diverse Religions', in *The Iran Primer*, 3 September 2013, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/node/827>.

7 Wilfried Buchta, *Who Rules Iran? The Structure of Power in the Islamic Republic*, Washington, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2008, <https://washinst.org/st/2EWjmCZ>.

implementation of Iran's foreign policy. At the same time, most of the numerous institutions of the Islamic Republic's polity are, to varying degrees, also involved in the foreign policy process. The single most important institution in this regard is the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC). The SNSC brings together representatives from all relevant institutions. In the realm of foreign and security policy, it is the key forum for negotiation and adoption of an elite consensus, which Iran's highly fragmented political system typically requires in order to proceed with new policy directions. Current President Hassan Rouhani served as the Secretary General of the SNSC between 1989 and 2005.

1.3 Key events since the start of the Arab uprisings

Dubbed 'Arab Spring' in the West, the uprisings in the Arab world in 2010–2011 have been welcomed by Iran as a '*bidariye eslami*' [Islamic awakening].⁸ Somewhat reminiscent of its own 1979 Islamic Revolution, Tehran saw Western-backed and secular authoritarian leaders being replaced by popular Islamic movements.

The ascendance to power of Rached Ghannouchi in Tunisia and—more importantly from the Iranian perspective—Mohamed Morsi in Egypt was important for Tehran in several ways. On the one hand, the Islamic Republic considered the successes of political Islamic groups, i.e., the Muslim Brotherhood and its various branches, as a testimony for its own cause. On the other hand, Tehran assumed popular Islamic rulers in these traditionally Western-leaning countries might be more open to co-operation with Iran, thus advancing Iran's geostrategic position.

In the Levant, however, matters unfolded differently in the eyes of Iran's leaders. Also in Syria the people took to the street. But from the early stages of the protests—which were brutally repressed by the Syrian government—Tehran saw outside interference, in particular

8 Ali Khamenei, *Mafhume bidariye eslami va risheh-haye an dar negahe maghame moazame rahbari* [The concept of Islamic awakening and its roots in the eyes of the Supreme Leader], 13 May 2012, <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/others-article?id=24715>.

from Turkey and Arabian Peninsula countries Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. Syria has been and is one of Iran's few Arab partners. It is further a vital bridge to Lebanon, where Tehran's ally Hezbollah relies on Iranian support. Tehran feared that a defeat of President Bashar al-Assad would bring Syria into the camp of its arch-rivals. In response, Tehran massively assisted al-Assad in fighting the opposition and foreign-backed rebels.

Between 2014 and 2017, Tehran supported the fight against the so-called 'Islamic State', both in Iraq and in Syria. As such, in 2014 Tehran dispatched units to prevent IS from taking over both Baghdad and Erbil. Among Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units, several enjoy close relations with Tehran.

In the international arena, the single most important event in Iran's recent history was the conclusion of the 2015 nuclear agreement, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). The JCPOA, agreed between Iran and the EU/E3+3,⁹ was to end over a decade of negotiations and sanctions over Tehran's nuclear programme. In essence, the JCPOA stipulates a reduction of the Iranian nuclear programme and greater international inspections in exchange for the lifting and/or termination of nuclear-related sanctions by the European Union, the United Nations, and the United States.¹⁰ Beyond the nuclear issue itself, the JCPOA was the first major accord between Iran and the United States since the 1979 revolution.

The change in the US Presidency from Barack Obama to Donald Trump also marked a change in US dealings with Iran. The US exit from the JCPOA has cast a shadow of uncertainty over the future of the Plan and Iran-US relations in general. Broadly, the Trump administration has been extremely sympathetic to the positions of Iran's regional rivals, Israel, and Saudi Arabia. This has given rise to fears regarding an escalation of tensions in the region.

9 The EU/E3+3 comprises the European Union, the three European states France, Germany, and UK as well as world powers China, Russia, and the United States.

10 Gary Samore (ed.), *The Iran Nuclear Deal: A Definitive Guide*, Cambridge, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 2015, <https://www.belfercenter.org/node/78295>.

1.4 Main geopolitical challenges

The first and foremost challenge confronting Iran's foreign policy is the country's strategic loneliness. Iran's military spending is significantly below the expenditures of major countries in the region¹¹ and Tehran has no access to the latest Western and Russian technologies. This leaves the country vulnerable in face of regional rivals and global adversaries. Moreover, Tehran has no militarily capable allies and is not part of any institutional security arrangement. This distinguishes Iran from several of its neighbours, who are either part of NATO or the GCC and, in any case, enjoy close ties to the US and European states like France or the UK.

Further, the worldview of Iranian decision-makers is deeply shaped by their country's dramatic experiences with foreign meddling over the past centuries: In the nineteenth century, Tehran had to give up important parts of its territory—located in today's Afghanistan and the Southern Caucasus—due to British and Russian pressure. In the twentieth century, Iran was repeatedly occupied by British and Russian forces during the First and Second World Wars and, after the nationalization of Iranian oil, democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh was toppled by a CIA-backed coup d'état in 1953. After the 1979 revolution, during the eight-year Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988), Iran was victim of Iraqi chemical weapon attacks against both military units and civilians. The United Nations failed to condemn and/or act against the Iraqi use of chemical weapons, which—from the point of view of Iran's current decision-makers—has further enhanced their sense of strategic loneliness.

These experiences have proven to Iran that it is barely capable of defending itself on its own soil and that it has to embark on alternative routes in order to address the perils of its strategic loneliness. By and large, the Islamic Republic is pursuing two pathways in parallel. First, it is advancing its missile capabilities to be able to deter adversaries by acquiring the capability to strike back in the event of an attack.

11 See SIPRI Military Expenditure Database: *Military Expenditure by Country in Constant (2016) USD*, <https://www.sipri.org/node/222>.

Second, Iran is trying to obtain some sort of strategic depth aiming at strengthening the Iranian position in the broader Middle East region. This is done through a combination of co-operation with states and governments (e.g., in Afghanistan, Armenia, Iraq, Syria, or Lebanon) as well as non-state actors (e.g., in Iraq or Lebanon and, to a lesser extent, the Palestinian territories, Bahrain, or Yemen). Moreover, Iran also seeks to improve its position through deepened economic ties, in particular with its neighbours Afghanistan and Iraq.

In terms of concrete threats, Iran's greatest concern is the United States. Ever since the revolution in 1979, 'regime change' ideas have been entertained in Washington, albeit to varying degrees. The Obama administration appeared to differ, which paved the way for the 2015 nuclear deal. But under President Trump, the United States has not only returned to past notions of regime change, but even escalated the rhetoric vis-à-vis Iran.

At the regional level, Israel, and Saudi Arabia are Iran's main rivals. However, while they are militarily capable (especially Israel), Iran does not appear to consider these countries to pose a fundamental threat to the existence of either the country itself or its regime. The fear is, though, that these countries might succeed in bringing the US into a conflict on their behalf.

2. Overview of Iran–EU Relations

As the global status of the European colonial powers declined during the twentieth century, the US emerged as Iran's primary political partner during the Cold War. The importance of European countries to Iran shifted largely to the economic realm.¹²

After the 1979 revolution, political and economic relations with Europe deteriorated. However, unlike with the United States, diplomatic

12 Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1982.

relations were never cut. Especially after the 1980–1988 Iran–Iraq War, economic and also political exchanges with Europe increased again. However, European–Iranian relations became once more strained after Iran’s nuclear programme became the focus of international controversy in 2003, followed by the populist presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005–2013) and harsh crackdown on public protests in the aftermath of the contested 2009 elections. During these years, Europe began to support multilateral sanctions against Iran within the framework of the UN.¹³ Later, in 2010, the EU began to impose unilateral sanctions, which caused significant harm for the Iranian economy (see below).

At the same time, the EU and the so-called ‘E3’—comprising the three European states France, Germany, and UK—were central to the negotiation effort between Iran and the international community to resolve the nuclear issue. This gained momentum after moderate-minded Hassan Rouhani became president of the Islamic Republic in 2013. Two years later, in July 2015, these negotiation efforts resulted in the conclusion of the Iran nuclear deal, the JCPOA, which led to the termination of all nuclear-related EU sanctions and shifted the overall momentum from confrontation towards co-operation.

2.1 The changing structure and nature of interactions with the EU

The conclusion of the JCPOA in July 2015 opened the latest chapter in the relations between Europe and Iran. In both Europe and Iran, its implementation—which commenced in January 2016—gave rise to hopes that this would lead to a broadening and deepening of relations.

There is an overall consensus that the JCPOA has met its main objective: guaranteeing the peaceful character of the Iranian nuclear programme—at least for the duration of the deal. This is underlined by

13 Cornelius Adebahr, *Europe and Iran. The Nuclear Deal and Beyond*, London/ New York, Routledge, 2017; Ellie Geranmayeh, ‘Engaging with Iran: A European Agenda’, in *ECFR Policy Briefs*, July 2015, https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/engaging_with_iran_a_european_agenda.

the repeated confirmation of Iranian compliance with the JCPOA by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).¹⁴

In the wake of the JCPOA, European–Iranian exchanges have drastically changed. Politically, high-ranking visits marked the opening of a new chapter in EU–Iran relations. Economically, trade has grown substantially, although the overall volume remains below pre-2010 sanctions levels.¹⁵ At the level of civil society, university co-operation and tourism have increased.

Nevertheless, there is also recognition in Tehran and in European capital cities that many of the expectations which emerged parallel to the conclusion of the JCPOA have not materialized.¹⁶ Iran hoped for greater economic recovery following the nuclear deal. In fact, in exchange for reducing its nuclear programme, Tehran expected the removal of international sanctions: i.e., to reconnect the Iranian economy with the world. While trade, especially with Europe, has increased, it is below the expectations of both Iranian officials and ordinary citizens. In particular, fear of punitive measures by the US has effectively curtailed European engagements in the Iranian economy.

Moreover, Tehran hoped the JCPOA would lead to recognition of Iran as a regional power. In light of the country’s traumatic historic experiences, Iran is convinced it can only ensure its own security through engaging in the region.¹⁷ Against this backdrop and in light of harsh criticism for its role in the Middle East, Tehran continues to feel that Europe—alongside the US and countries in the region—does not sufficiently appreciate Iranian security concerns.

14 International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), *Statement by IAEA Director General Yukiya Amano*, 13 October 2017, <https://www.iaea.org/node/41258>.

15 European Commission DG Trade, *European Union, Trade in Goods with Iran*, 6 November 2018, p. 3, https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb_results/factsheets/country/details_iran_en.pdf.

16 David Ramin Jalilvand, ‘Managing Expectations: Europe and Iran in the Second Year of the Nuclear Deal’, in *FES Perspective*, May 2017, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/13376.pdf>.

17 International Crisis Group (ICG), ‘Iran’s Priorities in a Turbulent Middle’, in *ICG Middle East Reports*, No. 184 (13 April 2018), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/6057>.

On the other side, Europe hoped the JCPOA would lead to what European officials describe as a more constructive Iranian role in the Middle East or, depending on the viewpoint, the broader Mediterranean region. Both regarding Iraq and Syria, many Europeans are convinced that Iran—using its influence in these countries—could facilitate some form of power-sharing agreements among the various stakeholders. Europeans also express concerns about repeated Iranian ballistic missile tests.

These unfulfilled expectations constitute stumbling blocks, hampering the broadening and deepening of European–Iranian relations. Differences regarding the situation in the Middle East/Mediterranean particularly stand in the way of a fully-fledged partnership. To this day, the JCPOA has not translated into substantive European–Iranian exchanges on how to address the various challenges of the region. Quite the contrary, in many cases, Europe and Iran consider the positions of the other side, respectively, as highly problematic. In 2018, tensions over Syria increased, with the potential to escalate into open conflict between Iran and Israel. For obvious reasons, Europe would be very much affected by any such escalation of tensions (in terms of migration, stability, etc.).

Despite the challenges, however, relations between Europe and Iran have intensified since the conclusion and implementation of the JCPOA. In a number of areas, Europe and Iran are seizing on the momentum created by the nuclear deal. These include action on academic co-operation, climate change, and international drug-trafficking.

The intensification of EU–Iran relations has become particularly clear as the presidency in the United States changed from Barack Obama to Donald Trump. Under the new administration, the US withdrew from the JCPOA in May 2018.

While acknowledging its own strong commitment to the deal, Iran is worried that Europe, while staying in the JCPOA, might take a harsh stance towards Iran on issues outside the nuclear agreement. Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif expressed concerns that Europe might ‘pander to Washington’s determination to shift focus to yet another

unnecessary crisis—whether it be Iran’s defensive missile program or our influence in the Middle East’.¹⁸

All in all, European–Iranian relations have significantly improved parallel to the conclusion and implementation of the JCPOA. Nevertheless, despite a commitment on both sides to improve ties, the overall political framework of relations between Europe and Iran remains somewhat fragile.

3. Elite Survey: Research findings on Iran

3.1 Perceptions towards the EU and its Iran-related policies

Iran looks at Europe with mixed feelings. Meanwhile, the European–Iranian relationship is developing, featuring elements of both cooperation and confrontation.

Generally, Iran sees its relations with Europe as inherently troubled, in that Tehran considers Europe to be, by and large, part of the broader US-led Western camp. Ever since the 1979 revolution, Iranian officials have suspected the US is entertaining regime change policies towards the Islamic Republic. European countries have generally not adopted US notions of regime change; but at the same time, they have been unable to effectively take this element out of the broader Iranian–Western relationship. Further, the EU and its member states remain outspoken about Iran’s human rights record and are concerned by the country’s involvement in the region, certain elements of the country’s ballistic missile programme, and the rejection of Israel’s right to exist.

Nevertheless, Iran has fostered quite constructive relations with both the EU and numerous of its member states. Diplomatic channels have always remained open and political and economic exchanges have

18 Mohammad Javad Zarif, ‘Europe Must Work with Iran’, in *The New York Times*, 10 December 2017, <https://nyti.ms/2kOqwAp>.

continued, albeit to varying degrees. As such, there is a substantial element of co-operation in the relations between Iran and Europe.

A subordinate, but growing political position: Politically, Europe's role in the Middle East/Mediterranean has been subordinate, from the Iranian point of view. For most of the past decades, the US has been the most relevant foreign actor in the broader region. Partly through co-operation with regional countries (Egypt, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey) and partly through direct military interference (in Afghanistan and Iraq), Washington assumed a central role in defining and safeguarding the regional order—which, from Tehran's point of view, has been decisively directed against the Islamic Republic.¹⁹

Against this backdrop, the profile of the EU and its member states was of secondary importance to developments in the region. Some EU countries joined US military efforts, and Europeans are involved in extensive arms sales, especially to Arabian Peninsula countries. Nevertheless, when it comes to the more fundamental political questions in the Middle East, especially those concerning war and peace, Iran generally does not consider the European role to be particularly significant.

However, in the Iranian view, Europe's profile has gradually increased since 2003 as the so-called 'E3' (France, Germany, and the UK) have initiated negotiations with Iran in an attempt to diplomatically solve the international dispute surrounding the Iranian nuclear programme.²⁰ The E3 were soon joined by the EU in 2004 and later, in 2006, by world powers China, Russia, and the US. Together, the group became known as the E3/EU+3. The E3 and the EU assumed a central role in co-ordinating the international negotiation effort with Tehran. Moreover, the format allowed for the first meaningful diplomatic process between Iran and the US since the 1979 revolution. Therefore, the conclusion of the nuclear deal in July 2015, formally known as the JCPOA, was very much a success of European foreign policy and appreciated as such by Tehran.²¹

19 Authors' interview with an expert, 2018.

20 Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi, Thierry Coville and David Ramin Jalilvand, 'Better Together: Brexit, the E3, and the Future of Europe's Approach towards Iran', in *FES Perspective*, April 2018, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/14382.pdf>.

21 Authors' interview with an expert, 2018.

In the course of negotiations on Iran's nuclear programme, Tehran also began to fully acknowledge Europe's economic weight. In 2010, the EU joined the US and the United Nations in adopting sanctions against the Islamic Republic over the country's nuclear activities. European energy and finance sanctions caused substantial harm to the Iranian economy (see above). Among other impacts, this resulted in Iran being effectively cut off from the international financial system (as access to the Belgium-based SWIFT banking network was suspended), a reduction of Iranian oil production, the halving of Iranian oil exports, and a reduction of European trade with Iran from 27.8 billion in 2011 euro to 6.2 billion euro in 2013.²² Overall, the imposition of European sanctions on Iran led to years of negative real GDP growth in 2012, 2013, and 2015.²³

With JCPOA implementation in January 2016, Tehran hoped to end years of international sanctions over the Iranian nuclear programme and to reconnect with the global and, especially, the European economy. In this regard, Europe assumed a special position for Iran since essentially, European–Iranian trade is key to meeting Iran's economic expectations associated with the nuclear agreement.

Europe's importance to Tehran grew further in 2017 with the change in the US presidency from Barack Obama to Donald Trump. The new US president has been an outspoken critic of the JCPOA and withdrew the US from the treaty in May 2018.

The increasingly harsh stance of the US towards Iran has translated into a more prominent European role. On the one hand, the US seeks to shift to Europe the burden of the nuclear deal. By asking Europe to 'fix' what Washington sees as flaws, Trump might intend to blame Europe, given the US withdrawal from the deal. At any rate, Europe now is in the spotlight when it comes to the future of the nuclear deal. It remains to be

22 European Commission DG Trade, *European Union, Trade in Goods with Iran*, cit., p. 3.

23 International Monetary Fund (IMF), 'Islamic Republic of Iran: 2018 Article IV Consultation – Press Release; Staff Report; and Statement by the Executive Director for the Islamic Republic of Iran', in *IMF Country Reports*, No. 18/93 (March 2018), <https://www.imf.org/~media/Files/Publications/CR/2018/cr1893.ashx>. For the various sanctions imposed on Iran before the nuclear deal, see ICG, 'Spider Web: The Making and Unmaking of Iran Sanctions', in *ICG Middle East Reports*, No. 138 (25 February 2013), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/397>.

seen whether it can offer Iran sufficient economic and political incentives to remain in the JCPOA even without the US (in the economic realm, it appears, Europe will not succeed in compensating for the fallout from the American JCPOA exit).

On the other hand, Tehran is beginning to appreciate Europe as an important actor on the international stage in its own right and independent from the US. The EU and its member states no longer merely act as a cover to facilitate Iran–US diplomacy. Rather, Europe now has both a crucial responsibility and political weight: whatever steps Europe ends up taking, the actions of Brussels and EU member states are likely to have great importance when it comes to the future of the nuclear deal and, as such, the nature of Iran’s engagement with the international community.²⁴

The desire to reconnect with the European economy: Economically, Iran’s view of Europe is a reflection of the political relationship between the two sides. Unlike Asian or Russian companies, and in the absence of meaningful business ties with the US, in most cases, Europeans are offering the latest technologies and products available to Iran. Therefore, Iranians show great interest in co-operation with Europe, especially, but not only, in the industrial sector.²⁵

However, there is also a great deal of caution. As highlighted above, before the nuclear deal, EU sanctions caused significant harm for Iran’s economy. In response, Tehran adopted two important measures. First, the country initiated a series of economic policies under the umbrella of the so-called ‘*eghtesad-e moghavemati*’ [‘resistance economy’].²⁶ These seek to bolster economic autonomy by reducing international (inter-)dependence: foreign products are to be replaced by domestic production—which basically constitutes an import substitution industrialization approach—while boosting Iran’s own exports. Second, Iran’s foreign trade increasingly shifted to Asia. As China, India, and other Asian countries do not tend to mix political and economic matters

24 Authors’ interview with an expert, 2018.

25 Authors’ interview with an expert, 2018.

26 ‘Mavaane tahaghogh-e eghtesad-e moghaavemati chist?’ [What are the barriers to realizing a resistance economy?], in *Donya-e Eqtesad*, 30 April 2016, <https://www.donya-e-eqtesad.com/fa/tiny/news-3035479>.

the way Europe does, Iran feels incentivized to promote economic ties with the states to its east.²⁷

Iran's approach to Europe: cautious engagement: These observations reflect the general Iranian stance towards Europe but there is obviously no one single Iranian approach. In this context, it is important to note that there is no particular foreign policy debate in Tehran on Europe alone. Rather, discussions on Europe are a function of the broader Iranian foreign policy discourse.

Here, on the one hand, the government of President Rouhani advocates for a constructive engagement with the international community. Rouhani represents a coalition of pragmatists and reformers, who joined ranks under the umbrella of *e'tedaal* [moderation]. The Moderates argue that the Islamic Republic's survival can best be assured through co-operation with the outside world. Especially also in the economic realm, the Islamic Republic will need to foster conducive relations with the world. Considering that relations with the US remain extremely complicated, this camp wishes to deepen ties especially also with Europe, parallel to already expanding relations with Asian countries.

On the other hand, the broader conservative camp in the Islamic Republic—oftentimes referred to as the '*osul-garâyân*' [Principlists]—calls for greater autarky and interdependence. As such, the Principlists are highly critical of President Rouhani's approach. Principlist policy-makers suspect that the West, and in particular the US, are not only generally opposed to the government but actively seek to overthrow it. Accordingly, they have criticized the JCPOA as being detrimental to the interests of Iran. Since JCPOA implementation in January 2016, Principlists have expressed their scepticism towards the Rouhani government's ambition to especially deepen economic ties with Europe.²⁸

27 Olivier Basdevant *et al.*, 'Islamic Republic of Iran: Selected Issues', in *IMF Country Reports*, No. 17/63 (February 2018), <https://www.imf.org/~media/Files/Publications/CR/2017/cr1763.ashx>.

28 Azadeh Zamirirad, 'Hassan Rohanis Drahtseilakt: Gesellschaftliche und politische Herausforderungen in der zweiten Amtszeit des iranischen Präsidenten', in *FES Studies*, May 2018, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/14487.pdf>.

Overall, these two schools of foreign policy thought condition Iran's approach to Europe, which can generally be described as one of cautious engagement. The administration of President Hassan Rouhani is interested in deepened ties with the EU and its member states, especially on the economic but also on the political front. At the same time, Iran—and especially the Principlist faction—is keen to avoid being overly vulnerable to political and economic pressure by Europe.

3.2 *Challenges for Iran and Europe's role*

Iranian decision-makers are confronted with numerous challenges in the fields of security, economy, and migration. Compared with most countries of the broader Middle East region, the position of Iran is arguably better. The Iranian state generally functions and is able to secure the country's territory. Economically, it has already been decades since Iran embarked on its industrialization process, which has resulted in a somewhat diversified economy with an industrial base. Similarly, despite migration in no small numbers, migration-related challenges are not threatening the social fabric of Iran. Nevertheless, the challenges facing Iran are huge and for many of the country's problems there are no easy fixes.

Security: Iranian officials consider the Islamic Republic's security situation to be precarious. Tehran sees Iran as strategically alone in a region where all relevant powers possess military capabilities far exceeding those of their own. Coupled with traumatic historic experiences, this awareness shapes the widely held Iranian view that the country is highly vulnerable.²⁹

In order to overcome these weaknesses perceived by Iranian decision-makers, Iran seeks to expand its *strategic depth* through adopting a compensatory deterrence strategy. Tehran has come to understand that it is unable to effectively counter foreign powers on its own soil—the last instance being the Iran–Iraq War between 1980 and 1988. In light of the factors discussed above, Tehran fears it would be unable to counter aggressions through traditional warfare. To make up for this, Iran is keen to be able to deter adversaries asymmetrically. Thus, in the event

29 ICG, 'Iran's Priorities in a Turbulent Middle', cit.

of a conflict, Iran does not intend to confront its opponents directly and/or on its own soil. Rather, Tehran would like to be able to strike back against vulnerable points on the territory of its opponents and/or their allies (e.g., military bases, critical infrastructure, etc.). In this way the Islamic Republic hopes to increase the risks and costs for any country considering taking military action against it.³⁰

Essentially, this position is oriented towards the status quo Iran wishes to defend its territory and the Islamic Republic. On the ground, however, matters are more complex. Tehran's quest for strategic depth is alarming to many countries throughout the region—not least Iran's regional rivals, who fear the Islamic Republic is seeking regional hegemony. Iran's revolutionary rhetoric and posture massively add to such fears. Therefore, Iran's approach to overcome its security challenges results in somewhat of a paradox. By expanding its regional profile in an attempt to overcome vulnerabilities, Tehran unintentionally provokes further efforts on behalf of regional and international powers to counter the Islamic Republic, resulting in further threats to Iran's security situation.

Economy: Iran's economy faces a myriad of challenges. These comprise massive unemployment—especially among the youth—high inflation, chronic difficulties in foreign exchange, a problematic role of parastatal organizations in the economy, and an almost chronic lack of investments from abroad. For decades, revenue from oil production has played a central role in the economic development of the country. At the same time—and in contrast to many other oil-exporting countries—Iran already possesses an industrial base, and economic diversification has already been underway since the 1960s. As such, and notwithstanding the above-mentioned problems, the country has already successfully embarked on a process of industrialization.³¹

In 2013, Rouhani won his presidential campaign with a twin promise of delivering a nuclear accord and spurring economic growth. While the president delivered on the former, things are less clear-cut with the latter. Since the implementation of the nuclear deal, Iran has become the fastest

30 Authors' interview with an expert, 2018.

31 David Ramin Jalilvand, *Transformation des Rentierstaats Iran. Zur Rolle des Energiesektors in der politischen Ökonomie*, Wiesbaden, Springer VS, 2017.

growing economy in the Middle East and North Africa. In his first term in office, Rouhani also managed to bring down inflation from around 40 percent to below 10 percent. It did, however, increase dramatically once again in 2018. Similarly, Iran's foreign trade, especially also with Europe, has grown markedly. Yet, progress is substantially below the expectations of both Iranian officials and the broader public.³² Thus, while important progress has been made, the broader challenges facing the Iranian economy remain to be tackled successfully.

Migration: For half a century, significant numbers of Iranians have been emigrating, while Iran is also a destination and transit country for large numbers of migrants from abroad. Already before the 1979 revolution, Iranians from upper- and middle-class backgrounds were leaving the country to study abroad, mostly in the US and Europe, and many remained abroad after the completion of their studies. In 1979 and the subsequent years, the revolution caused a sharp rise in the number of emigrants from Iran as political persecution forced many Iranians to flee their country. Over the years, economic factors have resulted in people from lower-income backgrounds also leaving the country. While the numbers have declined in the recent two decades—compared with the years following the 1979 revolution and 1980–1988 Iraq War eras—emigration remains an issue for Iran. In particular, ‘brain drain’ remains a huge challenge. While concrete data are scarce, large numbers of the highly educated groups in Iranian society continue to leave the country, seeking better opportunities abroad.³³

Parallel to this, Iran is also an important destination and transit country for migrants from neighbouring countries. To a very large extent, these come to Iran from Afghanistan but also, albeit to a significantly lesser degree, from Iraq and Pakistan.

The position of migrants in Iran is complicated. On the one hand, their situation is somewhat better than that of migrants in many other countries of the region. Migrants in Iran do not live in camps (as for example in Jordan or Lebanon) and there is also no organized system of economic

32 Authors' interview with an expert, 2018.

33 Shirin Hakimzadeh, ‘Iran: A Vast Diaspora Abroad and Millions of Refugees at Home’, in *MPI Country Profiles*, 1 September 2006, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/node/4582>.

exploitation (as for example in many Arabian Peninsula countries). Further, migrants in Iran generally have access to basic public schooling and health care. On the other hand, migrants find themselves disadvantaged vis-à-vis Iranian citizens. In many quarters of Iranian society, xenophobic sentiments are widespread. There is a significant element of economic exploitation as many migrants, lacking work permits, are forced to work on the black market, where basic labour rights are not granted. Refugees from Afghanistan especially face difficulties in obtaining residency permits and/or citizenship, despite the fact that many have lived in Iran for a long time or were even born in the country. There are also reports of deportations, and detentions to this end, without sufficient legal process.³⁴

Quantitatively, the number of migrants to Iran exceeds the number of Iranians emigrating from the country. According to UNICEF, 765,000 Iranians resided abroad in 2013. At the same time, 4.2 million refugees lived in Iran, some 95 percent of whom came from Afghanistan.³⁵

3.3 *Expectations towards Europe*

By and large, there are two fundamental expectations towards Europe when it comes to official Iranian policy. Firstly, Iran seeks to realize the economic benefits it hoped for when it entered the JCPOA. Secondly, Tehran wishes to be recognized and treated as a regional power in the Middle East/Mediterranean. From Tehran's perspective, these two issues fundamentally define relations between the two sides as well as the Iranian approach to Europe. At the level of civil society, there is also a third expectation: greater exchanges with Europe.

Economic recovery after JCPOA implementation: In important ways, with the conclusion of the JCPOA, Iran hoped for extensive economic recovery after years of sanctions. Iran agreed to limit its nuclear

34 Human Rights Watch, *Iran: Afghan Refugees and Migrants Face Abuse*, 20 November 2013, <https://www.hrw.org/node/251753>.

35 UNDESA Population Division and UNICEF, *Migration Profiles – Common Set of Indicators: Iran (Islamic Republic of)*, 2014, <https://esa.un.org/MigGMGProfiles/indicators/files/Iran.pdf>.

activities in exchange for sanctions relief, deemed key particularly for the revitalization of European–Iranian economic relations.

In fact, there have been important developments in this direction since JCPOA implementation in January 2016. Iran became the fastest growing economy in the Middle East and North Africa at a time when most of the region’s countries are suffering from chronic economic stagnation. Temporarily, inflation was brought down from above 40 percent to single digits. Concurrently, trade with Europe has picked up from 6.2 billion euro in 2013 to 20.9 billion euro in 2017.³⁶

Despite these positive developments, however, progress on the economic front remains considerably below the expectations of both officials as well as the public in Iran.³⁷ To a large extent, the uptick in economic activity is related to resumed oil exports, which require only very little labour. As such, unemployment in Iran remains high. Investments into the broader economy are still low. A key problem in this regard is the reluctance of major international banks to reconnect with Iran, fearing punitive measures from the US.

This has led to consistent complaints on the part of Iranian officials. From their point of view, Iran has been prevented from reaping the economic benefits associated with the JCPOA. Europe is criticized in this context for not providing sufficient (political) guarantees to European companies considering trade and investments with Iran.³⁸

Against this backdrop, Tehran expects more progress from Europe in tackling the obstacles that stand in the way of deeper European–Iranian economic relations. Iran would especially, but not only, like to see more progress in the realm of finance.³⁹ Several EU member states (Denmark, France, and Italy) have already opened state-backed credit lines to provide companies from their nations with Euro-denominated finance to engage in Iran. From the point of view of Tehran, these are important steps in the right direction. But more would need to be done towards the normalization of European–Iranian financial relations for

36 European Commission DG Trade, *European Union, Trade in Goods with Iran*, cit., p. 3.

37 Authors’ interview with an expert, 2018.

38 Authors’ interview with an expert, 2018.

39 Authors’ interview with an expert, 2018.

Iran to reap the economic benefits it had hoped for when concluding the JCPOA.⁴⁰

Recognition as a regional power: Iran seeks recognition as a legitimate regional power in the Middle East, which it feels Europe does not acknowledge. On the one hand, the country's traumatic historic experiences have translated into a sense of strategic loneliness Iran seeks to overcome through advancing its strategic depth. On the other hand, there is a deep-rooted historical awareness of the past greatness of the Persian Empire and the civilizational contributions Persia/Iran made, especially to the development of the region. Tehran complains that Europe is appreciating neither of these aspects.⁴¹

Instead, Tehran sees itself to be the subject of harsh criticism over the Iranian engagement in the region. In the Middle East/Mediterranean—especially in Iraq and Syria, but also in Lebanon and Yemen—the Iranian role is oftentimes strongly criticized by European policy-makers, who call for a 'more constructive' Iranian position. While the EU and its member states generally acknowledge that Iran's growing role is a fact, the ways in which Tehran is realizing its influence are causes for concern. In some cases, Tehran even faces calls to entirely disengage from the region. Meanwhile, to Iran it does not appear reasonable to withdraw from the region, giving up the influence it wields, without any meaningful guarantees for its security.⁴²

More exchanges at the level of civil society: While somewhat less vocally articulated by officials in Tehran, there is a strong desire within Iranian civil society to have more exchanges with Europe. Culturally—both in high and popular culture—Iran is strongly focussed on Europe and the West. While Iranians also acknowledge deep-rooted historical ties with the East, there is great affinity with and or the Occident.⁴³

Large segments of the Iranian population have a strong desire to enhance exchanges at the level of civil society. These would include, among other sorts of exchange, university co-operation, cultural

40 David Ramin Jalilvand, 'Managing Expectations', cit.

41 Authors' interview with an expert, 2018.

42 David Ramin Jalilvand, 'Managing Expectations', cit.

43 Authors' interview with an expert, 2018.

programmes and tourist visits. For example, the visit of the German pop-music band *Schiller* in December 2017, which marked the first pop concert in Iran since the 1979 revolution, was greeted enthusiastically by Iranians. The group's concerts were uniformly sold out, there have been calls to bring the group back to Iran, and a strong desire for more European bands to perform in Tehran is regularly expressed. The same applies to visits by theatre groups: with similar positive reactions, several European and Iranian theatre groups have visited Iran and Europe, respectively. An exhibition in Tehran from the French Louvre museum has, according to Iranian sources, attracted more visitors than the parallel Louvre exhibition in Abu Dhabi, which is significantly larger.⁴⁴

3.4 Co-operation areas with Europe

There is substantial potential for co-operation across a broad range of issues. Obviously, though, the extent to which this potential can be tapped will be a function of the overall political relations between Europe and Iran.

Regional Security

While Europe is concerned with Iran's role in the Middle East, Tehran believes Europe could play an important role, especially when it comes to mediation efforts between the various regional actors.⁴⁵ Based on this, the EU and its member states could advance dialogue formats on different levels, including through formal diplomatic channels as well as civil society exchanges.

In January 2018, E3 countries (France, Germany, and the UK plus Italy) started a 'Structured Dialogue' with Iran on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference. While the subject then was reportedly the situation in Yemen, the ambition of the E3 plus Italy is to broaden the dialogue to address other, arguably more complicated, regional issues as well.

Obviously, the overall atmosphere for talks has deteriorated due to the harshening stance of the Trump administration. Nevertheless, there should be enough incentives on both sides to meaningfully engage in a

44 Authors' interview with an expert, 2018.

45 Authors' interview with an expert, 2018.

broader dialogue on the various issues affecting the Middle East, which are of great importance to both Europe and Iran.

Ideally, any such dialogue efforts would go beyond bilateral European–Iranian relations and also embrace other regional actors. Considering the growing tensions in the Middle East, this would be no simple task for Europe. At the same time, the more tensions increase, the more there is a need for mediation.

Human rights: The human rights situation in Iran is troublesome, and not only to Europe. Effectively, it prevents a further deepening of ties as well as a full-fledged normalization of European–Iranian relations.

From the Iranian perspective, the EU is applying double standards when it comes to human rights. Human rights violations, in the eyes of Tehran, do not seem to complicate Europe’s relations with other countries in the region.⁴⁶

At any rate, the fact that human rights concerns are de facto complicating European–Iranian relations should be reason enough for both sides to enter into a dialogue on this matter. For any such dialogue to be meaningful, it would be important to depoliticize the format in the sense that neither side should seek to utilize the dialogue for any reason other than making progress on the human rights issue itself.

Practically, beyond formal exchanges on this matter, Europe could offer assistance to support reforms in Iran. This could comprise legal advice as well as practical assistance on the implementation of reforms.

Environment: Iran is facing serious environmental challenges. These include chronic air pollution in Iranian cities and industrial centres, increasingly dangerous water supply problems, high energy inefficiency, and repercussions of climate change, such as warmer temperatures and droughts.

On various levels, Europe could support Iran in addressing these problems. At the bilateral European–Iranian level, the EU and its member states could provide scientific assessments, including joint European–Iranian research; support the articulation and adoption of appropriate policy measures; and promote technological assistance when it comes to implementation.

46 Authors’ interview with an expert, 2018.

Moreover, Europe could promote Iran's participation in intra-regional exchange formats on these topics. The countries from the region can benefit substantially from the sharing of experiences. In this context, Iran at times finds it difficult to connect to the various regions it is part of and neighbours, i.e., especially the Arab world and Central and South Asia. Europe could assist in bringing Iran into various regional formats.

Economy: After years of sanctions, there are a number of practical obstacles, in contrast to more political factors, which complicate Iran's full reintegration into the global economy. For example, there are standards in accounting, finance, or due diligence that Iranian companies and banks will need to adopt in order to conduct business internationally—especially with Europe and the West. Here, the EU and its member states could provide technical assistance.

Recommendations

When approaching Iran, Europe's main challenge is to find an appropriate balance. On the one hand, Europe will need to engage with Iran in light of both the great potential for European–Iranian relations as well as the importance of the country in the Middle East/Mediterranean, Europe's immediate neighbourhood. On the other hand, the EU and its member states will need to constructively challenge Iran in those areas constituting concerns for Europe: the human rights situation in Iran, certain elements of the Iranian ballistic missile programme, Tehran's support of non-state actors in the Middle East and the rejection of Israel's right to exist.⁴⁷

In moving forward, Europe may draw from the successful experience that allowed for the conclusion of the JCPOA. As such, a European approach that seeks to positively link topics in a quest for win-win or more-for-more solutions appears most conducive. In this context, the following comprises a partial list of general policy recommendations.

47 Authors' interview with an expert, 2018.

- (1) *Fully and comprehensively implement the JCPOA:* Not only in light of complaints from Iranian officials and European businesses, Europe should ensure the full implementation of the JCPOA. To this end, Europe would need to further remove nuclear sanctions-related obstacles to European–Iranian trade, especially regarding finance. A full and comprehensive implementation of the JCPOA is the interest of reducing tensions in the Middle East as well as global non-proliferation. Moreover, a successful implementation of the JCPOA would be testimony that diplomacy and negotiations can deliver meaningful results in Iran’s foreign relations. As such, the extent to which the JCPOA becomes a success story will in many respects define the future character of European–Iranian relations.
- (2) *Enhance and institutionalize political exchanges:* Building on the extant positive momentum from the JCPOA negotiations, Europe should enhance and institutionalize political exchanges with Iran on all matters relevant to relations between the two sides. These exchanges would obviously need to take into account both European and Iranian concerns. When it comes to addressing the various concerns, dialogue might be most successful when aiming at the identification of inter-subject linkages, aiming at the creation of win-win or more-for-more outcomes.
The EU–Iran High Level Political Dialogue, which has been held three times since JCPOA implementation, is a constructive starting point. Beyond this important but rather general discussion format, it might be helpful to advance working groups on the various issues important to relations between Europe and Iran. These exchanges would also need to be promoted at the level of EU member states and might benefit from embracing participants from civil society as well.
- (3) *Enhance and institutionalize the human rights dialogue:* The human rights situation in Iran is a great concern to Europe, effectively complicating relations between the sides. Within the above-outlined framework, a constructive dialogue should be held aiming at the identification and implementation of concrete steps to improve the human rights situation in Iran.

The human rights issue has been included once again in the European–Iranian official agenda following implementation of the JCPOA. In November 2017, the subject was discussed at the High Level Political Dialogue in Tehran. Considering the urgency of the matter, it is of great importance to institutionalize exchanges on this matter.

To realize positive outcomes, the EU and its member states might link human rights to other areas, where Europe could offer Iran more beyond its immediate obligations (e.g., on economic reform or trade).

- (4) *Support economic reform in Iran*: Since assuming office, the administration of President Hassan Rouhani has introduced numerous economic reforms. Some of these aim at increasing transparency and fighting corruption. Further, Iran seeks to meet the legal and technical requirements to reconnect with the global economy.

Many of these reforms are very much in the interests of Europe. Accordingly, Europe could support the economic reform process in Iran. Whilst offering assistance, Europe could package programmes so as to include further aspects as well, such as improving social welfare or advancing labour rights.

- (5) *Ease difficulties for civil society exchanges*: Throughout Iran, there is great interest in enhancing exchanges with Europe at the level of civil society. Here, bureaucratic barriers imposed by the EU and its member states are effectively hampering progress. Difficulties in obtaining visas especially constitute a stumbling block, in particular when it comes to the Schengen Area.

To promote civil society exchanges and to embrace the full potential for European–Iranian relations, for which civil society exchanges are key, Europe might ease some of the restrictions in this context.

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Chapter 5: Lebanese Elites' Views on Lebanon and Its Relations with the EU

In recent years, the Mediterranean region has experienced and continues to experience drastic changes. The sea itself has become a border and its porousness, despite extreme danger, has been utilized by hundreds of thousands in recent years. As a dangerous border, the Mediterranean has also become a final resting place for thousands, a reflection of larger conflicts that many are fleeing in countries along or near the sea. The ever-changing dynamics in the Mediterranean region thus require new questions, answers, policies, and approaches. The MEDRESET project seeks to understand how the European Union can better engage with the Mediterranean region, an area that is dynamic, diverse, in conflict, and at odds even with itself.

This chapter is a summary of an elite survey conducted in Lebanon, and presents the findings of the qualitative research based on 30 interviews (with 15 female and 15 male interviewees). The questions posed to the interviewees focused on perceptions of the EU, its member states, and their policies; perceptions of the Mediterranean and key issues in this region; and issues specifically related to Lebanon.

With respect to the methodology, two researchers conducted the interviews. The initial list of interviewees was compiled by the researchers with oversight and approval. The list was later amended with additional names, as some individuals who were contacted either did not respond or stated that they did not wish to participate in the interview. The list of the interviewees therefore included individuals with different backgrounds, who wished to be interviewed. The profile of those interviewed included policy-makers, activists, artists, journalists, designers, business and banking professionals, start-up

sector professionals, humanitarians, and academics. Individuals were contacted by email primarily, with full information on the purpose of the interview and the consent form. Individuals were met in public spaces in Beirut, such as cafes, where they first received information on the purpose of the interview and read and signed the consent form. The interviews lasted one hour and followed the interview structure and questions that were provided.

To briefly summarize the findings, the interviews reflect that the image of the EU held by elites in Lebanon has changed since the beginning of the Syrian refugee crisis, as many saw the EU as failing to provide safe passage for refugees and migrants. Similarly, many interlocutors were critical of the EU–Turkey agreement on refugees, as well as the amount of aid the EU has or has not provided to Lebanon in dealing with its critical refugee crisis. Furthermore, the elites in Lebanon did not speak of the Mediterranean region in great detail, seeing their country as being in a region that encompasses parts of the Mediterranean but also the Gulf area and Iran. Finally, although the interlocutors shared a variety of policy concerns and issues, the number one issue mentioned by most of the interviewees was the vast corruption in Lebanon, which they see as a barrier to any progress in the country.

The chapter is structured as follows. In the first section, background data is provided on the demographics, history, politics, and economy of the country. In the second section we provide an overview of the history of EU–Lebanon relations in a timeline. In the third section the authors discuss the research data pertaining to: the perceptions of the EU; challenges confronting Lebanon; expectations for the EU’s future role in Lebanon; co-operation areas with the EU; and policy recommendations. A list of anonymized interviewees with interview dates is finally provided as an Annex. In the conclusion, the authors summarize the findings of the interviews.

1. Country profile of Lebanon

1.1 Demographics

Lebanon, a country of 10,452 square kilometres, is situated on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean, and has a population estimated in 2016 (in the absence of census data) at just over six million. This figure excludes several million expatriates, including perhaps two million who left during the 1975–1990 civil war, as well as over 1.5 million refugees residing in Lebanon, primarily Syrians and Palestinians, and finally approximately 150,000 migrant workers from Asian and African countries.

1.2 Relevant stakeholders at the domestic, regional, and global levels

The Lebanese political system is organized on a confessional basis, with key offices in the state and its institutions, as well as parliamentary seats, allotted to members of specific sects/religions. Although Shia Muslims are believed to constitute the majority of Lebanon's population, the leading posts have traditionally been occupied by Maronite Christians (President) and Sunni Muslims (Prime Minister). Druze and Orthodox Christians constitute additional significant constituencies in Lebanese political life.

This system has generally—but with important exceptions—translated into one where political activity is organized on the basis of religious/sectarian identification.^{1 2} In the increasingly polarized reality that is Lebanese politics, key national stakeholders are the rival March 8 and March 14 coalitions, which differ primarily in their attitudes to Lebanon's regional and international orientation.³ The Shia Hezbollah is considered the most powerful force within the country,

1 Fawwaz Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon*, London, Pluto Press, 2012.

2 Kamal Salibi, *A House of Many Mansions. The History of Lebanon Reconsidered*, London, I.B. Tauris, 1988.

3 The March 8 Alliance is led by Hezbollah and its allies, while the March 14 Alliance is led by the Future Movement of Sa'ad Hariri and its allies.

maintaining an independent militia believed to be more powerful than the Lebanese military. Its main coalition partner is the Free Patriotic Movement led by current Lebanese President Michel Aoun. The Future Movement led by the Sunni Hariri family is its main rival and is closely aligned with the Progressive Socialist Party which is led by Druze Chieftain Walid Jumblatt and the Lebanese Forces of Samir Geagea. Geagea and Aoun, both Maronite Christians, represent the increasingly polarized nature of their community. In 2008, the rival coalitions fought street battles, which were decisively won by Hezbollah within a matter of days.

At the regional level, Lebanon has been an arena of fierce Saudi–Iranian rivalry, and these powers also constitute the main regional stakeholders in the country today. Traditionally, Syria has been the dominant power within Lebanon, having stationed forces within the country and dominated its politics between 1976 and 2005, but its influence has waned in recent years; first on account of its withdrawal and more recently due to the Syrian conflict. Internationally, Lebanon’s closest relations are with the former mandatory power France, and with the United States.

1.3 A chronology of key events since the start of the Arab uprisings

Lebanon did not experience mass protest or prolonged civil strife during the upheaval that engulfed the region for much of the past decade. It has however been deeply affected by these events, most prominently the Syrian conflict. On the one hand, Hezbollah has been a key player within Syria, particularly in the military sphere where it has made an important contribution to the survival of the al-Assad regime. At the same time, its Lebanese rivals, primarily various Sunni groups, initially served as an important conduit for supplies, including armaments, to the Syrian opposition. The Syria conflict extended to the Lebanese border region, and as a result, the al-Qaeda-affiliated Nusra Front and the Islamic State movement were able to establish bases within Lebanon, and conduct a number of attacks in the country, including the capital Beirut. With

the support of Hezbollah, it took the Lebanese military several years to eliminate these groups from Lebanese territory.

Lebanon did have brief protests in the summer of 2015 in response to the country's ongoing trash crisis. The movement, known as YouStink, did not have the same impact nor duration as other movements during the Arab Spring. However, in the most recent municipal elections in 2016, a new social movement, *Beirut Madinati* [Beirut My City], did emerge. Its birth has been linked to the 2015 uprising. In the 2018 Parliamentary elections, the social movement *Kuluna Watani* [We Are All 'My Nation'], has entered the race and received attention.

1.4 Main geopolitical challenges

The main geopolitical challenges confronting Lebanon derive from two sources: Israel and the Saudi–Iranian rivalry extending throughout the region. Israel and Hezbollah fought a devastating conflict in 2006, and most analysts believe it is only a matter of time before a new and more catastrophic conflict erupts. Although the peace has been kept for over a decade by mutual deterrence, there is a widespread belief that Israel is awaiting the opportunity to at least significantly degrade the increasingly powerful militia entrenched on its northern border. This is closely related to the ongoing conflict between Israel and Iran, which is increasingly centred on Syria. An eventual collapse of the nuclear deal, the JCPOA, may set the stage for such a conflict. At the same time, Saudi Arabia has been pursuing an increasingly aggressive policy within Lebanon in order to reduce Iranian influence and re-establish its primacy. This resulted in 2017 in Riyadh's effective kidnapping and forced resignation of Lebanese Prime Minister Sa'ad Hariri, an initiative that ultimately failed and backfired spectacularly. For the time being, the contagion of the Syrian conflict upon Lebanon appears to have been contained, though it may well be where a new conflict involving Israel, Hezbollah, and Iran—and thus Lebanon—erupts.

2. Overview of Lebanon–EU relations

2.1 Timeline

2002: Signature of EU–Lebanon Interim Agreement and Association Agreement.

2003: Entry into force of Interim Agreement.

2005: Government of Lebanon approves participation in EU Neighbourhood Policy.

2006: Entry into force of Association Agreement.

2007: Entry into force of EU–Lebanon Action Plan governing co-operation within the framework of the EU Neighbourhood Policy.

2008: Lebanon joins Union for the Mediterranean.

2016: Lebanon and EU adopt partnership priorities and compact.

The EU is Lebanon’s largest trading partner and a key source of aid and assistance to Lebanon. The total 2017 trade with the EU amounted to 7.72 billion euro. Industrial products at 351 million euro are the main item of trade.⁴ The nature of trade of industrial products has however changed during the past decade. In the aftermath of the 2006 conflict, the EU began to prioritize reconstruction assistance in addition to previous programmes to promote economic development and improved governance. Since 2011, a growing proportion of assistance disbursed in Lebanon—much of which has been channelled through international organizations—has sought to assist Lebanon with the challenges of hosting a large and growing community of Syrian refugees. From 2014 to 2016, EU aid to Lebanon totalled 147 million euro. The Lebanese government has continued to state that it requires more aid due to the Syrian refugee crisis and the pressures this has placed on the small host country. There are also wide reports of corruption which claim that aid money does not always reach those in need.

In addition to the above, the EU considers the strengthening of the Lebanese state and its capacity to govern and provide public services as a key objective.

4 European Commission DG Trade, *European Union, Trade in Goods with Lebanon*, 16 April 2018, <http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/html/113412.htm>.

2.2 The changing structure and nature of interactions with the EU

EU collaboration with Lebanon is implemented through the European Neighbourhood Policy. The ENP is based around the main themes of political, economic, and human-rights-related reforms, and aims to promote further collaboration with countries neighbouring the EU. The EU thereby offers financial as well as technical assistance to local municipalities and public or private actors in exchange for agreed upon commitments and reforms. The ENP was originally launched in 2003 but was reviewed in 2011, following the ‘Arab Spring’. The new ENI is the main financial instrument for implementing the ENP, and has a worth of 15.4 billion euro for the period between 2014 and 2020.

The reworked ENP is mainly implemented through bilateral co-operation between the EU and each neighbourhood partner, to better adapt to individual challenges and requirements. The mutually agreed upon Action Plans, formulating the agenda for any further co-operation efforts, are however contingent upon the same goals and priorities as in the original policy. These are divided among the sectors of (1) political and economic reform, (2) security, (3) migration and mobility, and (4) education and development of job opportunities. According to the ENI Regulation, external action partners, including civil society organizations and local authorities, are involved in preparing, implementing, and monitoring EU support, given the importance of their roles. Furthermore, civil society organizations are called upon to participate in the development of the three financial programmes—for bilateral, multi-country, and cross-border co-operation—and will be, together with local and regional authorities, their main beneficiaries.

In the case of Lebanon, research projects that are in collaboration with the EU and ENP centre on promoting Lebanese citizenship and furthering the participation in democratic processes. Research is especially focused on gaining further knowledge of the relation between political figures, politicians, and processes of voting. Furthermore, the aim is to display dynamics of political clientelism as a significant factor in elections. EU collaboration seeks to fund projects that seem to empower the Lebanese citizens to contribute to and engage in the

process of policy-making. Many of these research projects focus on single municipalities; others draw on a broader context, including all the country's political parties or the Lebanese state as situated in a broader 'Arab world'.

One of the focuses of ENP economic reformation projects is related to the environmental issue and so-called 'green economy' projects. These projects are intended to help individual municipalities to upgrade their infrastructure for services like water supply, sanitation, and waste disposal. Most recently, these projects have had the aim of increasing the resilience of Syrian refugee communities as well as their Lebanese hosts. Other projects around the country support communities via financial and technical assistance to small-scale agriculture. On a different tack, ENP projects also focus on start-ups and private businesses. These projects are meant to promote entrepreneurship and self-employment as part of a grander strategy to help soften the impact of the Syrian refugee crisis.

The security policy of the ENP focuses on strengthening the military–civil co-operation of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and the population especially in the south. These projects materialize in the development and support of civil services and infrastructure like water supply, education, and cultural events. Additionally, ENP support of the LAF focuses on border security management via Lebanon's Integrated Border Management programme (IBM). The aim of the IBM is to improve co-operation between various law enforcement and ministerial actors involved in matters of border security.

ENP projects on migration and mobility aim to intensify co-operation between Europe and Lebanon pertaining to regular and irregular patterns of migration. This is accomplished by an increased financial and technical support for Lebanon during the era of an increased influx of refugees as well as co-operatively addressing the root causes of irregular migration and forced displacement. The objectives of programmes such as the EUROMED Migration IV is to implement a comprehensive and shared approach to strengthen effective dialogue and co-operation on migration, mobility, and international protection issues between the ENI South Partner Countries and EU member states, as well as among the South Partner Countries themselves. It also works

on promoting better identification of skills gaps in the EU to facilitate mutually beneficial legal migration and launch dialogues on academic mobility.

The ENP education policy sets out to influence the very early steps of childhood education by stabilizing the public education system with financial aid. Such efforts are meant to support all children in public schools but especially vulnerable communities. Recent education projects funded by the EU have focused on issues of food security and agricultural and rural development by promoting the ongoing improvement of graduate and post-graduate programmes in that area. Furthermore, the ENP offers support for young entrepreneurs to form a sustainable cross-border landscape for start-ups and youth businesses.

3. Elite Survey: Research findings on Lebanon

3.1 Perception of the EU and its policies in the Mediterranean

Some of the people we interviewed worked with the EU in regard to applying for or receiving grants. Among those surveyed, government officials, and—to the extent that they have a relationship with EU programmes—civil society and private sector representatives displayed greater knowledge of the EU and of its policies and programmes in Lebanon. Respondents who have or had a direct relationship with the EU or European states were less critical, in the sense that they typically had a positive assessment of such dealings. But they also shared many of the more general observations of their compatriots concerning EU policy in Lebanon and the region. Primarily, most individuals, other than journalists and government workers, were not aware of what the ENP was and spoke more generally of their EU perceptions. They saw the role of the EU as largely unclear and vague.

Generally speaking, respondents have a positive impression of the EU, which reflects either their appreciation of the role it has played within Europe, the values it proclaims, positive views about prominent EU member states, or a combination of the above.

‘I think it is a group of countries which is part of what we call the first world that have sets of values. They are trying to encourage them in our country through different projects, whether it’s directly or indirectly. I think they are a good set of values, they aren’t a bad set of values. I also think that sometimes they are distant from reality. Some of the projects don’t really work because they are up from top down and not from bottom up in the community. I don’t think it has a bad perception, I think it has a good perception. [*sic*].’⁵

There is widespread consensus that the collective role of the EU is overshadowed by the policies of its individual member states. There is, on the whole, a greater awareness of and knowledge about individual European states and their policies than about the EU. This is particularly the case with European states that have a prominent historical or current relationship with Lebanon (France), or are otherwise recognized as leading European states (Germany and the United Kingdom are the most referenced in this respect).

‘France will always have a pretty positive image even historically and given the fact that people have a lot of ties and this cuts across many social and political factions. Then again, [there is] the complicating factor of Bashar in Syria. Currently, regarding Macron [French President] and the previous administration [the view] is that if you are anti-Bashar you are in the position vis-à-vis France. If you are pro-Bashar maybe you are more with Russia. As for the UK, Brexit was a mistake and it looks like the UK is going in the direction of Trump. People with investments maybe are looking at other places in Europe. Germany is stable, many Lebanese visit [there]. A lot of people might send their children there to study.’⁶

‘But these three countries [France, Italy, and Germany] are seen as points of asylum for a lot of people. Healthcare, privileges, services. A place to go and have a sort of opportunity for life. At the same time, with the racism that exists in those countries and the conservative politics they have pushed forward, there is a sort of negative response. [...] Sweden gets off a bit easier, it is not as vocal

5 Interviewee 3: Political activist, female, 25 July 2017.

6 Interviewee 16: Political expert and academic, male, 26 July 2017.

about its foreign policy here. It is seen as a place to go to escape. Germany has that as well, but it's become harder and harder. [...] The underlying point I am trying to make is that a lot of the reactions come from how these countries work and what they do in this area. And more often than not what they do is quite negative in most of these areas, which is unfortunate because they could do the, quote unquote, right thing.'⁷

The survey additionally revealed that the EU is, particularly in contrast to the US, not perceived as an active political player in Lebanon. Rather—and to the extent that awareness of its role and policies is identified—it is seen as a practitioner of soft power, a trading partner and development/funding agency: 'You feel that they are more playing the role of a facilitator or a mediator. Not really doers of a policy or forcing a policy.'⁸

'I think broadly the EU is perceived as an aid-provider; somebody that doesn't have a lot of strictly political interests, when you compare it to the US for example. The US has more political interests tied to their aid. The EU is perceived as an actor that has more humanitarian interests that they are implementing in Lebanon.'⁹

'Judging by my personal experience and what I saw the past years, if I talk about EU policy, they did contribute to a lot of aid that came to the region.'¹⁰

'I think it depends on who you are asking or where you are asking that question but in general, it is not perceived in a bad way if you compare perception with other foreign entities, the US for example. You have a fairly good perception so far as I can see, but then again it will depend on who you are asking and when and where. If you go into refugee communities, you might hear a different answer. However, in general the EU is fairly well-perceived.'¹¹

In summary, the EU was seen as an aid-provider primarily, and a medical INGO professional and activist characterized the EU's role as 'symbolic', consisting of 'funding, without any other impact'.¹²

7 Interviewee 5: Medical INGO professional and activist, male, 20 July 2017.

8 Interviewee 1: HR professional in banking sector, female, 15 July 2017.

9 Interviewee 2: Journalist at foreign news agency, female, 23 July 2017.

10 Interviewee 4: Media spokesperson for INGO, male, 20 July 2017.

11 Ibid.

12 Interviewee 5: Medical INGO professional and activist, male, 20 July 2017.

The EU's role and record in the Middle East is by contrast notably absent as an explanation for positive views of the institution. Rather, some are highly critical of the EU in this respect.

'But also, they contributed negatively to a lot of the conflicts that are taking place in the region at the same time. I can't really see a clear policy from the EU and if they did have one, judging from the values of the EU, they failed at that policy. I think they were more interested in absolutely guaranteeing their own interests no matter what the costs. We saw the refugee deal they did with Turkey. We saw the way they dealt with—I don't want my answer to sound political—but to see the way they dealt with Aleppo [in Syria], with Mosul [in Iraq], with the way they dealt with the ridiculous death toll and the ridiculous violations in the region. I can't see what their policy is in the region and if there was one or if there is clear one. Or just keeping what is here by pulling the right strings be it the UN Security Council.'¹³

Interviewees also mentioned the bilateral interventions in Syria by some EU member states, noting that some states had a particular stance on military intervention, and this had impact on the way people view the EU.

'Yes, it is trying to play an active role and I am aware of it at least in relief efforts, welcoming refugees, resettlement of refugees, medical efforts, the documentation of violations. In Lebanon, the problem is that the major countries in the EU called for military intervention in Syria. This was seen positively only by a relative minority. The pro-revolution camp was not, as a majority, for it. Of course, the pro-Assad camp was against this. The majority of people here were against it. Other than political activists, the population couldn't handle it, anymore interventions.'¹⁴

The issue of historical baggage was raised in this respect as well:

'I don't think it has a specific politics towards the region. It has policies, multiple, but sure you can describe them as sort of umbrella policy. I will be harsh. It is anti- the population self-determination in this region. This goes way back in history. And it's not like colonialism has really ended. Certain aspects of colonialism have ended. The key impetus of it all is to go against this idea of self-determination of these communities that reside in the region. And I am talking about true self-determination, true representation, and true power for the populations here. And

13 Ibid.

14 Interviewee 18: Researcher, male, 28 July 2017.

this is not something that the EU will be friendly with because it threatens their economic and political interests.’¹⁵

‘Of course, it has specific policies, as a form of soft power. I think of the EU as having had a big history of colonialism in the whole region, I think it is definitely a way for these countries to exercise their cultural predominance. It has always been two-fold, one way it is a good way to get information. In another way, it is a way to keep things in check. I found quite often, that working in Europe as well, there is a mindset that somehow these agencies in Europe are more the decision makers of what culture and arts should look like in the region and more so what people’s worries should be. If the EU decides that arts and culture should be on the refugee crisis, then everyone should do this, and if it is women and empowerment, then this is what everyone should do. A lot of these policies don’t come from the Middle East but from the EU onto the Middle East.’¹⁶

Regarding the Syrian refugees, some interviewees admitted that the EU, often mentioning Germany in particular, has been welcoming of refugees. They also stated that Gulf countries, on the other hand, have not welcomed any refugees. However, the expanding perception is of ‘Fortress Europe’, whose priority is to ensure that the Mediterranean serves as an effective physical barrier between its northern and southern shores.

‘I mean, if you are going to evaluate their policies in the Mediterranean, first thing that comes to mind is the “Fortress Europe” policies that are forcing men, women, and children to go through horrifying experiences. People drowning, people suffering on the borders. Their policy of securitization and outsourcing securitization. They are often outsourcing securitization to the governments here to do their dirty work: to Lebanon, Turkey, etc.’¹⁷

‘From another part I think the EU is looked at as a caged continent where people have dreams to visit and to live there but it is not accessible due to the selection criteria that they have and the conditions that don’t allow people to live there. Also, there is a general feeling that the EU has—due to the Syrian refugee crisis—started to move towards supporting governments in the region to contain the refugees and not have the influx going to Europe, especially through the Mediterranean. Looking at the neighbourhood relationship, now you have the Fund which is to support governments

15 Interviewee 5: Medical INGO professional and activist, male, 20 July 2017.

16 Interviewee 10: Professional in design sector, female, 31 July 2017.

17 Interviewee 5: Medical INGO professional and activist, male, 20 July 2017.

and NGOs that are working in response to the crisis. So, I think the EU is trying to limit the amount of people that are migrating to Europe through working with local governments and enhancing their security procedures and to work with NGOs which are responding to the crisis. For me personally, I do believe that Europe is a “Fortress Europe”, it is a gated continent which promotes its diversity and the different identities towards this region, but I don’t think that they do celebrate the cultures from the southern neighbourhood countries. It is not a reciprocal relationship.’¹⁸

The gap between proclaimed values and actual policies was also noted in this respect.

‘Championing itself as a progressive, liberal and democratic entity, I believe that EU policy in the Mediterranean is lacking real efficiency. The effects of its intentions are often watered down, diluted by bureaucracy [so] that by the time they hit the ground they are often limited, and incapable of producing the intended results.’¹⁹

That said, a number of respondents professed ignorance about EU policy towards the Mediterranean, either because they are unaware of it, or because they believe the EU does not have a coherent policy that can be identified. Notably, throughout this spectrum, those consulted believe the EU has effectively been relegated to secondary status by the more assertive roles played in the region by the United States and Russia.

The perceptions of the EU role within Lebanon are also rather critical. The EU is often perceived as being involved in Lebanon either to serve European as opposed to Lebanese or joint interests, or otherwise viewed as present in Lebanon because of conflicts elsewhere in the region, particularly Syria, and in order to insulate Europe from the refugee crisis.

‘I think they want to maintain whatever sort of political strife we are going through in order to minimize whatever expenditure they are putting towards us. I think they are doing this. They are trying to maintain us, how to maintain people from this region, more so than including them.’²⁰

‘They are not helping. We don’t need EU help except in refugees [*sic*], they should welcome more. This is the one area where they are helping.’²¹

18 Interviewee 17: Palestinian refugee working at INGO, male, 4 August 2017.

19 Interviewee 8: Professional in creative sector, female, 3 August 2017.

20 Interviewee 7: Artist, female, 10 August 2017.

21 Interviewee 6: Academic, professor, and economist, male, 25 July 2017.

3.2 Challenges confronting Lebanon and expectations

There is much broader consensus on the key challenges confronting Lebanon. Unsurprisingly, the Syria conflict next door, and the broader ramifications of regional upheaval—not least the refugee crisis—are consistently mentioned. So too, albeit to a lesser extent, the Arab–Israeli conflict and the possibility of a new war involving Lebanon.

In terms of domestic issues, corruption and the lack of accountability by political and other elites figures prominently. The persistence of the confessional political system and growing socioeconomic inequalities are also mentioned. The Lebanese are often critical of the state of democracy in their country, and believe their government is working to undermine rather than promote it.

‘Refugees, refugee rights. Infrastructural problems, corruption, gender issues in terms of treatment of women. In a nutshell, it is a bundle of social and economic problems that takes a book to respond. The government here does not really deal with it or enables the problems to continue. The government here is war lords and corrupt officials. They aren’t being harmed and have power and are rich. Everyone else is being harmed and they are inciting communities to fight each other and harm each other.’²²

At the same time, the interviewees are cognizant that they live in a much more democratic political system than most of their neighbours. Notably absent from most responses is the increasing polarization within Lebanese politics and society in recent years. One possible explanation is that many respondents view this as a given. Many Lebanese across the spectrum also expressed a pessimistic attitude when it comes to identifying opportunities for their country in the coming years.

Opinion is divided on the role the EU can or should play in addressing these challenges. Responses ranged from the view that the EU can play a vital role in helping Lebanon to address its problems through support within the country and providing greater access to its markets, to the conclusion that the EU is an insufficient external actor lacking significant impact on the domestic and regional crises confronting Lebanon.

22 Interviewee 5: Medical INGO professional and activist, male, 20 July 2017.

When asked in which policy areas the EU could be specifically beneficial, interviewee 3 answered:

‘Freedoms, individual freedoms, freedom of speech, killing censorship. Maybe the EU can support everyone working on killing censorship, on supporting individual freedoms. The second that I think is important [is the] environment, even if we don’t feel it is a necessity, I feel we are completely forgetting this field [that] affects our health issues and affects how we live. Whether it is traffic, whether the whole health system is not working well. I also think anti-racism is important, whether anti-sectarianism, anti-sexism, anti-fanaticism. This whole “hate of the other”—whether it’s women, domestic workers, a Syrian refugee, etc.—needs to be tackled somehow. I’m not saying democracy and secularism, because I think these are very big titles that you can’t address at a distance. I think when you work on building values, they will come eventually. When everyone is free and tolerant, I think it will come as a consequence.’²³

3.3 Co-operation Areas with the EU

There was a general observation that the states of the Middle East could benefit from more co-operation with the EU in terms of the economy and governance, in particular. This, however, would require the EU to pursue an agenda that was more aligned with the interests of the peoples of the region as opposed to the narrow priorities of the EU, and to partner less with governments that stand in opposition to the values Europe espouses. On the whole, Lebanese would like to see greater economic co-operation with the EU, and a more energetic European promotion of good governance in Lebanon. As expressed by one respondent, ‘they [should] avoid being hypocritical about their own values’.²⁴

Most did not call for specific policies. They stated that the people know what needs to be done; what they need is funding, knowledge sharing and expertise.

‘We need different tactics and become more innovative in how we can address these issues. Technology innovation needs to be a core part of this. These issues cannot be addressed without this.’²⁵

23 Interviewee 3: Political activist, female, 25 July 2017.

24 Interviewee 9: Professional in start-up sector, male, 10 August 2017.

25 Ibid. The interviewee is referring to what he considered to be core issues within the country, such as the refugee crisis, waste crisis, corruption, etc.

In Lebanon there is an opportunity with the knowledge economy, if I were the EU, I would try to at least be part of it because there are so many opportunities that could be offered to the entrepreneurs. You have a lot of talent, a lot of start-ups. Open the European market to them. They would be better off and the EU would benefit from innovation disruptions and the start-ups would benefit and [in turn] benefit Lebanon. [...] Maybe an entrepreneur visa for start-ups. Facilitating travel, meeting with policy-makers, providing funds, soft landing zones, establishing residency, legal aspect, these kinds of things.²⁶

Visa policies were also seen as crucial for the Lebanese economy. In the words of an HR professional in the banking sector:

‘They might work more on the visa system, because they want tourists, but they are not helping us in doing this. They are a union, but they are inconsistent in the way that they give visas. You have some flexible countries but some that aren’t. If we get a visa for 5 years, we can get our tickets and then go there. So, we opt for Turkey or for the US because they give us a 5-year visa. [...] So, it is becoming obnoxious to go to Europe. They want to appear as being close, but they don’t walk the talk. [...] They look at us from above, we aren’t at the same status. This is repulsing. We’re not on the same level and it’s not fair.’²⁷

The EU is lauded for its generous funding of refugee programmes in Lebanon but criticized for its own restrictive refugee admissions policies, though these are recognized as being more open than those of, for example, the United States. In general, the EU is seen as supporting refugee absorption in Lebanon in order to reduce migration flows to Europe. In some cases, such observations were accompanied by complaints that it has become increasingly difficult for Lebanese citizens to acquire visas to European states. Others noted that the EU also supports Lebanese security forces that engage in human rights violations against refugees.

In the local context, interviewees did call for the EU to exert more efforts, regionally and in Lebanon, towards solving the refugee crisis. Noting the power and wealth of the EU, they stated that the EU was capable of this, but insisted that the EU works more with local, rather than external, actors in this respect.

26 Interviewee 15: Leading figure in the start-up sector, male, 4 August 2017.

27 Interviewee 1: HR professional in banking sector, female, 15 July 2017

'A drastic approach towards solving the refugee crisis. All that has been done is just spending some money and hoping this will be beneficial. But this is all going to NGOs, maybe only 10 percent of them are helping. It should be more in-depth and hands-on with local people. You don't need to bring people from abroad. Making people accountable for whatever they have been allocated to do. There is a lack of accountability. Even if it is well-intended. This creates corruption. Autonomy to the wrong people makes them corrupt.'²⁸

Regarding civil society support, many people are aware that the EU and its member states are a primary external funder of non-governmental organizations and various civic initiatives. Here again, those who assess EU policies on the basis of direct experience generally provide high marks, whether in terms of donor programmes, funding, or technical expertise. Impact assessments were more varied, but responsibility for failures in this respect were as often laid at the door of the Lebanese authorities as attributed to the Europeans, leading some to opine that the EU should exercise more political pressure on the Lebanese government to adopt policies that reflect the objectives of EU assistance programmes. Assistance to Lebanese NGOs, whether by the EU or individual member states, appears to be particularly appreciated, not only for the reasons noted above, but also because its contributions are seen as vital to the sector and because such funding is in contrast to its American counterpart not viewed as politically tainted.

'Yes of course there are a lot of ties between civil society and the EU, whether in funding projects or funding research, initiating projects, and in offering protection in a non-direct way. I know that many civil society groups, especially related to gender and sexuality, especially sexuality; they don't have leverage over the government and the population. Whenever there is a crackdown, the first body they think to support them is the EU. So, they are a supportive body for society that has leverage over the Lebanese government. [...] It is not perceived as a hostile influence but rather compromises what the government has to do in order to keep the EU on its side.'²⁹

Furthermore, acquiring European support is also seen by its civil society recipients as extending a measure of political protection vis-à-vis hostility to their programmes by the Lebanese authorities.

28 Interviewee 15: Leading figure in the start-up sector, male, 4 August 2017.

29 Interviewee 18: Researcher, male, 28 July 2017.

The EU is also seen as a prominent actor in terms of its gender policies. In this respect its own values and assistance to organizations that promote gender equality are widely noted and seen as important contributions. At the same time, it is also observed that the EU partners with governments in the region whose gender policies sharply contradict those of the EU and the organizations it supports. In terms of gender perspective and how the EU could be involved in this regard, interviewees felt that the EU could have more leverage over the Lebanese government in passing faster gender reform.

‘There are a few gains which are happening, but I’m not sure how much the EU is really using their influence on Lebanese politicians on such things. Again, as I said, the only support is financial, and the change is being done by civil sector society, but I do believe the EU could put more conditions or provide more conditional support and funding for the government based on government’s performance in gender equality.’³⁰

Furthermore, one interviewee stated the following.

‘I personally hate the positive discrimination that they try to enforce. I talk about research because that is the field that I know most. When you want to apply for a project you need to have the same number of men and women researchers. This [is the] type of quota that they try to impose. They are blind to the local context. In Lebanon all of the projects have more females than males. In my university we have more female professors.’³¹

Assessment of EU policies in Lebanon within specific sectors such as agriculture, water, energy, or industry was largely declined by those with no direct experience, on the grounds of lack of knowledge. A recurrent observation with respect to these programmes, however, has been that the EU is insufficiently accessible, for example, supporting Lebanese agriculture while restricting access for Lebanese products to the European market—something that would significantly contribute to its further development. One expert stated that the need is infrastructural:

‘I think this is the major need. [...] We need to drink non-polluted water. We can expect a lot from the EU in this regard. We could expect a lot from the EU, especially

30 Interviewee 17: Palestinian refugee working at INGO, male, 4 August 2017.

31 Interviewee 6: Academic, professor, and economist, male, 25 July 2017.

local solutions to technical problems like waste management, solar energy. These kinds of very small-scale projects that specifically target municipalities.³²

Conclusion

In conclusion, the interviewees provided key information, from an elite status perspective, on awareness and perception of EU policies, potential for EU policies in the region, expectations for Lebanon, and with some reflections on gender. Regarding awareness and perception of EU policies, the interviewees realize that the EU is a powerful leader in the region, but they are less aware of EU policies and projects, and much more aware of projects and policies of individual EU member states. Generally, most people had a positive view of the EU. Individuals working in the NGO or creative sectors saw the EU as a critical donor and funder. Primarily, the interviewees were most critical of (1) the EU refugee policy in regard to lack of provision of safe passage to Europe and (2) EU and Schengen visa policies for Lebanese citizens, stating that they prefer the US system which either gives a visa for 5 years, or does not give a visa at all.

Regarding the potential for EU policies in the region, many interviewees called for the EU to work with grassroots organizations and employ a less top-down approach. Many interviewees felt that policies and working areas were decided in the EU, and there was not a dialogue between the EU and its Lebanon partners. Again, individuals from the NGO and creative sectors voiced criticism of the EU's bureaucratic system in applying for grants, which they found discouraging. Finally, individuals felt that the EU could be more effective in using its leverage to influence and place pressure on the Lebanese government. The key policy recommendations which emerged from the interviews were that the interlocutors expect the EU to:

32 Ibid.

- (1) assist more strongly with the refugee crisis and prevent the Mediterranean Sea from acting as a border;
- (2) localize their intervention, as the central government in Lebanon is seen as corrupt, and work with municipalities and grassroots organizations; and
- (3) not make pre-decisions within EU offices to then apply in Lebanon, but instead, make decisions with Lebanese partners or allow for full self-determination.

On awareness in Lebanon, interviewees spoke very critically of their government, primarily stating that corruption is the number one issue in the country. Many expressed feelings of being disheartened and could not envision a different Lebanon. Problems were primarily seen from the point of view of corruption and sectarianism, which also aligns with international influence as all political parties are aligned with other countries regionally. International actors, especially in the Arab and Gulf regions, were seen as key and powerful stakeholders.

With a final note on gender, interviewees discussed a lack of general human rights, including gender rights, mentioning laws regarding a woman's ability to pass on nationality, domestic abuse, and sexual harassment. Many simultaneously discussed a concern regarding LGBT rights when discussing gender. People were intersectional in their approach, underlining that refugees and migrant workers face even harsher situations.

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Annex: List of Interviewees

- Interviewee 1: HR professional in banking sector, female, 15 July 2017 (follow up on 18 September 2017)
- Interviewee 2: Journalist at foreign news agency, female, 23 July 2017 (follow up on 7 September 2017)
- Interviewee 3: Political activist, female, 25 July 2017 (follow up on 8 September 2017)
- Interviewee 4: Media spokesperson for INGO, male, 20 July 2017
- Interviewee 5: Medical INGO professional and activist, male, 20 July 2017 (follow up on 7 September 2017)
- Interviewee 6: Academic, professor, and economist, male, 25 July 2017 (follow up on 22 September 2017)
- Interviewee 7: Artist, female, 10 August 2017 (follow up on 12 September 2017)
- Interviewee 8: Professional in creative sector, female, 3 August 2017 (follow up on 12 September 2017)

- Interviewee 9: Professional in start-up sector, male, 10 August 2017 (follow up on 21 September 2017)
- Interviewee 10: Professional in design sector, female, 31 July 2017 (follow up on 31 August 2017)
- Interviewee 11: Financial consultant in NGO sector, female, 9 August 2017 (follow up on 5 September 2017)
- Interviewee 12: Government official, female, 7 August 2017
- Interviewee 13: Human rights activist and case worker, female, 8 August 2017 (follow up on 18 September 2017)
- Interviewee 14: Humanitarian official, female, 7 August 2017 (follow up on 13 September 2017)
- Interviewee 15: Leading figure in the start-up sector, male, 4 August 2017 (follow up on 31 August 2017)
- Interviewee 16: Political expert and academic, male, 26 July 2017 (follow up on 9 September 2017)
- Interviewee 17: Palestinian refugee working at INGO, male, 4 August 2017 (follow up on 8 September 2017)
- Interviewee 18: Researcher, male, 28 July 2017
- Interviewee 19: Sexuality and gender activist, female, 2 August 2017
- Interviewee 20: VC funder, male, 9 August 2017 (follow up on 16 September 2017)
- Interviewee 21: Founder of an NGO, female, 2 August 2017
- Interviewee 22: Academic/research on political issues, male, 3 August 2017
- Interviewee 23: Film director, male, 6 August 2017
- Interviewee 24: Artist and film director, female, 9 August 2017
- Interviewee 25: Ceramicist, female, 12 August 2017
- Interviewee 26: Owner of furniture gallery, male, 10 August 2017
- Interviewee 27: Private sector, male, 11 August 2017
- Interviewee 28: IT sector, male, 11 August 2017
- Interviewee 29: Journalist, male, 11 August 2017
- Interviewee 30: NGO sector, female, 14 August 2017

Chapter 6: Israel, the EU, and the Mediterranean: Understanding the Perceptions of Israeli Elite Actors

This chapter aims to provide an in-depth analysis of the discourse and perceptions of the Israeli elite actors with regard to the EU's policy towards the Mediterranean and in particular *vis-à-vis* the state of Israel. The analysis is based on a series of in-depth interviews with selected senior-level Israeli experts, including both policy-makers and practitioners. Among the interviewees for this chapter are governmental officials, representatives of CSOs, leading scholars of Israeli academia and think-tanks, as well as media professionals coming from different age ranges and gender groups (see Methodology). The chapter provides a detailed understanding of and insight into current and future challenges to EU–Israel relations, and draws recommendations for policy areas of potential co-operation between the parties. It is imperative to mention that all of the 20 interviews were conducted during the first and second quarters of 2018, and thus the chapter reflects the developments at that time.

Forming a framework for interviewees' perception of the Mediterranean and Israel's policies towards the region, the common stance among Israeli elite is the concern that Israel's 'Mediterranean dialogues have been very political in the last decade' and 'North Africa has turned into a union of its own'. 'For this reason, Israel stands as a minority in the region and deliberately chooses not to seek political partnerships specific to the Mediterranean'.² Consequently, although all

1 Nimrod Goren contributed to the background section on Israel. Eyal Ronen and Emir Bayburt were involved in carrying out in-depth interviews and contributed to the Elite Survey section. Goren and Ronen were commissioned by PODEM, as Work Package 3 leader for the MEDRESET Project.

2 Interviewee 18: Senior official, male, Jerusalem, May 2018.

respondents described Israel's standpoint in the Mediterranean in detail, they could only provide limited insight on current and future policies of Israel, specifically focusing on the Mediterranean.

The mainstream discourse of the Israeli elite views the EU's relations with Israel as strong and stable, but interviewees expressed their concern that the 'desired expansion of the partnership and addressing mutual economic challenges is often "being taken hostage" due to discrepancies over political matters'.³ Moreover, some find it unwise that, in recent years, Israel has shifted its attention away from the EU and instead, to the member states—mainly those that are more supportive of its government policies. Lastly, among the interviewees who expressed their views in the elite survey, there are differences of opinion regarding the required extent of active involvement by the EU in Israel's domestic affairs. On the one hand, some advocate that the EU needs to solidify its partnership and interdependence with Israel to achieve a beneficial impact on what they frame as shared foundations and values, as well as political stability and economic development. Nevertheless, others assert that an excessive involvement may strengthen those within Israel who shape public opinion regarding 'an unacceptable EU foreign interference on Israel's internal policy'.⁴

The chapter, which is devoted to the perceptions of the Israeli elite on the EU's policy towards the Mediterranean and Israel in particular, is comprised of three main sections. The first one presents an overview country profile of Israel. The second section presents an overview of its historical relations with the EU. The third section begins with key perceptions of interviewees with regard to the EU's current foreign policies in the regional and local spheres. It further describes the main political and economic challenges and opportunities that lie ahead in Israel and the expected stance from the EU in that regard. The same section finally identifies the main areas for future co-operation between the EU and the region, with country-specific policy recommendations for the future.

3 Interviewee 6: Senior official, female, phone interview, February 2018.

4 Interviewee 11: Think-tank member, female, Tel-Aviv, February 2018.

1. Country profile of Israel

1.1 *Demographics*

Israel had a population of only 806,000 when it was established in 1948, and according to the data issued by Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics, its population was recorded as 8.9 million in 2017.⁵ Jews make up nearly three-quarters of the population (approximately 6.5 million), while Israel's almost 1.8 million Arab citizens make up just over one-fifth of the population. Druze, non-Arab Christians, and others comprise less than 4.5 percent of the population.

1.2 *Relevant stakeholders at the domestic, regional, and global levels*

Israel's system of government is a parliamentary democracy,⁶ based on nationwide proportional representation. The country is led by a prime minister and coalition government, while the president—who is the official head of state—holds a mostly symbolic role. In July 2018, the Israeli government passed a new Basic Law that would define Israel exclusively as 'the nation-state of the Jewish people', which is viewed as contentious since it would marginalize more than 2 million non-Jewish Israeli citizens.⁷

At the regional level, in the Middle East, Israel has formal diplomatic ties with Egypt and Jordan, following the peace agreements signed in 1979 and 1994 respectively. These ties were not cut off even at times of bilateral tensions, Israeli–Palestinian violence, and Muslim Brotherhood leadership in Egypt. But at times, the Arab ambassadors were recalled for consultations,

5 Central Bureau of Statistics, *Israel in Figures – Rosh Hashana: Selected Annual Data 2018*, 4 September 2018, http://cbs.gov.il/hodaot2018n/11_18_263e.pdf.

6 For a review on the current state of democracy in Israel, see: Yohanan Plesner, 'Israel 70 | Democracy against all odds, or at odds with democracy', in *Fathom*, March 2018, <http://fathomjournal.org/?p=5914>.

7 Jonathan Lis, 'Israel's Contentious Nation-state Law: Everything You Need to Know', in *Haaretz*, 19 July 2018.

and the Israeli embassies could not function effectively.⁸ Israel's relations with both Egypt and Jordan are mostly official, and do not include much engagement between the peoples. The countries share strategic, economic, and environmental interests on which their relations usually focus.

Israel's relation with the Palestinian Authority is based on the Oslo Accords, which it signed in September 1993 with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). The Oslo Accords included mutual recognition and launched a series of interim agreements. A major attempt to reach a final-status deal failed at the Camp David summit in 2000, leading to the second *intifada*. Additional failed efforts were carried out in 2007–2008 and 2013–2014.⁹ Since 2014, no official peace negotiations have taken place, despite ongoing security and economic co-ordination. Israel has no official direct contact with Hamas, which is the political party that leads Gaza, either.

The US, China, India, Russia, and multilateral institutions are counted among the primary stakeholders at the global level. Israel's main ally in the international arena is the US, which provides it with financial, security, and diplomatic support. The special relations between the two countries have been in place since 1962,¹⁰ and in 1987 the US gave Israel the status of a major non-NATO ally.¹¹ Israel and the US have signed several Memorandums of Understanding but not a formal defence treaty.¹² In December 2017, the US President recognized Jerusalem as

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- 8 'Egypt to Recall Israel Envoy over Sinai Shootings', in *BBC*, 20 August 2011, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14600357>; Nick Zieminski, 'Israel's Jordan Embassy to Resume Full Operations: Israeli PM's Office', in *Reuters*, 18 January 2018, <https://reut.rs/2DoxyVc>.
 - 9 Carol Migdalovitz, 'Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process: The Annapolis Conference', in *CRS Report for Congress*, No. RS22768 (7 December 2007), <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RS22768.pdf>; Ben Birnbaum and Amir Tibon, 'The Explosive, Inside Story of How John Kerry Built an Israel-Palestine Peace Plan—and Watched It Crumble', in *The New Republic*, 21 July 2014, <https://newrepublic.com/article/118751>.
 - 10 Zach Levey, 'JFK and the U.S.-Israeli Relationship', in *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (2005), pp. 379-382, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.2005.00487.x>.
 - 11 Dan Fisher, 'U.S. Is Granting Israel Non-NATO Ally Status...', in *Los Angeles Times*, 16 February 1987, http://articles.latimes.com/1987-02-16/news/mn-2391_1_egypt-non-nato-ally.
 - 12 Yair Evron, 'An Israel-United States Defense Pact?', in *INSS Strategic Assessment*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (November 1998), pp. 12-15, <http://www.inss.org.il/?p=58196>.

Israel's capital, and in May 2018 he moved the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.¹³

Israel is a partner and member of a variety of multilateral organizations. Since 1957, it has been an observer to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (CoE); since 1975 it has been a Mediterranean Partner for Co-operation at the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE); since 1994 it has been part of the NATO Mediterranean Dialogue; since 2010 it has been a full member of the Organization for Co-operation and Development (OECD); in 2013 it was admitted to the UN Western European and Others Group (WEOG); in 2014 Israel gained an observer status at the Pacific Alliance; and in late 2017, Israel announced that it plans to leave the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) due to what it perceives as the body's anti-Israel bias, and following a similar American move.

In order to diversify its foreign policy, Israel has been making increased efforts to improve ties with China and India. Both countries are seen to be major economic markets for Israel, while China is also seen as a growing political actor in the region. Mutual visits have taken place with both countries, leading to the signing of various agreements and economic deals.¹⁴ Russia's involvement in Syria led Israel to pursue security co-ordination with Russia, aimed at maintaining Israel's ability to protect its security interests and limiting Iran's influence and presence in Syria.¹⁵

Finally, the relevant stakeholders regarding Israel–EU relations are the prime minister, the ministry of Foreign Affairs, the National Security Council, the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee and the security establishment. Also of relevance are the ministry of Economy

13 White House, *Statement by President Trump on Jerusalem*, 6 December 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-president-trump-jerusalem>.

14 China's Embassy in Singapore, *Xi Jinping Meets with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel*, 21 March 2017, <http://www.chinaembassy.org.sg/eng/jrzg/t1448057.htm>.

15 Anna Borshchevskaya, 'The Maturing of Israel-Russia Relations', in *InFocus Quarterly*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Spring 2016), <https://www.jewishpolicycenter.org/?p=16360>.

and Knesset delegations to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe; and for relations with the European Parliament, the Knesset caucus for furthering relations between Israel and Europe as well as Inter-Parliamentary Friendship Groups with the EU member states.

1.3 Chronology of key events since the start of the Arab uprisings

2011: Negative framing of the Arab Spring. At the onset of the Arab Spring, the Israeli government framed it in a negative manner, focusing on potential threats for radicalization, destabilization and increased Iranian influence.

July 2011: Social justice protests. A broad protest movement emerged in Israel against the high cost of living. The protests mobilized a large number of Israelis to the streets, and two of their leaders currently serve as Knesset members.

October 2011: Gilad Shalit prisoner exchange. After five years of captivity in Gaza by Hamas, Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit was released in a deal including a release of 1,027 Palestinian prisoners from Israeli jails.

October 2012: Morsi's Egypt sends a new ambassador to Israel. Despite long-standing opposition by the Muslim Brotherhood movement in Egypt to the peace deal with Israel, when Morsi assumes power he appoints a new ambassador to Israel and sends a personal letter of friendship to Israel's then-President Peres.

November 2012: Operation Pillar of Defence. An Israeli military operation against Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

January 2013: General elections. Israel goes to the polls, and the Likud party wins and forms a coalition government, headed by Netanyahu.

March 2013: US President Obama visits Israel. Obama's first presidential visit to Israel includes a public speech calling on Israelis to support peace. During the visit, Netanyahu calls Turkey's President Erdoğan (in Obama's presence) and apologizes for the flotilla incident of May 2010.

2013–2014: Israeli–Palestinian peace talks. US Secretary of State John Kerry leads a series of intense negotiations between the sides, which eventually fails to bring a breakthrough.

July 2014: Operation Protective Edge. An Israeli military operation against Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

March 2015: General elections. Israel goes to the polls, and the Likud party once again wins and forms a coalition government, headed by Netanyahu.

June 2016: Israel–Turkey reconciliation agreement. After a long negotiations process, Israel and Turkey resolve the flotilla crisis and restore full diplomatic ties.

July 2017: Tensions around al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. Israeli–Palestinian tensions flare up around the holy sites in Jerusalem, leading to mass civilian protests of Palestinians in East Jerusalem.¹⁶

December 2017: US President Trump’s Jerusalem declaration. Trump recognizes Jerusalem as Israel’s capital and announces that the US Embassy will be relocated to the city, sparking a fierce reaction by the Palestinian leadership and a condemnation at the UN.

1.4 Main geopolitical challenges

The main geopolitical challenges and foreign policy priorities of Israel’s current government are: confronting Iran’s nuclear project and limiting its role in Syria; preventing Hezbollah and Hamas from obtaining advanced weaponry and threatening Israel’s civilian population; further consolidating the alliance with the US; countering the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement; seeking international recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital and of Israel’s Jewish nature; developing ties with countries in South America, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East; and reducing international attention to the Palestinian issue.

As for the Israeli public, its top three foreign policy priorities in 2018 were: developing ties with moderate Arab countries, promoting the Israeli–

16 For a detailed account see Ofer Zalzburg, ‘Palestinian Activism Reawakens in Jerusalem after Holy Esplanade Attack’, in *ICG Commentaries*, 19 July 2017, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/5590>.

Palestinian peace process, and countering the BDS movement. In terms of bilateral relations, the Israeli public views the US as the most important country for Israel in the world, followed by Russia and then Germany.¹⁷

2. Overview of Israel–Europe relations

2.1 *Societal relations and views*

Israel–Europe relations draw from the long Jewish history in Europe. They are based on cultural affinity, on a major European component in the identity of a large number of Israelis, and on shared liberal values. However, the relations are also heavily influenced by a history of persecution against Jews in Europe, especially during the Holocaust. This creates ‘love/hate relations’ between Israel and Europe.

Israel has a broad set of relations with the EU and European countries, which includes diplomatic ties, security co-ordination, trade (Europe is Israel’s largest trade partner)¹⁸ and co-operation in culture, research and development, tourism, sports, education, civil society, and aviation. However, Israelis tend to believe that Europe has a pro-Palestinian bias, that it does not understand Israel’s unique security concerns, that it is too critical of Israel’s actions, and that anti-Semitism and delegitimization of Israel prevail in parts of Europe.¹⁹

17 Mitvim, *The 2018 Israeli Foreign Policy Index*, October 2018, <http://www.mitvim.org.il/en/10-news/284>.

18 European Commission DG Trade, *European Union, Trade in Goods with Israel*, 16 April 2018, <http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/html/113402.htm>; Dan Catarivas, ‘Israel’s External Economic and Trade Policy’, in *InFocus Quarterly*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (Spring 2015), <https://www.jewishpolicycenter.org/?p=14847>.

19 Haim Yacobi and David Newman, ‘The EU and the Israel–Palestine conflict’, in Thomas Diez, Mathias Albert and Stephan Stetter (eds.), *The European Union and Border Conflicts. The Power of Integration and Association*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008, pp. 173–202; Michael Borchard, ‘Israel’s View of Europe–Israeli Relations’, in *KAS Studies*, September 2017, <https://www.kas.de/wf/en/33.49967>.

The accession of Cyprus into the EU in 2004 led Israel and the EU to become geographic neighbours. This was formalized with the coming into force of the ENP.²⁰ Moreover, the enlargement shifted dynamics within the EU, and brought into the European project countries from central and eastern Europe which were closer to Israel. This has become evident recently, with the growing divide between EU member states on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. In general, Israel is investing more in developing bilateral ties with specific European countries, than in its relations with the EU.

The 2004 enlargement also enabled those Israelis whose families originated in the new member states to apply for European citizenship. Large numbers of Israelis did so and became EU citizens.²¹ Public opinion polls conducted in Israel after the enlargement saw an Israeli aspiration for EU membership (75 percent in 2007; 69 percent in 2009).²² Consecutive public opinion polls carried out by the Mitvim Institute also show that Israelis are split on whether their country belongs more to Europe or to the Middle East. According to the 2017 poll carried out as part of the OPEN Neighbourhood Programme, most Israelis feel the EU is an important partner, and that the EU and Israel share sufficient common values to co-operate.²³

Recently, Israel has become increasingly worried about the rise of populist parties and movements across Europe that have anti-Semitic roots and ideology.²⁴ This, while developing closer political ties with the

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- 20 EU Delegation to Israel, 'The European Neighbourhood Policy and Israel', in *EUfocus*, Vol. 4 (2007), http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2004_2009/documents/dv/e/ENP.pdf; Lior Herman, 'An Action Plan or a Plan for Action? Israel and the European Neighbourhood Policy', in *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (2006), pp. 371-394.
- 21 Efrat Neuman, 'A Tale of Two Passports', in *Haaretz*, 15 April 2013.
- 22 Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, *Measuring the Attitudes of Israelis Towards the European Union and its Member States*, 22 February 2007, <https://www.kas.de/wf/en/33.10196>; *Measuring the Attitudes of Israelis Towards the European Union and its Member States*, April 2009, <https://www.kas.de/wf/en/33.16236>.
- 23 EU Neighbours South, *Opinion Poll 201 Israel (Factsheet)*, 14 December 2017, <https://www.euneighbours.eu/en/node/22911>.
- 24 Reuven Rivlin, *Address at the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Day 2017*, Jerusalem, 23 April 2017, <https://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/remembrance/2017/reuven-rivlin.asp>.

leaders of Visegrad countries, which are currently moving away from liberal democracy.²⁵

2.2 *The history and changing nature of Israel–EU political relations*

Israel was one of the first countries to establish full diplomatic relations with the European Economic Community, in 1959.²⁶ Over the years that followed, relations between the sides developed on a range of economic, political, and societal issues, eventually leading to the signing in 1975 of a Free Trade Zone agreement.²⁷

Alas, Israel and Europe had diverging views regarding the Israeli–Palestinian issue, and this became clearly evident in 1980. That year, the European Community issued the Venice Declaration, which outlined the European policy on the Israeli–Arab conflict following the signing of the Israel–Egypt peace treaty.²⁸

While criticizing Israeli policies on the Palestinian issue, especially during the first *intifada*, Europe was encouraged by the Israeli–Arab peace process of the 1990s and sought a way to contribute to its success. After the signing of the Oslo Accords (1993) and the Israel–Jordan peace agreement (1994), the Essen Summit of the European Council (1994) considered that ‘Israel, on account of its high level of economic development, should enjoy special status in its relations with the European

25 Noa Landau, ‘Netanyahu Pushes Hosting Visegrad Group in Israel in Talks with Senior Hungarian Official’, *Haaretz*, 13 February 2018, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/1.5820476>.

26 Sharon Pardo and Joel Peters, *Israel and the European Union. A Documentary History*, Lanham, Lexington Books, 2012.

27 Alfred Tovias, ‘Relations between Israel and the European Union’, in Alain Dieckhoff (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Modern Israel*, London, Routledge, 2013, pp. 240–245.

28 The Venice Declaration called for a recognition of the right to existence and to security of all countries in the Middle East including Israel, as well as the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people. It called for a comprehensive solution to the Palestinian problem, including the issues of refugees and Jerusalem, in line with UNSC Resolutions 242 and 338 and through negotiations (including with the PLO) that would end the Israeli occupation.

Union'.²⁹ Later, the EU would clarify that for Israel to enjoy such special status, it must resolve its conflict with the Palestinians (see below).

In 1995, in light of the ongoing peace process, the EU launched the Barcelona Process, which was a platform through which Israel could develop ties with European as well as Arab countries.³⁰ In the same year, the EU and Israel further tightened their relations by signing an Association Agreement. In 2002, in light of the stagnation in the Israeli–Palestinian peace process and the second *intifada*, the EU became part of a new international mechanism to advance peace, the Quartet.

The launching of the European Neighbourhood Policy led Israel and the EU to agree in 2004 on an Action Plan to further develop EU–Israel relations.³¹ The Action Plan identified mutual objectives and priorities for joint action. The signing of the Plan led to positive momentum in Israel–EU relations, which also included increased co-operation on security issues (i.e., EUBAM Rafah, the EU Border Assistance Mission at the Rafah crossing point). This momentum was positively influenced by Israel's disengagement from the Gaza Strip in the summer of 2005.

As a result of these developments, the EU announced in 2008 that it would upgrade relations with Israel,³² and the two sides negotiated regarding the content of such an upgrade. That same year, Israel also joined the newly established Union for the Mediterranean.³³ Six months after the EU announcement, Israel launched operation Cast Lead in Gaza against Hamas. This operation led to criticism from the EU towards Israel

29 European Council, *Presidency Conclusions*, Essen, 9-10 December 1994, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/21198/essen-european-council.pdf>.

30 Fulvio Attinà, 'The Barcelona Process, the Role of the European Union and the Lesson of the Western Mediterranean', in *The Journal of North African Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (2004), pp. 140-152.

31 For further details see European Commission, *EU/Israel Action Plan*, October 2004, <https://library.euneighbours.eu/content/eu-israel-enp-action-plan>.

32 Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *The European Union Upgrades Its Relations with Israel*, 16 June 2008, <https://mfa.gov.il/MFA/PressRoom/2008/Pages/The%20EU%20and%20Israel%20upgrade%20relations%20%2016-June-2008.aspx>.

33 Raffaella A. Del Sarto, 'Plus ça change...? Israel, the EU and the Union for the Mediterranean', in *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (2011), pp. 117-134.

and a freeze in the process of upgrading relations.³⁴ The EU stressed that the upgrade is conditioned on Israel's conduct in the fields of democracy and human rights, as well as progress on Israeli–Palestinian peace, and cannot be implemented should Israel continue the policies it demonstrated at the time.³⁵

Israeli governments rejected the linkage between bilateral Israel–EU relations and the Israeli–Palestinian peace process, as well as EU policies of differentiation between Israel and settlements in the West Bank, but eventually had to accept it in practice.³⁶ The main example was the Horizon 2020 programme. In 2013, Israel had to agree that only institutions within the 1967 borders will be eligible to participate in the programme.³⁷ Additional agreements that exclude Israeli settlements were signed between Israel and the EU, including the recent cross-border co-operation agreement (ENI CBC Med).³⁸

Another aspect of EU conditionality was the European offer to Israel and the Palestinians to establish a Special Privileged Partnership with the EU following the signing of an Israeli–Palestinian peace agreement.³⁹ This was the first major incentive for peace issued by the EU. It was introduced in December 2013, in the midst of the Kerry-led Israeli–Palestinian talks. The offer did not achieve its desired impact, due to

34 Oded Eran, 'A Reversal in Israel-EU Relations?', in *INSS Strategic Assessment*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (June 2009), pp. 59-68, <http://www.inss.org.il/?p=58513>.

35 Council of the European Union, *Statement of European Union*, 11th Meeting of Israel and EU Association Council, Brussels, 24 July 2012, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_PRES-12-353_en.htm.

36 Differentiation refers to a variety of measures taken by the EU and its member states to exclude settlement-linked entities and activities from bilateral relations with Israel. See Hugh Lovatt, 'EU Differentiation and the Push for Peace in Israel-Palestine', in *ECFR Policy Briefs*, October 2016, https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/eu_differentiation_and_the_push_for_peace_in_israel_palestine7163.

37 Barak Ravid, 'Israel and EU Compromise on Terms of Joint Initiative, Following Rift Over Settlement Funding Ban', in *Haaretz*, 26 November 2013.

38 Noa Landau, 'Netanyahu Agrees to Exclude Settlements from Economic Deal with European Union', in *Haaretz*, 14 December 2017.

39 Council of the European Union, *Council Conclusions on the Middle East Peace Process*, Brussels, 16 December 2013, http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/140097.pdf.

objection in Israel to the notion of conditionality,⁴⁰ little public awareness of the offer's existence and lack of clarity regarding its actual content.⁴¹ The collapse of the peace talks in 2014 shelved the European offer, although the EU has repeatedly acknowledged that it is still relevant.⁴² In June 2016 the EU's Foreign Affairs Council also called for a 'global set of incentives for the parties to make peace',⁴³ an idea introduced that year as part of the French Peace Initiative.⁴⁴

The EU also tried to use 'sticks' to increase the price Israel pays for its continued control of the Palestinians. In 2015, it published guidelines on labelling products from Israeli settlements, as another step of differentiation. The EU presented these guidelines as a technical step that was taken to assure necessary compliance with international law and EU regulations, but in Israel it was perceived as a political move and it reacted harshly to this decision,⁴⁵ which the EU said is merely a technical—and not a political—one.⁴⁶ To date, the guidelines have not been implemented by most EU member states, some of which have openly rejected the EU's call for labelling products.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, the

40 Mitvim and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, *A Special Privileged Partnership with the EU as an Incentive for Israeli-Palestinian Peace. Summary of a Policy-Planning Workshop*, June 2016, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/israel/13105.pdf>.

41 Mitvim, *84% of Israelis Have Never Heard of the New EU Incentive for Israeli-Palestinian Peace*, March 2014, http://mitvim.org.il/images/Poll_findings_-_EU_peace_incentive_-_March_2014.pdf.

42 Council of the European Union, *Council Conclusions on the Middle East Peace Process*, Brussels, 20 June 2016, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/06/20/fac-conclusions-mepp>.

43 Nimrod Goren, 'The Unknown Incentives for Israeli-Palestinian Peace', in *Haaretz*, 13 December 2015.

44 Middle East Peace Initiative, *Joint communiqué*, Paris, 3 June 3 2016, <https://franceintheus.org/spip.php?article7605#03>.

45 Peter Beaumont, 'EU Issues Guidelines on Labelling Products from Israeli Settlements', in *The Guardian*, 11 November 2015, <https://gu.com/p/4e544>.

46 Melanie Lidman, 'EU Envoy Insists Settlement Labeling Purely "Technical"', in *The Times of Israel*, 11 November 2015, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/eu-envoy-insists-settlement-labeling-purely-technical>.

47 Daniel Koren, 'Greece Rejects EU's Call to Label Israeli Settlement Products', in *The Canadian Jewish News*, 4 December 2015, <https://www.cjnews.com/?p=154658>.

EU, much like other international actors, does make it clear that it does not view the settlements in the West Bank as part of Israel proper.⁴⁸

In 2017, the EU tried to promote a positive agenda with Israel. The EU and Israel were supposed to hold in February 2017 a meeting of the Association Council, for the first time since 2012.⁴⁹ However, the passing of a law in Israel that allows more land to be appropriated for settlements led the EU to delay the meeting.⁵⁰

Netanyahu voiced his discontent with the EU during a trip to Hungary in July 2017, where he said that the EU policy towards Israel is ‘crazy’.⁵¹ The gap between Israel and the EU was also clear following Trump’s recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital, which the EU rejected.⁵² Mogherini repeatedly claims that the EU supports the two-state solution, with Jerusalem as the capital of both Israel and Palestine.⁵³ The EU also highlights the role that civil society can play in promoting Israeli–Palestinian peace, takes action in this regard⁵⁴ and makes efforts to reach out to the Israeli public, highlight the positive aspects of Israel–EU relations and dispel concerns regarding EU policies.⁵⁵

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- 48 Federica Bicchì and Benedetta Voltolini, ‘Europe, the Green Line and the Issue of the Israeli–Palestinian Border: Closing the Gap between Discourse and Practice?’, in *Geopolitics*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (2017), pp. 124–146.
- 49 Raphael Ahren, ‘After 5-year Hiatus, EU and Israel Reconvene High-level Forum’, in *The Times of Israel*, 31 January 2017, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/after-5-year-hiatus-eu-and-israel-reconvene-high-level-forum>.
- 50 Barak Ravid, ‘EU Delays Summit with Israel over Settlement Buildup and Land-grab Law’, in *Haaretz*, 7 February 2017.
- 51 Barak Ravid, ‘Netanyahu Launches Blistering Attack on EU: “Their Behavior toward Israel is Crazy”’, in *Haaretz*, 19 July 2017, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/1.5431215>.
- 52 European External Action Service (EEAS), *Speech by HR/VP Federica Mogherini at the European Parliament Plenary Session on US President Trump’s Announcement to Recognise Jerusalem as Capital of Israel*, Strasbourg, 12 December 2017, <https://europa.eu/!gt64WP>.
- 53 EEAS, *Middle East Peace Process: ‘This Is Not the Time to Disengage’ Mogherini Tells Abbas*, 22 January 2018, <https://europa.eu/!pm47Xc>.
- 54 EEAS, *Speech by HR/VP Federica Mogherini at the European Parliament Plenary Session...*, cit.
- 55 Raphael Ahren, ‘New EU Envoy Vows to Take Seriously Israeli Feelings that Brussels Is Hostile’, in *The Times of Israel*, 29 December 2017, <https://www>.

Israel and the EU share a rich history of relations and co-operate on a wide range of issues. Nevertheless, the prolonged Israeli–Palestinian conflict prevents these relations from fulfilling their potential, and casts doubt on the ability to even maintain the current level of Israeli–European partnership.

3. Elite Survey: Research findings on Israel

3.1 Methodology

This chapter reflects the perceptions of Israeli actors at the elite level toward the EU and its policies in the Mediterranean region. A total of 20 elite actors (10 male and 10 female) from Israel were involved in the fieldwork in which a team of three researchers, including one of the authors and the two researchers from PODEM, conducted in-depth interviews. The interviews were held at intervals between February 2018 and May 2018 (see anonymized list of interviews in the Annex). Among the interviewed respondents were senior officials, CSO representatives, academics, researchers, and media and business professionals of varied ages.⁵⁶

The interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and were conducted either in person in Israel—in the cities of Tel Aviv, Beer Sheba, and Jerusalem—or via phone as in four cases. All interviewees were informed by email about the project before the actual interviews took place. In line with MEDRESET’s data management plan, all interviews were anonymous and were not recorded. The researchers only took notes during the interviews.

[timesofisrael.com/new-eu-envoy-vows-to-take-seriously-israeli-feelings-that-brussels-is-hostile](https://www.timesofisrael.com/new-eu-envoy-vows-to-take-seriously-israeli-feelings-that-brussels-is-hostile).

56 The interviewees in Israel requested complete anonymity including their ethnic backgrounds and affiliations.

3.2 Perceptions of the EU and its policies in the Mediterranean

The Israeli society can be divided into four separate sections regarding its perceptions of the EU: (1) the general public, (2) the economic sector, (3) the academic sector, and (4) the political sector.

To begin with the *general public*, Israel has a close cultural affinity to the EU and the continent of Europe, since a large number of its population migrated from there in the first half of the 1900s. Tourism is highly vibrant due to this cultural connection.

Secondly, the *economic sector* views the Union as a natural partner as Israel lacks ‘complementary economies’ in the region. Israel’s main production and commercial good is its high-tech innovations and products which attract the EU. The economic sector also views the Union as a very uncomplicated partner for conducting business as Israeli businesspeople only have to develop relations with Brussels and can accomplish ‘28 free-trade agreements’ without further complications.

Thirdly, the *academic sector* has deep connections with the EU and its member states since Israel does not have a regional alternative to the EU. Israeli universities and think tanks work in the Horizon 2020 programme as well as having countless ‘study in Europe’ programmes.

On the other hand, relations between the EU and the *political sector* in Israel are very complex. A senior Israeli official asserts that the peace process of Israel and Palestine (the two-state solution) can be considered as the one and only issue on which the EU has a common stance.⁵⁷ The official stresses that with the enlargement programme, reaching consensus with the EU became even more challenging. The Israeli politicians are not content with the EU’s unchanging and what is seen as stubborn approach to the two-state solution. The respondent further claims that the EU is not ‘contributing’ by ‘repeating’ the decades-old version of the two-state solution and consequently, the Israeli bureaucracy constantly experiences frustration. Israeli officials welcome the monetary contributions of the EU to Gaza and the West Bank; however, they underline the fact that the EU needs to play a role in the peace process by bringing the Palestinians to the table and acting as a ‘player’ rather than a ‘payer’.

57 Interviewee 19: Senior official, male, Jerusalem, May 2018.

The survey reflects that Israel's relations with the EU are greatly influenced by the political and internal processes occurring within Israeli society. In contrast to the general public opinion in Israel which gives significant weight to the external threats to Israel's national security, the elite we interviewed perceive a greater potential risk to Israel's resilience and its international standing from the ongoing adverse domestic changes that might gradually weaken its inner power. Based on the survey responses, it is possible to list these trends under four items:

- (1) The deterioration of the political discourse and politicization of Israel's democratic governance fundamentals, alongside the rise in political corruption;⁵⁸
- (2) The polarization between citizens of different social classes, which undermine Israel's social solidarity and cohesion;⁵⁹
- (3) The gradual weakening of the social status of CSOs and public institutions that should provide the necessary checks and balances to the political system;⁶⁰ and
- (4) The absence of discussion regarding Israel's long-term vision and the lack of establishment of national and foreign priorities to achieve better prospects for its people.⁶¹

These internal processes, along with the adverse impact of the deadlock in the peace process to terminate the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, are perceived as having grave implications for Israel's international standing. Interviewees emphasized the need to find new diplomacy breakthroughs, possibly with the assistance of Europe.

Despite such a long and troubled history and differences in policies and opinions on regional conflicts, Europe and Israel's affairs are seen to be built on shared social and political values. The respondents acknowledge the co-operation between Israel and Europe as a whole, as well as with the individual EU member states; and see the EU an asset for Israel's existence in general, and particularly its economic

58 Interviewee 9: CSO, female, Jerusalem, February 2018.

59 Interviewee 5: Business organization, male, Tel-Aviv, February 2018.

60 I Interviewee 9: CSO, female, Jerusalem, February 2018.

61 Interviewee 11: Think-tank member, female, Tel-Aviv, February 2018.

development. Nevertheless, it is of great concern that Israel's desire to upgrade economic relations, in recent years, is being hampered by the EU's political institutions, due to political disagreements with Israel mainly over claims that Israel is in violation of international law in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.⁶²

The majority of interviewees from Israel agree that, over the past 25 years, Europe has increasingly expanded its involvement in the Mediterranean, which is often torn by political and economic instability, as well as security threats to itself and Europe.

'Europe's foreign policy towards the Mediterranean during this period has nevertheless consisted in searching for means that could provide genuine solutions to the region's political and social problems. This has demonstrated Europe's commitment to support a smooth transition towards stable democratic governance, better security, and prosperity for the region.'⁶³

The complexity of global and Near East geopolitical developments, as well as internal dynamics, are seen to influence Europe's identity and its political position. An Israeli academic⁶⁴ argued that 'these effects are even amplified when it comes to its foreign policy towards the Mediterranean region, which in recent years is viewed through the lens of the EU's self-interests, primarily regarding migration and refugees, energy security, and terrorism'.

According to the Israeli academic experts, the relations between the two sides of the Mediterranean are subject to at least two main conflicting factors. On the one hand, Europe and the Mediterranean countries enjoy geographic proximity and long historical as well as economic and trade ties. On the other hand, values and political interests reshape the relations within an atmosphere shaped by an incessant clash of cultures. While the latter pose a severe threat to the stability of the whole region, the EU often seeks to use soft power strategies to overcome these challenges and increase its positive influence.

Regarding the EU's realization of its foreign policy goals within the region, an Israeli official stated that 'Europe has taken a proactive

62 Interviewee 4: Israeli university, male, phone interview, February 2018.

63 Interviewee 1: Senior official, male, February 2018.

64 Interviewee 4: Israeli university, male, phone interview, February 2018.

geopolitical role towards the MENA region, with the aim of pursuing greater security and enhancing political and economic development, yet, this determined foreign policy has been implemented by employing diverse approaches'.⁶⁵ Since the revision of the ENP in 2015, the EU is seeking to construct, with each MENA country, a new Partnership Priorities (PP) compact, which will redefine areas of co-operation considering recent challenges such as migration, security, and instability. 'The process is rather slow and gradual, and while several ENP countries have already signed the new PP with the EU, the formation of the PP document with Israel is not yet in place'.⁶⁶

The delay in preparation of the PP document is explained by a senior official saying that,

'As the EU became more political, the relations went even more sour which is counterproductive to the ENP. Israel chose to be part of the EU, as it was never a political necessity for Israel. As the consensus against Israel became negative over the years, Israel decided to block and stall this association.'⁶⁷

Despite certain positive advancements, thanks to each of the initiatives and the progress made in most of the countries, it is widely perceived that the overall success in changing the reality in the region has been fairly limited. A senior official reflected on his experiences with the EU bureaucracy over the longstanding conflict in the region: 'Whenever there is an issue here, we go to Brussels, but Brussels directs us to member states and when we visit the member states, they direct us to Brussels'.⁶⁸ Thus, although all the approaches have demonstrated the EU's strong commitment, they have also 'underlined the insufficient effectiveness and lack of coherency of the different attitudes which are in the heart of the EU's foreign policy towards the region'.⁶⁹ According to a think-tank member, another imperative factor for the imperfect outcome of the Euro-Mediterranean co-operation is 'the large heterogeneity among

65 Interviewee 1: Senior official, male, February 2018.

66 Interviewee 7: Senior official, female, Tel-Aviv, March 2018.

67 Interviewee 18: Senior official, male, Jerusalem, May 2018.

68 Interviewee 19: Senior official, male, Jerusalem, May 2018.

69 Interviewee 4: Israeli university, male, phone interview, February 2018.

the Mediterranean countries, both from the economic development dimension, as well as the political structure of their regimes'.⁷⁰

3.3 From the outside in: Views on geopolitical developments and domestic policy issues

Based on the survey findings, the various political, economic, and social challenges that Israel currently faces could be categorized into three main themes: (1) the first theme deals with challenges related to Israel's strategic posture in light of the recent global developments, and the near geopolitical environment, including the Iranian threat and its involvement in the Syrian War, as well as the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and its derivatives; (2) the second theme discusses the multiple socioeconomic challenges, chiefly the profound urgency to improve Israel's social inclusion; (3) finally, the chapter depicts Israel's democratic governance challenges and the fragile status of its civil society. It is viewed that these challenges have a significant impact on Israel's long-term prospects and on its relations with the regional and international actors including the EU.

Geopolitical issues: The geopolitical developments of recent years, the intensification of threats, and shifting regional alliances have had a significant impact on the region. In particular, the power relations and emergence of Russia, Turkey, and Iran as potent stakeholders in the region, along with the aftermath of the Arab uprisings on traditional regimes—such as the unending war in Syria—pose additional challenges to the complexity of the troubled area.

The current geopolitical issues of Israel can be explained through the effects of this new power constellation on the dynamics of the region. A research institute member draws a comparison in which the turbulent atmosphere has led to an increase in security risks that have not only impacted countries of the region, but have also made their presence felt even on Europe's soil.⁷¹ It is nonetheless noted that the regional

70 Interviewee 11: Think-tank member, female, Tel-Aviv, February 2018.

71 Interviewee 12: Research institute, male, Beer Sheba, February 2018.

developments, and particularly the political aftermath of the Arab Spring, have had minor importance for the EU's foreign affairs with Israel.

The current developments in the Middle East have had a certain effect on the national security of Israel. However, it is perceived that 'the conventional threat to its existence from regular armies has significantly receded in recent years'.⁷² The respondents agree that this is mainly due to Israel's effective military deterrence, its technologically offensive, and defensive capabilities, but also thanks to the fact that it has successfully avoided being dragged into severe confrontations or full-scale war. However, it is important to note that the situation in Syria might lead Israel into a direct confrontation with Iran.

The domestic developments reveal that the Israeli–Palestinian conflict does not appear to be shifting from its deadlock position and there is no peaceful resolution in sight. On top of that, evidence of a humanitarian crisis in Gaza is accumulating, causing the Palestinian leadership and people to feel trapped, which may lead to a dangerous escalation. Unlike the general public opinion which refers to the Iranian threat as Israel's major problem, the majority of interviewees believe that reconciliation with the Palestinians should no longer be postponed. An academic underlines that

'it is crucial to Israel's national interest and to Israel's leadership to demonstrate its steadfast support for this objective, even when the prospects of peace seem slim. Such a commitment should be reflected not only in statements, but also in actions aimed at changing the reality on the ground.'⁷³

This particular policy could display a clear message to the world that Israel is committed to a real change in the status quo, and to accomplishing a peace agreement with the Palestinians, which experts highlight that it should be based on the two-state solution.

Furthermore, Israel's most substantial challenge is to establish a long-term foreign policy based on the identification of opportunities and strategies, and leverage them for creating new alliances and partnerships. Although collaborating with the EU has been a challenge for Israel in

72 Interviewee 6: Senior official, female, phone interview, February 2018.

73 Interviewee 3: Israeli university, female, Jerusalem, February 2018.

recent years, according to a senior official, ‘bilateral relations with the EU member states have never been better’.⁷⁴ On the other side, another senior official claims that ‘the new US administration is leading Israel to new achievements such as the transfer of the US embassy to Jerusalem, and the foreseen similar transfers by additional countries’.⁷⁵ However, a peace NGO representative asserts that,

‘Israel should define the regional belonging to which it desires to relate and strengthen the interdependence within this region. It should strive to accomplish an inclusive foreign policy and seize the moment to set out its outward-looking long-term regional strategic vision, based on proactive initiatives to promote peace and multidimensional partnerships.’⁷⁶

From the international standpoint, there is a widespread demand from Israel’s leadership to strengthen its foreign policy and improve Israel’s international stance. To that end, a senior official stresses that ‘Israel and the EU leadership in Brussels [should] enhance the direct dialogue and overcome the political controversies’.⁷⁷ Moreover, a strong emphasis should be made on forming new alliances and deepening Israel’s diplomatic, economic, and cultural relations with its traditional partners. While Iran and the hostilities in Syria are perceived as the major threat, there is no controversy among the respondents regarding the importance of realizing a peaceful reconciliation and a conclusive resolution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, based on the two-state solution with the necessary security arrangements. A senior official suggests that through international co-operation an agreement can be established and ‘such an accord should be designed to enable new, fresh relations with the Palestinians, and possibly provide the foundation for a sustainable coexistence with most Arab and Islamic countries’.⁷⁸

It is a matter of great urgency for Israel to set a novel and long-term strategic vision in place, with coherent national objectives. From the standpoint of an Israeli member of parliament, ‘such a roadmap should

74 Interviewee 18: Senior official, male, Jerusalem, May 2018.

75 Interviewee 7: Senior official, female, Tel-Aviv, March 2018.

76 Interviewee 8: Peace NGO, female, Tel-Aviv, March 2018.

77 Interviewee 7: Senior official, female, Tel-Aviv, March 2018.

78 Interviewee 1: Senior official, male, February 2018.

include not only new partnerships and signing co-operation agreements but doing so as a means to achieve larger international objectives'.⁷⁹

Economic and social challenges: Israel is known for its entrepreneurial spirit, whereas its economic competitive advantage is most prominently exhibited through its high-technology innovative industries and attractive investments in R&D. Yet, this has not been paired with similar convergence in productivity, resulting in income inequality as well as large performance gaps between the high-tech sector and the rest of the economy (the 'dual economy' problem). The gap becomes more apparent in some sections of the Israeli society and 'despite encouraging signs of increase in their participation in the labour market, the widespread poverty, due to unemployment, is visible among ultra-Orthodox men and Israeli Arab women'.⁸⁰

From the economic perspective, the interviewees express their desire to live in a country that expands its sustainable economic growth, yet 'acts decisively to improve the standard of living of its citizens and reduce the large internal social inequality and gender gaps'.⁸¹ An Israeli member of parliament underscores that 'high salary gaps for similar work should not be tolerated in a modern society'.⁸² A stronger commitment of policy-makers is expected to reduce the high cost of living and provide the social security network and adequate means for the basic needs of all citizens, regardless of their income and background. In that respect, it is expected that the Israeli government will act in a determined manner to ensure that the fruits of Israel's economic growth are shared more widely among its population. In addition, 'Israelis expect their bureaucracy to be reduced and that the advancement and successes of the high-tech sector be duplicated in various social and governmental domains that are central in the daily life of citizens'.⁸³

The interviewees expect public services such as the healthcare, education, and transportation sectors to be improved and properly adjusted to the standards of the twenty-first century. The financial

79 Interviewee 10: Israeli parliament member, male, Tel-Aviv, February 2018.

80 Interviewee 1: Senior official, male, February 2018.

81 Interviewee 7: Senior official, female, Tel-Aviv, March 2018.

82 Interviewee 10: Israeli parliament member, male, Tel-Aviv, February 2018.

83 Interviewee 2: Business organization, male, Tel-Aviv, February 2018.

resources to realize all these objectives could be allocated directly, from Israel's national budget, should the government decide to effectively prioritize these economic and social objectives. However, additional resources could come into play, such as a specific portion of the revenues from natural gas discoveries (a natural gas wealth fund) and tax incentives. A representative from a business organization suggests that the Israeli government should promote 'a new mechanism of social entrepreneurship incubators, which duplicate the successful model and the proven experience of the high-tech sector'.⁸⁴ To that end, it should assist the business sector with financial incentives which would leverage the establishment of these social initiatives.

In recent years, the cost of living in Israel has grown significantly and is 23 percent higher than the average of OECD members. This major struggle for most Israelis is predominantly evident in the housing market, food prices, and other daily domains. Numerous public services and infrastructures are lagging behind most of the Western world and call for significant improvement. Among these are the public transportation and roads, public health services, education, and social security systems. A business organization representative explains: 'The perceived determinants of these challenges are Israel's concentrated market and that the fiscal constraints are too tight to address all these problems'.⁸⁵

The discoveries of natural gas along the coasts of the Eastern Mediterranean have proven to be a challenge as well as an opportunity. A senior representative comments that they need to plan ahead for commercializing this resource as it is a risky and complex process. According to a senior official,

'There are two ways of trading gas: (1) building a pipeline, (2) LNG (liquefied natural gas). For us, building the pipeline to Turkey is the most efficient and cost-effective way but due to the volatile political environment, it does not look feasible at this moment. Thus, building a pipeline through Cyprus into Greece and then Italy would be more dependable. On the other hand, utilizing the LNG facilities in Egypt and marketing the natural gas there would be an option as well but the LNG is a very expensive method'.⁸⁶

84 Interviewee 5: Business organization, male, Tel-Aviv, February 2018.

85 Interviewee 2: Business organization, male, Tel-Aviv, February 2018.

86 Interviewee 17: Senior official, female, Jerusalem, May 2018.

Thus, the natural gas discoveries are another field of potential economic co-operation in the Mediterranean, which would help the Israeli government address some of the internal economic obstacles.

Nevertheless, the majority of interviewees underscore that the Israeli government has not yet taken the necessary political affirmative approach to reshuffle its traditional priorities and fully utilize its financial toolbox to address these urgent challenges genuinely; and ‘without the commitment to achieve an inclusive and sustainable growth, that increases the quality of life, Israelis’ social sense of solidarity will be in severe danger and [so will Israel’s] long-term economic resilience’.⁸⁷

Democratic governance: The majority of respondents acclaim the founding criteria of Israeli democracy, however an academic thinks that ‘Israel, which has always been a pluralist and democratic country, founded on socialist principles, faces a significant challenge as, in recent years, it gradually shifts from these universal values and becoming ever more nationalistic’.⁸⁸

‘Followed by anti-democratic currents and populist discourse, ‘this trend aims to gain a tighter grip on all parts of the country. Unconstructively, ideological and political differences are mischaracterized as risks to Israel’s democracy instead of reinforcing its strength’.⁸⁹

‘Additionally, ‘constant politicization efforts are directed towards the media and press, as well as the supreme court, aimed at jeopardizing their independence and objectivity’, which results in ‘a process of delegitimization and weakening of institutions and organizations, and disqualifying individuals who criticize the government’s policy’ to the extent of ‘deteriorating into signalling them as insufficiently loyal, or even as national threats’.⁹⁰

An Israeli member of parliament finds this situation concerning since, ‘Such intolerant rhetoric is actively led by senior politicians, predominantly of the right-wing. Similarly, the Israeli government’s

87 Interviewee 5: Business organization, male, Tel-Aviv, February 2018.

88 Interviewee 3: Israeli university, female, Jerusalem, February 2018.

89 Interviewee 8: Peace NGO, female, Tel-Aviv, March 2018.

90 Interviewee 9: CSO, female, Jerusalem, February 2018.

efforts to enhance its political ties with extreme right-wing governments and often non-democratic regimes place an additional challenge'.⁹¹

It would be worth noting that the respondents expect their elected leaders to fortify the country's democratic governance and demonstrate a stronger commitment to follow the highest ethical standards. Emphasis is expected to be put on transparency, accountability, and restoring the public faith in its governing institutions, predominantly the parliament and its legislative members. The interviewees expect that Israel's government should halt the divisive and populist discourse and remove the restrictive measures against critics of its policy, through the elimination of 'limitations on the space for organizations of the civil society' and the promotion of liberties for 'individuals that challenge the current Israeli government'.⁹² The respondents recognize that the independence of the media and justice systems must be maintained and that 'Israel should strive to complete its official constitutional framework in order to protect the democratic fundamental freedoms, which are so crucial in a modern society'.⁹³

There is a widespread concern among the interviewees over the radicalization of the discourse between the political right and left. It is seen not only as a threat to forces of moderation, but as a pressing challenge to Israel's current state of democratic governance. The controversy is amplified when issues such as peacebuilding, separating 'state' and 'religion', human rights or justice for migrants are on the table. In that regard, for an Israeli parliament member,

'Freedom of expression is under constant attack, which puts predominantly progressive CSO movement activists on the defensive. Propositions for anti-democratic legislative acts and restrictions on their activities, together with actions that are aimed at shrinking the space for civil society, are steadily expanding. While often these legislative initiatives fail to become laws, they contribute to reshaping Israel's public discourse regarding its national identity, but more importantly undermine the legitimacy of its democratic foundations and weaken its international stance.'⁹⁴

91 Interviewee 10: Israeli parliament member, male, Tel-Aviv, February 2018.

92 Ibid.

93 Interviewee 9: CSO, female, Jerusalem, February 2018.

94 Interviewee 10: Israeli parliament member, male, Tel-Aviv, February 2018.

On the other hand, a senior official asserts that ‘the deep roots of democracy in Israel and the firm democratic structure are facing all these challenges in a solid and stable manner, and so far, the democratic public sphere is able to contain these challenges’.⁹⁵

4. Co-operation areas with the EU in the Mediterranean and country-specific policy recommendations

There is a widespread consensus among the interviewees over Europe’s interests as well as the political and economic power to take a more pivotal role in influencing the regional dynamics compared to other global actors. Despite the apparent complexities, it is a shared belief of the interviewees that, ‘EU should implement a multi-dimensional approach that is based both on actions in the multilateral arena with international organizations, as well as on stronger partnerships on the ground with the region’s political leaderships, economic actors, and CSOs’.⁹⁶

Given a steadfast leadership and practical guidance, paired with the adequate financial resources, better regional co-operation can be achieved. ‘To some extent that could provide some relief and stability to the troubled region and possibly improve the political and economic prospects of its citizens’⁹⁷.

The most urgent issue should be to support the regional promotion of a humanitarian and political response strategy to Gaza’s humanitarian crisis. Israel’s rehabilitation plan for Gaza, which was presented beginning of 2018 could serve as a starting point to achieve such a goal.⁹⁸ Additionally, a regional development bank that provides the required

95 Interviewee 7: Senior official, female, Tel-Aviv, March 2018.

96 Interviewee 2: Business organization, male, Tel-Aviv, February 2018.

97 Interviewee 11: Think-tank member, female, Tel-Aviv, February 2018.

98 According to a senior official, the plan aims at renewing the infrastructure (sewage system, education, housing, etc.) of Gaza for ‘reigniting hope’ among the people living there (Senior Official, (Interviewee 16), May 2018).

collateral support for capacity building and the restoration of crucial infrastructures and funding of joint projects, should be considered.⁹⁹

To that end, if the EU decides to invest greater efforts in mediation and addressing the political deadlock, ‘it may want to initiate an international summit, which could hopefully lead to the expected breakthrough’.¹⁰⁰ The EU’s comparative advantages, capacities, and strengths should be further used to trigger a diplomatic process and initiate its own peace proposal. From the respondents’ perspective, the EU should be ready to use all the potential leverage and incentives at its disposal to achieve these goals; however, ‘the success of these initiatives depends on how the EU attracts broader coalition support both financially and politically’.¹⁰¹

Secondly, the interviewees highlight that the promotion of democratic governance values and practices in the region is a crucial determinant for the EU’s success. Therefore, it is necessary for the EU to explore new paths with all Mediterranean countries to strengthen education for democracy, ‘ensur[ing] that governments are committed to elections that are conducted freely, democratically, and in full compliance with international principles’¹⁰² and stressing the importance of an independent judiciary, respect for fundamental liberties and principles, and the substantive role of civil society. In that respect,

‘It is imperative that the political systems are tolerant to critics and should not pose restrictions on civil society and those individuals that oppose its policies. Increasing co-operation and sharing practices on how to push back against restrictions on civil society are essential. It is necessary to gradually improve the way to protect the values and work of many organizations and activists who are at risk.’¹⁰³

Thirdly, on the economic level, the recent discoveries of natural gas reserves in the east Mediterranean coasts are projected to yield substantial dividends for this region. Despite some uncertainty with regard to the exact financial viability, ‘these natural gas reserves have sizeable economic potential and could possibly serve as the next game-changer of the political landscape

99 Interviewee 5: Business organization, male, Tel-Aviv, February 2018.

100 Interviewee 3: Israeli university, female, Jerusalem, February 2018.

101 Ministry of Economy (Interviewee 13), March 2018.

102 Interviewee 12: Research institute, male, Beer Sheba, February 2018.

103 Interviewee 9: CSO, female, Jerusalem, February 2018.

of the region'.¹⁰⁴ The EU's objective to diversify its energy sources could use the discoveries of natural gas as an opportunity to leverage regional co-operation. Since it is agreed that individual countries could not afford to construct the necessary export infrastructure separately due to financial constraints, these projects must be carried out in the framework of regional co-operation. If such an opportunity is not fully seized, a business organization representative points out that 'there is a risk of motivating the parties to ignite a new source of future dispute'.¹⁰⁵

Fourthly, with regard to political relations between Israel and the EU, although interviewees from Israel can draw a framework for the EU's future in the region, in the last few years Israel and the EU have not made any substantial progress in their relations, mainly due to political dispute over the EU concerns on Israel's violations of international law. Thus, it has been several years since the two sides signed new agreements, such as the co-operation in Horizon 2020 programme, or the Open Sky agreement.

According to an Israeli member of parliament, 'the very positive and close bilateral relations between Israel and the majority of the EU member states are not being translated into a strong support of Israel on the EU level'.¹⁰⁶ Furthermore, the deadlock of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and the European tendency to keep a 'politically correct' balanced approach in their attitude towards the Israelis and the Palestinians, is seen as continuously preventing progress in relations with Israel. If the EU is interested in enhancing its relations with Israel, it has to offer certain advancements in favour of mutual co-operation, notably implementation of the current Association framework—for example, by gathering of the Association Council—and enabling Israel to upgrade and update its existing agreements with the EU. Nevertheless, 'To realize a long-term vision for the potential relations, the EU has to clarify the content of the "Special Privileges Partnership" which was offered by the EU a few years ago, as an incentive to move forward on the peace process'.¹⁰⁷

With regard to potential economic and social relations with the EU, there is a great belief among the interviewees that Israel should deepen

104 Interviewee 10: Israeli parliament member, male, Tel-Aviv, February 2018.

105 Interviewee 5: Business organization, male, Tel-Aviv, February 2018.

106 Interviewee 10: Israeli parliament member, male, Tel-Aviv, February 2018.

107 Interviewee 7: Senior official, female, Tel-Aviv, March 2018.

its collaboration with the EU using various governmental channels, ‘as well as business and CSOs’.¹⁰⁸ Among other aspects, such co-operation should include:

- (1) expansion of economic and trade agreements to additional themes;
- (2) enhancement of Israeli participation in European programmes and agencies;
- (3) promotion of regular exchange visits and dialogue meetings among experts;
- (4) trade agreements to enhance the removal of unnecessary barriers and trade-restrictive measures that adversely affect trade in goods and services; and
- (5) expanded mutual recognition procedures to include a much broader scope of industrial sectors.

These actions could contribute to Israel’s success on the economic and social level, and assist in reducing the cost of living, while ‘providing a significant source of competitive and qualitative products, along with enabling Israeli firms to export more to the EU’.¹⁰⁹

On academic, technological, and scientific areas, ‘the co-operation between Israel and the EU is not sufficiently felt at the ground level, and could be further expended in this direction’.¹¹⁰ An Israeli business organization representative stresses that,

‘Efforts should be made to extend the presence of multinational European companies in Israel, attract venture capital and foreign direct investments, and provide the suitable incentives to build their R&D centres in Israel. All these activities are relatively negligible compared to similar accomplishments made by US corporates, therefore they should undoubtedly be promoted’.¹¹¹

Additionally, another business community representative underscores that ‘Israel’s experience in supporting innovative businesses through technological incubators and accelerators could serve as a basis for stronger

108 Interviewee 2: Business organization, male, Tel-Aviv, February 2018.

109 Interviewee 13: Ministry of Economy, female, phone interview, March 2018.

110 Interviewee 1: Senior official, male, February 2018.

111 Interviewee 2: Business organization, male, Tel-Aviv, February 2018.

future co-operation between the parties'.¹¹² Ultimately, the experts provide a list of specific fields of mutual interest for potential business collaboration with the European Union that are not sufficiently developed. Among these opportunities, a strong emphasis is placed on environmental, energy, life sciences, and security-related sectors. Further collaboration should particularly be directed to the following industries: (1) biotechnology and pharmaceuticals, (2) renewable and alternative energy, (3) clean-tech, agrotechnology, (4) water and (5) cyber and homeland security sectors.

Conclusion

Although limited by the discrepancies within the political sphere, Israeli elites continue to perceive the relations with the EU as inherently durable and permanent. Even though there is continuous co-operation in the areas of commerce, technology, and education, their critical opinions remain intact. They believe that the EU, as a substantial global actor, should be more active and visible in the Mediterranean; its 'soft power' strategies prevent the Union from becoming an influential agent within the region's turbulent atmosphere.

Accordingly, it is necessary to highlight that the Israeli elite actors do not mainly focus on developing policies or opinions on the Mediterranean, except for forming hypotheses on the commercialization of natural gas discoveries. Israel does not feel welcome in the relevant organizations in the region, and consequently the Mediterranean as a region is not a primary concern or a source of expectation, since the ultimate focus is on immediate opportunities or internal and external threats.

For this reason, the fate of relations with the EU and the Mediterranean can be considered as intertwined elements. Israeli elites define this issue in accordance with ardent political challenges which discourage both parties from effective and expanded channels of co-operation. Due to the state of relations with the EU in recent years, Israel—as a country which focuses on immediate concerns rather than long-term political

112 Interviewee 5: Business organization, male, Tel-Aviv, February 2018.

struggles—has made the decision to collaborate separately with member states, especially those that are more positive about Israel’s government policies. The internal struggles of Israel regarding the extent of the EU’s active involvement in Israel’s politics develop another element of disagreement between the parties as well.

Consequently, Israeli elites agree that Israel and Europe, whether as a Union or separate member states, will continue to co-operate on non-political issues in the future. On the other hand, the third angle of this relationship, the Mediterranean, proves to be a distant and discouraging area of co-operation for the Israeli professional elite due to its present structure. Therefore, the volume of co-operation in political and non-political issues in this triangle will be defined by possible revisions in both parties’ approaches.

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Annex: List of Interviewees

Interviewee 1: Senior official, male, February 2018

Interviewee 2: Business organization, male, Tel-Aviv, February 2018

Interviewee 3: Israeli university, female, Jerusalem, February 2018

Interviewee 4: Israeli university, male, phone interview, February 2018

Interviewee 5: Business organization, male, Tel-Aviv, February 2018

Interviewee 6: Senior official, female, phone interview, February 2018

Interviewee 7: Senior official, female, Tel-Aviv, March 2018

Interviewee 8: Peace NGO, female, Tel-Aviv, March 2018

Interviewee 9: CSO, female, Jerusalem, February 2018

Interviewee 10: Israeli parliament member, male, Tel-Aviv, February 2018

Interviewee 11: Think-tank member, female, Tel-Aviv, February 2018

Interviewee 12: Research institute, male, Beer Sheba, February 2018

Interviewee 13: Ministry of Economy, female, phone interview, March 2018

Interviewee 14: Journalist, female, 19 February 2018, phone interview

Interviewee 15: Media, male, 5 March 2018, Tel-Aviv, phone interview

Interviewee 16: Senior official, female, Jerusalem, May 2018

Interviewee 17: Senior official, female, Jerusalem, May 2018

Interviewee 18: Senior official, male, Jerusalem, May 2018

Interviewee 19: Senior official, male, Jerusalem, May 2018

Interviewee 20: Israeli University, Tel-Aviv, May 2018

Chapter 7: Revisiting the Role of the EU in the Neighbourhood: Moroccan Elite Perceptions on the EU and Its Policy Impact in the Mediterranean

Featuring a rich cultural blend of Arab, Berber, African, and European influences, Morocco is a strategic actor in the southern Mediterranean and in the MENA region, and one of the most developed countries in Africa, despite being a lower middle-income economy.²

With its strategic location and proximity to Europe, Morocco has deepened political, social, and economic ties with the EU and its member states. Within the spectrum of the MEDRESET project, which aims to reassess the understanding and definition of the Mediterranean, along with the related EU policies,³ this chapter centres on Morocco, and attempts to provide a comprehensive assessment and understanding on the country's perception of the EU and the Mediterranean in general, and the Union's Mediterranean policies in particular.

The assessments reflected in this chapter are based on a qualitative elite survey that was carried out in Morocco with local elite stakeholders. As a snapshot of the full analysis presented in the following sections, the Moroccan perception of the EU in the Mediterranean at the elite level centres on the view that the EU has a fragmented approach towards the region. In this

1 Omar Iharchane and Samir Bennis were commissioned by PODEM, as Work Package 3 leader for the MEDRESET Project. Iharchane Bennis contributed to the background sections of this chapter.

2 See World Bank Data website: *Morocco*, <https://data.worldbank.org/country/morocco>.

3 Daniela Huber and Maria Cristina Paciello, 'MEDRESET: A Comprehensive, Integrated, and Bottom-up Approach', in *MEDRESET Methodology and Concept Papers*, No. 1 (June 2016), p. 3, <http://www.medreset.eu/?p=13169>.

view, the EU's policies to the region need to improve in: (1) 'consistency', (2) 'integrity', and (3) 'parity'. Furthermore, the ENP was described 'a policy of defence in the interests of the EU rather than a win-win exchange' by the Moroccan stakeholders. Although diverging opinions were retained on to what extent and how the Euro-Mediterranean partnership can prove successful in addressing the challenges the region faces, the central focus was on the theme of 'development'. Above all, the EU was declared to be among Morocco's major stakeholders and a main actor that the countries in the region can continue to benefit from at different levels.

Elaborating on the elite survey findings, the structure of the chapter is arranged in three main sections. The first section introduces a country profile on Morocco, leading into the second section which features a brief history of EU–Morocco relations and their changing dynamics under the influence of domestic and regional developments. The third section is exclusively devoted to the elite survey and detailed analysis of the survey data. The chapter concludes by identifying policy priorities for the future collaboration between the EU and Morocco.

1. Country profile of Morocco

1.1 Demographics and current domestic issues

Unlike many Arab and African countries, Morocco is an old nation-state whose creation dates back over 1,200 years. The country's foundations were laid in the year 808 with the founding of the Idrisid dynasty. In the Arab world, what distinguishes Morocco's history from that of other countries is that it was unique in not being under the domination of the Ottoman Empire, and in fact preserved its political independence until the establishment of the French and Spanish Protectorate in 1912.

Like many other countries in the Arab region, Morocco has a young population. According to World Bank data, Morocco has a population of 35,739 million, primarily Sunni Muslims of Arab/Berber ancestry. The figures provided by the country's High Commission for Planning

show that the urbanization rate had reached 60.3 percent in 2014, against 55.1 percent in 2004.⁴

With a growing young population, the main challenge the Moroccan economy has faced over the past decades is to provide job opportunities to the increasing number of young graduates. Every year, about 95,000 graduates⁵ join the ranks of unemployed people striving to enter an insufficient job market, which puts constant pressure on the state. According to the latest estimates, the unemployment rate has reached 10.6 percent. Young people are among the most affected by unemployment, with 29.3 percent of youth between 15 and 24 left unemployed.⁶

In addition to unemployment, the health and education systems are among the areas that prevent Morocco from improving its human development index. All the *Human Development Reports* published in recent years by the United Nations Development Programme have ranked Morocco among the worst underachievers in the Arab region. According to the latest Human Development Indicators, published in September 2018, Morocco ranked 123rd worldwide. In the Arab region, it lagged way behind Algeria, which ranked 85th, Tunisia (95th), Libya (108th), and Egypt (115th).⁷

1.2 *The Arab uprisings and their impact in Morocco*

Over the years, Moroccans have become increasingly vocal in expressing their disgruntlement with the failure of the government to meet their demands. With the start of the Arab uprisings in early 2011, the Moroccan

4 See the 2014 Moroccan census indicators: *Chiffres clés* [Key figures], <http://rgphentableaux.hcp.ma>.

5 Moroccan Ministry of Education, Vocational Training, Higher Education and Scientific Research, *Statistiques Universitaires 2018-2019* [University Statistics 2018-2019], December 2018, <https://www.enssup.gov.ma/fr/Statistiques/4537>.

6 ‘Unemployment in Morocco: Young Urbans Have It the Worst in 2017’, in *Morocco World News*, 9 November 2017, <https://www.morocoworldnews.com/?p=233471>.

7 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP): *Human Development Indices and Indicators: 2018 Statistical Update*, New York, UNDP, 2018, <http://hdr.undp.org/en/2018-update/download>.

youth especially seized the opportunity to put heavier pressure on the state to take their concerns into account. They hoped the authorities would make the necessary economic, social, and political reforms to improve the living conditions of the working and middle class, protect fundamental freedoms, fight corruption and nepotism, and bring corrupt politicians to account.

Demonstrations were spearheaded by a movement called the February 20th Movement. Hundreds of thousands of unemployed and disgruntled Moroccans identified with the Movement's demands. This time around, demonstrations were not only limited to Rabat, but spread to Morocco's main cities. But unlike other Arab countries facing the Arab Spring—such as Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria, where the governments used excessive violence against protestors—the Moroccan government maintained its composure and spared the country a potential escalation between security forces and protesters.⁸

Furthermore, while protestors in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and Syria called to overthrow the regimes in place, Moroccan protestors merely called for a deep and genuine political reform, in the form of a constitutional monarchy where the elected government would be accountable to its citizens and would have exclusive control over the country's political, economic, and social policies.

Answering the growing demands of Moroccan streets and seeking to reassure the Moroccan masses that their concerns were being heard, King Mohammed VI addressed the nation on 9 March 2011. During his speech, the monarch announced the formation of a committee entrusted with revision of the Constitution. The speech proved to have a positive effect on the turn of events in the country, in that it successfully reassured Moroccans that the monarchy was willing to compromise and engage in genuine political reforms. These would put the country on the right track towards democratic reform and away from old practices and abuses.

On 1 July, Moroccans adopted a new Constitution with the majority of those who voted, the fifth in the country's history since its independence in 1956. Although there might still be debate over the scope of the reform, the new Constitution reduced some of the prerogatives of the King, enshrined

8 James N. Naster, 'Morocco's "Arab" Spring', in *MEI Publications*, 1 October 2011, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/moroccos-arab-spring>.

the principle of the appointment of the head of government from the party that ranks first in the legislative elections, enhanced gender equality, gave more powers to elected officials and more independence to the judiciary, and upgraded the status of the Amazigh language, which become official language of the country along with Arabic.

1.3 *The issue of territorial integrity*

The completion of territorial integrity has been the main feature of Morocco's foreign policy since its independence in 1956. When Morocco obtained its independence from France and Spain, large swaths of its territory remained under Spanish occupation, especially in southern and northern Morocco. This reality would condition both Morocco's overall policy and its relations with Spain.

When King Mohammed VI ascended to the throne in July 1999, the question of the Western Sahara was at the forefront of the main challenges facing Morocco's foreign policy. Following the ceasefire agreement reached between Morocco and the Polisario—which claims to represent the Saharawis and seeks to establish an independent state in the Western Sahara—and the adoption of the UN Settlement Plan in 1991, a referendum of self-determination was due to be organized in 1992. But due to irreconcilable disagreements between the two parties over voter eligibility, the referendum was stillborn.⁹ After over 10 years of shuttle diplomacy and innumerable fruitless meetings, the UN decided to adopt a new approach. Between 2011 and 2013, the UN Secretary-General Personal Envoy for Western Sahara, James Baker, came up with two proposals under which the Western Sahara would be granted autonomy for a period of years, following which a referendum of self-determination would be held to decide the fate of the territory. The two proposals were rejected respectively by the Polisario and Morocco.¹⁰

9 Erik Jensen, *Western Sahara: Anatomy of a Stalemate*, 2nd edition, Boulder, Lynne Rienner, 2005.

10 Samir Bennis, 'How Ban Ki-moon Missed a Golden Opportunity to Solve the Western Sahara Issue', in *Morocco World News*, 6 March 2016, <https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2016/03/181419>.

As a result of the failure of this approach, in 2004 the Security Council called on Morocco and the Polisario to come up with creative proposals that would help them achieve a mutually-acceptable solution to the conflict.

On 11 April 2007, Morocco submitted to the Security Council its autonomy proposal for the Western Sahara. The proposal, which was described by major members of the Council as ‘serious and credible’, grants significant autonomy to the region and unprecedented prerogatives to its elected assembly. One day earlier, however, the Polisario had submitted a counterproposal, which stressed that the only way to end the conflict was through a referendum of self-determination.

On 30 April 2007, the Security Council adopted Resolution 1754, which initiated a new chapter marked by more emphasis on the necessity that two parties work towards reaching an agreed upon and mutually-acceptable political position. The resolution seemed to give more prominence to the Moroccan approach, which was described by influential members as ‘providing the basis’ for reaching a mutually-acceptable political solution. While Resolution 1754 ‘welcom[es] serious and credible Moroccan efforts to move the process forward towards resolution’, it only ‘take[s] note of the Polisario Front proposal presented on 10 April 2007 to the Secretary-General’.¹¹

As of today, the Western Sahara issue remains unresolved and affects EU–Morocco relations.

2. Relations between Morocco and the EU

The European Union is Morocco’s main economic and political partner, absorbing the bulk of Morocco’s exports and providing much of the country’s imports. Since Morocco’s independence in 1956, for historical,

11 UN, *Security Council Extends United Nations Mission in Western Sahara until 31 October, Unanimously Adopting Resolution 1754*, 30 April 2007, <http://www.un.org/press/en/2007/sc9007.doc.htm>.

political, and geographical reasons, Rabat strove to strengthen its political and economic relations with the European Union. This policy translated into the signing of a number of co-operation agreements with France, Belgium, Spain, Italy, Germany, and the United Kingdom. However, these agreements did not result in a surge in economic exchanges between Morocco and its European partners. One of the main reasons for this was the protectionist and interventionist policy that the Moroccan government adopted in order to create an independent economy, decrease the volume of imports and preserve the balance of payments.¹²

2.1 Overview of Morocco–EU relations

With the signing of the Association Agreement in February 1996, relations between Morocco and the European Union were given a stronger impetus. Unlike previous agreements, the Association Agreement sought also to strengthen relations between the two parties at the political level. Additionally, an important component of the agreement was devoted to the support and promotion of human rights, fundamental freedoms and democracy in Morocco; the support of non-governmental organizations; and the support of mutual understanding between both shores of the Mediterranean.¹³

By virtue of the agreement, which came into force in March 2000, Morocco committed to establishing a free trade zone with the European Union. For its part, the EU committed to lend political and economic support to help Morocco to achieve a smooth transition by means of supporting the private sector and the country's socioeconomic balance.¹⁴

12 Samir Bennis, *Maroc-Espagne: Les relations politiques, économiques et culturelles (1956-2005)* [Morocco-Spain: Political, Economic and Cultural Relations (1956-2005)], Rabat, Confluences, 2008.

13 Mohamed Boussetta, 'Processus de Barcelone et Partenariat Euro-Méditerranéen: Le cas du Maroc avec l'Union Européenne' [Barcelona Process and Euro-Mediterranean Partnership: The Case of Morocco with the European Union], in *ERF Working Papers*, No. 110 (April 2001), <http://erf.org.eg/?p=15586>.

14 See trade figures between Morocco and the EU in the European Commission DG Trade website: *Countries and Regions: Morocco*, <https://europa.eu/!gh34tH>.

To further deepen their economic and financial ties, Morocco and the EU launched in 2013 negotiations aimed at establishing a DCFTA. This new instrument seeks not only to liberalize economic exchanges through the elimination of custom barriers, but also to deepen the integration of the economies of the two parties. If signed and implemented, this agreement would ‘reduce non-tariff barriers, simplify and facilitate customs procedures, liberalize services, ensure the protection of investment, and harmonize regulations in several areas of the business and economic environment’.¹⁵

However, negotiations to reach such an agreement have been at a standstill for the past 18 months, because of the Western Sahara issue, and the apprehensions of Moroccan officials about the impact the DCFTA could have on the Moroccan economy.

After four rounds of negotiations held in March and June 2013, and January and April 2014, the Moroccan government decided to conduct a survey to study the impact of the DCFTA on the Moroccan economy. The study, finalized in 2015, pointed that while the DCFTA could provide the ‘possibility of profound reforms for our economy and all its actors’, it also entails major social challenges and could put the Moroccan sectors of agriculture and service in jeopardy.¹⁶

What further complicated the situation is the position taken by the European Court of Justice (ECJ) with regard to the Western Sahara. In a ruling it issued in December 2015, the ECJ annulled the 2012 Agriculture Agreement signed between Morocco and the EU on the grounds that at the time of the signing of the agreement, the EU ‘did not consider whether the exploitation of the natural resources of the part of Western Sahara under Moroccan control was for the benefit of the population

15 European Union External Action (EEAS), *Les relations commerciales UE et Maroc et les négociations d’un Accord de libre-échange complet et approfondi (ALECA) UE-Maroc* [EU and Morocco trade relations and negotiations for a comprehensive and thorough Free Trade Agreement (ALECA) EU-Morocco], 7 February 2014, http://eeas.europa.eu/archives/delegations/morocco/documents/news/20140210_questions-reponses_aleca_ue-maroc_07_02_2014_fr.pdf.

16 Ayoub Naïm, ‘Négociations sur l’ALECA: Le Maroc toujours en “stand-by”’ [Negotiations on the DCFTA: Morocco Still in “Stand-by”], in *LesEco*, 13 January 2017, <http://www.leseco.ma/economie/53670>.

of that territory'.¹⁷ This ruling was followed by another in December 2016, stating that the Association and Liberalization Agreements, concluded between the EU and Morocco on trade of agricultural and fishing products, are not applicable to the Western Sahara.¹⁸ The two rulings caused the ire of the Moroccan government and, among other consequences, the suspension of negotiations on the DCFTA.

As clearly seen, the questions of agriculture and fisheries and that of the Western Sahara are intimately linked and have a major influence on relations between Morocco and the European Union. While in the past Morocco made sure to increase the monetary compensation that the EU pays in exchange for the exploitation of its territorial waters, in recent years it has added to its demands the inclusion of the Western Sahara in any agriculture agreement signed between the two partners.

As a result of the EU Parliament's refusal in 2011 to extend the EU–Morocco fishing agreement for one-year, Moroccan authorities suspended the activities of European fishermen in Moroccan waters and announced the end of the agreement linking the two parties. Following this decision of the European Parliament, it took the two parties 18 months of extensive negotiations to come to a new agreement. However, this time around, Morocco hardened its position by demanding a further increase in financial compensation, as well as the inclusion of the Western Sahara in the agreement.

The two parties signed a four-year agreement in 2013, pending the approval of the EU Parliament. Under the new agreement, the EU fishermen were allowed access to Morocco's fishing resources in exchange of 40 million euro per year. The new agreement increased the annual compensation that the EU paid to Morocco by 4 million euro. In 2018, the ECJ ruled that the fisheries agreement was valid as long as it does not include the Western Sahara and its adjacent waters, as such inclusion would violate certain rules of general international law.¹⁹

17 ECJ, Judgment in Case T-512/12: *Front Polisario v Council*, 10 December 2015, <http://curia.europa.eu/juris/liste.jsf?num=T-512/12>.

18 ECJ, Judgment in Case C-104/16 P: *Council v Front Polisario*, 21 December 2016, <http://curia.europa.eu/juris/liste.jsf?num=C-104/16>.

19 ECJ, Judgment in Case C-266/16: *Western Sahara Campaign UK*, 27 February 2018, <http://curia.europa.eu/juris/liste.jsf?num=C-266/16>.

2.2 *Changing dynamics in Morocco–EU relations*

The dynamic of relations between Morocco and the European Union has shifted in the past decade. With the growing role that Morocco has come to play in the EU security policy—especially in the fight against terrorism and illegal immigration, combined with Morocco’s efforts to put an end to the Western Sahara conflict—Morocco is adopting a more assertive foreign policy that demands more reciprocity from the European Union.

To understand the scope of Morocco’s contribution to the EU security policy, one has to consider the efforts it has undertaken in recent years to help its European partners to effectively address the scourge of illegal immigration, as well as in stopping many terrorist attacks on European soil. Part of Rabat’s effort to halt illegal immigration using the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla in northern Morocco was the decision to build a wire wall along its border with Melilla.²⁰ This decision, along with Morocco’s close collaboration, has resulted in a dramatic decrease in the number of undocumented sub-Saharan immigrants arriving on European soil.

The role that Morocco plays in stopping illegal immigration to Europe has a particular importance. According to a report in the Spanish daily *El Mundo* in August 2014, a decision by Moroccan authorities to turn a blind eye to undocumented immigrants attempting to reach Spanish soil caused an unprecedented surge in makeshift boats arriving on the Spanish coasts.²¹

What was said about Morocco’s role in securing the EU borders applies also to Rabat’s role in the fight against violent extremism and in thwarting several attacks in a number of European countries. In addition to the close co-operation between Morocco’s intelligence services and its European counterparts, Rabat’s contribution to the EU’s counterterrorism

20 Fiona Govan, ‘Morocco Building Wall to Halt Tide of Illegal Immigration into Europe’, in *The Telegraph*, 12 May 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/morocco/10825647/Morocco-building-wall-to-halt-tide-of-illegal-immigration-into-Europe.html>.

21 Ignacio Cembrero, ‘Mohamed VI llamó a Felipe VI para quejarse de que la Guardia Civil le diese el alto frente a Ceuta’ [Mohamed VI called Felipe VI to complain that the Civil Guard stop him in front of Ceuta], in *El Mundo*, 25 August 2014, <http://www.elmundo.es/espana/2014/08/25/53fa3bdf2704ec6128b457a.html>.

strategy was on display following the November 2015 Paris attack, when Moroccan intelligence services assisted their French counterparts.²²

3. Elite Survey: Research findings on Morocco

3.1 Methodology

This chapter seeks to introduce Moroccan elite perception in an attempt to offer a ‘non-Eurocentric’ reflection on EU–Morocco relations as well as the EU’s presence and role in the Mediterranean.²³ For the purposes of this research, the elites here refer to local interlocutors chosen based on their influence over policy-making processes or institutions at the social, economic, and political level.

To achieve this goal, an ‘elite survey’ was carried out in Morocco with 22 interviewees between January 2018 and May 2018. The questionnaire designed for the survey included questions that would contribute to answering the main research questions of this particular study,²⁴ including country-specific questions to inquire in more depth about Morocco and its domestic agenda.

Three researchers including two experts from PODEM were involved in the research phase. One researcher based in Morocco was assigned as a country expert for this particular research study and completed one set of interviews at intervals. Apart from the interviews done by the country expert, the two experts from PODEM conducted interviews in March 2018, in Rabat.²⁵

22 Samia Errazouki, ‘AP Interview: Morocco Had Key Intel Role after Paris Attacks’, in *AP News*, 5 January 2016, <https://apnews.com/dacb89528e9d4eab9eff162bff8cf713>.

23 Zeynep Gülöz Bakır and Gülşah Dark, ‘Review of Surveys on Euro-Mediterranean Relations...’, cit.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

25 Preliminary meetings for research arrangements took place before the actual interviews. The research team also held evaluation meetings between April–May 2018.

The in-depth face-to-face interviews conducted for the elite survey included academics and researchers at universities and NGOs, journalists, authors, civil society organization representatives, and political actors including representatives from political movements and parties. Coming from varied political and social backgrounds in Morocco, the local elites who agreed to take part in the research were aged between 25 and 65 and were informed beforehand about the subject of the project through either email or phone. During the arranging of the interviews, there were instances when potential interlocutors did either not respond or expressed their unavailability at the time of the interview arrangements.

The research team encountered limitations in reaching female respondents, and only three female respondents took part in the in-depth interviews (see Annex for the anonymized list of interviewees).

All interviews were anonymous, and the research team only took notes during the interviews. The following sections present and analyse the research findings.

3.2 Moroccan perceptions of the EU and its policies in the Mediterranean

Moroccan–European relations form a picture of reciprocity, complexity, and overlap, especially in the fields of politics, migration, and regional stability in North Africa, which are decisive in determining the nature of the relationship and priorities in policy management. The EU was seen as a strategic partner for the Moroccan state in these respects. A two-level relationship appears to set the direction of discourse and partnership between the EU and Morocco, which, according to the elite-level respondents, are complementary and interdependent. However, as also stated by the respondents, Morocco is not always seen to be in a comfortable position to choose when, how or where it can best serve its interests. As far as the EU's position towards the Mediterranean concerned, the impression retained from the interviews was that the EU is perceived as approaching the southern Mediterranean as an integrated part of European security arrangements yet prioritizes its own national security at the expense of development and fostering democracy in the region.

Although various views were put forward during the interviews, the Moroccan perception of the EU appeared generally positive at the public level, because the Union was held to be economically-attractive, and a destination for emigration. According to the interviewees, the existence of Moroccans living in the EU is another side of the relationship, which was also linked to the development of the Moroccan economy. Europe, as one interviewee pointed out, ‘entices Moroccans, who see it as “El Dorado”, and a place for social well-being.’²⁶

‘The relationship between the EU and Morocco dominates a paradox of love and hate. On one hand, many Moroccans consider the Union a land of opportunity, especially from the side of the youth.’²⁷

On the EU’s approach to the Mediterranean, the interviewees pointed out the lack of an equal relationship with the countries in the region and criticized the Union for pursuing ‘double standards’ and taking action without a ‘unified strategy’ towards the region.

‘The European Neighbourhood Policy is below the needs and the expectations of the region in terms of financial assistance, which is something related to the political and ideological constraints that the Union faces.’²⁸

‘One key objective of EU policies in the Mediterranean is to promote trade and investments between the EU and southern Mediterranean countries, and among the Southern Mediterranean countries themselves. However, the discrepancy between the declared goals and what takes place on the ground is wide indeed. Unless the relations are based on balanced policies that consider the interests of all those concerned, the Southern Mediterranean countries cannot expect much.’²⁹

In Morocco, assessment of the EU varies from one social segment to another based on ideological motives as well as the political and economic position of each group. Among the political actors, the leftists adopted a more contrary stance to the state on strategic issues, with their argument that the Moroccan economy is being increasingly dictated by

26 Interviewee 9: Independent democrat, male, Rabat, January 2018.

27 Interviewee 2: Professor in Agriculture, male, Rabat, January 2018.

28 Interviewee 9: Independent democrat, male, Rabat, January 2018.

29 Interviewee 7: Head of political movement, male, Rabat, January 2018.

recommendations of the credit institutions including those run by the EU. The conservatives, on the other side, expressed dissatisfaction with the decisions of the EU's representative bodies including the European Parliament and the European Court.

'The Moroccan state [still] has reservations on the EU policies that are against the Moroccan interests such as in fishing and agriculture as well as the issue of Western Sahara.'³⁰

Certain criticisms were also levelled at Morocco's position in the region, which was perceived to 'play the role of the gendarmerie' on the southern bank of the Mediterranean to reduce the flow of clandestine migration to Europe.

'By preventing migration to Europe, 'Morocco is making benefit from the EU, which turns a blind eye to Morocco's policies that are contrary to human rights, and do not contribute to the establishment of true democracy.'³¹

'There seems to be an empty shell of negotiations. The EU has high expectations from Morocco yet has less incentives to offer.'³²

The next concern raised by the interviewees related to the lack of a unified voice within the Union and the EU's reductionist approach to Morocco as the European position to the country is seen as fundamentally dependent on the position of France. On one hand, Morocco engages with the EU as an integrated entity, which sets the framework of the main co-operation and policy areas. On the other hand, southern Europe is historically a major stakeholder in Morocco. Most Moroccans were said to associate the Union with certain member states, the first two of which were, unsurprisingly, France and Spain.

'France and Spain are perceived in Morocco with mixed feelings; they have strong relationship with Morocco, but at the same time they are still viewed as the former colonizers.'³³

30 Interviewee 5: Socialist political party member, female, Casablanca, January 2018.

31 Interviewee 2: Professor in Agriculture, male, Rabat, January 2018.

32 Interviewee 17: Researcher at a policy centre, female, Rabat, March 2018.

33 Interviewee 12: Associate Fellow at a research institute, Male, Rabat, March 2018.

While the colonial legacy, cultural dependence, linguistic commonality as well as the geographical proximity and economic relations were put forward as the main reasons that shape the dynamics of relations with France and Spain, Germany was viewed to have a good reputation at the elite level for development and economic modernity as well as its comparatively positive stance on absorbing immigrants. The French hegemony over Morocco was described as a source of competition for other countries, especially Germany, which is already asserting itself in the field of energy.³⁴ It was understood that although a major part of the financial aid to Morocco is provided through the EU, the level of investment flow and security co-operation is majorly dependent on interstate relations. Other countries where Moroccans were said to create a certain kind of association were Belgium, Italy, and the Netherlands, basically because of the Moroccan community residing in these countries, and the tourists visiting Morocco from them.

Finally, the US–EU axis was seen as a handicap for the EU in forming its foreign policy. ‘The EU succeeded in consolidating currency and economic unity but has so far failed to develop a unified foreign policy. The dependence on the American position on foreign policy strategies is one reason to put forward.’³⁵

Moving to observations on the EU response to the Arab uprisings, one notable finding was that there were disparities in the Union’s response over time and from one country to another in the region, and the EU was unable to address the expectations of the Arab people.

‘At the beginning, the EU’s response was not decisive [but calm] to say the least. When the uprisings intensified, the Union stressed its commitment to support the people’s demand for change. However, it did not live up to its promises. It soon changed its policy on the grounds that security and stability should take precedence.’³⁶

The perception was that European countries acted based on a case-to-case approach, and the EU’s foreign policy remained under the influence of the interests of its major member states. In the case of Morocco, the position of France—which was believed to be in favour of the authoritarian elites to

34 See GIZ website: *German-Moroccan Energy Partnership*, <https://www.giz.de/en/worldwide/57157.html>.

35 Interviewee 2: Professor in Agriculture, male, Rabat, January 2018.

36 Interviewee 7: Head of political movement, male, Rabat, January 2018.

neutralize the pressure—was dominant. The case of Tunisia, on the other side, was described as a confrontation between ‘Europeanization’ and ‘Arab states’, where the EU tried to promote the revolution as a success story, dismissing the political and social challenges in the country. With regards to Egypt, there was a perception that the EU has failed.

‘Arab Spring was a resilience test for the EU, yet it failed. Security triumphed over democracy as witnessed in the EU’s stance to the Sisi regime.’³⁷

3.3 Views on key challenges and stakeholders in the region

Throughout the interviews, the Mediterranean region was characterized in terms of varying challenges and risks compelling the countries within its territory.

To begin with the key observations, most of the interviewees declared security, migration, terrorism, and the lack of democratic development to be the major geopolitical challenges. At the elite level, the challenges with regard to security were mostly associated with regional instability, as well as transnational crime, including networks of human and drug-trafficking.

In addition to these, the conflict in Syria as well as the profound instability in Libya were stated as growing geopolitical concerns on regional security. At the elite level in Morocco there also appeared to be a higher take on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, which was described as an ‘obstacle [ahead for] the integration of the Mediterranean countries’³⁸ and a ‘driver’ for regional instability. According to the respondents, although the Israeli–Palestinian issue may be overlooked by the ruling regimes of the Mediterranean, the European position on Israel, notably on the level of its unsatisfactory commitment to end the occupation, was claimed to widen the gap between the EU and the societies in the region.

As further retained from the interviews, sectarian tensions, the problems in democratic transitions in Tunisia and the long-rooted issue of the Western Sahara were cited among other key challenges in the Mediterranean. Another economic factor was described as ‘the need to

37 Interviewee 16: Senior Researcher at a policy centre, male, Rabat, March 2018.

38 Interviewee 4: Professor in IR at University, male, Marrakech, January 2018.

reduce the economic disparities between the countries of the North and the South of the Mediterranean states', as put by a senior academic at a university in Marrakech.³⁹

Also mentioned was the return of nationalism in the north of the Mediterranean and the perception that the EU now faces, indicating that the rising nationalist trends as well as the greater frictions among the member states hamper the Union's effectiveness. In the words of a teaching fellow in Rabat:

'After 60 years of European experience, the dynamics of autism [i.e. the EU goal of expansion within the European continent] have succeeded horizontally with the accession of a number of countries, but the deep unification has not succeeded in the same degree of horizontal integration. What I mean here is the unification of policies.'⁴⁰

Regarding the main stakeholders in the region, based on the survey responses, the Moroccan elite level perceives the EU and the US as the two key actors in the Mediterranean region at the international level, while mentioning China, Turkey, and Iran as the three countries with an increasing interest in accessing the African market. At the economic level, China's growing economic engagement with the larger Mediterranean region—with its future manifestations in terms of being drawn into regional affairs and frictions with the US and Russia—was raised as a potential geopolitical concern. At the regional level, the ruling elites and business community—especially those close to the decision-makers—were seen as the primary stakeholders. On the other side, the civil society sector was not among the frequently mentioned stakeholders but was expected to become an important partner in the region with its potential to bring change.

3.4 Policy issues in Morocco–EU relations

Going beyond the general nature of the relationship between Morocco and the EU, the main policy areas between both parties revolved around five themes, based on the survey responses: (1) agriculture, fishing and water; (2) energy and industry; (3) migration and security; and (4)

39 Interviewee 8: Professor and CSO activist, male, Marrakech, January 2018.

40 Interviewee 2: Professor in Agriculture, male, Rabat, January 2018.

civil society. The level of co-operation between the EU and Morocco, however, was observed to vary from one area to another.

Agriculture, fishing, and water resources: The respondents mostly highlighted the significant co-operation between Morocco and the EU in the field of agriculture along with the investments of European companies in Morocco's agricultural products and import activities. Despite this, the interviewees pointed out the competition between Morocco and Spain on similar agricultural crops. As stated by an academic in agriculture, Spain and Morocco are two competing sides in the field of agriculture, while Morocco is the weaker one because of the pressure exerted by Spain on the EU against Moroccan agricultural products.⁴¹

'Spain and France monopolize almost 90 percent of Moroccan tomatoes. To satisfy the needs of the EU and to avoid competing with Spanish products, Morocco is resorting to the intensive production of agricultural products, which in turn drains the land.'⁴²

The import of agricultural products was also said to be influenced by political tensions between Morocco and Spain. According to the respondents, the use and management of water resources is interrelated with the developments in agriculture, especially with the overexploitation of agricultural land in Morocco. Fisheries is another area where the competition between Morocco and Spain was highlighted by the interviewees, some of whom also raised the exploitation of fisheries resources by the EU.⁴³

Energy and industry: As understood from the interviews, the EU does not prioritize energy in its co-operation with Morocco, which is one of the largest energy importers in the region. A senior research fellow stated that Germany's investment interest in the field of renewable energy is very crucial for Morocco's energy security and path on green and sustainable energy.⁴⁴

The respondents mostly put emphasis on Morocco's potential to become a key partner in this particular area if the country succeeds in

41 Interviewee 6: Professor in Agriculture at University, male, Rabat, January 2018.

42 Interviewee 2: Professor in Agriculture, male, Rabat, January 2018.

43 Ibid.

44 Interviewee 12: Associate Fellow at a research institute, Male, Rabat, March 2018.

launching a gas pipeline that will connect Morocco, along with some other African countries, to Europe.

In the field of industry, the EU member states are known as the main supplier of industrial products to the Moroccan market.

‘There is a greater need for investment in Morocco’s energy and industry sectors. Although co-operation between the Union and Morocco is present at many levels, the level of co-operation should be more on technology transfer and agricultural mechanization [to increase the competence of Moroccan companies].’⁴⁵

An additional comment concerned foreign direct investments by the EU, in particular France and Spain, which target only certain Moroccan sectors such as the automotive sector. France was further criticized for its attempt to curb Morocco’s industry expansion to other EU countries, and for monopolizing the Moroccan market.

Migration and security: The general perception revealed during the interviews was that Europe focuses heavily on the migration issue due to its concern with European security. As described by a research fellow at a think tank, when it comes to the southern Mediterranean, the EU’s policy is merely centred on security.⁴⁶

‘The problem of migration in Europe poses intractable problems, not only about security and counterterrorism, but also the issues of identity, cultural integration, and the challenges posed by the growing Muslim demographic in Europe.’⁴⁷

Compared to other sectors, the co-operation on migration with the EU was seen as more consistent, yet respondents raised the need for agreeing upon a common agenda and approach on this particular issue, referring to the conditions of the mobility partnership between the Union and Morocco.

‘There is an asymmetry of interests: while the EU prioritizes readmission and security, Morocco is more on visa facilitation.’⁴⁸

45 Interviewee 5: Socialist political party member, female, Casablanca, January 2018.

46 Interviewee 16: Senior Researcher at a policy centre, male, Rabat, March 2018.

47 Interviewee 3: Author, political party member, male, Tangier, January 2018.

48 Interviewee 16: Senior Researcher at a policy centre, male, Rabat, March 2018.

According to the interviewees, the co-operation on migration—which is similar to the deal with Turkey to stem the flow of migrants entering the EU illegally—was not expected to produce effective results but to merely return illegal migrants to Morocco. The respondents would prefer to see a more inclusive strategy on migration, which would be based on the ‘neighbourhood of the neighbour,’ meaning that the Union should also consider Morocco’s neighbours like Senegal, one of the hotspots for migration in West Africa, when forming its strategies.

As for Morocco, the increasing migration from sub-Saharan Africa is expected to lead to a change in the country’s demographic structure in the near future, making Morocco not only a transit country but also an immigration destination.

With respect to mobility, the tourist flow from Europe to Morocco and Europe-based Moroccans coming with investment projects were seen as an important aspect for the economy.

Civil society: Throughout the interviews, perceptions on civil society were relatively divergent, especially due to the ideological factors involved as well as the differences in perspective at the elite level.

On one hand, the respondents asserted that there is a good level of co-operation in civil society with the Union and the particular focus is given to human rights issues, notably women’s rights, combating discrimination and violence against women, gender equality, and discriminatory laws. The support of the EU on the recognition of homosexuality and decriminalization of consensual sexual relations was further indicated.

On the other hand, the EU’s degree of openness to the civil society in Morocco was believed to vary according to the Union’s ideologies and principles, leading to the Union’s presence in limited subject areas. There was the expectation that the EU should go beyond its rhetoric and show its determination for concrete partnership based on impartial criteria and common interests.

‘There is a selective and patronizing relationship. The aid is majorly offered to those whose work does not deal with the concerns of the society, and these organizations are mostly linked to the regime. There is another challenge that

setting up independent and credible associations is also difficult in Morocco, notably in receiving consent.⁴⁹

Above all, representatives from the civil society sector drew attention to the transfer of expertise and technical knowledge from the EU, as indicated by a research fellow at an NGO:

‘There is a lack of knowledge on how to use the EU funds or applying for a civil society programme launched by the Union. To improve Morocco’s competency in the civil society sector, the EU can be more on the ground.’⁵⁰

3.5 Expectations and prospects for co-operation in the Mediterranean

The fact that the Mediterranean region is not a homogenous territory appears to make it difficult to predict the future role of the EU in the entire region, as put forward by an academic in agriculture.⁵¹ At the elite level, there were varied views on envisaging the EU’s future role in the region. Some respondents took a cautious stance due to the internal challenges facing the EU, including the anti-immigrant trend and the Union’s perceived lack of transformative power in the Middle East, except for its efforts on the Palestinian issue. On the other hand, certain respondents indicated the Union’s potential to play a more proactive role in the political and socioeconomic development of the region.

It is possible to conclude, however, that there are two areas where the EU is expected to exert more effort in the region, the first of which is support for democratic transition and putting pressure on authoritarian regimes, while the second is to contribute to forming a secure environment and living conditions through development that would bring stability to the region and reduce migration. Any initiative that would aim at helping to build democratic systems and foster social and economic development would be positively welcomed. The transfer of knowledge and expertise was among the most mentioned topics; further partnership is seen as necessary and highly valuable.

49 Interviewee 7: Head of political movement, male, Rabat, January 2018.

50 Interviewee 19: Researcher at a policy centre, male, Rabat, March 2018.

51 Interviewee 6: Professor in Agriculture at University, male, Rabat, January 2018.

Additionally, the civil society sector was described as the ‘door to the success of co-operation’ between both sides, which must be taken care of by strengthening advocacy initiatives, including women’s empowerment, and forming a balanced relationship between the society and the ruling elites. One recommendation was to launch an annual report in conjunction with the EU, specifically on monitoring the status of political and civil rights in the Mediterranean countries.

With respect to regional integrity, there was an emphasis on co-operation platforms, notably on the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), in relation to which the EU is expected to show more support in overcoming the political and economic challenges that the AMU faces.

A final note was that the presence of Russia as a major actor should be considered in the creation of a more balanced Euro-Mediterranean grouping.

Conclusion

This chapter aimed at reflecting how Moroccan elites evaluate the EU vis-à-vis its presence and policies in the country, but also in the Mediterranean. The findings discussed in the previous sections support the assumption on the EU’s ‘technocratic approach’, which ‘remains at the level of decision-shaping and not decision-making’ and is based on ‘on vaguely-defined benchmarks and standards’.⁵² The assumption is particularly relevant for Morocco within the context of the agreements concluded with the EU, as seen in DCFTAs and EU-funded programmes, where Morocco receives insufficient incentives from the Union in terms of both technical knowledge and practical assistance.

Furthermore, the challenges that the EU faces in the Mediterranean lie in the nature of the approach to co-operation that it adopts. It could

52 Münevver Cebeci and Tobias Schumacher, ‘The EU’s Constructions of the Mediterranean (2003-2017)’, in *MEDRESET Working Papers*, No. 3 (April 2017), p. 18.

be argued that what the Mediterranean countries need is a European role that can develop the region and improve the living conditions of the fragile social groups there. To enable better co-operation, one path would be to intensify the transfer of knowledge and strategies among the political actors and support the creation of a culture that could strengthen the political community and facilitate the transition to democracy.

It is further understood that the EU is expected to perceive Morocco as ‘more than a border guard’; as a ‘key partner’ that has the potential to provide investment opportunities to the European economy, and to address security challenges in the region. Respondents highlighted that EU’s image of ‘Fortress Europe’ is still present in the Mediterranean.

The key to a successful co-operation between the EU and Morocco also lies the area of civil society, which must be taken into account in terms of composition, qualification, and strengthening of advocacy capacities in specific areas such as climate, security, migration, justice, and the activation of participatory democracy and human rights.

To this end, based on the responses retained from the elite survey, it is possible to put forward the most pressing issues in Morocco that require the knowledge of the EU, while shaping the priorities of its work with the country.

Policy priorities for future collaboration with the EU

At the political level:

- The EU is expected to contribute more towards efforts that could ensure a true democratic transition without the threat of instability, both in Morocco and the region.
- The Union can support Morocco in introducing a profound constitutional amendment, which would redraw the relationship between institutions.
- Successful fight against drug-trafficking and transnational organized crime is believed to require joint strategies with the Union.
- There is a clear need to form a roadmap on the Western Sahara issue, which has direct impact on Morocco’s relations with the EU and member states on certain policy areas such as agriculture and fishing.

- To enhance relations with the Union, there is the expectation that the position of the EU should not be left to France alone, but be more unified and inclusive.
- The nature and content of partnership agreements with the Union, such as the DCFTA, can be revised to improve their efficiency.

At the economic level:

- The Moroccan development model was said to lack a political basis, and the need to link economic development with democracy was highlighted. The development model should also encompass ‘geographical equity’.
- The EU can help on promoting governance, transparency, and competitiveness in the Moroccan economy.
- It was seen as paramount to enable ‘social dialogue’ between the government and trade unions actors to achieve ‘social peace’, which would benefit the state, the trade unions and workers.
- Political interference in the Moroccan economy was seen as another challenge and hampers the provision of equal opportunities to all social segments.
- Equal distribution of development revenues to all regions and sectors in Morocco was highlighted.
- Further initiatives are expected on eliminating unemployment, poverty, and corruption.

At the social level:

- More efforts should be made on ensuring the freedom of belief in constitutional law and protecting the right to practice religious beliefs.
- Education was described as an urgent problem to handle through new reforms. The Moroccan state should be encouraged to spend more on the education sector.
- The EU can provide more support to the civil society and the media to play their role as awareness-raising sectors.
- Gender equality along with women’s and youth empowerment are the two other areas where further development is deemed necessary.

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Annex: List of interviewees

- Interviewee 1: Party member, male, Rabat, January 2018
Interviewee 2: Professor in Agriculture, male, Rabat, January 2018
Interviewee 3: Author, political party member, male, Tangier, January 2018
Interviewee 4: Professor in IR at University, male, Marrakech, January 2018
Interviewee 5: Socialist political party member, female, Casablanca, January 2018
Interviewee 6: Professor in Agriculture at University, male, Rabat, January 2018
Interviewee 7: Head of political movement, male, Rabat, January 2018
Interviewee 8: Professor and CSO activist, male, Marrakech, January 2018
Interviewee 9: Independent democrat, male, Rabat, January 2018
Interviewee 10: Journalist/editor, male, Rabat, January 2018
Interviewee 11: Academic at University, male, Rabat, February 2018
Interviewee 12: Associate Fellow at a research institute, Male, Rabat, March 2018
Interviewee 13: Researcher at an institute, female, Rabat, March 2018
Interviewee 14: Senior Researcher at an institute, male, Rabat, March 2018
Interviewee 15: Professor, Academic at University, male, Rabat March 2018
Interviewee 16: Senior Researcher at a policy centre, male, Rabat, March 2018
Interviewee 17: Researcher at a policy centre, female, Rabat, March 2018
Interviewee 18: Senior Executive at a policy centre, male, Rabat, March 2018
Interviewee 19: Researcher at a policy centre, male, Rabat, March 2018
Interviewee 20: Researcher at University, male, Marrakech, April 2018
Interviewee 21: Academic at University, male, Casablanca, April 2018
Interviewee 22: Academic at an institute, male, Rabat, May 2018

Chapter 8: Saudi Arabia's Relations with the EU and Its Perception of EU Policies in MENA

The Gulf region has always been crucial for Europe and the EU both for economic reasons and for the inevitabilities of regional politics. Among the seven Gulf countries, Saudi Arabia occupies a unique place in the Gulf–EU relationship.

While there are political, economic, and cultural dissimilarities, the oil-rich country of Saudi Arabia has been a close ally of certain European countries throughout its history, most specifically the UK and France. More recently, Germany has started to be mentioned as the third European country with improving relations with the Saudi Kingdom. However, despite the fact that there are several reasons for Saudi Arabia and the EU to develop a closer co-operation, it is not easy to argue that there is currently a strong and institutionalized relationship between both sides.

There is in fact an official dialogue between Saudi Arabia and the EU through the Co-operation Agreement signed in 1988 between the European Economic Community and the countries forming the Charter of the GCC. The signatory GCC countries are the UAE, Bahrain, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the Sultanate of Oman, Qatar, and Kuwait. Saudi Arabia's capital Riyadh also hosts the Secretariat of the GCC and the EU Delegation to Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, and Qatar as well as the Saudi Kingdom. The EU–GCC dialogue revolves around some major policy areas including trade, security, climate, energy, aviation, and political relations. Notwithstanding certain difficulties noted in the progress of the dialogue, the Co-operation Agreement is still in place.

This chapter aims to look in detail at the bilateral and regional dimensions of the relations between the EU and Saudi Arabia with a

specific focus on the Mediterranean and MENA region. The ultimate goal is to better understand how the EU and its policies in the Mediterranean region are viewed by Saudi Arabia. The findings of the chapter are achieved through desk-based research as well as in-depth interviews as part of an elite survey whose framework is set in the concept paper.¹ The in-depth interviews were carried out with 12 people in Brussels and London in 2018 (see Annex for the anonymous list of the interviewees). Unfortunately, a fieldtrip to Saudi Arabia was not possible due to the rift in the Gulf and domestic turmoil in Saudi Arabia (see the Methodology section). The people interviewed for the survey included researchers, academics, former and active officials, civil society members, and business-oriented people from European countries, who have either worked/served in the Kingdom, visited Saudi Arabia periodically or studied Gulf politics over a long period.

Structured in three sections, the chapter first analyses the domestic and regional dimension of politics in Saudi Arabia, followed by a history of relations with the EU. The elite survey findings are reflected in the subsequent section. The main findings of the elite survey on Saudi Arabia may be summarized as follows:

- (1) The perception of the EU as an institution is progressively improving, however there are no tangible signs to assert that there will be an institutionalized EU–Saudi Arabia dialogue in upcoming years.
- (2) Because threat perceptions of the EU and the Kingdom differ from each other, so do their priorities in security. On one side, Iran has become even more of a concern for Saudi Arabia, notably after the region boiled into chaos in 2011. On the other, the EU seeks a balanced approach in the region and favours engagement with both Iran and Saudi Arabia.
- (3) Economy is very likely to be the main area of co-operation between the EU and Saudi Arabia. The latter would welcome investments

1 Zeynep Gülöz Bakır and Gülşah Dark, ‘Review of Surveys on Euro-Mediterranean Relations, and an Introduction to the Elite Survey in MEDRESET’, in *MEDRESET Methodology and Concept Papers*, No. 5 (July 2017), <http://www.medreset.eu/?p=13424>.

in the coming period, which can be seen as an important tool to enhance bilateral relations.

- (4) Last but not least, the domestic politics of Saudi Arabia is evolving. The new Crown Prince has presented an ambitious reform agenda covering items ranging from economics to societal rights. Some minor reforms have already been put in place, yet the bigger picture of the Kingdom remains unchanged. Even though there is a seemingly limited role for the EU to push reform efforts in Saudi Arabia, an enhanced EU–Saudi Arabia engagement through business channels could be supportive.

1. Domestic and regional dimensions in Saudi politics

1.1 Country profile of Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia was founded in 1932 when the territories controlled by King Abdul Aziz Al Saud were unified and officially named the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The Al Saud family is the reigning power of the Kingdom. Within the Kingdom's territory lie two of Islam's Holiest sites (Mecca and Medina) and it enjoys the prestige of being the guardian of Islam's birth place. There is a strict Islamic rule in the Kingdom. The population ranges around 33.5 million (including migrants), with half of the overall population being under the age of 30.² According to World Population Review of 2018, the Kingdom is also reported to have 2 million illegal immigrants.

2 The current population of Saudi Arabia is 32,938,000, based on the latest United Nations figures. According to the UN data for 2017, 37 percent of this population is migrants, and half of the population is estimated to be under 30. See UN Data website: *Saudi Arabia*, <http://data.un.org/en/iso/sa.html>. See also the Gulf Labour Markets and Migration (GLMM) data: *Saudi-Arabia: Population by nationality (Saudi / non-Saudi) (mid-year estimates, 1974-2017)*, <http://gulfmigration.org/saudi-arabia-population-nationality-saudi-non-saudi-mid-year-estimates-1974-2017>.

Since discovering oil in 1944, Saudi Arabia has emerged as a critical, global economic power, and a dominant regional power that is currently the world's top oil producer. As the world's twentieth-largest economy, the country remains dependent on the oil industry, which generates 43 percent of its real GDP. The private sector of non-oil industries accounted for 39.5 percent of GDP in 2015.³ Saudi Arabia has one of the world's biggest expat communities, akin to other Gulf countries, with more than 6 million migrants working in the Kingdom, mostly coming from South Asia. These labourers at present make up 85 percent of the non-oil private sector workforce.⁴

Although for decades having enjoyed being an oil-rich country, the Kingdom has been facing economic risks recently, due to the decline in global oil prices. There is an effort in the Kingdom to reform the economy under the newly-appointed Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

1.2 Political turbulence and economic challenges

In January 2015, King Abdullah, who had ruled the country since 2005 and had been the power behind the throne since the mid-1990s, passed away. His successor was the current ruler of the country, 79-year-old King Salman. King Salman appointed Mohammed bin Nayef bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud as crown prince and made his youngest son and bin Nayef's cousin, Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud, the defence minister and deputy crown prince.⁵ In June 2017, however, the latter was elevated to the position of crown prince, replacing his cousin bin Nayef, who was removed from his position as head of the interior ministry and reportedly placed under house arrest by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS).

3 Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Labor and Social Development, *Saudi Arabia Labor Market Report 2016*, July 2016, p. 10-11, <https://irp-cdn.multiscreensite.com/ff00f1f0/files/uploaded/G20%20Labor%20Market%20Report%202016%20-%20Final%20-%20Low%20res.pdf>.

4 Ibid., pp. 11, 13.

5 'Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, Power Behind the Throne', in *BBC News*, 22 October 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-40354415>.

This was followed by additional measures aimed at consolidating his influence. In September 2017, hundreds of Saudi clerics and intellectuals were arrested; in November 2017, as part of a so-called anti-corruption drive, 11 princes, four ministers, and several influential businessmen were among dozens of people detained, including the billionaire Prince Alwaleed bin Talal and Prince Miteb bin Abdullah, who was also removed from his post as chief of the National Guard.⁶

Changes in the Saudi political hierarchy come amid domestic socioeconomic challenges. With population growth estimated to have increased at a rate of 3 percent since 2000—the number of expatriates has grown by 4 percent annually—Saudi Arabia is aiming to reduce its dependency on hydrocarbons by establishing a knowledge economy and a more expansive, diverse, and robust private sector. Its Vision 2030 project looks to modernize the Saudi economy and society out of economic necessity and envisages a larger, more diverse private sector, less dependency on the state, and greater integration of women and young Saudis into the workforce. As such, the Saudi government aims to secure 450,000 jobs for future generations, including for Saudi women, who currently face a series of social obstacles.⁷ In April 2017, King Salman asked the government to re-examine guardianship policies that prevent women from acquiring access to government services⁸ and in September 2017, it was announced by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman that women will be allowed to drive, a move that was presented by Salman as part of a broader campaign to reform and modernize Saudi Arabia, even though women's rights remain severely restricted in the country.⁹

As it stands, education requires further improvement, as does the lack of local and native teachers, since the country is dependent on foreign migrants. Its labour market will also undergo reform, and initiatives such as *Nitaqat* [Domains] look to expand the number of

6 Ibid.

7 Ben Hubbard, 'Saudi Arabia Agrees to Let Women Drive', in *The New York Times*, 26 September 2017, <https://nyti.ms/2yrfu5I>.

8 Christopher M. Blanchard, 'Saudi Arabia: Background and U.S. Relations', in *CRS Report for Congress*, No. RL33533 (updated 21 September 2018), p. 14, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL33533.pdf>.

9 Ben Hubbard, 'Saudi Arabia Agrees to Let Women Drive', cit.

Saudi nationals working in the private sector.¹⁰ Moreover, Saudi Arabia's overall unemployment rate is 11.5 percent among Saudi nationals. Only 1.8 million of its 13.5 million women (20.2 percent) participate in the work force and the unemployment rate among women is 32.8 percent.¹¹ There has been, nevertheless, tremendous growth in women's employment. In the last four years, based on figures provided by the Ministry of Labour and Social Development, the number of Saudi women working in the private sector increased by 130 percent. From 215,000 in 2012, the number of women in the private sector increased to 496,000 in 2016, an average of 8,500 jobs per month.¹² Literacy has increased dramatically in recent years—population-wide, the literacy rate was estimated to reach 99 percent by 2015¹³—but inadequacies vis-à-vis skills remain; schools currently lack the capacity to meet the needs of the labour market. The Saudi education system has shortcomings in respect of its focus on critical thinking, while students enter the labour market by way of personal and family networks, as opposed to, for example, a culture of internships and volunteering.¹⁴

Further attempts at reform include reorganising ministries and state institutions in a more efficient manner, to the extent that state councils were in some instances replaced with supreme security and economic councils which have additionally served to consolidate King Salman's authority. By late 2014, 50 percent of Saudi government funds supported 'salaries, wages, and allowances', while public land assets are currently

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- 10 Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Labor and Social Development, *Saudi Arabia Labor Market Report 2016*, cit.; Laura El-Katiri, 'Saudi Arabia's Labor Market Challenge', in *Harvard Business Review*, 6 July 2016, <https://hbr.org/2016/07/saudi-arabias-labor-market-challenge>.
- 11 Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Labor and Social Development, *Saudi Arabia Labor Market Report 2016*, cit. pp. 11, 17.
- 12 Habib Toumi, '130% Spike in Saudi Women Joining Workforce; 11.1 Million Expats in Private Sector', in *Gulf News*, 4 July 2017, <https://gulfnews.com/world/gulf/saudi/1.2052841>.
- 13 Harvard Kennedy School Evidence for Policy Design (EPoD), *Back to Work in a New Economy: Background Paper on the Saudi Labor Market*, April 2015, p. 37, https://epod.cid.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/inline-files/hks-mol_background_paper_-_full_-_april_2015.pdf.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

undergoing valuations; the government has also announced strategies aimed at establishing a VAT system by 2018.¹⁵

Although the Vision 2030 plan sounds good on paper, it should be noted that, as mentioned earlier, the reform initiatives have been limited until now and the general outlook of the Kingdom remains the same. What is often quoted for Saudi Arabia is that the plans in the Kingdom are big but the hurdles are even bigger. Lifting the ban on women driving, easing the conservative dress code for women and limiting the powers of the religious police are seen promising and even unthinkable changes for Saudi Arabia, however, it is still a question whether the reforms carried out so far will continue. The long-established conservatism in the Kingdom is not easy to challenge, with for instance reforms in governance structure. There are reports of international human rights organizations concerned with the continued arrests of human and women's rights activists in the Kingdom.¹⁶

1.3 Geopolitical stance: From past to present

As regional superpowers vying for regional hegemony, the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran has been in a state of continuous flux and has yet to make any real breakthrough in a longstanding history of conflict. Although pragmatism has defined the relationship to some extent, geopolitical rivalry and ideological differences continue to underpin the relationship and have an over-arching influence. The 1979 Iranian revolution presented what was perceived as an existential threat to the ruling authorities in the Arab world due to, firstly, perceptions on Iran's ambitions to export its revolution; secondly, the Shiite communities of the Arab world which in some cases, as in Bahrain, constitute a demographic majority; and thirdly, the transnational links these communities enjoy with the region's other Shiite actors, most notably in Iraq, Iran, and Lebanon.

15 Christopher M. Blanchard, 'Saudi Arabia: Background and U.S. Relations', cit., p. 11.

16 Human Rights Watch, *Saudi Arabia: Unrelenting Crackdown on Activists*, 20 June 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/node/319214>.

By 1999, there were efforts at rapprochement, to the extent that King Fahd of Saudi Arabia stressed it was in the interests of the Gulf to improve relations with Iran.¹⁷ What little progress was being made in the late 1990s and early 2000s was diminished when Saddam Hussein was toppled from power. The 2003 invasion of Iraq by the US dramatically destabilized Saudi–Iranian relations and, by default, the region at large. Both Iran and Saudi Arabia, along with the rest of the Arab world, were embroiled in an indirect confrontation with one another in a regionalized proxy war, supporting opposing sides in Iraq, comprised of Arab Sunni insurgents on the one hand and, on the other, Shiite militias that were backed by the Iraqi state. The fall of the Baath regime and the ensuing sectarian conflict, as well as turning the Middle East into a global battlefield, intensified the geopolitical rivalry and ideological conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

The 2011 Arab uprisings radically transformed the nature of Saudi Arabia’s engagements in the region. Jeddah played a critical role in helping the Bahraini authorities suppress their restive Shiite population.¹⁸ Like the rest of the Gulf, Saudi Arabia also backed the NATO-led military campaign in Libya. The rise in Egypt of the Muslim Brotherhood challenged the ‘identity distinctions that Saudi Arabia needs for its own existential security’, which saw Riyadh resort to a stronger emphasis on Wahhabism to create this distinction once again.¹⁹ The reason for this, according to scholars, was that the ‘rise of a new rival who attempted to assume the leading role in the Sunni Muslim world’, particularly when former Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi demonstrated the Brotherhood’s adherence to Salafism, which challenged Saudi Arabia’s claim as the leader of the Sunni/Salafi Muslims. This prompted Saudi Arabia to discredit the Brotherhood’s identity as a ‘true’ Salafi group,

17 ‘World: Middle East Saudi King Urges Rapprochement with Iran’, in *BBC News*, 6 July 1999, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/387078.stm.

18 Ethan Bronner and Michael Slackman, ‘Saudi Troops Enter Bahrain to Help Put Down Unrest’, in *The New York Times*, 14 March 2011, <https://nyti.ms/2Eu9EEr>.

19 Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Ariabarzan Mohammadi, ‘Saudi Arabia’s and Qatar’s Discourses and Practices in the Mediterranean’, in *MEDRESET Working Papers*, No. 6 (June 2017), p. 7, <http://www.medreset.eu/?p=13399>.

even denying the Salafi nature of the group.²⁰ The rise of the Brotherhood and other Islamist groups in the region, post-2011, saw Qatar double down on its support for these groups, prompting a series of crises that continue to engulf relations between Doha and the rest of the region, including the current blockade of Qatar by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, and Bahrain.

Saudi Arabia moved to extend its support to Syria's rebel groups when protests evolved into an uprising against the Bashar al-Assad regime. Like others in the Gulf, Saudi Arabia's policies have combined diplomatic, financial, and lethal support to Syria's rebel opposition groups, working through a variety of regional intermediaries to influence the leadership balance in the Syrian opposition.²¹

Sectarian tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran further escalated in January 2016 when Jeddah executed prominent Saudi Shiite cleric Nimr al-Nimr, a vocal supporter of the mass anti-government protests that erupted in 2011 in the Eastern Province, where a Shiite majority have long complained of marginalization. The execution prompted outcry in the Shiite Islamic world, and warnings of retaliation from Shiite political and religious communities in Iraq and Iran in particular.

In 2015, when the Yemen conflict broke out, Saudi Arabia and the UAE launched a military operation, that conducted a bombing campaign aimed at the country's Houthi rebels, to restore Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi's government to legitimacy after a civil war broke out between Hadi's supporters and those loyal to the former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who was overthrown during popular protests in 2011. Saleh had previously partnered with the country's Iran-aligned Houthi rebels but broke off ties with the Houthis in December in a move that was allegedly orchestrated by the UAE, saying he was open to a dialogue with the Saudi-led coalition that has been at war with him and his alliance with the rebels since March 2015. He was killed in the same month by his one-time Houthi allies.²² The Saudi-led bombing campaign has

20 Ibid.

21 Frederic Wehrey, 'Gulf Calculations in the Syrian Conflict', in *Carnegie Articles*, 9 June 2014, <http://carnegieendowment.org/publications/?fa=55865>.

22 Faisal Edroos, 'How did Yemen's Houthi-Saleh Alliance Collapse?', in *Al Jazeera*, 4 December 2017, <http://aje.io/vkra4>.

received active US military backing but is now widely-recognized as a strategic failure that has not accomplished its goals, while devastating the country's infrastructure and inflicting dire humanitarian consequences for its civilian population.

2. Overview of Saudi Arabia–EU relations

Historically, Saudi Arabia has been a crucial pillar of US and Western foreign policy in the region. This relationship further solidified after the 1979 Iranian revolution, which overthrew the US-aligned Shah monarchy and replaced his regime with a clerical leadership confronting the US since coming to power. However, allegations of terrorism-financing, especially since the 11 September 2001 twin-tower attacks, have strained relations between Saudi Arabia and the US. They recently improved, once again, after Riyadh vowed to suppress financing for terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS as part of a broader effort to jointly confront Iranian expansionism in the region with the current US administration.

Saudi relations with the EU are mainly established through the GCC. The EU is the largest trading partner of the GCC, but relations between the two entities continued to be limited, given a preference for bilateralism on the part of both Saudi Arabia and its European allies, and the fact that trade relations between the EU and the GCC have long stalled over questions of human rights and differences over subsidies. In general, relations between the two organizations mainly consist of trade and economic co-operation.²³ The EU is Saudi Arabia's first trading partner, making up 17.1 percent of Saudi Arabia's global trade; trade between the two countries takes place within the framework of the GCC. Forty percent of EU goods exported to the GCC are machinery—including power generation plants, railway locomotives, aircrafts, electrical machinery—

23 Agnès Levallois and Jane Kinnimont, 'Relations between the EU Member States and Saudi Arabia in the Field of Security and Defence', in *European Parliament In Depth Analysis*, December 2016, p. 11, [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EXPO_IDA\(2016\)578029](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EXPO_IDA(2016)578029).

and mechanical appliances. Meanwhile, approximately 76 percent of all EU imports from the GCC consist of fuels and their derivatives.²⁴ According to analysts, the EU, led by France in this regard, is looking to compete with the US for the Saudi arms market.²⁵ This trend suggests that Saudi Arabia could look to Europe to decrease its dependency on the US, particularly if the US moves away from its current role as the guarantor of Gulf security in the coming decades.

Saudi officials, including Prince Bandar bin Sultan bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud, have said that the country needs to diversify its security relationships away from the US.²⁶ According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Saudi Arabia was the third largest military spender in the world in 2017, and the second largest arms importer in the world in the period 1998–2017. In addition to the US, European countries have been its biggest suppliers, including UK and France.²⁷ There has been growing co-operation with France including the strengthening of defence procurements destined for the Saudi Navy. The UK and France both have formal defence accords with Saudi Arabia. For the UK's part, a 2013 parliamentary report on UK–Saudi relations found that defence co-operation underpins the entire bilateral relationship. The UK stations around 130 military personnel in Saudi Arabia: 20 from the navy, 40 from the army, and 70 from the air-force.²⁸

However, EU–Saudi relations have been tested by the EU's support for the nuclear deal or Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which has also paved the way for greater economic and trade ties between Europe and Iran. Crises in the Middle East, from terrorism to migration and displacement, have resulted in increased EU pressure on Saudi Arabia, including questions over the legality of arms sales

24 European Commission DG Trade, *European Union, Trade with Saudi Arabia*, 16 April 2018, pp. 8, 4, <http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/html/111845.htm>.

25 Agnès Levallois and Jane Kinnimont, 'Relations between the EU Member States and Saudi Arabia...', cit., p. 8.

26 Ibid., p. 16.

27 Pieter D. Wezeman, 'Saudi Arabia, Armaments and Conflict in the Middle East', in *SIPRI Commentaries*, 14 December 2018, <https://www.sipri.org/node/4711>.

28 Agnès Levallois and Jane Kinnimont, 'Relations between the EU Member States and Saudi Arabia...', cit., p. 15.

by some EU member states to Saudi Arabia.²⁹ Former German Vice-Chancellor Sigmar Gabriel accused Saudi Arabia of fomenting jihadist extremism.³⁰ A European Parliament report published in 2013 estimated that Saudi Arabia has spent over 10 billion dollars to promote Wahhabism through Saudi charitable foundations,³¹ but its trade and strategic ties have often translated into passive acquiescence towards its foreign policies and regional entanglements, including the campaign in Yemen. For example, the US, UK, and France withdrew their support for a call for an international inquiry at the UN Human Rights Council led by the Netherlands.³² Riyadh's intervention in Yemen has provoked a backlash within both the European Parliament and its member states. In December 2017, the European Parliament renewed its call for an EU-wide arms embargo against Saudi Arabia, which came only a day after UK Prime Minister, Theresa May, had visited Saudi Arabia with a pledge to build stronger ties. Members of the European Parliament voted 325 to 1 to back an embargo against Saudi Arabia.³³ A judicial review launched in the UK resulted in a decision that ensured weapons sales would no longer

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- 29 Eldar Mamedov, 'Is Europe Choosing Iran Over Saudi Arabia?', in *Lobe Log*, 20 January 2016, <https://lobelog.com/?p=32674>. For the recent situation see Daniel Brown, 'US Maintains Support of Saudi-led Coalition in Yemen War Even as NATO Allies Stop Selling Weapons', in *Business Insider*, 25 January 2018, <https://www.businessinsider.com/germany-norway-stop-selling-weapons-to-saudi-led-coalition-2018-1>.
- 30 'German Vice Chancellor Warns Saudi Arabia over Islamist Funding in Germany', in *Deutsche Welle*, 6 December 2015, <https://p.dw.com/p/1HIJD>.
- 31 Claude Moniquet, 'The Involvement of Salafism/Wahhabism in the Support and Supply of Arms to Rebel Groups Around the World', in *European Parliament Studies*, June 2013, [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EXPO-AFET_ET\(2013\)457137](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EXPO-AFET_ET(2013)457137).
- 32 Marietje Schaake, 'Europe Needs to Toughen Up on Its Saudi Ally', in *Politico*, 10 December 2015, <https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-needs-to-toughen-up-on-its-saudi-ally-isil-human-rights>.
- 33 European Parliament, *MEPs Demand End to EU Arms Exports to Saudi Arabia*, 25 October 2017, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20181018IPR16536>; Jon Stone, 'European Parliament Renews Call for Arms Embargo on Saudi Arabia the Day after Theresa May Visits the Country', in *The Independent*, 1 December 2017, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/saudi-arabia-arms-yemen-houthi-rebels-control-european-parliament-votes-a8086766.html>.

be within the executive's jurisdiction.³⁴ The new German government has announced it will stop all arms trade with countries involved in the Yemen war.

3. Elite Survey: Research findings on Saudi Arabia

3.1 *Methodology*

Introducing the findings of the elite survey on Saudi Arabia, this research follows a methodology of qualitative data compilation by conducting in-depth interviews with elite actors. The elite survey was conducted in Brussels and London in February 2018 and April 2018, respectively, by two researchers from PODEM, including the author. The ideal and initial plan of the researchers was to visit Saudi Arabia for this research, which seemed possible at the beginning of the project. However, the escalation of the ongoing conflicts in the region, the turmoil in Saudi domestic politics and the Gulf crisis necessitated cancelling a fieldtrip to the country. Therefore, the participants in the elite survey could not involve Saudi nationals but rather interlocutors based in London and Brussels. The researchers tried to get in touch with Saudi officials in Turkey and Brussels, however the attempts proved unsuccessful. In total, 12 interviewees were involved in the elite survey including four women and eight men.

The people interviewed for this research included officials, experts, civil society representatives, academics, and business people (see Annex for the anonymous list of the interviewees). As stated above, the interviewees are either experts on Saudi Arabia politics and society through their previous posts or are still engaged in the Kingdom as country experts or in business relations. Despite the fact that the target audience of Saudi nationals could be not reached due to the difficulties

34 Agnès Levallois and Jane Kinnimont, 'Relations between the EU Member States and Saudi Arabia...', cit., p. 13.

mentioned above, it was still possible to receive the perception of the EU and its Mediterranean/MENA policies from the perspective of Saudi Arabia.

All interviewees were informed by email about the project before the actual interviews took place. The interviews were based on note-taking and none of the interviewees were recorded. Each interview was around 30–45 minutes in duration and followed the structure and questions that were provided to the research team.

3.2 Perception of the EU as an institution

From the Saudi perspective, the EU does not have much weight as an institution. A civil society member describes the image of the EU in Saudi Arabia with the following words: ‘Europe counts as a region, but the EU does not’, meaning that ‘selected European countries have always been more important for the Kingdom than the EU [itself]’.³⁵

The EU is viewed in Saudi Arabia as an institution to encourage democracy and human rights. One official depicts the Union as ‘a norm-setting institution’, adding that ‘it is not a tangible organization in Saudi Arabia’.³⁶ Unlike many of the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern countries, the Saudi Kingdom is not a receiver of financial assistance from the EU. ‘The EU does not have much to offer to the Gulf as it has to North Africa’, an expert says.³⁷ The expert further commented that, to the contrary, the Kingdom is viewed as a ‘good buyer’ of EU-made technology and defence weaponry. Some interviewees describe this relationship ‘as an equal’ one, referring to the need for negotiations between the two parties if and when the EU wants a certain policy implemented by the Kingdom. A different expert notes that ‘the EU does not have a direct and solid leverage over the country’.³⁸ Also another commentator puts the same argument in different words, saying that

35 Interviewee 7: Expert and senior editor, male, London, April 2018.

36 Interviewee 1: Desk officer on GCC at an institution, male, Brussels, February 2018.

37 Interviewee 11: Research fellow, male, London, April 2018.

38 Interviewee 5: Senior foreign policy official, female, Brussels, February 2018.

‘the EU is not and has never been a significant actor in the Kingdom’.³⁹ Indeed, there is a consensus among the interviewees that ‘the EU does not have political weight’.

When asked about the reasons for the EU’s limited role in the Kingdom, most of the interviewees refer to the different ways of doing business between the EU and Saudi Arabia. As put by one expert, the Kingdom and the Union ‘do not speak the same language’⁴⁰. On one hand, Saudi Arabia has always been run by dominant personalities in power with personalized methods and relations. It is underlined by a few interviewees that after MBS took power, one-on-one relations have gained relatively more significance. On the other side, as noted by a former official, the EU is ‘a bureaucratic entity [that] lacks the needed flexibility’.⁴¹ The EU itself being inevitably bureaucratic while representing 28 countries, as well as the way it does business, appear to be among the main factors responsible for its intangible image in the Kingdom: ‘It [the EU] is invisible’.⁴²

As far as individual European countries are concerned, as the leading country of the Gulf region, Saudi Arabia has *sui generis* relations with a number of EU countries, namely the United Kingdom, France, and Germany. However, the US has always remained number one for the Kingdom.

‘The UK comes second, but at a great distance. France comes third. Germany is also on the line, but there again there is a vast distance.’⁴³ ‘Britain, France, Germany; these three mean Europe for Saudi Arabia.’⁴⁴

However, it was noted by the interviewees that the Kingdom has recently begun to place more emphasis on the EU. The main reason behind this change is related to the country’s economic agenda. There is a common view on the Kingdom’s efforts to improve its image in the EU. In this respect, the ambassador dedicated to the EU in Brussels and a specific department on EU affairs in Riyadh are given as examples. According

39 Interviewee 12: Senior research fellow, female, London, April 2018.

40 Interviewee 11: Research fellow, male, London, April 2018.

41 Interviewee 3: Gulf expert, male, Brussels, February 2018.

42 Interviewee 11: Research fellow, male, London, April 2018.

43 *Ibid.*

44 Interviewee 10: Research fellow at a policy institute, male, London, April 2018.

to the interviewed experts, Saudi Arabia now stands at a turning point since its foundation. It was reported that the Vision 2030 plan has been introduced first and foremost to keep the country economically capable in coming decades. In the words of a civil society member:

‘Economic success is needed in the country. This would, of course, require more and more European business investment. The Kingdom is not in denial; the new ruler MBS acknowledges that Saudi Arabia needs a [more] welcoming business environment. Not only that, [but also] a social image make-over at the same time. The 2030 plan aims for all of this.’⁴⁵

Respondents further mentioned that the EU is respected in Saudi Arabia at a public level as well as among the business community where a pro-EU stance can be observed. However, it remains unclear for the moment, whether Saudi Arabia will seek out more institutionalized relations with the EU or follow its current path and strengthen its ties with the individual European countries. At present, whether MBS will be able to deliver on the list of changes he has pronounced essential is a critical question on many minds. His moves seem to be able to gather support within the Kingdom, as well as in European circles. An expert from Europe says that, ‘we need to watch and ask for success, there is no other alternative.’⁴⁶

Another unclear point mentioned during the interviews is the future of the GCC after the crisis with Qatar, which would also influence the course of relations between the EU and Saudi Arabia. Most of the interviewees shared the view that because the dialogue with the EU has mostly taken place within the GCC–EU framework, the future shape of the GCC would have great significance for Saudi Arabia. An expert noted that if or when the GCC collapses, Saudi Arabia would look for its own institutional relations with the EU. Although the interviewees describe the GCC–EU dialogue as problematic, especially after the Gulf crisis, it is emphasized that the dialogue is still visible and seen as significant. As put by an active official, ‘[the] GCC needs to be kept alive as an organization. But not the same. The dialogue with the

45 Interviewee 9: CSO member, male, London, April 2018.

46 Interviewee 11: Research fellow, male, London, April 2018.

EU also needs to be revised. The dialogue cannot deliver as it is.⁴⁷ There is not much further argument on how and when the GCC–EU dialogue could be revised, but the need for a more effective dialogue is commonly noted.

3.3 Perception of EU policies on regional issues

The Arab uprisings and assessment of the EU's stance from the Saudi perspective

When the Arab uprisings broke out in 2011, the series of events in the region was a surprise for many, including Saudi Arabia. ‘Saudi Arabia was extremely cautious from the first moment’, a civil society expert says.⁴⁸ Another expert further commented:

‘With the turmoil in the region starting with Egypt and turning into unending civil conflicts in Syria and Iraq, Saudi Arabia realized that it needs to revise its regional and broader security arrangements. The breaking point with the EU came exactly at this moment: when the Arab uprisings started.’⁴⁹

What came across clearly in the interviews was the diverging perceptions of the uprisings in Saudi Arabia and the EU, and thus, the frustration with each other’s policies. An interviewee describes the Saudi feeling at that time as ‘an irritation with the EU policies’.⁵⁰ When the EU backed popular demands for governance change, this was described a rather ‘miscalculated’ policy in Saudi Arabia. In contrast to the EU, Saudi Arabia perceived the uprisings as a direct threat, and severely reacted to stop Shiite protests in the Gulf. As the reform demand in the region reached Egypt, Hosni Mubarak was forced to leave power after a thirty-year rule. The rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt was intolerable for the Saudi Kingdom since they consider the Brotherhood as a threat as well. The

47 Interviewee 2: Head of desk on MENA at an institution, male, Brussels, February 2018.

48 Interviewee 12: Senior research fellow, female, London, April 2018.

49 Interviewee 9: CSO member, male, London, April 2018.

50 Interviewee 7: Expert and senior editor, male, London, April 2018.

interviewees subsequently noted that the EU's stance towards what was going on in Egypt was 'unacceptable' for Saudi Arabia because—from the Saudi perspective—the chaos expanded and could not be controlled in the region: 'With its improperly studied policies, the EU is seen as responsible for the chaos in the region since the Arab uprisings.'⁵¹

As understood from the interviews, Saudi Arabia has long believed itself to be one the anchors of stability in the region, and thought this role was much appreciated by its Western allies. When the status quo was shaken after 2011, the Kingdom also revised its threat perception, possible to list under three main headings: (1) the threat of Iran (see also next section); (2) the political vacuum that prevailed in the region after long-lasting leaders such as Hosni Mubarak of Egypt and Ben Ali of Tunisia were forced to leave power, and Iran and other rival groups—Muslim Brotherhood was named here—filled this vacuum; and (3) the rise of non-state radical groups.

An expert commented that 'Saudi Arabia felt alone in the first two of its threat perceptions.'⁵² From the Saudi perspective, Europe and the US took the position of supporting change, and this was seen as a divergence of interests as far as regional policies are concerned.

It was put forward that the stability of the region, which is directly linked to security, should be essential for the EU as well as for the region; which is why policies need to be developed accordingly. The policies that the EU adopted at this specific moment in history were a disappointment for the Kingdom. It was further mentioned that this disappointment has led Saudi Arabia to seek new security alliances both in and outside of the region, and this was underlined as one of the main motivations behind the aggressive foreign policy of the new Crown Prince.

According to the Saudi perception retained from the interviews, the regional developments—i.e., Mohammed Morsi ascending to power in Egypt; and Iran filling the power vacuum in Syria—unfolded in a way that did not serve the European interests either. However, the West was not in a position to spend its resources in the region, but wanted to have a say in the direction of the events. Europe raised its voice to the involved parties in Yemen, Syria, and Iraq from time to time but was not able to do

51 Interviewee 1: Desk officer on GCC at an institution, male, Brussels, February 2018.

52 Interviewee 5: Senior foreign policy official, female, Brussels, February 2018.

something concrete, which is interpreted as ‘Europe is losing leverage in the region’ and seen by the Saudis as a proof of ‘impotent’ EU policies.⁵³

Saudi–Iran divide, the nuclear file and the Gulf crisis

Almost all the interviewees share the view that Saudi Arabia is at a turning point, and not only in economic terms; the Kingdom’s regional policies are simultaneously being revised and reshaped, particularly following the appointment of MBS as the crown prince.

‘Saudi Arabia now seems to be obsessed with the increasing influence of Iran in the region more than ever. Iran’s success in Syria, expanding upper hand in Iraq, role in Lebanese politics are a nightmare for the Saudi ruling elite. It is not only seen as threat to the Saudi role in the region, but is also read as a Sunni–Shia power game.’⁵⁴

‘Iran was, and now has become, the most important foreign policy topic in the Kingdom.’⁵⁵

‘Saudi Arabia under the new leadership is eager to become a regional power; there are two tools for that: use of force such as in Yemen and pushing for new alliances in the region.’⁵⁶

Additionally, it was commonly mentioned by the survey participants that the changes in the Saudi foreign policy have come at a time when relations with the US are being recovered. One respondent highlighted that the Kingdom was troubled by US policy in the Middle East under the Obama administration. When the US supported the Arab uprisings of 2011, Saudi Arabia felt ‘alienated’ and the signing of the nuclear deal with Iran in 2015 was a total frustration. The relations between Saudi Arabia and the US were relaunched with President Trump’s visit to Riyadh in May 2017. First and foremost, Saudi Arabia is very pleased to see the current US administration being harsh on Iran.

The interviewees frequently mentioned that the Iran policy of Europe and the EU is strongly criticized for its objective to ‘create a peaceful

53 Interviewee 7: Expert and senior editor, male, London, April 2018.

54 Interviewee 9: CSO member, male, London, April 2018.

55 Interviewee 12: Senior research fellow, female, London, April 2018.

56 Interviewee 9: CSO member, male, London, April 2018.

Iran, which will never be the case'.⁵⁷ Most of the respondents argue that Europe's not aligning with the Trump administration to crack the deal, pushed the Kingdom more to the US side. A civil society member summarizes the Iran case between the EU and Saudi Arabia as follows:

'Saudi Arabia is important to Europe for economic reasons; but this is not the full story. The EU cares about geopolitical balance and stability for security additionally. When Obama said Iran and Saudi Arabia need to learn to share the Middle East, this was welcomed in the EU since Brussels has more or less the same plan, they call it a "multi-polar Middle East". However, the EU misses the point that power is zero-sum in the Middle East.'⁵⁸

When the nuclear deal between P5+1⁵⁹ and Iran was announced in late 2013, Saudi Arabia was among the first to announce a cautious concern. 'The Kingdom was careful with the tone of its language to the Western world but definitely perceived the nuclear deal as a betrayal by its allies in the West', an expert says.⁶⁰ Another interviewee says Saudi Arabia felt 'so alienated' that its relations with Europe (and the US) have undergone a shock.⁶¹

Research findings demonstrate that the Kingdom was careful in its reactions against the nuclear deal, however had serious concerns which—three years after the signing of the deal—are allegedly proven to have just cause. According to the respondents, the Saudis were concerned with the deal for the following reasons:

- (1) it would reopen the gates of the West for Iran, and especially those of the US;
- (2) Iran's having the technical capacity of uranium enrichment is an issue for Saudi Arabia, since the belief is that if at any time the deal is broken Iran could have the capacity to develop a nuclear weapon; and

57 Interviewee 7: Expert and senior editor, male, London, April 2018.

58 Interviewee 11: Research fellow, male, London, April 2018.

59 Referring to the UN Security Council's five permanent members, namely China, France, Russia, UK, and the United States; plus Germany.

60 Interviewee 8: Analyst and researcher, female, London, April 2018.

61 Interviewee 4: Foreign policy official at an institution, female, Brussels, February 2018.

- (3) it would help Iran to gain confidence and reassert itself aggressively in the Middle East scene, especially at a time like today when chaos is widespread.

The Saudis now claim that they were very right in their concerns. Iran has increased its role in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon. Contrary to the EU which aims to bring balance in the region and foster peace, Saudis see the deal as increasing competition and thus a destabilizing factor for the region.

In line with these arguments, an expert reported that the nuclear deal is described by the Saudis as the ‘worst ever policy of the EU in the region’.⁶² A former official added that ‘if you have some sort of a relationship with Iran, then you should be ready to pay a price in Gulf. The EU has not yet paid but could do so.’⁶³

For the Saudi Kingdom, it is not clear why the EU is insisting on such a deal with Iran. For some respondents, one part of Saudi Arabia’s irritation comes from its isolation from the nuclear deal process. Despite the fact that the EU was in communication with Saudi Arabia during the process, the research demonstrates that the level of communication did not satisfy the Saudi Kingdom, and they were highly disturbed by not being made a part of such a deal, even if in an indirect way.

It is also noted that the Saudi Kingdom is today even more frustrated with the deal, believing that it helped Iran increase its influence given the power vacuum in the region. The future steps of the Kingdom are not easy to estimate, however some respondents mentioned the possibility of Saudi Arabia voicing its desire to have the same nuclear capacity as Iran. Saudi Arabia has made such statements before but this time; some say it could push harder on Europe. Having said that, the interviewees who made this argument also stated that the Kingdom first needs to eliminate its internal challenges.

The observation is that the US has now changed its policy in the Middle East to an anti-Iran direction. In addition, there is an improvement of relations between Israel and the US, and Saudi Arabia has the de facto support of both the US and Israel in its aggressive policies in the region.

62 Interviewee 9: CSO member, male, London, April 2018.

63 Interviewee 2: Head of desk on MENA at an institution, male, Brussels, February 2018.

This situation leads to the conclusion that the Kingdom has less need of European or EU approval for its actions.

Finally, on the recent the Gulf crisis, the perception is that no European country wanted to take sides, and also could not play a mediating role. From the perspective of Saudi Arabia, this demonstrates the limited role of Europe, which is well-received at the same time. An analyst puts the position of the EU as follows:

‘The battle inside the Gulf is a family one. The EU got that and did not want to be involved more than it needs to be. A split in the GCC is not of that much importance to the EU. The GCC does not mean much politically, it matters economically and that’s why now there is a trend in the EU to develop diverse relations with the countries of the Gulf.’⁶⁴

A former official also said, ‘Europe’s message was “our businesses will go on, we’ll keep it away from politics” and this was well received by the Saudis’.⁶⁵ The same interviewee comments that ‘EU is a baby in the Gulf politics’.⁶⁶

According to most of the survey participants, ‘Europe is well-aware that they aggravated the Saudis when asked for evidence on the terror financing allegations on Qatar; however, they could not react any other way’. It is also stressed that Saudis seem to be happy with the EU’s vague policy towards the crisis. One analyst says that ‘they [the Saudis] got what they were looking for from the US and Israelis; Europe not meddling any more is the ideal for the Kingdom.’⁶⁷

This is called a wise policy for the EU, since the argument is, as put by a think-tank expert, ‘Any crisis in the Gulf is big for the EU to resolve. The GCC could change and be reshaped in the future, and Europe may not have much of a say in this reshaping. When this is the case the best is to have enhanced relations with all six countries of the Gulf as much as possible.’⁶⁸

64 Interviewee 1: Desk officer on GCC at an institution, male, Brussels, February 2018.

65 Interviewee 3: Gulf expert, male, Brussels, February 2018.

66 Ibid.

67 Interviewee 7: Expert and senior editor, male, London, April 2018.

68 Interviewee 9: CSO member, male, London, April 2018.

Conclusion

The EU–Saudi Arabia ties have been tested by geopolitical developments in the Middle East, including conflicts in Yemen and Syria, tensions and disputes over the Iran nuclear deal, EU concerns toward human rights in Saudi Arabia, and growing discontent among European and Western audiences toward European arms sales to Riyadh. Nonetheless, the relations have been resilient to these challenges as has defence and intelligence co-operation between Saudi Arabia and European member states. While the Gulf crisis has resulted in political tumult in the Gulf itself, bilateral ties with a number of European countries—namely the United Kingdom, France, and Germany—have strengthened since the blockade, in large part because of Saudi Arabia’s geostrategic importance and its growing trade relations with the West.

The main conclusions of the research can be summed up as follows:

- (1) The EU as an institution is perceived as a non-player in the Kingdom.
- (2) The Arab uprisings were observed differently by the EU and the Kingdom, and their reactions were also different. While the EU took a positive stance towards supporting the popular demands of the Arab societies, Saudi Arabia was, from day one, concerned about the political rocking in its neighbours. When the deposition of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt was followed by the leadership of Mohammed Morsi, a Muslim Brotherhood member, Saudi Arabia felt very uncomfortable and reacted strongly.
- (3) When it comes to the nuclear file with Iran, this is still the major issue of divergence between the EU and the Kingdom. Iran is ‘the’ source of threat for Saudi Arabia; therefore, it seems that the Kingdom will continue to challenge the EU’s efforts on the nuclear deal.
- (4) The economy will be an important aspect of the relations between Saudi Arabia and the EU in the future, and the pragmatic approach of the Kingdom will continue especially at a time when there are economic targets to reach.

Europe continues with its approach of non-involvement in the domestic turmoil in the Kingdom. The appointment of Mohammed Bin Salman as Crown Prince was a surprise for Europe, which however was good at delivering the message that ‘this is an internal issue of the Kingdom’. The same attitude came in use when the new Crown Prince made extraordinary moves in the country. The major issue for Europe is that ‘whoever rules the Kingdom, they have to deliver and not collapse; as long as this is happening, we are fine’. The Kingdom perceived and approved the EU’s message. Although there could still be tough times to come for the EU and Saudi Arabia, neither side seems to be willing to sever the ties.

In this context, the EU is advised to follow a more flexible policy route to enhance its ties with the Kingdom. However, it is still acknowledged that the EU is an institution and therefore, may have difficulty in engaging in one-on-one relations. On the other hand, there could be alternative means such as appointing a special Gulf representative to facilitate the communication between both sides.

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Annex: List of Interviewees

Interviewee 1: Desk officer on GCC at an institution, male, Brussels, February 2018

Interviewee 2: Head of desk on MENA at an institution, male, Brussels, February 2018

Interviewee 3: Gulf expert, male, Brussels, February 2018

Interviewee 4: Foreign policy official at an institution, female, Brussels, February 2018

Interviewee 5: Senior foreign policy official, female, Brussels, February 2018

Interviewee 6: Policy counsellor, male, Brussels, February 2018

Interviewee 7: Expert and senior editor, male, London, April 2018

Interviewee 8: Analyst and researcher, female, London, April 2018

Interviewee 9: CSO member, male, London, April 2018

Interviewee 10: Research fellow at a policy institute, male, London, April 2018

Interviewee 11: Research fellow, male, London, April 2018

Interviewee 12: Senior research fellow, female, London, April 2018

Chapter 9: Towards a Viable EU–Gulf Engagement: Qatari Perceptions of the EU and Its Policies in the Region

The rise of Qatar as an emerging power and an effective power-broker in the Middle East has carried the country beyond its sarcastic categorization as the small ‘oil well state’ of the Arabian Peninsula. Indeed, the small Emirate of the Persian Gulf sandwiched between the two regional rivals—Iran and Saudi Arabia—has extensively increased its power-projection capabilities in the past decade. Qatar has also been working to become more engaged with international powers and several institutions including the EU to become a significant actor in the Middle East and beyond.

Qatar’s relations with the EU have historically developed within the framework of the GCC, and Qatar has steadily forged dialogue with EU countries over constructive economic relations. As an important trading partner for European countries, Qatar’s relationship with the EU is expected to become further enhanced in the coming decades as it attempts to diversify its economy beyond its gas reserves. Relations are expected to improve as a consequence of the EU’s position in the Gulf crisis, while Qatar is an important player in a possible security architecture in the region.

This chapter aims to reflect the perceptions of the local elites in Qatar regarding the EU in general, and its policies in the MENA and the Mediterranean region. In view of this objective, the chapter introduces the argument that the EU is not perceived as a power that could offer security guarantees to its neighbourhood including the Mediterranean. The Qatari perception at elite level also reflects the view that the countries settled around the Union’s ‘periphery’ prioritize socio-economic development more than security and defence when they deal with the EU, a trend also

relevant for Qatar. It should be noted that the local elites did not offer a broad perception on the Mediterranean issues, and focused on country-specific issues instead.

This chapter will investigate perceptions on the political, social, and economic problems that Qatar faces, as well as its geopolitical challenges, and will try to understand whether the EU is perceived as an influential stakeholder that can deal with these issues successfully. The chapter will also focus on the main policy areas for co-operation between the EU and Qatar, reflecting the local elites' ideas regarding the policy issues/areas in which the EU can be more effective.

The first section of the chapter offers a background analysis on Qatar in general, and sheds light on the country's relations with Europe. The second section is dedicated to analysis of the in-depth interviews conducted as part of the elite survey which seeks to reflect the elite discourse in Qatar towards the EU and its practices in the larger Mediterranean, including the Gulf, that would contribute in designing a future role for the Union as a 'responsive' actor.¹ Compiled in line with the survey design described in the Introduction, the data introduced and discussed in the second section is based on a fieldwork study conducted in Doha, Qatar in January 2018 (see Methodology). The chapter ends with a reflective conclusion with policy recommendations on the future of EU–Qatar relations as well as the EU's role in the Mediterranean, and particularly in the Gulf region.

1. Country profile of Qatar

1.1 *Demographics and country profile*

The emirate of Qatar has risen to regional and international prominence over the past twenty years, in large part because of its ambitions to become an economic power and fully integrated component of the

1 Daniela Huber and Maria Cristina Paciello, 'Bringing Social Justice and Human Rights Back In', in *MEDRESET Working Papers*, No. 11 (May 2018), <http://www.medreset.eu/?p=13540>.

international system as well as a key geopolitical actor. A country of roughly 2.5 million people (of which Qatari nationals are estimated to comprise 10 to percent),² since the 1973 oil boom Qatar has moved to import labour migrants in order to remedy shortages in the labour market, like other Gulf states. Indeed, the objective then, as it still is today, was to be less dependent on labour migrants by equipping Qatari nationals through investments in education and professional training.³ These efforts have yielded limited results and the country remains heavily dependent on immigrants, taking the country's population from less than 700,000 in 2003, to an estimated 2.5 million in 2016.

In the 1980s, Qatar's economy suffered as a result of the oil glut, leading to efforts by Qatari decision-makers to invest more heavily in natural gas. While Qatar has significant petroleum reserves—Qatar's proven oil reserves exceed 25 billion barrels, and its natural gas reserves are the world's third largest—it has significantly more gas, a natural resource that has historically been fraught with greater development challenges as its exportation required massive pipeline infrastructures. With the emergence of new technologies in the 1980s, the government decided to invest heavily in liquefied natural gas (LNG) and, thanks also to a partnership between state-owned Qatar Petroleum, ExxonMobil, and Total, Qatar became the world's largest LNG-exporting country from 2010 to 2015 and its wealth accordingly increased exponentially.⁴

2 The non-nationals comprise around 80 percent of the population, from countries including the Philippines, India, Nepal, Egypt, and Bangladesh. See the website of the Qatar Ministry of Development Planning and Statistics: *Monthly Figures on Total Population*, <https://www.mdps.gov.qa/en/statistics1/StatisticsSite/Pages/Population.aspx>. See also Jure Snoj, *Population of Qatar by Nationality: 2017 Report*, Priya Dsouza Communications, 7 February 2017, <http://priyadsouza.com/?p=54667>.

3 The first Qatari census, taken in 1970, put the indigenous population at 45,039. For Qatar's 2030 vision, see: Qatar's Ministry of Development Planning and Statistics, *Qatar National Vision 2030*, July 2008, <https://www.mdps.gov.qa/en/qnv1>.

4 Qatar remains the world's largest LNG-exporting country, accounting for around 28 percent of global trade by exporting 81 million tonnes in 2016. For more, see International Gas Union (IGU), *2018 World LNG Report*, June 2018, p. 7, https://www.igu.org/sites/default/files/node-document-field_file/IGU_LNG_2018_0.pdf.

While Qatar is heavily dependent on oil and gas, the ruling al-Thani family—which has governed the country since its independence from Britain in 1971—has placed investment emphasis on infrastructure, health care, and education, particularly since Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani came to power in 2013. After winning its bid to host the 2022 World Cup, the government expedited large infrastructure projects including roads, light rail transportation, a new port, stadiums, and other sporting facilities.⁵ International human rights organizations including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch criticized Qatar, drawing attention to the labour abuse and exploitation faced by the migrant labourers recruited to build and service World Cup stadiums in Qatar.⁶ Since oil and gas account for over 50 percent of government revenue, Qatar remains vulnerable to external shocks, including global energy demand and prices as well as geopolitical challenges emanating in a region that is fraught with political tumult and conflict.

1.2 Geopolitics

With its financial power, alliances with the West and proactive engagement with conflicts in the MENA region, the Gulf has assumed an unprecedented geopolitical role as states across the region have been weakened and many of the Gulf's historic rivals from Saddam Hussein—removed from power in 2003—to Muammar Gaddafi and Bashar al-Assad have either been ousted or suffered considerable decline.⁷

When the Arab uprisings erupted in 2011, Qatar found itself in a somewhat unique position where there was limited, if any prospect, of domestic economic and political grievances emerging at a time of immense upheaval for the region at large. What set Qatar apart in

5 Heritage Foundation website: *Index of Economic Freedom: Qatar*, <http://www.heritage.org/index/country/qatar>.

6 Amnesty International, *Qatar: Abuse of Migrant Workers Remains Widespread As World Cup Stadium Hosts First Match*, 18 May 2017, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/05/qatar-world-cup-stadium-first-match>.

7 Toby Matthiesen, 'Conservative Monarchies in a Transforming Region', in Valeria Talbot (ed.), *The Rising Gulf. The New Ambitions of the Gulf Monarchies*, Novi Ligure, Epoké, 2015, p. 26, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/node/13880>.

2011 from its Gulf neighbours was the absence of significant political demands among Qatari nationals: ‘Even in the outwardly similar extreme rentier case of the UAE, pockets of relative poverty and deprivation existed among the national population that could (and did) generate socio-economic discontent and political dissent.’⁸ Per capita levels of GDP among Qataris exceeded 440,000 dollars, thereby insulating Qatar from the unrest. Moreover, an annual Arab Youth Survey found that the proportion of Qatari respondents who ranked democracy as important more than halved from 68 percent in 2008 to just 33 percent in 2010, which contrasted with the polling in neighbouring UAE where the proportion of respondents who stated that democracy was important rose substantially, from 58 percent in 2008 to 75 percent in 2011.⁹

Political, economic, and social comfort at home positioned Qatar strongly as it moved to cement its status as a key regional actor amid the conflict and transitions unfolding in the region. Qatar positioned itself by taking a stand against the authoritarians of the region as they resisted domestic protests and unrest.¹⁰ Under Qatar’s presidency, the Arab League sanctioned the move to actively engage in the overthrow of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi. Such a decision presented Qatar and the League’s members with an opportunity to bridge the regional and international communities following the League’s largely passive role in previous international interventions.¹¹

In 2011, the Doha Debates—a forum to discuss major political issues in the region—commissioned an opinion poll of 1,000 people in 16 Arab states. The survey revealed that 75 percent of Arabs wanted to see Colonel Muammar Gaddafi forcibly removed from power.¹² However, while the Libya Operation and the Gulf’s subsequent efforts to overthrow

8 Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Arab Spring*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 104.

9 Ibid.

10 Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, ‘Qatar and the Arab Spring. Policy Drivers and Regional Implications’, in *Carnegie Papers*, September 2014, <http://carnegieendowment.org/publications/?fa=56723>.

11 Ibid.

12 The Doha Debates, *This House Believes Arabs, Not NATO, Should Be Dealing with Libya*, 18 April 2011, <https://archive.dohadebates.com/debates/item/index161b.html?d=103>.

the Assad regime may have provided the Arab world with a new lease on life, this actually was more about the power-shift among regional actors, with instability in Egypt and Syria permitting Saudi and Qatari dominance, than any renewed 'Arab' character in regional politics.¹³

Qatar's response was not simply due to its presidency of the League but was the result of a series of policy manoeuvres that predated the 2011 unrest. Since the 1990s, successive Qatari governments have aimed to strengthen the country's regional geopolitical standing. Its foreign policy has focused on mediation and conflict resolution. Doha assumed the role of mediator in almost every regional conflict: from Sudan to Eritrea, Lebanon to Palestine, and Somalia to Yemen.¹⁴ The decision to throw its weight behind Islamists after the 2011 uprisings also represented the culmination of longer-term developments.¹⁵ Qatar offered refuge to Islamists and political dissidents from across the Arab and Islamic world and established strong ties with the international Brotherhood movement as it welcomed members of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood fleeing persecution in Nasser's Egypt in the 1950s and 1960s and in Syria after Hafiz al-Assad's massacre of the group in Hama in 1982. As in other Gulf countries such as Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, many of the newcomers worked as teachers and civil servants and effectively shaped the political views of a generation of youth across the Gulf.¹⁶

In the immediate aftermath of the Arab uprisings, regional actors filled the vacuum and gambled on conflicted factions. The role of the

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- 13 Christopher Phillips, 'The Arabism Debate and the Arab Uprisings', in *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (2014), pp. 141-144.
- 14 Jamal Abdullah, 'Analysis: Qatar's Foreign Policy – The Old and the New', in *Al Jazeera*, 18 November 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/11/analysis-qatar-foreign-policy--2014111811274147727.html>; Sultan Barakat, 'Qatari Mediation: Between Ambition and Achievement', in *Brookings Doha Center Analysis Papers*, No. 12 (November 2014), <http://brook.gs/2bRAKqU>.
- 15 Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, 'The Rationale and Implications of Qatar's Intervention in Libya', in Dag Henriksen and Ann Karin Larssen (eds), *Political Rationale and International Consequences of the War in Libya*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 118-133.
- 16 Ibid. See also David B. Roberts, 'Qatar, the Ikhwan, and Transnational Relations in the Gulf', in 'Visions of Gulf Security', in *POMEPS Studies*, No. 7 (25 March 2014), pp. 22-26, <https://pomeps.org/?p=4644>.

Muslim Brotherhood emerged as a central focus as Qatar (and Turkey) identified Brotherhood factions as an opportunity to expand and consolidate their influence in the post-2011 transitions. Qatar appeared to gamble on the ascendancy of political Islam, subsequently triggering strong reactions from its Gulf neighbours in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, who view the Brotherhood as a threat. Qatar consequently found itself increasingly at odds with the two powerful Gulf countries in the years that followed the post-2011 conflicts.

The differences intensified in 2014 after Saudi Arabia and the UAE withdrew their ambassadors from Qatar. Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani agreed to demands related to Doha's alleged support for political Islam and the criticism of fellow GCC members regarding Al Jazeera, which was accused of broadcasting anti-Saudi programmes.¹⁷ Saudi King Salman, who ascended to the throne in 2015, sought to bring Qatar back into the fold in support of the kingdom's rivalry with Iran.¹⁸ The 2014 accord, however, proved to be inconclusive and in 2017, Qatar became embroiled in a fresh round of tensions with its Gulf neighbours, including Egypt, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain (the 'Quartet'), which imposed a land and air blockade and demanded that Qatar end its ties with Iran and Islamist organizations and close down media channel Al Jazeera, among ten other demands.¹⁹

Shortly thereafter, the impact of the blockade was eased when Qatar received support from Turkey and Iran. To reach a settlement in the Gulf crisis, Kuwait's Emir Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad also showed his commitment to mediate talks, while at the international level, the US and the EU joined the mediation efforts. The EU has played a mediating role in the crisis, with multiple European leaders shuttling between the Gulf countries to forge a resolution, and High Representative Federica Mogherini noting a 'clear risk of the situation escalating further and spreading in an unpleasant and dangerous manner beyond the region

17 Ian Black, 'Arab States Withdraw Ambassadors from Qatar in Protest at "Interference"', in *The Guardian*, 5 March 2014, <https://gu.com/p/3na3c>.

18 Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, 'Qatar and the Arab Spring. Policy Drivers and Regional Implications', cit.

19 'The 13 Demands on Qatar from Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the UAE and Egypt', in *The National*, 23 June 2017, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/1.93329>.

of the Gulf, be it in Africa, or in Southeast Asia or in the Middle East'. A significant proportion of EU–Gulf exports reach Qatar through the Saudi border and a number of EU companies operate directly or through joint ventures across the Gulf, many of which have been assigned major infrastructural or business projects. Europe has, therefore, firmly supported a peaceful mediation effort and has shown its support for the Kuwaiti diplomatic initiative.²⁰

Economically, Qatar could sustain the impact of the blockade but not indefinitely. By the end of July 2017, Doha had ploughed 40 billion of its 340 billion dollar sovereign wealth fund into local banks, while also selling off stakes in several foreign companies. Tourism has also been impacted, as has the number of passengers carried by the Qatari national airline, which dropped by 10 percent when the row unfolded. Although Turkey and Iran filled the import void, food and beverage prices climbed 4.5 percent in comparison to 2016. Qatar has approximately 340 billion dollars in reserves to address the negative impacts on its economy.

1.3 Overview of Qatar–EU relations

The EU and the GCC have been interacting since the early 1980s. The first joint ministerial meeting between the GCC and the EU's predecessor, the European Community, was held in 1985 and was followed by further rounds of negotiations. These led to the signing of a Co-operation Agreement on 15 June 1988, which was expected to provide 'a broad basis of cooperation on all aspects relevant to bilateral relations'.²¹ Yet, it is argued that the EU–GCC Co-operation Agreement reflected a European policy of promoting regionalism in international

20 Stasa Salacanian, 'Europe and the Gulf Crisis', in *Al Jazeera Center for Studies Reports*, 4 September 2017, <http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2017/09/europe-gulf-crisis-170904124324515.html>. See also Jon Gambrell, 'Qatar Says Kuwait Trying to Mediate Gulf Crisis with Arab Neighbours', in *The Star*, 6 June 2017, <https://www.thestar.com/news/world/2017/06/06/qatar-says-kuwait-trying-to-mediate-gulf-crisis-with-arab-neighbours.html>.

21 Giacomo Luciani and Tobias Schumacher, 'Relations between the European Union and the Gulf Cooperation Council States: Past Record and Promises for the Future', in *GRC Research Papers*, 2004, p. 26.

relations. This means that the EU has exclusively focused its efforts on a region-to-region basis, to the detriment of bilateral relations between the EU and the six Gulf countries.²²

However, the tangible goal of establishing a free trade agreement has never materialized. Indeed, scholars point out that the GCC falls on the periphery of the EU's external relations, despite more than twenty years of negotiations, which has been attributed to 'institutional, structural, material, and normative reasons'.²³ Nevertheless, free trade negotiations did pave the way for region-to-region co-operation and intensification of interactions on political and security issues.

Various attempts to revive the Co-operation Agreement have met with partial success; in 1995, an EU initiative looked to strengthen EU–GCC relations in terms of 'decentralized co-operation' and a regular political dialogue, but its results were limited. The free trade negotiations which were relaunched in 2002 on a more comprehensive basis have yet have to be concluded. At the 2004 joint council meeting it was agreed that both parties would refocus their activities on a limited number of areas, including the free trade area, business matters, and energy co-operation.²⁴

The limited EU–Gulf co-operation in the Mediterranean has been characterized by a lack of sufficient European policy instruments that can move beyond the donor–recipient relationship the EU has with other regions in the Arab world, such as North Africa and the Levant. New forms of financing and project management have yet to be established, while the Gulf itself has failed to embrace the potential of joint co-operation initiatives. The EU has concentrated its efforts on North Africa and the Middle East and not the Arabian Peninsula because of its geography. The Euro-Med dialogue, Barcelona Process, Neighbourhood Policy, and Union for the Med have all been designed as instruments to

22 Ibid.

23 Valentina Kostadinova, 'What is the Status of the EU-GCC Relationship?', in *GRC Gulf Papers*, 2013, p. 13, <http://www.css.ethz.ch/en/services/digital-library/publications/publication.html/167338>.

24 Steffen Hertog, 'EU-GCC Relations in the Era of the Second Oil Boom', in *CAP Working Papers*, December 2007, <https://www.cap-lmu.de/publikationen/2007/hertog.php>.

deal with the southern neighbourhood—an approach that has excluded the Gulf.

In 2003–2004, the EU declared its intention to link EU–GCC co-operation with its broader Euro-Mediterranean dialogue, but this idea was not implemented particularly vigorously. The EU’s 2004 ‘Strategic Partnership with the Mediterranean and the Middle East’ suggested that the EU would consider bilateral engagement with individual Gulf states wishing to co-operate on issues of reform. As of now, the Strategic Partnership largely remains a ‘hollow framework’ as EU states have different interests and priorities within the region.²⁵

The Gulf is the fifth-largest EU trading partner and an important destination for exports and investments. In 2014, trade between the EU and the Gulf reached 148 billion dollars, up from 100 billion dollars in 2010. The Gulf, as a whole, has experienced a boom in international prominence and assertiveness since the 2008 financial crisis and the 2011 unrest. The financial crisis saw the cash-rich Gulf countries acquire further inroads into the cash-poor economies of Europe, while also shaping and influencing events in the conflict-ridden countries of the region.

Qatar is the prime supplier of LNG to a number of European countries, particularly the UK and Italy,²⁶ and as demand rises over the coming decades, Qatar’s importance as an LNG trading partner will increase. The country is believed to have invested around 35 billion pounds in the UK. British exports of goods to Qatar rose from 1.31 billion pounds in 2013 to 2.13 billion pounds in 2016. Apart from property, Qatar is also a major shareholder in Barclays, injecting capital into the bank during the 2008 financial crisis and saving it from a government bailout.²⁷ Doha is a favoured location for UK military liaison and co-ordination activities in

25 Ibid, p. 5.

26 Howard Rogers, ‘Qatar LNG: New Trading Patterns But No Cause for Alarm’, in *Oxford Energy Comments*, June 2017, p. 2, <https://www.oxfordenergy.org/?p=30459>. See also Adam Vaughan, ‘Qatar Crisis Highlights Rising UK Energy Reliance on Imports’, in *The Guardian*, 8 June 2017, <https://gu.com/p/6tdzv>.

27 Ben Moshinsky, ‘The Crisis in Qatar Has Come at a Terrible Time for the UK’, in *Business Insider*, 12 June 2017, <https://www.businessinsider.nl/qatar-ik-economic-trade-ties-2017-6>.

the Gulf. Others such as France are also strongly aligned with the Gulf, with former President François Hollande becoming the first Western leader to attend a GCC leaders' summit. Qatar–EU ties have increasingly become focused around mutual security interests, including the sharing of intelligence, stabilization and reconstruction efforts in conflict-ridden countries within the MENA region, the war on IS and Qatar's capacity to host European military installations and personnel. Since the war on IS unfolded in 2014, the Gulf states have augmented their military capacity by purchasing arms from Europe and the US.

2. Elite Survey: Research findings on Qatar

2.1 *Methodology*

The findings introduced in this chapter are based on the elite survey, which was conducted with 12 respondents in Doha, Qatar in January 2018. The interviewees were chosen using the institutional network of the research team, and also based on the criteria provided in the conceptual framework set for the elite survey.²⁸ Although the research team tried to raise the number of interviewees, some potential respondents informed the team of their unavailability.

The in-depth interviews conducted for the elite survey involved respondents aged between 25 and 50, from different professional backgrounds including academics and researchers at universities, state officials, journalists, civil society organization representatives and economists. There were also expatriates among the interviewees (see Annex for the list of the interviewees).

The researchers attempted to maintain a balanced approach in terms of gender in the selection of interviewees; however, the lack of representation of women at the elite level was observed during the

28 See Zeynep Gülöz Bakır and Gülşah Dark, 'Review of Surveys on Euro-Mediterranean Relations...', cit.

interviews as well as during the fieldwork arrangements (see Annex). The research was however still able to compile data related to gender issues.

The fieldwork study was conducted by three experts at PODEM, including the author, and all interviewees were informed by email about the project concept before the actual interviews took place. The interviews were based on note-taking and none of the interviewees were recorded. Each interview took between 30 minutes and 1 hour and followed the structure and questions that were provided to the research team.

2.2 Perception on Qatar's relation with EU member states and the EU in general

One main finding retained from the interviews in Doha is the marked absence of a unified notion on the EU in general, which could be attributed to Qatar's engagement with the Union on a region-to-region basis within the framework of the GCC. On the other hand, a higher awareness on Qatar's relations with single member states, notably as the UK, was understood during the interviews, together with France and Germany, whose presence has recently become more visible.

From a historical standpoint, the UK is perceived as a key EU country for Qatar due to the dominant British influence in the country since it gained independence from the UK in 1971. It was in the 1990s that France also began to influence the tiny Arab emirate. A senior academic drew attention to the historic perspective of the British recognition of Qatar. The academic mentioned that all rulers in the region except those of Saudi Arabia came to power through a deal with the UK. In other words, the UK is seen a kind of 'big brother' to the rulers in the Gulf states, and this is also the case for Qatar.²⁹ The respondents further pointed to the fact that a majority of Qatari senior officials received education in the UK.³⁰ At an economic level, Qatar is seen as closer to the UK than to the EU per se.

29 Interviewee 4: Senior academic, male, Doha, January 2018.

30 The UK is also a popular education destination for students from Qatar. See 'Over 3,000 students from Qatar studying in the UK', in *The Peninsula*, 12 March 2018, <https://thepeninsulaqatar.com/article/12/03/2018/Over-3,000-students-from-Qatar-studying-in-UK>.

Following the UK, France is the EU member state most frequently mentioned by the local elites. According to the same academic, France fully supports its business relations with Qatar, giving more priority to them than to those with Saudi Arabia: ‘Economic co-operation also facilitates political co-operation. Total’s engagement with Qatar is significant. Although the privileges given to Total cause some problems, especially on the principles of competition, Total has the full support of the government.’³¹

Regarding economic relations with the EU states specifically, a research analyst at a think-tank put forward the view that Europeans know Qataris much more than Americans: ‘On the European elite side, they see Qatar as a reasonable partner. EU officials have good eyes for Qatar. UK and Germany (e.g., Deutsche Bank) have good economic relations with the country.’³² The domestic portfolio of Qatar Investment Authority (QIA) further demonstrates the presence of EU countries at an economic level: ‘The portfolio consists of listed foreign companies, real estate, domestic companies, safe haven assets and private equity. The safe haven assets, which are the largest part of the QIA portfolio, include treasury bonds from the UK and Germany.’³³

Foreign direct investments in the country are relatively small as Qatar has historically fuelled itself through its gas reserves and attracted LNG technology investments. European energy giants like Total and Shell have a strong presence in the country, and France and the UK are also active in the real estate sector. Qataris are also engaged in investments in Asia and interested in fast-growing markets. Following the US, Qatar’s investments in Turkey are the second highest of any country.³⁴

Qatar’s political relations with other EU countries are relatively more recent. As was pointed out by a Qatari diplomat, ‘Spain and Austria refused to open embassies in Qatar at first (and vice versa). In the early 2000s, Germany’s importance was understood.’³⁵

31 Interviewee 4: Senior academic, male, Doha, January 2018.

32 Interviewee 5: Economic research analyst, expatriate, male, Doha, January 2018.

33 Ibid.

34 Qatar’s investment in Turkey stands at 19 billion dollars, with more expected in the upcoming years.

35 Interviewee 1: Senior diplomat, male, Doha, January 2018.

It was further underlined that the progress with the EU as a whole is positive, although limited, because the EU has only recently been engaged with the country at the institutional level. In the words of the Qatari diplomat:

The Union [used to be] a potential role model for the Gulf. However, now there is the GCC crisis and the Union [has been] fragmented mainly because of the Brexit process. This is why it is hard to promote the EU as a role model to the region. The [current view] is that the perception toward the EU will be negatively affected when Brexit happens.³⁶

Certain scepticism is also levelled at the EU as its integrity is seen to be challenged by lack of coherence among the member states as well as growing internal problems. This is also why co-operation with the EU is seen to be more attractive to Qatar and its society at the economic, social, and cultural levels, rather than the political level.

The interviews at the elite level clearly demonstrate that the engagement between the EU and Qatar is slowly becoming more visible through occasional official talks and bilateral visits. However, it can be noted that not many Qatari officials at the foreign ministry have an in-depth knowledge of the EU institutional framework. According to an academic, the lack of human capacity at the ministry has become more apparent with the Gulf crisis. It was said that a new generation of diplomats is coming but currently there is a lack of skilled personnel who can build ties with the West and the EU in moments of crisis.³⁷ Furthermore, because the EU's relations with Qatar are largely based on economic exchanges, the EU is not viewed as a potential source of support against concrete security challenges.

It was further stressed that the country's principal expectations from the EU are firstly the establishment of a free trade area and secondly visa liberalization for Qatari citizens, as noted by the Qatari diplomat during the interviews.³⁸

36 Ibid.

37 Interviewee 4: Senior academic, male, Doha, January 2018.

38 Interviewee 1: Senior diplomat, male, Doha, January 2018.

2.3 *Gulf crisis: Implications, actors, and the role of the EU*

There was a common perception among the interviewees on the increasing mutual interest between the EU and Qatar following the Gulf crisis. An academic argued that the Gulf crisis created a sudden realization in Qatar of the importance of international affairs including relations with the EU, the Iran nuclear deal and so on: ‘The Gulf crisis was a wake-up call’.³⁹ The crisis is also said to have raised the EU’s interest in Qatar, which was previously more superficial.

Asked about the implications of and reactions to the diplomatic rift, several responses were generated during the interviews concerning the regional and international levels, while highlighting the role of each actor on the ground.

At the international level, the EU’s mediation efforts were appreciated, as the respondents pointed to EU High Representative Federica Mogherini’s nuanced stance and call for swift direct talks between Qatar and its neighbours. ‘The Union adopted a neutral stance; there have been increased visits between both sides in the aftermath.’⁴⁰

It was further underlined by a senior think-tanker that at the onset of the crisis, the EU maintained a hesitant response, being unsure how to react. However, economic dynamics appear to have had a larger role in the EU’s decision as the country’s substantial gas reserves constitute an economic draw for the EU.⁴¹ The EU’s mediation efforts in the standoff as well as supporting statements by EU member states are seen as an opportunity in the progress of EU–Qatar relations. In the words of the senior think-tanker:

‘Germany stepped in early in the crisis, suggesting that the boycott was unacceptable and called the parties to end the crisis through a diplomatic solution. This was followed by Italy, again calling for a solution through diplomatic channels. Even Nordic countries now know more about Qatar and there is more room for co-ordination between Qatar and the EU.’⁴²

39 Interviewee 4: Senior academic, male, Doha, January 2018.

40 Interviewee 1: Senior diplomat, male, Doha, January 2018.

41 Interviewee 11: Director of a research institute, male, Doha, January 2018.

42 Ibid.

On the other side, another senior think-tanker remarked that the EU countries still tended to keep their relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE on a good footing during that time.⁴³ Nonetheless, Qatar was seen as having made wise diplomatic decisions, which attracted the respect of the international community.

The EU response was also compared to those of other actors. According to the interviewees, the reaction of the West towards the Gulf crisis had two sides, so there are varying views when considering the positions of the EU and the US, as put by another senior think-tanker:

‘The EU has appreciated Qatar’s efforts on ending the crisis. Qataris worried that the EU would side with the Saudis. By contrast, the US is a “mixed bag”. Driven by Saudi Arabia, the White House remained indifferent to the blockade, while the State and Defence Departments were much aware of the blockade’s significance and outcomes; and appreciated Qatar’s political stance.’⁴⁴

At the regional level, many of the interviewees frequently emphasized Turkey’s rapid involvement in the crisis, and its military presence, which abated the risk of other countries’ taking military action against Qatar. Turkey’s support is seen as a clear demonstration of loyalty and its commitment to Qatar’s security was described as strong and very telling. During the crisis, Turkey’s helpful role was highly appreciated, and its support was perceived as crucial to ease the Gulf crisis. It is apparent that a strategic partnership has grown between the two sides after the Arab Spring. Turkey is a prioritized regional partner, and the bilateral relations have had a positive impact on Turkey’s economy as well. A researcher mentioned that Turkey provides comfort for Qatar as an ally.⁴⁵

It was further implied during the interviews that the country’s independent foreign policy has deepened political confrontations and has made it impossible to return to a unity in the Gulf. A senior-think tanker argued that the future of the Gulf will be driven by the emergence of new alliances cutting across the traditional factions:

43 Interviewee 12: Academic, founding director of a research institute, male, Doha, January 2018.

44 Ibid.

45 Interviewee 2: Researcher, expatriate, male, Doha, January 2018.

‘Iraq and Turkey will take a big role on security. And if that happens, it will be good for Qatar. The GCC, which is dictated by Saudi Arabia, will probably dismantle; it may continue to exist but will not be functional.’⁴⁶

It is viewed that the US will continue to be an important power in the region: ‘The US may still have hegemonic influence within 15–20 years if Gulf countries including Qatar adopt a diversification strategy at the economic, diplomatic, and military levels.’⁴⁷

‘While continuing alliance with the US on one hand and having close relations with Turkey—especially on the security level—on the other hand, Qatar might find itself in a position as a potential bridge or mediator between the two. In case of a conflict between Turkey and the US, Qatar might help bridge the gap.’⁴⁸

As for Iran, the Qatari Emir is seen to have established a good dialogue with the country, also during the Gulf crisis, although the bilateral relations are not expected to lead to an alliance as seen with Turkey. ‘Iran is a big key player in the region. Qatar has to get along well with Iran. The relations with Iran will be considered from a pragmatic perspective. Iran is not a threat as a regime, for Qatar.’⁴⁹

Iran’s increasing role in the MENA region was mentioned several times during the interviews. A Qatari diplomat argued that Iran has mastered asymmetrical warfare tactics:

‘It is difficult to overcome Iran, yet it can be defeated by its own people. On the other side, Saudi Arabia assumes that they are powerful—more than their potential. There is high unemployment there. They are not integrated into the system of the international community, so they have nothing to lose.’⁵⁰

It is also underlined that Qatar does not want to get involved in a war with Iran, and tries to establish a good dialogue for a number of reasons: (1) It could lead to regional chaos like the Iraqi war. Also, certain internal factors such as Iran’s being prone to decentralization—more so than

46 Interviewee 11: Director of a research institute, male, Doha, January 2018.

47 Interviewee 4: Senior academic, male, Doha, January 2018.

48 Interviewee 6: Research analyst, male, Doha, January 2018.

49 Ibid.

50 Interviewee 1: Senior diplomat, male, Doha, January 2018.

Iraq—and its complex geography may add further challenges. (2) Qatar’s positive outlook for future relations with Iran. (3) Qatar is in favour of dialogue exchange as it has no national interest at stake.⁵¹

Moving on to the implications of the Gulf crisis, it was argued that Qatar was quite successful in turning a serious challenge into an opportunity: it improved societal solidarity, managed food security and adopted timely fiscal policies that prevented an economic crisis.⁵² Despite the good management of the crisis, the blockade has socially and economically affected Qataris largely due to the travel blockade. Still, ‘this is our second independence’, a Qatari journalist said.⁵³

Although the blockade is expected to continue at least another couple of years; it not seen as a threat but rather a chance for the country to diversify its economic and foreign relations including those with the EU:

‘The boycott [maybe] will be gone in 10 years and during this period; many close and diversified relationships could be developed at a diplomatic level. A set of complementary relations will be developed.’⁵⁴ ‘The EU did not lose its economic interest in the region, as defence and commercial deals continued in the aftermath of the crisis.’⁵⁵

The blockade has also led to a domestic momentum for institutional change, as the senior think-tanker further posited:

‘It has reinforced the dynamics in Qatar; offering a chance to review the trade relations, to become less committed to the GCC, and to develop collaboration with Turkey and Iran. These achievements should be sustainable; otherwise, if the crisis ends within a month or so, Qatar would be back to its pre-crisis status quo.’⁵⁶

Interviewees underlined that regional dynamics such as the Syrian conflict have also had an impact on the blockade. The blockade significantly increased Qatar’s investment in military equipment, yet a Qatari diplomat

51 Interviewee 12: Academic, founding director of a research institute, male, Doha, January 2018.

52 Interviewee 2: Researcher, expatriate, male, Doha, January 2018.

53 Interviewee 7: Editor-in-chief/journalist, male, Doha, January 2018.

54 Interviewee 11: Director of a research institute, male, Doha, January 2018.

55 Interviewee 4: Senior academic, male, Doha, January 2018.

56 Interviewee 11: Director of a research institute, male, Doha, January 2018.

highlighted how the weapons flow influences the feeling of security: ‘The idea of security is based on buying the most expensive weapons, however this does not make you powerful. This is true for the case in the Gulf.’⁵⁷

Finally, it was added that regional political dynamics will shape Qatar’s foreign policy in that there are many actors on the ground, and the foreign policies of the Gulf states are generally ad-hoc and not long-term.

2.4 Perceptions on Arab uprisings, political Islam, and relations with the Mediterranean

The elites in Qatar are inclined to analyse the regional developments as well as Qatar’s relations with external actors through the lens of the Gulf crisis. Since this has been a direct threat to the country’s survival, this tendency is warranted. Relations with the North African countries are no exception to this trend. In general, Qatar’s relations with Morocco and Tunisia are viewed as positive, though it is underlined that the Saudi influence is more visible in Morocco. Qatar’s large investments in Tunisia as well as in Jordan are a clear indicator of Qatar’s vision to become a key regional player, and its desire to develop its capabilities.

The fact that Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria did not show an anti-Qatar stance during the Gulf crisis is noted as positive:

‘There is political polarization/fragmentation in Tunisia, yet it is more or less stable compared to Libya, for example. Tunisians think they can deal with everyone. There are no major problems with North African countries; however, the inter-Arab dialogue is limited. Qatar’s view of Algeria takes its root from the two countries’ historical backgrounds. The relations with Morocco are also good, improving especially on an economic level. With Tunisia, there are disputes over the Muslim Brotherhood, however Qatar has continued to maintain diplomatic channels.’⁵⁸

In the broader Mediterranean region, Qatar appears to have economic interests, as indicated by a Qatari diplomat.⁵⁹ Qatar has certain investment

57 Interviewee 1: Senior diplomat, male, Doha, January 2018.

58 Interviewees 1, 11, and 12. See also Kheireddine Batache, ‘Morocco and Qatar to Strengthen Their Ties’, in *Ecomnews Med*, 14 March 2018, <https://goo.gl/5Er6Uz>.

59 Interviewee 1: Senior diplomat, male, Doha, January 2018.

plans targeting the Mediterranean region, which are currently on the table.⁶⁰ However, the regulatory barriers and the economic imbalances faced in the Mediterranean, especially in relation to Spain and Italy, are certainly challenges to overcome. The oil issue is seen to be another factor when the Mediterranean is at stake.

There is a general consensus that the elites in Qatar do not hold a favourable view of the EU response to the Arab uprisings. It was argued that the Union did not develop a specific policy during that time. There were different messages from different countries and the Union's response to the uprisings remained under the influence of EU member states rather than originating with the Union itself.⁶¹ Respondents highlighted the lack of a unified voice within the Union and its inability to address the varying expectations of Arab populations.

From the beginning of the Arab uprisings, Qatar adopted a policy of support for popular movements. In the Syrian conflict, Qatar had a similar reaction. Although relations with Bashar al-Assad had been unproblematic before the civil war broke out, Qatari officials swiftly began to adopt a policy of confrontation once it became clear that the regime would not follow a reform agenda but instead target the civilian population. Therefore, Qatar supported the opposition in Syria, initially in partnership with two other Gulf countries, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, as well as Turkey. Qatar was the first country to close its embassy in Damascus and took a strong position within the Arab League, which suspended Syria's membership in the organization.

It should be noted that Qatar was in close co-operation with Turkey in offering financial aid to the opposition in Syria. The two countries, having previously agreed on Egypt and Libya, continued their natural co-operation by supporting opposition groups in their

60 It is possible to trace the presence of Qatar in the Mediterranean at the economic level, such as by its investments in Spanish companies through the Qatari Investment Authority; as well as its financial support to Tunisia to strengthen its development. See 'Qatar Investment Authority Secures Majority Stake In IAG', in *The Corner*, 30 January 2015, <http://thecorner.eu/?p=43432>; and 'Qatar Emir Pledges \$1.25 Billion to Support Tunisia Economy', in *The Express Tribune*, 29 November 2016, <https://tribune.com.pk/?p=1248061>.

61 Interviewee 1: Senior diplomat, male, Doha, January 2018.

struggle against al-Assad. However, since Qatar was never a military power in this equation, the country's influence was relatively limited where all other regional actors including Iran, Turkey, or Russia were militarily present on the ground. That is why the elite actors in Qatar emphasize the important role Qatar could play in supporting Syria's reconstruction financially, but also indicate the potential that the frightening extent of corruption in the country could subvert Qatar's interest in that role.

Asked about Qatar's stance towards political Islam within the context of the Arab uprisings, respondents did not label the Qatari ideological view towards political Islam as a radical one, and they hinted at certain overlaps between Qatar and the EU on this particular issue.

It was underlined that Emir Tamim has not been ideologically committed to political Islam in the way previous Emirs had been. The liberal and pluralist rhetoric adopted in the country following the Gulf crisis is seen as a clear example of this ideological stance. According to some interviewees, Europe is also aware of this ideological positioning and shows sympathy toward Qatar. In this direction, the respondents further raised that there is no ideological commitment to the Muslim Brotherhood:

'Political Islam is an important subject matter in Arab politics, yet in Qatar, it is not a major strand of politics, but sympathy exists towards it, especially towards the Arab and Muslim world. It is not seen a threat to the domestic order, either.'⁶²

The same interviewee also noted that the EU has never declared the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization. Also, on Wahhabism, it tends not to be interpreted as missionary work as can be seen in Saudi Arabia:

'Qatar adopts more liberal attitudes and the country is more homogenous than Saudis'. The fact is that there are no real political or ethnic tensions in the country, which stems from the connectedness of the royal family.'⁶³

62 Interviewee 4: Senior academic, male, Doha, January 2018.

63 Interviewee 12: Academic, founding director of a research institute, male, Doha, January 2018.

2.5 Expectations for Qatar and its reform agenda

In Qatar, the culture of civil society is seen to be weak. Women's solidarity groups or other similar organizations are small and most of them are state-connected. However, following the blockade, it is argued that there have been improvements as some businessmen are beginning to engage and provide funding for civil society initiatives. The Emir's political attitudes after the crisis, including improvements on women's representation in political life, are also noted as quite positive: 'The Emir has appointed female members to the Shura Council. Qatar has also approved a draft property ownership law for foreigners'.⁶⁴ More reforms are also said to be on the way, as in 2019 Qatar will hold elections for the Shura Council for the first time in its history.

Interviewees argue that the current crisis can be an opportunity for internal reforms. At the domestic level, state institutions may become more efficient and sustainable with more effective state bureaucracy. The newly set up councils and ministries are mentioned as examples of positive democratization efforts. Notably, many citizens are state-employed and there is a proximity between the state and the public. Also, public occasions like marriages and funerals provide room for political participation.

'Doha gives some sort of more freedom of thought compared to other Gulf countries, where there is no place for free speech in politics; zero room for manoeuvre. Qatar is more open to civil society organization initiatives and investments in education and culture.'⁶⁵

In 2017, Qatar's ruling elites introduced a law giving protection to foreign labourers who work as maids, cooks, cleaners, and nannies.⁶⁶ This was a long-awaited reform demanded by several human rights groups. Another reform being undertaken is to end the *kafala* system that applies to the low-income migrant population. This legally-mandated

64 Ibid.

65 Interviewee 11: Director of a research institute, male, Doha, January 2018.

66 Qatar's new law on providing labour rights for domestic workers is a first in the GCC. See Noah Browning, 'Qatar Enacts Law to Protect Foreign Domestic Workers', in *Reuters*, 24 August 2017, <https://reut.rs/2g7NdgG>.

sponsorship system ties a foreign worker to a specific employer and does not allow that worker to freely change employers. Many migrant workers are trapped in slave-like conditions and are unable to leave when they do not receive their salary, since employers hold their passports and paperwork. However, these reform efforts at present are viewed as ineffective and superficial.⁶⁷

Immigration reforms are highly crucial for investment policies. Qatar attracts a large number of foreign construction workers and when they leave the country, there is a subsequent change of the population's composition. As stated by an economic research analyst, 'Here, there is a need to increase local population and through private/public investments, in order to attract Qataris living abroad to return their country.'⁶⁸ He argued that Qatar should open itself to foreign investments through constructive policies: '[Qatar] has to figure out how to guarantee private investments, because capital accumulation does not make sense unless you have functional economic strategies'.⁶⁹

Within its 2030 vision, Qatar opens up full company ownership to expatriate investors, a process that has been accelerated following the Gulf crisis. Qatar is also committed to improving the local business sector. An economist at a bank underlines that Qataris have realized the necessity to diversify the economic sectors in the country: 'However, the government should not put money into inefficient projects like agriculture; knowledge economy might make sense'.⁷⁰

There is also demand for reforms that advance women's rights in order to create positive societal change. In the words of the research analyst, 'Incentives for the empowerment of women should be redesigned. Women are more active in empowerment compared to men.'⁷¹ The research analyst also underlined the potential role women in Qatar can

67 For a detailed analysis of Qatar's reforms, see Human Rights Watch, *Qatar: Year of Crisis Spurred Rights Reforms*, 18 January 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/node/313109>.

68 Interviewee 5: Economic research analyst, expatriate, male, Doha, January 2018.

69 Ibid.

70 Interviewee 9: Acting head economist at a bank, expatriate, male, Doha, January 2018.

71 Interviewee 5: Economic research analyst, expatriate, male, Doha, January 2018.

play to develop local businesses. It is argued that in Qatar, there is ‘big business of big families’.⁷² However, if they want to be more efficient and attractive, they will need smaller local partners in the end: ‘Boosting SMEs is important to develop local businesses. Here, women should be encouraged [to join in business operations] as they have family networks, better knowledge of society, are active on social media and have the potential to operate SMEs’.⁷³

It is believed that the reform agenda in Qatar will develop the country’s relations with the West and especially with the European Union. Qatar plans to engage in strategic diplomacy as the country continues to develop its economy in the future. As it was put by a senior think-tanker: ‘Qatar has choices ahead of it and the choice part is that Qatar should differentiate itself from other Gulf countries—such as on diversity and human rights. Qatar should engage more at a global level.’⁷⁴

Conclusion

Qatar’s institutional relations with the EU have been historically limited as the Union has approached the Gulf region through the diplomatic mechanisms established with the GCC. The Gulf crisis demolished the GCC alliance, and as a result the EU as an institution has become almost invisible in Qatar. Nevertheless, Qatar has traditionally maintained bilateral relations with EU member states, primarily engaged with the UK and France and more recently with Germany. Even though Brexit has created some confusion and concerns regarding the future of the Union, Qatar is committed to develop socio-economic ties with the EU and its member states in the future.

The blockade on Qatar has had a direct impact on almost all the issues related to domestic and foreign policy. The country’s elites see this

72 Ibid.

73 Ibid.

74 Interviewee 11: Director of a research institute, male, Doha, January 2018.

traumatic situation as an opportunity for the country's future. First, Qatar has revised its existing alliances and replaced previous alliances such as the GCC mechanism with alternatives. Turkey represents one of the new alliances for Qatar as does Iran, which has always been a source of fear when the country was under Saudi influence. The US is still seen as the biggest security provider with no viable alternatives. Secondly, there is a reform agenda within the country that is characterized by a desire for increased pluralism and inclusivity. As the blockade continues, it is believed that Qatari ruling elites will introduce additional reforms that could make the country among the most liberal of the Arab monarchies.

The EU perception of Qatar is primarily based on a socio-economic agenda and the Union represents a source of attraction for the Qatari elites. The state expects visa-free travel for Qatari citizens who enjoy spending time in European capitals such as London and Paris. Despite that interest, there exists little knowledge of the EU or its institutions in Qatar's state bureaucracy. This stems mostly from the fact that Qatar has not been on the EU's foreign policy agenda since its relations with the country were conducted within the framework of the GCC. Now that the GCC has become almost obsolete, there is a need for the EU to develop a new approach toward the Arab monarchies in the Gulf, including Qatar.

The EU, like the rest of the world, was caught off guard by the suddenness of the Arab Spring. In Qatar, similar to other countries in MENA, there is consensus that the EU's response to this series of popular revolts was inadequate. Elites underline that the Union did not create a particular policy and its answer to the uprisings remained under the influence of single EU member states. The lack of a unified voice within the Union was seen as a clear demonstration of its inability to address the varying expectations of Arab people. That is why, politically speaking, the EU is mostly seen as a weak actor in a complicated neighbourhood. From now on, it is believed that the challenges facing Brussels require the implementation of a firm and determined common policy, which goes beyond the many divisions that floods of refugees arriving in Europe have exacerbated.

The Gulf region is passing through an existential crisis. There have always been ups and downs in the past, but the current crisis is unique mainly because the instability is of the Gulf's own making and secondly,

because people are generally quite pessimistic about a resolution in the near future. Elites in Qatar also share this view and underline that the Gulf crisis will not be resolved soon. As mentioned several times, Qatari ruling elites are trying to establish new alliances and design a more independent foreign policy in order to achieve the most benefit from this complex and difficult time. The EU does clearly represent a window of opportunity for Qatar as it tries to find new co-operation and trade channels that would make the country more autonomous, stable, and less vulnerable against the uncertainties of the Gulf region.

The latest co-operation arrangement signed in March 2018 between the European External Action Service and the Qatari Ministry of Foreign Affairs is a clear indication of Qatar's new agenda of enhancing bilateral relations with the Union around areas of common interest. It is hoped that this arrangement will serve as the basis for greater political dialogue and intensified co-operation on specific areas of mutual interest, especially private sector development and research and innovation. In addition to these key areas of interest for Qatar, both sides can also co-operate in counterterrorism efforts as well as numerous regional issues, including the war in Syria, the Middle East Peace Process, Libya, and Iran.

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Annex: List of Interviewees

- Interviewee 1: Senior diplomat, male, Doha, January 2018
- Interviewee 2: Researcher, expatriate, male, Doha, January 2018
- Interviewee 3: Research director, female, Doha, January 2018
- Interviewee 4: Senior academic, male, Doha, January 2018
- Interviewee 5: Economic research analyst, expatriate, male, Doha, January 2018
- Interviewee 6: Research analyst, male, Doha, January 2018
- Interviewee 7: Editor-in-chief/journalist, male, Doha, January 2018
- Interviewee 8: Think-tank member, male, Doha, January 2018
- Interviewee 9: Acting head economist at a bank, expatriate, male, Doha, January 2018

Interviewee 10: Economist at a bank, male, Doha, January 2018

Interviewee 11: Director of a research institute, male, Doha, January 2018

Interviewee 12: Academic, founding director of a research institute, male, Doha, January 2018

Conclusions¹

The research presented in this edited book takes as its starting point the assumption that ‘stakeholders, policy instruments and policy issues have been defined from a European standpoint, marginalizing the perspectives and needs of local states and people, and ignoring the role played by new and powerful regional and global actors’.²

In this sense, the Elite Survey was undertaken to address a series of issues related to Euro-Mediterranean policies, which have previously been characterized by a Eurocentric approach and based on a narrow geopolitical construction of the Mediterranean.

Despite the limitations mentioned in the earlier sections, the research offers valuable insights on how the portrayal of the Mediterranean among local stakeholders has its own consistencies and contradictions, and how the perception of the region has become visibly entangled with the current geopolitical developments. Furthermore, and notwithstanding the limited sample, the research illustrates the shortcomings faced by the EU in the implementation of its Neighbourhood Policy and how this is assessed by the stakeholders, and the areas where the EU could show its efficacy as an international actor.

It would be possible to recap the main findings as discussed below with take-away policy recommendations for the EU:

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- 1 This section is a revised version of a European Policy Brief prepared for the MEDRESET project, and includes parts from a MEDRESET policy report authored by Gülşah Dark. See MEDRESET Project, ‘Elite Survey: How Local Elites Perceive the EU and its Policies in the Mediterranean’, in *European Policy Briefs*, December 2018, <http://www.medreset.eu/?p=13741>; Gülşah Dark, ‘The EU Seen from the Outside: Local Elite Perceptions on the Role and Effectiveness of the EU in the Mediterranean Region’, in *MEDRESET Policy Papers*, No. 5 (November 2018), <http://www.medreset.eu/?p=13672>.
 - 2 Daniela Huber and Maria Cristina Paciello, ‘MEDRESET: A Comprehensive, Integrated, and Bottom-up Approach’, in *MEDRESET Methodology and Concept Papers*, No. 1 (June 2016), p. 2, <http://www.medreset.eu/?p=13169>.

1. Perception of the EU as an international actor

In the Elite Survey countries, there is consensus that the EU's collective role in the Mediterranean is overshadowed by the policies and interests of its individual member states. The EU is often viewed as a 'soft power practitioner', 'trade partner', and 'development/funding agency'.

In Lebanon, Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia, the findings demonstrate familiarity with the EU as an institution. Across the elite surveys conducted in these four countries, there was an overwhelming consensus that the EU's rhetoric of promoting normative values abroad in previous Mediterranean policies was not fully realized due to structural constraints within each country. These constraints include authoritarian rule, corruption, lack of governance, and also infrastructure. The stakeholders in these countries expressed that the Union is seen as an important ally and understand the benefits which increased relations with the EU could have for economic growth, institutional building, educational, and health systems. The fieldwork results indicate a desire for partnerships with the EU that entail knowledge exchange in these areas. Furthermore, the EU is perceived by the respondents to be shifting from its international role as a normative institution to a realistic actor whose discourse and policies increasingly focus on security and migration.

For Iran, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, which are not traditionally a part of the Euro–Mediterranean policies, the fieldwork data showed that more emphasis is given to relationships with specific member states than with the EU as an institution. The term and concept of the Mediterranean as a region is comparatively low in each of Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar's discourses. Rather, their emphasis, as indicated in their discourses respectively, rests on interactions with certain Muslim and/or Arab countries in the broader Mediterranean (e.g. GCC countries). These countries view the EU as a 'soft power' on the international stage that could provide economic benefit through increased trade and business relationships. Respondents also noted that the EU was often perceived as secondary to the US in terms of regional influence. A good example would be Saudi Arabia, whose strongest ally is the US; and the Kingdom

is seen to maintain bilateral relations only with specific EU member-states, while being indifferent to the EU's conceptualization of the 'Mediterranean'. However, in putting more focus on its relations with the West, Saudi Arabia has begun to seek closer diplomatic and economic ties to the EU. The findings suggest that bilateral relations with the EU are perceived to be relatively recent in these three countries and that the EU is seen to have an opportunity to develop effective policies with Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Iran.

On the other side, the EU is perceived as a strategic ally to Israel; however, there is a frustration with the EU's political institutions due to the political disagreements with Israel over the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and Israel's violation of international law in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. The Israeli stakeholders also noted their frustration at the disconnect between the EU and its member states at the bureaucratic, functional level.

Turkey is geographically connected to Europe, and its relationship with the EU is defined by periods of political and economic integration as well as frictions affecting the level of bilateral interaction on both sides. Among the Mediterranean countries included in the Elite Survey, Turkey is the only country to gain EU candidate status, which it first attained in 1999. However, as reiterated by the interviewees, the accession negotiations have repeatedly been stalled, leading to a rise of Euro-sceptic sentiments among the public and a gradual decrease of EU leverage. On the official discourse, the EU is still seen as a key partner and the EU–Turkish relations have been more defined by migration and security issues against the backdrop of regional conflicts—most notably the Syrian war in the recent years—and a focus on shared challenges to scale up partnership.

2. Conceptualization of the Mediterranean and how the EU is seen to address changing geopolitical dynamics

Across the nine countries in which the fieldwork was conducted, the conceptualization of the Mediterranean in the narratives of the stakeholders reveal a ‘fragmented representation’ as the region is described highly ‘heterogeneous’ in its political, social, and economic alignments.

On one hand, the portrayal of the Mediterranean is intertwined with the changing geopolitical dynamics for countries such as Lebanon, Turkey, and Egypt, which perceive the region as a conflict-ridden territory that lies at the intersection of migration and trade/energy. On the other hand, the narratives of Moroccan and Tunisian stakeholders, while discussing the Mediterranean, further emphasize the EU’s potential contribution in their vision of a ‘united Maghreb’ in the region.

As for Israel, the country’s engagement with the Mediterranean generally continues in the commercialization of natural gas discoveries, discounting the region from its priority areas of concern. Furthermore, the findings demonstrate that Qatar, Iran, and Saudi Arabia do not hold a broader conceptualization of the Mediterranean, and therefore, give the GCC countries special consideration in their regional framing.

When asked about the region’s most pressuring geopolitical challenges, the stakeholders highlighted *regional security, continuance of conflicts, migration, refugee issue, and economic/social imbalances* in their responses. The Elite Survey also touched upon the EU’s function in the region in relation to the geopolitical developments:

- (1) *Response to the Arab uprisings*: The EU’s response to and involvement in the Arab uprisings was viewed negatively by a great majority of the stakeholders in the Mediterranean. The respondents generally expressed the sentiment that despite having the opportunity, the Union did not promote democracy, human rights, rule of law, and respect for human dignity, adding that many political transitions in the region have yet to realize these values.

- (2) *Agenda on security*: The perception of the EU's security policies and response to the migration crisis was intensely negative. Many Elite Survey responses noted the EU's increased emphasis on border control, stability, and migration deterrence. It was stated that the rhetoric used by the EU has not always translated into its policies, and further, can be discordant with the EU's recent migration and security efforts. According to the respondents, the ideological direction of the Union's policies towards the region is increasingly embracing a 'securitizing' nature.
- (3) *Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action*: As understood from the research findings, despite the US withdrawal, the multilateral diplomacy that facilitated the Iran nuclear deal was appreciated by various stakeholders including those in Iran. The EU's instrumental role in the diplomacy dialogue for the implementation of the JCPOA is perceived to have increased its political leverage as an international actor. On the other side, being apprehensive about Iran's regional goals, Saudi Arabia sees the EU's efforts and the JCPOA as a destabilizing factor, especially for the Middle East.
- (4) *Gulf crisis*: The diplomatic move of the Arab quartet—Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt—has left Qatar partially isolated in its economic, political, and cultural relations with its immediate neighbourhoods since 2017 and the region is now perceived to witness the emergence of 'new alliances cutting across the traditional factions'. In that regard, the diplomatic hyperactivity of Qatar with the West—including the EU states—during this period was viewed as an opportunity for both sides to deepen the historically limited bilateral relations and enhance the economic partnership.
- (5) *Israeli-Palestinian issue*: For the Israeli stakeholders, the EU's persistence on the two-state solution creates a deadlock, as the termination of the conflict is believed to necessitate a new diplomatic initiative. Israel appreciates the EU's monetary assistance to Gaza and the West Bank, while noting that the Union should use its institutional power to bring Palestinians to the table and become a 'player' not 'payer'.

- (6) *Syrian conflict*: Undoubtedly, the Syrian war was described by almost all stakeholders as a major factor driving instability and insecurity in the entire region. The conflict has a distinct place in the responses of the stakeholders from Turkey and Lebanon, two countries heavily affected by the unabated conflict and the accompanying refugee influx. According to the interlocutors in Turkey, the Union was not counted among the regional players like the US or Russia and its diplomatic absence was underlined.

3. On EU instruments in the area of civil society, democracy assistance, and economic development

The Elite Survey further explored how local stakeholders evaluated the EU initiatives that aim to foster the advancement of the civil society sector, democracy, and economic development in the Mediterranean.

While the EU efforts in the area of civil society were overall appreciated by the interviewed stakeholders, a good majority pointed the Union's 'technocratizing' and 'selective' approach in its working relations with CSOs, criticizing that the EU treats CSOs as service agents and not change-makers in their respective societies.

With respect to the EU's democracy assistance to its southern neighbourhood, the EU's promotion of normative values is not always seen as being coherent with domestic needs or interests of the societies in the region. The Union was said to export its own model of democracy to a region that should instead be addressed with a human rights and democracy-promotion strategy that takes into account the local contexts and actors. Furthermore, of the countries already included in the Euro-Mediterranean policies, the Elite Survey results revealed a common sentiment of the EU's regional goals and policies not being fully realized.

It is further worth noting that the stakeholders in the Mediterranean listed the informal economy, social polarization, youth unemployment, as well as regional disparities and lack of good governance among the top priority socio-economic challenges. There is an expectation of the

EU to put particular focus on these issues in their regional development agenda, adding that the Union should also pay more attention to the Mediterranean countries in trade negotiations by simplifying bureaucratic procedures as much as possible.

As far as the EU substance is concerned on gender, especially in the countries of Lebanon, Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia, the EU enjoys a good reputation regarding its leverage on the promotion of gender equality, albeit with certain expectations. In Lebanon, the respondents pointed to a lack of general human rights, including gender rights, with the expectation that the EU should impose more leverage over the government to better facilitate gender reforms, while emphasizing their concern on LGBT rights and the status of migrant workers. On the other side, Moroccan elites expressed their appreciation for the EU's efforts through civil society against the discriminatory laws and violence against women.

4. Policy implications and recommendations

Main takeaways:

- The EU should work towards a single comprehensive European approach to the Mediterranean. This comprehensive approach should serve as an umbrella under which member state relations with Mediterranean states are conducted. Member state policies can align themselves within this EU policy umbrella to complement and strengthen overarching policy goals in the Mediterranean region.
- While the EU has well-established economic and political relations with countries such as Turkey, Tunisia, Morocco, Israel, Lebanon, and Egypt, it has the opportunity to define new, clear-cut policies with Iran, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. The Union is expected to build a regional policy in the MENA region that fosters regional security with the aim of improving intra-regional relations in the EU's expanded neighbourhood and resolving political disputes throughout the region.

- In terms of its current security policies, the EU can work to shift its rhetoric to one that disentangles migration from security. The Elite Survey respondents discussed the need for international mediation to resolve political disputes throughout the region, and additional support to combat growing terrorist threats. However, they believe that immigration, while perceived by Europe as a security threat, is not merely a security issue, but a global crisis that requires economic, political, and humanitarian solutions. Elites urged the EU to provide additional aid to support refugee populations and expressed hope for the Union to adjust its policies to provide economic, diplomatic, and political incentives to governments, businesses, and civil society groups that support refugee and immigrant populations in the Mediterranean.
- The Elite Survey respondents across the Mediterranean expressed the desire for aid policy reform, as they see the existing EU aid policies as Eurocentric and ineffective within their Mediterranean country-specific context. The EU is perceived to imitate its own practices in its Mediterranean policies without fully considering the needs and expectations of the societies there.
- Development is a key term. The EU is expected to give more attention to green energy investments, water conservation, waste management, and agriculture technologies in its development agenda especially when targeting Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, and Lebanon.
- The EU is also expected to engage more with the local population in formulating its gender policies for the Mediterranean countries. The Union should improve its leverage over the governments to better facilitate gender reforms, including the status of migrant women.
- The EU should ease bureaucratic/technical difficulties for civil society exchanges with the Mediterranean countries. The Union is expected to act more inclusively towards civil society groups and to be open to knowledge exchange for their improvement.
- Strengthening institutional mechanisms and promoting good governance, accountability, and transparency are the areas where the EU can provide support in the region.

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