



POLICY PAPER

How Can the EU Overcome Its Absence from the Middle East?

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Background

The European Union is missing from the Middle East. Politically and diplomatically. Regarding the multifaceted struggles of the Syrian conflict, and the same goes for Libya and Yemen, the EU is absent. Between Israel, Palestine and the Middle East process, European support for the peace process range from barely impactful to not-at-all. Lastly, in countries plagued by chronic instability, such as Lebanon or Iraq, there also, the EU does not seem to have any weight.

While the EU's concern for all these countries and their struggles remains high, its absence remains highly baffling. Would these issues be located far from Europe, the EU's absence, albeit troubling for such an actor and the values it embodies, could be 'understood'. However, this is not the case. The Middle East lies at the European borders and its woes, even if we bury our heads into the sands, deeply and invariably impact the EU, its member states and its people.

Besides, the EU's impotence does not only impact it in the short term, such as exemplified by terrorism or waves of refugees but indirect, less visible, long term ramifications. Indeed, as a region of prime interest for Europe, the EU's absence only prompted third parties, such as Russia,¹ Turkey², Iran³ and China⁴ among others, to tighten their grip and cement their influence on the Middle East.

For example, Russia has been looking to increase its engagement in Iran⁵, while it already has got plenty on Syria⁶ and is making serious gains in Libya⁷. Regarding China, as one the biggest trading partner for countries of the region, Beijing represents a serious counterweight to Washington's withdrawal of the Middle East⁸ and pressure campaign against Iran⁹. Within the region, Iran's influence has not ceased to increase, especially within the so-called 'Shia Crescent' mainly fuelled by its 'wars by proxy'¹⁰. Lastly, in recent years, Turkey has also sought to increase its influence within its neighbourhood and did so with success¹¹. In the middle of all of this, where does the EU stand, why is it such a marginal actor and how could it reinforce its position?

¹ Cerulli, R. (2019). Russian Influence in the Middle East: Economics, Energy, and Soft Power. *American Security project* (2019). Retrieved from the URL:

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep19825.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3Afee9e4d45b26313686e9a83c390be603>

² Benli Altunışık, M. (2020). The New Turn in Turkey's Foreign policy in the Middle East: Regional and Domestic Insecurities. *IAI PAPERS 2020*. Retrieved from the URL: <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaip2017.pdf>

³ Collective. (2020). Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East. *IISS*. Retrieved from the URL: <https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-dossiers/iran-dossier>

⁴ Freymann, E. (2021). Influence without Entanglement in the Middle East. *Foreign Policy*. Retrieved from the URL: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/02/25/influence-without-entanglement-in-the-middle-east/>

⁵ Dejaiffe, F. (2021). How Should the EU Re-Engage with Tehran in the Face of Russia-Iran Entente?. *Vocal Europe*. Retrieved from the URL: <https://www.vocaleurope.eu/wp-content/uploads/How-Should-the-EU-Re-Engage-with-Tehran-in-the-Face-of-the-Russia-Iran-Entente.pdf>

⁶ Kodmani, B. (2020). The Path Through Moscow. *European council on foreign relations (ECFR)*. Retrieved from the URL: https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_the_path_through_moscow_how_europe_can_help_syria/

⁷ Arnold T., D. (2020) Exploiting CHaos: Russia in Libya. *CSIS*. Retrieved from the URL: <https://www.csis.org/blogs/post-soviet-post/exploiting-chaos-russia-libya>

⁸ Freymann, E. (2020). Op. Cit.

⁹ WSJ Editorial board. (2021). The China-Iran Axis. *WSJ*. Retrieved from the URL: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-china-iran-axis-11617059716>

¹⁰ Jones, S., G. (2019). War by Proxy: Iran's Growing Footprint in the Middle East. *CSIS*; Retrieved from the URL: <https://www.csis.org/war-by-proxy>

¹¹ n.a. (2020). Turkey is wielding influence all over the Arab world. *The Economist*. Retrieved from the URL: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/western-europemediterranean/turkey/turkey-and-middle-east-ambitions-and-constraints>

Current state of play

The concept of “EU’s absence” in the region is something that we first have to define. Of course, the EU is not diplomatically absent from the Middle East region as it benefits from a delegation in nearly every country of the region. The EU is neither politically absent as shown by the hundreds of visits and declarations made by EU officials in and about the region. Within the realm of engagement, the EU is also largely present, as the deployment of sanctions, foreign operations and assistance bear witness.¹² Therefore, what we mean by the “EU’s absence from the Middle East” is the lack of influence the bloc holds on the region and its, seemingly, incapacity to positively affect the region. Thus, if the EU is well and truly present, it scarcely seems more than a simple bystander.

Political engagement in the Middle East

It does not make any doubt that the Middle East is a particularly turbulent region and far from being easy to deal with. Whether on the political or diplomatic level, no single country has been able, by itself, to successfully influence its development and any political processes, stabilization efforts or ceasefire settlements have always been the result of collective efforts¹³. According to H.E. Ambassador Maria Hadjitheodosiou, even if the EU is not the most vocal actor in the region, it makes no doubt that it has a footprint and has been involved in positive developments in every country in the neighbourhood¹⁴. However, while Europeans are well and truly present, the EU fails to positively impact the region and its development for itself and in a way that would, *in fine*, benefit the region and its partners in the long term.

Syria and Libya

At the EU’s border, both Syria and Libya represent ongoing high-intensity conflicts. Despite Brussels’ many efforts to limit their developments and foster various peace processes, it does not seem that these attempts amount to much. This is deeply troubling as both conflicts continue to have negative consequences on the EU and its member states.

In Syria, despite the hardline taken by European policymakers (restrictive measures against the regime, strong political support for the opposition)¹⁵, the EU has not been able to reach its objectives¹⁶. Furthermore, its lack of credible involvement *vis-à-vis* the crisis’ resolution has left Brussels at the margin of relevancy¹⁷, pushed aside by bigger players such as Russia, Turkey and Iran, despite Europe being one the most hurt regions by the conflict and the biggest donor of aid.

In Libya, despite the launch of the maritime mission (Operation Iridi) early in 2020, and following the previous five-year-long Operation Sophia (2015-2020), the EU is also on the brink of irrelevance. Plagued by internal opposition between member states (France versus Italy) and the growing

¹² Lehne, S. & Siccardi, F. (2020). Where in the World Is the EU now?. *Carnegie Europe*. Retrieved from the URL: <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2020/04/29/where-in-world-is-eu-now-pub-81658>

¹³ Interview with H.E. Ambassador Maria Hadjitheodosiou, May 19th, 2021, Amman.

¹⁴ Interview with H.E. Ambassador Maria Hadjitheodosiou, May 19th, 2021, Amman.

¹⁵ European Commission. (2017) JOINT COMMUNICATION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND THE COUNCIL. Elements for an EU Strategy for Syria. Retrieved from the URL: <https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/celex3a52017jc00113aen3atxt.pdf>

¹⁶ Fève, B. (2021) Why It is the Right Time for the EU to Renew Its Strategy for Syria. *Vocal Europe*. Retrieved from the URL: <https://www.vocaleurope.eu/wp-content/uploads/Why-It-is-the-Right-Time-for-the-EU-to-Renew-Its-Strategy-for-Syria.pdf>

¹⁷ Théron, J. & Kawakibi, S. (2019). Les Européens et le conflit syrien : un bilan contrasté. *Centre Arab de Recherches & d’Études Politiques, Paris*. Retrieved from the URL: <https://www.carep-paris.org/publications/axes-de-recherche/les-europeens-et-le-conflit-syrien-un-bilan-contraste/>

engagement of foreign actors (Russia, Turkey), the EU's efforts, mainly funnelled through Germany's initiatives (Berlin Libya Conference), have mostly been non-impactful¹⁸.

Middle East Peace Process

The EU's position towards the Middle East Peace Process (MEPP) remains the one of a two-state solution and denunciation of the Israeli settlements in occupied Palestinian territory¹⁹. Through time, member states have always maintained a common view on this issue which allowed the EU to become an actor of the MEPP. Indeed, the EU is part of the "Middle East Quartet" alongside the United Nations, the United States and Russia. However, and despite their efforts, the EU's and the Quartet's record remains unimpressive²⁰.

But, the past year, the EU's rather common position *vis-à-vis* the MEPP was threatened by former President Donald Trump's 'deal of the century'. Despite the EU's firm opposition to the 'deal' it was met by the support of some member states²¹, thereby undermining the credibility or effectiveness of future EU actions²². This could prove particularly important as the Quartet has the intention of reviving the peace talks between Israelis and Palestinians²³. In addition, in the recent conflict between Israel and Hamas, the EU's diplomatic efforts were not met with any particular success.

Lebanon and Iraq

In Brussels, the situation in both Lebanon and Iraq is something that is not talked about as much as it should. As both countries face precarious threats on the economic, social and political fronts. These threats, albeit caused by different reasons in each country, could cause their collapse which would seriously threaten the EU.

Lebanon has never been as close to a total collapse as in the recent months and this despite the EU's intensive and continued support to the Lebanese political, economic and social sectors²⁴. However, as Lebanon's stabilization and overall well-being is of prime interest for the region and its neighbourhood, the EU has scarcely increased its involvement in the country as it seems to have delegated this responsibility to France. But France cannot do this alone, as it called on the EU's greater involvement in helping Lebanon²⁵.

In Iraq too, popular protests showed that the situation within the country remains deeply unstable, as it continues to struggle on the political and economic fronts. But there also, while the EU remains present, supporting the country in various areas²⁶ and spending billions in humanitarian and non-

¹⁸ Megerisi, T. (2021). Spoiler alert: How Europe can save diplomacy in Libya. *European council on foreign relations (ECFR)*. Retrieved from the URL: <https://ecfr.eu/publication/spoiler-alert-how-europe-can-save-diplomacy-in-libya/>

¹⁹ EEAS. (2021). Middle East Peace Process. *European External Action Service*. Retrieved from URL: https://eeas.europa.eu/diplomatic-network/middle-east-peace-process/337/middle-east-peace-process_en

²⁰ Elgindy, K. (2012). THE MIDDLE EAST QUARTET: A Post-Mortem. *The Saban center for Middle East policy at BROOKINGS*. Retrieved from the URL: https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/02_middle_east_elgindy_b-1.pdf

²¹ Pace, M., Yacobi, H. (2020). Can the EU Stand Up to Trump's "Deal of the Century"? *Istituto Affari Internazionali*. Retrieved from the URL: <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaicom2010.pdf>

²² Interview with Dr. Jamal Al-Shalabi, April 20th, 2021, Amman.

²³ Reuters Staff. (2021). Mideast quartet discusses reviving 'meaningful' Israel, Palestinian peace talks. *Reuters*. Retrieved from URL: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-palestinians-un-idUSKBN2BF34B>

²⁴ n.a. (2021). Lebanon. *European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations*. Retrieved from the URL: https://ec.europa.eu/echo/where/middle-east/lebanon_en

²⁵ Reuters Staff. (2021). Europe must act as Lebanon collapses, France says. *Reuters*. Retrieved from the URL: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-crisis-eu-idUSKBN2BE0VD>

²⁶ Fusco, F. (2021). De-Securitising and Re-Prioritising EU-Iraq Relations. *Istituto Affari Internazionali*. <https://www.iai.it/en/publicazioni/de-securitising-and-re-prioritising-eu-iraq-relations>

humanitarian aid, it is overshadowed by both the United States and Iran. Also, what is troubling is that beyond the framework of security the EU still has not designed any specific strategy for Iraq²⁷.

Threats and Strategic Interests

The EU's Southern neighbourhood is a region of prime interest for Europeans, and especially in the realm of regional security and trade and economy²⁸. In recent years, crises in the Middle East have tended to spill over into Europe and have heightened EU security concerns, as witnessed by waves of refugees and acts of terrorism. Regarding trade and economy, countries of the Middle East represent for some European countries their biggest trading partners, and especially regarding arms sales energy. Besides security and trade, the EU has recently made the concept of 'strategic autonomy' the number one goal of "our generation"²⁹ as Europeans cannot continue to rely on foreign powers to heal their woes³⁰.

Economy and Trade

The geographic proximity between the EU and the Middle East makes trade between the two regions natural and one of the most important components of their relationship. Between 2014 and 2017, trade between the two regions amounted to €520 billion (\$637 billion) which represented around 21% of the Southern neighbours' trade with the world³¹. Within those exchanges, two types of products stand out: arms (EU countries represent the second largest exporter of arms to the Middle East³²) and energy (18% of EU petroleum imports come from the Middle East³³).

However, trade between the EU and the Middle East is fragile as geopolitical developments tend to impact it severely³⁴. For example, the withdrawal of the United States from the JCPOA agreement and the reimposition of sanction led to the division of EU imports from Iran by fourteen (€10 billion in 2017 against €680 million in 2019) and of exports to Iran by two and a half (€10,5 billion in 2017 against €4,398 in 2019)³⁵. Seeing as though 90% of EU imports are made of oil, any disruption poses impacts EU's independence *vis-à-vis* Russian imports and overall oil prices.

Regional Security and Stability

As a region of prime economic interests for the EU, its security, stability and prosperity are high priorities for the European policymakers. But in the last decade especially, the Middle East's security has been troubled by waves of refugee, the development of terrorism in a fostering environment and the spread of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), which have also troubled the EU and its member states.

²⁷ Jiyad, S. (2020). Torn between two allies: How Europeans can reduce Iraqi dependence on Iran and the US. *European council on foreign relations (ECFR)*. Retrieved from the URL:

https://ecfr.eu/publication/torn_between_two_allies_europeans_can_reduce_iraqi_dependence_on_iran_us/

²⁸ Interview with H.E. Ambassador Maria Hadjitheodosiou, May 19th, 2021, Amman.

²⁹ EU Debates | eudebates.tv. (2020). Charles Michel: European strategic autonomy is goal number one for our generation. Retrieved from the URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7D0bn_NOasM

³⁰ Tocci, N. (2021). European Strategic Autonomy: What It Is, Why We Need It, How to Achieve It. *Istituto Affari Internazionale*. Retrieved from the URL: <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/9788893681780.pdf>

³¹ ECFR MENA Programme. (2019). Mapping European Leverage in the MENA Region. *European council on foreign relations (ECFR)*. Retrieved from the URL: https://ecfr.eu/special/mapping_eu_leverage_mena

³² Wezman, P., D., Fleurant, A., Kuimova, A., Lopes Da Silva, D., Tian, N. & Wezeman S., T. (2020). Trends in international arms transfers, 2019. *SIPRI Fact Sheet*. Retrieved from the URL: https://sipri.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/fs_2003_at_2019.pdf

³³ Eurostat (2020). EU imports of energy products - recent developments. *Eurostat Statistics Explained*. Retrieved from the URL: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=EU_imports_of_energy_products_-_recent_developments&oldid=512866

³⁴ Interview with H.E. Ambassador Maria Hadjitheodosiou, May 19th, 2021, Amman.

³⁵ DG Trade (2021). European Union, Trade in goods with Iran. *European Commission*. Retrieved from the URL: https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb_results/factsheets/country/details_iran_en.pdf

To safeguard its interests, improve stability within the Middle East and foster security³⁶, the EU never backed down in its deployment of tools and instruments. Financially, the EU helped the reception of millions of refugees in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey³⁷, supported the Global Coalition against terrorism in Iraq and Syria³⁸ and financed non-humanitarian development programs throughout the Southern neighbourhood³⁹. Besides, the EU deployed a series of civilian and military missions and operations in the Mediterranean (Operation Sophia, Operation Iriini), Iraq (EUJUST LEX-Iraq, EUAM Iraq) and Palestinian territories (EUBAM Rafah, EUPOL COPPS) to enhance the region's stability and security⁴⁰. Finally, the EU most notably played political and diplomatic roles in stopping the spread of WMDs in the region by being a key party in the JCPOA negotiations⁴¹.

However, these efforts were not enough to stabilise the region or develop influence and leverage. Humanitarian and non-humanitarian aid is useful and effectively provides relief to local actors but seems to be nothing more than a band-aid on open wounds. Civilian and military operations and missions, while they remain important to the EU's ambitions regarding strategic autonomy, lack a shared common vision on the use of force, reactivity of deployment and resources⁴². Regarding the JCPOA, the EU's efforts to keep the agreement afloat after the American withdrawal were not enough⁴³ despite it representing the flagship of European diplomacy.

Strategic Autonomy

While the Middle East always interested the EU, American interventionism in the region left European policymakers thinking, it seems, as though the region was its preserve and thus scarcely developed its influence there along the years. But chronic instability, which damaged the EU's interest, has shown that the United States interventionism was not enough to preserve them and especially that the EU could not rely on itself regarding its security.

This is even more relevant, and important, today as it is obvious that Europeans cannot rely anymore on foreign powers to protect their interests. Indeed, the growing influence of powers opposing the EU's interests in the region (Russia, China, Iran) and the erratic behaviour of its allies (United States, Turkey) make European strategic autonomy, in its Southern neighbourhood at least, a priority.

However, for many years EU objectives in the region mirrored those of the United States. According to Dr. Al-Shalabi, this has been the main flaw in EU policymaking in the Middle East, and what dragged back its influence, for European policies in the region were scarcely seen as anything else than a mere extension of the American ones⁴⁴. That is the main reason why the EU looks much more relevant or influential when its policies and objectives go in different directions than the ones of the United States. This shows that Middle Eastern diplomacies like to consider the EU as a third way and

³⁶ n.a. (n.a.). The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). *EU Neighbours South East*. Retrieved from the URL: <https://www.euneighbours.eu/en/policy/european-neighbourhood-policy-enp>

³⁷ European Commission. (2021). Syria. *European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations*. Retrieved from the URL: https://ec.europa.eu/echo/where/middle-east/syria_en

³⁸ Council of the European Union. (2016). Council conclusions on the EU Regional Strategy for Syria and Iraq as well as the Da'esh threat. Retrieved from the URL: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-9105-2016-INIT/en/pdf>

³⁹ European Commission. (2020). The EU and its Southern Neighbourhood #25BCNPROCESS. Retrieved from the URL: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/default/files/eu-southern-neighbourhood-partnership_en.pdf

⁴⁰ EEAS. (2019). Military and civilian missions and operations. *European External Action Service*. Retrieved from the URL: https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/430/military-and-civilian-missions-and-operations_en

⁴¹ Alcaro, R. (2021). Op. Cit.

⁴² DG External Policies. (2020). In-Depth Analysis. CSDP Missions and Operations. Retrieved from the URL: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2020/603481/EXPO_IDA\(2020\)603481_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2020/603481/EXPO_IDA(2020)603481_EN.pdf)

⁴³ Adebahr, C. (2021). Where's Europe on the Iran Nuclear Deal?. *Carnegie Europe*. Retrieved from the URL: <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/83879>

⁴⁴ Interview with Dr. Jamal Al-Shalabi, April 20th, 2021, Amman.

a more ‘moderate actor’ between the United States, on the one hand, and Russia or China, on the second hand⁴⁵. Case in point, the EU’s attitude towards the MEPP and the Iran nuclear deal is well seen by the relevant parties as were, for example, the position of European countries that opposed the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

Policy Recommendations

As we have seen, it is worrying that in the face of threats originating from the region and despite many strategic interests located in its Southern neighbourhood, the EU’s engagement in the Middle East remains low and its influence even lower. However, today is not too late for EU policymakers to remedy the situation, for the best time to act was yesterday but the next best time is today.

1. Crafting Individual, Comprehensive and Binding Partnerships with Implementation Mechanisms

Recently, the EU updated its strategy towards its Southern neighbourhood under the name “*A New Agenda for the Mediterranean*”⁴⁶. While this document seems comprehensive enough, the Middle East remains too complicated and too important for the EU for European policymakers to only produce a single global strategy for the region. For example, economic relations between the EU and its Southern neighbourhood are for the most part governed by individual Association Agreements between the EU and a third country⁴⁷. This shows that the stakes are too high and the situations too complex for the EU to only design a single broad common strategy.

In recent years, EU policymakers effectively set up strategies and partnerships going over the economic dimensions with their Southern neighbours. For example, troubled countries such as Iraq⁴⁸ and Lebanon⁴⁹ dispose of partnerships while Syria⁵⁰ has its own strategy. Countries with more stable internal situations such as Egypt⁵¹ and Jordan⁵² have also signed closer partnerships with the EU. Yet, these documents have been designed for the most part to either combat the issue of terrorism⁵³ and

⁴⁵ Interview with Dr. Jamal Al-Shalabi, April 20th, 2021, Amman.

⁴⁶ European Commission. (2021). JOINT COMMUNICATION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE ECOUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS. Renewed partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood. A new Agenda for the Mediterranean. Retrieved from the URL: https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/joint_communication_renewed_partnership_southern_neighbourhood.pdf

⁴⁷ All Southern neighborhood countries but Syria and Libya have signed an Association Agreement with the European Union.

⁴⁸ Official Journal of the European Union. (2012). PARTNERSHIP AND COOPERATION AGREEMENT between the European Union and its Member States, of the one part, and the Republic of Iraq, of the other part. Retrieved from the URL: [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:22012A0731\(01\)&from=EN](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:22012A0731(01)&from=EN)

⁴⁹ The Association Council. (2016); Association between the European Union and Lebanon. Retrieved from the URL: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/default/files/eu_lebanon_partnership_priorities_2016-2020_and_their_annexed_eu-lebanon_compact.pdf

⁵⁰ European Commission. (2017). JOINT COMMUNICATION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND THE COUNCIL. Elements for an EU strategy for Syria. Retrieved from the URL: <https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/celex3a52017jc00113aen3atxt.pdf>

⁵¹ The Association Council. (2017). Association between the European Union and Egypt. Retrieved from the URL: <https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/eu-egypt-partnership-priorities.pdf>

⁵² Council of the European Union. (2016). Joint Proposal for a COUNCIL DECISION on the Union position within the Association Council set up by the Euro-Mediterranean Agreement establishing an association between the European Communities and their Member States, of the one part, and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, of the other part, with regard to the adoption of EU-Jordan Partnership Priorities and annexed Compact. Retrieved from the URL: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/default/files/partnership_priorities_2016-2018_and_their_annexed_eu-jordan_compact.pdf

⁵³ Fusco, F. (2021). Op. Cit.

refugees⁵⁴ or as a declaration of good intentions with no real weight⁵⁵ and are not comprehensive at all. Above all, these strategies or partnerships are usually non-binding nor do they come with any tangible implementation or control mechanisms. These elements ought to be taken into account by European policymakers when designing their foreign policy strategies.

2. Developing Influence in Face of American Disengagement in the Middle East

In the context of the progressive withdrawal of the United States from the Middle East, the Europeans have to seize the growing space left by the Americans and this before the region gets saturated by the presence of foreign powers such as Russia, Iran, Turkey and China⁵⁶.

However, the EU will have to make sure that it does not merely mimic previous American positions and behaviours in the region. Indeed, Europeans have to consider themselves and have to make themselves considered a third way besides the United States, on the one hand, and the likes of Russia, China and Iran, on the second hand. Therefore, to develop its influence and gain a significant role in Middle Eastern issues that affect it, the EU has to adopt clear, moderate and strong-willed policies.

For example, European policymakers successfully did so in two notable cases: the MEPP and the Iranian nuclear deal. The EU's moderate position vis-à-vis the Israel, Palestine and MEPP⁵⁷ made it an attractive actor for the Arab parties⁵⁸ as witnessed by the Arab league's chief's desire to see the EU "play a vital role in reviving peace process⁵⁹". Vis-à-vis the Iranian nuclear deal, the EU's moderate position, far from the previous American administration's position, and key role made it desirable as a mediator for Iranians⁶⁰.

3. Showing Greater Care and Interest for the Middle East Peace Process (MEPP)

To develop its influence in the region, the EU should work on the MEPP and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As we previously mentioned, the position of the EU regarding the MEPP is favourably seen by the Arabs⁶¹ even though, by itself, its influence remains limited⁶². And despite American pressures and the signature of the Abraham agreements, the EU's stance remained firmly anchored to its moderate stance⁶³.

⁵⁴ Fakhoury, T., (2020). Lebanon as a Test Case for the EU's Logic of Governmentality in Refugee Challenges. *Istituto Affari Internazionali*. Retrieved from the URL: <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/lebanon-test-case-eus-logic-governmentality-refugee-challenges>

⁵⁵ Fève, B. (2021). Op. Cit.

⁵⁶ In the past years, the Middle East witnessed the [progressive withdrawal of the United States](#). According to Dr. Al-Shalabi, two elements are pushing the Americans out of the Middle. First, the United States does not need Middle Eastern oil as much as it did in the past and, second, Israel, its biggest ally in the region, does not represent a security concern anymore as its Arab neighbors are today incapable of seriously threatening it.

⁵⁷ "The EU recalls its commitment to a negotiated two-State solution, based on 1967 lines, with equivalent land swaps, as may be agreed between the parties, with the State of Israel and an independent, democratic, contiguous, sovereign and viable State of Palestine, living side by side in peace, security and mutual recognition" From: https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/73960/mepp-statement-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-us-initiative_en

⁵⁸ Interview with Dr. Jamal Al-Shalabi, April 20th, 2021, Amman.

⁵⁹ Abdallah, M. (2021). Arab League chief urges EU to play vital role in reviving peace process. *Arab News*. Retrieved from the URL: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1799486/middle-east>

⁶⁰ "Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif suggested a way on Monday to overcome the U.S.-Iranian impasse over who goes first in returning to the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, saying a top EU official could "synchronize" or "choreograph" the moves". From: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-usa-nuclear-idUSKBN2A13HI>

⁶¹ Interview with Dr. Jamal Al-Shalabi, April 20th, 2021, Amman.

⁶² Wermenbol, G. (2019). The eU and the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process in a Post-Mogherini Era. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. Retrieved from the URL: <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/79985>

⁶³ Osiewicz, P. (2021). The EU's diplomatic head and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict one year on. *Middle East Institute*. Retrieved from the URL: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/eus-diplomatic-head-and-israeli-palestinian-conflict-one-year>

Even though the EU cannot solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by itself, European policymakers should not back down in their interest in this specific affair and should reinforce even their solidarity and support (economic and political) for the Palestinian side and not hesitate in condemning the Israeli behaviour. Of course, European policy towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict should not be one-way only. European policymakers should work constructively with Palestinians from all sides, mainly pushing towards domestic reconciliation (Hamas-Fatah reconciliation process), reforming the political system and empowering the civil society.

The EU should do so in collaboration with Arab countries after it would seize the recent call made by the Arab League for greater European involvement in the MEPP. Doing so will deepen the EU-Arab diplomatic channels and transform the EU into a credible actor for the MEPP and not merely the supporter of peace initiatives initiated by third-party. This would put it on equal footing with the United States and make it a foreign actor not only interested in Israeli interests but also in the ones of Palestinians.

4. Pushing for Greater Use of Economic Instruments

“An economic giant and a political dwarf”: the EU has forever been hammered by this saying which points to its large financial capabilities but its incapacity to exert any political influence. This is indeed surprising as the EU has one of the largest economies in the world and one of the biggest donors of humanitarian and non-humanitarian aid. Because of this, when European policymakers decide to impose economic restrictive measures, their effects are rapidly felt, such as was the case with Russia, Iran and Syria for example⁶⁴. However, the impact of such sanctions is debated as regimes under economic pressure generally do not change their behaviours following their implementations. In addition, such sanctions tend to impact the civilian population as much as the regimes themselves.

So, while the effectiveness and impact of the negative use of its economic tools remain doubtful and hard to predict, the positive use of its economic instruments could produce much better and predictable outcomes. Indeed, the EU should use its economy, in ‘more for more’ approaches, which would encourage targeted countries to act as required by the EU. For example, it is with this idea in mind that the EU designed its strategy towards Syria and that some European countries and the United Kingdom, supported by the EU, set up the INSTEX mechanism for Iran.

Yet, if it wishes to succeed, the EU has to give itself the proper means to do so. First of all, in the case of a ‘more for more’ approach, the EU has to set out and define feasible goals and benchmarks for the targeted country in exchange for clear financial rewards. In the case of Syria, the EU promised reconstruction funds against a hypothetical “political transition” which is both unclear and unrealistic. Regarding specific mechanisms aiming at rewarding countries for their compliance and in face of American sanctions, such as the INSTEX mechanism, their sole creation does not suffice. Indeed, Iranian officials deemed the mechanism insufficient and lacking which did not prompt them to act better. The EU and its member states should not only create these kinds of instruments but also give them sufficient substance for them to be more than empty shells.

⁶⁴ European Union Institute for Security Studies. (2015). On target? EU sanctions as security policy tools. Retrieved from the URL: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/5e33fa7a-8bac-4dcb-8e97-346919fde492/language-en>

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