

# ESSAYS

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# EUROPE: IN SEARCH OF A ROLE

*The European Union's foreign policy since the Arab Spring has fluctuated between outdated economic initiatives and political misreadings; instead the EU needs more internal unity and a better understanding of needs in the Arab World*

*By Pierre Vimont*

When the events giving rise to what has been commonly termed the “Arab Spring” started to unfold in 2011, the European Union and its member states were genuinely convinced that their moment had come. As a self-proclaimed normative power and a constant champion of liberal democracy and the free market economy, Europe seized these events in the Mediterranean region as a unique opportunity to promote its long-held political and economic philosophy. After many years of wandering from dogma to unavoidable compromise with the regimes of the Arab World, European nations could reasonably hope that the words and deeds of Middle Eastern leaders might finally match.

Yet, reality very soon put an end to this hope. As unpredictable developments occurred after 2011 in the region, the European Union (EU) was rapidly reduced to an observatory player. While other global and regional powers interfered more and more in the turmoil engulfing the Middle East, Europe looked sidelined and stripped of its traditional influence. Granted, Europe did provide massive humanitarian assistance and significant financial and economic cooperation to the countries of the region. The EU also maintained a steady course in supporting all efforts to bring back peace and stability to the area.

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Yet, we must admit that the EU has had a mixed foreign policy record in the Middle East in recent years. In the context of an evermore complex interplay between global powers and local actors, why has the EU been perceived as lagging behind? Misperception about the transformative nature of the discontent spreading over the whole region, failure to define the appropriate answers, and divisions between EU members are some of the reasons for Europe's poor diplomatic performance.



But beyond these explanations, a more fundamental interrogation is warranted regarding the nature of EU foreign policy itself. When confronted with high-intensity crises like the ones destabilizing the Middle East, Europe has appeared to be reaching its limits as long as it remains locked in a fundamental dilemma between its aspirations to assume a role as a potential global power and a chronic inability to deliver on the requirements for such a role.

### A History of Sustained Involvement

The events unfolding within the Arab World from 2011 onward caught the EU by surprise as they did with other major powers involved in the region. Yet, few of the countries outside of the region had the depth of partnership which the EU had developed over the course of the last fifty years. From the first bilateral programs agreed upon in the 1970s with individual Mediterranean countries to the Barcelona Process in 1995 (establishing for the first time a multilateral frame for Euro-Mediterranean partnership) and finally the European Neighborhood Policy, launched in 2003, with countries of the southern Mediterranean, Europeans acquired experience in the region. The EU set up precise objectives for its southern neighborhood, to be achieved with specific toolkits intended to promote trade, investment, and economic cooperation, while also complementing this agenda with a security dialogue between the two sides.

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Prior to 2011, building up a “ring of friends” was the name of the game. This strategic objective seized imaginations on both sides of the Mediterranean and appeared as a sensible objective that could satisfy the mutual interests of the Middle East and the EU. Europeans were looking for stability and security on their southern borders. Leaders of the Maghreb and Mashreq were asking for support to stir the economic development of their still newly independent nations.

However, this rosy picture was not the whole truth. The colonial past between some of the European partners and their Middle Eastern and North African counterparts had left scars which sometimes affected the tone and substance of EU–Middle East cooperation. The EU also nourished its own vision of trade relations that was too often shaped to benefit or protect European interests. A tendency on the European side to lecture rather than genuinely listen to its Mediterranean partners’ needs slowly crept into EU policy as conflicting interests grew between the two sides.

◀ France’s President Emmanuel Macron, Germany’s Chancellor Angela Merkel and, Italy’s Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni arrive for a meeting of the European Heads of States and Governments, Brussels, Feb. 23, 2018. *Ye Pingfan/Xinhua/Alamy Live News*

Furthermore, the EU’s enlargement to include central

and eastern European members soon brought a new dimension to the priorities of the neighborhood policy. The EU's newly admitted members insisted on extending European assistance to eastern European countries and the countries of the southern Caucasus, while southern European member states such as France, Italy, Spain, and Greece wanted to maintain the focus on outreach to the "Southern Neighborhood." Insidiously, this new eastern partnership became a permanent source of competition inside the EU between eastern and southern European member states for the allocation of financial resources dedicated to the European Neighborhood Policy. The efforts initiated by France in 2008 to rekindle the Southern Neighborhood through a revamped version branded as the "Union for the Mediterranean" represented an attempt at striking a new balance in favor of the southern partners. But the somewhat clumsy handling of this initiative did not bring the expected results and, on the contrary, seemed to slow down the whole process.

Lastly, the emphasis placed by the Lisbon Treaty on the missions conferred to EU foreign policy led to more complicated relations with the strongman regimes prevailing in most Mediterranean countries. Embodied in Article 21 of the treaty and reaffirmed afterward in all association agreements negotiated with EU southern partners, the political guidelines for EU action on the international scene insisted on the principles "which have inspired its own creation, development and enlargement and which it seeks to advance in the wider world" from democracy to the rule of law, human rights, fundamental freedoms, and respect of international law. The priority given to values over interests was nothing new for the EU. It was part of the European creed since the start of the EU project and was often branded by the Brussels institutions as their original trademark which was seen to stand in contrast to the more self-centered—not to say cynical—foreign policies of the individual member states. If European diplomats found ways of favoring a realistic implementation of these principles (the most recent EU global strategy introduced the concept of "principled pragmatism"), this renewed emphasis on values nevertheless did strain Europe's partnership with its southern neighbors.

### **The Arab Spring: A Missed Opportunity for Europe**

It is against this European backdrop that the Arab Spring unfolded. Perceived as

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an overwhelming push for democracy inside the Arab World, it caught the imagination of both European member states and EU institutions as these developments seemed at first to offer a solution to the inherent contradictions of European foreign policy. As the Arab uprisings appeared to embrace the philosophy embodied in EU fundamental rights, a mutually agreed-upon

path was taking shape. Around 2011 and 2012 the hope was that Europeans could

from now on overcome their contradictions and leave behind the ambiguous attitude they had adopted, willingly or not, for convenient reasons in their relationship with the Arab World. In early 2011, the then-EU commissioner in charge of the neighborhood policy, Štefan Füle, declared that the EU had fallen prey in the past to authoritarian regimes perceived as guarantors of stability and that moving forward this short-term approach should be definitively rectified. For her part, Lady Catherine Ashton as the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy went on to underline that Europe had the experience and tools to help the countries in the Middle East region make the journey to “deep democracy.”

Yet, this new enthusiasm for the southern partnership did not deliver much. Indeed, it slowly petered out and looked increasingly like a missed opportunity. The cause of this poor record rests largely upon the unfolding of events perceived at the start as a revolutionary movement but progressively understood as a confrontation between diverging political forces. In this confused context where—with the exception of Tunisia—most EU Arab partners fell victim to civil war, diverse government changes, or simply a return to the past, the EU was at pains to draw up new plans. Not that the Brussels institutions did not try. On the contrary in early 2011, soon after the first uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, the EU released two communications devoted to a comprehensive and new Middle East strategy.

The first of these two papers, entitled “A New Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean,” sought to give a first quick response to the developments occurring in Tunisia and Egypt. The second document had a more ambitious scope as it proposed “a new response to a changing neighborhood” with the goal of revising the overall neighborhood policy in order to capitalize on the new reality introduced by the Middle East upheavals. The emphasis was on what the Brussels institutions called the “3 Ms,” namely money, markets, and mobility. Yet, in spite of its effort to show solidarity and support to the Arab partners, the EU mobilization gradually appeared for what it actually was: old wine in new bottles.

Financial commitments came predominantly in the form of loans with a limited addition of reallocated budgetary funds; the remaining economic assistance relied heavily upon private investors who were enticed by Brussels to go to the Middle East but preferred to wait for more stable times. The market dimension implied a new tailor-made approach to bilateral trade to fit the specificities of the EU’s regional partners. However, the EU proposition was merely the latest version of free trade

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agreements designed for a full integration into the EU single market and shaped along the requirements of the accession process. This was not the perfect match for Middle East partners, who were not candidates for EU membership and were only looking for concessions in tune with their more immediate needs. As for mobility, improved labor visas to allow young unemployed workers from the Mediterranean region to come to Europe could have been the genuine prize of the renewed engagement embodied in these discussions. Unfortunately, however, with the effects of the 2008 financial crisis being felt throughout the continent, such a demand could only fall on deaf ears in Brussels.

### **Comprehending the Region's Turbulent Dynamics**

What the Europeans missed at that time was the profound ongoing transformation of Middle Eastern societies and the need for an innovative EU response to this changing reality. Instead, Europe looked unable to move from its traditional thinking and to adapt to its partners' needs.

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exclusive relations with Europe at a time when more openness toward African partners in the south is becoming a feature of the Mediterranean economy, particularly with the Maghreb. This lack of EU flexibility has also been illustrated by the limits of European reaction to the unemployment situation in the Mediterranean area, which is characterized by a youth population whose qualifications often do not match the job requirements. More tailor-made assistance in education and vocational training should

have been the natural ground for a mutually beneficial partnership. However, Europe has not been agile enough to adapt its assistance to the changing social and political realities produced by the Arab Spring.

The same inability prevailed when dealing with the changing geopolitical reality in the region. Here again Europeans appeared to struggle with developments they could neither shape nor significantly influence. Undoubtedly Europe was not alone in failing to exert leadership and most of the external actors involved with the many conflicts inside the region experienced mixed success in their own diplomatic endeavors. In fact, all players did face a combination of intertwined factors that have haunted the Middle East for some time. Increased militarization of the different local conflicts, growing sectarianism, particularly in the Mashreq, and interference by outside players leading to extended proxy wars all collided to form a highly volatile background, where the past status quo gave way to a confused and unstable present.

As they faced these uncertain circumstances, Europeans were particularly

helpless and vulnerable to this unsettled environment. The EU sees itself as a soft power. It walks on safe ground when joining efforts on conflict prevention or peacekeeping operations. However, its policy becomes shaky when Europe confronts high-intensity conflicts where military hard power makes the difference. In such cases, EU institutions tend to leave it to the member states to take the lead in such militarized situations. Indeed, inside the coalitions of Western allies that intervened in Syria and Iraq, it is the individual member states which were involved, not the EU. And even there, individual members' involvement was mainly focused on providing support to the U.S. military intervention, not by any desire to take the lead.

Interestingly enough, despite the long history of Europe's economic and diplomatic relations with the Middle East, and its investment in cultivating a significant political network across the region, European influence in these days of upheaval and war seems to have lost its clout. Even European member states like the United Kingdom, Germany, or France—traditionally considered the ones with the most credible assets to lead a robust diplomatic engagement—have failed to do so, choosing instead to rally behind American leadership in their mobilization against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

Conversely, when President Barack Obama decided in August 2013 not to launch U.S. airstrikes against the Syrian military in retaliation for the chemical attacks against the opposition in Ghouta, European nations supported American inaction and did not take any military or diplomatic action of their own. As a result, Russia moved to fill the vacuum by brokering an international agreement to dismantle of Syria's chemical weapons stockpile, thus opening the way to an increasingly important role for the Russian military and Russian diplomacy in Syria, and later on, in the region as a whole.

This waning of European influence in the region is not without precedence. The aborted Anglo–French Suez intervention in 1956 or the constant grip since 1967 of American diplomacy over the Middle East peace process—not to mention the 2003 intervention in Iraq—all remind Europe of its limited room for maneuver in the region. Yet, the striking feature this time is precisely that the Middle East during the Obama administration had witnessed a steady reduction of U.S. presence, leading to a massive disruption of the status quo prevailing in the region. This shift has induced a sharp confrontation between global actors and local players over the redefinition of the new regional balance of power.

With the increased unpredictability of U.S. foreign policy, new features are morphing the political and diplomatic climate in the region. A complex strategic reality is emerging out of the many individual positions taken by the different players: the renewed interest of Russia in the Middle East, the silent presence of



China, the hidden networking of Israel, and the growing confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Iran (leading to the polarization of all relations in the region around this Iran–Saudi division line).

Amid this quest for a new Middle East status quo, Europe would have been justified in fighting for its own interests and would have been perceived as one of the significant diplomatic players in the region. However, so far, the

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EU has largely chosen not to jump into the escalating competition for regional influence with the sole but significant exception of Libya. Not that Europe has drawn a better record in Libya but it has demonstrated a willingness to be more politically and militarily involved there. It may be that Europe perceived Libya as a close neighbor with specific cross interests, particularly with the increasing number of migrants moving across the central Mediterranean. As such, European nations did act in the early months of the Libyan upheaval. France and the UK, with the cooperation of Arab nations and the support of the rest of the EU

members, led in the spring of 2011 a diplomatic offensive at the UN, which was then followed by the military intervention in Libya. And when the fragile political consensus built up with the different Libyan parties fell apart, Europe remained present on the Libyan stage. This active role has not gone without divisions and even competition between the EU members. However, the EU still maintains today a leading role in support of the UN special envoy's efforts.

### **The EU's Role: Dysfunctional, Prudent, or Structurally Flawed?**

The EU's presence in Libya nonetheless pales in comparison to the perception of Europe's overall inability to regain some influence in the current diplomatic machinations around Syria, Iraq, or Yemen. From that viewpoint, the ongoing confrontation with the U.S. administration over the nuclear agreement with Iran (formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action or the JCPOA) and the sanctions regime imposed by the U.S. government is another illustration of Europe's limited range of action on an issue that the EU could rightly present as one of its genuine diplomatic achievements.

Is this attitude a deliberate European choice to play for time? Is it on the contrary the consequence of a dysfunctional Europe unable to adapt its Mediterranean policy to the ongoing transformation of the Arab World? Or could it reflect a more structural flaw inherent in the nature of the EU foreign policy itself? The answer probably follows from a combination of these three factors.

The sense of EU powerlessness on the Middle Eastern stage stems first from

the shortcomings of its own system. Faced with the unprecedented challenge of a complex Arab Spring blending together social, economic, and political claims, Europe resorted to old policy recipes rather than new formulas. It relied on its toolbox of deep and comprehensive free trade agreements, mobility partnerships, and preferential loans to accommodate the changing realities of the Arab World. The resulting credibility gap was one from which the EU would never completely recover.

Where a new vision of Mediterranean partnership based on mutual interests and a more sophisticated assessment of the economic regional trends was urgently required, the EU maintained its adherence to its past conception, while the members themselves remained entrenched in defending a zero-sum game approach. In addition to this lack of vision, the internal divisions of the EU have taken their toll. Discussions have been left unresolved between members attached to favoring eastern European partners and those dedicated to the Southern Neighborhood, thus preventing a more ambitious Middle East policy from emerging. Lastly, the EU had the additional pressure of tackling at least three major domestic challenges with the 2008 financial crisis, the growing inflow of migrants and refugees, and a marked increase of terrorist attacks. As these problems have grown in importance, they have enhanced the EU's tendency to focus on its own inward continental challenges playing into a narrative of an encircled Europe, all of which is rarely propitious to a more open policy.

Equally counterproductive, procrastination—a tradition in EU circles—found fertile ground in the crises during and after the Arab Spring. For the EU it was a matter of being repeatedly caught in the dilemma of following its member states' political preferences or sticking to a more non-controversial position. Hesitation and delays naturally followed. Under pressure from some members proposing in the early stages of the Syrian conflict a public call for President Bashar Al-Assad to resign, EU diplomats agonized over the legitimacy of seemingly endorsing the regime change rationale. The call for Al-Assad to go came out finally but divisions never disappeared. Problems surfaced again when decisions had to be made on several occasions about supporting the Syrian opposition or suspending the EU delegation activities in Damascus.

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At the heart of this controversy was the question of how the EU should respond to sensitive matters and the division of labor between EU member states. EU institutions pleaded that the EU's Middle East foreign policy be the voice for a

long-term vision which would then leave the short-term foreign policy responses up to individual member states—at least those choosing to do so. Unsurprisingly, on most of these sensitive issues, the EU progressively adopted a low-profile attitude and refrained from taking any bold move likely to stir more divisions among EU members. Europe remained vocal but with little impact on events. In the end, this self-imposed powerlessness confined Europe’s role to a provider of humanitarian assistance to the victims in the areas stricken by conflicts and to the displaced populations across the region. In this field, Europe acted diligently and generously. But this inclination only further reinforced the perception of the EU as a payer and not a player. And this reputation still remains today as the Russian leadership presses Europeans to participate in the reconstruction of Syria without giving them much of a say in the ongoing political discussions. Similarly, in Yemen or Libya, the EU is mostly restricted to a support role for the UN special envoys, avoiding any initiative that might complicate their efforts, in stark contrast to the global powers’ attitude, which is usually much less scrupulous when it comes to the UN system.

Yet, does Europe have the will to act as a global power? One of the reasons for the constant misunderstanding—and the cause of so many criticisms addressed to the EU—lies precisely in the confusion over the nature of European integration. As a gathering of twenty-eight member states, several of which have exerted substantial diplomatic influence in the past and still retain some leverage of power, the EU looks to the average observer like the natural successor in the foreign policy field to these individual EU members. But to reach that point, Europe needs to be more than the mere sum of its members. It requires a common understanding about what its foreign policy missions should be, the responsibilities it can carry on its own, and the necessary autonomous means for that purpose.

It cannot just behave as an additional member competing with the other EU members. In the foreign policy field as in all the other sectors of the

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EU, it requires a clear subsidiarity pact between the EU and its members over the allocation of competences and the division of labor. Today, Europeans disagree on the vision of a common foreign policy. Between those like France who support the concept of Europe as a power (“L’Europe puissance”) and those favoring a looser form of European cooperation, the gap remains wide. In the absence of any consensus between its members, it should come as no

surprise that the EU had so little impact on Middle East events. Only when it possesses the necessary assertiveness of a genuine global player will Europe be able to display an efficient foreign policy.

## A Roadmap for Europe in a Troubled Region

Arguably one can doubt whether the EU will soon be able to bridge this capability gap. But Europeans are not doomed to impotence. With all its inherent limitations, Europe could still deliver a more impressive performance than it has done so far.

Amidst the intricacies of the Middle East turmoil, what has been missing for a significant European contribution is a vision of the future of EU relations with Middle East partners. A more self-assertive EU could define a roadmap capable of ensuring prosperity and security and defining the role of Europe for these purposes. Assembling previously scattered efforts into a more structured plan away from the piecemeal approach adopted so far would put Europe in a more relevant place. For this improvement to take place, Europeans will have to focus their actions on a few priorities and sharpen their means to act more efficiently. Fundamentally, Europeans need to overcome their divisions and agree on common foreign policy objectives.

From that perspective, some obvious choices cannot be discarded. The promotion of democratic rights and the support for more resilient civil societies will remain part of this agenda as intrinsic components of the EU philosophy. However, two other priorities may stand out as even more relevant, both to be elaborated jointly with Mediterranean partners and both shaping a more original role for Europe.

Regional security could be one of these topics as warfare in the area never seems to end. But rather than jumping into the conflicts with one more military contribution, Europe should take the long view. More specifically, it should work for the promotion of a security pact open to all countries of the region and based upon agreements ranging from practical confidence-building measures, to more principled provisions inspired by the UN Charter. Mutual non-aggression, non-recourse to the use of force, respect of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and many other principles recognized by international law could be patiently discussed to settle current confrontations and build for the Middle East a regional framework similar to the 1975 Helsinki agreements in Europe. No one can dispute the difficulties of this objective and the patience required to achieve these goals. Yet, this challenging ambition is probably where Europe can use, at best, its resources and experience.


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In the same vein, engaging with its Mediterranean partners through dialogue to shape a more mutually beneficial model of economic development in line with local specificities, could also represent for Europe a platform more attuned to its natural diplomatic disposition. With renewed efforts to avoid past errors, Europeans in tandem with their regional partners could investigate ways of accommodating more South–South trade patterns, promoting industrial transport or energy cooperation, and encouraging circular migration between Europe, the Maghreb countries, and Africa. The same can be done subsequently with the countries of the Mashreq taking into consideration their particular economic circumstances. By tackling more long-term challenges—which is more suited to what Europe can offer—this approach would let the EU off the hook in dealing with warfare and hot conflicts and move it into less controversial policies.

Europe did not show its most engaging face in confronting the turmoil that has been shaking the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern region since 2011. It hesitated, procrastinated, and too often stuck to parochial views. Its inner divisions made any ambitious goal an unrealistic objective. The EU's structural flaws proved too overwhelming to perform in the same league as other global powers. Yet, in spite of its reduced influence, the EU found some role.

Though limited, its action nonetheless alleviated some of the suffering from war and economic hardship. Today, the Arab upheavals look to be moving gradually to a new stage where the high-intensity conflicts give way to a search for fragile stability. It is high time then for Europe to reinvest in the Middle East arena. It must do so with an agenda that fits its own capabilities and promotes resilience for the sake of improved security and prosperity. This is how Europe can make a difference and leave its footprint in the Middle East. 



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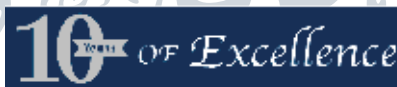
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