

How Can the Future of the Middle East Affect European Security?

DR. LEILA NICOLAS

PROFESSOR OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AT THE LEBANESE UNIVERSITY

Abstract: *The Ukraine war has prompted European security interests to emerge in the Middle East, raising two narratives, or “strategic perspectives,”: a realist vision of great power politics and an idealist lens of democracy versus despotism. The situation in Ukraine has strengthened these lenses and affected how Europe views the Middle East. As the Middle East is entering a new phase of global power competition, two main hypotheses for its future are emerging: a chaos scenario, where great power politics and competition lead to chaos and negatively affect European security, and a stability scenario, where powerful regional states prefer diplomacy and conflict resolution means, allowing Europe to prioritize security concerns in Eastern European region. The paper discusses EU paradoxes in the Middle East, challenges, and prospects, and analyses each hypothesis and its consequences.*

Key words *European Union, Middle East, Ukraine war, security, peace.*

INTRODUCTION

After the Ukraine war, new European security interests emerged in response to the loss of Russia as a source of energy and the threat to their national security. These interests will have a significant impact on the geopolitical environment throughout the world in the ensuing decades. Josep Borrell, the minister for foreign affairs of the EU, said that Europe “must learn to speak the language of force.”

Two narratives, or “strategic perspectives,” are beginning to incorporate this new European “language of power”: a realist vision of great power politics and an idealist lens of democracy versus despotism. While the situation in Ukraine has strengthened these lenses, which were fashioned mainly by earlier conflicts with Russia, they will also affect how Europe views the Middle East.

The Ukraine war, the worst military conflict to hit the European continent since World War II, has forced Europe to devote most of its military, economic, and political resources to face its consequences. Nevertheless, the Middle East remains a priority.

As the Middle East is entering a new phase of global-power competition, this paper will test two main hypotheses for the future of the region and their impact on the security of the EU:

1- Chaos scenario:

The Great power politics and competition will lead to a new cycle of chaos in the southern European neighbourhood (the Middle East), thus negatively affecting European security (re-rise of terrorist non-state actors, a new influx of refugees ...)

2- Stability scenario:

Powerful Regional states in the Middle East hedging their bets and using their oil reserves as a powerful negotiating tool to maintain their strategic priorities will prefer diplomacy and conflict resolution tools. This will lead to decades of stability in the Middle East, thus giving Europe a chance to prioritise security concerns in the East.

The first part of this paper shall discuss the EU prolonged paradoxes in the Middle East, challenges, and prospects. The second part shall analyse each hypothesis and its consequences. We end up with a conclusion and some recommendations for better EU engagement in the region.

PART ONE: EU PROLONGED PARADOXES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

EU–Middle East relations are multifaceted, varied, and complex, shaped by historical, political, economic, migratory, social, and cultural dynamics (Dimitris Bouris, 2022). The European Union continues to have a fundamental interest in the Middle East. After the Ukraine war, Europeans cannot turn a blind eye because how they handle their relationships with their larger neighbourhood, notably their southern neighbours in the Middle East, will significantly impact their future wealth, stability, and security.

In recent years, the European Union unveiled new agendas for the Mediterranean and the Gulf. However, there is not a “one size fits all” solution. The size of the region reflects the diversity of the states there, some of which have been embroiled in war for decades, while others are stable and have strong economies.

In their Middle Eastern experience, two apparent paradoxes defined the European Union's Middle East policy:

- First, The EU cannot shape the Middle Eastern developments despite being the second-biggest assistance donor to the region (after the United States) and the major economic partner.

The EU does not exert any pressure on the Arab regimes or Israel. They limit themselves to statements of condemnation or calls for more respect for human rights. Thus, the European voice is rarely heard regarding important Middle Eastern issues.

As the EU does not have the capabilities to shape the developments, they have to cooperate with the existing Arab regimes. According to many in the West, Arab autocrats are one possible cause of the current bloodshed, insurgency, and turbulence. Therefore, cooperation between the EU and the MENA region is sometimes seen by activists as damaging rather than beneficial because it helps maintain regime stability in the region (Hyde-Price, 2006).

- Second, the EU has applied two contradicting policies: promoting liberal values vs. preserving security.

The European Union has used the expansion of its liberal ideas as a primary foreign policy tool since the 1990s, especially in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). In the last decades, the EU consistently promoted good governance, democracy, and human rights as tools for combating terrorism and averting violent extremism (Skare, 22).

MENA governments have been co-opted into managing border and migration control, where they operate as Europe's gatekeepers, inside a system of structurally unbalanced economic connections from which Europe and MENA elites benefit the most (Del Sarto, 2021).

The Rise of terrorism led the EU to shift toward a “security first” focus in the region. This came after a gradual shift toward a more “realist-oriented” worldview, which undercuts other EU concerns and speeds up the EU's demise as a normative authority. In other words, the Union had been progressively adopting a security policy paradigm less affected by liberal ambitions. It is grounded in “bounded” logical evaluation of the costs and advantages of different courses of action, or “realpolitik.” (Skare, 22, p. 223)

Since the Iraq war, the Middle East has been in continuous upheaval, resulting in the displacement of millions of people fleeing from Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine, and Syria (Volk, 2022). This led to the “securitization” of aid and democratisation projects. EU projects in the MENA were mainly directed toward communities that are presented as a threat to European security. The EU focused on some groups because they are exceptionally vulnerable to terrorism and religious extremism. This securitization was applied because groups such as Al Qaeda- ISIS were far from defeated. The same is true for other jihadi organisations.

Specific nationalities and religious groups, mainly Syrian refugees, had been transformed from political and humanitarian subjects to security targets, thus getting disproportionate aid and care. This has increased tensions between them and the host communities, especially in Lebanon, where the Lebanese accuse the EU and human rights agencies of discrimination, i.e., giving all the resources and aid to Syrian nationalities and blocking benefits from the Lebanese.

Europe's selective expansion of its laws, customs, and dispersed borders, combined with the specific policy decisions of MENA governments, have actually exacerbated socio-economic inequality, and strengthened authoritarian rule in the “southern neighborhood” (Del Sarto, 2021).

In addition to the abovementioned complexities, the US retrenchment is forcing other challenges to EU strategy in the Middle East.

US retrenchment: adding more challenges to the EU.

In recent decades, Europe's influence in the Middle East was secure in the shadow of the United States that dominated the region. After the end of the cold war and the liberation of Kuwait, the US expanded its military presence, which solidified its dominance in the region. The flow of oil, containment of Iran, and security guarantees to principal allies like Israel and Gulf monarchies were at the heart of the American regional order.

This US-led Middle East required little of Europe because the US handled most of the challenging political and security tasks. However, in response to the Arab revolutions in 2011, Europe prioritised keeping migrants away from its borders and fending terrorist threats. France and the UK mainly conducted these missions due to their military presence across the region. However, Europeans had always practised coordinated policies with Washington and never acted independently.

When Donald Trump was elected, the previous cooperation between the US and Europe in the Middle East came under pressure.

A notable division occurred between Europe and the US when Trump granted his unconditional support for Israel's annexation of Palestinian territory, recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, and dismissed the two-state solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict, replacing it with the “deal of the century.” (Dohainstitute, 2020)

In 2017, after US President Donald Trump recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital, the European Union expressed grave concern, warning that this could impact future peace efforts (Reuters, 2017). The Israeli-Arab conflict was always more important to the EU than any other conflict in the region, which have been the key to shaping EU's foreign policy overall (Persson, 2020).

In 2018, Trump expressed his intent to withdraw from the Middle East, retracted unilaterally from JCPOA, and reimposed sanctions on Iran. Soon after Trump's announcement, the leaders of the UK, France, and Germany—all signatories to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) released a statement expressing their “regret and worry” and reiterating their “continuing commitment” to the accord (Martin Banks, 2018).

Trump's executive order threatened to reinstate sanctions against any foreign business conducting transactions with Iran. The European companies had to leave the Iranian market as Trump gave them an ultimatum of a 90-day or 180-day grace period to end their existing business relationships with Iran, after which they would be subject to US sanctions (TheGuardian, 2018).

European states' inability to keep their commitments to JCPOA was seen as a manifestation of their weakness. Iran accused the European states that they had succumbed to “high school bully” Donald Trump (Hafezi, 2020).

Today, after two decades of sustained military engagement in the Middle East, the US is re-adjusting. This is influenced by shifting strategic considerations, domestic tiredness, and the desire to end “forever wars.”

For the first time since 1952, the US no longer relies on Middle Eastern energy imports and is becoming a net energy exporter. In addition, the US has its strategic sights set on China and intends to shift its political attention, military, and financial resources from the Middle East to the Asia-Pacific region.

PART 2- EU IN A MULTIPOLAR MIDDLE EAST

A new multipolar regional order is emerging due to the United States' desire to “rightsize” its military and diplomatic stances in the region. This led to a rise in regional assertiveness and increased Russian and Chinese involvement in the Middle East.

US retrenchment will pressure the EU to try to fill the power vacuum and find a way to play a role in the region. However, Europe will be fighting with more forceful and geopolitically savvy states already attempting to push Europeans aside in MENA's more complex and multipolar regional system.

Europe has to deal with China and Russia's growing political, economic, and military influence in the Middle East. After its military intervention, Russia's relations with Turkey, Gulf monarchies, and Iran increased.

China's regional influence is being constructed on an economic rather than a security basis, with the Road and Belt Initiative serving as the main vehicle for China's economic objectives. China's readiness to forgo Western-style prerequisites like support for human rights and democracy and its policy of non-interference are key components of its appeal in the region.

China is now pushing for Saudi oil sales to be priced in national currencies rather than dollars to challenge US financial supremacy in the oil industry and de-dollarize the global economy. Also, China is increasingly attempting to use its economic clout to exert political influence. Mediating a reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and Iran is one example.

The Ukraine conflict has highlighted the Middle East's expanding significance as an energy supplier, as European nations struggle to lessen their reliance on Russian oil and gas. Europe's vulnerabilities will increase due to its closer relations with the Middle East. States in the Middle East and North Africa are in a good position, with new means of exerting pressure on the capitals of Europe.

Due to its urgent need for oil flow, Europe concentrated on transactional negotiations that served its immediate energy and immigration needs. However, the geopolitical environment in the MENA was significantly impacted by the conflict in Ukraine, particularly in the markets for food and energy. The war added more pressure on states that do not produce oil in the region, like Yemen, Lebanon, Syria, Libya, and Egypt, which face serious threats to their food security. This demonstrates how the fundamental socio-economic causes of the Arab Spring have not been adequately addressed. Taking these risks into consideration, Europeans need to re-evaluate their regional priorities.

In addition to oil supplies, Europe must deal with many security issues facing the region, such as the impending economic crises and inflation hitting many states. The regional effects of a world order increasingly characterised by multipolarity, and great-power rivalry may lead to either chaos or decades of stability in the Middle East.

A- Chaos Scenario

When the Arab Spring revolutions began to spread over the Middle East and North Africa, Europeans envisioned themselves as the ideal partners for democratic and economic transitions that would pave the way for long-term stability. The West thought the revolutions would lead to a moderate version of Islam that engages Democracy and Islamism. However, conflict and instability engulfed the region bringing hordes of refugees to Europe and deadly terrorism.

Today, MENA is at another possible turning point. Following years of unsettling, zero-sum conflict, the region observes a tentative shift toward dialogue and good relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Europeans welcomed the de-escalation because it may provide a way out of the instability and proxy wars across the region. However, the Saudi- Iranian reconciliation may not bring about the stability and prosperity many hoped for in the region.

The current calm has the risk of merely being a brief respite before destabilising forces are reactivated, especially if Iranian nuclear negotiations fail. The new road of diplomacy also covers up deep structural vulnerabilities and unresolved socio-economic problems.

In this scenario, while many in Europe would like to focus on the Russian danger in the East, they are unlikely to have the luxury of ignoring their southern neighbours. The bloc must consider expanding its role in the Middle East to help cement positive openings and avert new risks in a more competitive and multipolar regional order. In this scenario, long-standing European reliance on the United States in the MENA is no longer necessary, and they should do the heavy lifting by themselves.

B- Stability Scenario

The region has suffered a series of horrific conflicts over the previous decades, but on the positive side, the actors have worn out. The main regional actors are suddenly conversing instead of fighting. The perception of US disengagement in the region as Washington “rightsizes” its position following two decades of overstretch is a significant motivator for Saudi Arabia to reach settlements there. Trump's maximum pressure strategy that continued with the Biden administration has severely damaged Iran's economy.

States throughout the Middle East have engaged in an unprecedented pattern of reconciliation to safeguard their interests amid shifts in the global order, driven by a combination of conflict fatigue, COVID-19, a focus on economic security, the continued concern over declining US engagement, and increased geopolitical competition.

In response to Iranian-linked attacks on Saudi oil infrastructure in September 2019, a growing sense of insecurity in the Arab Gulf was exacerbated by former US President Donald J. Trump's refusal to support his campaign of maximum economic pressure against Iran with military action.

The subsequent willingness of US President Joseph Biden to reenter negotiations to revive the Iranian nuclear deal strengthened the perception that the West was prepared to work with Tehran—and that the region needed to do the same to protect its security.

The new bilateral diplomatic relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia have been the region's most significant indicator of this transition to diplomacy.

Iran, Bahrain, and Kuwait started a new phase of good relations with Iran. Saudi Arabia and other Arab states restored their relations with Syrian President Bashar Al Asad. A Yemeni deal to end the war is on the way. Also, to indicate a broader shift, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt are mending their relations with Turkey, bridging a gap that has been just as problematic. Despite its infancy, this diplomacy offers a route toward the urgently required de-escalation of regional tensions.

The benefits of US regional withdrawal are disputed by many. However, they are increasingly pushing players toward discussing their security issues through diplomacy, a trend that Europeans should support because it will be the best-case scenario for European security.

CONCLUSION

Geopolitical tensions, Arab revolutions, and socio-economic crises in the Middle East granted Europe enormous problems. However, multipolarity and new paths of diplomacy in the region may make it possible to advance European interests more successfully.

The rapprochement between Arab Gulf states and Iran, and other regional reconciliation efforts shed light on a significant region-wide trend of de-escalation. It also signals a change toward direct Middle East regional conflict management. Should it continue, it will be a turning point in the region after decades of geopolitical tensions and division.

These changes cannot remove the tensions that have grown over the decades of regional competition or dispel ingrained mistrust. Instead, they should be viewed as planned adjustments to minimise conflict and lessen economic vulnerability.

Permanent peace can be a result of significant change, a genuine regional reset over time, and sustained political investment. Nevertheless, these new ties could easily break down without deliberate international support, especially EU support. The EU has to invest politically, financially, and socially in peace and stability in the Middle East.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Stability and prosperity in the Middle East are beneficial for European security; however, because the EU lacks the power or leverage to exert pressure on MENA countries, realistic approaches and pragmatism should serve as the basis for a compelling European future strategy:

- The EU should accept “the region as it is” rather than imposing its vision and will. The EU can contribute to stability through programs to promote peacebuilding and reconciliation.
- The EU should participate in the war-torn states' rebuilding processes while focusing on the ideals required to ensure longer-term stability.
 - Despite competing for influence with Russia and China, Europeans should keep room for coordination with both states in the region.
 - Europeans should support the return to JCPOA and expand diplomacy with Iran.
 - Europeans should exert more pressure on Israel to abandon the expansion of illegal settlements in the Palestinian territories. The Europeans should take a clear and firm stance toward the Right – wing Israeli government aggression on Palestinians.
 - Arab and Turkish normalisation with the Syrian government may open a window for returning Syrian refugees from Europe and Syria's neighbouring states (Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey). Europeans should take a realistic-neutral position rather than an opposing one.

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