

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.

References

- 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>
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