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## FUTURE NOTES

# IMPLICATIONS OF THE EU GLOBAL STRATEGY FOR THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

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# IMPLICATIONS OF THE EU GLOBAL STRATEGY FOR THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

**Eduard Soler i Lecha and Nathalie Tocci<sup>1</sup>**

The Middle East and North Africa are in turmoil, Europe's security is inextricably linked to what happens in this region, and yet the EU has limited capacities to change realities on the ground. These are three of the main messages of the EU Global Strategy presented in June 2016. The document presents Europeans and the wider world with a vision on the international context in which the EU will operate in the coming years. It depicts a complex, contested and connected world, where the EU's strategic interests must be coherent with its values. It also espouses the concept of principled pragmatism as a guide for the EU's external action in the years ahead and mentions the concept of resilience more than forty times. The strategy acknowledges that the EU is not alone, that it needs to partner to be influential and that it has an interest in promoting cooperative regional orders. In the framework of the MENARA project, let's launch a discussion on what could be the practical implications of this new vision for EU policies in the Middle East and North Africa in the next decade.

## OPENING THE GEOGRAPHIC SCOPE

Precisely because this is a global strategy, this exercise should help the EU to look at the Middle East and North Africa through global lenses. In the text there are references to this region when addressing global concerns such as maritime security, counter-terrorism, energy and climate. And many other issues could have been added to the list: pandemics, cybersecurity, rapid urbanisation or technological revolutions. A global outlook on this region should translate into additional efforts to explore common positions on the global agenda, to establish cooperation mechanisms to meet global goals and to further engage with other global actors present in the region when trying to contribute to peace, security and prosperity in the Middle East.

This strategy builds on a geopolitical logic of concentric circles and offers a broader vision of geopolitical dynamics that transcends traditional categories such as "the neighbourhood" or "the Mediterranean." One novelty of the Strategy is the declared willingness to pursue balanced engagement in the Gulf, which implies strengthening cooperation with the Gulf Cooperation Council while gradually engaging with Iran, building on the E3+3 nuclear deal. This will not be easy but projects a clearer picture of the EU's grasp of regional dynamics: recognition of the Gulf's centrality and of Iran as an indispensable regional power. Another novelty is the acknowledgment of the (in)security nexus between the EU's southern neighbours and adjacent regions such as the Sahel and the Horn of Africa. All in all, it seems that, at least in geopolitical terms, the EU

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may recalibrate its priorities by looking more closely and in an integrated manner to a wider neighbourhood.

## A RESILIENCE AGENDA

This is one of the key words of this strategy. This concept, which is becoming increasingly popular in social sciences and political debates, is defined in the strategy as the ability of countries and societies to reform, withstanding and recovering from internal and external crises. The document applies this concept to the EU (for instance, mentioning the resilience of European democracies) as well as to third countries and particularly to those in the Middle East and North Africa.

According to this vision, the EU should contribute to making states and societies more resilient, probably as a response to a growing concern on the proliferation of failed states, ungoverned spaces and sectarian conflicts in this particular region. At the same time, resilience is an inherently dynamic concept and is not to be confused with a static understanding of stability. The Strategy notes that authoritarian states are inherently fragile in the long-term. The EU is not after phoney stability in the region, and while it will not pursue a blind one-size-fits-all approach to democratisation, it pushes back against the acceptance of authoritarian retrenchment in the region.

Precisely because resilience is rather new concept in the European jargon, it will require some fine-tuning and clarification in the implementation of the strategy. If the EU assumes that the Middle East, North Africa and adjacent regions are likely to project instability in the years to come, a strategy of resilience should consider mechanisms of early warning and targeted support to specific territories or sectors in the EU itself. Equally important, a resilience agenda implies strengthening the capacities of governments and societies of the region to deal with challenges that are already palpable such as water stress, radicalisation processes, lack of job opportunities for well-trained youth or the sudden influx of refugees.

## COOPERATIVE REGIONAL ORDERS

The EU has often been seen as an inspiration or even a model for regional cooperation efforts worldwide. Yet, this strategy assumes that regional organisations are not the only possibility, and that the EU itself is not the only model to emulate. In other words, that there is life beyond these organisations. The Middle East and North Africa are not short of regional organisations but as the strategy also points out, these bodies do not always address all relevant dynamics. The strategy is, thus, a call to make better use of already existing platforms but also an invitation to think beyond what already exists. Equally important, the EU seems to assume that regionalism is a means and not a goal in itself, and that not all forms of regionalisation are positive, while not all forms of positive regionalism ought to be highly institutionalised.

We can envisage four different effects of this new approach for the Middle East and North Africa even if this is not explicitly mentioned in the text: increased pressure (hopefully coupled with additional support) by the EU on the Union for the Mediterranean to deliver; an opportunity for stronger Euro-Arab political dialogue and cooperation if the League of Arab States is willing to (or

is allowed to) partner with the EU in areas of common interest; some sort of political initiative to improve different kinds of cooperation with and among Maghreb countries and between them and their African neighbours; and, finally, the attempt to launch parallel dialogues with the GCC and Iran, with the aim not only of reinforcing relations with the EU but also of deescalating tensions between Tehran and Riyadh.

## PRINCIPLED PRAGMATISM

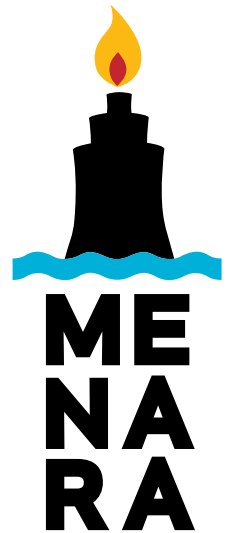
This concept says more about what the EU is trying to avoid (unprincipled pragmatism and principled idealism) than what it intends to pursue. The global strategy takes a modest and cautious approach. In a way, it does not want to create unattainable expectations. And this is even clearer in the sections of the strategy dealing with the Middle East and North Africa. There are no grandiose plans about transformation of the region, probably to avoid raising expectations while failing to deliver once again.

If this vision prevails, we can imagine an EU largely centred on supporting those few positive domestic and regional developments that already exist – be it in terms of supporting the resilience of Tunisia, backing local-level peace in conflicts such as Syria or Libya or supporting regional dialogue and practical cooperation bridging across regional divides. Human rights and civil society support might gain momentum, most likely at the expense of the democratisation agenda. On this particular point the EU should be cautious and find the right balance. For the EU to turn its back to legitimate concerns of citizens in the Middle East and North Africa is not sustainable. Let's not forget that the causes that led to the 2011 uprisings are still there and that many regimes can be fierce but also inherently fragile. The EU may not have the power to transform these realities, but being trapped, once again, in the illusion of stability in the region is a guarantee of failure.

## THE MENA REGION, A NATURAL TEST FOR THE STRATEGY

The lifetime of the Strategy should be more than five years and no more than a decade. A first question to be asked is whether the Middle East and North Africa will see a new order by then. Our answer is not yet. In other words, this strategy will have to cope with a transition to the unknown. Therefore, the upcoming steps to translate the EU Global Strategy into a regional one should avoid excessive rigidities and have inbuilt flexibility given that it will deal with a region in flux.

We also assume that the EU does not have the power to determine the regional order. Of course the EU does retain influence, along with other global actors or in partnership with some countries in the region. But arguably the main drivers in the region are more likely to respond to endogenous factors than exogenous ones. With this caveat in mind and being coherent with what is said in this strategy, one of the main challenges from now on will be to establish the means to strengthen endogenous forces that make societies and institutions resilient and that are willing and able to move the region into a more cooperative order. Any progress on these fronts will allow us to evaluate the Strategy's success.



**Middle East and North Africa Regional Architecture: Mapping geopolitical shifts, regional order and domestic transformations (MENARA)** is a research project that aims to shed light on domestic dynamics and bottom-up perspectives in the Middle East and North Africa amid increasingly volatile and uncertain times.

**MENARA** maps the driving variables and forces behind these dynamics and poses a single all-encompassing research question: Will the geopolitical future of the region be marked by either centrifugal or centripetal dynamics or a combination of both? In answering this question, the project is articulated around three levels of analysis (domestic, regional and global) and outlines future scenarios for 2025 and 2050. Its final objective is to provide EU Member States policy makers with valuable insights.

**MENARA** is carried out by a consortium of leading research institutions in the field of international relations, identity and religion politics, history, political sociology, demography, energy, economy, military and environmental studies.



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