



20 Years From the ENP

**De-Neighbouring EU-MENA Relations in Times of Hard
Politics**

Special Issue

Vol. 1, NO. 1, 1-84

**European
Student
ThinkTank**

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Editors' Foreword

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, the crisis in Gaza, and the spread of tensions, conflict, and instability in the wider Mediterranean have monopolised the European Union (EU)'s agenda in the first term of 2024, which has also marked the 20th anniversary of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). In-between the politics of enlargement and the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), the ENP's public space has dominated the EU's engagement with the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), becoming the principal EU policy framework in the region. Moving from the 20th anniversary of the ENP, the Observatory, in collaboration with the editorial team of the European Student ThinkTank (EST), promotes its first Special Issue "20 Years From the ENP: De-Neighbouring EU-MENA Relations in Times of Hard Politics" to understand and explain how EU-MENA Relations have changed over the last years while highlighting the EU's need and alleged attempt to go beyond its nearest neighbourhood. It does so at a critical moment of re-engagement with the region, seeking to unpack and contrast the idea of a normative neighbourhood that has long impacted on the EU's capacity and credibility in the whole region, while laying the foundations of the concept of "de-neighbouring" that seems to be key in tracing future trajectories in EU-MENA relations. This Issue combines academic contributions with policy-oriented research papers, and addresses the whole MENA region, not limiting itself to the traditional Mediterranean and Neighbourhood.

Luca Saviolo, Hafssa F. Elabiari & Tommaso Filippini

EST President's Foreword

Relations between the EU and the MENA region have for years sparked a lot of interest among young people joining the European Student Think Tank (EST). In this context, the Observatory on EU-MENA relations was founded to highlight the importance of the relations between the two regions and contribute to the creation of an interregional dialogue at youth level. In an interconnected world, developments and events in neighbouring regions have long impacted on Europe. 20 years since the launch of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), the EST is glad to present and promote the first Special Issue of the Observatory on EU-MENA relations. As the current president of the EST and a member of the organisation since the Observatory was created, I can attest to its evolution towards high quality standards and a high degree of professionalism in all the work published by the team. With the above mentioned objective in mind, this issue provides academic insights but also policy recommendations stemming from young people's perspectives. This Special Issue does not want to be an isolated publication, but invites and stimulates a rethinking debate on Euro-Med cooperation at all levels.

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How to cite (APA): Saviolo, L., Elabiari, F.H. & Filippini, T. (2024) "20 Years From the ENP: De-Neighbouring EU-MENA Relations in Hard Politics Time", *European Student ThinkTank*, 1(1).

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Introduction to the Special Issue

Unpacking a 'De-Neighbourhood Governance' in the Southern Mediterranean¹

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Abstract

The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) represents a milestone in the evolution of the European Union's (EU) external action in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Seen as an attempt of recasting the European engagement with the southern shore of the Mediterranean, it aimed to overcome "new dividing lines between the enlarged EU and its neighbours" and to promote and strengthen relations "on mutual commitment to common values" (European Commission, 2004: 3). In-between the politics of enlargement and the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), the ENP's public space has dominated the EU's approach to the MENA.

Moving from the 20th anniversary of the ENP, the Observatory promotes the special issue "20 Years From the ENP: De-Neighbouring EU-MENA Relations in Times of Hard Politics" to understand and explain how EU-MENA Relations have changed over the years. It does so in a critical moment of re-engagement with the region, seeking to unpack and contrast the idea of a normative neighbourhood that has long impacted on the EU's capacity and credibility in the whole region.

Keywords

EU, Foreign Policy, Middle East, North Africa, Southern Neighbourhood

Introduction

The launch of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) in the light of the 2004 enlargement represents a crucial step in the evolution of the role of the European Union (EU) beyond its borders. The ENP has been originally conceived as a tool to avoid "new dividing lines between the enlarged EU and its neighbours" and to promote cooperation and strengthen relations "on mutual commitment to common values" (European Commission, 2004, p. 3). Described as a recasting rather than a replacement of the previous Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), the ENP implied a combination of expansive power projection and norms diffusion that have placed the ENP space in-between enlargement structures and EU foreign policy by adopting a more-for-more approach on

¹A first version of this article has been published in the 2024 edition of the European Policy Review (ISSN: 2753-9199) as a special contribution from the Observatory.

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shared values and shared priorities with its southern neighbours. Given the emergence of new crises, challenges and threats, the ENP has undergone three main reviews since 2004 (2011, A New Response to a Changing Neighbourhood; 2015, Review of the ENP; 2021, A Renewed Partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood).

This paper aims to investigate the changing elements of the EU's approach to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) by focusing on its main policy framework, namely the ENP. Despite several revisions, we argue that the approach still follows a "more for more" logic, but that the nature of priorities, as well as the main vehicles for exerting influence have changed. Concretely, we posit that the nature of priorities has followed a security-stability trajectory, thus moving away from the original goals of the ENP, while the EU's vehicles for influence have expanded including non-traditional means of engagement and financing instruments. This leads us to argue and lay the primary foundations for theorising the idea of de-neighbourisation of EU-MENA relations as a response to emerging threats and new challenges.

Accordingly, the roadmap for this article is as follows: we first offer a brief literature review of the role of the EU in the international arena, while also covering the ENP scholarship. theoretical framework, highlighting the main discrepancies in terms of EU foreign policy, second we delve into the analysis, touching upon (1) the more for more approach, (2) the nature of EU foreign policy towards its southern neighbourhood and (3) the vehicles for this foreign policy influence. It is hoped that this study will be of interest to scholars of international relations and European studies, particularly those focusing on the development of economic, political and diplomatic relations between North Africa and the EU.

The ENP and its Myriads of Lenses

The role of the EU in the international arena has garnered vast academic interest from EU scholars, but theorising its external posture has always been highly problematic (Nicolaidis, 2015, p. 283). Although its external action has indeed nailed down a long-lasting debate over the EU's features and characteristics in the international arena as Civilian Power Europe (CPE) or Europe puissance (see Bull, 1978; Duchêne, 1972, 1973; Galtung, 1973), the notion of CPE - which targeted diffusion of norms, inner values and democratic standards as a means to enhance the scope of the European process (Orbie, 2006) - laid the foundations for further research on the conceptualisation of the EU pointing to its normative and ethical power (Aggestam, 2008; Diez, 2005; Manners, 2002), and marking a "conceptual shift" from what the EU is to what the EU does (Aggestam, 2008, p. 1), and what the EU pursues.

The construction and development of the EU as a normative power traces thus its roots back in the normative dimension of Duchêne's work which marked a fundamental step in the conception of the EU beyond its borders. Manners (2002, p. 236; 2008, p. 45) pushed it further by arguing that the EU has the ability to shape conceptions of "normal" and set "norms, standards and prescriptions" in world politics. Without going into the details of his work, it is here worth noticing how Manners' Normative Power Europe (NPE) has sparked an ever-active debate that has led to the rejecting, counter-arguing and recasting of the NPE in a 20-years' time frame. If some have emphasised the EU's value-driven external action (Sjursen & Smith, 2004), others, including Manners, have reshaped the NPE concept as key analytical element in the understanding of the EU's role in global and planetary politics (above all, Aggestam, 2008; Bicchi, 2007; Diez & Pace, 2011; Forsberg, 2011; Man-

-ners, 2008, 2013, 2023). The NPE has also attracted many critiques, leading authors to question whether the EU was actually “playing normative”. Some have pointed to the EU’s primary interests by depicting the EU as a realist actor in normative clothing, claiming that democratisation was not a top priority for the EU (Cavatorta et al., 2008; Hollis, 2012; Seeberg, 2009). Differently, Del Sarto (2015) places the critics to the EU on a different level by adopting an interest-oriented focus but through a constructivist perspective to argue how the EU pursues its security and economic interests but in a normative manner, therefore translating the NPE to Europe as a Normative Empire.

Here, the EU’s normative power is placed at a different level and represents a source of self-construction of the EU’s identity. This is clear by posing attention to the constitutive, founding norms of the EU. Examples can be given by looking at the Consolidated Version of the Treaty of the European Union (TEU), articles 2 and 3 state the normative posture of the EU by identifying its values and objectives in the promotion of freedom, democracy and human rights, while article 6 states the adoption of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. The latter defines the EU as “founded in the universal values of human dignity, freedom, equality and solidarity” and “based on the principles of democracy and the rule of law” (Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, 2012, p. 391). EU norms and values properly constitute the EU, and this is shown in how accession to the EU is conditional upon such values (art. 49, TEU). The EU’s normative character also crosses EU borders and informs foreign and development policies. Thus, the EU seems to be embedded within its norms and rules by paving the way towards a self-reinforcing process of integration, and therefore of identity formation (Christiansen, et al., 1999).

This is also the case of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) which marked a milestone in the evolution of the European Union’s (EU) external action in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), and thus of its beyond-borders identity.

While the role of the EU in the international arena has garnered vast academic interest, it is not surprising that scholars have also largely focused on the ENP. Authors have primarily directed their attention to the roots and origins of the ENP, pointing out its conceptual bonds with the enlargement policy (Bechev and Nicolaidis, 2010; Kelley 2006; Smith, 2005). The emphasis has been placed on the relation between enlargement and the ENP. The latter has been indeed conceived as an alternative or a response to the enlargement’s exhaustion trap (Lavenex, 2004; Lavenex and Schimmelfennig, 2011; Lavenex and Uçarer, 2002, 2004). Theorising the ENP as a mode of external governance allowed to account for the process of rule expansion and policy transfer beyond formal membership. This approach provides the ENP with more flexibility moving from hierarchical settings to horizontal forms of interaction (Lavenex 2004; Lavenex and Schimmelfennig, 2011, p. 794-796). Scholars have also focused on the EU’s actorness and its external posture identifying and constructing the EU as a normative power capable of setting norms, standards and prescriptions (Manners, 2002, 2008, 2013; Manners and Whitman, 2003). Others have criticised the concept of NPE through a constructivist approach, arguing the EU builds and shapes its own identity through internal norms and values “against an outside world” (Diez, 2005, p. 614; Laidi, 2005). These perspectives are reflected in the way the EU engages with and defines “the others”, including the MENA (Cebeci, 2022). One of the most ambitious critics to the NPE has been produced by Raffaella Del Sarto (2015, 2021) who applies a realist-constructivist analysis, tracing it as a neo-colonial bordering practice whereby the EU subjugates its periphery (Del Sarto, 2021). Post-colonial arguments have also been adopted by Nora Fisher-Onar (2022) who has claimed the necessity to re-“co-constitute” the relations between the EU and “the Others”, while feminist and queer perspectives have criticised how the EU enacts sex, gender and civil rights in the MENA as instrume-

nstrumental for stability and security (Ansorg and Hastrup, 2018; Muehlenhoff, 2022). Research work on the ENP has widely focused on the evolution of the EU policy in the Southern Neighbourhood and its relations with other EU's instruments and initiatives (Baracani, 2006; Bouris & Schumacher, 2016; Holden, 2008, 2020; Lehne, 2014). Authors have pointed to the EMP as a failing mechanism, conceiving the ENP as a recasting of old wine in new bottles (Del Sarto & Schumacher, 2005; Tocci & Colombo, 2012). Another vast flow of works has been produced on the EU security-stability nexus informing the ENP before and after the Arab uprisings (Badarin & Wildeman, 2022; Dandashly, 2018; Durac, 2018; Lounnas, 2022). Authors have identified it as a "master frame" to be operationalised in a dialogical and interactional manner with the region, introducing a more decentred perspective to the study and evolution of the ENP (Roccu & Voltolini, 2018, p. 2).

This large amount of academic work represents only a partial frame of the ENP scholarship developed in the last 20 years. This shows how the ENP has largely dominated the analysis and grasp of the EU in the MENA region, taking a central stage in academia, but also in policymaking. The next session will therefore move from the former to latter dimension by pointing to the evolution of the ENP priorities and means of engagement.

From 2004 Onwards: Normative Power, Security, and Moving Beyond the ENP

The ENP represents a milestone in the evolution of the EU's external action in the MENA area, depicted as an attempt of recasting the European engagement with the southern shore of the Mediterranean, while aimed at overcoming "new dividing lines between the enlarged EU and its neighbours" (European Commission, 2004, p. 3). The ENP has dominated the EU's approach to the region, becoming the EU's principal policy and institutional framework through which interaction has been structured.

Formally launched in 2004, the ENP was aimed at promoting "democracy, rule of law, respect for human rights, and social cohesion" at EU borders (European Commission, 2004), and responded to a series of events that have irreversibly muted the EU's approach beyond its borders more consistently and systematically, above all the 2004 enlargement that would have significantly modified European borders. It is thus unsurprising that the new policy framework towards the Mediterranean, Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia was drafted and negotiated together with the development of the new CFSP and on the side of the Constitutional process, failed later. The original goals of the ENP included alignment with EU democratic and humanitarian standards, for example through political (e.g., free and fair elections) and economic reforms through the instrument of conditionality (Lavenex & Schimmelfennig, 2011). The 2004 Commission's Strategy Paper (p. 3) set that "privileged relationship with neighbours will build on mutual commitment to common values principally within the fields of the rule of law, good governance, [and] the respect for human rights", while the degree of cooperation and interaction "will take into account the extent to which these values are effectively shared", including therefore an inner more-for-more approach since the very beginning.

Common values and priorities, including political reform and dialogue, were pursued through joint Annual Action Plans (AAPs), coupled with technical instruments such as Twinning (institutional collaboration between EU and ENP countries), TAIEX (Technical Assistance and Information Exchange instrument) or SIGMA (Support for Improvement in Governance and Management). Israel, Jordan, Morocco, the Palestinian Authority, and Tunisia were the first partners to join the Southern

ENP framework (Wesselink & Boschma, 2016). Libya and Syria were required to pursue internal political reform to meet the requirements for signing Association Agreements (AAs) or Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs), while Algeria and Egypt joined only at a later stage.

More than one wave of crises have obliged the EU to relaunch and revise the policy strategy in 2011, 2015 and 2021. This article claims that the “more for more” approach, despite the occurrence of multiple crises, has remained largely unaltered, but the rise of new challenges have obliged the EU to adopt new instruments and engage through non-traditional means of engagement that lead us to argue identify a de-neighbourisation of the EU approach towards the region, thus moving beyond the ENP framework. Our analysis moves through three key points: the “more-for-more” approach, the nature of the EU’s approach, and the vehicles for EU influence. This section analyses the three parts of this claim and concludes with some interpretations of the EU approach to foreign policy in the Mediterranean.

i. More-for-more and Policy Securitisation

The Arab uprisings marked a turning point for the ENP and its evolution, leading to its revision only seven years after its launch, three since its implementation starting from 2007, and not even completed the mid-term review of the 2007–2013 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF).

The revised framework, “A New Response to a Changing Neighbourhood” stressed the importance of “deep democracy” tied with the concept of “inclusive growth” by strengthening the “more-for-more” approach that would have allowed the EU to adopt a more flexible and differentiated strategy. The new approach would indeed have involved “a much higher level of differentiation allowing each partner country to develop its links with the EU as far as its own aspirations, needs and capacities allow” (European Commission, 2011). Moving from a regional to a differentiated bilateral framework, the text strongly emphasises the new strategy as a tool to address the evolving nature and needs of the EU’s southern partners, and to develop and formulate better tailored-policies. But if greater flexibility seemed to have prompted the EU to develop a more accentuated tailor-made approach per country and per sector, the ENP’s understanding of security has broadened across all sectors (Roccu & Voltolini, 2018). A comparison between the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI) and newly launched European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) – the EU external financial instruments for the MFF 2007–2013 and the MFF 2014–2020 respectively – strongly confirms it by showing a steep increase of the use of the term “security” in the latter. An analysis of the ENPI and the ENI texts reveals that the word “security” has more than doubled, while “migration” has almost tripled (Saviolo, 2021).

Please, note that observations were weighted proportionally by dividing by the number of pages of each text, and only those indirectly or directly referring to the Neighbourhood were included. At the same time, it is interesting to note how references to democracy steeply grew in line with the adoption of a “more-for-more” approach which is supposed to financially and politically reward those countries that perform more successfully in satisfying the EU’s demands (Völkel, 2014).

While the 2011 ENP review formally codified the need to follow a rewarding policy strategy, thus implementing the “more-for-more” approach, a new revision was adopted in 2015 given the emergence of new security challenges, such as terrorism, migration and regional instability: “conflict, rising extremism and terrorism, human rights violations and other challenges to internation-

-al law, and economic upheaval have resulted in major refugee flows [...] with the aftermath of the Arab Uprisings and the rise of ISIL/Da'esh" (European Commission, 2015, p. 1). By looking at the ENP documents, it is possible to observe how the "more-for-more" approach remained unaltered, as "not all partners aspire to EU rules and standards" (ibid.) and an incentive-based strategy has proven successful (p. 5). If the new policy would account for a greater space for non-EU countries, it placed the principles of differentiation and mutual ownership at the core of the new ENP, while codifying security and stability as key priorities. Although democracy, good governance, rule of law and economic development and growth remain on the EU agenda, their role appears to be quite different. If previous formulations depicted these as goals per se, the new revision clearly subordinated them to other primary targets, notably stability and security. While "economic and social development should be at the heart of the EU's contribution to stabilising the neighbourhood and building partnerships" (p. 7), security challenges are said to "lie outside the security domain alone" (p. 3). A securitised narrative is indeed applied throughout the whole text which contains 48 references to "security" in 21 pages, while a security dimension takes a central stage in all the identified priorities for joint cooperation (economic development for stabilisation, security, migration and mobility).

Once again, the occurrence of a new wave of crisis and emerging challenges led the EU and its southern neighbours to renew their partnership in light of the Covid-19 pandemic and the larger prominence taken by climate change and digital transition. While it does not come as a surprise that the rupture of the pandemic crisis, coupled with an increasing number of extreme weather phenomena, and the role of digital technologies, have stimulated a third review of the relations between the EU and its neighbours in less than 15 years, it is worth grasping how this new revision does not directly address the ENP but the Southern neighbourhood, albeit still within the ENP framework. The new partnership altered the foundational assumptions the policy has been based on. In the early 2000s, the ENP was heavily influenced and attached to the recent EU enlargements and the accession policy framework (Delcour, 2015), with a strong reliance on conditionality, monitoring and benchmarking, and the widespread adoption of EU rules and standards. Although a set of different objectives, the framework maintained a strong focus on security and stability, while combining them with a greater attention to climate and digital transition, and energy resources. The new strategy still adopts a more-for-more approach, strengthening the concept of joint ownership, in continuity with the ENP framework. In contrast, the renewed partnership expands the policy focus beyond the Neighbourhood, stressing the need to interlink the Mediterranean with interconnected areas, such as the Gulf, the Red Sea and the Sahel. This adds to the adoption of new tools, such as the Economic and Investment Plan or the adoption of the Team Europe Approach, that represent two main innovations of the new framework, still mainly focused on security and stability while promoting a more-for-more approach.

ii. New Vehicles for EU Influence

The EU's approach to exerting external influence in the Neighbourhood has notably changed, decreasing the norm diffusion dimension while reinforcing its emphasis on security and stability. The multiple revisions of the ENP has not, however, changed Brussels' more-for-more approach, but had a strong impact on the EU's vehicles for influence in the Southern region, moving from the ENP traditional tools to less traditional and new instruments. This section sheds light on the adoption of new means of engagement and financing instruments to argue that the EU is de-neighbourising its action in the MENA.

1) Means of Engagement: With respect to engagement, the shift from Annual Action Plans (AAPs) to Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) represents a significant change in the framework for international cooperation and aid disbursement. As mentioned above, the AAPs represent the main instrument within the ENP framework and through which EU policies and programmes are negotiated, formulated and implemented. Differently, MoUs do not fall within the ENP domain, and are historically less likely to characterise the EU's engagement with the neighbourhood. Such a shift has important implications for the interaction between the EU and the southern shore of the Mediterranean.

First, AAPs required deeper and larger interaction with regional stakeholders, including civil society organisations. This extensive engagement ensured that a diverse range of perspectives was incorporated into the planning and implementation phases, fostering a more inclusive and representative approach to regional development (European External Action Service, 2015). Additionally, AAPs mandated that specific criteria and performance benchmarks be met for the disbursement of funds. This performance-based approach ensured accountability and encouraged the effective use of resources by linking financial support to measurable outcomes and progress indicators (*ibid.*). In contrast, MoUs, such as the ones signed with Tunisia, Egypt and Lebanon, primarily involve state-to-state interactions, limiting the involvement of non-governmental actors, notably of civil society. This state-centric approach can streamline decision-making processes, but may overlook the contributions and concerns of local stakeholders. Furthermore, MoUs offer greater flexibility in terms of funding allocation, with most of the financial assistance provided as budget support aid. This flexibility grants recipient states more discretion in utilising the funds, allowing them to address immediate needs and priorities more effectively (García Andrade & Frasca, 2024). Given that MoUs are non-binding by nature, this approach may lead to more lenient accountability measures compared to the performance-based criteria of AAPs.

In summary, while MoUs provide a more flexible and state-focused mechanism for international cooperation, they may lack the inclusivity and rigorous accountability that characterised AAPs, reflecting a trade-off between adaptability and comprehensive stakeholder engagement, which effectively reduces the normative handle of the EU on its neighbourhood, thereby supporting the claim that the EU is engaging in de-neighbouring regarding the Mediterranean region.

2) Financing Instruments: In addition to the EU's means of engagement, Brussels' action is also shaped by its financial dimension, namely the EU's external financing instruments. The recent structural changes to the financing framework of EU foreign policy have led to a clear de-neighbouring of the Mediterranean region, reducing some of the emphasis that was initially placed on the Southern Neighbourhood as a result of the enlargement policy. Particularly notable is the shift from the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI), which applied from 2014 to 2020, to the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) - 'Global Europe', which will be the leading framework until 2027.

The ENI specifically targeted the ENP countries, encompassing nations in Eastern Europe, the Southern Caucasus, and the Southern Mediterranean (EurLex, 2023). In contrast, the NDICI has a much broader scope. It combines several existing instruments, including the ENI, the Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI), the European Development Fund (EDF), and the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP), into one comprehensive framework (European Commission, 2023). This integrated approach covers all countries and regions, such as Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, the Americas, and the Pacific, in addition to the Neighbourhood. This switch from the

regional to the global undermines the importance of the Neighbourhood and underscores the EU's strategic priorities in enhancing security and influence, potentially overshadowing its traditional emphasis on norm diffusion.

Changes are also evident in the budgetary allocation of both frameworks. The ENI had a budget of approximately €15.4 billion for 2014–2020 (EurLex, 2023), devoted specifically to neighbourhood countries based on bilateral and regional programs. This budgetary focus allowed for targeted interventions in the EU's immediate vicinity. On the other hand, the NDICI boasts a significantly larger budget of around €79.5 billion for 2021–2027, divided into geographic programs, thematic programs, rapid response actions, and an additional flexibility cushion for unforeseen events. This structure not only provides more substantial financial resources, but also ensures the EU can respond swiftly and effectively to crises and emerging priorities, since the NDICI allows funds to be reallocated to urgent priorities without lengthy procedural delays (European Commission, 2023). This increased flexibility and comprehensive budgetary framework reduce the emphasis placed on the Neighbourhood and reduce the support for de-democratisation and other dynamics that would have followed from the original ENP, heavily focused on norms diffusion. Additionally, the NDICI shows strengthened support for a faster and more direct route to securing the EU's external policy objectives, which is additional evidence to our claim that the EU's neighbourhood is no longer a normative playing field.

Puzzling the ENP's New Frames

The evolution of the ENP reflects numerous shifts in the EU's approach to the MENA region. Initially conceived as a vehicle for fostering cooperation with neighbouring states and promoting a normative alignment on shared values and priorities, the ENP has undergone significant transformations over the years that are worth analysing to make sense of the current geopolitical landscape surrounding relations with the EU's southern partners.

The ENP's trajectory underscores the EU's dual role as both a normative power and a pragmatic actor in international relations, which has been largely picked up by the research work. Scholars have long debated whether the EU's external actions truly reflect its professed norms and values, or whether they primarily serve strategic interests in stability and security. This tension between norm diffusion and strategic realism has been particularly evident in the policy's shifts towards a more securitized approach, triggered by the emergence of new threats and challenges that have led the EU to recast its regional policy more than three times in less than 20 years. This has shown how the different revisions have not altered the inner more-for-more approach that has been at the core of the ENP since its creation. This notwithstanding, the article has shed light on a process of retreat of the ENP in the EU's approach to the region, namely de-neighbouring its engagement with its partners.

The research work has shown how the process of de-neighbouring is marked by the displacement of democratisation as a mediator of security and the change in vehicles for EU external influence from traditional to non-traditional and informal means. Regarding the latter, both the engagement with multiple stakeholders and the financing frameworks, which represented the foundations of the ENP, have been subject to changes throughout the past years. The EU's current preference for MoUs showcases reduced engagement with civil society and stakeholders in the region, marking a departure from the AAPs as principal tools. Financially, the shift from the ENI to the NDICI

underscores the preference for a global approach that softens the focus on the neighbourhood and allows for direct, swift and effective action in cases of crisis or emergency. Looking ahead, the prospects for EU external action in the Mediterranean region appear increasingly shaped by pragmatic security imperatives rather than normative aspirations. Different waves of diverse crises and the emergence of new threats and challenges have led the EU to operationalise a policy shift that have moved the ENP to the background. By introducing the first Special Issue of the Observatory on EU-MENA Relations of the European Student ThinkTank (EST), this paper aims to lay the foundations for charting such a process of de-neighbouring that is expected to affect the whole EU's approach to the region. Mapping this process will be crucial to understand the new challenges and opportunities that may derive from it, but also to grasp and comprehend how this will impact on the EU's engagement with the neighbours of its neighbours.

Accordingly, the Special Issue *20 Years From the ENP: De-Neighbouring EU-MENA Relations in Times of Hard Politics* aims to launch, trace, and stimulate such a debate among the Euro-Med community at different layers and within different fora. It does so at a critical moment of the EU's re-engagement with the MENA region, seeking to unpack and contrast the idea of a normative neighbourhood that has long impacted on the EU's capacity and credibility in the Southern Mediterranean, while laying the foundations of the concept of "de-neighbouring" that seems to be key in tracing future trajectories in EU-MENA relations. This Issue combines academic contributions with policy-oriented research papers, and addresses the whole MENA region, not limiting itself to the Mediterranean. The decision to include countries that are not part of the ENP is meant to show the Observatory's awareness of the need of a more inclusive and coherent regional EU approach to the MENA. This contribution does not aim to be exclusive in its content. Rather, it invites and wants to stimulate reactions from the realms of academia, policymaking, and activist and non-profit organisations.

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Empowering Women and Youth: Rethinking the EU's Engagement with Iran

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Abstract

This essay argues that the European Union (EU) should expand its engagement with the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) beyond traditional matters such as nuclear non-proliferation, economic sanctions, and regional stability. Through a historical overview of EU-Iran relations, it highlights how this narrow focus has neglected other critical areas such as human rights, youth empowerment, and gender equality, which could promote a more inclusive and stable relationship. Moreover, it showcases the current situation of youth and women in the IRI and the EU's concerns and used strategies. For this reason, the essay proposes adopting a feminist foreign policy to emphasize the advancement of women and youth in Iran, in alignment with the EU's strategic objectives. The essay advocates for a paradigm shift in EU-Iran relations that allows for the incorporation of human rights and women's rights into diplomatic strategies. Several policy proposals such as engaging with civil society, increasing representation, and broadening the understanding of security, are recommended so that the EU can cultivate meaningful dialogue and promote shared values of prosperity and peace in the region.

Keywords

EU, Foreign Policy, Iran, Women, Youth

Introduction

Geopolitical relations are often based on conventional priorities, such as economic relations, diplomacy and security concerns. Nonetheless, underneath these traditional criteria lie overlooked metrics that can significantly influence international relations.

Historically, the European Union (EU) has focused its engagement with the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) on critical areas such as nuclear non-proliferation, economic sanctions, and regional stability. While these are undeniably crucial, a narrow and limited focus has led to the neglect of other key aspects that could promote a more stable and holistic relationship, or at least provide the EU with a greater room for manoeuvre. Over the past years, the issues of human rights, youth empowerment and gender equality have been excluded from the diplomatic priorities, limiting the potential for

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more sustainable and inclusive ties with the IRI and its society.

This essay explores the need for the EU to recalibrate its engagement with the IRI, moving beyond the traditional patterns of nuclear proliferation, economy, and regional stability. Drawing insights from the past two decades, it identifies an overemphasis on conventional metrics, and a neglect of vital dimensions such as human rights, youth empowerment, and the needs of marginalized communities. Later, it states the current context of these communities in the IRI and it proposes a new engagement model that advocates for emphasising the advancement of women and youth in Iranian society through a feminist foreign policy perspective. It discusses the political limitations and challenges of the policy shift and the alignment of these new proposed priorities with the EU's strategic objectives. In the end, the essay offers general policy recommendations that the Union can take toward a new feminist and human-rights-based paradigm.

Therefore, this essay puts forward the argument that emphasizing the advancement of women and youth in Iranian society will lead to a more inclusive and sustainable relationship between the EU and Iran, contributing to broader regional stability and social progress.

EU-Iran Relations: a Historical Overview

In 1971, the last Persian Shah, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, honored the 2,500 years of the Persian monarchy by throwing an ostentatious celebration attended by European state leaders from France, the United Kingdom (UK), Belgium, Spain, the Netherlands, and Italy – to name a few. The party was even recorded as the most lavish official banquet in modern history in the Guinness Book of Records. Only eight years later, the Islamic Revolution dethroned the Shah, drastically putting an end to the friendly relations between Iran, at that time Persia, and Europe. Even though diplomatic relations were not cut off, as was the case of the United States (US) after the famous US embassy abduction, the relationship that Europe and Iran used to have has never been restored and the practical cooperation among them remains well below potential.

During the last twenty years, the IRI has been one of the main priorities in the EU's foreign policy agenda. Most of the attention has come from the questionable Iranian nuclear program, which has long and is still believed to have military applications (Gaietta, 2015). In 2003, the Iranian nuclear programme caused international controversy, sparking concerns. At that time, the EU started imposing multilateral sanctions against Iran within the United Nations (UN) framework, which later became unilateral sanctions, significantly damaging the Iranian economy (Jalilvand, 2018). Iran was cut off from the international financial system, the total oil production was reduced, oil exports were cut by half, and European trade with Iran fell from 27.8 billion euros in 2011 to 6.2 billion in 2013. Overall, the imposed sanctions led Iran into negative real GDP growth in the years 2012, 2013, and 2015 (IMF, 2018).

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreement was finally signed by the US, Russia, China, and Iran in 2015 and it offered the country sanctions relief in exchange for reducing their capacity to produce nuclear weapons. The momentum was, therefore, switched from confrontation to cooperation. Moreover, the agreement marked an important victory for the EU's negotiation power (Besliu, 2023). The Union even portrayed the deal as a "crucial achievement of European diplomacy" (EEAS, 2024). Iran had two main objectives in accepting the deal: (1) It hoped to recover

economically after years of tough and rigid sanctions. In fact, in 2016, the country became the fastest-growing economy in the MENA region while other regional nations suffered economic stagnation; (2) Iran aimed to acquire recognition as a legitimate regional power in the Middle East (Jalivand, 2018).

However, only three years later, in 2018, the United States withdrew from the nuclear deal. In contrast, the EU maintained its commitment due to regional security concerns and normative interest in non-proliferation, as was reaffirmed by EU Member States in 2022. While the last 4 years have shown efforts to save the agreement, the relationship between Iran and the EU has degraded rapidly due to new external challenges, such as Iran's military support to Russia in the war in Ukraine, Tehran's increased involvement in regional conflicts, and its continued violations of human rights. Moreover, in recent years, Iran has opened bilateral talks with the US, bypassing the EU (Besliu, 2023). Therefore, Iran's unwillingness to fully cooperate with the International Atomic Energy Agency and the country's nuclear program expansion against the JCPOA puts the Union in a state of concern that trumps most other diplomatic relations in the region (Immenkamp, 2023).

Nowadays, the EU does not have a Delegation in Iran. In the words of the EU's diplomatic service, relations with Iran are based on a comprehensive approach that shifts between cooperation and divergence according to the areas of mutual interest or issues of concern. The Joint Statement from the 16th of April 2016, which the Council of the European Union further defined in December 2022 by adding new conclusions, conveys the goals set for EU-Iran relations. It includes numerous areas of cooperation, such as trade, investment, energy and climate change, civil nuclear cooperation, humanitarian issues, and other regional issues.

This historical overview clearly points out the continuous focus on traditional topics of nuclear proliferation, regional stability, and economy that Iranian-European relations have maintained during the last decades. Therefore, there has been an overemphasis on conventional metrics, while neglecting other crucial dimensions such as human rights, women's rights, and the needs of marginalized communities.

Considering the current challenges that burden EU-Iranian diplomatic relations - which will be analyzed further later on - the prospect of meaningful dialogue with Iran seems unlikely. Nonetheless, cooperation with Teheran remains vital for both regional and European stability.

Women and Youth in Iran

Given the stated challenges that characterize EU-Iran relations, a promising avenue for cooperation involves addressing and supporting the critical issues faced by women and youth in Iran, who are at the forefront of the push for change. Multitudinary protests that spread throughout Iran under the slogan "Woman, Life, Freedom", after the murder of Mahsa (Jina) Amini in the custody of Iran's morality police on September 16, 2022, are a clear illustration. Amini's death put focus on a movement that connects women's freedom to choose their dress code to the systemic social, political, and economic grievances of a larger population that demands fundamental change. In claiming the protection of their basic rights, Iranians were revolting against a system that not only oppresses women and peaceful dissent but also continues to fail to meet citizens' needs. This fight, which attracted global solidarity, highlights the core message that when women's rights are marginalized to nonexistence, human rights for all are at risk.

However, the Iranian government responded with brutal repression against the peaceful demonstrators, infringing human rights and constraining peaceful activists and civil society organisations.

The context of such protests is characterized by the worsening living conditions that have marked Iranians' lives during the past years and which were aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic: high inflation, rising inequality and unemployment, and increases in food prices are just some examples of the hardships the nation is facing. The unemployment rate amongst the youth increased to 20,6% during the fourth quarter of 2023 (Trading Economics, 2024) and the inflation rate reached 40% in 2021 (Puri-Mirza, 2023). It is important to highlight that the Iranian government has strong and broad control over the country's economy, making it highly responsible for its economic management and provision of services.

While economic hardship is impacting almost everybody's lives in Iran, it is relevant to analyse the way economic marginalization and precarity affect women particularly:

- Women's unemployment rate is two times that of men, even though they make up over 50% of university graduates in Iran.
- Three out of four families that live below the poverty line are headed by women.
- Internet shutdown and increasing restrictions to the web are impacting women entrepreneurs.
- The amount of child marriages increased by 10.5% in 2020.

Moreover, the conditions for women from ethnic minorities, who live in the country's less developed regions, are more fragile. The provinces of Kermanshah and Kurdistan, both populated by Kurds, had the highest unemployment rates in 2021 (Mittelhammer et al., 2023).

The "Women, Life, Freedom" movement that took over Iran is nothing new. Iranian women have been actively engaged in civil society over the last four decades, becoming themselves agents of social change. Contrary to how Iranian women are sometimes portrayed outside of their country, they are not powerless victims within patriarchal societies. Instead, they are at the forefront of advocating for equality, preventing violence, increasing women's political participation, seeking to reform laws that discriminate against them, and finding innovative ways to ensure the economic well-being of women.

A recent qualitative study aimed to understand the roles of women in Iranian society, through their experiences, and personal perspectives. It uniquely recognizes their forms of creating social change and new identities. The study shows that, in Iran, women lead the way towards breaking social boundaries and taboos, they believe in strong and consistent change (evolution) rather than unsustainable and temporary change (revolution), and they make use of social media as a strategic tool to amplify their concerns. Moreover, the increased participation of Iranian women in societal activities reflects the impact of their protests (Salehi et al, 2024).

Despite the current economic and social hardships in the country, which create problems for women and young people in Iran, the fact that they are continually trying to change and develop society is creating a chance for having new relationships with the country and its civil society organizations. This new paradigm of engagement can ensure a more inclusive and equitable future for all Iranians.

EU's Opportunities, Challenges, and Constraints

In recent years, tensions in Iranian-European relations have increased due to the emergence and continuation of several crises that have placed both actors in a precarious diplomatic position. The EU's concern grew steeply after the violent repression and human rights violations of the Iranian government on popular protests in 2022. Moreover, Iran's military support to Russia in its war against Ukraine has showcased Iran's capacity for conventional weaponry (Immenkamp, 2023). Tehran's aid in the form of money, arms, and diplomacy to non-state actors across the Middle East has increased tensions and difficulties in the EU's interests in the region. More recently, Tehran's involvement in supporting the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) in Sudan's civil war has also caught Brussels' attention.

In order to answer these concerns, the EU has adopted several measures. First of all, it has condemned the murder of Mahsa Amini and the disproportionate violence the government has used against nonviolent protestors in Iran. The EU and its Member States have also proclaimed their support to the Iranian people in their right to peacefully protest, share their opinions and discontent freely. Besides, the EU has imposed restrictive actions on numerous high-ranking Iranian entities and individuals, such as not allowing them to travel to the EU, freezing their assets, and banning them from making funds and economic resources available to them. With regard to the human rights violations committed by the government in Iran, the EU has adopted resolutions calling for the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps to be added to the EU terrorist list. Moreover, in November 2022, the European Parliament decided that delegations and committees would no longer engage with the Iranian authorities.

The EU has been an outspoken critic of the Iranian government's violent repression of citizens. Nonetheless, this position has not translated into an emphasis on fundamental rights in terms of political priorities. The EU's narrow policy framework still revolves around the nuclear deal, primarily focusing on trying to revive the JCPOA agreement. Since April 2021 for example, the EU has been leading diplomatic talks in Vienna to negotiate the return of the United States to the JCPOA and ensure its full implementation by all sides. Despite acknowledging its great importance, the deal addresses only a narrow security concern and blurs broader but equally important issues regarding human rights and gender equality, which are imperative to foster sustainable development, stability, and peace in the region (Mittelhammer et al., 2023). Adding a gender perspective into foreign policy is not just a matter of principle but also a strategic need for the EU to be able to engage with Iran regardless of the authoritarian nature of its government and support a resilient and inclusive Iranian society.

The EU's approach to its relations with Iran must comply with its own guiding principles of gender equality and human rights. The EU's Multiannual Indicative Program (MIP) for Iran outlines the need to incorporate human rights and gender issues as policy priorities. Therefore, it serves as a foundation for reshaping EU-Iran relations. In order to understand the opportunities and challenges of this paradigm shift, it is important to understand the basis of feminist foreign policy and how it applies to diplomatic strategies.

The feminist foreign policy approach focuses on the idea that men and women experience war and conflict in different ways. The consequences that they face and their possible contributions are distinct due to their diverse current positions and roles in society. Unlike traditional views that provide gender-blind analyses, this feminist perspective considers these inequalities at every scale to provide complete political interpretations. These feminist perspectives, when focused on diplomacy and security, aim to broaden security definitions, recognize women's agency in political processes,

and better understand power dynamics (Adebahr et al, 2020). Thus, the change in EU-Iranian diplomatic relations should focus on the following steps:

1) Expand the approach and prioritising human rights: providing support to Iranian women's organizations to broaden the dialogue on mutual concerns and societal issues. The EU must create a gender-aware policy approach that includes a broader definition of security. From a feminist perspective, achieving security is understood beyond military and coercive measures. Security is not defined just as the absence of war but as a context with elements of positive peace, including sustainable development in matters of health, economy, and social justice (Tickner, 1992).

Some actions to consider to work towards this goal are as follows:

- Keeping a strong stand against the execution of protesters and using all diplomatic tools available to the EU to end such violations;
- Creating safe processes for protesters and human rights defenders at risk to flee the country;
- Maintaining and expanding targeted sanctions against those individuals in the Iranian authorities responsible for women's and human rights violations;
- Monitoring and mitigating the negative impact of restrictive sanctions on the civilian population;
- Building multilateral coalitions (including key Global South countries) to communicate clear and specific human rights demands to Iran.

2) Fostering representation: in order to ensure effective and inclusive policies, the EU institutions ought to create cultural changes that establish equal representation and gender-aware resource allocation. For this matter, it is necessary to promote women's economic and political agency through concrete measures such as:

- Support female-led cooperatives and entrepreneurs with training programs and actions to increase their access to markets;
- When funding is available, prioritize Iranian provinces with weaker economies;
- Providing individual fellowships for research and training.

3) Nurture civil society: including the perspectives of civil society reinforces democratic values and allows for sustainable partnerships through time. The EU must work alongside both European and Iranian civil society organizations to inform policy strategies and empower grassroots voices. The EU's MIP (previously mentioned) specifically supports civil society initiatives in a wide range of sectors, which offers an opportunity to collaborate further for gender equality and youth empowerment. Nonetheless, maintaining at the same time dialogue with the government of Iran will secure effective policy implementation.

To work towards this direction, several policies can be taken into consideration:

- Enable communication mechanisms to promote civil society input and feedback into EU policy making on Iran;
- Manage input from civil society to reduce existing information gaps regarding women's rights and needs in Iran;
- Use the potential for cooperation through UN agencies and other international actors further;
- The EU could explore options to provide funding for women's rights organizations in Iran;
- Ensure gender-aware funds allocation and further analyze its impacts on society;
- An increase in funds allocation could be considered through the MIP, human rights and democracy programs, and civil society organizations under the Global Europe: Neighborhood, Development, and International Cooperation Instrument.

Besides, EU strategies have to take into consideration Iran's new global alliances that keep the nation from traditional engagement with Western countries. Joining the BRICS will offer Iran numerous trade opportunities with countries like Russia and China that also face Western pressures. Accordingly, dialogue and partnerships have to be leveraged while considering going from punitive measures like sanctions to incentives that foster cooperation (Besliu, 2023).

Conclusion

Despite the fact that there are sentiments of alienation nowadays between both regions, which have traces its roots in the establishment of the IRI and in the 1979 Islamic Revolution - although it is however worth clarifying that different and contrasting tendencies have been registered in EU-Iran relations since the 1979 - it is crucial to recognize the historical ties between Europe and Iran. To comprehend our past, it is important to understand the cultural and economic connections we have had (Nekuee, 2010). The European Union has taken a complex stance on its dealings with Iran; this involves denouncing human rights abuses, imposing sanctions, and making various attempts aimed at upholding non-proliferation agreements. The policy framework of the EU shows an inclination towards security concerns mostly emphasizing safeguarding measures in connection with the nuclear deal at the expense of wider human rights and gender equality questions. This narrow focus highlights the need for a paradigm shift in EU-Iran relations that integrates a feminist foreign policy perspective.

A feminist foreign perspective would imply putting the focus on representation, inclusivity, and dialogue with citizens and civil society organizations. However, it is important to clarify that adopting a feminist approach when it comes to European policy in Iran does not mean that the EU is taking the role of savior of Iranian women. Equally, it doesn't imply either that such policies can only be executed by women. Instead, adding a feminist foreign policy implies taking society as a whole into consideration, both at home and abroad, by considering women and other marginalized groups as agents of change. This perspective aligns with EU values and, at the same time, addresses some of the basic social challenges that Iranian women and youth face nowadays.

In conclusion, EU-Iranian relations require a paradigm shift that incorporates a holistic approach to prioritize human rights and women's rights within its diplomatic strategies. By engaging with civil society, increasing representation and broadening the understanding of security, the European Union can promote meaningful dialogue and foster the shared values of prosperity and peace in the region.

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Understanding Postcolonialism in the EU's Migration Governance in the Southern Neighbourhood¹

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Abstract

This chapter critically examines the European Union's (EU) discourse towards the Southern Neighbourhood. The central argument is that, following poststructuralism, the EU's construction of itself as an actor in the region is problematic, given its claims to civilizational values and the imposition of norms of good governance that have been legitimised through the framework of Normative Power Europe (NPE). The research question asks how the logics and rationalities of the EU's good governance discourse produce a set of norms under the ENP tools to enforce migration governance in the Southern Neighbourhood. This question is explored through the governmentality approach, which explains how norms and values are assumed and enforced. The case studies of Lebanon and Morocco, with their different political systems and history of engagement with the EU, demonstrate how good governance and its particular component of migration is central to the EU's foreign policy and its relationship with the neighbourhood. Moreover, this chapter draws from postcolonial literature in the MENA region. The methodology employed is critical discourse analysis (CDA), using a discourse historical approach (DHA) that places historical and governmental context at the centre of identity construction through language. The analysis takes into account the Moroccan and Lebanese contexts to address the scholarly gap in the literature linking migration governance critical theories applied to the southern neighbourhood. It concludes that the concept of 'migration good governance' must be decolonized.

Keywords

Lebanon, Morocco, Migration Governance, Poststructuralism, Critical Discourse Analysis, EU Foreign Policy

¹ This chapter builds on the author's Master Thesis, published and accessible via the following link:<https://www.coleurope.eu/fifth-special-issue-de-europa-european-and-global-studies-journal-featuring-six-masters-theses>.

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Introduction

Discourses are probably the most important element in international politics. Discourses and speeches made by the leaders both in the EU and the MENA region have influenced the construction of the relation between both entities. For example, we understand the countries of 'southern Europe' precisely more as countries belonging to Europe than belonging to other (un)constructed identities such as the 'Mediterranean' that is only seen as a geographical entity.

Discourses build the "us" against "them". Why, then, we do not give a more central role to the analysis of discourses? And which approaches can make us better understand discourses in the relations between the EU and the Middle East and North Africa? This chapter draws up from an array of critical approaches in the field of EU-MENA studies (poststructuralism, Foucauldian governmentality, postcolonial theory and critical constructivist perspectives), which can be summed up in their common objective to question "the very conceptualisation of the EU as an actor operating in the region" (Dionigi, 2021; p. 97). The objective of this chapter is to understand how the EU constructs itself as an actor and how it perceives the countries of the Southern Neighbourhood in some of its declarations, speeches and policy documents that has issued during the years. The EU defends a set of civilizational values that claims for itself and even places its origin in the same civilizations that once ruled the Mediterranean. These values are enforced through the norms of "good governance", and it has consequences in specific policy areas such as migration governance.

The EU has recurred to the metaphor of the "Neighbourhood" to talk about the immediate geographical countries in its foreign policy, giving birth to the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). Moreover, ENP policies are mostly governed by the ideals of "good governance", that are defined in several ways by international institutions, but that overall mirror the European liberal democracies. The EU good governance is presented in a sort of concentric circles, where the countries that are closer to the locus of power and richer are able to influence the policies more successfully (Schimmelfennig, 2016). The Southern Neighbourhood is made up of the south Mediterranean, Arab-speaking that have been subject to Orientalism by Western political thought, being the place "of Europe's greatest richest and oldest colonies" (Said, 1979). The collaboration with these countries started with the Barcelona Process in 1995 as a way to promote the adoption of norms and build a "secure, stable and peaceful" region (Pace, 2007). In the view of poststructuralism, foreign policy is highly dependent on the identity of an actor made via discourse construction (Adler, 2016), and some scholars have argued that even by differentiation with other actors or groups of actors. The southern neighbourhood is also defined, approached and constructed by the EU.

Therefore, the central research question of this chapter is the following: How do these logics and rationalities produce a set of norms under the European Neighbourhood Policy tools for migration governance in the southern neighbourhood? This question explores the governmentality approach, that explains how certain norms and values are assumed and enforced (Derous&De Roeck, 2019). As case studies are taken Lebanon and Morocco, which have different contexts and expectations from the EU. Despite this, they have some commonalities, especially in their colonial past: both countries were part of French colonialism and adopted a system of institutions and clientelistic relations as a result.

The chapter will be organised in the following way. In the first part, the theoretical background and the methodology are presented. This will take the article to explain what is the field of postcolonial studies, and its relationship with the EU's 'neighbourhood' as well as the concept of good governance.

The concepts of Foucauldian governmentality and Normative Power Europe will also be explained. The second part delves deeper into what these concepts mean in the specific case studies of Lebanon and Morocco in 'migration good governance'. Finally, the conclusion will provide reflections about what role postcolonialism can play in EU-MENA relations for the future.

Understanding Poststructuralism in EU's Present

i. Poststructuralism and European Foreign Policy

It is very difficult to locate the EU in a very specific category of an international actor (Ginsberg, 1999). Is it a "supranational organisation", is it a completely new kind or is it only an international organisation made up of states that have ceded part of their sovereignty? What is common to all the discourses, however, is the fact that the EU asserts that it has a positive force to create, that it can change the world for better: this is what was firstly defined by François Duchêne (1973): he conceived the European Communities as a "civilian actor": an entity that was able to create a harmonious community based on civilian forms of influence and action. This notion gradually evolved to become what in 2002 Ian Manners coined "Normative Power Europe" (NPE) (Manners, 2002): in other words, he changed the internal dimension that Duchêne had vested the European Communities with, and added an external dimension, the pulse for the globalisation of universal norms that EU was introducing through its external policies as a united bloc with a shared vision.

NPE quickly became a very popular notion that expanded in all directions: the EU was suddenly seen as a "norms entrepreneur", a "norms diffuser" or even a "normative empire" (Pace, 2007). Other categories brought in were also Ethical Power Europe (Hyde-Price, 2008), Market Power Europe (Damro, 2012) or Liberal Power Europe (Wagner, 2017). Moreover, with the advent of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) the EU quickly started to sign Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) that sought to implement a series of norms in external trade with the countries that negotiated with. By 2012, when the EU won the Nobel Peace Prize, it was almost set in stone that the EU as a community of values was an outstanding example of peace and prosperity and that it could extend these values especially through its neighbours.

All these ideas came from the realm of poststructuralism. Poststructuralism is a theory of international relations that confronts directly with other traditional theories, such as realism (Toje, 2011), that see the EU as a 'void' organisation: for them, it is not the EU who is taking the decisions, but the member states. Poststructuralism, nevertheless, advocates that ideas have a very powerful role to change reality and they even constitute reality itself, summed up in Derrida's phrase: 'there is nothing outside the text'. In this way, if the EU creates a specific discourse where it asserts that it can be a positive influence or a 'force for good', therefore this will have implications in those other institutions that the EU wants to influence. This has at least three implications: one, that we can do things with words (performativity); two, that certain norms and borders are set via these words (governmentality) and, third, that all discourses are open, they may change, that there is no way of defining something in an unmovable way (let's call this openness) (Carta, 2021; p. 50).

This is why NPE and poststructuralism are so strongly related. To this, we may add constructivism, which is not a theory of international relations, but is deeply embedded in the last consequence, the 'openness' of meanings and intentions and that explains how social meanings are constructed, where the 'EU' and the 'neighbourhood' can mean many things for many different people (Adler, 2016). This theory also informs my research. Thomas Diez, however, has criticised the notion of NPE from within poststructuralism itself: it is a "practice of discourse representation", that creates both

the 'Self' as a desired utopia and 'Others' as failed versions, therefore disregarding "their own shortcomings unless a degree of self-reflexivity is inserted" (Diez, 2005; p. 626). He poses the example of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, established in 1995, as a case in the creation of 'others' that violate a series of standards, which legitimises the EU to exert civilian power. Yet, Rumelili (2004) has also provided another argument, saying that not all EU's interactions are based on an 'other/self' relationship. In other words, there are 'grey' areas that can carry many different implications, where identity differentiation can lead to outcomes that range from direct cooperation or conflict to more abstract convergence or dissociation.

Lastly, Foucauldian governmentality is the approach that I will use to analyse the discourse of the EU. According to Cebeci (2017), the EU "sells" itself as a postmodern/post-sovereign/post-Westphalian actor, that is, following Manners' conceptions, different from pre-existing political forms (the nation-state); henceforth, Europe is normatively different. It poses values and norms in the front, leading by 'virtuous example'. But, in practice, this does not result in less domination: Europe expects these countries to adopt a one-size-fits-all model, for instance enforcing 'best practices' in the ENP. More specifically, governmentality is 'Foucauldian' because it is based on the findings of the French philosopher, who worked on the treatment of mental insanity and people with psychological disabilities: the "sovereign subject", the protagonist of Western thought since the Enlightenment, was discovered as nothing more than the "product of contingent normativizing practices" (Li, 2007), i.e. it said what was good and what was not good.

İşleyen (2015) has provided a very strong argument for neoliberal governmentality, studying the enforcement of the Twinning Instrument of the EU in Tunisia and Egypt and how a result of this instrument is the enforcement of neoliberalism: the privatisation of markets and public services. Merligen (2007) studies governmentality in the EU's foreign policy in Macedonia and Bosnia, where the EU experts impose a series of norms "while they themselves hailed from countries facing many of the same policing challenges as Macedonia". The conclusion is not that the EU is a negative power, but that norms have two facets: they serve as means of control or limits; on the other, a means of emancipation from tyranny, insecurity, poverty and so forth. For instance, in Eastern Neighbourhood countries such as in the recent protests in Georgia in 2024 but also in the Euromaidan in Ukraine, it was clear that the EU served as a benchmark to liberate themselves of the Russian jaw.

ii. Postcolonialism and Good Governance

Why is the EU valued as the paradigm of civilisation or human rights? Why are some people looking to emigrate to a very select group of countries, especially European ones? In the literature, we can find many explanations, but there is none that is as clear and revealing as postcolonialism. What is called "coloniality" or the *patrón colonial de poder* (colonial matrix of power) was a concept introduced by the Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano and it is served to "name the underlying logic of the foundation and unfolding of Western civilization from the Renaissance to today": the idea of modernity and its constitutive darker side, coloniality (Quijano, 2007). Coloniality has theological origins and creates a specific system of (re)producing knowledge fostering all the concepts that have their origin in the Enlightenment and the idea of the human as a rational agent and also creates a hierarchy: European/Western culture and forms of knowledge is always more legitimate, more 'seductive' than other cultures: the free market, democracy, ideas of freedom, progress and "scientific" knowledge are always created according to these rules and epistemology. Quijano's findings were highly rooted in the Latin American experience of Spanish colonisation that erased the systems of knowledge of the cultures that were present before the empire arrived.

In the MENA region, colonial legacies are very much known: France extended its dominance from what is today Morocco to Syria and Lebanon; and the United Kingdom controlled Palestine and Egypt. Even many other European countries were also involved to get a piece of the “cake” that is today the Global South. The contact with a different set of cultures that at the beginning was defined by economic interests suddenly also created a hierarchy of power, but also of knowledge. Among one of the most famous authors of postcolonial thought is Edward Said, whose writings set up the foundations to understand how the West saw the MENA region. His book ‘Orientalism’ (1979) was revolutionary and showed how terrorism, Islam and authoritarianism were not free of prejudices and history. The combination of what Said and Quijano has led to a prolific field of studies: postcolonialism, that focuses on the legacies of colonial exploitation and also its contemporary consequences. Postcolonialism is the “resilience of colonial structures, institutions and discourses”, whose effects are the prioritisation of an “European model of peace and democracy” (Sen, 2021). This means that colonialism still plays a role through many systems: the economic, the academic, the political... This is what I intend to show in this specific chapter.

If we focus specifically on ‘good governance’, we can understand better what I mean by postcolonialism. Good governance is defined as a set of rules that also originated in the European modernity and Enlightenment, as well as the European colonial experience. Governance is the “the process of decision-making and the process by which decisions are implemented” (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2009). According to Andersson and Heywood (2009), good governance originated in the ‘post-Washington Consensus’ at the end of the Cold War, suggesting the need for states to build a stronger regulatory capacity as a precondition for liberal markets, an approach “based on a particular understanding of politics that can serve to ground the economic reforms by multilateral agencies”. Today, good governance is used as the main argument for interventions in partner countries. For mainstream scholars and European institutions, the EU can play a role in topics such as the fight against corruption in the neighbourhood (Hackenesch 2016), but good governance also applies to many different fields such as migration or trade. This is not something the EU does alone: it obliges all its member countries to support the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) of the United Nations. Therefore, good governance around the MENA region is done in connivence with other international organisations such as the UN, the Council of Europe, the Union for the Mediterranean or the OECD, just to name a few.

Since the revised ENP of 2015, however, the EU has opted to stay out of the political dynamics of the MENA region given the failure to back up the democratic protests of the Arab Spring. Therefore, good governance attempts are now restructured under the umbrella of democracy projection, claiming that it “draws attention to micro-level interactions between EU and domestic actors”, meaning civil society. In the words of Börzel (2022), for EU policymakers, it “offers a middle way between overly ambitious democracy promotion and overly pragmatic resilience-building”. Much of the policies focus on the idea of building a bottom-up approach and establishing ties with the civil society.

Yet, the concept of good governance remains contested. What is more: there is no convincing definition that states in the EU what is understood as good governance (Nanda 2006). This is because countries that have a colonial past or exercise colonial rule resort to practices such as “selectivity”, where international donors require performance and the compliance with a set of indicators prior to the provision of funds to combat corruption. As Talad Asad (1992, p. 337) writes: “Within the modern world which has come into being, changes have taken place as the effect of dominant political power by which new possibilities are constructed and old ones destroyed. The changes do not reflect a simple expansion of the range of individual choice, but the creation of

conditions in which only new (i.e., modern) choices". Applied to good governance, we can see how the 'southern neighbourhood' ought to be governed by these rules of good governance.

As Scott (1995) writes, "what interests me about the problem of colonialism in relation to the political forms of modernity is the emergence at a moment in colonialism's history of a form of power -- that is, therefore, a form of power not merely coincident with colonialism -- which was concerned above all with disabling old forms of life by systematically breaking down their conditions, and with constructing in their place new conditions so as to enable -- indeed, so as to oblige -- new forms of life to come into being". The next step is decolonisation, that I will touch upon more in the conclusions. Decolonialising means the creation of alternative ways of understanding history and the institutions that do not reproduce the systems of domination of postcolonialism. An example of it is the provincialization of Europe (Chakrabarty, 2008): understanding that Europe's role in history has been minimal in comparison to all the other cultures and ways of understanding reality and economics, despite the current globalisation.

Postcolonialism and Migration Governance: the case-studies of Lebanon and Morocco

Lebanon and Morocco are not some of the closest countries of the 'Arab world' next to each other, yet there are many things that make them share many things, especially in their relation to the EU. In geographical terms, Morocco and Lebanon form part of two geographies of the Arab world, the *maghreb*, that gives the Arabic name for Morocco; and the *mashreq*.

Lebanon is regarded to be in the centre of the 'Middle East', a region where the EU has had limited influence but nonetheless has tried to intervene in some occasions when it comes to the peace process between Israel and Palestine (Soetendorp, 2002). The EU is one of Lebanon's main trading partners and Lebanon has free access to the European market. Nevertheless, the political situation is marked by high political corruption and a very critical economic situation (Pastor Vidal, 2023), with respect to which the EU has responded by issuing communications and organising conferences such as CEDRE to raise funds to provide economic help to the country, especially in humanitarian needs after Syria's civil war, that multiplied the population after the big influx of refugees coming from the neighbouring country (Dandashly, 2021).

On the other hand, Morocco's entourage comprises a competition with Algeria for influence in Africa, and the central foreign policy defending Western Sahara as part of its territory. Europe's position regarding this conflict is timid, despite its proximity to countries such as France and Spain, with big stakes in the issue¹²². Despite this fact, Morocco is usually portrayed as a "good student" for the EU: their relations date back to the 1950s, when the Rome Treaty recognized them as part of France (as well as Algeria). In 2008, Morocco obtained the 'advanced status', gaining a great deal of external legitimacy despite some concern on human rights abuses. Since then, political dialogue has intensified, with more integration of Morocco in the elements of the single market, as with the signature of a Green Partnership in October 2022.

Both Lebanon and Morocco were under French colonialism in the beginning of the 20th century and their political and legal systems were highly shaped because of this. Given the postcolonial legacy, both countries grew as communicating spheres between Europe and other geographies, a liminal position that has made them be on the centre of the discussion regarding EU migration governance.

For both cases, the political relationship has been shaped as a consequence of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (also called the Barcelona Process) that started in 1995. This strategy, which was almost more a result of Sarkozy's political ambition than a joint European strategy (Gillespie, 2008), was further structured with the creation of the Union for the Mediterranean in 2008. At that moment, the term southern mediterranean countries (SMCs) was preferred, but gradually this terminology shifted to the 'southern neighbourhood'.

i. A methodological tool to analyse discourses: critical discourse analysis

The last part of the puzzle is a tool that can help us apply all these concepts and extract some knowledge and value from them. This is the role of a good methodology. Critical discourse analysis (CDA)'s approach "establishes a dialectic relation between the role of discourse and the real world", meaning that discourses are "vehicles that reproduce the social domination of one group over another, although power does not necessarily refer to capitalism" (Carta and Morin, 2014, p. 302). Language becomes therefore a 'social practice' more than a basic unit of communication, that is able to shape reality.

Discourse is also not only the compilation of words in different sentences, but the knowledge that is produced and circulates in the talking, the general ways of viewing situations and phenomena and the assumptions that come with it (the 'utterances'). Gee puts the example of those who can consider themselves as "real Indians": it is not only something that someone "is", but the doing of it, the performance. To get into this "game", as he says, having certain kinship ties is needed, first; and second, it is a participatory phenomenon: one 'cannot be a "real Indian" unless one appropriately recognizes other "real Indians" and gets recognized by others as a "real Indian" (Gee, 2015; p. 32).

For CDA, discourse analysis is also "critical". Therefore, its intellectual origins can be traced back to Critical Theory studies, a paradigm developed by the Frankfurt School in Germany during the interwar period (1918-39). One of its main thinkers, Horkheimer, saw the role of the theorist as articulating social change and improving the understanding of how social phenomena are interconnected with the goal of emancipation of social actors by unveiling the asymmetries of power. In the words of Wodak¹⁰, to be critical is "to be understood as having distance to the data, embedding the data in the social (...) and a focus on self-reflection as scholars doing research" (Wodak, Meyer, and Wodak 2001; p. 9).

Wodak and Reisigl (2001) present a very specific methodological tool to analyse discourses, the Discourse Historical Analysis (DHA), that proceeds in the following way:

1. It establishes specific contents or topics of a specific discourse (the field of study).
2. It identifies discursive strategies. Some of them are:
 - a. Referential or nomination.
 - b. Predication.
 - c. Argumentation.
 - d. Perspectivation or framing.
3. It establishes the linguistic means, the words, phrases and any kind of language creation that is used to reiterate these strategies.

This can lead us to a set of questions that can be applied for any methodological analysis of discourses:

- How are EU and Lebanon/Morocco referred to linguistically?
- What traits, characteristics, qualities and features are attributed to them?
- By means of what arguments are certain representations of the subjects justified, legitimised and naturalised in discourse?
- From what perspective are these nominations, attributions and arguments expressed?

These questions will be used in the analysis below in order to shed light on how postcolonialism still plays a role in the construction of the EU as an actor in the southern neighbourhood using the theoretical framework of poststructuralism.

ii. Good Migration Governance: Analysing the case-studies of Lebanon and Morocco

The first part of the analysis is the establishment of the field of study. In particular, migration is an important topic for the EU, Lebanon and Morocco. Migration, as I have mentioned before, forms part of the topic of good governance, yet it has remained an underdeveloped topic in the general discussion, mostly under the label of human rights. Despite this, at the international level some tools have been developed such as the 'Migration Governance Framework' of the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), that extends the good governance principles to migration.

This chapter will therefore focus on some of the latest developments in EU migration governance in Morocco and Lebanon. Just taking into account the latest development for Morocco, in 2023, Morocco stopped 75,184 migration attempts (Reuters, 2024). After the approval of the new EU Pact on Asylum and Migration in April 2024, Morocco is planning to finalise a migration pact, something that has become possible only after the political support of the kingdom's claims over the Western Sahara (Wilson, 2022). The EU is also trying to tackle other routes to migration coming to Morocco, such as Mauritania, where it signed a migration deal in March in order to prevent migration coming through the Canary Islands (AfricaNews, 2024). In June 2023, the Commission presented an EU Action Plan on the Western Mediterranean and Atlantic, precisely designed to regulate one of the most important migration routes.

But this role as 'gatekeeper' of the EU's migration was not always so clear, given the political differences and the economic decoupling of Morocco from the EU, when it was once one of its most important trading partners (Fernández-Molina, 2019). In other older discourses by EU officials, such as Josep Borrell as High Representative-Vice President (HR/VP) of the Commission, migration is portrayed to be used as a tool against to create pressure against the EU:

"We remain, therefore, confident that similar situations will not happen again and that a close cooperation with Morocco, respectful of human rights and shared commitments and values, will be preserved" (Borrell, 2021).

Notice, however, how NPE's response is articulated through the argument of 'human rights', favouring the EU's position releasing some pressure, i.e., returning migrants to their country of origin before reaching Europe (in other words, contradicting the international human rights principle of *non refoulement*). Moreover, another layer of the discourse is the adjective "shared", meaning that a set of values, despite coming from European origin, are presented as common values. Consequently, this instrumentalization is a *normative convergence* that, rather than approaching Morocco to the EU,

serves to create differentiation, meaning that the obligation is on the side of Morocco (Rumelili, 2004). The reason for this is the growing securitisation and depoliticization in NPE (Cebeci, 2017): the EU tries to enforce a set of values that deems as common for all southern Mediterranean countries and bases the collaboration mainly in them. The result, nevertheless, is not a convergence of values, is only a superficial promotion of values that in reality do not permeate, but rather create mechanisms against migration in the name of “human rights”.

Lastly, despite the formalisation of collaboration with Morocco and other African countries, the president of the Commission, von der Leyen, delivered a keynote speech at the Global Alliance to counter migrant smuggling in November 2023, where she puts the focus on:

“We must offer more legal alternatives to the people who want to seek fortune abroad. This is an interest we all share. In Europe, labour and skills shortages have reached record levels. In other continents, there are millions of people who seek to work and learn. And we must manage this in a way that is safe, humane and mutually beneficial. (...) But this mobility must be managed by the law, not by the smugglers. This is why we are creating Talent Partnerships with Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt, Bangladesh and Pakistan. And we can grant more opportunities for people to come to Europe legally” (Von der Leyen, 2023).

A more subtle analysis of the discourse suggests that Europe is the only solution to create job opportunities for migratory routes, where the rule of law is positioned as the response to smuggling. This also suggests that domestic law, such as in Morocco or Lebanon is not appropriate to the European standards.

In the case of Lebanon, the cooperation in migration with the EU has mostly been a response against the Syrian refugee crisis after the war started, which reached a peak in 2015. The EU’s response was marked by fear of many migrants and refugees reaching Europe. As Badarin and Wildeman (2021) argue: “in spite of its rhetorical position of aid in normative and liberal discourse, contemporary EU development policy towards the MENA region is centred on the short-term aim of deterring migration and promoting security along with the long-term structural aim of exporting EU-styled governance and reforms”.

There is a craft of the migration–security nexus highly linked to the terrorist threat (İşleyen and Fakhoury, 2021). For example, in the 8th meeting of the Association Council, a document produced jointly between the EU and Lebanon, the EU uses the migration crisis to show off its role as a humanitarian actor, showing how much it has provided economic help to Syria, but immediately after,

“commends the increased commitment of the security agencies to work in a cooperative way in managing the land border with Syria and the progress that has been achieved in the field of integrated border management with EU support” (Council of the EU, 2019).

All these statements echo a bipolar conception of the world, where in countries of the Middle East, security, especially against threats to the Western model of values, is the priority, without taking into consideration that much of Europe’s stability comes at the expense of stability and order in the neighbourhood (Ayooob, 1995). In May 2024, the EU signed another deal with Lebanon, in a situation where the country is amid political paralysis and in economic devastation. Since October 2022, the term of the previous president of the Lebanese Republic, Michel Aoun, terminated without a election of a new one, creating a void in the state functioning that has been filled by the other two leaders:

the Speaker of the Parliament, Nahib Berri, and the Prime Minister, Najib Mikati (International Crisis Group, 2022). In Lebanon, this position is informally filled after the civil war with a member of the Maronite Christian community. Precisely, the package of €1 billion financial aid by the EU was signed in meetings with Mikati and Berri.

The reasons for the signature of this deal can be found in the war being fought in Gaza and that is expected to create even more migration. Apart from Syrian refugees, Lebanon is home to almost half a million of Syrian refugees according to UNRWA (United Nations Relief and works agency for Palestine refugees in the Near East) (Erni, 2013), where a great deal of them are the sons of the Palestinians who arrived during the nakba (the word in Arabic for disaster, referring to the exodus of Palestinians after the Israeli occupation in the 1948 war), and who still live in the same refugee camps as their grandparents. Moreover, the Lebanese security forces have the entrance to the camps forbidden, since they have their own security (Cordall, 2024).

Similarly to Morocco, this new agreement can be seen under the umbrella of a renewed EU's securitization, where migration is deterred. Here, it is important to distinguish between the words that are said in the discourse and the meanings that are evocated (the framing or perspectivation). Especially in the case of Lebanon, the EU is thought to be an actor "accompanying" Lebanon and bringing "security and stability" with the investments:

"to help you in managing migration, we are committed to maintain legal pathways open to Europe (...) we count on your good cooperation to prevent illegal migration and combat migrant smuggling. Finally, we understand the challenges that Lebanon faces with hosting Syrian refugees and other displaced persons. It is vital to ensure the well-being of the host communities and Syrian refugees" (European Commission, 2024).

Only Gaza is mentioned in some lines below in the text. The framing that von der Leyen constructs here is one where the EU is the one pushing for specific reforms in line with what it believes is best for the interests of Lebanon. Hence, a system for managing migration, maintaining "legal pathways" (this term has not been even properly defined in the literature), that in reality just reinstall a system of 'good migration governance'.

Conclusion

Overall, this chapter of the Special Issue has focused on a very important part of the relation between the EU and the 'MENA region': postcolonialism, and how postcolonialism is a strong tool in the creation of the EU's identity towards the 'southern neighbourhood'. However, as I have pretended to show during this chapter, drawing from constructivism (Cebeci, 2016), all these meanings and interpretations are built and modelled, mainly from the point of view of the EU: therefore despite we use them, they are not neutral, and we should remain aware of what they entail. The legacy of postcolonialism is specially important to understand the parameters that are used in 'good governance' in general and in migration governance in particular with regards to countries that act as 'gatekeepers' of migration and that also have strong ties with the EU in terms of trade but also of human capital trying to arrive to Europe.

As a conclusion, if we want to unveil the EU's own construction as an international actor in its 'neighbourhood', there are two main theoretical tools that we can use: first, poststructuralism, that I have brought here as a theory able to explain how the EU has tried to build a normative power (and

still is) through its discourse. The problem, however, comes when duplicates and contradictions are also shown in the response, such as in the double standards that the EU has been showing with regards the Syrian refugee crisis and other crises. Secondly, I already said that the way forward is to 'decolonize' the EU's discourse. This is an open call for many reflections. The most important of them, probably, is to understand that 'good governance' cannot be applied to force a system that only benefits Europe, and to reflect whether some coloniser discourses are being reproduced (Onar and Nicolaïdis, 2013). A great deal of that task is placed on the shoulders of the future generations of European and Arab students all over the Euro-Mediterranean area and in the future they envision.

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We Know What's Best for You: the Paternalistic Character of EU Migration Agreements

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Abstract

In the past year, the European Union (EU) has signed several migration agreements with countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, marking a shift in its migration management strategy. These deals, aimed at financially supporting third countries to reduce irregular migration to Europe, have been reached with Tunisia, Egypt, Mauritania, and more recently, Lebanon. Although these consensual and non-legally binding agreements may appear as examples of bilateral cooperation, a deeper analysis reveals underlying power dynamics that perpetuate neo-colonial patterns. This paper examines the agreements with Tunisia, Egypt, and Mauritania through the lens of paternalism, as defined by Michael Barnett. Paternalism involves substituting one actor's judgement for another's, ostensibly for the latter's welfare. Applying this framework highlights how these agreements, despite potential mutual benefits, reinforce hierarchical and oppressive power relations.

Keywords

Migration, Paternalism, Mediterranean, Tunisia, Egypt, Mauritania, Normative Power

Introduction

Over the last year, the European Union (EU) has pursued the signature of different migration agreements with third countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, revealing a new pattern in the EU's migration management strategy. These deals, which seek to financially support EU partners to curb irregular migration to Europe, are anything but new. Yet the period between summer 2023 and spring 2024 has marked a significant evolution in the pattern of the EU's engagement with the southern shore of the Mediterranean, as it has seen the emergence of multiple agreements signed between the EU and Tunisia, Egypt, Mauritania, and more recently Lebanon. These cooperation agreements were signed consensually and are not legally binding (European Parliament Legal Service, 2023). If such migration agreements can thus be seen as examples of bilateral cooperation, where the EU is respecting the autonomy of neighbouring countries. However, it is here worth noticing the underlying power dynamics between parties.

In continuity with this branch of studies, this piece addresses the power relations underlying the agreements signed between the EU and Tunisia, Egypt and Mauritania (migration agreements,

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hereafter) to shed light on their alleged paternalistic character while highlighting the EU's aim to limit the judgement of neighbouring countries in matters of migration. To operationalize paternalism, this paper draws on the theoretical framework developed by Michael Barnett (2015, 2017), who defines paternalism as "the substitution of one actor's judgement for another's on the grounds that it is in the latter's best interests, welfare, or happiness" (p.66). Barnett's work has already been largely applied to analyse several cases-study, but mainly in the context of humanitarianism (Auteresse, 2014; Skinner & Lester, 2012; Vandevordt & Verschraegen, 2019) and not bilateral agreements, which reinforces the originality of this paper. The choice of paternalism as the analytical framework allows us then to develop our argument, namely that while these memoranda might be beneficial for both parties, they can still showcase power relations of oppression, hierarchy and neocolonialism. Indeed, established research in the field suggests that the EU relies on neo colonial patterns of oppression to maintain its ontological security, in other words, to reinforce its *raison d'être* (Haastrup et al., 2021). The roadmap for this paper is as follows. First, the theoretical framework of paternalism and its application to the EU migration agreements is laid out. Following, a detailed description of the agreements is provided by synthesising the information available about their legal provisions and expectations, and comparing their similarities and differences. Second, the article delves into Barnett's framework of paternalism, showing (1) why the EU agreements are a case of it and (2) what style of paternalism they exhibit. To claim that it is a case of it, three arguments are made: that it is not a case of solidarity, that these agreements severely reduce the opportunities to "misbehave", and that paternalism can exist with consent. To assess the style (strong or weak), we use the six dimensions proposed by Barnett: tools, scope, purpose, duration, source of confidence and accountability. This paper sheds light on theoretical and normative considerations about the nature of these agreements, which is key at such an early stage of their existence.

Theorising EU paternalistic agreement-signing

The present section aims to provide an overview of the theoretical framework which consists of three sections: the seemingly equal power relations between signers of the agreement; the paternalistic power relations that we argue are present; and the motives behind this paternalistic exertion of power. The power relations underlying bilateral agreements have long been the subject of scholarly attention. For instance, work on informal pluralism (Oelgemöller, 2011), suggests that more transparent processes such as inter-state diplomatic cooperation are progressively being pushed aside to the benefit of informal agreements. Other studies have been conducted on the effectiveness of EU-Mediterranean inter-state agreements for matters of energy and migration (Colombo & Abdelkhalik, 2012). Generally, constructivism has served as a useful theoretical framework for studying the relations and cooperation between the two shores of the Mediterranean (Yonten, 2011). Furthermore, the literature has seen the proliferation of critical approaches to the securitization of migration and the EU's migration policy. Topulli (2016) compared France and the United Kingdom (UK) to pierce through inconsistencies between the human rights regime and a securitized migration system, while Ibrahim (2005) explored racist discourses in the securitization of migration. Moreover, feminist accounts of migration securitization have also become more prevalent (see, for example, Gerard, 2014, on the status of refugee women), while other scholars have placed the focus on the effects of securitization on migrants and host communities (Crépeau & Nakache, 2006). Finally, the claim that border securitization and the externalisation of EU borders in particular is a type of colonial power relation has long been supported by the work of numerous scholars, most recently Cappiali and Pacciardi (2024), but also Fanon (1963), Mbembe (2001) and Anderson (2015). Yet, analyses of bilateral agreements through the concrete lens of paternalism have yet to be deve-

-loped. One reason for such a gap might be that, by definition, agreements require consensus, thereby creating the illusion that there is an equal power balance between the two parties, which would not be compatible with paternalism. Let us turn to some pivotal works in the field of paternalism, from which this work teases out the particular framework that lays the basis of the following analysis. John Stuart Mill is a key name in the philosophical discipline of paternalism, arguing that paternalism is acceptable when removing someone's autonomy will cause more good than harm (Mill, [1856] 2011). Gerald Dworkin is also a paramount scholar in the field of paternalism, having developed thorough reviews and essays of when it is acceptable in politics (Dworkin, 2005). The work of Kelinig (see, for example, 2018), focuses on the relationship between paternalism and consent, showing that consensual relationships can be paternalistic too. Some examples of paternalism studies in philosophy include Fox (1993). More relevantly, critical scholars of the ethics of care in international relations have focused on how care and paternalism are intimately linked in the neocolonial system (Narayan, 1995). According to this view, paternalism is seen as a power relation that establishes an imbalance between the paternalizer and the paternalized, making the latter adopt a role that is simultaneously oppressive and caring (Robinson, 2016).

Barnett's work (2013, 2015, 2017) is fundamental in the application of paternalism to international relations (Robinson, 2016). He theorised that no matter how caring humanitarian aid is, it is always moved by a paternalistic intention. His theses are key for this study, as he argued that liberalism's individualistic ontology leads to a 'neglect of the underlying social relations that generates the positions of superiority and inferiority and a sense of noblesse oblige' (Barnett, 2013, p. 490). He thereby tackles a key tension, which is the inspiration for this paper: that the relationship between two signers of an agreement must be analysed against the backdrop of the underlying power relations between the two. Barnett's framework of paternalism has been widely applied to humanitarian aid schemes (Vandevoordt & Verschraegen, 2019; Baker, 2015; Auteresse, 2014; Skinner & Lester, 2012). However, as mentioned in the introduction, the application of the lens of paternalism on bilateral agreements remains limited. In this paper, we challenge this by exploring how the EU migration agreements with Tunisia, Egypt and Mauritania are instances of paternalism. We choose this approach to show that agreements can also exhibit neocolonial power relations.

We conclude that the EU has engaged in paternalism when it comes to its recently signed migration agreements. In the coming pages, it is argued that these migration agreements are far from meeting the liberal notion of an understanding between equal parties. Rather, they are a clear example of paternalistic neocolonial relations between the EU and countries in the European neighbourhood.

EU Agreements In-Depth: Tunisia, Mauritania, Egypt

As explained above, the EU migration agreements seem to be part of a pattern of similar deals that Brussels has recently signed with neighbouring countries under the auspices of curbing irregular migration. While these agreements share common objectives, it is crucial to delve into their nuances and disparities regarding scope, framework, and implementation strategies. Understanding these distinctions is essential for a comprehensive analysis, as they can significantly impact their effectiveness and implications for all parties involved.

Tunisia - EU <i>16th July 2023</i>	Mauritania - EU <i>7th March 2024</i>	Egypt - EU <i>17th March 2024</i>
Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on a strategic and global partnership between the Republic of Tunisia and the European Union	Joint Declaration Establishing a Migration Partnership between the Islamic Republic of Mauritania and the European Union	Joint Declaration on the Strategic and Comprehensive Partnership between The Arab Republic of Egypt and the European Union
Central Mediterranean route	Atlantic route	Central Mediterranean route
€1.155 billion € 105 millions (improve border management and support Tunisian coastguards)€ 900 million in macro-financial aid (conditioned on Tunisia agreeing to sign an IMF bailout)€ 150 million in budget support to improve financial stability and economic reforms.	€210 million [*no further specifications on how they will distribute this amount]	€7.4 billion €5 billion (concessional loans for macro-financial stability)€1.8 billion of additional investments and bilateral projects€600 million as grants (including €200 million for migration management)

Table 1. EU migration agreements with Tunisia, Mauritania and Egypt, migration routes concerned, and budgeted funds - source: European Commission

i. Tunisia

The EU-Tunisia Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on a strategic and global partnership between the Republic of Tunisia and the European Union was signed in Tunis by the EU Commissioner for Neighborhood and Enlargement, Olivér Várhelyi, and Tunisia's Secretary of State of Foreign Affairs and Migration, Mounir Ben Rjiba, on 16 July 2023. The agreement covers five areas of cooperation: macroeconomic stability, trade and investment, green energy transition, people-to-people contacts, and migration and mobility (European Commission, 2023a). According to the original document, the strategic partnership is aimed at enhancing the relations between both parties by strengthening their economic and trade partnership and promoting cooperation in combating and reducing irregular migration flows (ibid.). With the signature of the MoU, the EU agreed to provide an immediate sum of € 105 millions to improve border management and support Tunisian coastguards. Additionally, it also proposes to deploy € 900 million in macro-financial aid and €150 million in budget support to reduce the country's soaring inflation and macroeconomic imbalances (European Parliament, 2023). This development aid has been recently transferred to the Tunisian Public Treasury, as it was announced by the European Commission's President Ursula von der Leyen on 4

March (Guerrero, 2024). In return, Tunisia agreed to collaborate on combating the smuggling and trafficking of migrants, conduct search and rescue missions within its maritime territories, and repatriate Tunisian citizens who irregularly crossed EU borders – a duty already recognized under customary international law. However, contrary to Italy's hopes and unlike Türkiye's agreement in 2016, Tunisia declined to accept the return of migrants from other nationalities who passed through its borders en route to the EU, maintaining its stance throughout the negotiation process (Reuters, 2023).

In 2023, Tunisia became the first country of departure for migrants attempting to reach the EU through the Central Mediterranean route. According to the UN Refugee Agency (2023), 62% of the total people that reached Italy had embarked in Tunisia (97,667 migrants). This figure more than doubles that of the previous year. In 2022, a total of 32,371 migrants departing from Tunisia arrived in Italy (UNHCR, 2022). Different structural economic, climate and social crises in the Sahel have provoked the emergence of Tunisia as a key transit hub for sub-Saharan migrants aiming to reach Europe (Meddeb & Louati, 2024). As maintained by some sources, this situation has made cooperation with Tunisia a key priority in the EU's efforts to limit the influx of migrants (Barana & Okyay, 2023; De Leo, 2023).

According to the European Parliament civil liberties and foreign affairs committees, the MoU cannot be considered an international agreement insofar as it has no legally binding effects. It is a statement of political will and intention above anything else (European Parliament Legal Service, 2023). It is relevant, then, to stress that the MoU reflects a larger trend of moving from formal to informal EU partnerships with third countries, offering flexibility for swift adaptation but raising concerns about bypassing constitutional procedures. While informal arrangements expedite implementation, they risk undermining democratic oversight and legal clarity as they deviate from standard treaty-making protocols. This is all the more important if we stress the absence of guidelines for negotiating non-binding agreements that might leave EU treaties lacking in transparency and democratic safeguards (De Leo, 2023).

ii. Mauritania

In February 2024, Von der Leyen and the Spanish President, Pedro Sanchez, travelled to Mauritania in an official visit that is said to have set the basis for the signature of the agreement with Nouakchott. Consequently, on 7 March 2024, the Joint Declaration Establishing a Migration Partnership between the Islamic Republic of Mauritania and the European Union was signed between Commissioner for Home Affairs, Alva Johansson, and the Mauritanian Minister of Interior and Decentralization, Mohamed Ahmed Ould Mohamed Lemine, in the presence of a high-level European delegation, aligning with the team Europe approach followed by the EU (European Commission, 2024b). The agreement is based on five pillars: the creation of job opportunities in Mauritania, protection and asylum, promoting legal migration, reinforcing cooperation to prevent irregular migration, and strengthening border management. Although this case follows similar agreements signed with others, it is clear that this partnership has a fundamental migration focus. Out of these five pillars, four of them deal with migration issues. Furthermore, the declaration clearly reads: "as it fundamentally intends to launch an EU-Mauritania migration partnership" (European Commission, 2024c). The overall aim of the agreement could be then summarised in supporting the reception capacity of Mauritanian overcrowded system, promoting and facilitating legal migration of high-skilled Mauritanian workers, and fighting irregular migration further supporting Mauritanian border management and surveillance capacities .

This agreement will basically establish a long-term cooperation framework facilitating dialogue, joint action, and coordination. To materially implement the goals, the EU has pledged to invest €210 million. The declaration states that dialogue between the parties will be held on a regular basis, aiming at exchanging information, exploring possibilities for practical cooperation, and formulating policy and recommendations. This intended dialogue is said to be operationalized through high-level meetings once a year and technical meetings when needed. However, no further detail is given on the intended 'Action Plan' (European Commission, 2024c). As the Mauritanian Ministers emphasised, it is important to develop a strong mechanism of implementation, follow-up, and evaluation and ensure the bilateral dialogue sessions (Agence Mauritanienne d'Information, 2024).

The agreement comes at a time of heightened tension on the Spanish coasts of the Canary Islands, which have been receiving an increasing number of migrants since last year, the majority of whom depart from Mauritanian coasts. In 2023, 39,910 migrants entered Spain through the islands overlooking Western African shores. This data represents more than double if compared with that of 2022 (15,682 migrants) (Gobierno de España - Ministerio del Interior, 2023). But, it is also Mauritania itself that is increasingly struggling to cope with the growing number of migrants entering their own borders. As of February 2024, Mauritania counts 128,000 refugees and asylum seekers, most of which comes from the unstable Mali (UNHCR, 2024). It is precisely the instability in the Sahel and Senegal's political crisis that position Mauritania as a key and approachable ally in the region.

Finally, regarding the binding nature of the agreement, the declaration concludes that its provisions and the action plan do not establish any legal rights or obligations under international or national law (European Commission, 2024c). Understanding the bindingness of these agreements is crucial for the analysis that will follow because it directly impacts the assessment of paternalism, as non-binding agreements may mask unequal power dynamics and the substitution of judgement, key elements in Barnett's definition of paternalism. By evaluating the non-binding nature, we can better discern whether the agreements reflect strong or weak paternalism.

iii. Egypt

The Republic of Egypt, represented by Egyptian President Abdel Fatah El-Sisi, and the EU, represented by von der Leyen and five EU national leaders, signed on 17 March 2024 a *Joint Declaration on the Strategic and Comprehensive Partnership between The Arab Republic of Egypt and the European Union*. The agreement set the basis for the formulation of an "inclusive document" on a comprehensive and strategic partnership between both countries during the first quarter of 2024. Although the text has not been published yet, the agreement in March already establishes the specific areas of cooperation in which it will be focused: political relations, macroeconomic stability, sustainable investment and trade, water resilience, migration and mobility, security, and human capital development (European Commission, 2024d).

The agreement establishes that the EU will deploy a financial support package of €7.4 that will be distributed in instalments between 2024 and 2027. Out of the €7.4 billion, €5 billion will take the form of concessional loans to help support the macro-financial stability of the Northern African country, €1.8 billion of additional investments and bilateral projects under the Southern Neighborhood Economic and Investment Plan, and €600 million will be administered as grants, including €200 million for migration management (Euronews, 2024).

The partnership, therefore, intends to control the complex migration situation in the Mediterranean and boost border control throughout what it seems to be two defined channels. On the one hand, and as Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni has declared, it intends to boost Egypt's economy, or at least avoid a massive financial collapse that will push many to migrate. On the other hand, it aims at strengthening border control and migration management, helping Egyptian authorities and increasing the EU's presence in this matter.

The agreement comes at a turbulent time in Egypt, as the country faces one of its worst economic crisis in decades. This situation has pushed many to leave the country in recent years (O'Carroll, 2024). Additionally, the country hosts about 9 million migrants and refugees, including 4 million from Sudan and 1.5 million Syrians (IOM, 2022). Despite the successful efforts of Egyptian authorities to curb irregular migration from its northern coasts since 2016, the EU is increasingly worried of a potential migration wage if the situation remains unstable. As clearly stated on the EU's press release, "the European Union acknowledges Egypt as a reliable partner, as well as Egypt's unique and vital geo-strategic role as a pillar of security, moderation, and peace in the region of the Mediterranean, the Near East and Africa" (European Commission, 2024d).

Analysing Paternalism in Migration Agreements

The previous section laid the foundations of what is known to date about these agreements, namely their legal character, financial provisions, and expectations from both sides. In this section, the article applies Barnett's framework to analyse the pacts signed between the EU and Tunisia, Egypt, and Mauritania. Let us reiterate that paternalism is here understood as "the substitution of one actor's judgement for another's on the grounds that it is in the latter's best interests, welfare, or happiness" (Barnett, 2017, p.66). The paper will first demonstrate that the migration agreements are a case of paternalism through three arguments. The first argument is that these agreements do not embody solidarity because they primarily serve the interests of the EU rather than fostering mutual support and cooperation. The second one is that, by limiting the opportunity window, the EU imposes its own judgement over the migrants' choices, assuming it knows what is best for them. The third one is that the consent given by the North African countries does not reflect equal power relations, as it is influenced by economic pressures and political dependencies. Finally, the paper will seek to assess what type of paternalism these agreements exhibit: strong (typical of colonial power relations) or weak (more common in neocolonial power relations). To do so, Barnett's six dimensions are applied: tools, scope of interference, duration, purpose, source of paternaliser's confidence, and the mechanisms of accountability.

The implications of this paper are undeniably normative, for two reasons. First, paternalism is motivated by a desire to help, the motivation for it comes from the belief that the weaker actor is unable to act in their own best interest. As such, Barnett elaborates, "implicit in paternalistic acts is a judgement about the competence and capacity of the subordinate actor" (2017, p. 77). Second, we argue that paternalistic power relations are a feature of neocolonial approaches to border externalisation, which is supported by the work of numerous scholars, most recently Cappiali and Pacciardi (2024), but also Fanon (1963), Mbembe (2001) and Anderson (2015). As a result, the findings of this paper are key to questioning and bringing to light patterns of "securitization" that are by no means apolitical or void of ethical implications.

i. Paternalism vs Solidarity

A fine line divides paternalism from solidarity, charity or foreign aid, but while the former is a suppression of the other's judgement, solidarity is selfless help destined to advance the receiver's interest (Barnett, 2017). Paternalism involves making decisions for others under the belief that it is in their best interest, often overriding their autonomy and judgement. In contrast, solidarity involves support and cooperation based on mutual respect and equality, with the intent to empower the recipient rather than control them (McGrath, 2022). There are two main reasons to deem migration agreements as a result of paternalism and not solidarity: one, that accepting the money diminishes the agency of the recipient country; and two, that the money is expected to retrieve an outcome that is beneficial to the EU but not necessarily to the third country in question. The money is expected to be used for border control, increasing their capacity to deal with irregular migration at their borders, and also to facilitate legal migration path routes for certain migrants (in the words of the Commission: "to promote and facilitate legal migration of well-educated Mauritians"). It is difficult to see how these results would be directly beneficial to Mauritania, Tunisia or Egypt. Instead, they seem more directly beneficial to the EU. In the same vein, accepting the financial support means committing to using it for the purposes stipulated in the agreement, which again strips countries of their agency and decision-making ability.

Egypt is a case in point for this argument. The North African republic has struggled with public debt and surging inflation for years. We should make no mistake in thinking that the EU financial aid package will rescue Egypt: rather, it will force it to invest in projects that might have been secondary otherwise, like the new capital city project. What the money will mean effectively is that Egypt is left with little agency and it must work toward a goal – securitizing the border – that is only beneficial to the EU and that will not help it out of its economic situation.

Another example is the reactive action of Tunisia to this very issue. In October last year, only a few months after signing the MoU, Tunisia refunded the EU some €60 million, labelling it as a form of "charity". Notably, President Saied maintained that: "Tunisia, which accepts cooperation, does not accept anything resembling charity or favour, because our country and our people do not want sympathy and do not accept it when it is without respect" (EuroNews, 2023).

It would not be appropriate to claim that paternalism is more desirable than solidarity or "charity", as emerges from Saied's words. According to the theoretical framework applied by this paper, what Saied was referring to is effectively paternalism. Solidarity and charity are forms of helping that do not engage in disrespect or in taking away agency, such as trade unions that support each other, collective action, or redistributive schemes. Those represent charity or solidarity, but they respect the recipient's judgement, value and capabilities. What Tunisia is accusing the EU of doing, effectively, is paternalism, which requires a substitution of agency and judgement and "the presumption [that] allowing some actors to determine their own fate will lead to a substantially reduced quality of life" (Barnett, 2017, p. 92). Indeed, the answer of the EU, namely that "implementation of the (memorandum) should continue once Tunisia returns to the spirit of our strategic & comprehensive partnership based on mutual respect" (EuroNews, 2023) showcases a sense of reprimand and a lack of will to "meet in the middle".

ii. Reducing the Window of Opportunity

Another problematic aspect of the EU's strategy of border externalisation, materialised in these agreements, is that it is actually impeding crossing the Mediterranean. An irregular migrant's journey

across the Mediterranean sea is, without a doubt, treacherous, unsafe, and uncertain. So is the journey along the Atlantic to reach the Canary islands from Mauritania. Yet impeding migrants from crossing by externalising the border to North African countries and beyond appears to be a form of paternalism, because it reduces the possibility of third countries to “misbehave” and endanger the securitization of the EU border. To put it differently, small children rarely do very dangerous things because they are not given a large window of opportunity, contrary to teenagers or young adults. In *The Human Costs of Border Control*, Spijkerboer (2007) argues that the EU has the moral duty to avoid the “human costs” of border control. While this can hold, it is also true that border securitization and externalisation strips migrants of their agency to take decisions and risks for themselves, under the premise that they are unable to take care of themselves and will engage in too many risks. As Kleinig (2018, p. 144) puts it: “On this understanding, the paternalist, no matter how compassionately or benevolently motivated, violates a fundamental moral boundary. Although we may advise and perhaps even warn others about the self-harming consequences of their actions, we may not interfere”. Even if the EU’s motives are to avoid deaths in the journey, externalising the border does not give migrants more opportunities or tools for successful border crossing. Thus, paternalism remains a repressive tool, even if it comes from the moral obligation to spare lives lost at sea.

iii. Paternalism vs Consent

A possible critique to our argument could be that parties to the agreement retain consent and freedom to depart from the agreement if their interests diverge from those of the other party or those stipulated in the memorandum. Thus, some claim that this is not paternalism, but rather neo-institutionalism, bilateralism, or mere international cooperation. While this is true on paper, one could argue two things, dichotomous but both logically valid, that would deem this argument weightless. First, consent can exist in paternalistic relationships. While it is true that the basic father-child relationship is not based on consent per se, in the field of international governance, Lake’s writings (see, for example, 2011) argue that consent is commonplace in many situations of hierarchy. This is because paternalism can result in a favourable outcome for the paternalized actor, who then has an incentive to agree to such hierarchical relationships.

The other argument follows from the fact that “the concept of consent is easier to stipulate than empirically assess” (Barnett, 2015, p.223). Even if the consent of the state and its representatives is clear, the citizens of those countries should have a way to give or retreat their consent. Tunisia, Egypt and Mauritania present little policy accountability and high political instability, with repression of civil society and accusations of competitive authoritarianism (especially Tunisia and Egypt). It can thus be argued that consent is not organic in these agreements, and that citizens in any of these three countries would not necessarily be able to retreat their consent if the agreements do not satisfy their preferences.

iv. Styles of Paternalism

In this last subsection, an analysis of how the migration agreements fit into the framework of strong and weak paternalism is carried out. Barnett’s argument is that strong paternalism was typical of colonial power relations, whereas the neocolonial world usually exhibits weak paternalistic relations instead. At the same time, in line with current postcolonial critiques of EU border externalisation (Cappiali & Pacciardi, 2024), there are reasons to believe that we are facing some form of neocolonialism, or weak paternalism, in the context of migration agreements. To pin down the

specific features of such paternalism, migration agreements are here analysed in light of the tools, scope, purpose, duration, source of confidence and accountability.

Elements	Strong	Weak
Tools	Force	Information
Scope	Wide	Narrow
Purpose	Ends	Means
Projected duration	Unlimited	Limited
Source of confidence	Faith	Evidence
Accountability	Internal	External

Table 2. Strong and Weak Paternalism – source: table copied from Barnett, M (2017). *Hierarchy and Paternalism*. In Zarakol (ed.) (2017) *Hierarchies in World Politics*. Cambridge University Press.

Tools. The tools used by the paternalizer to exert influence can be force (strong) or information (weak). In this case it is information because force is not being used to enforce the agreements. Information refers to the agreement itself and the set of norms and expectations that it carries, as we previously laid out.

Scope. If the scope of paternalization is wide (strong), it affects autonomy in all facets of governance, whereas a narrow scope affects a few policy issues. These agreements pertain to migration first and foremost, with some areas of development and security being affected too. Yet they are not general enough to be categorised as having a wide scope.

Purpose. The purpose can be to change the ends (strong) or the means (weak) of a certain process. The EU is certainly impacting the means of achieving border securitization, but it is also adding a new goal for these countries: to curb migration in the Mediterranean, which is arguably not a priority for them. Thus, here the EU's strategy can be placed somewhere between ends and means.

Project duration. If there is a limited timeframe to the paternalizer's influence, we say it is limited (weak), whereas if there is no end in sight, the timeframe is unlimited (strong), a typical feature of colonial domination. In the case at hand, duration is often limited to the timeframe of the agreement (for example until 2027).

Source of confidence. If the authority of the paternalizer is fed by evidence that they, indeed, have better knowledge and judgement than their subordinate counterparts, domination is weak. Yet, if it comes from faith and subjective perceptions of norms and values, it is strong. On the one hand, the

EU has a record of welfare and development that could qualify as evidence of its authority. On the other hand, its success when it comes to handling migration remains limited. Studies on perceptions of buffer states citizens show that citizens are happy with externalisation to their home countries if they perceive it as cooperation with a powerful actor. However, if those citizens have been migrants or attempted to migrate, they will probably oppose it (Buehler et. al., 2022). The lack of discourse analysis and qualitative research in this topic makes the analysis more challenging, but overall we can assume that evidence is not solid enough, and that the confidence of the EU's authority is, at least partially, faith-based.

Accountability. Accountability is measured on “whether the affected populations have the ability to check those who claim to be their trustees” (Barnett, year, p.86). This is not the case in our examples because 1) citizens of Tunisia, Egypt and Mauritania cannot hold EU officials accountable for the provisions they include in their agreements, and 2) nor can they often hold their own elected officials accountable, since all three countries have unstable political regimes with limited accountability mechanisms. Accountability is thus internal and limited, making the paternalism style strong.

Elements	Strong	Weak
Tools	-	Information
Scope	-	Narrow
Purpose	Ends	Means
Projected duration	-	Limited
Source of confidence	Faith	-
Accountability	Internal	-

Table 3. Strong and Weak Paternalism in EU Agreements- source: authors' own elaboration

The implications of this last section are that, in the context of these migration agreements, we witness paternalistic power relations that do not fully align with either a colonial or neocolonial approach. This enhances our understanding of the character of unequal power relations in the EU's approach to bilateral agreements in the EU Neighborhood. Additionally, it is important to note that while the EU is acting in its own interest, it is also helping the counterparts of the agreement. Help is an undeniable feature of paternalism, and it should not be ignored. The EU is neither solely trying to take advantage of these states, nor is it acting in altruistic charity. Analysing these nuances is key to better explaining “what this is a case of” and react accordingly.

Conclusion

The analysis of the EU migration agreements with Tunisia, Egypt and Mauritania through the lens of paternalism reveals the existence of unequal and paternalistic power relations that oscillate between a colonial and neocolonial style. The implications of these findings are undeniably normative, because they evidence the paternalizer's disregard for the judgement of the paternalized, and in this particular case, a perpetuation of oppressive and colonial power regimes disguised in multilateralism. Disguising these agreements as bilateral cooperation of "mutual understanding" is a biased and blindsided approach. Future research is encouraged to look at paternalism in new migration agreements such as the one between the EU and Lebanon, which has been recently signed at the time of writing. Since it is a new phenomenon, there are reasons to believe that countries may showcase dynamics that differ from the paternalism framework offered in this paper. Overall, understanding the paternalistic nature of these migration agreements is crucial for policymakers, scholars, and civil society actors to critically assess what lies behind the seemingly balanced power relations.

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Prioritising Macro-Economic Stability and Border Security: EU-Tunisia Relations and the Challenge of Democracy Support

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Abstract

This paper examines the shift in the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and other European policies towards Tunisia following the Arab Spring, focusing on the lack of balance between intergovernmentalism and supranationalism in EU external policies. In the wake of Tunisia's democratic transition between 2011 and 2015, the ENP initially prioritised democracy promotion through support for governance and civil society. However, the 2015 ENP review and the start of Kais Saied's presidency in 2019 signalled a return to pre-Arab Spring dynamics, where EU-Tunisia relations were based on economic reforms and security cooperation, rarely addressing socio-political dimensions. This policy paper critically evaluates the application of Differentiated Integration (DI) in EU-Tunisia relations, questioning whether the ENP's supranational ambitions have been overshadowed by bilateral agreements driven by member state interests, even though undersigned and supported by the EU. The analysis centres on two key issues: the influence of member state interests on the EU-Tunisia partnership and the role of EU institutions in promoting democratic processes. By exploring the wider ENP framework and Euro-Mediterranean cooperation, the paper assesses the balance between EU strategic autonomy and external and member states' pressures, investigating whether recent policies mark a shift towards intergovernmentalism, prioritising macro-economic stability and border control over Tunisia's social and democratic progress.

Keywords

Tunisia, Democracy, EU Foreign Policy, Macroeconomics, Realism

Introduction

Following the Arab Spring in 2010–2012, the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) shifted its focus towards the South, emphasising the support for deep democracy with the introduction of a “more for more” approach to sustain the Mediterranean countries in their transition towards democratic governance.

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This shift was particularly evident in Tunisia, where the uprising led to the overthrowing of Ben Ali's regime and, consequently, to renewed relations with the European Union (EU). The new Tunisian government embarked on drafting a new Constitution, seeking to align legislation with the values of democracy and human rights. During this phase, Tunisia demonstrated a strong absorption capacity – understood here as the partner's capacity in absorbing EU funds – the ENP began to prioritise political and governance programmes rather than solely economic reforms, as it was used to under Ben Ali's regime. The implementation of justice reform, support for civil society, and the establishment of the first Human Rights and Democracy Committee – finally launched by the EU in 2015 to aid the democratisation process – became conditions for EU budget support. This demonstrated a genuine EU commitment to sustaining Tunisia's socio-political progress.

However, the 2015 ENP review, the start of Kais Saied's mandate in 2019, and the renewed EU cooperation with the Mediterranean in 2021 have, to some extent, begun reverting the EU's relations with Tunisia to its state prior to the Arab Spring when ENP programmes primarily focused on economic reforms, strong intergovernmental and security relations, while governance support and democracy promotion was not on the agenda. As highlighted in the 2015 review of the ENP, political responsibilities were delegated to individual member states, elevating the role of the ministerial level in managing partnerships (European Commission, 2015, p.4). This approach effectively bypassed the EU's supranational dimension putting into discussion the foundations of the Differentiated Integration (DI) mechanism – i.e., a balanced combination of intergovernmentalism and supranationalism that is meant to characterise EU policies and actions. After 2015, EU institutions recognised the need to build stronger partnerships in the form of bilateral agreements with privileged partners – such as Tunisia and Morocco – to accomplish both political association and economic integration, providing intergovernmental institutions and entities, such as the Council of the EU and member states, greater political role (European Commission, 2015, p.5), while temporarily deprioritising governance support, democracy promotion and respect for human rights. As this paper will demonstrate, the DI mechanism in EU external affairs is not always applied consistently when taking concrete action, or it is implemented over-emphasising the intergovernmental dimension – as seen in the case of the 2023 EU-Tunisia Memorandum of Understanding (MoU).

The seemingly enhanced role of the European Parliament (EP) in endorsing the newly launched external financing instrument, the Neighbourhood Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI), programmes does not necessarily mean the EP owes more influence within the ENP decision-making process. It seems to be therefore essential to measure the current level of supranationalism in the ENP and EU policies towards Tunisia. This assessment will help determine whether intergovernmental interests continue to be prioritised over policy areas, such as democracy and human rights promotion, with the Council and Commission playing major roles in concluding economic and security agreements.

This paper aims to determine whether the measures adopted by the Council and the European Commission in Tunisia since 2019 prioritise democracy support or focus on neoliberal economic principles and security measures through bilateral partnerships. This work aims to examine whether these actions indicate a shift back in EU foreign policy toward an intergovernmental approach to ensure stability, marking a departure from the efforts made between 2011 and 2015 and realigning EU priorities more closely with International Financial Institutions, the United States, and other European interests. The analysis investigates the following two aspects: 1) the extent to which the partnership between the EU and Tunisia is currently influenced by EU member states' interests;

2) EU policies towards Tunisia and the role of EU institutions in supporting democratic processes . The paper will initially explore the broader EU policy framework, both within and beyond the ENP, regarding the support for democratic processes in Tunisia. It aims to identify which EU institutional actor is primarily focused on socio-political initiatives, and which one holds the decision-making power. Additionally, it will delve into the multitude of interests within the EU and evaluate the extent of supranationalism and strategic autonomy – intended as the capacity of the EU to act independently from other actors (European Parliament, 2022) – in its regional policies, such as Euro-Mediterranean cooperation.

EU Policy Framework Towards ‘Democracy Support’: the Case of Tunisia

If EU democracy promotion has consistently permeated the ENP, at least on paper and especially from 2011 to 2014, Tunisia has been the focus of the EU’s action among North African and Eastern Mediterranean countries. The greater European efforts to support the democratic process in Tunisia were concentrated between 2011 and 2014, following the Arab Spring and leading up to the adoption of the new Constitution in 2014.

The 2015 ENP review signalled a shift in the EU’s external governance strategy. Rather than prioritising the promotion of democracy, the EU began to focus more on exporting its economic regulations and protecting its borders. This change is shown by the numerous agreements on economic cooperation, security, and migration control signed with Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria, and other Middle East and North Africa (MENA) countries since 2015. This notwithstanding, the 2021 Joint Communication for a “Renewed Partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood, A New Agenda for the Mediterranean” has once again reaffirmed the importance for Southern partners of upholding the rule of law, democratic principles, and human rights (European Commission, 2021, 7). The Council and the Commission, responsible for EU external policies, should translate these ideals into concrete actions. However, they often tend to delegate the political priorities of “democracy support” to the EP, granting it the necessary decision-making power too slowly to have a significant impact on policy areas and actions. In EU foreign affairs, the EP can only play a consulting role and pose “parliamentary questions”, contributing to policy-making without the authority to directly intervene during the formulation, adoption, and implementation phases. Often, the EP submits “parliamentary questions” to both the Council and the Commission concerning human rights protection or support for democracy in certain MENA countries where the EU is active. However, these questions frequently go unanswered, and policies that disregard good governance, focusing solely on economic and security issues, are adopted without consulting the Parliament (European Parliament, 2024). Recently, as detailed below, the EP has repeatedly inquired about both the ongoing socio-political degradation in Tunisia and the EU’s decision to strengthen its partnership with Tunisia (European Parliament, 2024), yet its concerns have remained unaddressed.

With the enactment of the NDICI-Global Europe within the ENP-South framework, the EP has taken on a more significant role in approving the budget for the NDICI Cushion. This is a sub-priority within the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) under the category “Migration and External Challenges”, which falls under heading 6 of the MFF, titled “Neighbourhood and the World” and representing 9.2% of the total MFF budget. Consequently, the EP’s influence has increased, but only over less than one-tenth of the MFF. Despite this relatively small proportion of the budget, the Parliament is tasked with addressing a wide range of important priorities related to EU neighbouring relations, which highlights the need for a larger budget. Furthermore, priorities can sometimes appear conflicting when translated into actions and fund allocations. For instance, the thematic programme

“Human Rights and Democracy Support” is a political priority within NDICI. However, since NDICI is primarily focused on migration and external challenges, funding for democracy support must be aligned with the objectives of security and border control, rather than promoting endogenous development and democracy in neighbouring regions. To optimise policy outcomes and ensure effective democracy and human rights supports, security, economic and socio-political objectives should not be grouped under the same budgetary category. The inadequate focus on socio-political cooperation with neighbouring regions in the 2021-2027 MFF is evident in its 2024 mid-term revision, which did not explicitly mention “democracy” but instead concentrated on external actions aimed at securing EU borders (European Commission, 2024). In contrast, the NDICI programme’s aspirations, focusing on safeguarding individuals, fostering resilient and democratic societies, and championing a global system for human rights and democracy (European Commission, 2021), seemed more ambitious. However, within the broader context of the MFF decision-making process, the Council plays a pivotal role in approving the MFF through unanimous decisions. While the EP gives its consent, it is often compelled to compromise with the Council and Commission, prioritising security-related issues and national interests of member states – such as controlling migration flows – over democratic values (Wallace et al., 2020). This may explain the absence of any reference to democracy support within the headings of the MFF, deferring this challenge to NDICI-Global Europe.

Under NDICI’s human rights and democracy support program for Tunisia, the EU has implemented four projects since 2023, totalling €3.3 million, and launched three new projects in 2024, worth €2.7 million (European Commission, undated). These initiatives aim to support Tunisian civil society and protect it from discrimination, empower citizen participation, and ensure the socio-political and economic rights of the population. These projects have the potential to bolster civil society at the grassroots level, but they are overshadowed by broader agreements between political actors. For instance, the 2023 MoU between the EU and Tunisia on security and economic support did not address democracy and has effectively legitimised President Kais Saied’s repressive policies, and indirectly hindering the EP’s efforts to enhance the effectiveness of NDICI programmes on democracy support. The complex landscape of EU decision-making appears to prioritise intergovernmental interests during the MFF adoption and bilateral agreement processes. Indeed, addressing migration policies within the MoU between the EU and Tunisia was a key national interest for both Tunisia and other EU member states, such as Italy. If the DI mechanism allows countries to opt out of certain community policies, EU member states can choose between managing some areas – especially in foreign affairs – through intergovernmental relations or by delegating part of the responsibility to the EU. However, the case of the MoU between Tunisia and the EU, backed by Italy and the Netherlands, illustrates a peculiar and ambiguous application of the DI mechanism. Italy and the Netherlands, pursuing their national interests, used the EU decision-making system to adopt an agreement aimed at compelling Tunisia to curb migration across the Mediterranean. Nonetheless, the supranational interests of the EU, such as those championed by the EP in defending human rights and promoting democracy globally, were not adequately considered in the conclusion of the MoU. The approach of DI should balance the interests of individual governments with those of the EU as a whole, allowing supranational institutions, such as the EP, to have significant influence in the decision-making process. However, in practical terms such as in the case of the MoU between the EU and Tunisia, it appears that the actions of individual states heavily influence the actions of the EU, resulting in a misinterpretation of the DI mechanism. Moreover, although the EP plays a significant role in the Election Observation Mission (EOM) to support electoral processes in non-EU countries with weak or absent democratic institutions (European Union External Action, 2023), its efforts in Tunisia have not had a lasting impact. This is due to other priorities in the EU-Tunisia agenda and the Saied regime’s rejection of what it considers “interferen-

-ce" in domestic affairs. For 2024, Tunisia is the only MENA country prioritised by the European Parliament's EOM (2024) and has been a target country of the annual democracy support program since 2016. The continued focus on Tunisia's democratic process suggests that since the first elections in 2011, overseen by the EOM and funded by the US, Tunisia and its population have shown potential for establishing a democratic culture. Tunisian civil society was among the most active during the Arab Spring uprisings, and the 2014 Constitution, along with subsequent legislative harmonisation, has laid the foundations for a gradual realisation of fundamental democratic rights.

Nevertheless, the path towards democracy has been undermined on several occasions since Saïed's electoral win in 2019. The dissolution of the Parliament in 2021 and 2022 and of municipal councils in 2023 has halted Tunisia's democratic progress, which – according to V-Dem Democracy Report 2023 – is in a state of autocratization (V-Dem, 2023). After a poorly attended referendum in 2022, the President of Tunisia revised parts of the Constitution, issuing new decrees such as Decree 54 on cybercrime. The latter imposes severe prison sentences for spreading "fake news" and grants authority's extensive powers to intercept, monitor, collect, and store private communication data without safeguarding human rights. Since 2021, prosecutions against civilians have dramatically increased, judicial independence has been undermined, and elections are being organised under military control (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

The EP's efforts to support Tunisia's democratic transition have not yielded long-term results. Projects implemented under the Human Rights and Democracy thematic programme of NDICI-Global Europe, and efforts made under the EOM, often conflict with national priorities of European states and Tunisian authorities. This situation highlights the complexity and diversity of interests within the EU's institutional framework. The differing priorities of the Parliament, the Commission, and the Council for the EU-Tunisia relationship cast doubt on the supranational nature of the ENP-South itself.

Inconsistencies of EU Policies in Tunisia: Intergovernmental Interests, Western-Centrism, and Strategic Autonomy

Criticism of the ENP for its inconsistencies in promoting democracy has been a longstanding issue among experts. Following the 2011 and 2015 ENP reviews, analyses highlighted contradictions between the EU's security concerns and its externally driven, neo-liberal approach to development support on the one hand, and its commitment to democratic values on the other. This discrepancy became particularly evident in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, especially after 2014, when the EU's efforts to support democracy in most MENA countries largely failed to attain their goals. For instance, although the EU aimed to promote good governance, it often prioritized stability and economic interests, leading to a fragmented approach to democratic development. Tunisia emerged as the only country in the MENA where a regime change led to a democratic process, yet even there, the democratic gains were short-lived. This failure demonstrated that the EU's overarching goals in its Southern Neighbourhood did not translate into a clear and effective implementation of democracy support. Indeed, the 2015 ENP review marked a significant shift in the EU's approach towards the MENA region. The onset of civil wars in Libya and Syria, the ensuing refugee flows from these countries, the 2013 coup d'état in Egypt, and heightened terrorist threats within Europe, collectively prompted a change in attitude among EU decision-makers regarding their actions towards neighbouring countries (Narbone, 2020, p. 6). Securitisation consequently became the primary pillar of the ENP, altering the overarching goal of the Barcelona Process from

fostering a “ring of friends” in the MENA region to establishing a ring of economic and military stability to protect European borders from external threats. The EU's political objective of supporting democracy, which had been focused on Tunisia in 2011, diminished after 2014. EU policymakers, believing that Tunisia – with its new 2014 Constitution – could independently progress towards democracy, recognised the need for the ENP to adopt a more pragmatic, *realpolitik* approach, concentrating on safeguarding the EU's economic and security interests abroad. An example of this securitisation attitude is the Mobility Partnership signed between Tunisia and the EU in 2014. This agreement emphasised the importance of addressing illegal migration and enhancing joint border management, involving Tunisian military authorities and European coast guards, such as Frontex (European Commission, 2014).

According to some experts, the ENP approach to democracy serves as both a narrative and normative tool for the EU to legitimise its actions internally and externally (Cianciara, 2016; Kurki, 2015). However, as highlighted by Kurki (2015), there is a notable absence of a clear definition of democracy. Instead, the EU generally employs the ideology of ‘development support’, which also includes democracy promotion, as a narrative tool in engagements with other international actors and institutions, such as the US, NATO, or international financial institutions (Kurki, 2015, 35). NATO interventions in Libya in 2011, along with NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue – of which Tunisia is a member – are considered measures of Euro-Atlantic dialogue aimed at promoting stability and development in the MENA region. Similarly, interventions by international financial institutions (IFIs), conducted in close cooperation with the US and the EU, have focused on implementing political and economic measures that view macroeconomic adjustments as drivers of neoliberal democratic governance. This collaboration between the EU and other international actors – primarily concerned with military security and economic issues rather than democracy support – may undermine the EU's ability and potential to foster the development of a democratic culture in the civil society of its neighbourhood.

This implies that the EU's approach to democracy in pursuit of political legitimacy appears to be shaped by a “Western” narrative, rather than establishing a solid foundation. This indicates a deficiency in Strategic Autonomy, as the EU struggles to independently define its own understanding of democracy. Certainly, the ENP's overarching approach can be characterized as the predominant “Western” approach, grounded in neoliberal economic and political values. However, it can be argued that this does not necessarily represent the EU's distinct vision, given the recurrent expressions of dissatisfaction from the EP towards the actions undertaken by the European Commission, the Council of the EU and individual member states with regards to Tunisia.

Among the ENP-South wide set of policy objectives, security, stability, and macro-economic balance appear evidently as the most fundamental ones to be implemented by European countries in its neighbourhood. All ENP reviews and documents highlight the importance of cooperating with IFIs and the 2021 Joint Communication re-emphasised the need for EU engagement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the European Investment Bank and the World Bank in economic and investment plans for Southern neighbours (European Commission, 2021, 2). While there is a distinct emphasis on neo-liberal economic reforms in all ENP reviews, the importance of liberal democratic principles is described in broad strokes, encompassing general concepts like the separation of powers, the rule of law, and the promotion of freedom of association and expression. In line with this approach, the 2023 MoU between the EU and Tunisia was based on assurances that Saied would implement economic structural adjustment reforms “necessary to restore macroeconomic balance” (European Commission, 2023, p. 1), presumably through restrictive fiscal policies. The US has repeatedly urged Tunisia to accept the agreement with both the EU and the

IMF. This raises concerns about the form of governance being endorsed by the Western actors in Tunisia. IMF adjustment programs, which are often characterized by restrictive fiscal policies, may have limited effectiveness in enhancing social empowerment and protecting human rights for both the local population and migrants. The MoU has been signed despite concerns raised by the EP about the connection between funds provision and migrant refoulement (European Parliament, 2023). Although the EP has a role in approving the NDICI budget, in overseeing Election Observation Missions and related activities, it lacks initiative power in decisions regarding treaties with countries that may disregard human rights and democratic principles.

In December 2023, the European Commission adopted an urgent procedure to disburse €150 million to Tunisia to support reforms for macro-economic stability (European Commission, 2023). These funds were meant to be sent to Tunisia urgently, but the EU was waiting for the country to make progress in its negotiations with the IMF on a comprehensive package of reforms. In recent months, Saied and IMF authorities have been working towards a “fair” economic agreement for both parties (Asharq Al-Awsat, 2024). It is therefore not surprising that the Commission decided to unlock funding to Tunisia.

Unfortunately, this approach has led the Commission to deprioritise the current state of democracy in the country. Indeed, the 2023 MoU put macro-economic stability as its first pillar: the EU pledged Tunisia €1.5 billion euro in macro-economic support, 900 million of which conditioned to the country’s acceptance of a deal with the IMF (European Commission, 2023, p. 29). The MoU, initially conceived as a comprehensive package for cooperation on a vast array of dimensions including socio-political dialogue, ended up tackling almost exclusively macroeconomic stability and migration management. This suggests that the Commission and the Council – holders of the decision-making power in foreign affairs – might view economic transformations imposed by IFIs, alongside border control measures, as prerequisites for other forms of economic or political cooperation, such as democracy support, or strategies for better integrating migrants and respecting their fundamental rights. In this context, there is a valid concern, as raised by Theuns (2017, p. 287), regarding whether the macro-economic adjustments promoted by the EU and the IFIs in the ENP are in line with the objective of fostering a free and democratic society. Here, the tension between economic transformation and democracy arises. Enforcing macroeconomic adjustments tied to IMF loans, which involve adopting stringent fiscal policies in countries with fragile institutions, not only has the potential to diminish the democratic power of citizens but also risks neglecting their vital needs. Similarly, exclusively focusing on joint border control to manage migration flows may hinder the assurance of respect for migrants’ fundamental rights.

While the €900 million EU loan remains frozen until Tunisia accepts the IMF loan, the remaining €150 million has recently been disbursed through an urgent procedure called “special measure”, allowing for the immediate release of funds without the usual phases of scrutiny. Once again, the only EU institutional actor which seems to place and prioritise democracy as a pre-condition to other forms of cooperation is the Parliament. In February 2024, through a “parliamentary question”, the EP inquired about the necessity of the “special measure” and emphasised that the disbursement of the €150 million loan should have been contingent upon certain conditions, including the respect for human rights. Given the deteriorating democratic situation in Tunisia, the Parliament questioned whether the Commission had adequately assessed the current situation (European Parliament, 2024). In addition to the “parliamentary question”, in March 2024, the EP adopted a resolution regarding the adoption of the “special measure” for Tunisia. The Parliament highlighted that no informal consultations had taken place between the Commission and the Parliament to assess the status of democratic erosion in Tunisia before deciding on the urgent provision of funds. Citing arti-

-les 27, 29, and 40 of the NDICI-Global Europe regulatory text, the Parliament stressed that an ex-ante impact assessment was essential to prevent funding that could have resulted in human rights violations (European Parliament, 2024). Additionally, in cases of democratic degradation, economic assistance could have been suspended. The Parliament also emphasised that when providing budget support, the Commission must establish and monitor criteria for applying conditionalities and enable parliamentary oversight (European Parliament, 2024).

On 13th September 2023, an EU delegation from the Committee on Foreign Affairs was denied entry to Tunisia, thus limiting the EP's ability to exercise its power of scrutiny through the EOM (Euronews, 2023). Subsequently, towards the end of September 2023, Tunisian authorities unilaterally postponed a visit from the European Commission (Politico, 2023). These actions further suggest that the Saied administration was unwilling to engage with EU institutions on matters related to human rights violations in the country. Given that democratic erosion in Tunisia has been ongoing since 2021, the unwillingness of Tunisian authorities to collaborate with European entities to enhance democratic governance could have been anticipated through an ex-ante impact assessment, thus preventing the adoption of the "special measure" and the urgent disbursement of the €150 million loan.

The answer seems clear: it's a matter of priority. The European Commission and the Council, together with the IFIs, prioritize the adoption of neo-liberal economic strategies to address both stability and border control issues. This approach often ties funding conditions to adherence to Western-sponsored macroeconomic principles. This tendency underscores the EU's limited strategic autonomy in formulating an independent framework for promoting grassroots socio-political and economic stability in its neighbouring regions. This dependency on Western actors such as the IMF, the US, and World Bank illustrates the EU's lack of sovereignty in shaping its own regional policies. Moreover, this emphasis on neo-liberal economic paradigms accentuates the internal fragmentation within the EU's institutional structure. The priorities of the EP sometimes diverge from this approach, as it tends to prioritize the interests of people over states and is more inclined towards promoting democracy rather than solely focusing on economic agreements. Despite the Parliament's persistent calls for the Council and Commission to adhere to 'democracy conditionality' in agreements with Tunisia, these appeals frequently go unheeded. Additionally, the EP can suggest changes in approach by offering ongoing commentary and posing questions to the Council or Commission, but it lacks the authority to make binding decisions for nations regarding matters concerning EU external relations. As the EU increasingly adopts an intergovernmental approach, there is a risk that democratic principles will continue to be deprioritized, potentially leading to a situation where national economic and security interests become the sole priority.

Conclusion: Policy Recommendations for the Future of EU-Tunisia Relations

EU policies towards Tunisia, whether under the ENP-South or other EU frameworks, primarily focus on strengthening neo-liberal institutions and intergovernmental relations. This approach often overlooks the need to foster a democratic culture at the micro-level and to empower the EP in this process. To address this fundamental weakness, the EU should:

1) Define Supranational Normative Concepts and Interests: The EU must clearly articulate its objectives in the neighbourhood. It needs to decide whether its goal is Euro-Mediterranean integration among people or states. Adopting the concept of Strategic Autonomy can help the

EU critically evaluate its regional policies and focus on fundamental areas such as the well-being and freedom of populations.

2) Prioritize Civil Society Engagement: Despite the EU Council's emphasis on civil society's role in promoting good governance and the rule of law, this dedication often takes a back seat to macro-economic adjustments and international relations. The EU should bridge the gap between its democratic support ideology and its concrete actions by prioritizing the involvement of civil society in its policies.

3) Enhance EP's Role: Better inclusion of the EP in consultations and decision-making processes could create a more balanced approach between the need for macro-economic stability and democracy support. The Parliament's involvement would ensure that human security – social, political, and economic – of people in Tunisia becomes the cornerstone of the EU-Tunisia relationship.

4) Political Accountability in Project Management: While the EU funds projects aimed at enhancing democratic culture within civil society, its political involvement in managing these projects is minimal. The EU should take on more political accountability in concrete democracy support initiatives. For instance, in projects like SHAPEDEM-EU, which promotes resilience and democracy in Tunisian civil society, the EU should be directly engaged rather than merely acting as a financial donor.

5) Reevaluate Partnerships and Conditionalities: The EU needs to reconsider the implications of its partnerships and the conditions it imposes. A fundamental question remains: what would have happened if the EU had not adopted the 2023 MoU or the urgent procedure, and if the IMF had not interfered in EU regional policies? A more adaptable and cooperative approach focused on people-to-people contact might have fostered stronger democratic ties.

6) Operationalize Democracy Support Effectively: The EU must address the overarching challenges in its democracy promotion efforts, such as the lack of Strategic Autonomy, reliance on Western ideals and institutions, and the intergovernmental nature of decision-making. Ensuring political accountability and the appropriate level of DI is crucial for developing and implementing an effective and grassroots ENP-South policy to support democracy in Tunisia.

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The EU's (Ir)relevance: Lessons from Syria, Iran and the JCPOA

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Abstract

In the 1990s, the European Union (EU) became a pivotal actor in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). From the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) in 1995 to the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) in 2004, the EU positioned itself as a credible actor that could counterbalance the United States by adopting a value-based, normative, and less interventionist approach. However, the post-2011 MENA order, characterised by instability and volatility, was a decisive test for the EU's regional engagement. Despite the surge of authoritarianism, revolutionary movements, and political violence, the EU has been a bystander, failing to play a role that matches its geopolitical aspirations. Rather, it opted for a low-profile engagement, self-sabotaging its relevance. To explore the intrinsic and extrinsic factors that account for the EU's diminished relevance, this paper examines the Syrian conflict and the Iran nuclear agreement.

Keywords

European Union, Irrelevance, Syria, Iran, Crisis Management, JCPOA

Introduction

The Arab Spring is the clearest juncture that signals the European Union's (EU) waning engagement in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Contrary to the 1990s, during which the EU launched the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), replaced ten years later by the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) to reinforce its image as a "force for good" (Pace, 2007), the Arab Spring inaugurated a new regional order characterised by persistent instability and volatility (Nas, 2019). The competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia heightened, bringing about new alliance spheres; Washington's military overreach saw a remarkable decline, giving the impression of an alleged power decline (Lynch, 2019); China revealed distinct aspirations in the region, dissociating itself from Washington's way of doing things (Liangxiang et al., 2024).

In front of these testing dynamics, the EU has been a bystander, unwilling and unable to play a significant role that matches its geopolitical aspirations as an international game-changer. Despite enhancing its tools, diversifying policies, and adopting more pragmatic approaches over the years, the EU's achievements have been limited to tackling symptoms rather than influencing developments

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(Koch, 2019). While some comprehend this as the inability to act, others point to unwillingness. This low-profile engagement, or reticence, is visible across many settings, including the Western Sahara, post-Gaddafi Libya, and the Yemeni Crisis. This paper examines two cases: Syria, where the conflict has been raging since 2011; and the Iran Nuclear Deal, an agreement highlighting Brussels' varying engagement. The central argument is that the EU self-sabotaged its relevance by prioritising transactional diplomacy to tackle the symptoms of instability rather than instability itself and overlooking the opportunities that could bolster relevance.

The paper proceeds as follows. The first section provides an overview of the concepts of relevance and irrelevance in international relations, followed by a second section on the Syrian conflict and Europe's hands-off engagement. The third section delves into the nuclear deal, outlining the EU's post-2018 declining engagement. This work scrutinises EU external policy as much as it answers the following question: what went wrong in the neighbourhood? Amid the war in Gaza and Brussels' flawed approach to principled pragmatism (Colombo, 2021), answering this question is more timely and pertinent than ever.

The Caveats of (Ir)relevance

While this work is not purely academic, delineating the concept of relevance is nonetheless necessary. What does relevance and irrelevance mean in international relations? Who is a relevant actor and who is not? Is irrelevance deliberate (i.e., chosen), inadvertent, or imposed? Who is an event-maker and not an event-taker (Kribbe, 2020, pp. 194-95)? Who is able to use its material and non-material capabilities to take actions with a direct impact on events?

In this work, relevance is defined as having a weight in a specific time, external space, and juncture. It hinges on the ability to act with authority, autonomy, flexibility, and harmony (Russell & Tokatlian, 2003; Kustermans & Horemans, 2022):

- Authority means not ceding power to rival actors that may put one's interests at stake. Authority neither entails domination nor the deployment of hard power or interference in the internal affairs of other countries.
- Autonomy has to do with relative power and it means being able to make decisions in full sovereignty, without subserving to the will of an actor (state or non-state) or group of actors.
- Flexibility means adapting actions according to the development of the issue(s) at stake.
- Harmony is reconciling divergent interests to build a consistent course of action.

On the flip side, an irrelevant actor is one that either lacks the will to become relevant in a particular setting or is unable to due to power limitations. In this study, we differentiate between unwillingness and inability because deliberate irrelevance in a particular setting is different from imposed irrelevance. The latter is usually the result of external dynamics such as internal divisions and relative power gaps.

The Syrian Crisis: The EU's Hands-off Engagement

Since the onset of the Syrian civil war, the EU has followed a hands-off policy summarised in the abundance of non-coercive measures and the paucity of conflict resolution efforts. In January 2011, a small group of Syrians gathered in the capital Damascus to express support for the protest in Egypt and Tunisia (Dagher, 2019, p.18). While the gatherings were quickly shut down by authorities,

protest in Egypt and Tunisia (Dagher, 2019, p.18). While the gatherings were quickly shut down by authorities, February 2011 marked a key turning point in the crisis when a group of students in Daraa wrote anti-regime slogans on walls, triggering a wave of arrests, and in turn, demonstrations. Civil unrest broke out after civil society actors took to the streets to call for human rights reforms (Bouris & Nacrou, 2018). However, the situation abruptly escalated when regime forces chose arrest instead of appeasement, and torture instead of dialogue. The intended message was one and only: "Assad or we burn the country" (Dagher, 2017). Indeed, the imminent conflict opposed those who sought the end of the Assad regime and those who either supported the Baathist clan or believed that it was the lesser of two evils (Pearlman, 2017, pp. 28-29). Subsequently, a sectarian tone started moulding the protests which slowly yet acquired a militarised tone. Initially, the armed civilians and army defectors acted as a shield between protesters and the army, but over time, it began targeting regime forces. In the following seven months, nearly 2,000 people were killed (Pearlman, 2017, p. 30).

Closely monitoring the harrowing developments in its southern neighbourhood, the EU insisted that nothing would prevent the looming war other than the departure of incumbent president Bashar al-Assad, and the initiation of a peaceful democratic transition (Ashton, 2011). Accordingly, former Commission Vice President Catherine Ashton (2011) stepped in with the language of democracy, human rights and solidarity, vigorously calling for Assad's departure.

This is the starting point of the EU's deficient policy in Syria. Brussels thought that the fall of Assad would be unavoidable and achievable, not knowing that the Assad regime would be much more resilient in comparison with its Egyptian or Tunisian counterparts (Van Veen et al., 2021). This mistake is not surprising given the history of mutual indifference between the EU and Syria. In the subsequent months, while countries such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye and the US reached out to arm the Syrian opposition, the EU refrained from what could be labelled as a hawkish policy for several reasons, mainly its reticence towards direct military engagement (Portela, 2012). Indeed, weapons could have helped the opposition shield civilians from indiscriminate violence, but they would surely have added complexity to an already entangled scene. Always reiterating the necessity of Assad's exit from office and a peaceful political transition, Brussels opted for a two-faced policy: sanctions and humanitarian diplomacy.

i. Sanctions Regime

In May 2011, the EU imposed the first batch of sanctions on Syria, accompanied by a cancellation of all forms of bilateral cooperation and the suspension of Syria's investments at the European Investment Bank, making it the first to sanction the Assad regime (European Commission, n.d). Contrary to the sanctions imposed on Egypt, Libya and Tunisia to prevent the ousted ruling elite from putting their hand on state funds, Syria was a peculiar case. In fact, protests and demonstrations did not trigger regime overthrow or change, and both the EU and protesters were encountering a leadership whose unrestrained use of violence provoked a deadlock at the internal and external levels. On the one hand, there was no comeback for Syrians who suffered loss, destruction, and displacement. For them, the revolution reached a point of no return, and so did people's distrust towards the regime. On the other hand, Assad's willingness to wage war against his people alienated the international community and left little room for mediation (Pearlman, 2017, p. 94).

Hence, the EU opted for different three types of sanctions, imposed over several phases (Seeberg, 2016, p. 106). Sanctions mainly targeted entities and individuals that were part of Assad's repressive

and finance networks, mainly consisting of embargoes and asset freezing. The rationale was to suffocate the regime to beget positive change, and that worked to a limited extent (Mahony, 2012; Pearlman, 2017, p. 27). Indeed, the Syrian government opened a dialogue channel and even held local elections to signal change, all while continuing its policy of 'kill to survive.'

That said, the EU introduced a comprehensive arms embargo to prohibit the Syrian regime from acquiring weapons that would be used to crack down on dissent. However, intra-EU disagreement would culminate in the easing of the embargo in 2013. Indeed, France and Britain maintained that the attack was a direct sign that the embargo should be amended to allow the armed opposition to bolster its finances through the export of crude oil to Europe and the ease of financial sanctions (Laub & Masters, 2013). However, this move was met with international condemnation because the resumption of arms transfers could facilitate breaches of international humanitarian law and exacerbate impunity (Amnesty International, 2013). Eventually, the regime used chemical weapons in Ghouta in August 2013.

In parallel, Brussels' oil and petroleum derivatives embargo did inflict a heavy blow on the Syrian economy. Prior to 2011, the 385,000 daily barrels that Syria produced accounted for about 20% of the government revenue (Butter, 2014). If the production was modest in comparison with that of oil giants in the MENA, it still made a difference in Europe's energy supply. Indeed, 95% of Syria's oil went to the EU, and the suspension of exports entailed Europe sacrificed its own energy needs (Portela, 2012).

That said, if the sanctions constrained the regime's ability to carry out international transactions, widened the gap between the regime and its loyalists, and undermined leading institutions, they failed to jeopardise the Syrian deep state, enforce compliance with international law, and hamper the regime's adaptability. First, Assad relied on Russia and Iran which proved able and willing to assist, while capitalising on the weakness of moderate opposition forces which lacked military assistance (Kizilkan, 2018). Additionally, the conflict acquired so much complexity with the emergence of a panoply of armed non-state actors and the conflict of interests within the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) (Seeberg, 2016, p. 111). Third, the regime's loyalist business people sought alternatives to circumvent the restrictions by diversifying their activities, targeting new markets, and using Russian and Iranian banks. Furthermore, the regime bolstered its financial structure by resorting to illicit activities, particularly narcotics. It is worth mentioning that the production of Captagon thrived in 2018 once the regime forces recaptured territory in the south. Since then, the conflict has acquired a new dynamic, allowing Assad to keep making gains without offering concessions (Steenkamp, 2024; Cafiero, 2024); the latest one being Syria's readmission into the Arab League and the lobbying efforts of Abu Dhabi and Riyadh to have the EU lift its sanctions (Tür, 2023).

Consequently, it is difficult to maintain that European sanctions fulfilled the general purpose of the sanctions. True, the packages imposed perfectly mirror Brussels' discontent vis-à-vis the developments in Syria, but they did not represent a manifestation of power by forcing Assad to make decisions he would not have made otherwise. The sanctions in play have also not triggered compliance with international law. The Syrian Emergency Task Force (SETF) and the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), for example, still document egregious human rights violations, including kidnappings, arbitrary arrests, and killings.

ii. Humanitarian Response

The second pillar of the EU strategy in Syria is humanitarian relief. The militarisation of the conflict, coupled with Russia's military intervention in 2015, pushed millions to seek refuge in neighbouring countries and Europe. Facing this conundrum, the EU deployed the currency it knows best: "humanitarian diplomacy," borrowing the words of former EU Commission Vice President Federica Mogherini (Bouris & Nacrou, 2018). Indeed, Brussels had a fully-fledged armed conflict raging in the Eastern Mediterranean, and a massive influx of refugees coming through the Balkans or the Central Mediterranean route.

Hence, the resolution of the conflict was no longer an attainable goal. Also, the so-called de-escalation zones, established during the Astana process, created a false hope that the dropping conflict intensity would ultimately enforce the UNSC Resolution 2254. In fact, the process was the first to gather the regime and the powerful opposition groups to the negotiation table with the hope of initiating a political process, and if the talks managed to reduce Syrian/Russian bombings in areas controlled by the opposition, they failed to yield a lasting reduction of violence.

Accordingly, instead of engaging with a conflict that is 'too complex,' the EU chose to tackle its ramifications, including the humanitarian cost. This mirrors its 2016 Global Strategy which delineates "principled pragmatism" as the roadmap for EU foreign policy (Rieker & Riddervold, 2021). Either in the 2013 Strategy or the 2015, the priority was a political transition that honours UNSC Resolution 2254 and the 2012 Geneva Communiqué. However, the 2017 strategy is more people-oriented than its 2013 antecedent. It is no surprise that this strategy was reflected in the EU being by far Syria's largest humanitarian donor (Blockmans, 2017).

Humanitarian diplomacy consists mainly of (EEAS, 2024):

- Preventing the collapse of the Syrian public service infrastructure
- Providing lifesaving
- Partnering with various interlocutors to ensure safe and unrestrained humanitarian access
- Supporting refugees and host communities (e.g., Madad Fund)
- Supporting community resilience (e.g., the White Helmets)

However, this strategy was met with three problems. While the EU spent billions of euros on humanitarian relief and non-humanitarian assistance (e.g., education, civil society), it prioritised lifesaving aid and overlooked Early Recovery (ER). Early Recovery refers to humanitarian assistance that falls between life-saving and reconstruction; it is about restoring basic services to increase resilience and reduce Syria's reliance on humanitarian aid (e.g., rehabilitation of health facilities and schools). (Al Dassouky, 2024). In 2021-2023, lifesaving aid amounted to more than 90% of humanitarian aid, leaving a minimal margin to ER (note: this is not specific to the EU). If this is important, it is like prescribing pain-killers instead of antibiotics to a disease. It also creates imbalance in terms of the cost-benefit relation.

Second, the paucity of credible interlocutors inside Syria. In Syria, civil society has always remained under the regime's shadow. Even when the constitution vowed to abolish the subordination of civil society organisations to the Baath Party in 2012, which had been in place since 1963, Syria's police state remains in control of who gets the authorisation to start an association, especially those operating in the field of human rights as they constitute a distinct threat to its survival (Homsy & Hadid, 2023). One of the few exceptions of credible organisations operating inside Syria is the White Helmets, co-founded in southern Türkiye by former British army officer James Le Mesurier, who

passed away mysteriously in 2019 in Istanbul. What started as rescuing expanded to include the provision of basic social services, including the maintenance of electrical grids and water supply systems. The White Helmets enjoy considerable financial support from the EU, the latest one being a 4 million euro package intended to alleviate the impact of the earthquake in 2023. However, the White Helmets operate in rebel-held areas, and this joins the point on interlocutors. In rebel-held areas, the main obstacle is usually funding and safety, whereas in regime-held areas, the risks are countless.

Third, EU humanitarian aid does not fully benefit civilians. Since the UN maintains distance between donors and work on the ground, the allocation circuit of aid remains blurry. This 'blind spot' allows the regime to engage in embezzlement by putting loyal NGOs in the façade (Hauch & Van Veen, 2024). Additionally, Damascus capitalises on its special relationship with Moscow to veto the delivery of cross-border aid from Türkiye without his consent. This situation allows the regime to weaponize aid while hampering ER prospects and weakening the leverage of the UN and donors.

iii. Explaining the EU's hands-off engagement

More than a decade into the Syrian conflict, the EU has been undertaking a test, trying in vain to strike a delicate balance between its normative ideals and the security imperatives on the ground. The reasons accounting for this failure are multiple, and they are not always intrinsic.

The first factor that accounts for the EU's hands-off policy in Syria is the absence of pre-2011 Syria from Europe's priorities. Damascus, whether under Bashar or his late father Hafez, has rarely considered the EU to be a strategic partner. Likewise, Syria was in Europe's eyes a "problematic country" due to its close relations with the Soviet Union and Hezbollah (Özcan, 2017). Aside from the Cooperation Agreement signed in 1977, Syria was also not very enthusiastic about fostering deep bilateral relations since doing so would have eventually brought its close relations with the combo Russia-Iran and human rights issues to the table (Turkmani, 2016, p. 6). Moreover, the democratisation inherent to ENP was not among Syria's priorities (Seeberg, 2014). It is no surprise that Brussels and Damascus never ratified the so-called Association Agreement (AA) which had intended to make Syria take part fully in the ENP framework because Damascus kept postponing its signature, citing reasons to further examine the agreement (Seeberg, 2014). The EU-Syria distance was also manifest in the timing of the EU's Syria strategy. Following the 2011 developments, it took Brussels two years to change the already outdated 2007 strategy (Turkmani, 2016, p.10).

By 2011, Brussels had a solid reason to freeze its signature and suspend cooperation under the ENP framework. Hence, caution has often been the lens through which the EU perceived Syria. This approach falls under the so-called renewed ENP, which posits the double strategy of 'more for more' and 'less for less' (Nas, 2019). If this approach helped the EU curtail its expectations from the Baathist regime, it nonetheless paved the floor for transactional diplomacy that mainly consists of responding to the symptoms of crises. Sanctions are the clearest example; The EU could not use its leverage to compel the Assad regime to enact reforms, let alone leave office, thus it took the shortcut of sanctions. The distance between the EU and Syria is in part what drove Brussels to miscalculate the power of the Assad clan and assume that the fall of autocrats in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya would create a domino effect in Syria.

Second, intra-EU division hampers the ability of member states to develop a consistent strategy. In

2015, the EU ranked the refugee crisis a top priority following the Lampedusa shipwreck and the UNHCR's call on Europe to address the "root causes" of migration flows (Saatçioğlu, 2020). Indeed, the EU set an action plan towards a common policy, based on the principles of solidarity, responsibility sharing and resettlement, but existing inter and intra divergences did not take long to show and obstruct the progression of this common approach. On the one hand, EU members had to comply with international refugee law, which grants the right to seek refuge in the event of war or persecution. On the other hand, they felt alone confronted with the burden of addressing the 'refugee crisis', and that not all countries were willing to engage in responsibility-sharing. For example, while Germany chose the 'open-door policy', countries like Hungary and Poland advocated for a unilateral approach to migration, especially following the Daesh attacks in Paris in 2015 (Kriesi & Moise, 2024). In a few months, the premise of the EU migration approach shifted from solidarity to securitisation and externalisation, which comprised sidelining EU normative values (Saatçioğlu, 2020). This materialised with the conclusion of the EU-Türkiye agreement in 2016, which was based on the principle of granting temporary protection to refugees and hosting returnees.

Behind incentives lies a major problem. Not only has the deal portrayed the EU as the weak actor that delegates responsibilities, but it also placed Brussels in a weak position vis-à-vis Ankara. The EU believed that relying on buffer zone Türkiye to manage the flow of migrants would be temporary. As mentioned earlier, the assumption was that the Assad regime would not last long. However, as Russia stepped in militarily, the tension increased, and so did Ankara's demands from Brussels because there was no sign that the security situation in Syria would allow the return of refugees any time soon. Furthermore, the EU agreed to make concessions that would later prove unfeasible: one example is Türkiye's EU accession (Özalp, 2021). The manifestation of this weakness would manifest in 2020, when Türkiye opened its border to allow crossings into Greece, putting Greece and by default, the EU, in the spotlight of human rights.

Third, the varying security climate in Syria left little room for the divided EU member states to develop a conflict management strategy that reconciles humanitarian and political imperatives. Especially since 2013 when the UN confirmed the evidence on Assad's use of chemical weapons, Brussels has been divided on two aspects: arms embargo and military action. However, the regime's continuous repudiation of the possession of chemical weapons stockpiles, coupled with pressure from France and then-EU member UK, pushed the EU to lift the arms embargo on Syrian rebels in May 2013 (SIPRI, 2013; UN, 2023). If this measure was intended to twist Assad's arm and pressure him to take part in peace talks (Geneva II Conference in 2014), it backfired, sparking a legal debate (Smith & Lang, 2013). Plus, the Syrian regime capitalised on the embargo lifting to indulge in the 'terrorism rhetoric' to legitimise his rule: all of Syria's problems are due to terrorism (Crisis Group, 2024).

Furthermore, as the conflict began acquiring a wider amplitude, various non-state actors joined the theatre, driving the regime to lose its monopoly over territorial control. Daesh, which seized crucial cities in Syria and Iraq, revived the debate on military action, downscaling Europe's vision to ENP I which was focused on stability rather than shared prosperity and democracy (Bouris & Nacrou, 2018). Especially following the Paris attack of 2015, Europe understood the need for swift and joint military action and with this, the Assad regime was no longer seen as 'the worst villain.' Yet again, inter-state divisions, driven by the diversity of interest and capabilities and the divergence on the deployment of force, meant that the EU supported the US-led Global Coalition Against Daesh at an individual level (Artega, 2014). France, for example, was at the forefront of the coalition by maintaining a direct military presence in Syria and Iraq (Opération Chammal).

The fight against Daesh involved cooperation with the People's Defense Units (YPG), which further entangled the EU's role in Syria. For Europe, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and its Syrian branch, the YPG, have different statuses. Accordingly, the YPG was a close ally of the Global Coalition Against Daesh. For Türkiye, the former is an extension of the latter, itself deemed terrorist. This disagreement pushed Ankara to take matters in its own hands by bolstering its military presence in Iraq and northern Syria. Among the military operations that bolstered the Turkish presence in Syria, particularly, are Operation Euphrates Shield (2016-17) and Operation Olive Branch (2018).

Fourth, conflicting interests within the UNSC sidelined the EU from the conflict resolution process. The EU remained passive vis-à-vis Russia's unwavering diplomatic and military support for Assad, easing the way for Moscow to defend its interests in Syria through the use of the veto card, thus translating its support into leverage. Russia, together with China, used their positions to sabotage accountability and further jeopardise the safety of civilians. This vetoing made the Syrian regime a protégé. For example, in mid-2023, Russia vetoed the extension of cross-border aid delivery in rebel-held areas in an attempt to force dialogue with the Syrian regime while undermining the opposition (Tür, 2023). So, despite imposing comprehensive sanctions and being the first humanitarian donor, the EU could not take part in conflict resolution. It is no surprise that previous peace talks (Astana and Sochi) included the trio Russia-Türkiye-Iran only.

EU Diplomacy in Turmoil: the Controversial JCPOA

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i. Leading JCPOA Negotiations: The E3/EU Journey from Early Stages to Deal Signature

Iran's nuclear program emerged as a significant concern for the EU only in 2003 when the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) uncovered undeclared nuclear activities in the country. Iran's lack of cooperation with the IAEA and reluctance to report to the UNSC prompted France, Germany, and the UK (the E3) to initiate diplomatic efforts to address the issue through negotiations.

In June 2003, EU leaders began working on the European Security Strategy (ESS) and the EU Strategy against the Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD Strategy). The ESS detailed specific actions the EU planned to take to achieve 'A More Secure Europe in a Better World', while, in the WMD Strategy, the EU committed to being 'ready to act' if international organisations, regimes, and treaties were violated. It also stated that if political dialogue and diplomatic pressure failed, 'coercive measures under Chapter VII of the UN Charter and international law (such as sanctions) could be considered' (Meier, 2013). This marked the start of extensive and challenging efforts of the EU to counter Iran's nuclear ambitions.

In the second half of 2004, as talks with Iran faced potential collapse following the "parliamentary coup d'état" in the 7th Majlis (Parliament) elections, where hardliners gained ground over reformists, the E3 recognized the need to strengthen their negotiating leverage with Tehran by offering financial and economic incentives to persuade the country to curb its nuclear activities (Kaussler, 2008). Initially, the E3 operated outside of EU institutions and could not rely on instruments under the EU's competencies. However, to offer attractive incentives to Tehran, such as discussions on a Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA), the E3 needed the efforts and commitment of the entire EU block (Bassiri Tabrizi & Kienzle, 2020).

In this context, Javier Solana, former EU's High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy, joined the negotiations at the end of 2004, leading to the Paris Agreement, where Tehran agreed to halt its entire enrichment program until a comprehensive agreement was reached with the EU. The EU promised to offer Iran political and trade concessions in exchange for Iran abandoning its domestic uranium enrichment activities. However, the Paris Agreement marked a partial victory for the EU as Tehran resisted the demand for an indefinite suspension of uranium enrichment, while the Europeans insisted on maintaining the freeze until a satisfactory long-term agreement was achieved (Traynor & Kasra Naji, 2004).

The EU managed to play a crucial role due to the US refusal to negotiate with Iran and Tehran's greater trust in the EU than in the US, emphasising effective multilateralism. Despite initial successes, the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005 as the president of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) stalled negotiations. While Iran resumed enrichment activities, the E3/EU shifted towards supporting coercive measures, including UN sanctions, to address the ongoing nuclear issue. In January 2006, Solana endorsed the UNSC strategy on Iran's nuclear program. Additionally, the IAEA referred the matter to the UNSC, expanding involvement to include the E3/EU+3 (China, Russia, and the US). Despite the US refusal to negotiate without enrichment suspension and Russian and Chinese opposition to sanctions, the E3/EU played a key role, leading to the first UNSC Resolution (1696) in 2006, demanding Iran to cease enrichment. Iran's non-compliance led to further UNSC Resolutions: 1737 in 2006 (imposing sanctions), 1747 in 2007 (prohibiting weapon exports), and 1803 in 2008 (blacklisting and inspecting Iranian ships/planes). The EU implemented all sanctions, demonstrating effective multilateralism and crisis management.

In December 2009, Catherine Ashton succeeded Solana as the chief negotiator for the E3/EU+3 on the Iranian nuclear issue. The Lisbon Treaty introduced institutional reforms that assigned the High Representative significant roles in representing and participating in EU foreign and security policy matters, effectively making her the external representative of the EU. Additionally, the High Representative was supported by the newly established diplomatic service, the European External Action Service (EEAS), which was officially launched in December 2010 (Bassiri Tabrizi & Kienzle, 2020). In 2009, US President Barack Obama also joined the negotiations unconditionally. However, the situation became strained due to the re-election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a hardline conserv-

-ative who served as Iran's the situation became strained due to the re-election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a hardline conservative who served as Iran's president from 2005 to 2013. Ahmadinejad's victory was highly controversial, sparking widespread allegations of electoral fraud and leading to the emergence of the Green Movement. This protest movement, largely driven by those demanding more political freedoms and transparency, led to significant unrest across Iran, further complicating the diplomatic landscape (Dagres, 2018). The discovery of a secret enrichment plant, along with Iran's continued enrichment activities, further worsened the situation. Despite sanctions and diplomatic efforts, Iran expanded its nuclear program, leading the EU to consider unilateral sanctions. The UNSC adopted Resolution 1929 in June 2010, imposing sanctions on Iran's heavy weapons and ballistic missile activities. The EU complemented these with its own economic sanctions to encourage negotiations that severely impacted Iran's economy.

The election of Hassan Rouhani in June 2013 marked a change in Iran's foreign policy, aligning with the Obama administration's willingness to accept low levels of Iranian civilian uranium enrichment as part of the criteria for a final negotiated settlement. This revitalised negotiations, paving the way for the Joint Plan of Action (JPOA) in November 2013 (European Union External Action Service, 2013). This interim agreement was signed between Iran, the EU and the P5+1 group (UK, China, France, Russia, the US, and Germany) and allowed UN nuclear inspectors to visit Iranian heavy water facilities after Iran announced the suspension of uranium enrichment. While economic boycotts and material restrictions remained in place, the EU indicated a potential gradual reduction of these embargoes. Finally, in 2015, Iran agreed to the JCPOA with the P5+1 countries and the EU, endorsed by the UNSC Resolution 2231 (Davenport, 2023). This historic agreement primarily focused on three key aspects: restricting the Iranian nuclear program for a minimum of ten years, lifting international sanctions, and increasing inspection measures. Specifically, it entails reducing the number of centrifuges (from 19,000 to 5,060), with the excess centrifuges required to be placed under the oversight of the IAEA. Furthermore, the Islamic Republic was required to export or dilute enriched uranium exceeding 3.67%, thereby ensuring that its stockpile did not surpass 300 kg. The agreement also included provisions to limit plutonium production: Iran committed to modifying the Arak heavy water plant to prevent military plutonium production and agreed not to construct new heavy-water reactors for fifteen years. In addition, by ratifying the additional IAEA protocol, Iran consented to undergo inspections for fifteen years from the agreement's implementation date. Lastly, the JCPOA also implied the complete removal of UNSC sanctions, along with multilateral and national sanctions linked to Iran's nuclear program. This encompassed measures affecting trade, technology, finance, and energy access (United States Department of State, 2015).

In the EU Headquarters, Federica Mogherini, the successor of Ashton, established the Iran Task Force within the EEAS, which aimed to coordinate the various actions related to the country, focusing on implementing the JCPOA, developing bilateral relations, including setting up an EU representation and exploring a more cooperative regional framework. Between 2015 and 2018, the Task Force was notably successful, facilitating meetings between Iranian and European officials to discuss bilateral ties, and regional relations (José Leandro et al, 2021).

ii. The JCPOA: Enhancing EU Influence and Iran Non-Proliferation

The JCPOA represented a significant milestone in strengthening the non-proliferation regime in the Middle East. Through the UNSC the EU has advanced its key foreign and security policy priorities, including reinforcing the global arms control regime, especially the NPT, and reducing tensions in the Middle East. The JCPOA was an important event also in Iran's recent history, aimed at resolving over

a decade of negotiations and sanctions related to Iran's nuclear ambitions. During the negotiations, Iran sought to achieve sanctions relief and de-securitization, the latter being interpreted as eliminating the perception that the Islamic Republic poses a threat to international security (Divsallar & Otte, 2019).

From the European perspective, the foreign ministers of France, Germany, and the United Kingdom (E3), entered into diplomatic talks with Iran, to pursue mainly three primary objectives: 1) They aimed to showcase the significance of diplomacy in averting potential military action by either the US or Israel against Iran; 2) They sought to advocate for "effective multilateralism," a key principle outlined in the EU's 2003 Security Strategy, particularly concerning non-proliferation actions; 3) They endeavoured to enhance Europe's global influence by assuming a leading role in addressing the Iran issue at a time when the US was busy with Iraq and thus less engaged (Adebahr, 2014).

The signature of the JCPOA at the beginning showed that the Europeans had achieved success on all three fronts. The deal seemed initially to reinforce the EU's commitment to effective multilateralism, making the EU gain credibility on the global stage, especially after having received intense criticism on its crisis management approach during the Arab uprisings and in Syria (Adebahr, 2014). Following the signature of the JCPOA, Europe and Iran experienced a change in their relations. Politically, high-level visits signalled a new era in EU-Iran relations; economically, trade saw significant growth, albeit still below pre-2010 sanction levels. However, despite these advancements, both parties acknowledged that many expectations surrounding the JCPOA were unfulfilled. Iran expected a much greater economic recovery post-deal and the lifting of international sanctions to re-empower its economy, but fear of US sanctions has restrained European involvement in Iran's economy. Additionally, Tehran hoped the JCPOA would elevate its status as a regional power, but considered its security concerns are not adequately recognized by Europe, the US, and regional actors. On the contrary, Europe envisioned a more constructive Iranian role in the Middle East and Mediterranean, particularly regarding the Iraq and Syria crisis. As a result, unresolved differences and the US withdrawal from the agreement hindered the deepening of relations between the EU and Iran, marking the beginning of the treaty's decline.

iii. European Diplomacy Efforts in the Wake of US Policy Shift

The increasing dissatisfaction with the agreement and escalating tensions between the EU and Iran were exacerbated by the US withdrawal from the Iran Nuclear Deal in 2018, resulting in significant strains across the involved parties. However, the general reactions were disproportionate, as the JCPOA wasn't a formally signed document. According to US constitutional law, only international treaties ratified by Congress hold legal weight, which didn't occur in this case. Former President Obama could implement the deal because previous legislation granted him authority to lift sanctions against Iran, and the same legislation allowed Trump to reinstate them (Schwammenthal, 2018). While Trump's decision was legally permissible under both US and international law, it doesn't necessarily mean it was the right choice. Besides abandoning the deal that exchanged sanctions relief for substantial restrictions on Iran's nuclear activities and greater transparency, Trump also launched a campaign of maximum pressure against Iran. He immediately reinstated the sanctions that had been lifted and threatened severe consequences for anyone continuing to do business with Iran. The explicit intent was to force Iran to choose between changing its behaviour and facing severe economic hardship, hoping that this approach would lead to a better result. A year later, contrary to the Trump Administration's expectations, Iran had not succumbed to the pressure or complied with US demands. Instead, in May 2019, Iran began violating JCPOA limits, ending a

twelve-month period during which it had continued to comply with the agreement despite Trump's withdrawal (Miller, 2023). The EU faced difficulties accepting the US decision, yet European leaders acknowledged the deal's flaws with minimal public debate. In the EU-US negotiations to uphold the JCPOA, French President Macron and German Chancellor Merkel advocated for amendments, despite previously praising the agreement as a major diplomatic accomplishment (Schwammenthal, 2018). The E3/EU recognized the necessity of supporting the JCPOA, even at the risk of straining their relationship with Washington. To preserve the economic and broader benefits promised to Iran, the E3/EU established the INSTEX - Instrument in Support of Trade Exchange - a Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV), aimed to facilitate non-dollar, non-SWIFT trade with Iran to circumvent US sanctions (European Parliament, 2018). Initially, it focused on essential goods such as food, medicine, and medical devices, which were not targeted by sanctions. INSTEX acted as a barter system, allowing European and Iranian firms to match their trade needs without direct financial transactions. For instance, a European company exporting medicine to Iran could be matched with an Iranian company exporting oil to Europe, with payments settled indirectly. Therefore, the SPV aimed at supporting European businesses engaging in legitimate trade with Iran, in compliance with EU law and UNSC Resolution 2231.

However, this tool has been employed only once, during the Covid-19 pandemic failing to ensure the EU's efforts in maintaining trade ties with Tehran. Despite Iran's challenging situation, the EU further committed 20 million euros in aid and supported a \$5 billion emergency loan request from the IMF, but all these efforts were hampered by the US. The EU's attempts to maintain trade ties with Iran were insufficient to uphold the economic growth objectives of the JCPOA. Additionally, the US withdrawal from the JCPOA and the imposition of sanctions led to economic contraction, Rial devaluation, and increased inflation in Iran. To address these challenges, the Islamic Republic needed to integrate more deeply into the global economy and attract foreign investment, but, the European business community prioritised maintaining access to the lucrative US market over commitments to support Tehran's potential economic expansion, thereby challenging the EU's efforts. At the same time, while the EU was striving to sustain the JCPOA, Iran's relationships with Eastern powers were strengthening, with China and Russia providing significant support to the country during the sanctions. Consequently, as the US economic sanctions against Iran obstructed EU interests, Europe's hesitation and procrastination allowed Eastern rivals to seize the opportunity and fill the void in the Islamic Republic (Leandro et al, 2021).

iv. European Diplomacy Efforts in the Wake of US Policy Shift

The US withdrawal from the JCPOA not only undermined the agreement's viability but also highlighted certain deficiencies in the EU's approach throughout the entire process. Despite playing a key role in the negotiations, the EU's strategy towards Iran showed significant shortcomings. Rather than preparing for potential disruptions in the deal and exploring broader engagement with Iran, the EU focused solely on securing and leading the negotiations (Adebahr, 2014). By limiting its scope to the nuclear issue, the EU treated the agreement as an end in itself, lacking a long-term perspective and strategic thinking beyond its commitment to diplomacy and preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons.

European support for the JCPOA, and broader engagement with Iran, was based on several assumptions directly impacting EU interests, including normative, security, and economic concerns. These represented shared priorities among EU institutions and member states. Therefore, the collapse of the JCPOA would undermine these interests and potentially jeopardise the NPT, to which

the Iranian regime still remains bound. This could trigger further nuclear proliferation in the Middle East, undermining regional security, a key EU priority. Europe aimed to change Iran's threat perceptions and regional calculations by offering incentives such as sanctions relief and boosting EU-Iran trade, replacing the US containment strategy with one based on conditional engagement through economic and political interactions. European trade and energy interests with Iran were closely tied to the successful implementation of the JCPOA, which was part of a broader effort to stabilise the Middle East. The EU believed that isolating Iran, a key strategic player, could not achieve stability, however, the failure to fulfil the agreed commitments, such as expanding trade relations, maintaining banking exchanges, and preserving Iran's oil export capacity following the US withdrawal from the deal, made European calls for strategic patience increasingly unsustainable for the Islamic Republic (Besliu, 2023).

Ultimately, it was evident that regarding the JCPOA, the EU couldn't act independently from the US. The Europeans believed their main role in preserving the JCPOA was to isolate Washington and keep Iran bound by preventing the implementation of the snapback mechanism, a system that would reactivate previously terminated UN resolutions (Rome, & Dugit-Gros, 2023). But this approach was insufficient for Iran which suffered significant financial losses due to the US maximum pressure policy and Europe's inability to counteract the latter. In fact, Iran participated in JCPOA negotiations mainly for economic and security benefits, which were lost with the US exit (Safavi, 2023). As a result, Iran began violating the JCPOA's terms. In 2019, the UN nuclear agency confirmed the presence of advanced centrifuges for uranium enrichment and a quantity of nuclear material up to 60 per cent purity, close to weapons-grade capacity (Besliu, 2023).

In this context, the nuclear deal reached an end in September 2022, as the Europeans could no longer prioritise the nuclear issue among their policies. The simultaneous crackdown on protesters and military support for Russia in the Ukrainian war have made any possibility of engagement with Iran highly problematic, with confrontation being the only approach. The EU finds it extremely difficult to translate its rhetorical confrontation with Iran into policies that effectively address its broad range of interests regarding Tehran. These interests now extend beyond nuclear proliferation and Middle Eastern stability to include European security and the protection of human rights (Alcaro, 2024).

Conclusion: Learning and Moving Forward

The post-2011 MENA order, characterised by instability and volatility, placed EU relevance on the test. If the Syrian conflict and the post-2018 JCPOA differ in nature, they both highlight the EU's inability and unwillingness to act authoritatively and autonomously while adapting to the course of events and reconciling the interests of member states. In Syria, Brussels did not frame its policy in terms of conflict management, choosing instead to focus on the ramifications of the war and the dictates of UN mandates. This, in turn, undermined the effectiveness of sanctions and humanitarian diplomacy. In contrast, the conclusion of the JCPOA was a notable accomplishment in Europe's foreign policy record. Despite the primary focus being on the US and Iran, the Europeans played their supportive role exceptionally well. When the deal was finalised in July 2015, they could celebrate their contribution to sustaining the nuclear non-proliferation regime and reducing a potential conflict trigger in the Middle East. However, Washington's decision to withdraw cast a dark cloud over this achievement. The decision of the US reimposition of sanctions has proven far more influential on Europe's foreign policy than the EU governments' intentions, revealing Europeans'

limited power against determined US opposition.

In short, the EU (1) failed to reconcile pragmatism and values, (2) overlooked the fact that European security and Mediterranean security are interdependent, and (3) relied on confrontational discourse with the hope of pushing Tehran or Damascus to make concessions. Those mistakes cost the EU the invaluable currency of credibility. However, the good news is that it's not too late for Brussels to reset its approach to the MENA. That would take risk, impartiality, and most importantly, willingness. Playing a proactive role to restrain Israel and implement a lasting ceasefire in Gaza is perhaps the first step.

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