

EU Foreign Policy and the Middle East

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INTRODUCTION

Over the last two decades the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), including Iran and Turkey, have acquired considerable importance for the European Union (EU). As the process of deepening and enlarging made the Union's external relations more central to EU policy-making, the MENA region also went through a significant number of socio-economic and political changes that influenced the relations between the two. The rise of political Islam, the introduction of market-oriented reforms, the resilience of authoritarianism and the periodic conflicts affecting some of the MENA states all contributed to raise the political interest of the EU policy-making community towards the region because proximity provided the incentive for engaging with it more thoroughly and systematically beyond the traditional bilateral relations that EU member states conducted. In parallel with this greater political engagement with the MENA, there has been a

significant growth of academic studies on EU–Middle East relations and this area is currently flourishing due to the seemingly never ending dramatic events the MENA experiences, ranging from the emergence of terrorism to the Arab Awakening, from civil war to sectarianism and from hard security issues to the Arab–Israeli conflict.

SCHOLARSHIP

Since the mid-1990s when the scholarship on EU–Middle East relations began to take off, the focus has been on a number of principal and recurring themes inextricably linked with the policy tools the EU designed and implemented in its relations with the MENA. It should be highlighted here that the onset of the relevant literature coincides with the launch in 1995 of the Euro–Mediterranean Partnership, also known as the Barcelona Process, because this was the first systemic

attempt on the part of the EU to conduct a somewhat united and coordinated foreign-policy action towards the region. The Partnership was built on three different pillars: the creation of a free-trade area that would ensure greater economic growth; cultural exchanges destined to challenge the notion of the clash of civilisations that had emerged in the early 1990s following the work of Samuel Huntington and political cooperation that would contribute to the liberalisation of societies and opening up of political systems on the southern bank of the Mediterranean. The rationale behind the Partnership was the overall promotion of regional stability through economic integration and democratization in a multilateral forum that included the whole of the EU and all the countries in the south, including Israel and excluding Libya. Two main factors motivated the launch of the Partnership. First, the Algerian crisis of the early 1990s made EU policymakers aware of the political and security challenges that might emerge from the region. Issues of instability, it was thought, could be solved through both political and economic liberalisation. The rise of radical Islamism with its anti-Western rhetoric and controversial political programme in Algeria and its subsequent electoral victory led the Algerian military to carry out a coup to keep Islamists out of power. The ensuing civil conflict brought to the world's attention, and in particular to EU policymakers, the dangers of regional instability. The EU decided to engage with the MENA countries by exporting its own constitutive norms through the Barcelona Process given its commitment to and belief in democracy and the free market as instruments for conflict resolution, stability and growth. Second, the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians saw the normalisation of relations between a number of Arab countries and Israel, inducing the EU to play a prominent role in strengthening cooperation through multilateralism.

Following the launch of the Barcelona process, the scholarship was preoccupied for quite some time with the evaluation of

the three broad pillars of the Partnership and how they could be linked to a wider theoretical debate about the nature of the EU external relations and the EU itself. In the context of this scholarship, the bulk of the attention has been devoted to the political, security and economic aspects of the Partnership, while the cultural one has been somewhat marginalised. More specifically, the post-Barcelona process literature can be divided into four clusters of analysis.

First, a significant number of studies have been dedicated to the economic dimension of the relationship between the EU and the Middle East with a focus on the costs and benefits of the progressive liberalisation of trade and the creation of a free trade area (Brach, 2007). Broadly speaking, studies have been critical of the way in which the EU pushed economic liberalisation and the strategies of development designed for its MENA partners (Holden, 2010). This criticism, however, is not necessarily based on the poor economic performances of many MENA countries following liberalisation in so far as the macro-economic indicators point to rather constant and consistent growth over time. The central criticism has to do with the effects of economic liberalisation on wider society and the political systems of the MENA states. In other words, although the MENA economies as a whole benefited from the increase in exchanges with the EU in a freer trading environment and from the domestic reforms that were carried out, the necessity to push these reforms through made the MENA governments more authoritarian (Cavatorta and Durac, 2009). Under these authoritarian constraints, the benefits of economic integration did not trickle down; quite the contrary, a small elite benefited significantly from them, generating the anti-neoliberal backlash that characterised the Arab Awakening of 2010–11 (Chomiak and Entelis, 2011). Access to energy resources features prominently in these debates (Bahgat, 2010) in so far as the majority of EU economies rely on oil and gas coming from the region. In this context, the Qaddafi-led Libya case is particularly

significant because of the aggressive promotion of linkages with a country that had faced enormous criticism and ostracism for its domestic and foreign policies. Scholars have indeed noticed that although the EU had excluded Libya from multilateral fora with the other Middle Eastern countries, it has deliberately ignored issues such as human rights violations in order to keep on purchasing Libya's energy (Bahgat, 2009; Lutterbeck, 2009; Menon, 2011).


Second, a significant number of analyses, particularly after 11 September 2001, have dealt with security issues that the Partnership was supposed to address. In the context of EU–Middle East relations, security has been broadly conceived, encompassing issues ranging from political instability due to the rise of Islamism to terrorism and from the arms race to migration. However, for the last two decades, the focus of both policymakers and academics has been mainly on the rise of Islamism (Youngs, 2006). Although in policy-making circles Islamism has been broadly perceived as an inherently destabilising factor, academic studies have attempted to problematise this notion, suggesting that it is a phenomenon that should be better understood and potentially engaged with. Migration has also been central to academic studies because on the one hand it is perceived as a threat to the stability of European societies and on the other it is a developmental factor for both host societies and sending countries (Gallina, 2007). A more recent security threat that attracted scholarly attention is the regional arms race, with a clear focus on Iran's nuclear programme and subsequent fears of proliferation. Although the Partnership was not designed to include such crucial hard security themes and Iran is not part of the Barcelona process, the progressive coordination of external relations on the part of the EU forced it in some ways to deal with the Iranian nuclear issue. In this respect, scholarship has been preoccupied with identifying the way in which the EU is different in its approach to the US and how it has engaged with Iran on that basis (Bergenäs, 2010;

Kaussler, 2012). In any case, security matters have acquired more importance for the EU since the mid-2000s, as demonstrated by the negotiations with Syria over the Association Agreement when issues related to hard security, namely chemical and biological weapons, were openly discussed (Cavatorta and Gomez Arana, 2010).

Third, an almost endless number of analyses and empirical studies focused on the political dimension of the Partnership, in particular on the issues of democratisation and democracy-promotion, which were absolutely crucial to the whole construction of the European Mediterranean Partnership and its successors, such as the European Neighbourhood Policy (Seeberg, 2010) and Union for the Mediterranean, which can be considered an attempt to take on board criticism of and improve on it (Special Issue – *Mediterranean Politics*, 2011). Thus, there are numerous works on the way in which the EU has attempted to promote democracy and human rights in a region where political authoritarianism prevailed for a long time and is still enduring, despite the Arab Spring (Boserup and Tassinari, 2010). The vast majority of academic work on this topic has been very critical of the way in which the EU promoted democracy and human rights (Pace et al. 2009), with scholars identifying different explanations for this, ranging from poor policy coordination among members (Bicchi, 2010) to inherent contradictions in the Partnership (Pace, 2009; Del Sarto and Schumacher, 2011) and from the mistaken assumption of EU normativity (Powel, 2009; Cavatorta et al. 2008) to the ability of MENA regimes in place to withstand external pressure because of the knowledge that such pressure was not genuine (Hollis, 2005).

Finally, as mentioned earlier, the Partnership was meant to politically strengthen the Arab–Israeli peace process and underpin its success through the provision of material incentives to all sides involved. One of the very ideas of the Euro–Mediterranean Partnership was to have Israel in a multilateral forum together with the vast majority of


Arab countries to foster peaceful multilateral dynamics that could have a positive spill-over in the relations between Israel and the Arab world (Del Sarto, 2007). Ultimately, this political strategy did not work because of the developments on the ground in Israel–Palestine and because of the inability of the EU to take a unified stand on the issue. Scholarly work has indeed highlighted the inability of the EU to move beyond rhetorical support for international legality, which would favour the Palestinian position, due to the internal divisions that member states display when it comes to Israeli policies in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (Tocci, 2009; Peters, 2010).

Beyond these clusters mentioned in the context of the Barcelona Process, there are a number of studies on bilateral relations and on the reasons why the European countries are not able to come up with shared positions on a range of issues vis à vis the MENA. The Barcelona Process has been the central focus of scholarship, and one of the main observations that emerged from studies related to the shortcomings and difficulties of its implementation has to do with the consistent inability of the EU to come up with a coherent, cogent and united European policy towards the MENA on a number of issues. It follows that some scholars began to look into the way in which individual states might be responsible for such state of affairs, suggesting that bilateral relations between a specific EU country and a specific MENA country with respect to any given issue might be much more important than the multilateral ones. This is particularly evident in the case of security issues that the EU has approached in a fragmented way, even if it was done nominally under the banner of Europe. For instance,  is the case for the Iranian nuclear negotiations, which have been conducted by Germany, France and the UK (the EU-3) with Russia, China and the US (the P5+1), for the Madrid Quartet as in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and finally for the European approach to the Gulf Council Cooperation. By discussing the European posture in these different cases,

scholars have highlighted the preference for bilateral or specific agreements on the part of the leading European countries and to the absence of a shared position on a number of issues (Kirchner, 2006; Menon, 2011).

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FIELD OF STUDY

The scholarship on EU–Middle East relations contributes to a number of broad and intense debates related to the nature of EU foreign-policy-making and the EU itself. Despite their relative young age, studies on the EU–Middle East relations have brought about significant changes in how the EU is analysed because of the extremely controversial nature of the political decisions that have been made in Europe when it comes to the MENA region.

The most significant contribution has been to the overarching debate on the nature of EU power and, specifically, whether the EU displays normative power or, alternatively, a realist one. Authors generally attempt to demonstrate the validity of one theoretical conceptualisation over the other by testing the way in which the EU approaches key issues in the region and its constituent states, generating an enormous amount of empirical evidence that is then turned into support for a specific theoretical position. On the one hand, we find studies confirming the validity of the normative power approach utilising concepts such as Europeanization (Müftüler-Bac and Gürsoy, 2010) and multilateral institutionalisation. For instance, a number of studies highlight how the positive influence of the EU has contributed to Turkish democratisation and, in turn, to its softer stances in international politics due to the necessity to conform to EU standards and to the benefits that this brings about (Special issue – *Journal of Southern Europe and Balkans*, 2007). In addition, there are studies underlining the osmosis of norms from the EU to MENA countries on very specific issues such as women's rights, as the case of the family  de

reform in 2004 in Morocco demonstrates (Cavataorta and Cavataorta, 2010). It should be underlined, however, that such studies are few and far between because the overwhelming evidence emerging from the region points to the failure of such osmosis taking place on a significant scale. On the other hand, there are studies arguing that the end goals and instruments of the EU in the region respond to classic realist interests and concept of power (Hyde-Price, 2006). It follows therefore that analyses of the pillars of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership or the content of European Neighbourhood Policy agreements tend to highlight contradictions that are not simply the result of poor policy coordination or unfortunate circumstances, but are the direct outcome of the intention of the EU to operate as an amoral realist actor, despite its normative rhetoric. Numerous examinations of EU security policy, for instance, underscore how it has contributed willingly to the strengthening of authoritarian rule in the name of the War on Terror or the control of migration flows (Toje, 2005) because it is only with the cooperation of authoritarian regimes that the objective of the EU can be achieved. Also, analyses of the economic exchanges between the EU and the Middle East suggest that the EU is a rather exploitative actor benefiting from positive commercial ties because of its power. The theoretical struggle between normativity and realism when it comes to the EU is particularly significant because of the broad assumptions that have been made traditionally about the nature of the EU. The notion of normativity is very much the constitutive norm through which the EU is understood, and any problematisation of the concept or rejection tends to throw the literature in turmoil (Pace, 2007, 2009). The scholarship on EU–Middle East relations has been extremely influential in doing this and the vast majority of studies in this field, whether intentionally or not, tend to side with the often minoritarian view that the EU is far from being a normative actor or the good guy of international politics. This view today is more acceptable and accepted

because of the work of scholars of EU–Middle East relations, who have been able to shed the assumption of normativity over time and embrace a more challenging and unpopular perspective that ultimately explains what the EU does in the MENA region and how it does it better (Tocci, 2009). The relevance of the debate between normativity and realism as the frameworks through which the EU should be studied has tended to fade over recent years because of its increasing sterility to the extent that it is no longer academically productive. It is now too simplistic to start from a theoretical stance and then look for evidence that either supports or negates the validity of a theoretical approach that would encompass what the EU is and does, and implicitly negates the complexity of EU external policy-making, which may respond to and be explained by multiple theoretical frameworks. It is for this reason that what is termed ‘post-normativism’ has emerged as a development in the literature, whereby the debate has shifted away from the nature of the EU towards what the EU does in practice and in every MENA state (Zorob, 2008), thereby allowing theoretical flexibility. This implies a much more in-depth analysis of the empirics that emerge from examining how the EU engages specific countries and which policy instruments are employed. The goal is not to substantiate a specific theoretical perspective that would be valid for all time and places, but to provide a much more complex picture of the nature of EU external relations that cannot entirely be accredited solely to normativity or realism (Youngs, 2006). The concept that emerges more forcefully from post-normativism is pragmatism, which seems to offer the conceptual tool through which EU engagement in the region can be assessed. Pragmatism is informed by both normativity and realism, but constitutes a separate analytical entity, which benefits from constructivist ideas about the way in which the EU thinks of itself, how it projects its external relations and how it is capable of adapting to the unique challenges and circumstances that each MENA state offers

(Special Issue – *European Foreign Affairs Review*, 2010).

The second contribution of the scholarship speaks to another fundamental question that is not only crucial for EU external relations, but for other policy-making areas as well: who is really in charge of EU foreign-policy-making? The Middle East is a challenging region where numerous hard and soft security matters have to be dealt with and where changes have come about rapidly and often times dramatically. The EU has attempted to formulate coherent policies on these matters and to unify potentially diverging positions among member states. As mentioned earlier, it is fair to argue that the results have been disappointing, leading specialists in the field to point to a number of institutional weaknesses that the EU suffers. Furthermore, some of the European countries have post-colonial ties with Middle Eastern countries, and this makes a general, European approach far more difficult to be adopted for individual states who enjoy exclusive relations with former colonies based on the sustenance and perpetuation of patronage networks. Operating in a multilateral context is therefore far more complex because there are parallel relations between certain EU member states and former colonies that transcend multilateralism and could be far more significant in terms of economic and political issues. The very nature of the issues that the MENA region has highlighted would require a clear, rapid and coherent response on the part of the EU, but this has not yet materialised and the scholarship recognises this particular failure. As a result, studies on EU–Middle East relations have informed the broader scholarship on actorness and agency within the EU in addressing the actual role of the EU at times when important decisions have to be made. A number of examples related to specific issues the EU has dealt – and is still dealing with – should suffice to clarify this point. Scholars have emphasised how the 2003 invasion of Iraq divided the EU member states and how, consequently, the EU was marginalised due to its inability to reconcile

diverging positions (Chari and Cavatorta, 2003). The same divisions exist when it comes to dealing with the Arab–Israeli conflict, where the strong views of some member states prevent the EU from presenting a common position on the issue. More recent events, such as the Arab Spring and the war in Libya, have further highlighted divisions and the inconsistency of the attitude on foreign policy of the single European countries. This is the case of the French recognition of the Libyan Transitional Council in March 2011 as the sole legitimate power in the North African country, a move which was made disturbingly early and hastily for the other EU members who were still evaluating and discussing what should be done and what joint position should be taken. The resolute attitude taken by Paris caused criticism and bitterness among the allies (Menon, 2011). European states have similar difficulties in the case of the Iranian nuclear issue, and the manner in which negotiations have taken place is evidence of this. The rounds of negotiations that Iranian foreign-policy officials meeting with EU counterparts often had no significant outcomes because the EU's mandate is extremely limited due to the divergences between member states with different attitudes and conflicting agendas vis à vis Iran and its nuclear programme (Hamish, 2007; Dryburgh, 2008). Thus, the scholarship in the field – possibly because the issues arising from the region are so contentious, crucial and difficult – points decisively to the EU structural and institutional problems in light of the domineering role of some member states when it comes to foreign policy in the region. In turn, these weaknesses have highlighted similar ones in other policy-areas and reopened the debate about the submissiveness of European institutions to the interests of the ‘big powers’ within them (Harnisch, 2007). This has had profound repercussions on broader studies of agency within the EU, which the financial crisis has made all the more relevant in the current climate of divisions among member states (Whitman and Juncos, 2012).

This debate feeds into the third contribution that the scholarship has made to the wider understanding of the relationship between the EU and multilateralism. The EU project has traditionally been a multilateral one with norms and ideas about democracy, peace, human rights and economic integration being the foundation upon which stability and conflict-resolution could be built. Multilateral external relations have therefore always been privileged within EU policy-making circles in contributing to peace and stability worldwide. It follows that much of EU foreign-policy-making in the Middle East is predicated on the attempt to establish regional institutions fostering multilateral cooperation. These fora, be they the Euro–Mediterranean Partnership or the Union for the Mediterranean, would serve as arenas to discuss and manage issues of common interest to countries on both sides of the Mediterranean and hopefully make the Mediterranean an area of democracy and shared prosperity. Although such multilateral fora have achieved a degree of success in some technical areas where cooperation has indeed occurred, the scholarship generally points to weaknesses and shortcomings, which, in turn, affect the broader debate about the genuine commitment to multilateralism of the EU when concrete material interests have to be promoted or defended. The supposed commitment to and effectiveness of multilateralism therefore contradicts the employment, to a great degree, of bilateral tools in dealing with Middle East countries, and allowing for a broader questioning of not only EU policies, but also of the theoretical underpinnings of multilateralism itself (Echagüe et al., 2011). Studies of relations between the EU and individual MENA countries suggest that when bilateralism prevails, the EU benefits much more greatly than the partner country because of the power differentials that exist (Special Issue – *European Foreign Affairs Review*, 2010). This finding also links back and feeds into the discussion over the true nature of EU power.

Finally, a further debate informing broader scholarship on the EU is the transatlantic relation. Since the end of the Cold War, both policymakers and academics have been pre-occupied with the nature of the transatlantic relation and the seemingly increasing divergence of interests and values between the EU and the US. Since the wars in the former Yugoslavia, there have been studies suggesting the existence of a so-called transatlantic rift, which is supposedly driving the EU and the US in progressively different directions over a number of crucial issues ranging from trade to the environment and from human rights to engagement with rogue states. A simple and possibly simplistic picture emerged from these studies, whereby the US was becoming increasingly unipolar, uninterested in multilateralism and committed more to the use of violence than diplomacy, while the EU was progressively more idealistic and committed to the solution of conflicts through multilateralism and aid. In short, ‘Americans were from Mars and Europeans from Venus’ (Kagan, 2002). Although this view did not enjoy the consensus of the community of scholars, it nevertheless influenced the way in which the scholarship of the EU–Middle East relations analysed how the EU and the US behaved in the region in order to draw some broader lessons about the supposed transatlantic rift (Smith, 2009). Beginning in particular with the war in Iraq of 2003, increasing attention was given to the divergence between the European position and the American one, but the problem is that this supposed divergence rested on the premise that the EU would be capable of behaving as a unified actor. This was far from the reality and when the individual positions of EU member states with respect to the war in Iraq were analysed, what emerged was that some countries were very close to the US position, while others radically disagreed with it. In a sense, there was nothing to compare because the EU did not act as a unified actor. Despite this, what emerges from analysing how the US and the EU behave in the Middle East is an empirics-based validation

of the argument that the transatlantic rift does not exist. Although the two actors sometimes have different policies and employ different tools to engage with the region, the general objectives are shared and a high degree of consultation and consensus-building exists. This has important implications on how one looks at the role of the EU in the wider international political scene to the extent that the EU does not seem to represent a challenge for the US, but rather an actor that willingly 'bandwagons' despite sometimes utilising different rhetoric and policy instruments (Everts, 2004; Special Issue – *Journal of North African Studies*, 2009).

THE WAY FORWARD

The scholarship on EU–Middle East relations over the last two decades has accomplished significant achievements because it expanded our knowledge of a previously limited area of research, contributing in the process to the broader fields of International Relations and European Studies. There are four significant achievements that should be highlighted.

First and foremost, it has challenged the prevailing view of the EU as a normative power. Unlike the studies on EU foreign policy towards Latin America or East/Central Europe, the Middle East constitutes a profound challenge for normative Europe, which has been demonstrated in the literature by the assumption that normativity does not explain EU external relations in the MENA. This has resulted in a much stronger scrutiny of EU foreign policies elsewhere and a wider questioning of the way in which supranational institutions operate in general, suggesting that there may be more to them than a traditional liberal understanding.

Second, the scholarship in this field has contributed to a greater understanding of how multilateral instruments of cooperation work in practice. Although there is a widespread theoretical assumption about

the benefits of multilateralism, it is useful to examine how the practical implementation of such instruments functions. The vast array of studies on the different aspects of the Euro–Mediterranean Partnership, the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Union for the Mediterranean have informed this debate on the mechanisms of multilateralism. The way in which multilateral cooperation occurs and what are its strengths and weaknesses, particularly in the context of controversial issues such as economic liberalisation and democracy promotion, has been crucial for a re-evaluation of the EU stances. In addition, such re-evaluation has been extremely beneficial for policy-making debates to the extent that the practical consequences of these studies are taken into account in policy-making circles. Any area of study aims at being 'translated' into real changes, and the literature on EU–Middle East relations is no exception. It is to the credit of all scholars in this field that there have been significant changes made over time in the actual EU approach to the region. Although scepticism still surrounds EU policy-making – even in the aftermath of the Arab Awakening – and of how it has been dealt with in Brussels (Teti, 2010) there is no denying that the criticism of the scholarship towards specific assumptions about MENA politics have been taken on board, above all the necessity to engage with all local political actors, including the Islamists.

Third, the scholarship has questioned the validity of the assumption of the transatlantic rift between the US and the EU because empirical studies of security issues and democratization policies have identified similar goals and means to achieve them.

Finally, the scholarship has provided further and interesting empirical evidence about the power of Europeanization in very specific contexts. Studies on the conditions under which Europeanization occurs have been influenced by empirical and theoretical examinations of how EU values and norms have affected specific countries in the region or specific issues such as women's rights or

minority rights. This is most evident in studies of Turkish domestic and international politics.

These powerful theoretical and empirical accomplishments should not obscure the weaknesses that the scholarship still presents. There are three significant shortcomings. First is that the theoretical debate about the true nature of the EU still informs too many studies on EU–Middle East relations. Although the debate is certainly important and contributed extensively to the wider discussion about EU foreign policy, it has become, to a certain extent, sterile due to the large number of studies. There is therefore the need for greater engagement with other theoretical traditions and perspectives that can capture the sheer complexity of the EU and what it does in the region. It is no longer sufficient to argue that the EU is a normative, idealist or realist actor and then proceed to examine whether this is reflected in practice or not. The empirical work runs the risk of becoming so specialised that it is no longer interesting because the EU has grown both externally and internally in complexity, preventing a simple and neat understanding of it. As mentioned, there are some studies attempting to go beyond this dichotomy and utilising concepts such as pragmatism, but even this is no longer satisfactory. What is encouraging however is that there are an increasing number of studies that deal with individual countries rather than the region as a whole or a specific policy area. This development should be further encouraged because it allows scholars to examine more closely what the EU does in specific contexts, therefore taking into account the specifics of the country in question. This helps overcome an Orientalist approach, which assimilates countries in the region into a coherent whole that in practice does not exist, and also permits exploring how the EU engages with countries that have different geo-strategic importance, regimes, socio-economic institutions and resources.

The second shortcoming is the paucity of systematic studies dealing with the relations

between the EU and the Gulf countries, despite the importance of the linkages they have, notably in the energy and security domains. Although some scholars have attempted to engage with this (Nonnemann, 2006), it appears that there is a reluctance to study EU–Gulf countries relations for a number of reasons. First, there is the issue of the perceived impenetrability of European norms and values in the Gulf. Why focus on a region of the globe where it is clear that EU normativity does not play any significant role? Conversely, why concentrate on the Gulf states when it is clear that realism dominates the EU's political approach? Although this may be true, it represents a return to the way in which the EU is assumed to be as an actor on the world scene, and neglects that there might be specific and unintended reactions to specific challenges. Second, there is a tendency to look at the Gulf as a coherent whole rather than a number of distinct countries that may have similarities, but also profound differences and even rivalries. Studies are therefore often conducted to see whether and how the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) might develop in some sort of EU rather than examining the type of the engagement the EU has with individual countries. Third, there is the energy resources aspect that seems to dominate thinking about the Gulf, preventing scholars from looking at factors and actors that have nothing to do with the energy issue. The Gulf is likely to become increasingly relevant, not only to the political power balance in the MENA region, but also to the wider region, including Afghanistan. The withdrawal of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) from Afghanistan in 2014 opens up a new scenario of uncertainty in which the regional competition between the GCC and Iran is likely to increase. This is particularly relevant in the context of an environment where sectarian and religious divisions are becoming more prominent, partially as a consequence of the Syrian civil war. The Sunni–Shia divide is indeed widening and few responses to it have been prepared by the international community and the EU.

In such a context, the Syrian civil war is likely to become a spark that can light up broader conflicts and enmities, while traditional divisions among EU member states prevent a stronger and meaningful role of the EU in conflict-resolution.

The third shortcoming, despite its crucial relevance, is the shying away from studying the EU engagement in the Arab–Israeli conflict more systematically. There are numerous studies dealing with it at a rather superficial and descriptive level, but very few in-depth theoretical and empirical discussions about it. There is no doubt that the Arab–Israeli conflict constitutes an extremely challenging issue for policymakers and scholars because of the passions that the conflict tends to raise. There is reluctance on the part of scholars to be seen in any way as partisan in this conflict, and mainstream scholarship has therefore developed a descriptive body of knowledge but very little in terms of analysis and explanation. Furthermore, the turmoil in Egypt and the civil war in Syria are two factors urging scholarly attention back to this issue.

This overview of the scholarship on EU–Middle East relations would not be complete without references to the Arab Awakening and how it speaks to the field as a whole. The Arab Awakening has challenged a number of preconceptions about Arab politics and societies that EU–Middle East relations' experts should take into account. At times, there has been a difficult relationship between EU and area study experts, whereby simplistic assumptions have informed the way in which the MENA has been approached. In particular, this is valid for the tendency that both scholarly communities have displayed when it comes to the supposedly normative power and success of the EU programs of democracy promotion. A closer collaboration between the two communities could have allowed to better address the hidden implications, and unintended consequences of such programs and economic liberalisation because these two initiatives have not delivered the expected outcome, namely a gradual move towards liberal democracy.

On the contrary, they have caused mass upheaval and the toppling of dictators friendly with the EU. A closer relationship between the studies focusing on EU and area studies could highlight crucial dynamics that have been largely overlooked. The Arab Awakening also represents an opportunity to better understand and explain the influence that EU policies may have had in the region and, consequently, to reformulate policies. What has been found that the push for the adoption of neo-liberal economic reforms has been thoroughly rejected by the new social and political actors in the region in the aftermath of the uprisings. This has implications not only for the EU, which has been promoting such reforms, but also for the linkage between neo-liberalism and democracy (Ricketts, 2013). In fact, contentious politics and democratic engagement have emerged because of the abject failure of neo-liberalism. This has been a paradoxical outcome – from the point of view of many studies based on the assumption that market reforms would generate democracy and which have been proven ironically right for the wrong reason. Studies have also found that there is a political and scholarly necessity to better understand the rise of Islamist parties, what they are and how they operate. Once again, simplistic assumptions about their views and policies should be abandoned in favour of critical engagement. The rise of Islamists in many countries has also led scholars to rethink the prominence of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood as a model for all the Islamist parties and movements in the region. The attention that the rise of Salafism throughout the region has attracted is evidence of the positive development of the scholarship in this direction, albeit a recent one (Haugbølle and Cavatorta, 2012; Philbrick Yadav, 2011). Studies examining the security aspect of the region need to be re-evaluated accordingly in this new scenario. Finally, and crucially, the rhetorical EU engagement for democracy and human rights needs to be reframed in a new discourse that moves away from Orientalist assumptions

and followed up by actions (Hanau Santini and Hassan, 2012). This also means that the scholarly community has to attempt to move beyond institutionalism and critically re-examine its fundamental assumptions in light of the most recent events. Indeed, the case of the EU–MENA relations in the aftermath of the Arab Awakening highlights that part of the assumptions of institutionalism are wrong because actual political and social dynamics may go beyond the institutions' plans and expectations. Institutionalism rests on problematic assumptions because, as in the case of the EU–MENA relations, there are few concrete efforts for policy coordination following statements of goodwill on the part of the single European countries. The most significant contribution of EU–Middle East scholarship has been to expose the gap between the rhetoric and the reality of democracy promotion. Today, both scholars and policymakers within the EU are aware of the existence of such gap and it is time to begin reducing it.

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