

**THE ART OF THE (IM)POSSIBLE:  
SOWING THE SEEDS FOR THE EU'S CONSTRUCTIVE ENGAGEMENT IN THE  
MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA**

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**Executive Summary**

This report provides policy recommendations to European Union (EU) policy makers with regard to the EU's engagement in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. It draws on the inputs and insights gathered during three years of research conducted by the MENARA Project. It argues that designing a new flexible roadmap to advance mutual engagement and cooperation between the EU and the MENA is a key priority and an opportunity that should not be missed. This endeavour should take into account global and regional geopolitical shifts.

The report is composed of three parts. The first articulates conclusions derived from the bottom-up assessment of current and future geopolitical dynamics in and related to the MENA region. According to this assessment, the EU is perceived as an actor that could do more than it actually does. In comparison with other global players (the United States, Russia and China), the EU is perceived as a different kind of player in view of its promotion of multilateralism and regionalism and of its engagement with civil society. In addition, while not projected to become the single most influential player, durability and reliability are among its greatest assets. The level of expectations of the EU's engagement in the MENA differs across the region – higher in the Maghreb and in Iran and lower in Turkey and in the rest of the Middle East – and depending on the issue area – the EU is expected to give a greater contribution to socio-economic development, human rights, democracy and the engagement to civil society.

The second part of the report deconstructs certain false dilemmas or perceived dichotomies that have impinged on the EU's potential in the MENA to date. It identifies three 'old' false dilemmas – security vs. democratic change; cooperation with state authorities vs. engagement with societal actors; multilateralism vs. bilateralism – and three 'new' false dilemmas in the making – the neighbourhood approach vs. wider geopolitical scope (the geographical scope); instrument-based cooperation vs. strategy-based cooperation (the toolbox); coordination vs. leading (the role).

Finally, the third and most important part of the report offers ten policy recommendations that synthesize the overall results of the MENARA Project. Each of them is developed in detail in the body of the report, while they are listed here in the spirit of setting the new roadmap for the EU's constructive engagement in the MENA region.

1. Making borders more friendly
2. Engaging with intermediary structures at domestic and local levels
3. Supporting politically impactful and locally owned strategies to conflict prevention

4. Speaking up for freedom, fairness, pluralism and reconciliation
5. Developing comprehensive strategies for crisis management
6. Making a difference where it is most needed: social and environmental justice
7. Fostering an incremental approach towards a regional security architecture in the MENA region
8. Framing Africa as an opportunity for the Maghreb and for the EU
9. Leveraging the comparative advantages of member states
10. Grasping the opportunities offered by the changing international order and by the global agenda

## **The MENA and the EU: A two-way complex relationship**

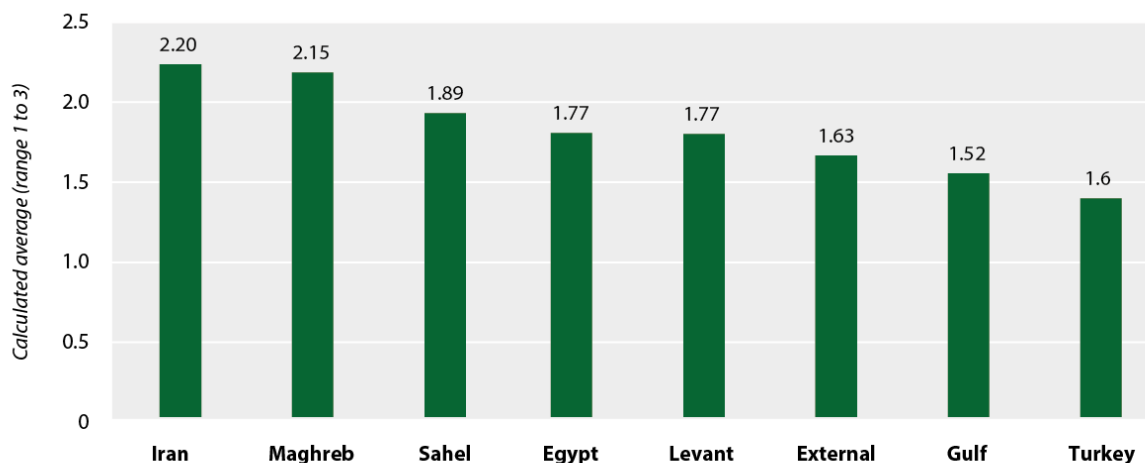
Relations between the European Union (EU) and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region stand at a crossroads: designing a new, flexible roadmap to advance mutual engagement and cooperation is therefore a key priority. The roadmap should take into account the track record of past relations as well as the numerous transformations that have taken place in the countries of the region, in the EU and in the global order since the 1990s. It should also take into consideration interconnections, deconstruct (false) dilemmas and table ideas and policy solutions that can be actionable and sustainable in the light of the experience, leverage and tools available. By grounding these ideas and policy solutions on the insights gathered during three years of research in the framework of the MENARA Project, this report aims to offer policy recommendations to EU policymakers.

MENARA provides a bottom-up assessment of current geopolitical dynamics in and related to the MENA region at domestic, regional and global levels and tries to anticipate what may come next. The project findings are based on numerous fact-finding missions in 29 countries, almost 300 face-to-face interviews, an online Delphi survey with 71 experts, 3 focus groups (Brussels, Rabat and Beirut) and 2 stakeholders' meetings (Istanbul and Rome). One of the cross-cutting issues in this research project has been the assessment of the EU's policies towards the MENA region and the full range of expectations regarding its future engagement.

The six conclusions that follow are offered as a starting point for further discussion below.

1. **The EU is perceived as an actor that could do more than it currently does.** MENARA stakeholders' opinions on the EU are diverse, and the same factors are sometimes cited as producing opposing effects. Instability in the MENA region, for instance, is underscored as an element that is pushing the EU to become more active but also as a factor that is distancing the EU from the region. Similarly, the EU's internal crises are sometimes depicted as an obstacle for a more ambitious policy but also as something that will be overcome at some point in time, creating the conditions for a different kind of engagement. What all the stakeholders tend to agree on is that the EU is underperforming. This realization, which could be apprehended as a problem for the EU – also entailing a significant communication shortcoming – could be turned into an advantage. There is a perception that the EU could do more and better; it is just a matter of getting the priorities right, overcoming certain obstacles and finding relevant partners.
2. **Expectations of the EU's engagement in the MENA differ across the region.** Social and political stakeholders in Iran and the Maghreb tend to expect (and wish for) an EU that could be even more involved than today (see Figure 1). In the case of the Maghreb this is mainly due to geographic, historical and social proximities and interconnections, while for Iran this is very much related to the key role played by the EU in negotiations of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. On the contrary, the low expectations in Turkey are worth noting, most likely owing to accumulated frustration and the perception that other global powers (mainly Russia and the United States) overshadow any attempts by the EU to play a meaningful role.

Figure 1: Expectations of the EU's engagement in the region (more active 3, less active 1).

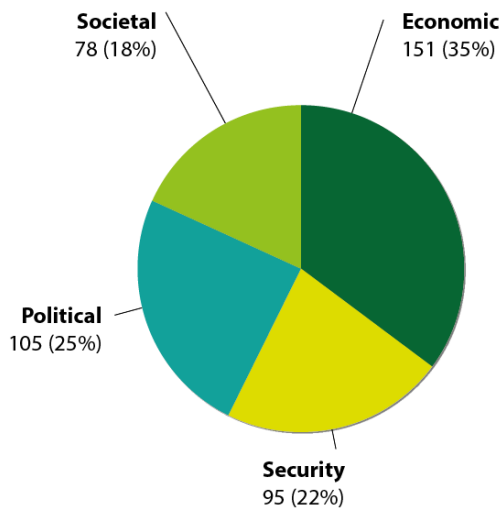


Source: MENARA fact-finding missions. Created by CIDOB.

- The EU can (still) make a difference.** The EU is expected to play a significant role in promoting economic development, something it has already partially fulfilled in many parts of the region, and cooperation, investment, aid and financial support are the main tools at its disposal (see Figure 2). Next to this, stakeholders interviewed by the MENARA Project mentioned issues such as human rights, democracy and civil society as aspects in which the EU could or should get more involved. All in all, it seems that the EU's normative appeal is not yet lost. Finally, security and migration are two elements that are likely to keep the EU focused on this particular region. They act as magnets that prevent the EU from turning its back to the MENA.

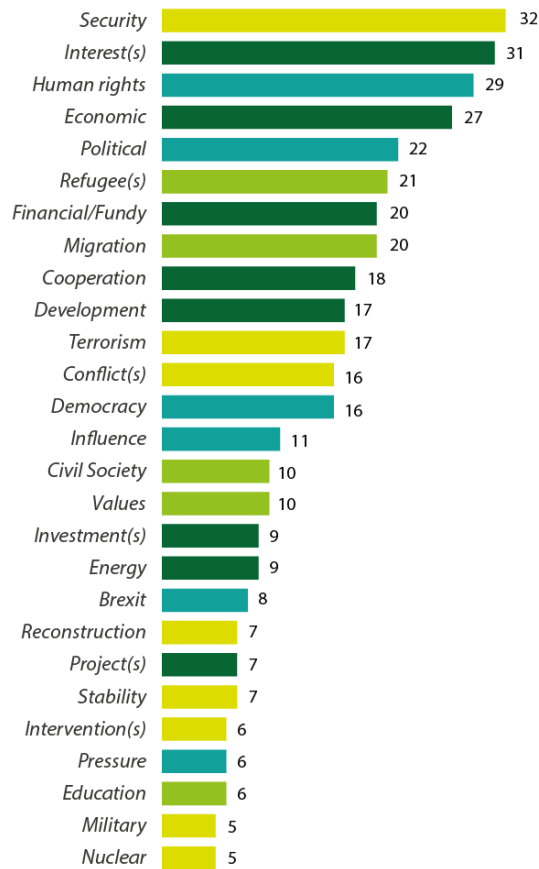
Figure 2: Issues that will shape the EU's engagement with the MENA region.

## AGGREGATED CATEGORIES



Answers to the question:  
 "Do you envisage a more or a less active  
 European Union in the MENA region in the  
 years to come? And what would you expect  
 from it?"

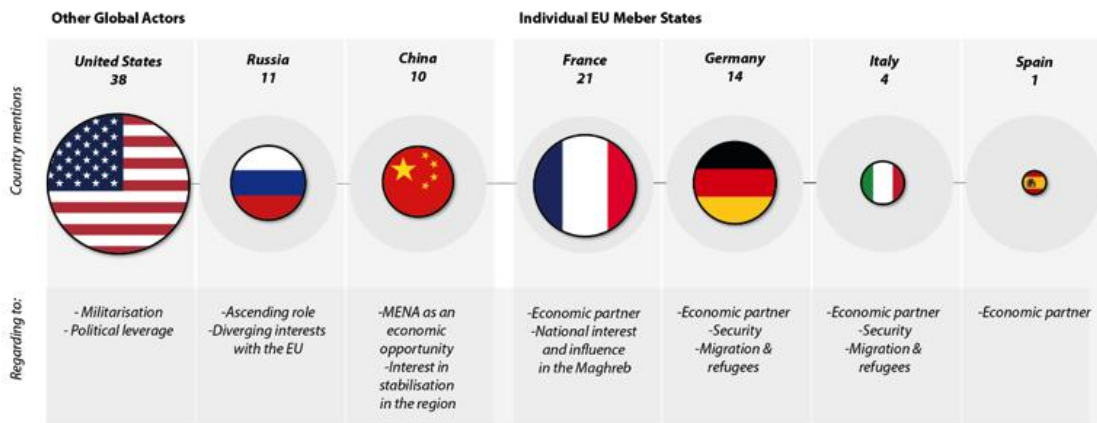
## List of specific issues more frequently mentioned in the interviews (at least 5 times)



Source: MENARA fact-finding missions. Created by CIDOB.

4. **The EU is a different kind of player.** The stakeholders interviewed in the framework of the MENARA Project spontaneously assessed the EU's performance in the MENA and their own expectations towards it by comparing it to those of other global players, namely the United States, Russia and China (see Figure 3). While the United States is perceived as a player in retreat (which may push the EU to assume more responsibilities towards the MENA while also weakening the transatlantic alliance), Russia and China are perceived as players on the rise, which has already put them in competition with the EU on the political front – for Moscow – and the economic one – for Beijing. Many stakeholders consider that the EU is of a different nature, a *rara avis*. Of all the global actors influencing the region, it is the one that promotes multilateralism and regionalism and reaches out to civil society and grass-roots organizations. However, in some circumstances the consideration that the EU is a different sort of player takes a negative connotation. It is seen as a fractured or cacophonous actor, one in which the member states not only pursue parallel but sometimes opposing strategies. France is, by far, the country most often mentioned and, as reflected in Figure 2, the United Kingdom is no longer referred to as an actor but rather as an issue in view of Brexit.

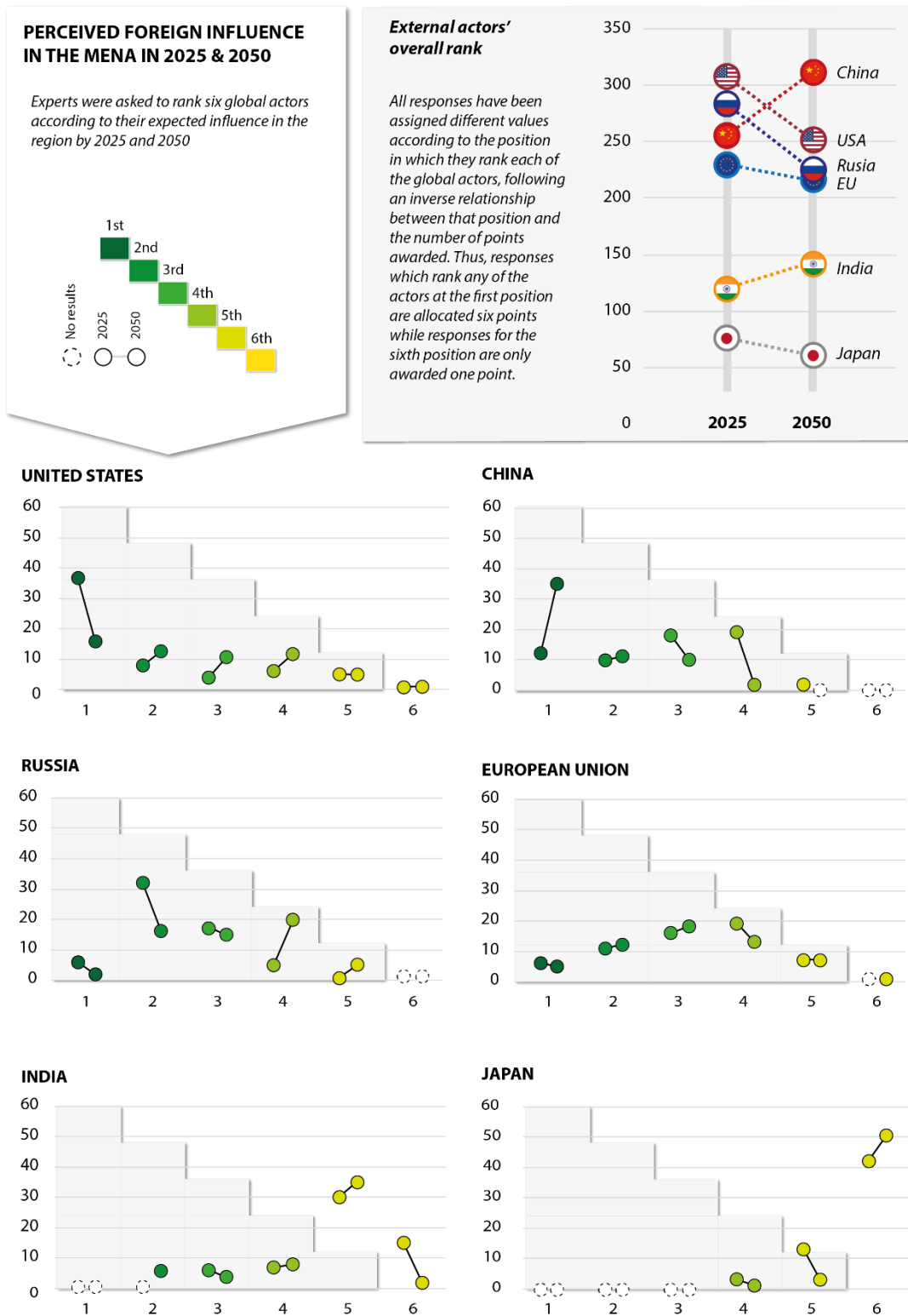
Figure 3: Other actors mentioned when asking about the EU's role.



Source: MENARA fact-finding missions. Created by CIDOB.

- The EU will not become the key player but nor will it be a negligible actor.** As part of the online Delphi survey, experts were asked to rank six international actors in terms of their foreseen weight in MENA affairs by 2025 and 2050. While the trend points towards significant changes – i.e. gradual disengagement of the United States, long-term decline of Russia, long-term rise of China and an emerging role for India – the assessment of the EU is more stable (see Figure 4). This has significant policy implications if the EU is able to convey the message that, while not being the single most influential player, it may be the most reliable one, and certainly one to take into consideration if and when the focus shifts from short-term emergencies to long-term challenges.

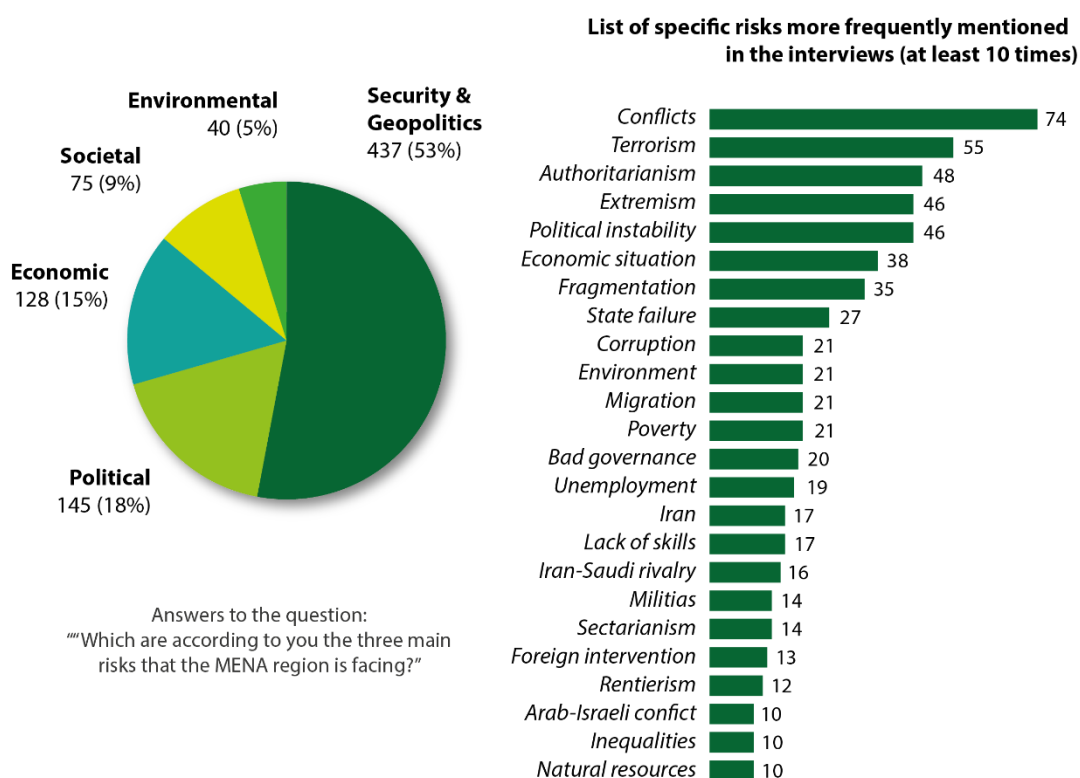
Figure 4: Ranking of global actors' influence in the MENA region.



6. **Getting the priorities right and seizing the opportunities.** Unsurprisingly, conflicts and terrorism are usually the first risks to be highlighted (see Figure 5). However, security concerns should not blind the EU when setting its priorities. Authoritarianism is also perceived as a major risk and issues related to

corruption, environmental degradation and economic fragility could significantly destabilize the region. According to MENARA stakeholders, the EU should be advised to focus not only on containing or reducing risks but also on seizing and multiplying opportunities. On that particular front, observers have pointed at youth and dialogue as two areas in which efforts should be stepped up (see Figure 6). A surprising element that is worth reflecting on is that while environmental issues are one of the topics that is perceived as both a risk and an opportunity, it was hardly mentioned when stakeholders were asked about their expectations regarding the EU. This mismatch is even more telling when taking into account that the EU has been a major international player in the fight against climate change and for environmental protection.

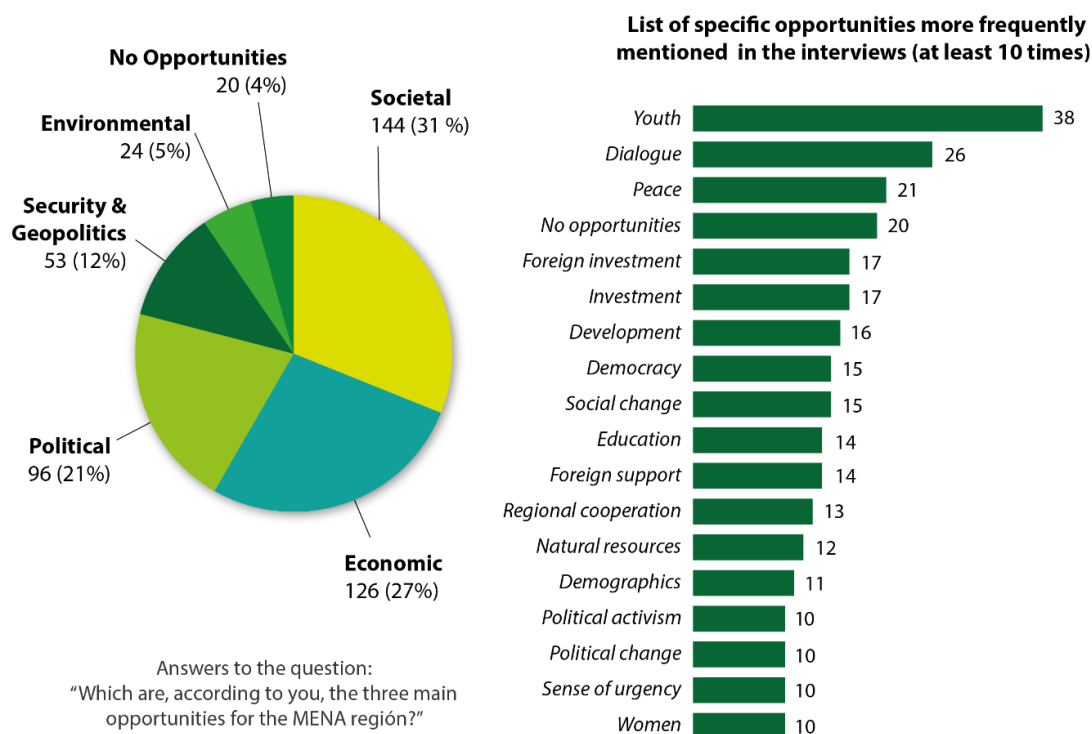
Figure 5: Main perceived risks for the MENA region.



Created by CIDOB. Source: Aggregated and clustered results of the face-to-face interviews.



Figure 6: Main perceived opportunities for the MENA region.



Created by CIDOB. Source: Aggregated and clustered results of the face-to-face interviews.

## Old and New “Dilemmas”

How to move from these perceptions and expectations to the construction of new EU policies towards the MENA region? The expert analysis carried out in the framework of the MENARA Project points to a track record of the EU in the region that has suffered from false dilemmas or perceived dichotomies, which have impinged on the EU’s potential so far. The first false dilemma concerns the need to choose between security and democratic change. Very often, and even more so in this particular region, the EU has abandoned its normative transformative drive, as it has been perceived as clashing with short-term or pressing security needs. However, as the idea of resilience enshrined in the EU Global Strategy suggests, the absence and resistance to change may be the trigger for more insecurity and instability.

The second false dilemma the EU has faced regards, on the one hand, the need to cooperate with state authorities in MENA countries and, on the other, the willingness to work with the full range of societal actors, some of which may not be positively perceived by their governments. From the inception of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership the EU has perceived the cooperation with the state leaders and governments as the main avenue to pursue its goals, often disregarding broader societal dynamics and the accumulations of grievances in state-society relations. This did not change in the context of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the Union for the Mediterranean. Cooperating with societal actors is not an obstacle to government-to-government relations per se. It only becomes so if and when partners oppose such a possibility, in which case

this should be seen as a reason to downscale the relations altogether. On the contrary, when relations between societies are strong, it should be easier to accompany intra-governmental ones.

Finally, the third false dilemma the EU has fallen prey to is that between multilateralism and bilateralism. The tensions between recourse to multilateral or region-making policies and tools, on the one hand, and purely bilateral relations – including those cultivated by its member states – on the other, has always tended to exist in the EU's cooperation frameworks towards the MENA. Recently, a gradual but steady drift towards more robust bilateralism in the name of differentiation can be observed, particularly in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings, while the EU's multilateral effort has been diluted and put on the back burner. This should not be taken as a given. The existence of multilateral frameworks should be seen as a platform where bilateral relations could expand and, by the same token, bilateralism could in certain circumstances create the conditions for enhancing trust and for launching coalitions of players that could positively boost multilateralism.

The construction of these false dilemmas has not only been the result of an internal EU process concerning its policymaking towards the MENA. It has also been shaped by the agency of and the interaction with MENA partners themselves at different levels as well as by the discourses, practices and actions pursued by other global players such as Russia and the United States. To take the example of the perceived dichotomy security versus democratic change, most governments in the MENA have exploited the dithering and inconsistencies of the EU by presenting themselves as the most reliable partners to prevent radicalization, terrorism and insecurity from spreading from the region to the EU countries and by putting pressure on the EU to develop securitized approaches towards the MENA. The US and Russian rhetoric on the fight against terrorism not only as a priority but as a frame justifying exceptional measures to ensure stability at the expenses of fundamental freedoms goes in the same direction. Turning to civil society, particularly the few instances of independent and opposition organizations with which the EU cooperated before but also after 2011, it has always been critical of what it perceived as EU “double standards” with regard to freedoms, human rights and democracy promotion in the region.

These false dilemmas have taken on a life of their own and have represented an important structural obstacle in the attainment of the EU's goals in the MENA. In recent times, changing realities in the countries of the region (particularly between 2011 and 2013) and in the EU itself – coupled with global geopolitical shifts – have produced a partial transformation of the regional order in the MENA region (a change *within* the order rather than a change *of* order) with significant implications for the EU's current and future engagement with it. New questions and issues have become salient. The year 2015 has to some extent heightened the perception of new risks and of potential pitfalls for the EU coming from the region in light of the terrorist attacks on European soil, the so-called migration crisis, the events in Ukraine and Russia's increased involvement in Syria.

As a result of these push and pull factors, the EU is today confronted with new questions and issues that could easily turn into new false dilemmas. It is very important not to repeat the mistakes of the past, as once false dilemmas become a reality of their own it is very difficult to dislodge them owing to institutional inertia and the burden of bureaucratic and administrative constraints on the EU's side, the existence of competing agendas, particularly involving the individual member states, and the web of interests connecting the European countries to the MENA at different levels that act as “joint ventures”.

Pointing to these traps is the first step to effectively defuse them. The first false dilemma in the making concerns the geographical scope of the EU's actions and policies. As a result of growing geopolitical complexity in the MENA, the traditional framework of reference that sees the Mediterranean as the centre of gravity and thus leads to a geographically constrained EU-neighbourhood approach is no longer sufficient to capture the existing interconnections that extend further beyond the EU's backyard as well as its loss of geopolitical relevance. The growing importance of the Sahel and Africa at large in addressing mobility and security issues across the

Mediterranean, Turkey's pivoting to the Middle East, the new centre of gravity represented by the Gulf region, the role of transnational non-state actors and of the spill-over of intra-state conflicts in gluing the MENA together are but some factors the EU has to take into account when engaging with this region. Its borders have significantly expanded and a wider geographical scope is needed. Yet a geopolitical strategy that neglects the specificities of each sub-region and in particular of those areas and countries that stand closer to the EU in geographic, historical and functional terms would be detrimental. In order to fine tune the focus on the Mediterranean and the neighbourhood, on the one hand, with one that also pays attention to and engages with the "neighbours of the EU's neighbours", on the other, the EU needs to equip itself with appropriate lenses. Bifocal lenses should allow the EU to develop specific approaches with regard to those countries and areas that have traditionally enjoyed preferential relations with it (for example the Maghreb or the Mediterranean basin for concrete cooperation projects) or that holds the greatest relevance in light of new geopolitical circumstances (the Gulf region). At the same time the EU could broaden the geographical scope of its reach and action by grasping the interconnections that exist across North Africa, the Sahel, the whole of Africa, the Middle East, the Gulf and to some extent the area of Afghanistan and Pakistan. This is in line with the rationale and aspirations of the EU Global Strategy, and this approach should be encouraged.

Connected to this, and in order to equip the EU with the appropriate tools to perform its role in the MENA, a second false dilemma in the making should be deconstructed. This concerns the EU's toolbox. In view of the complexity of the bureaucratic and administrative bodies and functions that make up the Union, the risk might arise to oppose traditional technical, instrument-based cooperation to the quest for strategy-based cooperation. The former is embodied in the growing articulation and autonomy of functional cooperation mechanisms and tools in the hands of the European Commission. The programmes developed in the context of the ENP, ranging from the reform of the judiciary and the empowerment of civil society to the support to sustainable agricultural systems and the fostering of orderly energy transitions in the MENA countries, are all examples of the priorities and the range of actions that the EU has invested most of its leverage and tools in during the past decades. These programmes are underpinned by the power of the purse of the European Commission and are implemented on the basis of conditionality.

In parallel, the EU has set on the path of developing a geopolitical strategy towards the region mainly thanks to the creation of the European External Action Service through the Treaty of Lisbon in 2009. This geopolitical strategy is meant to provide the overarching framework for the EU's role and to sow the seeds for far-reaching goals in the light of geopolitical shifts. What it is not meant to do is detract attention from the issue areas in which the EU has traditionally performed best and has accumulated a lot of experience, namely socio-economic assistance. Thus, the EU has to work to develop its toolbox in a way that answers both the need to foster functional cooperation and the aspiration to pursue a geopolitical strategy. To that end, the toolbox must include both the big instruments such as the hammer and the drill – to forge a sound geopolitical strategy – and the small pieces such as the nails, to implement specific cooperation goals – that have to be available to make the big instruments usable and effective. The former without the latter cannot be used and vice versa. Furthermore, the toolbox needs to be kept in order and to be rationalized so that each tool is in the right place when needed and the full array can be easily deployable.

Finally, the third false dilemma that the EU has to beware of is the one that opposes coordination to leading and attempts to depict them as two alternative pathways. This applies both to the internal dynamics and relations between the EU institutions and the member states and to the arrangements with the partners from the MENA region and the external ones, such as the United States, Russia and China. On the one hand, coordination entails the EU's willingness and capacity to create the right conditions for its own internal members to conduct an orderly foreign policy and cooperation activities vis-à-vis the MENA, by levelling the playing field and setting some rules and red lines. In the external arena, coordination envisages the sharing of a minimum common denominator of understanding of the situation and of diagnosis of the possible measures to be implemented. On

the other, leading would mean that the EU takes on the leadership position when push comes to shove or when it sees the opportunity. Starting with leading the effort in those areas in which the EU has the capacity to do so and an added value to offer would prepare the ground for the EU's capacity to coordinate on other issues by setting a precedent about its capability to deliver when in the leading position. This would set off a virtuous circle between leading and coordination that would better help fulfil the EU's potential towards the MENA. Not only would this be the right posture to tame the competition among the member states, but it would also be very welcome at a moment when multilateralism and the transatlantic relationship are in deep crisis. To take one concrete example, in addressing conflict situations in the region the EU has effectively shown it can lead the humanitarian effort through support and mediation – as the case of the conflict in Syria demonstrates. This could be the launching pad for a more structured coordination for crisis management and conflict prevention in other contexts by exploiting the available regional or global platforms.

## **A Policy Roadmap for the EU's engagement in the MENA region**

There is a wide consensus that the EU's strategies, policies and tools have not sufficiently or adequately adapted to the new regional and global dynamics. What is less apparent is that the futures of the MENA region and of the EU are so interlinked that the direction each of them takes can influence the other. Almost everyone would agree that it would be better for the EU to deal with more cohesive, integrated and peaceful neighbours. Similarly, conflicts, inequalities and fragmentation are a problem, first and foremost for the MENA's own societies, but the repercussions are clearly felt also in Europe. In order to move away from undesired futures and get closer to those in which opportunities are grasped, it is key to understand the intensity, nature and direction of the transformations the MENA region is experiencing, to map the key drivers of change, to pay more attention to the perceptions in the region, to be able to anticipate which risks and opportunities could arise and to assess the performance of the EU so far. This is what the MENARA Project has been doing for three years, and its conclusions translate into the following ten policy recommendations.

### ***1. Making borders more friendly***

Physical and ideational borders between the EU and the MENA countries are perceived as an obstacle for the development of responsive, sustainable and flexible relations. Not only does this apply to aspects of mobility and migration, but also to the existence of other sets of barriers or on the contrary enablers to cooperation. Physical infrastructures such as roads, railways, pipelines, grids, flight connections and information and communication technology are crucial aspects to invest in to ensure a better connection both within the MENA region and between it and the EU. Next to this, and more importantly, investments in human infrastructure through orderly migration and mobility, people-to-people contacts and educational opportunities should be envisaged to tap into the human potential offered by the region. Visa facilitation schemes, starting with specific groups, should be at the top of the priority list. To achieve these goals, a comprehensive framework addressing mobility, educational opportunities and infrastructures should be set up, going beyond the silo mentality in EU policymaking and policy implementation.

### ***2. Engaging with intermediary structures at domestic and local levels***

The lack of understanding in European thinking and policymaking of societal dynamics and cultural references in the MENA countries has too often led to a patronizing, if well-intentioned, attitude in the EU's aid programmes and cooperation agreements for the region. In this framework, intermediary actors and structures at MENA domestic and local levels have more often than not been neglected as targets or fully fledged partners in EU cooperation. The intermediary structures and communities representing a link between the individual and the macro-level of the state, including the business sector and associations – in particular young entrepreneurs and

female entrepreneurs – the trade unions, the local authorities, such as the mayors, and the more or less informal civil society groups, should not be seen as an alternative but rather a complement to the cooperation with the central state authorities. However, engagement with local authorities and civil society at large should not impinge on the role of central institutions, particularly in those countries in which their authority is contested. To achieve this goal, it would be useful to leverage MENA diasporas in Europe, some of which are showing signs of creating networks of influence with regard to MENA affairs while remaining loyal citizens to their countries of adoption. While being wary of potential distortions stemming from their contribution to EU policymaking, they could be powerful actors not only in practical assistance but also in helping build bridges between European and MENA societies and fighting against stereotypes that fuel racism.

### ***3. Supporting politically impactful and locally owned strategies for conflict prevention***

In the spirit of the EU Global Strategy, more political emphasis on resilience and conflict prevention in the MENA is needed by ensuring that the structures and processes that are already in place receive the highest political attention, for example at Foreign Affairs Council level, and by fostering the creation of contact groups that include EU policymakers, representatives of MENA populations and, eventually, of other international actors with stakes in this region or parts of it. Grass-roots and regional groups and initiatives have the greatest potential to address specific problems of concern for the local populations as a means to prevent the outbreak of conflicts or to solve ongoing ones. Among many other cases, Iraq seems to be one of the spaces where possibilities for constructive engagement have increased the most, and this is because of the existence of new local dynamics. Exploring this approach across the region will lead to long-term, sustainable and locally owned solutions. The change of template is to let the people of the MENA region come up with their own transformative model and give them the means to do so, instead of exporting the EU's, especially at the moment at which it is unravelling. This strategy would be more productive and less expensive.

### ***4. Speaking up for freedom, fairness and pluralism***

Societal, economic and political reconstruction can only be achieved through reconciliation. This is a message that the EU should consistently convey when engaging in discussions about the future of Libya, Syria or Yemen. This also applies to those countries that have not been exposed to armed conflicts. There the EU should unambiguously speak of and act upon its transformative agenda entailing the promotion of freedom, fairness and pluralism. This would mean going back to basics while also accepting that there are different degrees of transformative agenda that can be promoted depending on the specific circumstances. The key ingredients there should be the return to an explicit human rights agenda, the promotion of free and pluralistic media, the investment in ties with and among civil society, the fostering of institutional revisions in the name of the rule of law and a policy emphasis on social justice and socio-economic rights. In addition to “what is to be promoted”, a key point to raise is how to promote it given that formerly available mechanisms, such as conditionality, do not have the same resonance as before. While a certain degree of conditionality needs to be maintained and stepped up, other means to increase the EU's leverage vis-à-vis its MENA partners should be found by standing firm behind engagement and multilateralism, by advancing flexible, tailor-made and niche-targeting policies and by embedding the transformative agenda into a comprehensive strategy that also accounts for geopolitical and security dynamics.

### ***5. Developing comprehensive strategies for crisis management***

Crisis management is not the arena in which the EU performs best. However, it cannot avoid being alerted to the fact that conflicts are there and while it may not have foreseen or prevented them and cannot solve them alone, it does have to be prepared to manage them and their ramifications. As such, the EU should not shy away from making use of the full array of instruments it has at its disposal to address MENA conflicts from political, security and humanitarian perspectives. Examples of the instruments the EU should incrementally make use of

are various types of sanction, resort to the tools and mechanisms of international law to address crimes and misconduct in the context of such conflicts and politically relevant gestures that reward those who want to move towards peace and punish the spoilers. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in which the EU has for long invested a good deal of energy and resources, is one of those cases in which such instruments are needed. Although some may think that the conflict has somehow lost its geopolitical relevance, it still has a major impact on the region's stability and shapes popular opinion while limiting Arab leaders' options. In this and many other conflict situations, showing teeth might be necessary to prevent the darkest scenarios from materializing.

#### ***6. Making a difference where it is most needed: social and environmental justice***

Managing expectations of its role in the MENA is key for the EU to be more effective. This would mean focusing on the issue areas in which the EU, owing to experience, leverage and means at hand, is best placed to make a difference. The EU should push for a more socially and environmentally sensitive agenda that would better fit with the needs and aspirations of the populations in the region. As already mentioned, social justice and socio-economic rights should be the key priorities, and specific actions should be taken to create sustainable, equitable job opportunities particularly for the youth by tailoring trade, industrial, development and investment policies. In parallel to this, the EU should work on other issue areas in which it can have an impact owing to its added value, experience and expertise. EU–MENA relations on energy, environment, climate change and agriculture would allow the unlocking of the potential offered by these “door opening” issues with regard to new forms of regional cooperation. Other issues that bear global transnational significance and impact are demography and new technologies such as digitalization and automation.

#### ***7. Fostering an incremental approach towards a regional security architecture in the MENA region***

Being sober and modest about what the EU can realistically contribute to in the MENA region does not mean that it should not set the bar as high as possible in a manner that is consistent with its capabilities and long-term interests. One way of doing this would be to work towards negotiating a step-by-step, variable geometry formula of structured security cooperation in the MENA. The two sub-regions it should start focusing on are, on the one hand, the Maghreb (discussed below), in view of the EU's added value there compared to other players, and the Gulf, on the other. First, the EU should contribute to creating more constructive links between the Gulf countries and the rest of the Middle East and to taming their potentially disruptive and reckless actions in the MENA region at large by investing in existing bilateral relations, confidence-building measures at the micro-level and issue-based cooperation. Second, in order to move from this to a larger convergence and the development of sustainable forms of multilateral engagement among the regional partners and with the EU, it should act more ambitiously to launch a Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone in the Middle East and contribute to regional de-nuclearization.

#### ***8. Framing Africa as an opportunity for the Maghreb and for the EU***

Preferential bilateral relations with some of the Maghreb countries should be pursued with an eye to the potential of developing broader Europe–Maghreb–Africa connections. Standing as bridges between Europe and the whole of Africa, not only geographically but also functionally thanks to their growing bilateral relations with their sub-Saharan counterparts in business, energy, infrastructure, education and culture, the Maghreb countries could contribute to and at the same time greatly benefit from more robust EU–Africa relations. Africa's growing importance for Europe and the opportunities offered by the new laboratory of EU–Maghreb–Africa relations would buffer the effects of acute regional rivalries on the northern rim of the African continent by the fostering of greater regional integration, instead of mistrust and competition, and the development of more cooperative intra-Maghrebi dynamics in areas such as the economy and security. All in all, the EU's credibility and leverage as a foreign policy player in the broader MENA region would significantly increase if it is successful in building an

even stronger relation with the Maghreb countries while also contributing to bringing Algeria and Morocco closer together.

### ***9. Leveraging the comparative advantages of member states***

The EU is a plural entity, a constellation of policy entrepreneurs located at different levels. Among these levels, the bilateral foreign policies and interventions in MENA affairs pursued by the member states on the basis of their national priorities have led to ambiguities and contradictions in terms of actorness and to a faulty design of policy tools at the EU level, thus adding to the inherent incoherence of its role in the MENA. To reduce the harmful impact of division and competition among member states, the EU should foster a joined up approach underpinned by horizontal (across policy areas) as well as vertical (across the supra-national, national and sub-national levels) coordination. The key ingredients for such an EU joined-up approach should be leadership and trust. In terms of leadership, the EU should be the space where the rules of the game are agreed, upheld and implemented in spite of member states' diverging strategic interests in the MENA (e.g. by Central and Eastern European countries) and by leveraging their comparative advantages. With regard to trust, the EU could act as a facilitator for the sharing of information and strategies (e.g. in defence cooperation) and for the respect of international treaties by all its member states (e.g. concerning the selling of weapons to countries in conflict in the MENA).

### ***10. Grasping the opportunities offered by the changing international order and by the global agenda***

Significant changes in the international order have to be accounted for when designing and implementing the roadmap for a new constructive engagement of the EU in this region. On the one hand, the (re)emergence of global players such as Russia and China need to be factored in. These are not particularly friendly to a rules-based order, including in the MENA, and are actually contributing to actively undermining the EU's model of governance. On the other, a reset – or at least a substantial revision – of transatlantic cooperation in the MENA should be a political priority for the EU in light of the United States' policies and disengagement mode that does not date from President Trump's presidency. In spite or actually because of their diverging agendas towards the MENA region, the engagement with these international players has to be pragmatic and based on transactional diplomacy by fostering synergies, coordination or differentiation – hence the EU taking the lead on some dossiers. In parallel to this, the EU should exploit the opportunities offered by the global agenda by cooperating bilaterally or with some groups of MENA countries on, for example, sustainable development goals, the environment and climate change. Engaging the MENA on these issues would also foster greater awareness across the region of the potential of larger (sub-)regional groupings – institutionalized, such as the League of the Arab States, or not, such as the “5 plus 5” or ad hoc regional coalitions – and better confront them with their responsibilities towards global issues.