

Europe and the Middle East

The hour of the EU?

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Introduction

Giovanni FALEG

When the authors of this volume convened in Strasbourg to discuss the role of the European Union (EU) in the Middle East, three main issues were shaping the policy agenda: first, the Obama administration's new foreign policy towards the Middle East – and its implications for the US relations with Israel and the Arab-Israeli conflict; second, the threats to global security arising from Iran's nuclear program; third, the challenges posed by the rise of political Islamism and by Islamic extremism in the region. Nobody could predict that, barely one year later, uprisings and revolutions in North Africa and the Middle East, a process also known as the Arab Spring, would have driven further changes in the European neighborhood's fragile geopolitical landscape. Furthermore, few could foresee the beheading of Al Qaeda, the world's most powerful terrorist organization responsible of the 9/11 attacks, following the killing of Osama Bin Laden by US commandos in his compound in Abbottabad (Pakistan) on 1 May 2011.

At a time where momentous changes are taking place in the Middle East and Nord Africa, this volume provides a timely and critical assessment of the EU foreign policy towards the region. We have put together the papers presented at the third Academic Forum on European Security, which took place at the *Institut des hautes études européennes* (IHEE) in Strasbourg on March 2010¹. The subtitle “the hour of the EU” was chosen to emphasize the moment of opportunity for the EU to actively influence a peaceful resolution of the major crises affecting the Middle East. Such formulation was also meant to topicalize the potential and limits of the EU's soft-power-based, normative diplomatic toolbox in transforming its neighborhood. After five months of widespread turmoil across the region that has ushered in regime changes (in Egypt and Tunisia), civil war (in Libya) and domestic upheaval, violently cracked down by authoritarian governments (in Syria, Yemen and Bahrain), opportunities have now turned into imperatives. The authors believe that this can still be the hour of the EU, but are also aware of an inevitable

¹ The conference program and list of participants, as well as other relevant information are available on the Forum's website: http://www.fase-rete.eu/edition_2010.htm.

truth: change in the Middle East cannot and will not wait for the EU. Inaction now will come at a high price for Europe's future role in the world. Nor can the EU afford acting inconsistently with its rhetoric or, even worse, being in the wrong side of history.

Contributions to this volume show a mixed picture of the EU's engagement in the Middle East. Hurdles to a fully-fledged EU "actorness" and "presence" in the Middle East seem to amount to yet another empirical demonstration of the "capability-expectations gap" tainting EU's international role² since the very establishment of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) by the Treaty of Maastricht. At the same time, there is a wide consensus in Brussels that the Middle East is a strategic area of vital importance and that lessons from the Balkans cannot be disregarded when dealing with the "Global Balkans"³ without facing serious consequences. What then makes EU's role in the Middle East a glass half full, half empty?

The book addresses this fundamental question. Articles are divided into four macro-areas, which are regarded as the most urgent policy issues swaying the research agenda: the Arab-Israeli conflict, the rise of Iran as a regional (and perhaps nuclear) power, EU "soft" and "hard" power-driven interventions in democracy promotion and state-building, and EU-Turkey relations. Contributors are young researcher and senior scholars from different countries and academic backgrounds, thus able to provide an insightful, fresh and, in some cases, insider account of the subject matter. We understand that, given the complexity and unpredictability of the current circumstances in the Middle East, it will take years for political scientists to make sense of the change we are currently witnessing, both in terms of its drivers, processes and consequences. Accordingly, this book does not attempt to engage in scenario-building or theory-development. Our purpose is to offer an overview of the challenges facing the EU in the Middle East, and to provide the reader – informed or uninformed – who wants to learn more about EU foreign policy's achievements and deficiencies with a close-up on those four critical areas.

Part One addresses the EU's involvement in the Arab-Israeli conflict since 1967, through investigating EU's foreign policy record and the prospects for the future, namely in terms of Europe's ability to influence the peace process. Rory Miller analyzes the EU's attempt to gain political influence in the politics of the Israel-Palestine conflict through its

² Hill, C., "The Capability-Expectations Gap, or Conceptualizing Europe's International Role", *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 31:3, 1993, p. 305-328.

³ Brzezinski, Z., *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives*, New York, Basic Books, 1998.

economic involvement, from trade to aid. Going through the nature of EU's financial assistance to the Palestinian National Authority as well as its commercial relations with Israel, Miller concludes that "trade and investments" did not turn into political influence and that Europe can expect little diplomatic gain from simply strengthening its economic policy. Accordingly, the Israel-Palestine conflict confirms the view of the EU as an "economic giant but a political pygmy". Equally critical about the EU's diplomatic engagement, Amnon Aran broadens the analysis to the Arab-Israeli conflict, pointing out the flaws of a European foreign policy that may have been coordinated at times, but not common at all and certainly far from successful. At the same time, Aran sees the new conundrum of Middle Eastern politics as a new opportunity for Europe to change the diplomatic framework from a bi-lateral to a multilateral and regional one. According to Aran, the bi-lateral Israeli-Palestinian framework is doomed to fail and the EU can seize this chance to act as a diplomatic innovator and put the peace process on a more promising track.

Part Two explores the relations between the EU and Iran in light of energy politics and Teheran's quest for Nuclear Technology (NT). It makes an assessment of EU foreign policy towards Iran based on the tension between political objectives (i.e. threats arising from Iran's nuclear weapons) and economic interests (i.e. energy supply and security). Amir Kamel demonstrates that EU energy policy over the past 20 years has supplied Iran with the tools, know-how and financial input required to launch and develop its NT. Accordingly, Kamel argues that sanctions enforced by the EU aimed at preventing Iran from producing nuclear weapons came too late, as Iran had already capitalized on the EU's increasing consumption and demand for energy to develop NT, through imports and trade surplus with EU member states. Antonio Dai Pra takes a different approach. He does not blame the EU soft power approach for supplying the means for Iran's nuclear ascension. Rather, he sees EU-Iran energy relations as an opportunity to enhance Europe's security, and advocates the benefits of an EU investment strategy towards Iran that could facilitate the rise of a new, pro-Western elite. On that account, Dai Pra's paper provides an insightful and technical contribution explaining how EU energy needs (i.e. diversification of gas suppliers and delivery routes, reduction of the dependency on Russia) meet Iran's economic targets (i.e. getting the required technology and capital to develop its industry), and suggests that the EU should seriously consider an energy partnership with Teheran.

Part Three examines the contradictions arising from an ambiguous use of soft and hard power instruments in the conduct of EU foreign policy in the Middle East. Silvia Colombo and Benedetta Voltolini's

comparative analysis uncovers the gap between EU's democracy promotion-oriented rhetoric and the interest-based implementation of electoral policies in Lebanon and Morocco. Colombo and Voltolini argue that the EU pursues its strategic interests under rhetorical clothes, and that possession-goals-driven shortsighted politics prevails over the achievement of normative or "milieu" goals underpinning the democracy promotion agenda. This ultimately jeopardizes the impact of EU external action and reinforces the perception of an inconsistent and ineffective EU foreign policy in the Mediterranean region. Moving from soft to hard power (and hence from the EU to "Europe"), Alessandro Marrone provides a comparative study of American hegemony and European contribution to the definition of NATO strategy for Afghanistan. The election of Barack Obama, in fact, raised important expectations about American multilateralism and the beginning of a "new phase" of Alliance politics. The paper's conclusions are twofold: on the one hand, the Obama administration kept on adopting a unilateral approach in the strategic review of operations in Afghanistan, hence disappointing European expectations; on the other hand, Europeans still lack a common vision of the purposes of Afghani missions and tend to be reactive rather than pro-active vis-à-vis developments in Afghanistan, "keen to wait and see" what the US decide despite their significant contributions to the Allied military efforts.

Part Four engages the sea change in Turkey's foreign policy towards the Middle East and its implication for the relationship with the West and, in particular, the European Union. Both papers adopt an identity-based approach to investigate the role of ideational and non-material factors as key drivers of Turkey's foreign policy shift. Drawing from Samuel Huntington's definition of "torn country" and relying on a social-constructivist approach, Giovanni Faleg explains the recent sea change in Turkey's Middle Eastern policy as a result of the confrontation and interaction between two competing visions of the Turkish state: Kemalism and Neo-ottomanism. Accordingly, Turkey's new regional assertiveness under the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) is not just a structural adjustment to the post-Cold War and post-9/11 international system, but also results from a deeper process of identity change having profound domestic and international implications. Since identities are formed through processes of social interaction, Faleg concludes that the future of EU-Turkey relations (and the convergence of their strategic interests) depends on the extent to which Europeans are willing to use their normative power to shape – and not oppose – identity change in Turkey. Sebastiano Sali's account of the evolution of Turkey-Israeli relations also suggests that ideational and emotional factors, namely a common sense of political and cultural beliefs and values, have heavily influenced military and security cooperation between the

two countries. On that account, Sali's paper investigates the reasons why Turkish-Israeli relations are stalling. It emphasizes and contextualizes on the historical background the non-rational factors causing the 1990s "honeymoon" to turn into the current crisis. A shift in Turkey's narrative and a rethinking of the fundamental assumptions of Turkish identities, rather than mere hard-power balances, explain the friction between the two allies.

In conclusion, this volume suggests that, in four pivotal areas of Middle Eastern politics, EU power, whatever its form (hard, soft, economic, normative, or smart) has failed to materialize as yet, making the glass less half full than half empty. Overall, this resulted in little political impact, reinforcing criticism over EU's inconsistent, incoherent and ineffective foreign policy and hence undermining the pillars of the EU as a credible political entity. Under the current hectic circumstances in the Middle East, the EU has no other choice but to review and strengthen its foreign policy toolbox to better deal with a restless neighborhood. Learning from the past, and in particular from its own mistakes and failures may prove beneficial not just to the EU power projection, but to the European integration project as a whole. There is no progress without learning, but there can't be learning without a commitment to common values and principles. These times have opened up a window of opportunity to renew such commitment and find new solutions to boost the European project. Will the EU be able and capable of learning the Middle East's lessons?