

Framing the security-stability nexus in recent EU-Mashreq relations: Need for changes of EU foreign policy tools?

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News

Co-chaired by the EU and the UN, the Brussels II Conference on “Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region” was held on 24-25 April 2018, providing an “opportunity for the entire international community to relaunch its consistent support for the political process and commit new pledges to help the main victims of this ongoing conflict, namely the Syrian people inside and outside Syria.”¹ The article takes its starting point in the existing security-stability nexus in the relations between the EU and the Arab states in the Mashreq and points to new policy perspectives following the Brussels II Conference.

Summary

It is the aim of this article to shed light on the recent EU policies towards the MENA-region focusing on EU-Mashreq relations in the light of the Syrian crisis. Recent bilateral agreements between the EU and the Arab Mashreq states, focusing on the specific challenges related to the development of the Syrian crisis and its spill-over effects and consequences for the Arab Mashreq states.² The cooperation between the EU and the Mashreq states over the last years has focused on security and stability in the region. It is shown that the Brussels II Conference 24-25 April 2018, rather than preparing for new challenges related to a post-war scenario in a not too distant future, primarily focuses on the humanitarian aspects of the recent crisis in the Mashreq.

Key Words

EU, Arab Mashreq states, Brussels II Conference, security-stability nexus

1. The conference in Brussels was announced in this document: EU-Council, "Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region - Brussels Conference, 24-25/04/2018," ed. European Council. Council of the European Union (Brussels 2018). The quotation is from here: "Declaration by the High Representative Federica Mogherini on Behalf of the EU on Strikes in Syria. Press Release," ed. Council of the EU - General Secretariat of the Council (Brussels 2018).

2. See Peter Seeberg, "Eu-Mashreq Relations: Differentiation, Conditionality, and Security," in *The Routledge Handbook on the European Neighbourhood Policy*, ed. Tobias Schumacher, Thomas Demmelhuber, and Andreas Marchetti (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2018).

Analysis:

Introduction

The Syrian crisis and its consequences for the MENA region has become one of the most important aspects of the co-operation between the EU and the Arab Mashreq states. It is furthermore a significant determinant when it comes to possibilities for the policy manoeuvring of the relatively weak Arab economies, which without doubt have been impacted significantly by the critical situation in Syria and in the region in general. Some states experience deepening poverty, in particular in their poorest localities, where youth unemployment is alarmingly high.¹

Showing that a security–stability nexus forms the main framework for the EU’s foreign and security policy approach towards the Middle East, the article discusses to what extent recent EU policies – including the Brussels II Conference on “Supporting the Future of Syrian and the Region” – present relevant foreign policy tools regarding the Syrian crisis.

The EU, the Arab Mashreq and the Syrian Crisis

With the EU’s new Migration Partnership Framework of June 2016, it was the ambition that migration and refugees should become an integrated part of EU foreign policy.² In a short-term perspective all current efforts should be continued in order to counteract human smuggling and trafficking and to prevent deaths in the Mediterranean Sea.

Furthermore, the policy aimed at increasing the return of migrants without a legal claim to stay in Europe and at the same time supporting activities enabling migrants and refugees to remain closer to their country of origin, thus avoiding a continued flow of refugees and migrants towards Europe. In the longer run, it was the ambition to address the root causes of migration through an approach where the partner countries were supported in their social and economic development.

Andrew Geddes and Leila Hadj-Abdou have analyzed how international migration is understood by the actors involved in the migration governance systems at the EU level. By applying an issue-framing approach, Geddes and Hadj-Abdou seek to “account for

¹ MENA, "The Middle East and North Africa 2018," (London: Routledge, 2018).

² EU-Commission, "Third Progress Report on the European Framework with Third Countries under the European Agenda on Migration," (Brussels: European Commission, 2017).

influences derived from interactions within the EU migration governance field” (Geddes and Hadj-Abdou, 2018: 144), involving government and EU officials and political leaders.³ The idea of looking at EU migration management from a framing perspective has been suggested by Roberto Roccu and Benedetta Voltolini, who argue that the preservation of stability in the MENA region aiming at maximizing EU security has long been identifiable as the main ambition of EU’s policies vis-à-vis the southern Mediterranean.⁴

Roccu and Voltolini contend that the link between security and stability can be perceived as a ‘master frame’ shaping the EU’s overall approach to the region. Frames should thus be understood as processes of social construction between the EU and its partners in the Arab Mashreq states. Given changing political, social or economic conditions in the Mediterranean, a need for a reframing might occur, making it possible to make sense of new challenges and provide new ways of dealing with the security–stability nexus and maybe – in the future – to move beyond this frame.

In this perspective it is necessary to analyse the specific actors and their forms of involvement in the given context. The analysis should thus trace the changes over time in the EU engagement with the relevant Arab states – seeking to understand how the policies and practices are pursued and legitimized. In order to be able to utilize some of the insights of the framing and reframing approach, it would be relevant to look more closely at the development of the EU–MENA relations regarding migration and security and how this development has been impacted by the problematic developments taking place in the Arab Mashreq states since the Arab uprisings in 2011. Obviously this cannot be done in the context of this short news analysis, but it is possible to indicate in which direction the analysis should move.

First of all it will be necessary to include changes which have taken place in the EU’s policies and practices related to co-operation between the EU and the Arab Mashreq states, in particular Jordan and Lebanon. In June 2017, the EU presented a report on EU–MENA relations in the framework of the revised ENP assessing the cooperation over the years 2015-2017. The main focus areas of the cooperation in the context of the severe regional crises, as referred to by Federica Mogherini in the press release following the launching of the report, were security, counter-terrorism and stability,

³ Andrew Geddes and Leila Hadj-Abdou, "Changing the Path? Eu Migration Governance after the ‘Arab Spring’," *Mediterranean Politics* (2017)., p. 144.

⁴ Roberto Roccu and Benedetta Voltolini, "Framing and Reframing the Eu’s Engagement with the Mediterranean: Examining the Security-Stability Nexus before and after the Arab Uprisings," *ibid.*

aiming at counteracting the spillover effects of the developments in Syria. As shown in the report, security and stability so far remained the main themes for the EU's foreign and security policy approach to the Arab Mashreq states.

Secondly, however, it will be necessary to focus on the recent and future development in Syria: In the light of the present situation in Syria, probably the challenges gradually will begin to change towards a complex and unstable post-war scenario, where new perspectives might appear – for Syria, for the international community and for the Syrian refugees.

Perspectives beyond the Brussels II Conference

As emphasized, there is a connection between the complex and highly differentiated development since the so-called Arab Spring and the EU's ambition of promoting agreements on migration in the Mediterranean. The common interest shared by the EU and the Arab Mashreq states in reducing the security risks attached to the refugee crisis is a recurring and for both parties important theme, as can be seen in the many documents and statements from the co-operation related to the crisis in Syria. Comparing the realities after the Arab Spring in 2011 with the present situation where the Syrian crisis has unfolded in all its in many ways tragic dimensions, there is hardly any doubt that the recent realities in many ways are different, more problematic and more challenging. But also that new developments and challenges are on the way

Obviously it is still too early to assess the outcome of the Brussels II Conference on Syria. It seems that the general focus was on humanitarian aid, and this is of course still extremely important, both in Syria and in its neighbouring countries. However, as indicated above it might also, in a not too distant future, be necessary to start working on the difficult task of dealing with a situation, where millions of Syrian refugees will have to choose between “poverty and exploitation in host countries and insecurity and possible persecution in Syria.”⁵ It goes without saying that this, together with post-war reconstruction in Syria and finding policy solutions for the internal situation in Syria, will constitute difficult challenges for the cooperation between the EU and its Arab Mashreq partners. The EU will need to rethink its traditional policies primarily based on providing humanitarian assistance and come up with new tools capable of dealing with significant and partly unknown foreign policy territory.

⁵ Maha Yahya, Jean Kassir, and Khalil el-Hariri, *Unheard Voices. What Syrian Refugees Need to Return Home* (Beirut: Carnegie Middle East Center, 2018), p. 9.

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