

The EU and the Conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa: How to Build a New Relationship between Old Neighbors

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I Unifying, Fragmenting, Contradictory – Defining and Characterizing the MENA Region

The contradiction between unifying and dividing is closer to us than we think. Between Europe, Africa, and Asia there is a ring of 21 states. It encompasses 18 Arab countries, from Morocco to Oman, and three non-Arab states, Turkey, Israel, and Iran. Together, they form the Middle East and North Africa region – MENA for short. 11 of these 21 countries are among Europe's closest southern neighbors. One of them - Turkey - is even a candidate for EU accession. While the EU is home to some 450 million people with an average age of 44, between the Atlas Mountains and the Persian-Arabian-Gulf there are around 580 million people with an average age of 27. From a European perspective, this intermediate region can be seen as a "bridge", but also as a "bulwark" against the neighboring continents of Africa and Asia. There are unifying and contradictory elements both within the many states located in the MENA region and in the trans-Mediterranean relations between Europe and its wider southern neighborhood in the MENA region.

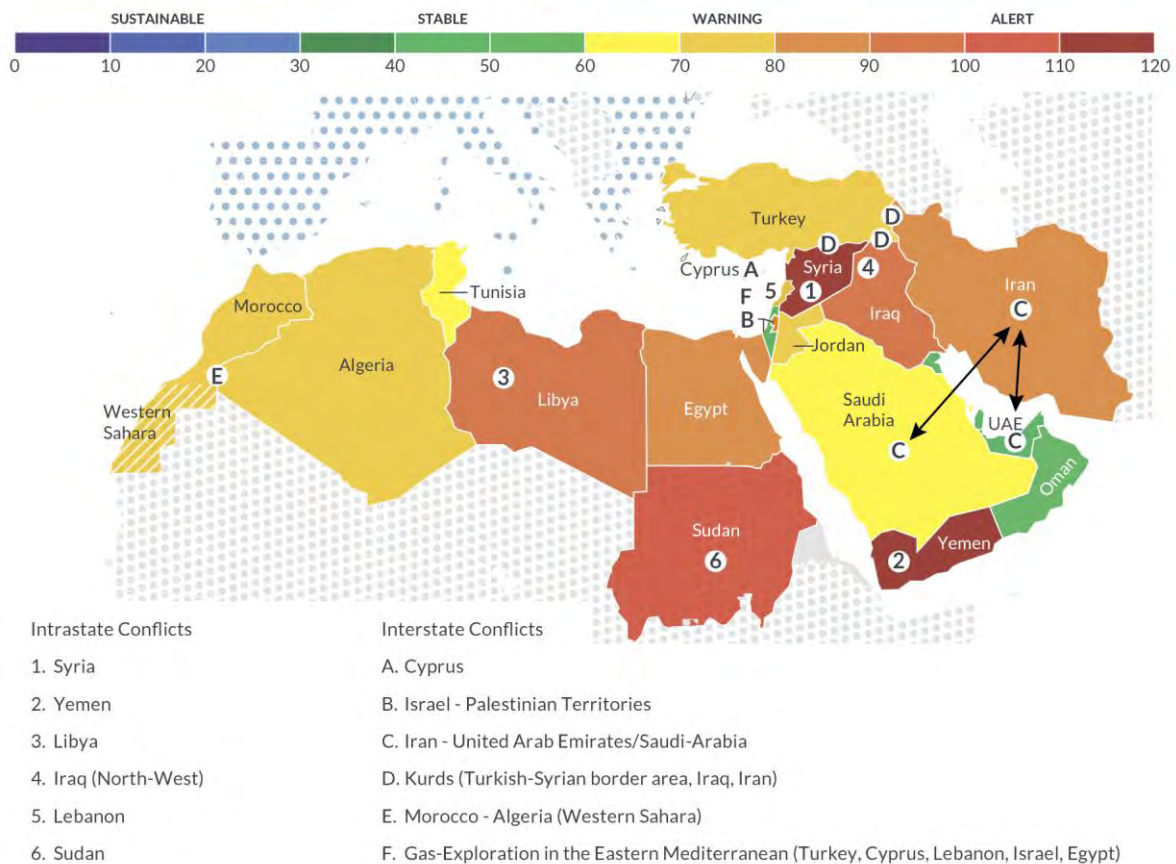
Europe's close ties to these southern neighboring regions – the "trans-Mediterranean bridge" – are the result of a number of factors. These include geographical proximity; historical events extending from the Roman Empire and the Crusades to colonial history; wide-ranging trade relations; and the diversity of people who have migrated or fled from the MENA region and now live and work in many European nations. Behind these unifying factors, however, there are also opposing and contradictory aspects that tend to describe the "bulwark". With the help of its neighbors, Europe is also trying to seal itself off from the real and perceived effects of the region's conflicts, first and foremost terrorism and migration. At the same time, it should not be forgotten that according to recent surveys by the World Inequality Lab, there is currently a one-to-four wealth gap between the EU and the MENA region.¹

There are also large disparities in prosperity between the states of the MENA region and within the societies there. While countries like Algeria and Saudi Arabia have extensive reserves of natural gas and oil, Tunisia and Jordan have no natural resources and must purchase them at high prices on the world market using valuable foreign currency. Countries like Israel and the United Arab Emirates, moreover, are among the most innovative economies in the world, while most people still residing in Syria and Yemen would starve without humanitarian aid from the EU and United Nations. Although the MENA countries and societies show a certain unity historically and geographically, contradictions and contrasts dominate. There is virtually no state in which the population structure is homogenous. One of the most striking examples of this heterogeneity is Lebanon, where political and economic power is distributed among 18 recognized ethnic and religious groupings. This diversity alone is already incredibly complex. A global comparison shows the extent to which the MENA region is marked by conflicts, with the area south of the EU having one of the world's largest

¹ Chancel, L., Piketty, T., Saez, E., Zucman, G. et al. World Inequality Report 2022, World Inequality Lab, wir2022.wid.world.

inflows of armaments.² The armed conflicts' density and intensity is high by global standards, as are the absolute numbers of refugees and displaced persons. When 1.1 million Syrian refugees arrived in the European Union within two years between 2015 and 2016, they not only brought with them their diversity and their past, but they also reintroduced the trauma of war and displacement into European societies. This, too, is an important indication of how closely intertwined Europe is with the Middle East. Our image of the MENA region ranges from fantastic stories from *A Thousand and One Nights* and clever minds – Avicenna, Al Khwarizmi, Ibn Rushd – who were long ahead of us Europeans in the fields of medicine, mathematics, and philosophy, to the attacks by jihadist terrorists of the so-called Islamic State, who brought their terror from Baghdad to Paris. We Europeans want a southern neighborhood with societies and states whose friendship we can rely on. However, the Middle East and North Africa, with their complexity that sometimes seems unmanageable, can also trigger a reflexive tendency towards isolationism, especially when we perceive the conflicts and potential crises in the region as a threat to our own stability.

Intrastate and Interstate Conflicts and State Fragility



Data Source: Fragile States Index, The Fund for Peace, 2021.

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Cooperation, however, is the most realistic alternative! We feel compelled to place cooperation on a new footing. Working together, we hope to achieve more sustainable successes in conflict resolution and crisis management. These ultimately serve the vital interests that we increasingly perceive in the region. To this end, it would be helpful to transform the confused picture of crises

² Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), <https://milex.sipri.org/sipri>.

and wars we usually see into a structured overview of the causes and character of the MENA region's conflicts. Historically, four lines of conflict have played a dominant role:

II Four Dominant Lines of Conflict in the MENA Region

1. Disputes over territory: Three territorial conflicts stand out in the MENA region: The dispute between Israelis and Palestinians over the "Holy Land" between the eastern Mediterranean coast and the Jordan River; the aspiration that Kurds living in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria have for their own state in the Middle East; and the status of the Western Sahara region, which Morocco considers part of its territory but which the Sahrawis regard as their own, supported by Algeria.

2. Turkey's search for identity: On the one hand, as a member of NATO and a candidate to join the European Union, Turkey is part of the "West"; on the other hand, due to its geographical location, conflict with the Kurds, and more prominent expression of Islamic identity, it is part of the Middle East. Internally, Turkish society is also struggling to find its place – in terms of the role religion should play in everyday life, to what extent nationalism should define its identity, and how authoritarian its governance structures should be. Turkey's unclear identity and its position between Europe and Asia make it a party to conflicts – not only in the Kurdish question, but also in disputes ranging from Cyprus to Libya.

3. The antagonism between the regional powers Iran and Saudi Arabia: In order to consolidate and/or expand their zones of influence throughout the region, Tehran and Riyadh support different parties to conflicts and wars taking place from Yemen to Syria. Both sides vie for political and military supremacy in the oil- and gas-rich Persian-Arabian Gulf region. In addition, Iran sees itself as protector of the Shiites, who make up about 10 percent of the world's Muslims. The majority of Muslims are Sunnis, for whom Saudi Arabia sees itself in a leadership role, partly because Mecca and Medina, Islam's holy sites and most important pilgrimage destinations, are located in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Different ethnic identities, Indo-European Persians on one side and Semitic Arabs on the other, reinforce the antagonism between the two regional powers.

4. The tense relationship between state and society: In many countries in the MENA region, fault lines appear between the governing and the governed, in some cases between the rulers and the ruled: Who is entitled, who is legitimized, to decide about taxes and duties? Who gets to collect these assets and then determine how this capital generated by society is used? Bitter disputes often break out over the distribution of revenues from trade or from oil and gas sales, and over the licensing of foreign brands. All these questions are central aspects of social contracts. Agreement on them becomes even more prone to conflict the more inhomogeneous a society is, and the more it is subject to demographic pressure from an ever younger and growing population.

The explosive power of precisely this fourth line of conflict is illustrated by the example of Syria: A state artificially sculpted by the British and French from the territory of the defunct Ottoman Empire after World War II, a state in which 18 different religious and ethnic groups have struggled to create a system of government. In Syria today, the Assad family clan, which belongs to the Alawite minority, has asserted itself as authoritarian rulers who distribute state resources primarily to their favorites, neglects most of society and, in the wake of protests in 2011, unleashed a civil war in which half the population was displaced, and half the country destroyed. The conflict which rapidly took larger dimension, evolved into one in which powerful neighbors from Turkey to Iran and global players from the US to Russia confront each other. To the extent its members were able to flee, most of the Syrian intelligentsia is now in exile in Europe.

III A Struggle for Political and Economic Power – Weaponizing Ideology and Religion

The Assad regime explains this war as a defensive struggle against Islamist terrorists. This narrative shows how some rulers use religious and cultural aspects to distract from the real reasons for conflict, which are rooted in how political and economic power are determined and distributed. In 2012, the regime began releasing radical Islamists from its prisons so they could infiltrate the secular opposition. This endeavor proved successful – with financial and military support from governments in Qatar and Turkey, and due to a lack of help from the West for a peaceful, secular movement among the majority of the country’s citizens. If we do not seize opportunities like this to mediate in political and territorial conflicts, the latter can become so bogged down in religious-inflected confrontation that there no longer seems to be an adequate way out. The Middle East conflict – the dispute between Israelis and Palestinians over the allocation of territory located between the eastern Mediterranean coastline and the Jordan River – is another example of how this can happen: As early as the 1990s, the Israeli government concluded agreements with Palestinian representatives and took the initial steps towards creating two states. However, the relevant decision makers underestimated the power of their political opponents to block the agreements. Resistance from within the ranks on both sides was and is mainly driven by ideology, be it Israeli settlers who dream of “Greater Israel”, be it radical Islamists among the Palestinians who firmly believe that the Jews must be expelled from the Middle East. The conflict’s ideological narrative has continued to gain strength since the 2000s, intensifying antagonism between Jews and Muslims to such an extent that a peaceful resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict seems for the most part unattainable.

IV Maintaining Power Instead of Citizen Welfare – Reflecting on Political Leaders’ Motives

The example of the Assad regime in Syria illustrates the key role that the acquisition and maintenance of power can play in shaping conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa. The political leadership tries to compensate for the lack of a legitimate claim to power by using various instruments: expanding their control over society, increasing the hierarchical nature of decision-making structures, exaggerating nationalist narratives and marginalizing parts of the population. The presidents of Egypt and Turkey, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi and Recep Tayyip Erdogan, use these instruments in exemplary fashion. These methods are also attractive because they make it easier to organize the distribution of scarce resources – a process that is always easier when the group of beneficiaries is as small as possible and the number of excluded as large as possible. El-Sisi has declared not only the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood to be terrorists, but also secular civil society organizations and opposition groups, thus marginalizing important parts of society. Erdogan overstates Turkish nationalism and Islam to suppress the Kurdish identity and persecute its representatives – whether they be parliamentary, like those of the HDP party, or violent, like those of the PKK. The power of intelligence agencies is also increasing, extending far into people’s private lives. Even social media, which played an essential role as recently as 2011 in the Arab Spring uprisings, can now be used by those in power to control the public. By creating a network of oligarchies, the relevant leaders have been able to secure their influence on their national economies. The desire for power that motivates authoritarian leaders not only has an effect domestically, but it can also lead to rapid and unexpected shifts in the realm of foreign policy. One example is the Turkish-Saudi confrontation:

Tensions had grown after the murder of the Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in October 2018 but evaporated almost overnight when Erdogan visited the Saudi crown prince in April 2022. Erdogan demonstratively took part in the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia to show the local population his attachment to Islam. Today, Turkish companies once again benefit from a greater number of orders from Saudi Arabia.

Governance

BTI-Governance-Score



Data Source: Bertelsmann Transformation Index, Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2022.

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V Fragile Social Contracts – A Conflict-Ridden Relationship between the Governing and the Governed

People in different countries react differently to their political leaders' authoritarian behavior. Historically, the majority has accepted their leadership's claim to power as long as the rulers have been able to share a sufficient portion of the state's wealth with those they rule – through opportunities ranging from well-paid state jobs to free health care and education. This give-and-take no longer works, as resources become scarce, and social contracts become fragile and come under increasing pressure. As a result, the ruled react quite differently to the authoritarian behavior of their rulers. In the still-rich Arab Gulf countries, people continue to have high expectations that they be well provided for financially, and the social imbalance thus remains stable. In Iran, on the other hand, where the relationship between providers and those provided for no longer functions, corruption is rampant. Large parts of the population have reacted phlegmatically to the worsening living conditions. Instead of fighting a suffocating system at home, many are trying to use their contacts to build a new life abroad. In Tunisia, conversely, the public responded to worsening social and political conditions with demands for participation and justice ousting their authoritarian leader in 2011. However, the example of Tunisia also shows that if the new, democratically elected politicians do not meet the expectations of an economic "democracy dividend," the same public can cheer a president they put in office if he dismantles the system of checks and balances and strengthens his position simply by addressing the issue of corruption.

VI The EU's Ambiguous Relationship with the MENA Region

Europe is involved in each of these four lines of conflict. The EU and its member states play an ambivalent role as the direct northern neighbor of Middle Eastern and North African countries. The undisputed high point of the European Union's positive and active engagement with its MENA neighbors was the establishment of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership at the November 1995 summit in Barcelona. The Event combined a high-level government meeting with a forum for civil societies. In the agreement reached at the summit, all sides pledged to establish a partnership for peace, prosperity, and democracy. This initiative was reinforced through many targeted trans-Mediterranean projects. The dubious low point of the European Union's relationship with the Middle East came in 2003 when European states found themselves divided over the legality, justifiability, and feasibility of the military invasion of Iraq. The bitter dispute led to eight European states – including the UK, Spain, and Italy – providing military support to the “coalition of the willing” under then US President George W. Bush. The remaining seven – including France and Germany – were so vehemently opposed that a realignment of the common European policy towards a country as important as Iraq took almost 20 years to materialize.

Three examples highlight how internal tensions can lead to the European Union being perceived as a contradictory actor by its southern neighbors:

The contradiction between national foreign economic interests and joint declarations by the EU's member states: The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has been the main supporter of restoring autocratic leadership in Arab Spring countries since the uprisings of 2011. Abu Dhabi lobbies even for Syrian autocrat Bashar al-Assad – persona non grata in the eyes of the European Union – to be readmitted to the Arab League. It provides financial and political assistance to President el-Sisi in Egypt, who – contravening the guiding principle of European foreign policy to promote democracy and pluralism – suppresses secular groups in both the political sphere and in civil society. Through financial and military aid provided through Egypt, moreover, Abu Dhabi supports General Haftar's counter-government in Libya, which is trying to undermine the UN-backed peace process. This contradicts the EU's joint efforts to mediate and promote political stabilization and transformation in the North African country. Nevertheless, the national foreign economic interests of European member states – from the *couple franco-allemand* to Italy and Spain – seem to always be at the heart of major trade policy decisions, at least when it comes to the sales of weapons, industrial goods and services, or the purchase of raw materials and energy resources from the rich Gulf states. European leaders appear to be making certain groundbreaking decisions – for example, increased purchases of fossil and alternative energies from the UAE in the medium term – without critical examination of the UAE's policies that run counter to European interests in the EU's immediate neighborhood.

The contradiction in the relationship to the Middle East conflict: Europe's declarations on resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are mainly valued as balanced, based on international agreements, and committed to achieving a jointly negotiated, peaceful, two-state solution. Brussels and the member states back up these declarations with annual expenditures of around €1 billion. At the end of the day, however, the European Union cannot serve as a truly neutral mediator in this conflict, since e.g. the relations many EU states have with Israel are reinforced by important national interests, i.e. the inglorious history these states have with their Jewish citizens who were murdered or driven into exile. Many of Europe's former Jewish residents were only able to find refuge in Israel, and countries like Germany therefore feel a special responsibility for the existence and security of the state of Israel. At the same time, many EU member states in Central and Eastern

Europe rediscovered the roots that Jewish culture has in their countries and societies only after the fall of the Iron Curtain, and they do not want to jeopardize these ties. Beyond this historical dimension, for many European countries Israel is also a gateway to a future driven by an innovative digital economy.

The contradiction of mobility and migration: While we Europeans are able to travel visa-free to almost all countries in the Middle East and North Africa, even business and civil society representatives from MENA countries have to go through a lengthy process to obtain a visa to enter the Schengen area. Our neighbors naturally see this asymmetry as a major disadvantage. Moreover, go-it-alone tactics by individual countries give rise to additional uncertainty. For example, seven months before the presidential election in April 2022, French President Emmanuel Macron – without consulting the other EU member states – ordered a short-term reduction of 30 percent in the number of Schengen visas issued by France. His motive was to persuade the Maghreb states to relent in negotiations on readmitting illegal migrants, a key topic in the country’s domestic politics. Concerns about migration stem primarily from the inability of EU member states to exercise the necessary solidarity and agree on an orderly approach to integrating migrants into the labor market and distributing refugees fairly. Our inability to reach intra-European agreement that goes beyond mere declarations of intent³ causes us to send conflicting signals to our neighbors: We tend to preach democracy and the rule of law while at the same time cooperating with authoritarian rulers because we hope that this will prevent migration to the EU; in many southern neighboring countries, this double standard unsettles the rulers and the ruled alike, as it more or less forces them to question the true motives behind the trans-Mediterranean partnership.

VII Under Pressure – Regional Interests and the Actions of the US, Russia, and China

External influences that weaken Europe’s interests and policies in this region reinforce the various ambivalent aspects of the European Neighborhood Policy towards the Middle East and North Africa. The traditional transatlantic partnership in the MENA region has lost its continuity since the jihadist attacks of September 11, 2001, in New York and Washington. The frictions have been particularly evident during Republican administrations: The military invasion of Iraq in 2003 led by President George W. Bush left deep fissures, and President Donald J. Trump’s unilateral recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel in 2017 was also met with mixed feelings in Europe. The US is still the strongest Western military power in the Mediterranean and Gulf regions, but politically and diplomatically it has increasingly withdrawn from conflicts on the ground. The main reason for this withdrawal is the belief that, from Libya to Yemen, Europeans should take on more responsibility themselves. After its annexation of Crimea in 2014 and since its military interventions in the civil wars in Syria in 2015 and Libya in 2018, Russia has expanded its political and military power not only in the Black Sea region but also in the eastern Mediterranean. This course of action places the Kremlin alongside rulers whom EU foreign policy excludes as partners for consensus-based conflict resolution. President Putin’s divisive logic is evident in the MENA region: Russian soldiers and mercenaries are stationed in regions through which refugees and migrants travel to Europe – because the Kremlin knows that few other challenges complicate public discourse in the EU as

³ The 10-Point Plan – For stronger European coordination on welcoming people fleeing the war from Ukraine, European Commission, June 10, 2022.

much as migration. Chinese foreign economic policy aims to control global trade routes and exclusive access to essential raw materials. To that extent, the MENA region plays a central geographic role in China's Silk Road project; Chinese investments in ports in North Africa and the Red Sea, in railways and roads in Iran and Turkey, and in mobile networks all represent serious competition for Europe's economic and trade interests. In addition, China is by far the most important buyer of Arab oil and Iranian natural gas, which gives it considerable influence in its relations with these countries.

VIII Justice and Victimization – A Region's Attitude towards

International Rules

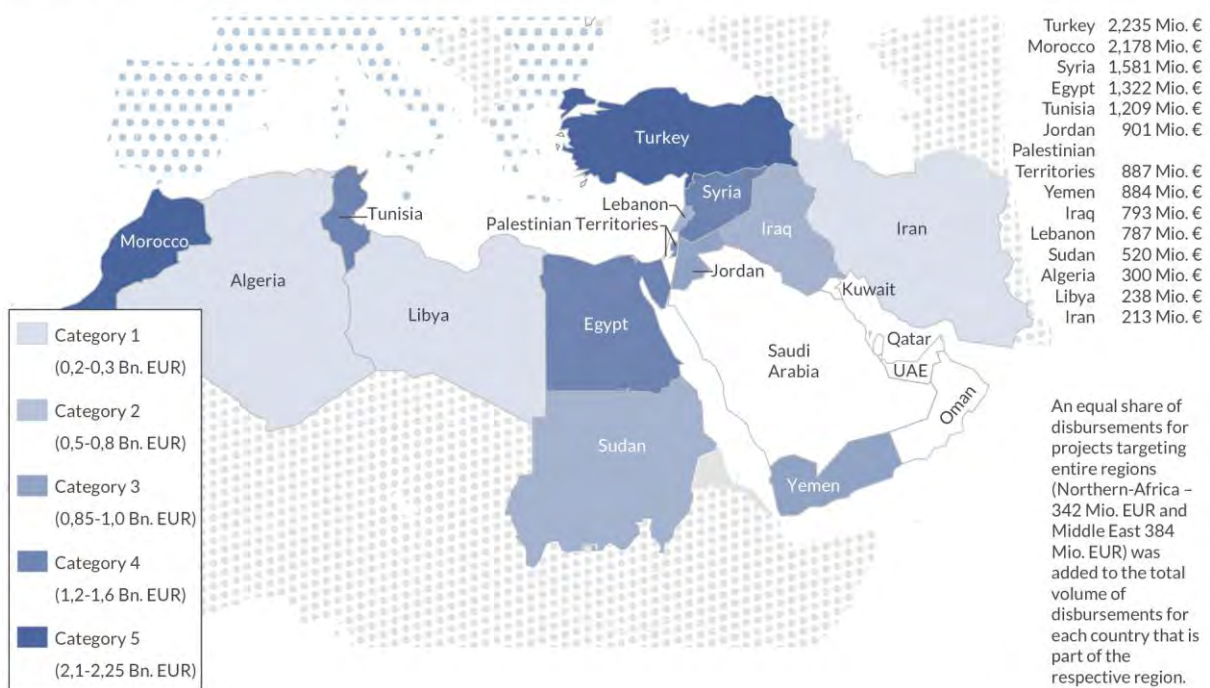
Despite changing geopolitical power structures, many Arabs and Muslims still perceive the US in its former, self-defined role as the "world's policeman", using its military superiority and veto power in the UN Security Council to turn international law largely into a tool for advancing national interests. The main factor in these perceptions is the US-led military invasion of Iraq in 2003, which Washington carried out without the requisite UN Security Council resolution. Europe, due to its lack of emancipation in the areas of foreign and security policy, is often seen as an "extended arm" of the respective US administration. The underlying narrative – that its peoples are the victims of American interests and politics and thus are treated disadvantageously – is one often found in the Arab world. This perception often undermines the West's credibility in terms of advocating for human rights and the rule of law. Even the fact that the US used their military power to liberate Kuwait from its illegal occupation by Iraq under Saddam Hussein in 1991 is sometimes equally dismissed in parts of the MENA region as an expression of US policy serving its own interests. Interpreting the situation in this way, however, ignores the fact that the US acted in 1991 with the unanimous support of the UN Security Council and that the intervention was thus legitimized under international law, in contrast to 2003. When Arab countries are elected to the UN Security Council, often with support from African or Asian states, they seek to gain greater recognition primarily through their international engagement. Positive examples here include Kuwait's outstanding political and financial commitment to international humanitarian aid, and Egyptian scientist and politician Mohamed ElBaradei's role as the long-serving head of the International Atomic Energy Agency.

IX Conditional Success – The EU's Approach to Conflict and War in Its Southern Neighborhood

The complexity of the four lines of conflict in the MENA region shows how difficult it remains for the European Union to contribute decisively to the resolution of conflicts and wars in its southern neighborhood. Three examples illustrate the limited possibilities for success: **Under European leadership, key actors negotiated a multilateral agreement on international control of Iran's nuclear program in 2015**, a milestone in international conflict mitigation. However, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) insufficiently addresses the full range of issues in the MENA region. By only examining nuclear capabilities it fails to allay the legitimate fears that Israel and its Gulf Arab neighbors have of potential attacks from conventional Iranian missiles and from Tehran-backed militias in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. The agreement would have been a comprehensive diplomatic and political success if the nuclear agreement with Iran had been complemented by a European-initiated regional security system between Iran and its neighbors – including appropriate military guarantees. In January 2020, **German diplomacy made it possible to bridge France's and Italy's clashing interests in the Libyan conflict**. These efforts brought all parties

to the war inside and outside Libya, including its financiers, to the negotiating table in Berlin. Turkey, Russia, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates, which are dispatching mercenaries and materiel to the Mediterranean war zone, also signed the final Berlin Declaration⁴, which provides a comprehensive roadmap to peace and transformation in Libya. By signing the agreement, Ankara, Moscow, Cairo, and Abu Dhabi even pledged to withdraw their mercenaries and cease their military support for the parties to the Libyan conflict. Since then, however, very little has happened, since Berlin and Brussels lack robust instruments to enforce written agreements and overcome the resistance of those driving the conflict. What is particularly tragic is that the longer the situation continues, the less likely it becomes that the truly exemplary roadmap set out in the Berlin Declaration will be implemented. As a result, resolving the conflict in Libya and building political, economic, and civil society institutions is becoming increasingly difficult. Starting in 2011, **German and European transformation partnerships were supposed to support the new and often inclusive governments that emerged from the Arab Spring uprisings in formerly authoritarian states** from Tunisia to Egypt as they progressed towards democracy, good governance, and a social market economy. Europe had high hopes for an effective, values-driven European Neighborhood Policy based on the valid premise of promoting more democracy by disbursing more money.

EU Institutions' and Individual Member States' Bilateral Development Assistance



Data Source: OECD-ODA (2020), EU Aid Explorer, EU Commission, 2022.

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Financially, Brussels is particularly influential in Tunisia, a country undergoing fundamental change. Yet, it did not use this leverage to convince policy makers in Tunis to establish a constitutional court, the central body enshrined in the constitution developed in 2014. Therefore, Tunisia lacked a democratic corrective that could have helped resolve the political crisis into which the small North

⁴ Press and Information Office of the Federal Government (BPA), January 19, 2020, The Berlin Conference on Libya - Conference Conclusions, full text available at: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/the-berlin-conference-on-libya-1713882>, [retrieved, 25.07.2022].

African country was plunged in the summer of 2021, and which has plagued it ever since. Thus, Europe's self-imposed restraint ultimately backfired.

X New Catalysts – The Four Dominant Lines of Conflict Today

In the summer of 2022, the MENA region remains highly crisis-prone along the four major conflict lines. **The territorial issues remain unresolved:** The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is dominated by identity disputes. While the EU member states are divided on the question of whether Western Sahara is Moroccan territory or is occupied under international law, Turkish armed forces are once again taking military action against Kurdish militias in northern Syria and northern Iraq. These military actions also illustrate **the ambiguous role Turkey continues to play between Europe and Asia.** On the one hand, Turkey acts as a conflict driver in the Middle East, contravening liberal values. On the other, its geostrategic importance for NATO in the confrontation with Russia in the Black Sea region and eastern Mediterranean is increasing – not least because of its current ability to provide allies with modern weapons systems more quickly, cheaply, and easily than Western partners. The wheel of history has almost come full circle: Despite constant mediation efforts by the EU, **tensions between the US, Israel, Iran, and Saudi Arabia remain high. The conclusion of a new version of the nuclear agreement with Iran seems to be a distant prospect.** Once again, there are no signs of active diplomatic efforts to implement a regional security system that would resolve the antagonism between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and the security concerns of Israel and Arab Gulf countries. As a result, the international community is in danger of losing any possibility for controlling Iran's nuclear program. A remaining hope is that Iraq will continue to try, as it has since 2020, to engage the governments of Tehran and Riyadh in direct negotiations as part of an intraregional initiative. Saudi Arabia and Iran themselves are at least trying to find a conflict-reducing agreement for the war in Yemen. The glimmer of hope offered by direct negotiations is overshadowed, however, by a dangerous proxy war between Israel and Iran: Israel is apparently cooperating with the Arab Gulf states to counter Iranian interventions in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. **The state of the governance systems in the MENA countries remains worrisome:** The rise of autocratic regimes, the disintegration of statehood and public order, the lack of legitimate leadership, the alienation of the rulers from the ruled, the exclusion of social groups and the exodus of young talent all underscore that in many countries social contracts and economic models are not sustainable; neither are they based on the rule of law, or inclusive, or forward-looking. There are only a few exceptions: Israel, for instance, or some Arab Gulf states.

Of particular concern are three temporary crisis drivers that have been exacerbating the causes and consequences of the fourth line of conflict in the MENA countries since 2020, impacting governance, economic development, and social cohesion:

XI Temporary Conflict Drivers

The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified the fourth line of conflict's causes and consequences due to the grave socioeconomic problems that have followed in its wake. Iran and the Arab countries have been particularly affected: Their societies have neither social security systems nor a well-ordered health-care system and much of the population survives by working in the informal employment sector. Low- and middle-income countries in the EU's southern neighborhood have been hit especially hard by health risks, lockdowns, the disruption of trade and supply chains, the absence of tourists and seasonal job opportunities in southern Europe, as well as reduced remittances from migrant communities. The EU has been able to provide short-term aid to help bridge the crisis

in the form of donated vaccines and direct budget support. However, the loss of growth, jobs, remittances, and government revenue has further unsettled the already unstable social and economic situation. In view of the difficulties, they experienced during the pandemic people in these countries adjusted their demands to their leaders: They are now calling for more to be done to fight corruption and reduce bureaucratic hurdles and inefficiencies in agencies and institutions ranging from public health care to public education.

The circumstances and consequences of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine have not only changed the social realities described by the fourth line of conflict, but also the balance of power surrounding Turkey and the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Turkey's geostrategic importance has become even more visible: NATO and the EU depend on the country to underpin their security architecture and prevent Russian expansion in the Black Sea region and eastern Mediterranean. The reduction in the Kremlin's military activity in Syria has led President Erdogan to use the subsequent vacuum to step up action against Kurdish militias in northern Syria and northern Iraq. Iranian leaders are expanding their political and military presence in the territory ruled by the Assad clan in Syria, which is perceived by Israel in turn as an increased threat and is thus giving rise to clandestine military activities in Syria. At the same time, the oil- and gas-rich Arab countries are becoming more important for Europe as substitute suppliers of the fossil fuels previously imported from Russia. Yet these key MENA states do not adhere to the West's strict anti-Russia policy or its sanctions; they try to remain neutral. This stance is based on a political calculation that is different from our own: Algeria and Egypt have agreements to cooperate with Moscow militarily, Israel depends on Russian approval for air strikes on Iranian positions in Syria, the United Arab Emirates profits from investments by Russian oligarchs and warns that working relations with the Kremlin must be maintained, since the Arab Gulf states cannot rely solely on the United States as a political and military protector. The impact of the Russian-Ukrainian war on governance and socioeconomic development is most severe in those MENA countries that are especially dependent on imports of fossil fuels and basic foodstuffs and, at the same time, lack the financial reserves to buy oil and wheat at rapidly rising world market prices. These low- and middle-income countries also lack sufficient tax revenues to pay high prices for grain, corn, rice and cooking oil from Ukraine and Russia. They therefore rely on international budget support to finance energy and food imports. Exploding prices and food shortages are also putting pressure on the region's often finely balanced systems of subsidies for gasoline, electricity, cooking oil, bread, and rice. In many cases, these negative economic developments are being accompanied by an additional loss of purchasing power due to high inflation. Both those who govern and those who rule are worried about social discontent and even unrest among their citizens. At the same time, given the ever-scarcer resources, it is becoming increasingly difficult to provide adequate social welfare to prevent such unrest. The growing demands for an effective, socially just and corruption-free distribution of resources within these societies will inevitably also increase demands for efficient and legitimate governance and public administration.

Increased and changing economic interdependencies are rapidly gaining importance for international relations and thus also for the various areas in which Europe and the MENA region cooperate, a development currently illustrated by the tensions in the global energy and food markets. The countries that are best able to diversify their external economic relations are the ones that are most resilient when economic crises occur, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and Russian-Ukrainian war. The shortages and high prices of fossil fuels and basic foodstuffs that we are experiencing in 2022 clearly demonstrate the importance of analyzing these economic

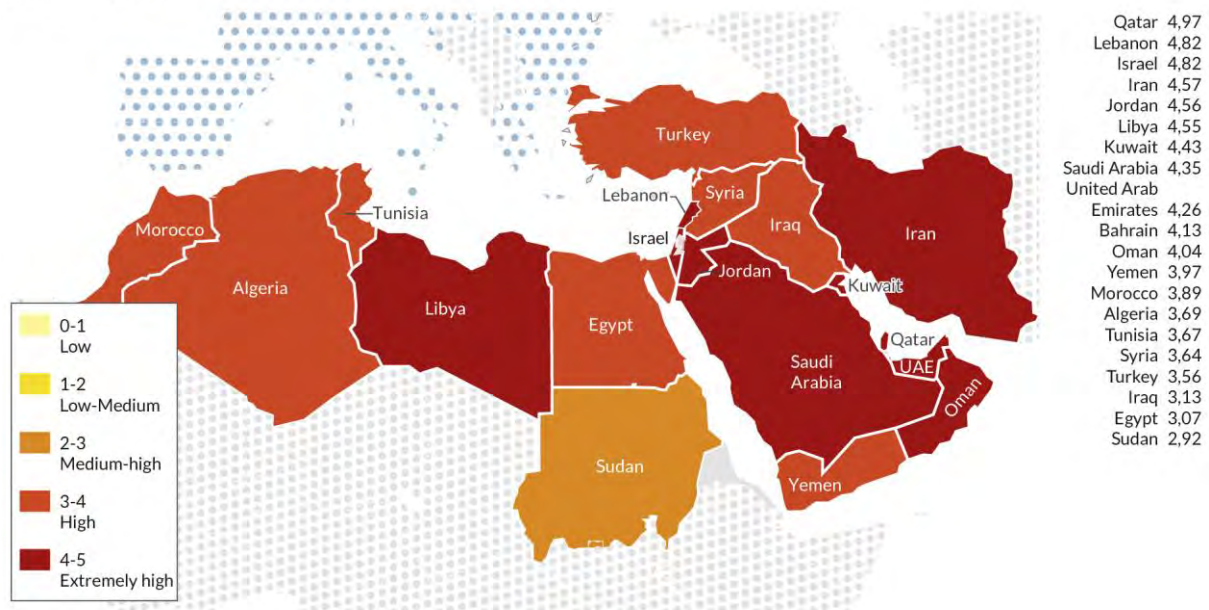
interdependencies and their underlying factors. They highlight the growing importance of cooperation not only within the EU but also with friendly neighboring countries in order to simplify and shorten supply chains and gain access to a wider range of sources for imports. For this reason, certain areas of trans-Mediterranean cooperation will play a particularly important role in the future: digital networking and the promotion of IT-supported companies, sustainable production of agricultural products and their unrestricted export and import, and the joint development of alternative energy sources. Progress in these sectors will make it possible to minimize economic dependencies and mitigate the impacts of future socio-economic crises.

XII Ongoing Conflict Drivers – The Impacts of Climate Change

The negative consequences of climate change influence the conflicts in the MENA region – in addition to the three temporary conflict drivers – continuously and thus even more significantly. Hardly any other global region is so threatened by extreme weather phenomena: Ever-longer periods of drought and the resulting loss of water reserves and agricultural land are just some of the hallmarks of this problem. Combined with rapid population growth and the subsequent increase in population density and urbanization, the negative effects of these changes can be felt in all areas of people’s personal and working lives.

Climate Change Impacts on the Basis of Water Stress Levels

Overall Water Risk



Data Source: Aqeduct 3.0 Country and Province Rankings, World Resources Institute, 2019.

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This is a vicious circle that seems unstoppable: More people need more food, more space, more water, and more opportunities to earn a living. This is true in stable as well as in fragile and failed states. Sandstorms are increasingly passing through residential and agricultural areas; plagues of locusts are destroying harvests; lifelines such as the Nile, Euphrates and Tigris are being reduced to trickles; the Sahara is spreading toward the southern Mediterranean coast; and temperatures above 50° Celsius for weeks on end are becoming the norm. Additional strains on local governance capacities and growing pressure to migrate to Europe are the foreseeable consequences of these existential threats to social and economic systems throughout the MENA region. Surveys show,

however, that there is still much less awareness in these societies of the need to protect nature and the environment than in the West⁵ – something that can largely be explained by the fact that most people in the MENA region already have their hands full coping with the everyday hardships of rising prices, corruption, and lack of work.

XIII Hope Despite a Bleak Outlook: An Encouraging Mindset among Young People

The maze of conflicts both within the MENA region and in trans-Mediterranean relations is becoming increasingly complex and relevant – a development that will also persist in the future. As a result, pressure to act is rapidly increasing in a growing number of political and economic areas. These negative circumstances stand in contrast to the hope offered by the mostly young societies present in the extended region to the EU's south. Many young people are not merely passively adapting to current problems but are actively searching for ways to make use wherever they can of ever-scarcer freedoms. They are united by the goal of bringing about local change for themselves, their families, and their friends – a dynamic that can also trigger progress in society at large.

During deliberations in the European institutions on distributing the budget for the 2021–2027 period, Brussels revised the priorities for its partnership with the 10 countries in the EU's direct southern neighborhood, from Morocco to Lebanon. In this context, the Bertelsmann Stiftung's Europe program asked experts from those countries what their priorities were for the coming seven-year period of trans-Mediterranean cooperation. All the experts emphasized that, despite the considerable administrative hurdles and the ambivalent European Neighbourhood Policy, they preferred to cooperate with the EU than with China, Russia, or Turkey. Despite all the contradictions, Europe is seen as more committed to rule of law and humanitarian standards within cooperative partnerships than the other external project partners.

Nevertheless, after 30 years of direct engagement in the southern neighborhood, we Europeans must admit that on our own we lack the means to directly influence actors on the ground. If we want to create a true "Ring of Friends" in the Middle East and North Africa, we need to refocus our strengths and then play to them. As we do, emotional and rational factors will take on a new and important role.

"The only genuine values are those for which one is capable, if necessary, of sacrificing something."⁶ These words of the then Czech leader and convinced European Václav Havel date from a time when the countries of Central and Eastern Europe were trying to find their way into the then European Community and its economic and social system. However, the underlying thought also applies to EU-MENA-relations today: If we want to credibly represent to our partners the values of rule of law, good governance and a social market economy, we must be prepared to seriously debate the concept of "faster, higher, further" that we assumed would always drive our affluent consumer societies. If we are to conduct this discussion without being paralyzed by fear, however, we must ensure the potential restrictions on our lifestyles are manageable enough that they are not seen as an immediate threat to our very existence. Today, therefore, it is more important than ever

⁵ The Arab Barometer, What MENA Citizens Think About The Environment in 11 Graphs, March 24, 2022, full text available at: <https://www.arabbarometer.org/2022/03/what-mena-citizens-think-about-environmental-issues-in-7-graphs/>, [retrieved, 25.07.2022].

⁶ Václav Havel, April 1994.

that we take collective, rational action in Europe and its neighborhood – in keeping with the idea that sharing burdens fairly is a form of mutual protection.

In terms of Europe's relationship with its southern neighborhood, first and foremost this means building consistent credibility. Since the Lisbon Treaty⁷ was signed in 2007, the EU has committed itself – through Article 8 of the Treaty on European Union, which remains valid today – to further develop its relations with its immediate neighbors based on democracy, the rule of law, good governance, and a social market economy. The foreign ministers of the EU member states laid down these basic principles as early as 1995 in a joint declaration with their counterparts from the other side of the Mediterranean when they established the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership at the Barcelona Summit.⁸ Since then, countless projects financed with funds from European sources have followed guidelines that promote civic engagement, the rule of law, democracy, citizen-oriented governance, and sustainable economic activity. At the same time, European politicians often allow themselves to be guided in their decisions by key dependencies, with the result that fundamental European principles fade into the background. If we want to be able to act more credibly vis-à-vis our neighbors, we must reflect on these dependencies, reduce them, and intentionally take responsibility for how they develop in the future.

We offer six suggestions on how this claim can be realized:

1. Credibility and Setting an Example

If Europe is to be capable of acting toward its neighbors in the way described in the Treaty on European Union, resolute steps must also be taken to strengthen its credibility within its neighborhood. When the core problems present in the EU are examined clearly and honestly, it becomes apparent that there are far fewer differences in the challenges facing societies on both shores of the Mediterranean than is often assumed. **When it comes to the rule of law, governance and a focus on citizens and their needs, EU member states also have their weak spots. We need a shared commitment if these shortcomings are to be remedied.** It sends a contradictory signal when countries like Tunisia are criticized for disregarding the separation of powers, while at the same time the ruling party in Poland can heavily influence the appointment of judges and the prime minister of Hungary can put concerning pressure on the country's media – so far without any decisive response within the EU.

2. Migration and the Rule of Law

In concrete terms, this also means we must begin by solving the "migration conundrum". The toxic tensions at the intersection of asylum, migration and border security severely limit the effectiveness of the European idea both in Europe and in its neighborhood. At present, we have an opportunity to break new ground here and advance in the direction of genuine solidarity among EU member states. **The changing geopolitical and demographic situation and the resulting migration movements have the potential to make an agreement on a fair and effective refugee support and integration mechanism a win-win solution for all EU member states** – including those that had little exposure to migration until early 2022. Not least, such a mechanism would allow the societies of smaller and economically weaker EU member states to assess the impact of future

⁷ Treaty of Lisbon amending the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty establishing the European Community (OJ C 306, December 17, 2007); entry into force on December 1, 2009.

⁸ Barcelona Declaration, Adopted at the Euro-Mediterranean Conference (November 27 and 28, 1995). Full text available at: <http://aei.pitt.edu/41674/1/A5824.pdf>, [retrieved, 25.07.2022].

mobility and migration policies more accurately. This would remove the fear among decision-makers in those countries that their compatriots might perceive future measures facilitating immigration as nothing more than an asymmetric overreach. This development would in turn help to finally establish a truly common foundation for migration policy. On this basis, member states could further reduce disproportionate immigration barriers - to everyone's benefit.

In this way, EU member states could also markedly reduce public spending where maintaining migration barriers conflicts with our own values. This is especially true for funds that flow to states which qualify for support not so much because of their promising approaches to transformation, but predominantly because of their geographic location. Turkey and Morocco, for example, receive billions of euros from Europe every year. The EU disburses these sums not least in the hope that the receiving countries will use their position along important transit routes to prevent migrants from continuing their journey to neighboring European regions. In this way, the EU is trying to protect countries that might feel overwhelmed if they had to handle a large number of arrivals on their own. This approach is not only problematic considering Europe's desire to implement a values-based foreign policy, but it is also a questionable investment. Providing for people in one's own country is one of the state's key tasks. If this is done inefficiently – as is often the case when public administrations are faced with large numbers of challenging individual fates – external investments do relatively little to improve the situation of those in need. A substantial portion of the resources invested in preventing migration instead seeps away into inefficient state structures, and only a small percentage flows directly into measures that benefit refugees, something that holds true both north and south of the Mediterranean. Faced with such a persistently bleak outlook, many migrants continue to set off illegally for northwestern Europe despite the EU's considerable spending in the Mediterranean region.

3. Mobility and Efficiency

If this unhealthy relationship were to be dissolved, resources would be freed up that could improve the options for legal migration. It would not be enough, however, to simply create additional exceptions and partial solutions; for there to be real progress, the complexity of migration systems must be reduced. The greatest potential lies in increasing the administrative capacity of EU member states. If immigration rules were more stringent and transparent, it would take much less time to apply them fairly. Faster processing of cases ultimately means not only more legal certainty for individual applicants, but also more cases processed in the same amount of time. German regulations that apply to stays of more than 90 days, e.g., for taking up gainful employment or studying, offer a variety of starting points here – such as when special conditions or exemptions apply, or cases are complicated due to the number of procedures and institutions involved – without the regulatory content having to be changed to a substantial degree.

Efficiency gains are also possible at the European level if overly bureaucratic procedures in individual countries can be further reduced – e.g., when it comes to certificates and other documents that must be supplied to obtain a visa for a short stay in the Schengen area. First and foremost, this requires targeted preliminary work in the governance systems of the MENA countries. For instance, if documents are to be accepted more readily by the consulates of EU member states, corruption within the issuing authorities must be combated effectively. Trans-Mediterranean cooperation in this and other legal processes has stalled in many countries in the southern neighborhood because too few incentives exist to take the necessary steps together. One way of realizing the needed improvements here can be seen in Georgia: In 2017, in return for the substantial progress in terms of the rule of law and reducing corruption it had achieved over the previous

20 years, the country was included in the list of states whose citizens can visit the Schengen area without a visa. This development, which is far from complete, shows the results that are possible over the long term as part of a transformation partnership. **The decisive factor here was the EU's willingness to offer the prospect of uncomplicated entry to the Schengen area to all members of the society.** In the southern neighborhood, not only could such a solution have a sizeable systemic impact on the ground, it would also lessen the burden on European administrators, who would no longer have to double-check the authenticity of every single document they receive from a citizen in the countries concerned.

4. Consumption and Dependencies

The same applies to prosperity and its development: We must admit that resources have specific limits, which each member of our societies has a responsibility to respect – regardless of which shore of the Mediterranean he or she lives on. For our southern neighbors, this may mean in very practical terms reducing their high meat consumption; for us it means honestly reflecting on our excessively energy-intensive lifestyles in their entirety – including food, housing, and transport – and responsibly limiting consumption to a level that is acceptable to all. The visible consequences of the current disruption to long-standing energy supply lines in Europe make it clear that keeping within individual limits is ultimately the only way to avoid new, unmanageable dependencies over the long term. **This means that the fewer resources we need to generate an acceptable level of prosperity, the less we will have to depend on countries with democratic deficits,** such as Algeria, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, to import them – thereby diminishing the credibility of our values.

5. Civil Society and Joint Security

As long as the debate on whether and how the EU should strengthen strategic sovereignty – a debate that is entirely appropriate in light of current events – Europe, as long as it cannot responsibly deliver, should rely less on military approaches for resolving conflicts and increasing security in its southern neighborhood. Instead, we Europeans should refocus our strengths in other areas and apply them more effectively in coordination with actors in the region who are ready to cooperate. **This includes regional security forums that provide a trusting space for sustained dialogue among stakeholders, since they enable members of civil society to contribute their extensive networks on the ground.** One example of a promising approach is the civil society initiative called Tafahum and Taabadul (Understanding and Networking). This NGO initiative brings together young researchers and activists from the fields of business, society, culture, and the media from Iran and Arab-Gulf countries impacted by conflict, enabling them to promote mutual understanding and cooperation. The work done by the participants helps those involved in the region's disputes understand that regional cooperation, rather than confrontation, is the more promising response, not only from a security policy perspective, but also increasingly in terms of socio-economic factors. In addition to this "lobbying" for peaceful conflict resolution, however, ways and means are also needed that can limit conflict drivers. At present, the EU cannot provide regional security on its own, but it can use its proven diplomatic influence to broker security guarantees – within the transatlantic relationship, for example. Moreover, the EU itself can take direct action: **Targeted sanctions against individual perpetrators/instigators of conflict are particularly effective. We already have appropriate mechanisms in place to freeze assets held by such individuals within the EU.** Therefore, not only can we restrict purchases of expensive real estate and luxury goods by the relatives of these individuals, but we can also effectively prevent the European assets from being used to finance conflicts.

6. Image and Engagement

For this endeavor to succeed, our development policy may also appear more credible. Without being naive, we should embrace and communicate the positive aspects of our image in the southern neighborhood, without getting stuck in the status quo. **Exchange programs for school and university students, such as Erasmus+, are a good foundation on which to build lasting relationships on a business, institutional and personal level.** They facilitate interactions among equals at the very beginning of the participants' professional careers. These ties change perceptions in the participating societies one person at a time – increasing mutual respect and mutual benefits. Figuratively speaking: Instead of using bilateral investments to build only high-speed rail lines, we should also use our expertise and capital to create functioning regional commuter trains and to renew and expand the tramway network. In the MENA region, urbanization is increasing, and traffic is already collapsing in countries where relatively few people can afford a car. **Having a comprehensive network for local and long-distance transport that can also be used under increasingly extreme climate conditions boosts the sustainability of regional mobility.** Paradoxically, this also has the potential to improve our image: We can not only earn money by selling European-produced cars to the few rich people in the region, but also by building high-quality trains and railroads that benefit all members of the societies in our southern neighborhood. This is now becoming a reality in Egypt, where Siemens Mobility is working with two local companies, Orascom Construction and The Arab Contractors, to build three fully electrified rail lines and supply express, regional and freight trains. Financed by the Egyptian government, the project will benefit large segments of the population and not just a small clientele.

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