

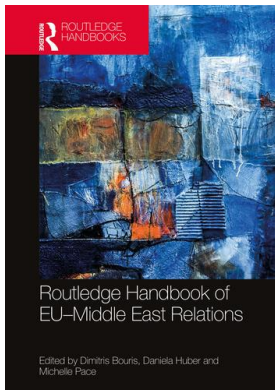
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### **In the shadow of the European neighbourhood**

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# 13

## IN THE SHADOW OF THE EUROPEAN NEIGHBOURHOOD

### Political geographies of EU–Middle East relations

*Virginie Mamadouh*

#### **Introduction**

To a political geographer, “EU–Middle East relations” is an intriguing expression. On the surface, it suggests relations between equivalent entities, but the very labels used immediately reveal an asymmetrical relation: the European Union (EU) refers to a political organisation, the Middle East to an area. Talking about EU–Middle East relations (as a specific vista on Europe–Middle East relations) necessarily suggests that it is mainly about the engagement of the EU as an actor in the Middle East as an arena. In this light, this chapter begins with a discussion of the EU and the Middle East as problematic geographical notions. The following sections then turn to two main perspectives on the spatialities of EU engagement with the Middle East. The first discusses geographical imaginations and geopolitical representations of the Middle East (at the EU level–its Member States). The second focuses on the notion of ‘region’ and regionalisation and considers both EU bordering and EU region building in the Middle East.

#### **The EU and the Middle East: a fuzzy actor in a fuzzy region**

Both the EU and the Middle East are contested geographical notions, in their own terms (see also Chapter 6 in this collection). The EU being a legal entity established by successive international treaties between its Member States, it is a priori easy to locate (it) in the pooled territories of its Member States. The actorness of the EU is however often disputed, especially by those who see it as an international organisation and as an instrument in the foreign policies of its Member States, the principal (sovereign) actors in international relations. Nevertheless the EU is more than its Member States; it plays a specific role in global politics. It has its own strategies and its own policies, including civilian and military missions. Moreover, the EU keeps its own diplomatic service (the European External Action Service since 2010) with civil servants from the Council, the Commission, the Member States and the EU delegations around the world, one of the largest diplomatic networks alongside those of China, the USA, the UK and France (see for recent general assessments of the EU as diplomatic actor Kuus, 2014; Koops and Macaj, 2015; Spence and Jozef, 2015).

The very existence of the Middle East as a region is a matter of discussion as it is concealed in “geopistemological fog” (Salamé, 1994). Moreover, the label has been imposed on the region from the outside (which is not exceptional) and remains fluid, covering quite different areas and competing with a wealth of alternative labels (and overlapping groupings) such as the Near East, the Levant, the Mashreq, the Arab world, the Muslim World and Western Asia (see also Davison, 1960; Gueynard, 2005; Bonine, 2012; Valbjorn, 2015).

Originally the Middle East emerged in the context of British hegemony and referred to the region between British India and England, more specifically to Persia, and it was popularised in the work of the American admiral Alfred Mahan on the region of the Persian Gulf. Winston Churchill as secretary of State for the Colonies in the 1920s created the Middle East Department to deal with Iraq and Palestine (the British mandate territories) under the Colonial Office – and thus not under the Indian Office. The notion spread from there in diplomatic and military practices (especially during operations in World War II), but later Churchill seems to have questioned its use for the Levant:

I had always felt [. . .] that the name “Middle East” for Egypt, the Levant, Syria and Turkey was ill-chosen. This was the Near East. Persia and Iraq were the Middle East; India, Burma and Malaya the East; and China and Japan the Far East.

*(quoted in Davison, 1960: 671)*

After World War II the Americans adopted the label Middle East, while they largely took the role of the British in the region. From the 1950s onwards (especially after the Suez crisis) Near East and Middle East became almost interchangeable in US military and diplomacy – and consequently in media coverage and in usage in the rest of the world. Despite this prevalence, it remained a shifting strategic concept with successive and competing meanings: Cold War Middle East, Arab Middle East, Islamic Middle East, Mediterranean Middle East (Bilgin, 2000, 2004b).

A new label emerged in American foreign policy in the 2000s in their response to 11 September with the Greater Middle East Initiative that frames the wars on Afghanistan and Iraq as “two opportunities to beg in transforming the whole region” (Güney and Gökcan, 2010: 31). The New Middle East or Greater Middle East, also known as MENA (for Middle East and North Africa) runs from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean. Under the Trump administration MENA was still a meaningful region, but it was relabelled Near East (to add to the confusion). MENA remains in use as a regional grouping to organise policymaking at the EEAS and the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of most EU Member States (the Italians speak of a region of the Mediterranean and the Middle East), showing once again how pervasive the hegemon’s geopolitical vision of the world is.

### **EU and national geopolitical representations**

Geopolitics is a fashionable term (again). It is used in diverging ways by geographers, International Relations (IR) scholars, but also journalists and politicians. Originally, the neologism referred to the spatial characteristics of the territory of the state (location, shape, borders, access to the sea, climate, geology, geomorphology, etc.) and their impact on its politics. It echoed older discussions, famously summarised by an aphorism generally attributed to Napoléon “Tout État fait la politique de sa géographie”, re-actualised in the 1980s by the French President François Mitterrand (see Dijkink, 1996). In other words, the physical geographical characteristics of a state determine its foreign policy. While this covers the ways geopolitics has

evolved in the first half of the twentieth century, especially the German school of *Geopolitik*, and is still appealing to many politicians and journalists, such deterministic ways of thinking of the relations between physical geographical features and policies have long been abandoned by (academic) geographers. They question instead the ways such rhetoric has been used to justify foreign policies, portraying decisions as commonsensical and undisputable as “given by geography”, and analyse the “writing” of the Earth in scholarly work, policy documents or popular culture.

Since the early 1990s critical geopolitics has become a fruitful way to deconstruct the geographical imaginations and the geopolitical representations underlying foreign policies (Dodds et al., 2013). These geopolitical representations encompass expectations about how the world is organised and how international politics function (or ought to function), ideas about one’s own role in the world, perceptions of threats and opportunities, and maps of friends and foes (Dijkink, 1996). They function as justification for foreign policies but also shape the ways problems are conceived and solutions are elaborated (Ó Tuathail and Agnew, 1992; Ó Tuathail, 2002). Expectations pertain to specific actors (like the EU and its Member States) and geopolitical codes pertain to specific regions (like the Middle East). National geopolitical visions are often hegemonic although alternative visions may be articulated by some political parties, peripheral regions, ethnic minorities or marginalised socio-economic groups. The EU seems to lack such a clear, dominant geopolitical vision, or perhaps it would be more appropriate to say that its performance is embedded in a more complex frame, because the geopolitical vision for the EU co-exists – by definition – with the geopolitical visions of its Member States (Mamadouh, 2015). These visions are not necessarily convergent; they might be complementary but also contradictory at times. This is true both of the visions on the self-perception of the EU and its role in the world and of visions for specific regions such as the Middle East.

### ***A geopolitical vision for the EU***

The EU’s emerging geopolitical vision over its role in the world revolves around discussion of its role as civilian power (Duchêne, 1972; Bachmann and Sidaway, 2009) especially in contrast to the USA after 9/11 (see also the lively debates in political science around the notions of empire following Zielonka, 2006, and normative power following Manners, 2002). The actor-ness of the EU was boosted in reactions to the crisis in the transatlantic partnership around the 2003 Iraq War and of the completion of the eastern enlargement of the EU. Two documents published in 2003 formalised the common ambition: the first *European Security Strategy (ESS)* adopted by the Council and *Wider Europe* initiative proposed by the Commission “to develop a zone of prosperity and a friendly neighbourhood”, “a ring of friends” surrounding the EU where the EU would spread security, liberal democracy, market economy and prosperity.

The latter evolved into the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). It targets two distinct neighbourhoods, the Eastern and the Southern one, building on previous engagement in those regions, and creating distinct instruments: the Eastern Partnership (EaP) and the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) respectively. Both policies and the geopolitical visions underpinning them have attracted much scholarly attention (Jones, 2006; Jones and Clark, 2008, 2011; Boedeltje and Van Houtum, 2011), although sometimes under another label like mindscapes, geopolitical imaginaries and geospatial visions (Browning, 2018), strategic narratives (Miskimmon, 2018), spatial imaginaries (Scott et al., 2018), or even macro-regional fantasies (Bialasiewicz et al., 2013). The issues addressed range from the impact in specific countries or conflicts (Bouris and Papadimitriou, 2020), change and continuity after policy revisions in 2011 and 2015 (Bouris and Schumacher, 2017), EU reactions to the Arab uprisings (Bicchi, 2014;

Del Sarto, 2016; Demmelhuber, 2019) as well as its political architecture: issues of depoliticisation (Seeberg, 2010), co-ownership (Gillespie, 2013), the (im)balance between bilateralism and multilateralism (Bicchi, 2011; Bicchi et al., 2018) and the lost appeal of regionalism (Bicchi, 2011). Before we turn to the impact of the ENP on (region building in) the Middle East we need to assess also the national geopolitical visions that might combine or interfere with this EU vision.

### ***National geopolitical visions for the EU and the Middle East***

The geopolitical visions of the Member States first differ in terms of their conception of the EU, its finality (in some states the EU is mostly seen as a peace arrangement, in others mostly as a free trade area) and its role in the world (in some states mostly as an economic and normative power, in others potentially as a military power with ambitions in its near abroad and beyond). Secondly, Member States' priorities differ regarding the EU's engagement with specific regions in the rest of the world. There is a sharp contrast between the Eastern orientation of Germany and the Southern orientation of France and other Mediterranean countries, or between the Arctic orientation of Nordic countries and the United Kingdom (UK) and the orientation towards Latin America of Spain and Portugal. The UK and the Netherlands are "closer" to the USA than others. Germany and France have strong economic ties with China, as do the Central and Eastern European countries participating in the 16+1 dialogue (now 17+1 since Greece also joined it).

Geographers have analysed and compared national geopolitical visions (Dijkink, 1996). Despite commonalities during different geopolitical eras (Agnew, 2003) and their common EU membership, the geopolitical visions of France, Germany and the UK remain different, shaped by different national histories concerning the consolidation of their national territory and its borders, wars, colonisation and imperialism, invasion and occupation, division and unification, etc. (Van der Wusten and Dijkink, 2002). These differences pertain to their orientation in the world (more continental or more global) but also to their conception of the EU and their role within the EU. Coexisting geopolitical imaginations of the EU were mapped by Schott (2007) to demonstrate the mismatch between the expectations and the priorities of different actors within the EU regarding Eastern enlargement, contrasting the geopolitical regionalisations of the Commission with those of different Member States (France, Great Britain and the Czech Republic) but also political parties (CDU and SPD for Germany).

Differences are similarly important when it comes to the Middle East. As for any region, the geopolitical vision of the EU about this region has to accommodate the variegated relations of its Member States with the region. This relates both to the intensity and the geography of their relations with specific states in the region. The UK and France stand out for their long engagement with the region, first as major European powers with their role in the Eastern Question (the political and economic instability of the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century), later as colonial powers (in Egypt most notably) and as powers entitled with a mandate of the League of Nations after the Great War over territories formally controlled by the former Ottoman Empire (see Chapter 3 in this collection).

In general we know rather little about the specific configuration of EU and national geopolitical visions, especially when it comes to the Middle East. Studies of national foreign policies tend to downplay the actorness of the EU, like studies in EU foreign policy tend to downplay national divergences. In absence of comparative assessments replicating Schott's approach for the Middle East, case studies demonstrate the importance of analysing visions for the EU and for the Middle East in conjunction. For example, Simón (2013) advances an interpretation

of the evolving French strategy for a broader Middle East featuring Northern Africa, the Sahel, Levant, Horn of Africa/Red Sea and the Gulf as an attempt to position itself as a spider in the web of the emerging multipolar world. Combining three “outlets” (Atlantic, Continental and Mediterranean) it aims at improving its relations with the US and the UK on the one hand and Russia on the other, on top of its special partnership with Germany as motor of the EU.

Disparate EU and national geopolitical visions may coexist – although not always easily – with an emerging geopolitical vision for the EU. Differences between the Member States need not paralyse the EU. Diplomatically, it might even be useful to have access to different partners to foster and forge new relations, and overall it might actually even enhance the role of the EU, be it at the cost of reducing legibility and visibility. It is also not specific to the Middle East that Member States have different visions, interests and ambitions (see Kuus, 2014). What is however specific to the Middle East is the lack of clarity of the geopolitical vision of the EU, due to the fact that the Middle East is not really shaped as a coherent region, neither internally, nor by EU policies targeting the Middle East as a bounded region, as we will see in the next section.

### **Region, region building, regionalism, regionalisation**

(Supranational) regions are the product of social processes. The Finnish geographer Anssi Paasi has developed a powerful analytical tool to study the institutionalisation of a region (Paasi, 1986, 1996 in general, 2001, 2005 applied to Europe as a macroregion). He distinguishes different dimensions in that process: its symbolic shape (to begin with its name), its territorial shape (the bounded space that forms its territory and its borders), its institutional shape (not necessarily political institutions to govern the region, but also cultural and economic institutions emerging from social interactions in that territory) and, finally, its place in the world (the way it is embedded and acknowledged as such in its relations with other regions). Some regions are more institutionalised than others. Moreover, regionalisation is an ongoing and reversible process: some regions are under construction and become “thicker” gaining meaning and relevance, others are eroding and might shortly wane out and be overshadowed by other regional fixes.

Region building is important in EU–Middle East relations from at least two perspectives. First, there is the issue of bordering the EU as a region (where does EUrope end? Where does the Middle East begin?). Second, there is the issue of the EU’s contribution to region building in the Middle East (how does the EU promote and engage with region building projects in the Middle East?).

### ***EU bordering in the Middle East***

The borders of the EU have received ample political and scholarly attention over the past decades, especially regarding the management of border crossings and migration. Here we are concerned with the bordering of the EU as a territorial construct and more specifically with debates about the limits of the EU – in its current form and in its potential form – and the bordering processes at work, as bordering always entails the ordering and the othering of territories and populations (Van Houtum and Van Naerssen, 2002), and the construction of identity and difference (Rumelili, 2004).

In this case, the question is where the border lies between Europe and the Middle East, between EUrope and its Middle Eastern Other. This immediately connects to the lively debates about Orientalism, the form of Othering arguably most documented, thanks to the seminal work of Said (Said, 1978, see also 1993) and tremendously influential in cultural and political geography and critical geopolitics (Gregory, 1994, 2004). The point here is not only that

Western representations of the Middle East tell us more about the West than about the region they represent, but that (the Orient, the Levant, the Near East or) the Middle East is not necessarily non-European. In this sense, the situation is comparable to that of Central and Eastern Europe and of South-Eastern Europe. There is a gradient of *Europeanness* (Mamadouh and Müller, 2017; see also Müller, 2018 on the Global East) between the more European core in north-western Europe and the less European periphery in south-eastern Europe. In this context the distinction between Balkanism and Orientalism (Todorova, 2009) is also relevant and a comparison with the westward “relocation” of Northern and Central European countries after the Cold War could be insightful (Moisio, 2003, 2007, 2008; Kuus, 2007).

Hence, there is no sharp border between Europe and the Middle East but a transition zone. Contra Browning (2018), who argues that the European Neighbourhood is divided between a *European* Eastern Neighbourhood and a *non-European* Southern Neighbourhood, I would like to stress the fuzziness of the border between Europe and the Middle East. Much like Eastern Europe and Southeastern Europe, the Levant demonstrates some features of Europeanness – not to mention its role in the history of Europe as cultural and religious cradle.

Some states in the original Near East (areas belonging to the Ottoman Empire at the time of the Eastern Question) are now EU Member States: Greece since 1981, Cyprus since 2004, Bulgaria and Romania since 2007 (for the position of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus as not an “inner neighbour” see Casaglia, 2019). Other successor states of the Ottoman Empire are candidates: Turkey and the countries in the so-called Western Balkans. Moreover, Israel could be seen in this category too because of its special relation to the EU. It even considered joining the European Economic Community in 1957 (Pardo, 2013) and is closely associated with the EU. While Israel could arguably be conceived as a European (or Western) enclave in the Middle East, Turkey is often framed as a bridge between the EU and the Middle East, belonging to both, or neither. Such a geopolitical imagination of Turkey as a bridge has also been a popular metaphor among Turkish politicians and has been extensively studied to scrutinise its potential and contradictions (Yanik, 2009, 2016; Rumelili and Suleymanoglu-Kurum, 2017; and foremost Bilgin, 2004a, 2004b, 2012).

Moreover the Southern Neighbourhood as a whole can be considered as a frontier of the EU, or as an EU borderland, rather than as a region of its own. In sum, the Middle East is an important locale of EU region building, while diverging shades of Europeanisation also affect the EU’s contribution to region building in the area.

### ***The EU and region building in the Middle East***

The Middle East has fuzzy symbolic and territorial shapes (as has been discussed in the first section) and is not institutionalised in regional institutions. Some have called it an exception, or even a paradox (“regionalisation without regionalism” Aarts, 1999; see also Valbjørn, 2015), since the states in the region have a priori a lot of common features, in religious and cultural terms, and even in linguistic terms when it comes to its Arab core area.

Competing regionalist projects have emerged but there is no reason why they could not coexist in the region as overlapping organisations do coexist in Europe (see Bilgin, 2004b: 37). However, none has the ambitions or the depth of the EU and none seems to be able to overcome the animosity between states in the region (Farrell, 2010; Valbjørn, 2015; Seeberg, 2015). The EU has engaged to some extent with most of these regional organisations (see, for example, the Arab League, the Gulf Cooperation Council, etc. elsewhere in this handbook) but in an ad hoc fashion and with modest results in terms of regional integration and generally confined to trade and economic issues (Baabood and Edwards, 2007).

There is no EU equivalent to the notion of “Greater Middle East” in American foreign policy (Güney and Gökcan, 2010). Instead, most of the EU’s region building in the region pertains to the notion of a Mediterranean region, although it remains very disputed: the Mediterranean as a border (margin or edge) of the EU or as a region in its own right, as a Euro-Mediterranean region (partly overlapping with the EU) or a non-European region at the doors of the EU, etc. Scholars, geographers in particular, have been particularly keen to show how the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) launched in 1995 (before the ENP) and the UfM launched in 2008 have shaped spaces in Europe and beyond Europe in the Mediterranean (Melakopides, 2000; Pace, 2004, 2006; Adler et al., 2006; Jones, 2006; Jones and Clark, 2008, 2011; Bialasiewicz et al., 2009, 2013; Bialasiewicz, 2011; Moio et al., 2013; Scott et al., 2018; Bicchi, 2018) stressing the Eurocentric approach to the Mediterranean (see Dimitrova and Kramsch, 2017; Cobarrubias, 2018 for attempts to foreground Southern views of the Mediterranean instead). The most important conundrum remains the impossibility to square two incompatible objectives: unnegotiable European values (liberal democracy, human rights) and equal partnership and co-ownership with authoritarian regimes.

Although the EMP and the UfM generate little region building, the ENP is divisive of the Middle East as a macro-region, as it excludes part of the region: states in the Gulf, in the Sahel or the Horn of Africa, Iraq and further East. These became neighbours of neighbours (Gstöhl and Lannon, 2014). As a result of their exclusion from the ring of friends, the relation with the Gulf states and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) has remained much more limited than their strategic relevance (and Europe’s strategic dependence on oil) would warrant (Baabood and Edwards, 2007). A “strategic partnership with the Mediterranean and the Middle East” was agreed in 2004 to remedy the divide created by the ENP, but it has not been substantiated by further steps. Youngs and Echagüe (2010) therefore conclude that Europe, the Mediterranean and the Middle East are in great need of three-way linkages – what they called triangulation. Ten years later, after the Arab uprisings, the wars in Libya and Syria, the revisions of the ENP and the Global Strategy, neither an EU Common Strategy for the Middle East, nor triangulation (i.e. better linkages between the EU, the Mediterranean and the Middle East) have materialised. The gap between the diverging perceptions of the EU among elites in different parts of the Middle East (ENP vs others) tellingly demonstrates this division between EU neighbours and their neighbours (Görgülü and Dark Kahyaoğlu, 2019).

### **Conclusion: open to surprise**

Geographers and other scholars sensitive to spatial issues have long demonstrated how the EU is shaping its neighbourhood and creating regions through its representations, its policies, and how problematic these regional identities can be for their partners in the Mediterranean. In the case of the Middle East, the main problem seems to be that the EU actually fails to provide such a constraining but coherent framework. The fragmentation of its interventions is magnified by this void, while region building projects within the region remain very modest and fragmented. The fuzziness of the Middle East as geographical label is likely to remain a brake on creative multilateral solutions in the region.

Hopefully, political geography can prove helpful to question the geographical imaginations and geopolitical representations that guide EU actorness and to analyse the institutionalisation of the Middle East as a meaningful region for itself, and in EU external action. It also urges us to be open to surprise, acknowledging the possibility of new developments in the shadow of the ENP (reiterating Bilgin’s conclusion about regionalism in the Middle East “the future is open”



(Bilgin, 2000: 37)) while keeping in mind the importance of past experiences in the construction and the circulation of new geopolitical representations.

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