

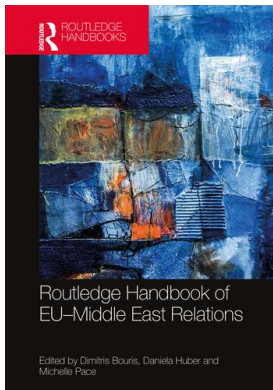
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29

EU–LEBANON RELATIONS

*Assem Dandashly***Introduction**

Since its independence in the mid-1940s, Lebanon has maintained a close relation to France and upon its creation, viewed the European Community as a strategic partner, resulting in the signature of the 1965 Trade and Technical Cooperation Agreement. Since then, these relations have developed to cover areas beyond the commercial focus with the Association Agreement (AA) (in force since April 2006) within the 1995 Euro–Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) framework. Relations were expanded with the launch of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) in 2004 and the creation of Action Plans which include several tools for economic, political and cultural cooperation that take the AAs to a more advanced stage in relations between the EU and targeted countries of the eastern and southern neighbourhoods.

The aim of the EU–Lebanon AA is to promote good governance, rule of law, democracy, human rights, and social and cultural dialogue, in addition to cooperation concerning the free movement of people and goods. This therefore makes the EU a major political and economic partner for Lebanon (European Commission, 2018a, 2019a). Evidently, the AA between the EU and Lebanon opened a new era in bilateral relations and consolidated the EMP. The AA covers far more than enhancing trade, financial and economic relations. It sets up new institutional structures for an intensified political dialogue, and for cooperation across a very wide range of fields, from education, culture and technology to the fight against crime, money laundering and drugs. Both parties have made a commitment to uphold human rights and democratic principles (European Commission, 2002).

The first EU–Lebanon ENP Action Plan adopted in 2007 emphasised state capacity (economic, institutional, security and political reforms) in addition to human rights and social and cultural cooperation; however, due to high levels of corruption in Lebanon,¹ the effect of institutional and economic support remains limited. This strategic partnership is based on “common values and interests, regular political, security, economic and social dialogue, wide-ranging people-to-people contacts, and substantial development and humanitarian assistance” (Delegation of the European Union to Lebanon, 2016a). While the EU initiated talks with Lebanon regarding a Mobility Partnership in December 2014, and although EU elites have shown interest in moving towards signing such a partnership, to date no progress has yet occurred (European Commission, 2017a).² This is unsurprising given the unstable domestic situation in Lebanon

due to the Syrian refugee crisis, the involvement of Hezbollah in the Syrian war, the Palestinian refugee camps, political instability in addition to the protests against political elites that erupted on 17 October 2019.

On 11 November 2016, and considering the revised ENP (mainly the 2015 review) and the EU's Global Strategy for foreign and security policy, the EU and Lebanon agreed to focus on priorities running until 2020 with a special emphasis on the best ways to support Lebanon in dealing with the Syrian refugee crisis (Delegation of the European Union to Lebanon, 2016a) as well as address security issues and counter-terrorism; governance and the rule of law; foster growth and job opportunities; and migration and mobility (Council of the European Union, 2016).

The EU fulfils its obligations through funding schemes such as the Single Support Frameworks for 2014–2016 and 2017–2020. Both of these focus on three main areas: promoting growth and job creation; good governance and socio-economic development; and supporting rule of law and security (European Commission, 2019a). The 2017–2020 framework prioritises security issues, counter-terrorism, migration and mobility, and enhancing growth and development, while human rights and democracy receive less attention (European Commission, 2017b).

Following this background, the next sections of this chapter will elaborate on several important themes in EU–Lebanon relations, encompassing economic cooperation, democracy promotion, security cooperation, Lebanon's conflict with Israel and Palestinian refugee camps, the Syrian refugee crisis, and the 17 October 2019 protests. The final section concludes with the main lessons and findings.

Economic cooperation and EU aid

The EU is one of the most important international players and donors and also Lebanon's main trading partner. The EU–Lebanon AA gradually liberalised trade in goods between 2008 and 2014. Both its industry and significant parts of the agricultural sector benefit from free access to the European market. The main aim is to reach a bilateral Free Trade Area (FTA) between the EU and Lebanon in the near future. To facilitate the legal basis for the FTA, the parties signed a protocol in November 2010 to establish a trade dispute settlement mechanism within the provisions of the AA (European Commission, 2019b). The EU also encourages and supports Lebanon's steps towards membership of the World Trade Organisation and its beneficial participation in the Agadir Agreement (Council of the European Union, 2016).

As of 2012, the EU ranked as the first trading partner for Lebanon (37.7% of Lebanese total trade in 2015) (European Commission, 2017b). The EU accounts for a third of Lebanese imports, which have been increasing since 2006 with an average annual growth of 7.5%, with total trade amounting to €7729 billion in 2018 (European Commission, 2019b) (see Figure 29.1).

As evident in Figure 29.1, there is a trade imbalance in favour of EU exports amounting to €7.729 billion in 2018 – mainly mineral products (€2.3 billion, 31.8%), machinery and transport equipment (€1.1 billion, 15.8%) and chemicals (€0.9 billion, 13.7%) – whereas Lebanese exports are around €0.5 billion only – mainly mineral products and metals (€0.1 billion, 32.3%), agricultural products (€0.09 billion, 21.8%) and chemicals (€0.03 billion, 7.5%) (European Commission, 2019b).

The reason for weak exports to the EU is that the Lebanese economy is based mainly on tourism, real estate, retail and financial services, and is more oriented towards the Arab region, “rendering it vulnerable to volatility in growth and sizable macroeconomic imbalances”

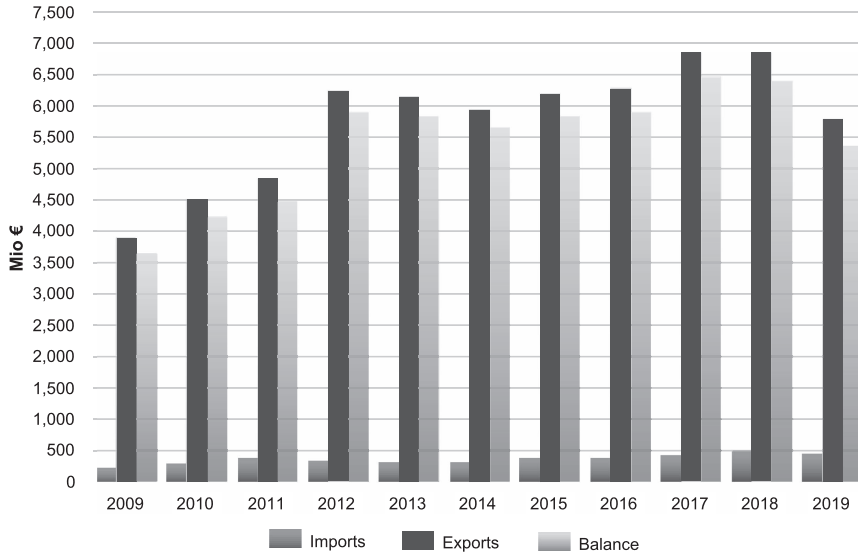


Figure 29.1 EU trade flows and balance, annual data (2009–2019)

Source: European Commission (2019c)

(The World Bank, 2019). In 2016, EU exports to Lebanon were €1.4 billion in services whereas corresponding imports were €0.9 billion. Furthermore, the Lebanese economy benefits from “foreign income earnings, including capital inflows, remittances from the Lebanese diaspora, as well as the tourism, banking and insurance sectors” which help in tackling the deficit (European Commission, 2019b) (see Table 29.1).

In terms of financial and technical assistance, the EU has been supporting Lebanon’s reconstruction and economic development since the end of the Lebanese Civil War. Lebanon has benefitted from European assistance through MEDA I (1995–1999) and MEDA II (2000–2006). The EU (Community, Member States, European Investment Bank) provided €182 million under MEDA I and €235 million under MEDA II. Furthermore, in December 2001, the EU adopted a Country Strategy Paper for Lebanon covering the period from 2002 to 2006 which laid out the EU’s priorities, aims and the framework for cooperation with Lebanon. For the same period, the National Indicative Programme (NIP) contributed a total of €130 million

focusing on four main priorities: 1) support for European Neighbourhood Policy initiatives and promotion of the implementation of the AA; 2) support for the knowledge economy (vocational training, Tempus, scientific co-operation); 3) strengthening the competitiveness of the private sector; and 4) water reform and environment.

(EEAS, 2016)

Following Lebanon’s military conflict with Israel (2006), another Country Strategy Paper was issued covering the period 2007–2013 with an average of €50 million per year. For 2007–2010, funds via the NIP reached €187 million (€22 million for political reform; €86 for social and economic reform; and €79 million for reconstruction and recovery (EEAS, 2016). For 2011–2013, funds reached around €150 million (€91 million support for socio-economic

Table 29.1 EU–Lebanon trade in services, 2015–2017 (€ billions)

Year	EU imports	EU exports	Balance
2015	1	1.6	0.6
2016	1.1	1.4	0.3
2017	1	1.5	0.4

Source: European Commission (2019c)

reforms, €25 million for political reforms and €34 million for recovery and reinvigoration of the economy). The Strategy supports three main areas: political reform, social and economic reform, and reconstruction and development (European Commission, 2013). To strengthen state capacity and institution building, the EU allocated funds ranging from €186.05 million to €228 million within the framework of the European Neighbourhood Instrument (Delegation of the European Union to Lebanon, 2016a).

In addition, the EU provides humanitarian aid to Lebanon through financial institutions such as the European Investment Bank and the European Commission's Directorate General for Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection which has allocated €583 million to Lebanon since 2012. Other cooperation schemes also exist such as the Instrument Contributing to Stability and Peace for crisis management and peace-building; the European instrument for Democracy and Human Rights for democracy support (discussed in the next section); Erasmus+ programmes for higher education; the Neighbourhood Investment Facility for investments in areas such as energy, transportation and environment; Horizon 2020 for supporting innovation and technology projects; in addition to more thematic regional programmes for civil society and networking across the Mediterranean that would strengthen the integration of the Mediterranean region with the EU (European Commission, 2019a).

Moreover, the EU has been one of the main donors during conferences held in Paris. France organised several of these meetings with the support of the EU and other international institutions (Paris I Conference on 23 February 2001; Paris II on 23 November 2002; Paris III on 25 January 2007 and CEDRE Conference (*Conférence économique pour le développement, par les réformes et avec les entreprises*) on 6 April 2018). During Paris I, the Lebanese government presented its economic and financial policy and received support from the international community to the amount of €500 million. The second conference resulted in further international aid to Lebanon (€4.2 billion in financial aid and €1.3 billion in project aid) (ReliefWeb, 2007). At Paris III, the EU and other international donors (38 donor countries and 7 regional and international institutions) pledged a total of USD7.6 billion (50% was disbursed). This international aid was conditioned on the Lebanese government taking serious measures “distributed across nine areas: Expenditure measures, Revenue Measures (VAT in particular), Structural Fiscal Measures, Debt Management, Privatization Programs, Social Sector Reform, Social Security and Pension Reform, Growth Enhancing Structural Reform, and Program Oversight, Implementation and Monitoring” (Atallah et al., 2018: 4). The success of Paris III in bringing billions of euros to Lebanon was important for Lebanese PM Fouad Siniora and his 14 March ruling coalition³ to face the increased pressure from Hezbollah and its allies in the 8 March Alliance (Schenker, 2007).

All these conferences, under the French umbrella, aimed at easing the economic and financial difficulties resulting from policy decisions of consecutive Lebanese governments (especially in terms of fiscal policy and financing the service on the high public debt) and the country's extremely high levels of corruption. France's historical relation with Lebanon as a

former coloniser has created a sense of responsibility to continue supporting the small and heterogeneous Mediterranean republic established after World War I, which hosts a Christian minority in a region dominated by Muslims. Moreover, two of the three conferences (Paris I and II) happened during the terms of President Jacques Chirac and Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri, who shared a strong friendship. Paris III also took place during Chirac's presidency in support of Sinoria's government and the 14 March coalition (backed by the Gulf Countries and the West), during the sharp division with the 8 March movement backed by Hezbollah and Iran.

The 2018 CEDRE Conference was held to support the Lebanese government's economic and structural adjustment plans (Council of Ministers of Lebanon, 2018)⁴ to tackle the pressing financial and economic problems that had led to a decline in foreign investments, a two-digit budget deficit and high public debt (around 150% of GDP as of 2018), increased inflation and a high unemployment rate especially among youth. At the conference, the EU announced a conditional package of €150 million. The aim of the funds is to "support the revitalisation of the Lebanese economy, which could generate up to €1.5 billion loans for Lebanon until 2020" (European Commission, 2019a). To benefit, the Lebanese government is required to take fiscal, structural and sectorial reform measures such as adoption of the 2020 state budget that should include clear reforms in the taxation system to fight tax and customs evasions through all ports; reforming the electricity and telecommunication sectors and establishing regulatory bodies for each sector; and reforming the public sector that is overstuffed due to corruption and sectarian system (for further discussion see Fransabank, 2018). By March 2020, with the lack of the CEDRE required reforms, no funds have been disbursed.

The structural problems as well as the delayed reforms are the products of Lebanon's consociational political system based on difficult cooperation among heterogeneous sectarian groups who are in continuous disagreement – even within the so-called consecutive unity governments since the end of the civil war in the early 1990s. This situation has resulted in high levels of corruption, inefficiency, political deadlock and compromises that end up providing rents, dividing the benefits and shares of whichever project is under discussion (Adwan, 2005).

Eventually, unprecedented deterioration of the economic situation in Lebanon combined with the high degree of corruption led to protests demanding change and reform that pushed Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri to resign on 25 October 2019. At the time of writing (March 2020), a new government was formed by Hassan Diab to tackle the worsening economic situation. The new government, lacking popular support, is backed by Hezbollah and the so-called 8 March group. Until now, the country is still suffering economically and financially with credit rating agencies having downgraded Lebanon's status and the government still having not taken serious measures to stop the deteriorating situation. Upon the request of the Lebanese government, the IMF sent experts in February 2020 who provided technical support on possible scenarios to help Lebanon out of its crisis. The international community and the Arab countries have not yet provided aid to the country for several reasons: any support has to be preceded not only by a clear strategy for real reforms, but must also actually implement them to tackle the deteriorating situation and corruption. Finally, some actors hold the view (mainly the Gulf countries and the United States) that the new government is Hezbollah's government. As for the EU and its MS, instead of actively engaging in the country to push for a solution and avoid instability, so far they seem to have shied away. This is however an opportune moment for the EU to push for a shift in the political management of Lebanon towards a more responsible/accountable government that will tackle the necessary reforms for building functioning democratic institutions. This area has been on the EU agenda for a long time with no real success.

Democracy promotion

EU support for democracy and the rule of law in Lebanon takes numerous forms. The EU has focused on “the development of independent, effective, and accountable public institutions, particularly the justice system and penitentiary administration”; active civil society that is engaged in the decision-making procedure; and good governance and accountability (Delegation of the European Union to Lebanon, 2016a). When it comes to achieving these objectives, the EU’s financial support for democracy promotion is minimal compared to socio-economic development and security. For example, EU support to democracy promotion for 2007–2010 via the NIP constituted €22 million (11.76% of the total budget) (EEAS, 2016). One reason for this is the focus on reconstruction and recovery of the Lebanese economy and infrastructure following the 2006 war with Israel. For the 2011–2013 period, the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument’s bilateral assistance committed for Lebanon totalled €388 million, of which 16.6% supports political reforms (mainly through the NIP) (European Commission, 2014: 26). In terms of elections, the EU Election Observation Mission (EOM) issued a set of recommendations following the 2009 elections “aimed at improving the electoral process”, of which some recommendations were included in the June 2017 electoral law that was applied in the 2018 parliamentary elections – monitored by the EOM (EU EOM, 2018: 10).

Despite all these efforts, the democratic situation in Lebanon has not progressed since the end of the civil war and the Tai’f Agreement,⁵ for reasons including: not implementing the Tai’f Agreement fully especially in terms of reforming the political system and putting an end to the sectarian system; the high level of corruption; sharp divisions among the various political groups (which increased significantly after the assassination of Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri in 2004 and the Syrian conflict that erupted in 2011); and the domination of Hezbollah on the political scene and acting as a veto player for any reforms that would weaken its powers (for a discussion on EU democracy promotion in Lebanon, see Seeberg, 2009). Since the eruption of the crisis in Syria and the subsequent pressure on the socio-economic situation and security in Lebanon, the main focus has been on “supporting and strengthening Lebanon’s resilience and stability while seeking to address the impact of the protracted conflict in Syria” (Council of the European Union, 2016) to avoid a new influx of Syrian refugees towards the EU via Syria’s neighbours as we will see later.

Security cooperation and support

Another area of EU focus has been support to the Lebanese security forces. Between 2014 and 2016, EU assistance to Lebanon amounted to €147 million. A significant part of the EU’s funds went to strengthening state capacity: €12 million to the Lebanese security agencies; €55 million to socio-economic problems and development; €5 million as technical assistance for the government; €6 million to support “Implementation of the EU–Lebanon Partnership Priorities” and €5 million for twinning programmes and civil society (European Commission, 2019a). In 2016, the EU launched Security Sector Reform (with a budget of €3.6 million in grants), which provides technical assistance to the Lebanese Armed Forces and the General Directorate of General Security (Delegation of the European Union to Lebanon, 2016b). This support aims to address the negative impact of the Syrian refugee crisis on Lebanon, manifested as security, political, social and economic problems.

On 15 March 2018, at the Rome II Conference for supporting the security sector, the Lebanese Armed Forces and the Internal Security Forces presented a five-year plan for strengthening security and stability. The EU emphasised its commitment with €50 million until 2020

to support “these plans in ongoing and sustained cooperation with Lebanese national security institutions [. . .]. Lebanon committed to setting up a follow-up mechanism to Rome II to monitor progress” (European Commission, 2018c: 2). Already, €3.5 million was committed to support aviation security and €46 million “for technical assistance, training and equipment programmes aiming to support all security agencies on rule of law, security and counter-terrorism, with a focus on integrated border management and counter-terrorism” (European Commission, 2018c: 3–4).

Cooperation with the Lebanese Army and Internal Security Forces has been stronger than in other areas for two main reasons: first, domestic and international trust in these forces in comparison to corrupt political elites; and second, to allow them to face terrorism and security threats, border control with Israel and Syria and to deal with the impact of the Syrian crisis.

Lebanon’s conflict with Israel, and Palestinian refugees

Israel’s establishment in 1948 and the ensuing Israeli–Arab conflict triggered a flow of Palestinian refugees to camps in Lebanon and saw the eventual move of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) to Lebanon. With the PLO running its operations from Beirut, the conflict with Israel escalated into operations against Lebanon such as the Litani Operation in Southern Lebanon against the PLO in 1978, the 1982 invasion of Lebanon, and the 1996 war. As a result of the conflict with Israel and the Iranian Revolution in 1979, Hezbollah was formed in the early 1980s. As a military power loyal to Iran, Hezbollah acted as a resistance force against Israel and as a proxy for Iran in its conflict not only with Israel, but also Gulf and Arab countries. Despite the end of the Lebanese civil war in the early 1990s and the Israeli withdrawal (2000) from most of Lebanon, Hezbollah kept its weapons as a resistance force against Israel.

The EU’s involvement in the Lebanese conflict with Israel has been limited to diplomacy. Its major contribution is within the United Nations’ framework: the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) and the UN Interim Forces Lebanon (UNIFIL II).⁶ The refugee camps have been managed by the Palestinians since the 1968 Cairo Agreement. In its support to the UNRWA, the EU and its MS are among the main contributors (42% of the UNRWA budget) (UNRWA, 2016). Beyond providing humanitarian aid to the UNRWA, the EU has not played a major role in trying to solve the refugee camp problem – which is linked to the Palestinian question and future peace agreement with Israel. Those camps have become a safe-haven for terrorists and criminals over the past years – especially with the lack of political agreement that does not allow the Lebanese army to enter the camps and secure them (*Asharq Al-Awsat*, 2018) (an exception was Nahr al-Bared refugee camp when the Lebanese army fought Fatah al-Islam militants and entered the camp in 2007).

Following the summer 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah, the EU MS increased their involvement in the enhanced UNIFIL II. The EU MS are the main contributors to UNIFIL, with 15 MS contributing to the UNIFIL mission in southern Lebanon. Moreover, the MS contribute to the UN Maritime Task Force (MTF UNIFIL) responsible for monitoring “Lebanon’s territorial waters, securing the Lebanese coastline and preventing arms smuggling” (Asseburg, 2010: 82). UNIFIL participant groups play an important role in state capacity building to enable the Lebanese Army to take over some UNIFIL tasks in the future. The role of these contingents is also crucial “in terms of civil–military cooperation projects that they fund and implement in favour of the hosting municipalities and communities” (ENPI, 2013).

Despite the support to UNIFIL, EU MS have different views regarding the conflict with Israel. During the 2006 war between Hezbollah and Israel, EU MS were divided and this was reflected in their response “with some calling urgently for a cease fire, while others, notably then British Prime

Minister Tony Blair, held out for a Hezbollah defeat that did not materialise” (Hollis, 2010: 37). These differences among the MS did not prevent the Commission and the then EU presidency from sending representations to Israel encouraging them to respect international humanitarian law and to secure humanitarian access. The External Relations Council called for “an immediate cessation of hostilities to be followed by a sustainable ceasefire” in addition to supporting “UN efforts to find a lasting solution and their commitment to assisting in Lebanon’s reconstruction” and in order to show solidarity and active engagement, a “ministerial mission was sent to Israel, Gaza, and Lebanon immediately following the Rome Conference” (European Commission, 2006).

Regarding Hezbollah, it was not until 22 July 2013 that the EU agreed to include only the armed branch of Hezbollah on its terrorist list due to concerns over its activities in the EU – ignoring American and Israeli pressures “to ban the Lebanese organisation outright, allowing contacts with its political representatives” (Black, 2013).⁷ This is partly due to the popularity of Hezbollah, especially among the large Shiite sect. Moreover, Hezbollah has had members in the Parliament and is also part of the government. Any act of demilitarising Hezbollah requires diplomacy and agreement among the Lebanese, which has not been the case so far. The use of force might lead to tensions on the southern borders with Israel. Furthermore, if the EU increases sanctions on Hezbollah’s political branch, this might negatively impact the EU’s role as a mediator and trusted player by all parties within Lebanon.

In sum, the main involvement of the EU in both the Hezbollah issue and the refugee camps is in supporting state capacity and providing humanitarian aid to the UNRWA. This is due to its link to the Palestinian question and the fate of the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. Thus, any possible future negotiations between Lebanon and Israel should take the issue of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon into consideration.

Syrian refugee crisis

The Syrian conflict that erupted in March 2011 led to a large number of refugees seeking shelter in neighbouring countries (Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey). The influx of migrants to those countries with weak infrastructure and failing economies prompted the international community to rush to offer aid. The EU has led the humanitarian international reaction to the refugee crisis in Syria and its neighbouring countries with over €0.6 billion (European Commission, 2019a). While this partly is driven by international responsibility towards what is labelled as the worst humanitarian crisis since the Second World War, it is also driven by the fear that those refugees would end up on EU soil – an issue that European leaders are trying to avoid at any cost:

By bribing Turkey to keep Syrian refugees out of sight, the European Union has been able to keep Syrian suffering out of mind. The West, it seems, is haunted more by the specter of the refugee than by the suffering of children. To break through this apathy, Syrians will have to use the only leverage available to them: The threat to flee toward Europe.

(Idrees Ahmad, 2019)

The EU has spent a lot of money to help countries with a large influx of Syrian refugees. Lebanon has been among the countries most affected by the migration of Syrians fleeing the conflict and has received around 1.5 million Syrian refugees (including Palestinians coming from Syria) (UNHCR, 2019). Syrian refugees

make up 30% of Lebanon’s population, the highest concentration per capita of refugees in the world. Almost 75% of the refugees lack legal residency, exposing them to

various protection risks. There are an increasing number of measures targeting Syrian refugees, such as raids, evictions, arbitrary arrests, demolitions, curfews, shop closures and confiscation of documentation.

(European Commission, 2018d)

Since the Syrian crisis started, the EU has allocated over €1.7 billion to Lebanon. In February 2016, the EU and Lebanon adopted an EU–Lebanon Compact for the period 2016–20. At the Brussels I conference (5 April 2017), Brussels II (24–25 April 2018) and Brussels III (12–14 March 2019), the EU and the international community renewed their commitment to support the host countries (European Commission, 2019a). Since 2015, the EU has created the EU Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian Crisis which “pools an increasing share of the EU’s aid to the region into one single and flexible instrument” (European Commission, 2019c) as agreed at the London Conference on Syria in 2016 and the Brussels I, II and III conferences. Support via the Trust Fund has reached €1.5 billion of which €521 million has been allocated to Lebanon (European Commission, 2019a).

EU–Lebanese cooperation has been significantly influenced by the Syrian crisis that worsened the unstable political environment (Seeberg, 2018). The EU focus is thus on addressing the urgent needs of Syrian refugees in their host countries. The EU has aimed at providing support for health, food, shelter and clean water for Syrian refugees in addition to fostering economic development “and job creation for both Lebanese citizens and Syrian refugees”; socio-economic development and to integrate Syrian refugees into the economy; and capacity building of Lebanese institutions in charge of crisis’ response and management (European Commission, 2019a, 2019b). Furthermore, to enable Syrian refugee children (more than 400,000) in Lebanon to attend public schools, the EU has committed “around €346 million for education and child protection in Lebanon”. This is crucial to address the Lebanese public education system which already suffers from weak infrastructure, facilities, enough schools, etc. (European Commission, 2019d; on the impact of the war on Syrian refugees’ children, see Pace and Sen, 2018).

With the economic/financial worsening in Lebanon, the situation is becoming more difficult not only for Syrian refugees, but also for Lebanese people. The Lebanese are fed up with Syrian refugees, who exceed 1.5 million, and partly blame them for the worsening economic situation (Vohra, 2019). The protests that erupted on 17 October 2019 along with the resulting deep stagnation put more pressure on Syrian refugees to return to their country or seek refuge in other countries.

Conclusion

EU relations with Lebanon are based on mutual benefits and strong cooperation in areas including socio-economic development, political reforms and democracy, human rights, security, etc. While the agenda is broad and covers many issues, the main focus is on the economy and security. Since the 1990s, the EU’s focus in its relations with Lebanon has been on strengthening the economy, supporting the reconstruction of Lebanon after the civil war, and strengthening the Lebanese Army and Internal Security Forces.

Following the 2011 Arab uprisings, EU engagement with Lebanon continues to be influenced by the security–stability nexus “due to the regional security lens through which the EU views the Southern Mediterranean and the domestic situation in the targeted countries” and more recently due to the threat raised by the Syrian crisis (Roccu and Voltolini, 2018). These developments have shifted the focus to dealing with the repercussions of the refugee crisis on the Lebanese socio-economic conditions and weak infrastructure.

The EU approach to Lebanon has been influenced by economic and security issues resulting from internal conflicts, conflict with Israel and other regional problems. Democracy support is neglected while urgent economic and security issues are tackled. Putting democracy promotion on the EU's back burner applies not only to Lebanon but also to most MENA countries. The priority for the EU since 2014/15 has been to keep refugees in the counties neighbouring Syria and avoiding a new influx to the EU.

The domestic situation in Lebanon (sectarianism and division, corruption, weak infrastructure) has had negative effects on the economy and further delayed the reforms necessary if Lebanon is to emerge from the economic crisis, culminating most recently in the eruption of demonstrations on 17 October 2019. So far, the new government has not been able to decide on making the economic and political reforms agreed with the EU and the international community at the CEDRE conference in 2018, as a requisite for Lebanon to benefit from the aid it is in dire need of. This situation necessitates increased EU/international pressure on the heterogeneous political elites to avoid total collapse. There is a need for a new social contract and a new constitution that will pave the way for building a new political system, as the current one has proved to be a failure. Instead of a wary approach, the EU and its MS can be more proactive to push for a clear roadmap to exit the crisis and avoid having a new unstable country on their southern Mediterranean shores.

Notes

- 1 According to Transparency International, Lebanon has the highest rate of bribery “paid to access public services” in the MENA. The country suffers from high levels of political and economic corruption, deteriorating public service due to clientelism and patronage, corruption in the justice system, in addition to insufficient reform efforts to tackle the deteriorating standards of services and the financial difficulties the country has suffered from in the past few years (Schoeberlein, 2019).
- 2 For discussion on the Mobility Partnerships, see Seeberg (2017).
- 3 Following the Cedar Revolution of 2005 that resulted by the end of the Syrian occupation, the 14 March Alliance is a coalition of different Lebanese parties/groups who are pro-West and anti-Syria and Iran. They are in grave opposition to the 8 March Alliance who are pro-Syria, and include Hezbollah. Despite the use of this terminology (14 March vs. 8 March alliances), however, the two groups do not really exist as created in 2005 due to changes across coalitions in the unity governments formed.
- 4 During the CEDRE meeting, the Lebanese government “presented its vision for stabilisation, growth and employment and a ‘Capital Investment Programme’. The Government recognised that the implementation of structural and sectoral reforms is critical to attract new investments for the implementation of the ‘Capital Investment Programme’” (European Commission, 2018b: 2).
- 5 The Taif Agreement (National Reconciliation Accord) formed the basis for ending the civil war in Lebanon. It was signed by the various political and conflicting groups in Ta'if-Saudi Arabia on 22 October 1989 and ratified by the Lebanese parliament on 5 November 1989, and undergirded the post-Civil War constitution.
- 6 The UNIFIL mission is based on UNSC 1701, which emphasised a ceasefire, ending of hostilities, Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon, disarmament of Hezbollah and all militias, the presence of the UNIFIL and Lebanese forces only along the Litani river in the south and the importance of the Lebanese government controlling the entire country (United Nations, 2006).
- 7 The UK added the entire Hezbollah movement to its terrorist list subject to asset freezing in January 2020. Germany's parliament passed a resolution on 19 December 2019 calling for a national ban on the activities of Hezbollah and for the EU to list it on its terrorist list and that the separation between the military and political branches should be abandoned (*The New York Times*, 2019).

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