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The Need for Dialogue between the European Union and the Arab League¹

Abstract

In recent years the relations between the Arab League and the European Union have not been particularly close. It resulted from both the limited activity of the League, as well as other directions of foreign policy implemented by the EU. Changes that have taken place in the international balance of power (e.a. the Arab's Spring, increased Chinese interest in Arab states) should be factors prompting the European Union to undertake a more intensive dialogue with the Arab League. Both the EU and the Arab League have many common interests, and the refugee problem seems to be one of the most important. From the EU's point of view, refugees are a serious social, economic and political problem as well as an obstacle to sustainable development for the member states of the Arab League.

Key words: Arab League, European Union, international relations, international organizations, sustainable development.

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Introduction

The Arab Spring, the growing Chinese presence in the Middle East, the US intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq, the civil war in Syria, the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant and the US diplomatic attempts to build Arab-Israeli disengagement led to significant changes in the Middle East. The new developments in international relations are forcing the European Union to face new challenges in relations with the Middle East. In the long term the rapprochement could be beneficial for both European and Middle Eastern countries. It could bring about a chance for sustainable development. As the Middle East is a very diverse entity,² in order to make some generalizations about the mutual relations between Europe and the Middle East the author of this paper decided to focus on relations between the European Union and the Arab League. The author decided to use this example as the Arab League is the largest regional organization in the Middle East,³ both in terms of the number of member states (22) and in terms of population – c. 428 million people (World). As such, it represents the interests of a significant part of this region. Due to a limited space of this publication the problem of relations between the member states of the Arab League and their attitudes towards the organization itself was omitted, as each and every case could be a topic for a separate article. The main objective of this publication is to point out the most important fields of common interests between the European Union and the Arab League, as well as any threats which could harm those relations in the future.

The main research method used in this publication is an analysis of various types of documents and reports from different institutions. The press releases are also very important, particularly the ones with statements made by leading politicians.

The Arab League in international relations

The Arab League was formed in Cairo in March 1945. Initially there were six members, but currently the number has grown to 22. The main reason to form the Arab League was to “draw closer the relations between member states and coordinate

² One may point to differences in political systems, the level of internal stability, wealth of each country or the mineral resources.

³ Other regional organisations were: Arab Union of Maghreb, Council of Arab Economic Unity, Gulf Cooperation Council and Agadir Agreement.

collaboration between them, to safeguard their independence and sovereignty, and to consider in general way the affairs and interests of the Arab countries” (Pact 1945).

Despite the fine premises which were at the foundations of the Arab League, it went through hard times – caused by both internal and external problems – several times throughout its existence.

The decline of British and French colonial empires and the emergence of the Cold War changed the balance of power in the region. Antagonisms between Arab states, strategic importance of the Middle Eastern oil and a U.S. and USSR policy in the region provided many possibilities conflicts for the League. For example, during the Lebanese civil war, the Arab League had limited success trying to help negotiate peace.⁴ Also, in the case of the civil war in Yemen in 1962, which deteriorated into an eight-year proxy war between Saudi and Egyptian-backed forces, the Arab League failed to resolve the conflict (Orkaby 2014).

If one was to sum up mediational “achievements” of the Arab League, then according to a 2009 study of 56 regional conflicts and crises between 1945 and 2008, the League only mediated 19, and successfully resolved the conflict on five occasions, which means that in most cases the League failed to contribute to the successful resolution of those conflicts (Pinfari 2009, 10). The Arab League had also failed in safeguarding independence of smaller Arab states like Kuwait. The League held two summits to resolve dispute inter alia over oil and debt between Kuwait and Iraq. Both summits had failed, which led to a direct foreign intervention by the United States, Great Britain and other states (Dakhlallah 2012, 409). In crises and conflicts where foreign powers were engaged, the Arab League traditionally took a backseat or retreated completely from the conflict resolution process. For example, such situation happened in 2003, when the Arab League withdrew from mediation in Iraq’s case (Moran 2005).

The previous – not too impressive – achievements of the Arab League in the region rise a question of its future. It seems that Marwan Bishara, one of Al-Jazeera frontmen, put it correctly while answering a question concerning the future of the Arab League: “The 400 million Arabs who share the same geography and the same history, bitter and sweet; a people who worship the same God and share the same pride in a glorious past; a people who write with the same alphabet, read the same books, recite the same poetry and sing the same lyrics – they deserve at least one functioning institution that truly represents their collective will” (Bishara 2019).

⁴ This civil war lasting from 1975 to 1990 and resulting in 120,000 fatalities and an exodus of almost one million people from Lebanon. See: Edgar O’Ballance, *Civil War in Lebanon, 1975–92*, Palgrave Macmillan, London 1998; Dilip Hiro, *Lebanon: Fire and Embers. A History of the Lebanese Civil War*, Palgrave Macmillan, London 1993.

The Arab League and European Union

It seems that in the current international situation the Arab League has better chances to consolidate its position in the region. Among other factors we may point to the coming of new players in the region, such as China (Lons et al. 2019) and India (Khushnam 2020; Burton 2019; Mohan 2020). Their engagement is growing every year, which means that the previous partners of the Arab League, such as the United States or European Union, need to face a new challenge.

One of the most important changes from the perspective of the Arab League was the situation of Palestine. In the annex to the *Pact of the League of Arab States* there were stipulations concerning the question of Palestine, which stated among others that: "Her existence and her independence among the nations can, therefore, no more be questioned *de jure* than the independence of any of the other Arab States. Even though the outward signs of this independence have remained veiled as a result of force majeure, it is not fitting that this should be an obstacle to the participation of Palestine in the work of the League. Therefore, the States signatory to the Pact of the Arab League consider that in view of Palestine's special circumstances, the Council of the League should designate an Arab delegate from Palestine to participate in its work until this country enjoys actual independence." (Pact 1945) For several decades the Palestine question was one of the most important topics undertaken by League. But the creation of a Palestinian State⁵ radically changed the situation, as it pushed the Palestinian problem to the background as an issue in relations of the Arab League with European countries and the United States. It was visible in an agenda of the summit which took place on 24–25th February 2019 in Sharm el-Sheikh. The aim of the meeting was to „boost cooperation” and “find common ground”, to strengthen their relations, achieve common interests and aspirations of their people to ensure a life free from conflict (Nugali 2019). The subjects of terrorism and migration dominated the gathering (*Terror* 2019), but despite officially hailing

⁵ The position of the Palestinian State is not completely clear. The State of Palestine was recognized by 138 United Nations members and since 2012 has a status of a non-member observer state in UN. Since July 2019, 138 UN members recognized the State of Palestine. Palestine is a member of the International Olympic Committee, Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, Group of 77 (a coalition of 134 developing countries founded in 1964) and Arab League. See: Mathias Holvoet, Medlir Mema, *The UN General Assembly Vote. Upgrading the Status of Palestine and Its Implications for a Possible Role of the ICC*, Institute for European Studies, Policy Brief, Issue 2013/06, June 2013, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/293401647_The_UN_General_Assembly_Vote_Upgrading_the_Status_of_Palestine_and_Its_Implications_for_a_Possible_Role_of_the_ICC; Philip Leech, *The State of Palestine. A Critical Analysis*, Routledge, London and New York 2017; Kavitha Giridhar, *Legal Status of Palestine*, <https://www.drake.edu/media/departments/offices/dussj/2006-2003documents/PalestineGiridhar.pdf>; The Group of 77 at the United Nations, www.g77.org.

the talks a “new step in EU-Arab relations”, as it was denominated by then European Council President Donald Tusk (Hirsch 2019), no formal agreements were reached, mostly because of divisions within both camps and differences in the approach to human rights between the two blocs.⁶

As Shahira Amin stated: “While the summit ended with the two blocs nowhere nearer to seeing eye to eye on the contentious issue of human rights and other topics, the meeting’s organizers say the gathering is indeed a first step toward ironing out longstanding differences” (Amin 2019). Taking into account the issues faced by both the European Union and the Arab League it would be most desirable if both sides reached some sort of consensus and start an effective cooperation instead of sham actions. Being aware that both organisations have their set of internal problems it must be said that only by working as unified entities can they work out realistic goals and achieve them.

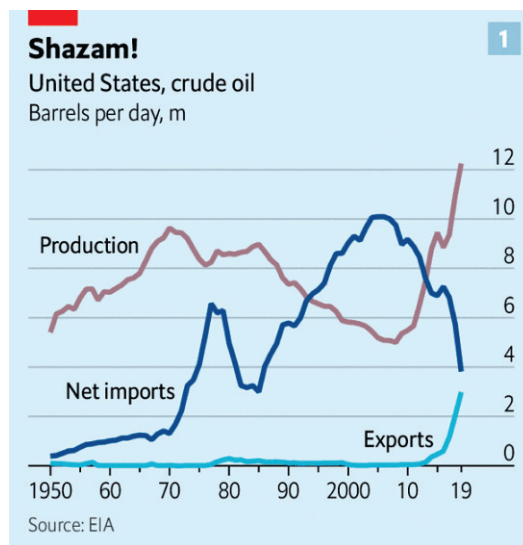
Reaching a consensus and starting a real cooperation between those two organisations would be invaluable in the face of the US, Chinese and India engagement in the region. The US have been active in the Middle East for decades, and one of the main reasons of their engagement there was an access to sources of oil and natural gas, as well as countering Soviet activities in the region. The American involvement fluctuated significantly over time, but a significant decision to disengage from the region, made by the administration of the former President Barack Obama and continued under President Donald Trump, left a lot of room to be filled by other players. It goes hand in hand with the expectations of Americans, who are tired with their country’s engagement in the Middle East⁷, and with the fact that there is a diminishing demand of the US economy on Middle-eastern oil and natural gas.

⁶ On scene were inter alia the murder of Washington Post columnist Jamal Khashoggi inside the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul, allegedly on the order of Saudi officials and execution of nine people in Egypt convicted for the 2015 murder of the prosecutor Hisham Barakat. Amnesty International denounced as unfair trials and Human Rights Watch accused Egyptian police of using torture, arbitrary arrests, and disappearances of political dissidents. What is more, some summit observers stated, that the Europeans seemed to prioritize Brexit over other subjects. See: Jamal Khashoggi, *All You Need to Know About Saudi Journalist’s Death*, BBC, July 2, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-45812399>; Austin Koltonowski, *UN Rights Experts Decry Egypt’s Executions of Nine Men Who Confessed Under Torture*, Jurist, February 25, 2019, <https://www.jurist.org/news/2019/02/un-rights-experts-decry-egypts-executions-of-nine-men-who-confessed-under-torture/>; Amnesty International, *Egypt: Execution of Nine Men After an Unfair Trial a Monumental Disgrace*, February 20, 2019, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/02/egypt-execution-of-nine-men-after-an-unfair-trial-a-monumental-disgrace/>; Dominic Dudley, *Europe’s Summit with Arab League Ends As It Began, Overshadowed by Brexit*, Forbes, February 25, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/dominicdudley/2019/02/25/europe-summit-arab-league-overshadowed-brexit/#6da479956fd1>.

⁷ For example, since the end of the Cold War, the United States has been involved in two wars in the Persian Gulf and intervention in Afghanistan.

The U.S. oil production in 2018 (per the BP Statistical Review) was 15.3 million BPD, which was more than a total sum of Iran, Iraq, and the UAE. In 2018, the impact of the U.S. shale oil production was readily apparent. Crude oil imports to the U.S. had fallen to 9.9 million BPD, and the share from the Persian Gulf had fallen to less than 1.6 million BPD (15.9%) (Rapier 2020).

Figure 1. United States crude oil production, import and export 1950–2019

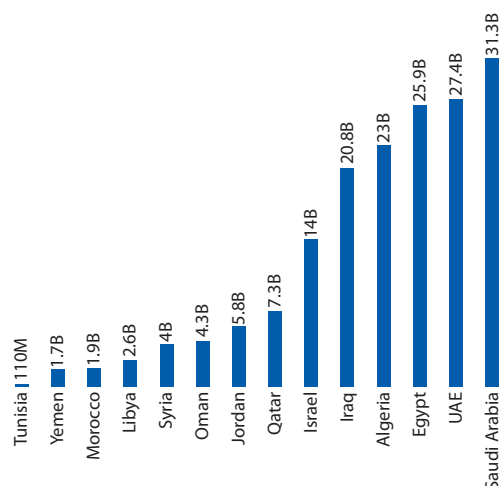


Source: *America's Domination of Oil and Gas Will not Cow China*, The Economist, September 17, 2020, <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2020/09/17/americas-domination-of-oil-and-gas-will-not-cow-china> [accessed on: 6.11.2020].

The declining engagement of the US in the Middle East creates a vacuum which is more and more filled by China. As a result of this increased engagement, China has become the largest investor in the region. In 2018 China committed 20 billion USD in loans for reconstruction of the Arab world, as well as 3 billion USD in loans for the banking sector. Through a wide range of financing vehicles, China has provided a mixture of concessional, preferred, and commercial loans to support central banks (for example – Dubai hosts branches of China's four largest banks) and fund infrastructure projects that use Chinese companies and Chinese labour (often on strict conditions on the use of Chinese materials and labour). In 2016 China became the largest extra-regional source of Foreign Direct Investment in the Middle East. China is Egypt and Lebanon's largest source of imports. China's relations with the United Arab Emirates has expanded dramatically in recent years, with Beijing

becoming the UAE's largest trading partner in 2017 with 53 billion USD in trade. The Port of Dubai is a key focal point of Chinese trade throughout the region. Algeria has also been a major focus of Chinese trade in the Arab world, with Algiers importing close to \$8 billion in goods and services from Beijing in 2018. China decided to build a new shipping port in the Algerian city of Cherchell, and the port's future capacity will be 3 to 6 million freight containers per year (Yeranian 2020; Elnaggar 2020; Fulton 2019).

Figure 2. China's investment in Middle East, 2005–2018 (USD)



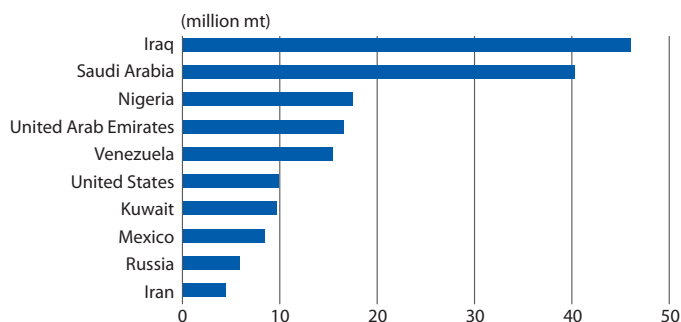
Source: Aisha Han, Rachel Rossi, What are the Implications of Expanded Chinese Investment in the MENA Region?, Atlantic Council, August 10, 2018, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/what-are-the-implications-of-expanded-chinese-investment-in-the-mena-region/> [accessed on: 6.11.2020].

India's relations with the Middle East are also undergoing a change. As India has emerged as a major economic force and global player, Indian policymakers have expanded their horizons, seeing the Middle East in strategic terms, perhaps for the first time. The India's policymakers are attempting to widen the economic ties with a focus on energy, but also on commercial ties with the region. Around a quarter of India's total imports are from the Middle East, with nearly 80% of these imports being crude oil and petroleum products. In 2017, India sourced nearly 64% of its oil imports from the Middle East, mostly from Iraq, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates and Kuwait. India is also heavily reliant on natural gas from the Middle East, especially from Qatar.

Countries belonging to the Arab League became a source of Foreign Direct Investment for India. India became a partner in FDI with UAE and other Persian

Gulf countries. Not without importance is the fact that more than 6 million Indian nationals are working in the region and they are sending approximately \$40 billion US dollars to India (Gupta 2019; Nandy 2020; Biswas 2020; Pai 2020). Of course, the India involvement in the Arab League countries is much smaller than that of China. Still, in recent years we may observe a significant boost of contacts between India and the Middle East.

Figure 3. India's oil suppliers, 2019



Source: Venezuela Vaccum Intensifies India's Heavy Crude Search, Petroleumworld, May 5, 2020, <http://www.petroleumworld.com/storyt20030602.htm> [accessed on: 6.11.2020].

The reluctance of the EU to normalize relations with the Arab League could, in effect, lead to a situation where, after a partial withdrawal of the United States from the region, the Euro-Atlantic factor could be marginalised and this, in longer terms, may have serious consequences for the European Union. It can afflict access to oil and natural gas sources and have an influence on migrations. Especially the latter factor, a problem of migrants and refugees, became a common issue for both the EU countries and the Arab League.

In 2017, according to statistics released by the United Nations, the percentage of immigrants of all sorts in proportion to the total population reached high levels in the United Arab Emirates (more than 88%), Kuwait (75.5%) and Qatar (68%). In the European Union, the percentage is: 46% in Luxembourg, 17% in Austria and Sweden, and more than 12% in Germany, Spain and France. In terms of emigration Syria was the Arab League country with the highest level in 2017 (around 20%), followed by Lebanon (13%) and Morocco (11%). Moreover, the majority of Algerian, Moroccan and Tunisian international migrants live in the EU member states, mostly in France. There are also many Moroccans living in Spain, Belgium, the Netherlands and Italy. Egyptian international migrants (more than 6 million) live mainly in Arab countries, the same applies to Palestinian refugees and Jordanian citizens. A majority of Syrian

emigrants lives in Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and, to a lesser extent, in Europe, mainly in Sweden and Germany (Migration 2019).

Migration has multiple effects on migrants, but also on host countries both in the Arab League and the European Union. In the case of migrants in the Arab League countries they are often forced to live in refugee camps with lack of basic infrastructure, poor planning and sometimes insecurity, malnutrition and restrictions on personal rights and freedoms. In many cases those camps lead to deforestation, air pollution, water pollution, soil erosion and a rise of crime. Migrants are usually a great burden on their countries of destination. In case of migrants in the European Union countries, the social condition of refugee camps is usually much better than in the Arab League countries. Still, migrants are going through a so-called cultural shock due to the difference of language, environment, traditions, and customs, particularly pertaining social and family issues, and the role of women and women's rights. The other problem of migrants is the problem of social integration. Cultural and historical specificities of immigrants from the Middle Eastern and North African countries to their new societies hampers their integration. When migrants attempt to adhere to their customs and cultural identities they face many problems, especially in raising children and trying to raise them in a way that reflects their culture and identity (Salameh 2019). In the case of European countries the influx of large numbers of migrants has political, security, cultural, economic and social consequences. These repercussions vary *inter alia* according to the wealth of the host country, the number of migrants, economic condition and measures taken by the official institutions and civil society organizations addressing the problem of migration.

As migration became a problem for both the European Union and the Arab League, the cooperation in this respect is desirable. A removal or at least limitation of the factors determining migrations is in the interest of both organisations, and only by cooperation they would be able to cope with this problem. One of the methods of solving this problem could be an introduction of the policy of sustainable development by the Arab League countries.

On October 25th 2001 the League adopted the Ministerial Declaration of Sustainable Development and expressed its willingness to fulfil Agenda 21⁸, the Millennium Agenda⁹ and the World Summit on Sustainable Development (Earth

⁸ Agenda 21 is an action plan accepted by the United Nations during the UN Conference on Environment and Development (the Second Conference of Rio de Janeiro, 3–14 June 1992). It presents ways to prepare and implement of programs of sustainable development on the local level.

⁹ One of the most important documents of the United Nations, enacted on September 8, 2000. It defines fundamental goals and strategy of the UN activities in 21st century. It deals with the questions of

Summit).¹⁰ Activities of the Arab League in the area of sustainable development concentrate on several aspects: peace and security, institutional structures, healthcare, education, scientific research, transfer of technology, resources management, production and consumption, trade and investment, fighting poverty (*The Sustainable*).

Adopted areas of activity reflect the needs of member states, but despite the undertaken actions, in many areas they did not achieve their planned goals or achieved them only partially. It was caused by many factors, some of which could be overcome with the help of the European Union. It is enough to mention poverty and unemployment issues, or the healthcare and education.¹¹

Achieving sustainable development in all of the Arab League countries could serve both to limit the emigrational push in those countries, as well as provide them with the tools to stop migration from other areas. It would bring measurable benefits both to the European Union and the Arab League countries. Moreover, increasing standards of life in some of the Arab League countries would most likely limit the activity of terrorist organisations and limit the impact of their propaganda, which finds eager listeners among the poor and left out. In this way, in a longer perspective it could lead to a weakening of terrorist organisations and limit the range of their activities.

Conclusions

After a closer look at the relations between the European Union and the Arab League, one may dare to state that both organisations have common goals in many areas, such as stabilising the Middle East, creating a good neighbourhood policy and resolving the common problems of both organisations. Previous attitude was very

peace, security, economic and social development, elimination of poverty, environment protection, human rights, and takes into special consideration the needs of African continent.

¹⁰ When the Ministerial Declaration of Sustainable Development was accepted by the Arab League, the World Summit on Sustainable Development (Earth Summit of 2002) was in preparation as it took place in Johannesburg from 26 Aug. to 4 Sept. 2002.

¹¹ Specific data concerning the level of achieving the sustainable development in different areas by the Arab League countries could be found in: Ibrahim Abdel Gelil, *The Sustainable Development Initiative in the Arab Region. Third Progress Report*, Arabian Gulf University, October 2011, Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, <http://css.escwa.org.lb/sdpd/1545/3rd.pdf>. The actions concerning the sustainable development in the area of telecommunication see: International Telecommunication Union, *ICT for Sustainable Development. Project and Initiatives, Connect Arab Summit 2012*, ITU 2012, <http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/connect/arabstates/publication/E/Connect%20Arab%20Summit-EV1.pdf>

distant and did not bring any benefits to none of them. If the European Union does not come closer to the Arab League, it will mean further serious problems for the Union and for the League. It will be difficult, perhaps even impossible, to solve the problem of migrants who are already in Europe, some of which come from countries belonging to the Arab League. What is more, taking into account the situation in the Middle East we can expect more waves of migrants coming to Europe – without cooperation with the League there is no chance of improving the situation. Another factor that should persuade the European Union to enter into dialogue with the Arab League is the increased activity of China and India in the Middle East. Strengthening the position of these Asian states in the Middle East region may threaten the vital economic and political interests of the European Union in the long run.

It seems that the only way to resolve all of the problems between the European Union and the Arab League would be to follow the words of Hossam Zaki, assistant secretary general of the Arab League, who said: “Multilateralism and dialogue are the way forward” (Amin 2019).

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