

# 32 EU GLOBAL STRATEGY EXPERT OPINION

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The world is in the midst of a period of great uncertainty – one that is likely to be prolonged. The rise of China, the return of Russia, crises in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), and transnational challenges such as climate change, terrorism and irregular migration are just a few of the complex issues on the global agenda.

### A new MENA focus

Crafting a list of priorities for the EU's Global Strategy on Foreign and Security Policy (EUGS) is, therefore, an unenviable task. But if there is one challenge that should be at the top of the EU's global priorities it is helping to build a new order in the Middle East.

The consequences of the region's current chaos hardly require rehearsing: enormous humanitarian suffering (and not just in Syria and Iraq); massive waves of refugees flowing to Europe; and the empowerment of terrorist groups.

To understand what the EU should do in the Middle East, first the problems need to be cor-

rectly diagnosed. We are told that the inadequacies of US policy, the rise of Islamist groups and rivalry between regional powers are the causes of the current disorder. More commonly the finger is pointed at rising sectarianism.

But what the region suffers from is less a problem of provenance, than a failure of governance. Under the old order, one-man, one-party or one-family regimes ruled by co-option and coercion. Mostly they relied on a social contract which provided public goods in return for public loyalty. That contract was underwritten by coercive measures that either prevented dissent from arising or protected regimes when it arose.

In most countries in the region, save a few hyper wealthy petro-monarchies, the social contract began to erode decades ago as population growth and popular expectations began to exceed economic rents. It was the breakdown of this social contract that precipitated the Arab uprisings; but it was also the performance of coercive measures – chiefly whether the security forces decided to stick with or abandon the leader – that decided

the fate of regimes.

In the failure of the old order we can find the source of most, if not all, of the region's current problems. Ungoverned or misgoverned spaces have created opportunities for extremists, and as governance has failed, regimes and extremists alike have stoked sectarianism in search of legitimacy. Governance failures have provided greater opportunities for states to meddle in the internal affairs of others, provoking regional power competition.

Ironically, the regional turmoil resulting from the Arab uprisings has made some sentimental about authoritarianism. Leaders have noted that heavy-handed coercion saves regimes. Post-uprising chaos has created a popular desire for stability over democracy. External powers long for the days when dealing with regional counterparts meant one man, one phone call, one time.

But this sentimentality should not cloud our judgment. Coercion may have saved regimes but an over-reliance on it has doomed countries to conflict and produced radicals. Once populations recover from their exhaustion, they will remember the material and other shortcomings of the old order. External powers may even recall why authoritarian leaders were no more reliable than democratically-elected ones.

## A new social contract

The EU can help create a new model of governance in the Middle East. Central to this should be a new social contract, so that governments can once again largely rely on co-optation rather than coercion to ensure stability.

This will mean helping governments meet the

material demands of their people, but it cannot just mean new state-run, EU-funded job-creation programmes. In most cases, the private sector must become the engine of economic growth, because the state can no longer play this role. This will require both external investment and internal reform.

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Because material improvements to life in most Middle Eastern countries will not come quickly, any new social contract will also need to include

mechanisms for broad-based consultation and participation. This does not necessarily mean, and probably should not mean, elections right away. But consultative mechanisms have to be real and effective enough to ensure that popular expectations of material change become realistic.

There is no single blueprint for building a new order in Middle Eastern states. But to succeed, the process will need to be gradual and organic. The role of the EU should be to cultivate a new order from below, rather than to dictate one from above.

To do that a lot of work must go into identifying the green shoots of a new order among the debris of the old one. Local examples of enterprise or good governance will need to be supported politically, developmentally and financially. All of this will need to be done while navigating a complex political environment and while continuing to manage the fallout of the old order's collapse.

