

# 07 EU GLOBAL STRATEGY EXPERT OPINION

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The EU is a unique political entity which has achieved many milestones in the realms of political and economic integration. In spite of these substantial achievements, however, European security remains the prerogative of nation states, with decisions undertaken individually on the basis of national threat perceptions.

If the EU wishes to assert itself on the international scene, as well as effectively contain rising threats to human security (such as nuclear proliferation, international terrorism, organised crime and environmental degradation), it needs to be more active in coordinating a collective security policy.

The geographical proximity of the EU to the instability of the Middle East should further prompt the Union to assume a greater international role. This is particularly the case given that the geopolitical upheavals of the region are producing a sustained stream of substantial security threats.

The latest string of terrorist attacks and the successive waves of mass migration which have

triggered widespread uproar in Europe are both examples of global challenges with roots in the Middle East. The European response has been to concentrate on consolidating military action against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), searching for new avenues to stem the influx of foreign fighters to Syria and to contain the spread of religious extremism and/or terrorist propaganda among Arab and Muslim populations in Europe. The EU has also had to reassess certain internal policies such as the freedom of movement within the Schengen area and the resettlement of refugees.

### Raising the game

Although some of the recent ideas and proposals adopted to address the public outcry might be adequate for crafting short-term policies, they can hardly serve as a basis for a long-term efficient security strategy. A coherent EU Global Strategy on Foreign and Security Policy (EUGS) must stem from a clear political vision which acknowledges terrorism and mass migration as symptoms of a chronic disease which has destabilised the Arab

world. The effectiveness of any EUGS therefore depends largely on its ability to comprehensively deal with the external, as well as the deep-rooted internal causes of these threats.

Bad governance, despotism, corruption and religious extremism are generally understood as the internal causes of the threats emanating from the Middle East. To effectively deal with these issues, substantive political, social, cultural and institutional reforms in the Arab world are required. Conversely, past European actions and current US and Israeli policies, as well as weak international institutions, are perceived to be the primary external causes. Radical changes in Western foreign policy and a comprehensive reform of the international system are therefore also required.

The responsibility for much-needed domestic reforms falls on the shoulders of Arab ruling and intellectual elites. Though a complex and lengthy process, the EU can greatly contribute to certain aspects.

## Changing the game

A top priority would be the reform of Arab religious institutions and educational structures. Two Arab countries stand out in particular: Egypt and Saudi Arabia. For example, Al-Azhar, Egypt's most prestigious religious institution could play a pivotal role in helping contain extremist threats if it were to promote moderate interpretations of Islam to its followers in the Sunni world. Along with other religious schools, it could also support rapprochement with other theological branches of Islam, namely Shi'ism.

Similarly, the Wahhabi educational and judicial

structures in Saudi Arabia ought to be reformed in an attempt to eliminate the roots of religious extremism. Importantly, reforms in both Egypt and Saudi Arabia have to be undertaken in parallel in a coordinated fashion. The EU has a clear interest to push for these changes, but support must come in the form of technical and, if needed, financial aid. The process itself and the policies created must be pursued by Arabs themselves.

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Furthermore, an honest reassessment of European/Western colonial and post-colonial policies towards the Arab world is necessary. This will help policymakers understand how Arabs perceive historical injustices from the Balfour Declaration of 1916 to the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Successfully redressing these injustices will, in part, require the EU to be morally and politically committed to helping the Palestinian people establish their own independent state within the 1967 borders. This will, first and foremost, entail preventing further illegal Israeli settlements being built in the occupied territories. Achieving such a modest but difficult goal will, admittedly, not be possible unless the international institutional system is also reformed.

This must, however, be the number one priority: in the absence of an independent Palestinian state, the destabilisation of the Arab world will continue, as will the growth of terrorism inspired by Islamic extremists.

