

EXPLORING THE POTENTIAL OF MINILATERALISM FOR THE EUROPE-MEDITERRANEAN PARTNERSHIP

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Exploring the Potential of Minilateralism for the Europe-Mediterranean Partnership

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Introduction

The Mediterranean and Europe, as interconnected regions sharing geographical spaces and proximity, severe challenges, common interests and intertwined goals, present a compelling opportunity to explore minilateralism as a framework for fostering cooperation and develop resilience. This research examines the potential of minilateralism to contribute to the Europe-Mediterranean partnership, highlighting the rationale, objectives, potential areas of focus, and expected outcomes of promoting minilateral frameworks in this context. Two minilateral frameworks will be examined: Israel-Greece-Cyprus and Israel-Morocco- European Union (EU). Based on this examination, the research will discuss particular insights regarding these specific configurations, and general insights regarding characters, opportunities and challenges of minilateralism in the region as a way to foster the Europe-Mediterranean partnership.

Theoretical framework: minilateralism

The global and regional changing geopolitical circumstances demand wide and immediate responses by multiple actors working in coordination. It becomes evident that states face challenges and opportunities that emerge with global warming, migration, pandemics, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and crime, and must understand that they cannot deal with them successfully by themselves.

It is relatively easy for a state to decide a policy on its own, but its ability to successfully address the abovementioned pressing issues is limited. The same is true for the bilateral formation. It enhances the ability of the pair to tackle joint challenges or to realise opportunities, but it is still limited in

scope and abilities. In contrast, multilateral frameworks offer chances for wide and effective joint actions facing these kinds of profound challenges. Their main problem is the difficulty to reach a binding agreement over an effective policy accepted by all parties, and execute and enforce it. Thus, scholars stress the diminishing role and effectiveness of the multilateral frameworks. Many point out the structural characters of multilateralism frameworks, such as the needed consensus and universal application and formal binding nature of the decisions that make the multilateral frameworks inefficient (Tirkey, 2021, p. 8). The diminishing global leadership of the United States (US), with the emergence of a more multipolar system and a rivalry between the US and China is another reason. Trump's decision to turn back on the longstanding US policy tool of multilateralism is a way to ensure its hegemony and reflects this trend (Tirkey, 2021, p. 6). Others stress the increasing conception of multilateralism as no more than a tool for superpowers to promote their goals and recruit other states to join and serve their interests (Chhangani, Tey, & Noor, 2022).

And here enters the formation of minilateralism, which expands the state's abilities beyond its borders, and provides it with better tools and power to address pressing issues, while allowing a more flexible, immediate and feasible mechanism for action and decision-making. It is a voluntary formation that may propose, among other things, a transgovernmental, multilevel bottom-up approach as opposed to state-centric and top-down management (Patrick, 2015; Kahler, 1992). Besides allowing flexibility, modularity, feasible and shorter decision-making processes, bringing multiple stakeholders to take part, and providing the opportunity to disaggregate complex issues and pragmatically advance a cluster of complementary activities, it even allows states to cooperate with geopolitical rivals

while facing a shared interest. It is a formation that adds another important layer to the global governance tapestry.

Minilateralism is increasingly considered as an alternative approach for forging partnerships and coalitions among countries to address regional and even some global issues. Today, we are witnessing a growing number of minilateralism formations, all over the world. The US uses minilateralism to shape the global economic system to its own advantage (Wei and Yaohui, 2022). One of the prominent and successful examples for the minilateral framework is the Quad, a diplomatic partnership in the Indo-Pacific between Japan, Australia, India and the US committed to advancing a stable and prosperous region that is inclusive and resilient. Minilateralism plays a role in reshaping transregional relations in Middle East-South Asia inter-state affairs (Baba, 2023). Germany uses the minilateralism formation as a means to exercise leadership in international diplomacy (Helwig, 2020). Under the current geopolitical conditions, with the escalating conflicts among the superpowers, it is considered as a meaningful way for the EU to engage with the Indo-Pacific (Atanassova-Cornelis & Pejsova, 2021). We see these formations spread in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region as well, while facing failures in advancing integration in the region through the multilateral approach, as expressed in the Barcelona Process. For example, the minilateral formation of Israel, Greece and Cyprus, the “Negev Forum”, or the new construct in the making of Israel, United Arab Emirates (UAE), US and India (I2U2), and the decision by the UAE, India and France to work together through a trilateral framework in various fields, which transcend the MENA region and are actually transregional configurations.

Minilateralism has also its limitations and drawbacks. Minilateral frameworks, due to

their exclusive nature, can challenge the promotion of inclusive institutions, shared identity and political cooperation in a specific region. They might allow states to find an adequately efficient alternative to the broader regional framework, thus avoiding the need for broader agreements with states that are more difficult to get along with (clearly it holds benefits as well). Indeed, the effectiveness of organisation tends to increase as its scope narrows and its geographic area is defined, but the minilateral framework usually lacks the ability and also the aspiration to become a significant global player and lead extensive processes – for this purpose, there is still a need for multilateral frameworks (Chhangani, Tey, & Noor, 2022, p. 3; Mladenov, 2023). Other potential drawbacks of minilateral frameworks are related to the limited resources of a country to sustain various relational systems, and the fact that creating minilateral frameworks might essentially duplicate efforts already being made in other frameworks (Alajlouni, 2023). Furthermore, the flexibility and lack of a strong institutionalisation might come at a cost, such as when a cooperation based on personal relationships is harmed due to shifts in power within one of the states.

Another important point to remember is that not all minilateral frameworks are alike. There is a variety of minilateral frameworks that present differences, among other things, in the number of participating entities, the scope and breadth of the discussed subjects, the existence of additional/competing frameworks that the participating member take part in, the degree of the institutionalisation of the partnership, and the level of equality in strength and assets that each partner brings to the framework. This pertains for example to whether the framework involves a partnership between relatively equal states or entities in terms of their strength or their legal standing. Or maybe it is a framework led

by a superpower, which exploits it as an additional means to advance its interests (Patrick, 2015, p. 120).

Cooperation in Europe and the Mediterranean

The Mediterranean Basin is a place of shared challenges. It is a hotspot where the early and severe implications of the climate crisis are manifested, and expressed in prolonged heat waves, sea level rise, wildfires, floods, and more. The population of the Mediterranean Basin grapples with political instability and corruption in certain areas, as well as with migration, poverty and inequality, acute threats to food, water, and energy security, and enduring violent conflicts. These fundamental conditions are further compounded by the current wars in Ukraine and Gaza, the struggle between global powers, and economic and identity crises. All of these are challenges that are not confined to a single country and require cooperation among numerous countries and sectors in order to successfully address them. The challenge of reaching cooperation is added to the long list of challenges. Cooperation between parties holding significant differences – in economic and military power, culture, language, governance structure, political stability, supranational organisational forms, and more – only makes this even more challenging (Behr, 2010).

Countries in Europe and the Mediterranean Basin are aware that they need to cooperate in order to address these challenges and seize the opportunities. In the Mediterranean Basin, there are numerous bilateral relationships between countries that assist each other in achieving their diverse goals in various areas. Additionally, several multilateral frameworks operate with the aim of promoting cooperation. The most prominent example is the Barcelona Pro-

cess initiated in 1995, which gave rise to several multilateral frameworks, including the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), and reflected the EU's policy of leading a Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. The EU has also promoted instruments that interact with the different frameworks such as its Cross Border Cooperation (CBC) programme and the southern dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), which for its part also emphasises strengthening bilateral relations. There is also an attempt to use minilateral frameworks as a means to promote cooperation. Beyond the examples mentioned above, there are additional initiatives such as the Western Mediterranean Forum (5+5 Dialogue). Introduced in 1990 and re-launched in 2001, this configuration presents a unique cooperation based on solely Mediterranean countries and on an equal north-south basis.

All forms of promoting cooperation are important and necessary for strengthening Europe-Mediterranean relations. Thus, the relevant questions among others, focus on which formation would contribute best to fostering cooperation in a specific context? On which subjects and domains should each kind of formation focus? And what are the effective ways to build these forms of cooperation? To address these questions, the next section discusses two test-cases.

The opportunities of minilateralism for the Europe-Mediterranean partnership – case studies

The current research focuses on two possible minilateral arrangements of states from Europe and the Mediterranean and their possible contribution to strengthening Eu-

rope-Mediterranean relations – the tripartite alliance which includes Israel, Greece and Cyprus (The Hellenic Alliance), and a possible minilateral framework involving Israel, Morocco and the EU. The first is an existing minilateral arrangement whose history and conduct have not been thoroughly investigated as such, and the second is a potential minilateral arrangement, which serves as a theoretical exercise in our context. The paper examines the potential, opportunities, and challenges inherent in these minilateral arrangements, as well as the broader minilateral approach, to strengthening the connection between Europe and the Mediterranean, in promoting cooperation, stability, resilience and peace.

The Hellenic Alliance

The Hellenic Alliance is a minilateral partnership between Israel, Greece and Cyprus. It began to evolve during the second decade of the millennia on the background of natural gas discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean, geopolitical changes encompassing the consequences of the Arab Spring, shifts in the superpower strategy and policies in the region, growing tensions between Israel and Turkey, the unresolved Cyprus issue, and changes in domestic politics in each of the countries (Eiran, 2021; Tziarras, 2019).

The deepening relations and collaboration became institutionalised in early 2016, when the leaders of the three countries met in Nicosia and declared the establishment of a formal alliance that would promote cooperation in various areas based on shared interests, principles, and democratic values, contributing to peace and stability in the Mediterranean and the wider region. In their declaration, the leaders emphasised that the alliance is not exclusive and is open to like-minded

actors. They highlighted that the partnership promotes cooperation across sectors, focusing on numerous and diverse subjects. While stressing the energy sector as particularly significant, joint projects like the Euro-Asia Interconnector, the EastMed gas pipeline, and renewable energy development were emphasised, alongside security and counterterrorism efforts, tourism, migration, and environmental issues. The leaders underscored in their statement the importance of strengthening relations between Europe and the Mediterranean for the benefit of the countries in the region, expressed their support for EU initiatives to bolster these ties, and announced the formation of a steering committee and plans for a future leaders' summit (Greece-Cyprus-Israel Trilateral Summit Declaration, 2016).

To a large extent, the vision that was set at the beginning of the journey has been realised over time. The relationships between the three countries – at the bilateral level and within the minilateral framework – have expanded, institutionalised, and deepened, serving the goals they set for themselves at the outset of the journey.

The partners have held a series of summit meetings over the years, between the leaders, ministers, parliament members, and professionals. Parliaments have passed laws supporting the alliance's creation and endorsing the agreements signed by the governments. Significant projects in the energy field have been promoted: a preliminary feasibility study of the EastMed gas pipeline has been conducted, the idea of connecting electricity grids by the Euro-Asia Interconnector cable advanced, and the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) has been established with other partners in the region, mainly Egypt. In the security realm, intelligence exchanges, joint exer-

cises and cooperation have taken place. Various agreements have been signed in areas such as communication, law, transportation, tourism, research, and more.

The Hellenic Alliance that has been formed was not confined solely to activities within the trilateral framework. It has significantly strengthened bilateral relations among the three countries. Consequently, alongside the advancement of agreements and cooperation within the trilateral framework, we witness a blossoming of various agreements and cooperation in numerous areas between the three countries in their bilateral relations.

Additionally, the alliance has collaborated in the face of external factors. It has worked together in response to perceived threats and shared interests that lie beyond their borders – whether it be migration, the exploitation of energy resources, or Iranian terrorism. The very existence of the alliance, and the reinforcement and coordination it has brought with it, has supported the establishment and management of the EMGF. Cyprus decided to lead a regional climate initiative that emerged out of the partnership. The alliance has engaged in a joint dialogue with the world's leading superpower, the US, and established a 3+1 framework inaugurated in June 2021, providing an additional avenue for shared dialogue. This framework further contributes to a complex regional architecture aimed at promoting regional cooperation and supporting other regional frameworks. In a joint meeting of the foreign ministers of the Hellenic Alliance and the US in 2022, they expressed their commitment to “intensify their cooperation in the areas of energy, economy, climate action, emergency preparedness, and counterterrorism, contributing to resilience, energy security, and interconnectivity in the region,” as well as their support for the emerging regional framework of the “Negev Summit”

(US Department of State, 2022). In April 2023, representatives of the parliaments of the countries met within this quadrilateral framework for the first time.

An attempt to construct a similar 3+1 model has also been made by the Hellenic Alliance in its relations with the UAE. The foreign ministers of the Hellenic Alliance met with the UAE Foreign Minister in February 2021 to promote cooperation in the areas of tourism under the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, security, and energy. Although this cooperation did not evolve into a continuous formal framework, the idea has not been completely abandoned. And it was not perceived to be relevant to the UAE alone. In the meeting of the Hellenic Alliance leaders in September 2023 in Nicosia, for example, Prime Minister Netanyahu mentioned that the alliance countries can apply the 3+1 model built with the US to their future relations with India (Tugwell, Georgiou, & Bronner, 2023).

However, without a doubt, the central cooperation between the alliance and another player takes place with the EU. The EU has actively participated in advancing energy projects that the Hellenic Alliance sought to promote. Greece and Cyprus, as EU member states, advanced the cooperation asking the EU to invest and support the proposed alliance activities. Thus, it provided funding for the preliminary assessment of the feasibility of the gas pipeline and supported the advancement of the Euro-Asia Interconnector electricity cable. The EU has also externally supported the EMGF and strengthened various forms of cooperation among the alliance countries.

While the Hellenic Alliance has indeed succeeded in leading mainly positive cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean that has contributed to stability, wellbeing and resilience, its existence and actions are not without challenges and setbacks.

One of the challenging aspects, for instance, is surprisingly manifested in its relations with the EU. The EU, which saw this alliance as an asset for promoting its own interests, sometimes finds that the Alliance promotes interests that do not align perfectly with its own. For example, when Cyprus or Greece responded positively to Israel's requests by hindering decisions of the Union that were politically or diplomatically inconvenient for it, it damaged the EU's cohesive and effective foreign policy that it sought to establish (Ahren, 2015; Mitchell, 2021).

The tension between the Hellenic Alliance members and Turkey, each with its own reasons, which to some extent explains the strengthening relations between the members and the consolidation of the alliance in the face of a common external challenge in the form of Turkey, also entails challenges and difficulties. It is clear that Turkey's exclusion from the developing positive relationship framework does not contribute to regional stability. However, more than that, Turkey's position and actions in relation to the Hellenic Alliance have also posed real challenges to the pursuit of the alliance's goals and interests. For example, while the Hellenic Alliance seeks to advance the gas pipeline from Israel through Cyprus to Europe, Turkey signed an agreement demarcating its exclusive economic zone with Libya, so any possible route of the pipeline is expected to pass through its economic waters, requiring its approval. Another example may be the incident when Turkish navy ships forced an Israeli research vessel to leave Cypriot waters. The relations between the allied countries and Turkey have evolved in different directions over the years, but from Turkey's perspective, the Hellenic partnership is largely seen as a front against it, working against its economic and security interests in the Eastern Mediterranean. The fact that Turkey is not a part of the EMGF

and was in a prolonged conflict with Egypt only added to its regional isolation and hindered the advancement of regional cooperation.

Another significant challenge facing the ability of the Hellenic Alliance to fulfil its plans stems from the prolonged conflicts within its member states, i.e., the Northern Cyprus and the Palestinian issues. These two enduring conflicts introduce an additional political dimension to the alliance's relations and sometimes limit the room for cooperation. Beyond the complexity introduced into the alliance's relationship with the EU due to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, its operational scope is also affected. For instance, the Hellenic Alliance's ability to effectively involve the Palestinian Authority and Gaza in advancing the energy sector in the Eastern Mediterranean is hampered by the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It can be identified, for example, in the Palestinians' decision to impose a veto on the inclusion of the UAE in the EMGF, a move supported by the Hellenic Alliance. Additionally, the protracted Cyprus conflict certainly complicates the alliance's ability to engage Turkey within the regional framework and cooperation initiatives.

The war that broke out in Gaza in October 2023 served as a litmus test for the relations' resilience in the context of the conflict. The governments of Greece and Cyprus expressed support for Israel, while dealing with growing critical public opinion towards it, especially as images of the destruction from the Gaza war overshadowed images of Hamas's massacre. The countries slightly lowered the public profile of their relations, but continued to promote cooperation. The war also reversed the trend of improving relations between Israel and Turkey, leading to a renewed crisis between the two countries. This happened at a time when relations between Turkey and Greece were improving, and the op-

portunity to integrate Turkey into regional architecture was fading. On the other side, the idea of advancing a “humanitarian corridor” for Gaza through Cyprus, involving Israel, Cyprus, and other international actors, serves as an example of how conflicts and efforts to resolve them can also strengthen alliances. This potential can also be relevant to the context of conflict resolution in Northern Cyprus.

All of the above challenges should be added to the inherent challenges in any minilateral organisation, as mentioned before – the available resources for the alliance’s development, the attention member states can devote to the framework, conflicts between the minilateral framework and the bilateral/regional relationships, domestic politics in each of the member states, and more.

When examining the role of the Hellenic Alliance in strengthening the ties between Europe and the countries of the Eastern Mediterranean, it can be summarised as a successful mechanism that has enhanced relations between Union’s member states and the EU with a country outside it (Israel). Furthermore, the minilateral framework has taken on the task of promoting specific issues that were of great importance to it and served the goals of the EU, primarily the promotion of energy connectivity between Europe and the South, but also security issues in the Eastern Mediterranean. Thirdly, the fact that EU member countries were also partners in the minilateral framework provided the EU with additional tools to support and promote the framework’s activities. However, we have also observed challenges that do not necessarily serve the strengthening of relations. The establishment of the framework created an ad-

ditional player in the field, which did not always align its interests with those of the EU. And we have seen how members of the Hellenic Alliance have used the Hellenic framework to bolster their own influence in the face of Union activities.

The Israeli-Moroccan-EU case: connecting the dots

The Israeli-Moroccan-EU case is distinctive in that, currently, it does not exist. The formal diplomatic bilateral cooperation between Israel and Morocco is relatively new (12/2020). It was made possible following the Abraham Accords and has since deepened in various domains. Israel and Morocco participate in the multilateral frameworks of the Mediterranean and Europe such as the Barcelona Process, the UfM and the ENP. They also have little experience in jointly participating in European programmes such as TAIEX.¹ But, they have no previous experience in *joint* minilateral frameworks. The new minilateral framework of the “Negev Forum”, which both states are part of, is only taking its first steps, and has already met severe challenges. And the EU is not part of it.

However, the notion of establishing Israel-Morocco-EU trilateral framework extends beyond mere theoretical speculation. The intention to create such a structure was deliberated in a meeting between the Moroccan Foreign Minister Bourita and the European Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Olivér Várhelyi in March 2023 (Arredondas, 2023). The EU has started to recognise the significant potential inherent in the geopolitical changes brought by the Abraham Accords to advance its interests in the Southern Neighbourhood, and has expressed its desire to

¹ See, for example, TAIEX Regional Workshop on Circular Economy, held in Casablanca in October 2017, <https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/TMSWebRestrict/resources/js/app/#/library/detail/64750?hasBackBtn=false>

participate in the developments, to join the “Negev Forum” and collaborate with predictable and reliable partners that are part of the Abraham Accords (Várhelyi, 2022). Accordingly, the EU, through the DG NEAR, committed 10 million euros to advance projects within the newly proposed Abraham Accords framework. Consequently, the EU sponsored a first instance of trilateral cooperation, focusing on water management. Israel and the EU delegations convened in Morocco with their counterparts to discuss the topic in August 2022, followed by a second gathering in Brussels in March 2023 (Goren et al., 2023). Therefore, the inquiry into the viability of a tripartite minilateral framework involving Israel, Morocco and the EU transcends theoretical contemplation; it emerges as a pertinent policy question.

At the core of the rationale for establishing a joint minilateral framework involving Israel, Morocco, and the EU are shared or intersecting interests. Each of the potential partners in this alliance has a clear and distinct interest in strengthening relations with the other two partners, and the alignment of such an alliance serves as an additional mean to bolster these relationships. But beyond that, there are issues and interests that pertain to the potential partnership – topics including energy and the transfer to renewable energy, water security, food security, national security, terrorism, migration, trade and supply chains –, which are all critical issues for all potential members.

The fact that shared interests exist is not sufficient to justify cooperation. What truly underscores the rationale for such a partnership is the increased potential to achieve and realise objectives and address interests by and through this potential trilateral collective collaboration. In other words, there is a compelling logic to advancing these shared interests together, where each potential partner has something to

contribute to the attainment of their goals. For instance, the geographic location of Israel and Morocco, positioned as transition spaces between continents and seas, serves as spatial, cultural and economic connecting spaces between Europe, Africa and Asia, making them valuable assets for the EU. The EU's economic and political strength, coupled with its knowledge, technology, and soft power, elevates it to a significant strategic partner for both Israel and Morocco. And in any case, considering the majority of the issues at hand and associated interests, it is not feasible for any single partner to address them comprehensively by itself, as they necessitate a regional perspective, analysis and engagement.

While regional frameworks exist to address these issues and the like, they come with certain limitations. Based on the theoretical review at the beginning of this paper, these frameworks, such as the UfM, highlight various drawbacks associated with multilateral structures (see, for instance, Bicchi, 2011; Gillespie, 2011; Woertz, & Soler i Lecha, 2022). These include slow responses, difficulties in decision-making, lack of enforcement mechanisms, and more.

There is also the alternative of pursuing interests bilaterally. Indeed, the minilateral framework does not seek to replace this channel but can complement it by providing added value where the bilateral avenue falls short. Firstly, substantively, to advance plans and actions related to comprehensive connectivity across the East-West-North-South spectrum, it is necessary to expand the bilateral channel. Every bilateral partnership lacks at least one of the key nodes. Secondly, the minilateral framework provides opportunities for pooling resources. Undoubtedly, the Israel-Morocco bilateral channel is limited in terms of resources compared to the opportunities available through engagement with the EU. However, resources are not just financial, and

each country has something unique to contribute to the larger partnership. Thirdly, the establishment of a minilateral framework extends the room for political-diplomatic manoeuvres beyond the bilateral channel, both vis-à-vis other actors in the system and regarding domestic politics. For example, it is easier for Morocco to continue cooperating with Israel within such a minilateral organisation during periods of tension or crisis surrounding the Palestinian issue.

Morocco can pacify domestic political criticism of its relations with Israel by cooling down the bilateral channel but still utilising the minilateral framework to advance its interests. The existence of an independent player in the form of the minilateral framework allows for a broader political-diplomatic game, cynical or not. The EU, for instance, can engage with Morocco through the minilateral framework even when it is uncomfortable with Morocco's activities in Western Sahara or Israel's actions in the occupied territories.

The establishment and operation of such a framework are not without challenges. There are the usual challenges that confront any new framework, primarily those related to resources. This includes not only funding but, more importantly, attention, management, and human capital resources. Some of the tasks involved in establishing and operating a new minilateral framework also encompass ongoing investment in relationship and coordination with other channels of action – the independent, bilateral, and multilateral channels of action in which the country operates. Additionally, it involves the need of investing and coordinating in the interaction between the newly-established framework and other relevant actors who wish to cooperate with it, feel threatened by it, or may be affected by or impact the framework's activities in any other way.

When considering the possibility of establishing a joint minilateral framework involving Israel, Morocco and the EU, several issues are added and come into play that may pose difficulties and challenges in the alliance's formation and operation. One such issue is the difference in identity among the partners. While Israel and Morocco are nation-states, the EU is a supranational entity. Although each nation has its own distinct decision-making processes, the similarity between a nation's ability to make decisions and lead agreed-upon policies is not equivalent to the EU's capacity to do so. The decision-making processes within the EU differ in terms of complexity and pace compared to the potential processes in Morocco and Israel.

The difference lies not only in the different institutional identity of the potential partnerships but also in the varying degrees of power. Significant power disparities exist between Israel and Morocco, which are somewhat comparable to each other in terms of their economic, political, and diplomatic capital, and the EU. Building an equitable trilateral partnership in the face of such disparities is a not insignificant challenge, or, alternatively, constructing a non-egalitarian partnership that Israel and Morocco will willingly engage in and commit to.

In addition to the challenge of internal diversity, there are also contentious issues among the potential partnerships. For example, the EU and Morocco do not see eye to eye with the Israeli government on the resolution of the Palestinian issue, nor does the EU align with the Moroccan Kingdom on the Western Sahara matter. The EU has firm positions on these issues that do not align with the approaches taken by the governments of Israel and Morocco. The EU, for instance, holds different commitments to international law compared to Israel and Morocco. It is also true for the

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Therefore, while the establishment of the minilateral framework can be advantageous in promoting cooperation despite disagreements, these disagreements can also hinder the framework's activities in specific contexts.

Another challenge that adds to the collection of difficulties is related to the internal processes taking place within each player and the perception of these and other processes by the other potential partners. These are two distinct challenges, of course. One is an objective difficulty related to existing characteristics or internal processes. For example, the challenge the EU faces in formulating a unified foreign and security policy or its involvement in the conflict in Ukraine that calls for much of its attention. Or, similarly, Israel's available resources to invest in yet another diplomatic organ while it is entrenched in an internal struggle over its democratic character.

The second component pertains to mutual perceptions. For instance, do Morocco and the EU view the current Israeli government as one they can "do business with"? Is it stable enough and capable of providing the necessary commitments for the establishment and operation of a minilateral alliance? Or, how does the Israeli public perceive the EU – as a friendly entity to engage with, or as a foe critical of the prolonged occupation? Consequently, would the Israeli public grant political leeway to the Israeli government to promote such an alliance with the EU?

Another challenge worth considering is related to the advantage of expanding the political manoeuvring space provided by the minilateral framework. It is important to remember that expanding the political manoeuvring space not only offers opportunities to advance cooperation but

can also serve as a political-diplomatic lever against one of the partner states. For example, Morocco (and other states in the forum) has demonstrated its disapproval of the Israel government's policy on the Palestinian issue and Jerusalem by repeatedly postponing the convening of the "Negev Forum" planned to be in early 2023 in Morocco, which was politically significant for the Israeli government to convene.

There are, of course, additional challenges that we have not addressed here – personal aspects of the leaders, interests of other players in the region that could challenge such an alliance – such as the Palestinians, Algeria, or even the US, the competition between major powers, China's activities in the Middle East and Africa, the potential for failure in joint efforts to address this or other issues, the inherent tension between a new mechanism and the established bureaucracy of each of the partners, and more. However, for the sake of this focused discussion, we will leave it at that for now.

A minilateral framework that includes Israel, Morocco and the EU can contribute to strengthening cooperation in the Mediterranean region, promoting stability, and advancing collaborative efforts. Ultimately, it is a stable tripartite partnership of stable organs, where each party knows the others, and how to work with each other at the bilateral level (although Israel and Morocco are still at the beginning of the process and in the learning phase), and possesses the tools, knowledge and institutions that enable the promotion of cooperation. Each of the potential partners possesses valuable assets that can mutually benefit the interests and goals of the other two, making it a complementary partnership, where each has something to contribute to and gain from it.

Discussion

It is clear that such a short paper is insufficient to encompass and complement the discussion on the opportunities inherent in minilateral frameworks for strengthening the relationship between Europe and the Mediterranean. Even the discussion about the specific examples presented here is lacking, and there is room for further investigation. However, even this narrow discussion allows us to extract several important insights that can reinforce existing assumptions and assist in advancing research about and practical efforts to strengthen the European-Mediterranean relationship through minilateral frameworks.

Minilateral frameworks serve to add an additional layer and complementary activity to the independent actions of states and their activities within the bilateral and multilateral channels. It is crucial to acknowledge that they alone cannot offer comprehensive solutions to all problems and come with inherent drawbacks and challenges. Therefore, it is imperative to consider, analyse, and strategically plan their contributions as integral components within the broader tapestry of relations and cooperation.

In the cases discussed here, in general, there was no conflict between the different channels of operation; rather, there was mutual reinforcement and an expansion of the scope of manoeuvre and action in various areas of life. In the case of the Hellenic Alliance, we saw how the minilateral framework fitted the private interests of the partners, and did not limit their independent activities; it strengthened bilateral relations between the partners and opened up an additional channel of communication and activity with the EU. Given the convergence of common strategic interests, it seems that

the Hellenic Alliance did not create problems for the freedom of action of the participating countries within it or for their activities in other channels.

The second case of the theoretical tripartite alliance of Morocco, Israel and the EU can also be identified with a convergence of identical or complementary goals and interests that go hand in hand with the bilateral and multilateral channels the members are jointly part of. Of course, it does not mean that the activities in the minilateral channel suit all the activities of the partners in all of their frameworks. For example, it is easy to see how the shared minilateral framework between Israel, Morocco and the EU supports the joint efforts taking place in direct relations between the Union and Morocco, the Union and Israel, and Morocco and Israel, as well as the efforts within shared multilateral frameworks like the UfM. However, it is also conceivable, for example, that Morocco's alliances within the Arab League or the African Union could create conflicts between its activity in these frameworks and its activity within a shared framework with Israel. As is evident from the presentation above, in the two examples chosen for this paper we are dealing with minilateral frameworks involving countries that have good relations in bilateral channels. We are not dealing with cases where the minilateral framework serves the joint activity of countries that either have no relationship or have poor relations with each other. Examples like these might show a different picture regarding tensions between different levels of activity.

The speed at which relations between the Hellenic Alliance members have developed, the variety of collaborative efforts that have emerged, and the numerous agreements signed between the parties indicate the overall advantage of minilateral frameworks in promoting cooperation compared to

multilateral frameworks. For example, when comparing this to the number of new agreements signed between Israel and the EU, the lengthy negotiations between the Union and Israel regarding a new association agreement or an updated action plan, and the bureaucratic and political difficulties on the path, it highlights the ease, speed, and efficiency in advancing relations within the minilateral alliance. Given that certain strategic issues, such as migration, security, climate, energy, and others, require both comprehensive responses and rapid attention, it appears that minilateral frameworks provide a kind of efficient interim solution – while adhering to the general rules of the game established by multilateral frameworks, and until these frameworks can adjust to the substantial shifts happening in the real world.

With this depiction, one can observe how these alliances serve the effort of Europe and the Mediterranean to promote connectivity and integration. The fact is that the Hellenic Alliance is the one actively promoting energy connections between the Eastern Mediterranean and Europe (EastMed, Euro-Asia Interconnector, EMGF), which receive Union support, but it remains debatable whether they could have been advanced through multilateral or bilateral avenues. The topic of energy connectivity stands out above other issues within the Hellenic Alliance – security, climate, migration, democratic identity, and more –, all of which also find responses in other frameworks and channels. The activity within the multilateral framework complements and strengthens these efforts. It is worth noting that the Hellenic Alliance has not always provided exclusively positive outcomes for strengthening relations between Europe and the Mediterranean, as seen in the challenge it posed to the Union's activities in the Palestinian issue, and the increased

tension and instability in relations with Turkey. It is worth mentioning that enhancing stability in the East Mediterranean through regional integration aligns with the strategic interests of the US. Consequently, this fosters a favourable environment for the Hellenic Alliance to flourish.

In examining the potential contribution that the framework of Israel, Morocco and the EU can make to strengthening the connection between Europe and the Mediterranean, we need to identify critical issues that are not meaningfully addressed through other channels, or a meaningful unique contribution of the minilateral framework. This framework will only be established if such issues are found. The more the connection between the Eastern and Western Mediterranean becomes a critical issue for the Union and the Mediterranean people, or if topics like migration through land channels via Israel and Morocco into Europe become such, or the need to expand regional energy connectivity to transition successfully to renewable energies, a unique role will be found for such a minilateral organisation that can provide an efficient and effective interim solution, not found in other channels.

Issues related to water security, technology, food security, emergency response, and others, which may not exclusively define the potential alliance, can be dealt with in the bilateral and multilateral relations without unique added value to this specific minilateral framework. It is possible that the choice to initiate trilateral relations on environmental and climatic issues such as water security, as announced by the Moroccan Foreign Minister Bourita, is not because they are the central issues that could uniquely connect the potential partners but because they are strategic issues that are perceived as less politically

problematic and thus facilitate the initiation of such a relationship.

Given all the challenges facing the minilateral framework of Israel-Morocco-EU as an effort towards strengthening cooperation and stability, the potential partners should also consider alternative minilateral frameworks that may better serve the purpose. For example, the Hellenic Alliance discussed above, though in a different context, presents a model of 3+1. In this model, a European country (or more) forms a minilateral framework with Mediterranean countries in the Southern Neighbourhood, while the EU does not become a full member of the minilateral framework but maintains ties and collaborations, and provides political, economic and/or organisational support for it. It is possible to learn from the Hellenic case and promote collaborations and stability through such a minilateral framework involving Israel, Morocco, and additional European countries, with the EU providing supportive backing. For example, one can consider a minilateral framework involving Israel, Morocco and France. This would be a structure more similar to the Hellenic Alliance and its relationship with the EU. Several factors may make this option more favourable. It is easier to build a minilateral alliance when the players are more equal in size, assets and power, and the power disparities between Israel and Morocco compared to the EU are substantial. Moreover, it is easier to promote cooperation among three states than with a complex non-state actor like the EU. The intricate decision-making process of the EU may hinder the exploitation of the advantages of a minilateral framework in terms of flexibility, quick decision-making, modularity, and more. Specifically, Israel, France, and Morocco possess various cultural-historical tools that can support the establishment of this alliance and contribute the “soft” dimension of values and norms. The French language, the large Moroccan community

residing in France and Israel, the historical relations between Israel and France in the early years of the state, and certainly the well-established relations between France and Morocco all speak to the potential of this alliance. Certainly, there are distinctive challenges associated with this configuration. Tensions exist between Israel and France, as well as between France and Morocco. These dynamics could potentially impede the motivation to advocate for such a minilateral framework. Conversely, they might serve as a catalyst for the involved parties to utilise it as a cooperative tool, effectively managing and mitigating the existing tensions.

Generally speaking, Mediterranean states like Morocco and Israel might find more success in pursuing minilateral partnerships with individual European states rather than directly engaging with the EU. For the EU, a more effective strategy could involve refraining from direct involvement in minilateral frameworks but instead encouraging its members to actively participate in various minilateral collaborations. Establishing a clear system of support and fostering robust relations between the EU and these frameworks, as well as between the EU and its member states engaged in different minilateral initiatives, could serve as a vital mechanism. This approach has the potential to transform these minilateral frameworks from competitors to complements of multilateral structures, thereby facilitating cooperation rather than impeding it.

Conclusion and final remarks

Minilateralism provides a pragmatic and effective framework for advancing cooperation, integration, and global engagement between the Mediterranean and Europe. By leveraging their geographical proximity, historical ties, and shared aspirations, mini-

lateral initiatives can contribute to regional stability, economic prosperity, and joint responses to global challenges, ultimately fostering a more connected and resilient Mediterranean and European community.

Therefore, the recommendation is to establish and promote a complementary minilateral framework. This paper discussed frameworks where member states have good bilateral relations, but there is room to supplement the discussion by considering the role of minilateral frameworks in promoting cooperation between countries that do not have good relations.

Principles for coordination and collaboration between minilateral frameworks and multilateral frameworks need to be developed. This is a task entrusted to the countries participating in minilateral frameworks, but it is also an interest of multilateral frameworks to see how to give expression to minilateral frameworks in their conduct and to use those minilateral frameworks to promote issues that are important to the broader framework, as well as to strengthen the multilateral framework itself by enlisting its support and commitment to the broader framework. This can be promoted by creating mutual dependence and structured interaction with the minilateral frameworks as independent actors.

The choice of specific topics around which to build a minilateral alliance is important. It is advisable to select issues that are not already covered by other frameworks, those that have a common and strategically significant interest, and require effective and rapid intervention to seize opportunities or successfully address challenges. Issues related to climate, which are generally perceived as transcending political boundaries and emphasising human cooperation, tend to pose fewer political difficulties, but un-

justifiably are often not considered critical strategic issues. Energy and economic issues are another area that allows for cooperation; although they are seen as more competitive than climate issues, they still rely on collaboration and mutual dependence, usually carrying higher strategic weight. Lastly, security issues are often considered the most critical, but the demand for independent action and self-reliance in this field is higher, and external political resistance to such cooperation can be stronger, potentially contributing to instability. Focusing on peace-making and conflict resolutions can be an interesting avenue to explore. The choice of issues should be tailored to each specific case and context, but perhaps, among countries that have just begun their joint work, it would be more prudent to start with topics that have broad consensus, and arouse less antagonism and concern, such as climate crisis and its derivatives, emergency situations, health, research, and science, and then grow from there.

Regarding the EU's efforts to strengthen relations with the Mediterranean through minilateral frameworks, it should examine where it is appropriate for it to participate as a partner in such a framework, if at all, where it is more suitable for it to join as an observer, and where it is more fitting for it to treat the minilateral framework as a separate external player with whom it should establish an entirely independent set of relations. In addition, the Union will need to shape its relations and modes of operation with the minilateral frameworks that include some of its member states.

In the specific case of the Hellenic Alliance, which presents a successful model for promoting regional integration and stability, the EU should continue to support it, strengthen its normative aspects and democratic identity, work to expand the range of issues the alliance addresses,

and promote efforts to strengthen the connection between this alliance and Turkey. This can be promoted through multilateral or other minilateral frameworks, such as the EMGF or the establishment of a joint regional climate forum. In addition, it is advisable to bring one of the major projects promoted by this alliance to fruition, with an emphasis on the Euro-Asia Interconnector. The successful advancement of such a large-scale project could turn the Hellenic Alliance into a successful model that other countries would want to emulate, thereby further advancing regional integration.

In the specific case of the alliance between Israel, Morocco and the EU, it is worth considering an alternative alliance with France instead of the EU alongside the continued provision of support from

the Union to promote specific trilateral projects and strengthen bilateral channels among the three partners. All of this can be done within the framework and the tools it already has to offer today, as well as additional ones it can develop.

In summary, this paper highlights the positive potential inherent in minilateral frameworks for promoting regional integration between Europe and the Mediterranean Basin. There is room to expand and deepen the discussion on this potential and the challenges it presents, to better define them, learn from other examples in the region and the world, and develop unique initiatives. Ultimately, it is an additional, highly significant tool that should be fully utilised for the benefit of peace, stability, resilience, and prosperity for all residents of the region.

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