

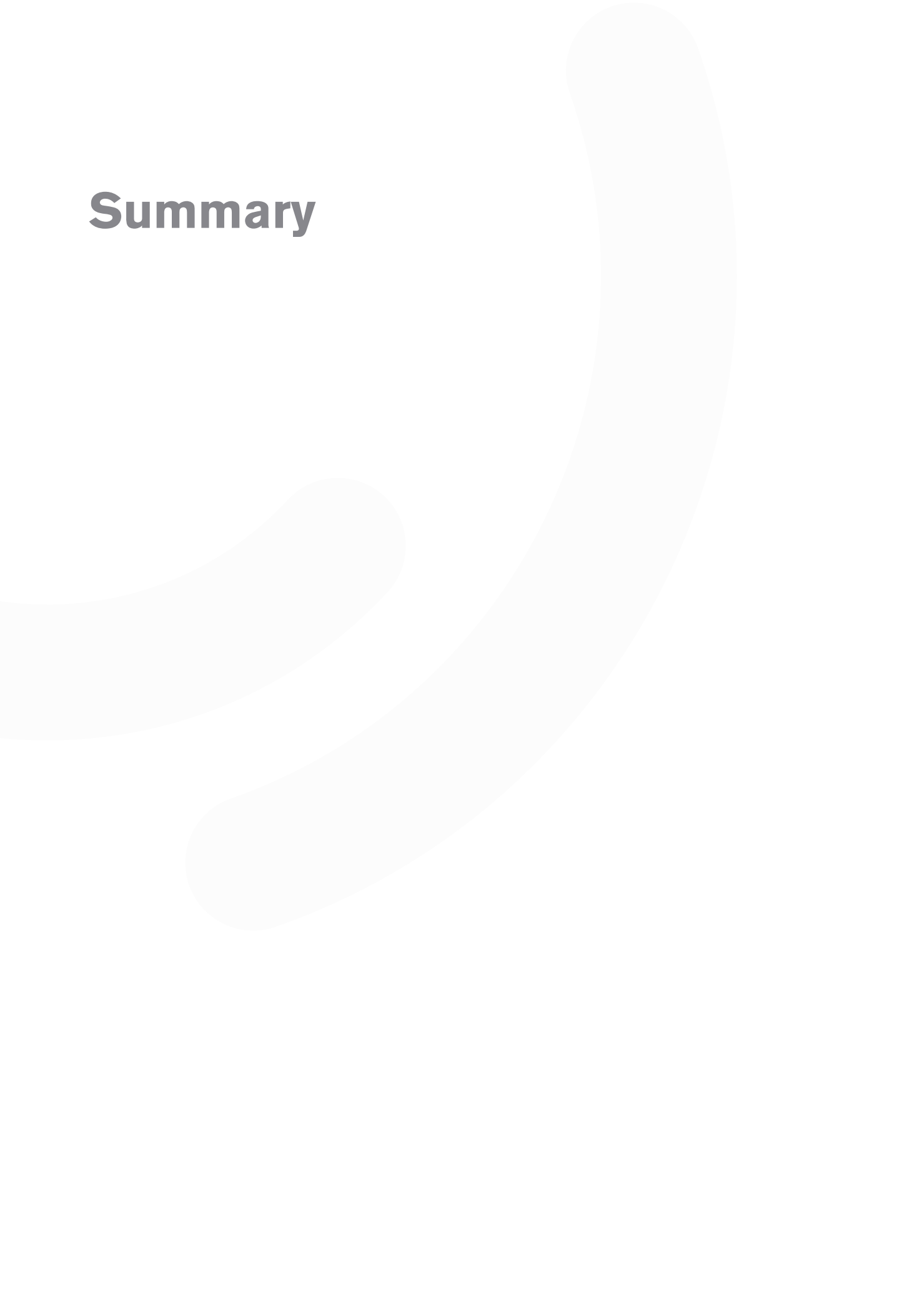
EUROMESCO ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2026

**STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS UNDER
PRESSURE REWIRING
EURO-MEDITERRANEAN
COOPERATION IN AN AGE
OF GLOBAL COMPETITION**

LARNACA, CYPRUS, 4-6 JUNE 2026

Report

Summary





“Strategic partnerships under pressure Rewiring Euro-Mediterranean cooperation in an age of global competition” was the theme of the EuroMeSCo 2026 Annual Conference, held at the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) in Larnaca, Cyprus, from 4 to 6 June 2026. The event brought together around 70 participants from 28 countries, including representatives of think tanks, academic institutions, governments, civil society organisations and EU institutions aiming to discuss common political challenges in the Euro-Mediterranean region.

The global order is becoming increasingly competitive, fragmented and interconnected with geopolitical rivalries extending into trade, connectivity, infrastructure and technology. In this context, the Euro-Mediterranean region is featured by its growing interdependence, shifting partnerships and

rising security, energy and migration challenges. Against this backdrop, the EuroMeSCo 2026 Annual Conference explored future scenarios for the Euro-Mediterranean cooperation and developed practical policy recommendations to strengthen regional governance and enhance the EU’s role in an increasingly fragmented international order profoundly marked by conflict and geopolitical competition.

The conference consisted of three working sessions addressing strategic alliances in the Middle East, corridor geopolitics in the Eastern Mediterranean, and regional cooperation in a conflict context. Subsequently, the conference also hosted three plugged-in sessions discussing the emergence of a new regional order following the war in Iran, Gaza’s future peace prospects, and Lebanon political and security challenges. Finally, the conference

hosted three plenary sessions featuring diverse topics around the region such as human mobility and migration in the Mediterranean, post-conflict reconstruction with Syria as a case study, and the geopolitical competition in the Middle East and the Gulf.

The event was organised by the European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed) in cooperation with the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) Cyprus Centre and with the financial support of the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID).



Opening Session



Speakers:

Senén FLORENSA. Executive President of the European Institute of the Mediterranean – IEMed.

Harry TZIMITRAS. Director of PRIO Cyprus Centre.

Cecilia GARCÍA GASALLA. Director of Cooperation with Africa, Arab World and Asia of the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation – AECID

Senén Florensa, Executive President of the European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed), opened the session by warmly welcoming all the attendees and participants to the 2026 edition of the EuroMeSCo Annual Conference, held in Larnaca, Cyprus.

After thanking all the distinguished researchers and professionals from different think tanks across the Mediterranean for

attending the conference, the IEMed's Executive President proceeded to acknowledge the collaboration of PRIO Cyprus Centre for hosting the event, and the Spanish Agency for Cooperation and Development (AECID), whose funding assisted and made possible the organisation of the event.

He remarked the importance of the gathering in Larnaca due to the complicated political, economic and social circumstances taking place in the Mediterranean region. This demonstrates the commitment and engagement of the attendees, making this conference possible despite the security challenges and the fragmented international system that is plausible in the Mediterranean.

Amb. Florensa highlighted that, considering the current geopolitical situation, the EuroMeSCo Network has become more important and necessary than ever before. In a context marked by political polarisation,



narratives simplification and policy choices taken under pressure - and often without long-term analysis - independent expertise and the need to reconnect policymaking with evidence becomes key priorities.

At the same time, the questions to be addressed during the Conference were revealed. How the regional actors navigate multipolarity and multi-alignment, energy and connectivity challenges in the Mediterranean, geopolitical competition in the Middle East and the Gulf, the difficulties of cooperation in war contexts and human mobility among others.

Following Senén Florensa, Harry Tzimitras, Director of PRIO Cyprus Centre, thanked him and welcomed the distinguished speakers, chairs and moderators for attending the conference. He expressed his satisfaction for hosting this event in Larnaca and underlined the importance and commitment of Cyprus, holding the Presidency of the European Council during the first half of 2026, in

Euro-Mediterranean policies regarding its connectivity and energy with the Middle East facing several security challenges at the time.

Finally, Harry Tzimitras gave the floor to Cecilia García Gasalla, Director of Cooperation with Africa, Arab World and Asia, Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID). She emphasised the deep commitment of AECID with development cooperation in the region and thanked EuroMeSCo for the organisation of the event that, undoubtedly, strengthens the links between both shores of the Mediterranean facing the current political challenges in the region. Moreover, she remarked the important role of cooperation in the Mediterranean during the uncertain and unstable moments that the region is currently experiencing.

Amb. Senén Florensa thanked again PRIO Cyprus, AECID, all the organisations and external supports, and wished all participants a pleasant stay in Larnaca, concluding the opening session.



Working Session I:

Geopolitics and diplomacy in the Middle East: Small-state strategies and emerging multipolar alignments



Chair:

Heidi HUUHTANEN. Senior Research Fellow at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs (FIIA).

Speakers:

Ali HIJAZI. Senior Researcher, Politics and Society Institute

Chiara LOVOTTI. Associate Research Fellow, Italian Institute for International Political Studies – ISPI

Lorenzo FRUGANTI. PhD Candidate, Scuola Normale Superiore; and Research Associate, MECAM Tunis

First Discussant:

Rabha ALLAM. Expert, Al-Ahram Center for Political & Strategic Studies – ACPSS.

This first Working Session explored two interconnected issues. On the one hand, the strategic value of small states in the region in the current fragmented and multipolar system in a geopolitical competition context. On the other hand, the implications of BRICS enlargement in the region for Euro-Mediterranean governance and policymaking.

On this occasion, two papers analysing these geopolitical topics were presented. The first paper analysed how the conflict with Iran could affect the future of NATO, trans-Atlantic relations and alliances. In this paper, the author argued that the conflict and crisis involving Iran did not generate a rupture in the security relations between the United States and the European countries but resulted in a new kind of partnership in security affairs characterised by a more selective cooperation shaped by the national interests of every NATO member. Despite the fact that western countries share similar interests and objectives, such as maritime security, regional stability and safe and free trade – interests directly affected by the conflict within Iran and the crisis for the closure of the strait of Hormuz – they hold different approaches on crisis management and how to tackle the instability and conflict escalation in the region. The discussion emphasised that this new form of partnership based on flexible alliances may strengthen NATO's approach to emerging challenges, even though at the same time it raised concerns about the alliance political cohesion and the commitment among its members. Thus, participants argued that NATO's future and potential shared strategy in the region and worldwide, will be shaped not only by its internal dynamics, but also by the trans-

formations of the international order and the global security challenges.

Some other interesting concepts were introduced during the session such as “wartime stability areas”, referring to countries capable of joining mediation, trade and dialogue spaces during an ongoing conflict. The discussion among the attendees also underlined the importance of strategic diversification among the states in the region, aiming to tackle energy crises, the closure of trade routes and reshaping security dynamics.

The second paper analysed the BRICS enlargement in the MENA region, using Iran, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates as case studies. The authors argued that the three countries did not join BRICS for the same reasons and the organisation should not be comprehended as an anti-western alliance. The examples provided stressed that Iran joined the organisation to prevent global isolation and to provide different governance alternatives to the western-led international system. Unlike

Iran, Egypt’s membership had economic reasons, especially related to access to finance and credit in addition to partnership flexibility. However, the UAE case reflected an intention of alliance diversification and strategic autonomy while maintaining strong links with Western countries.

The discussion led participants into highlighting BRICS enlargement as an example of the current trend in alliance construction in a multipolar international order. This could be seen as an avoidance of rigid alliances and blocs by regional powers aiming to pursue alliance diversification and expand its diplomatic and economic options globally. In addition, some questions were asked about the limits of hedging strategies, the diverse approaches of cooperation between Global South countries among BRICS members and the organisation’s struggle to offer an alternative to Western-led regional organisations and alliances. Attendees also raised questions about the how BRICS enlargement in the



Mediterranean could affect the EU's political approach to the region, by reducing its role in the region as the only external key actor.

To conclude, the Working Session underlined the deep transformations of the alliance dynamics and frameworks of economic cooperation in the MENA region in

a multipolar international order and in a geopolitical competition context. Participants agreed that the countries across the Euro-Mediterranean region are pushing towards a more diversified partnership system in order to expand its diplomatic options and seeking new opportunities to face the geopolitical and security challenges in the region.



Working Session II: Corridor Geopolitics and Strategic Connectivity in the Eastern Mediterranean



Chair:

Valeria TALBOT. Head, Middle East and North Africa Centre, Italian Institute for International Political Studies – ISPI.

Speakers:

Laury HAYTAYAN. MENA Director, Natural Resource Governance Institute

Mehmet ILHANLI. PhD Researcher, National University of Singapore & General Coordinator, Diyarbakır Institute for Political and Social Research.

First Discussant:

San BILAL. Executive Director, European Centre for Development Policy Management – ECDPM.

The session examined the growing importance of corridor politics and connectivity in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East, focusing on how infrastructure projects, regional conflicts and geopolitical

competition among major powers are reshaping energy and trade routes in the region. On this occasion, two papers were presented. The first paper analysed the energy and trade corridors, as well as aerial connectivity in the region. The second paper studied Post-Assad Syria's potential role in the region regarding regional connectivity projects.

The first paper presentation argued that the discussion on corridor geopolitics have traditionally focused on maritime and land routes, often overlooking the potential of airspace corridors. The author used China's Belt and Road Initiative, the EU's Global Gateway and the Development Road project that links Europe to the Gulf through Iraq and Türkiye as examples. Likewise, the author proposed a more comprehensive approach to connectivity using airspace as a third dimension to consider. The author underscored how contemporary economic integration and trade connectivity in the region do not only depend on road routes, railway networks and further commercial ports, but

also on airports, air cargo systems and air corridors, that have played a key role in the current global supply chains.

Subsequently, the first discussant commended the author's initiative. He stressed the importance of the interconnection between the three dimensions – land, sea and air – to better explain the interaction between them. In addition, the value of regulatory frameworks was highlighted, such as aviation agreements, as sometimes these become further than infrastructure issues and can determinate the success of trade and connectivity projects.

Discussions among the participants focused on the security issues that connectivity faced in the region. The debate highlighted how the recent conflicts in the Middle East demonstrated the vulnerability of trade routes and connectivity regarding military escalation and the extended use of drone warfare. Participants also explored how airspace disruptions could affect

economic models like the ones in the Gulf countries, the growing use of airspace defence identification zones and hybrid warfare threaten civilian population and air trading routes. Experts warned about how these dynamics could endanger the agreements on air and maritime trade.

The second paper explored Syria's potential role in connectivity projects through the Eastern Mediterranean as an alternative trading and energy resource route regarding the geopolitical context in the region. The author analysed broader initiatives such as the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) and the search for new alternative routes due to the conflict escalation within Lebanon, Yemen or Iran, following the closure of the Strait of Hormuz. Therefore, Syria was presented as a country with geographical potential to become a new link between regional and international connectivity, even though its ability to benefit from this opportunity depends on governance challenges, a suc-



cessful post-war reconstruction and the avoidance of political instability.

The latter discussion among the participants explored the interests of different external actors such as the United States, the European Union or the Gulf countries. Attendees underlined the importance of the creation of new energy, trade and economic corridors linking the Persian Gulf, the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, and expressed their concern about Syria's current political situation and the uncertainty that surrounds the port of Tartus. Questions related to Syria's ability to attract investments without replicating past errors were also raised. Moreover, the role of external actors

in shaping connectivity and political resilience was also discussed.

The session stressed the centrality of connectivity and corridors in the geopolitical competition in the Euro-Mediterranean region, the Middle East and the Gulf. The speakers highlighted that transportation corridors, airspace and energy trading routes are being reshaped by economic interests, security concerns and ongoing rivalries. The discussion also contributed on the broader debate on connectivity, concluding that this is not only about infrastructure, but a broader issue involving governance, cooperation and security affairs.

Working Session III: Regional Cooperation in War and Crisis





Chair:

Rim FILALI MEKNASSI. Head of Euro-Mediterranean Policies Department, European Institute of the Mediterranean – IEMed.

Speakers:

Nadim HOURY. Executive Director of the Arab Reform Initiative – ARI.

Natalia SANCHA. International Correspondent, MENA Region, El País.

Moussa BOUREKBA. Research Fellow at the Barcelona Centre for International Affairs -CIDOB.

This working session explored the future of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation in a context profoundly marked by armed conflict, fragmentation and geopolitical competition, in addition to the declining trust between the European Union and its Southern Neighbours. The session ad-

ressed whether the recent Pact for the Mediterranean could be effectively implemented as long as the armed conflicts and political instability issues in the region remain unsolved. Participants argued whether the EU's current approach to the region which emphasises technical cooperation is enough to address the deep transformations that are currently taking place in the Middle East and North Africa. One of the most discussed key topics was the need for the European Union to redefine its strategy towards the region. Several participants argued that currently the EU's role in the region remains that of a payer rather than a player. In consequence, Europe would be a financial contributor instead of a genuine political actor in the region if it continues separating economic cooperation from security and conflict resolution. The discussion highlighted that connectivity, education, energy and investment projects may not succeed without a broader political strategy capable of addressing the ongoing conflicts in the region. For instance, par-



Participants stressed that any renewed partnership between the EU and its Southern Neighbourhood should be accompanied by a clear vision of the regional order that the EU seeks to promote.

The discussion also highlighted the credibility of the European Union's foreign policy. Participants underscored that the EU suffered a huge loss of legitimacy in the region especially for its double standards regarding Gaza and the different responses given by the EU towards Ukraine and Palestine. Participants argued that the traditional role played by the EU as a guarantor of a rule-based order and a defender of international law and human rights has been weakened, which has contributed to its loss of political influence in the region.

Another major theme addressed was the relationship between security, economic development and regional cooperation. Participants questioned the viability of connectivity projects and large-scale energy corridors, arguing that infrastructure alone cannot generate sustainable development without addressing the se-

curity issues and the armed conflicts generating profound instability in the region. Some interventions suggested that Europe must place greater emphasis on strengthening governance, judicial institutions, transparency and state capacity rather than transport and energy projects. The discussion explored also alternative development cooperation strategies that could foster long-term resilience instead of reinforcing rent-based economies linked to the MENA traditional economic framework.

Subsequently, broader geopolitical transformations were also discussed. It was underlined that ongoing conflicts in Lebanon, Gaza and Iran, in addition to Syria's difficult situation, are reshaping regional order, marking the emergence of a new era of geopolitical competition in which Israel, Türkiye and Gulf countries are transforming the region's security dynamics. Simultaneously, participants argued that the EU's influence in the region has been affected by the increase of the strategic role taken by other external actors like the United States, raising concerns about the EU's

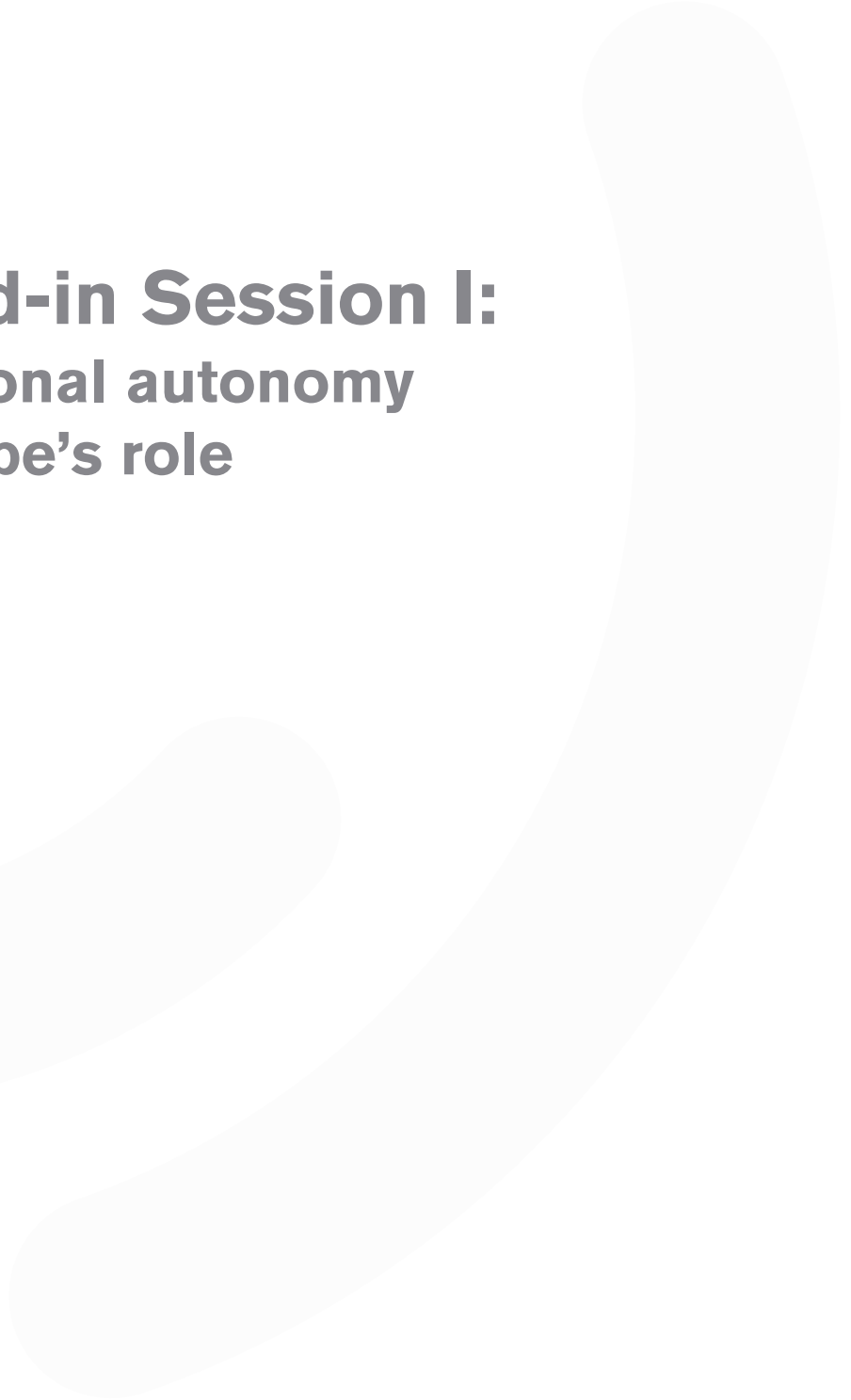
ability to shape future regional developments.

In addition, the discussion also addressed issues related to governance and the role of civil society. Attendees stressed the relevance of engaging not only with governments but also with local communities, civil society initiatives and non-governmental organisations in order to promote regional development projects. In that sense, it was underlined that Euro-Mediterranean relations should rely on a broader range of partners to strengthen regional ownership rather than solely supporting state-based initiatives. Simultaneously, questions about the shrinking civic space and freedom

of expression were raised, stressing the importance for the EU to remain faithful to its principles and values in order to not lose credibility abroad.

Overall, the session concluded that regional cooperation is inseparable from the conflicts, the security dynamics and crises taking place in the Mediterranean, the Middle East and North Africa. It was highlighted that the success of the Pact for the Mediterranean depends not only on technical cooperation, but on remain consistent with the values, political credibility, developing a coherent regional strategy and at the same time addressing governance issues, institution building and conflict resolution.

Plugged-in Session I: Iran, regional autonomy and Europe's role





Chair:

Diba MIRZAEI. Research Fellow, German Institute for Global and Area Studies – GIGA.

The first Plugged-In Session focused on the consequences of the war with Iran and the implications of the American and Israeli intervention for the regional order. The discussion explored the consequences of conflicts in the region, the role of external powers, the limitations of security and co-operation frameworks in the Middle East and potential scenarios of a new regional order.

One of the main topics discussed in the session was the need to rethink the security framework and agreements in the region. It was highlighted that the current security

arrangements in the Gulf do not respond to the new geopolitical situation and challenges, adding that every future security architecture in the Middle East and the Gulf should include all regional powers, especially Iran. Participants argued that the Gulf security framework can no longer be understood solely within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) but requires a broader and inclusive regional approach.

Iran was also one of the central themes of the session. About this, participants warned against assuming that a regime change in Iran would lead to democratisation, a wide political opening or regional stability. They agreed that the Iranian regime's political future is uncertain, and it turns into a complicated issue to predict potential internal scenarios. Nevertheless, it was underlined that a future regional strategy ought not

to be conceived without recognising Iran as a regional power and an influential actor, regardless of any future changes to its political system.

Another major question raised was the future role of the United States in the region. Discussants argued that the current war in Iran has reinforced perceptions of a United States gradual strategic disengagement from the Middle East and growing shift towards the Indo-Pacific. At the same time, they stressed that this potential reduction in US commitment towards the region may trigger deep transformations in the Gulf security architecture, leading local actors to assume a greater responsibility in security affairs. However, participants agreed that US future strategy towards the region remains an uncertain variable that, undoubtedly, could reshape the Middle East and the Gulf strategic outlook.

The relationship between the Gulf and the Mediterranean Levant also emerged as an important topic of discussion. Participants indicated that the traditional distinction between both subregions may have become increasingly as a result of recent conflicts, creating a broader geopolitical space heavily interconnected. Especially, the confrontation between Iran and Israel, that was featured as a multi-theatre conflict that, in one way or another, linked the security dynamics of the Gulf and the Eastern Mediterranean closer than ever before.

Nevertheless, Türkiye's role in the region was also addressed. In that sense, participants highlighted Türkiye's rise in the region and how Ankara is increasingly shaping the regional developments especially in Syria and with its relations with the Gulf countries. However, they acknowledged



that Türkiye faces several internal political and economic challenges and its future role in the region remains uncertain as well as its capacity to act as a reliable strategic partner.

Finally, the session addressed the European Union's position in the region. Different participants stressed that the EU lacks both the strategic capacity and the political will to play a more active role in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf. For instance, they argued that current European priorities are still focused on Eastern Europe and particularly on Ukraine in the context of the ongoing war with Russia. Despite this, several participants argued that the EU possesses major diplomatic,

economic and institutional instruments that could be employed more effectively. Particularly through the relationships that some Member States maintain with regional partners.

To conclude, the session highlighted the increasing complexity of the Gulf and the Middle East geopolitical environment after the war against Iran. Participants agreed that the region is entering a period of profound uncertainty featured by power balancing, regional political transformations, uncertainty regarding the future role of the United States in the region and the need to develop new security agreements capable of addressing emerging threats and challenges.



Plugged-in Session II:

Gaza, trust and Europe's engagement in the future peace process

Chair:

Omar SHABAN. Director, Pal Think for Strategic Studies.

This session focused on the war in Gaza, the future of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Israeli settlement policy and the potential annexation of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank by Israel. Thus, the central topic on the debate was that the events that took place on 7 October 2023 cannot be analysed without looking at the historical context of occupation, Israeli settlement expansion and the absence of a viable political process. Several participants underlined that the current state of the conflict reflects several decades of unresolved grievances and violence linked to the deterioration of prospects for a long-term solution. In addition, one of the main themes discussed was the enlargement of Israeli settlements in the West Bank, the pro-

liferation of settler violence and the broader impact on Palestinian society through occupation and economic restrictions.

The debate paid special attention to the internal crisis of Palestinian governance. Attendees indicated that the Palestinian National Authority represents a weak actor that lacks legitimacy as no elections have been held in Palestine since 2006. The participants argued that, due to internal fragmentation and external pressures, the Palestinian National Authority can no longer represent the interests of the Palestinian population. In addition, some participants stressed that the annulment of the elections in 2021 was a missed opportunity for the Palestinians to renew their political leadership and reduce public frustration.

Another theme that was broadly discussed is the viability of the two-state



solution in the current times. And even though participants acknowledged the proposal of France and Saudi Arabia, most of them questioned whether the creation of a Palestinian state is still viable considering the current political conditions. Interventions among the attendees highlighted that there is a disconnect between the official international support for the two-state solution and the current reality on the ground, heavily marked by displacement, settlement expansion, political fragmentation and the ongoing violence in Gaza. Several discussants emphasised that researchers, especially from European policy circles, should acknowledge these realities ex-

ploring different alternatives beyond the two-state solution.

Regional actors were also part of the discussion. Therefore, the roles of Qatar, Egypt the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia in the reconstruction of Gaza and its future development were discussed. Participants also stressed the diplomatic pressure that these countries can exert on Israel regarding post-war governance, especially Egypt, which have played a mediation role and is heavily involved in Gaza's reconstruction and its future administration.

Moreover, questions were raised about the European Union's role in the conflict. Most



participants agreed that the EU could play a more meaningful role beyond sanctioning violent settlers and provide humanitarian aid to the population of Gaza, starting with exerting more pressure to Israel to influence its decision-making framework.

The session also analysed Israel's internal political developments. Speakers argued that the current Israeli government is show-

ing little political commitment to pursue a negotiated peace process and shifting the discussion about Palestinian statehood away. In addition, the session also underlined the generational change and the physical and psychological separation between Israeli and Palestinian societies. In that sense several speakers showed hope for a political transition that could enable the opening of new dialogues regardless

of the leadership crisis that both Palestinians and Israelis are experiencing.

An important part of the debate was focused on Hamas and the future governance of Gaza after the war. Attendees questioned if the Israeli objective centred the total eradication of Hamas is realistically possible. For instance, they established a distinction between Hamas as an armed actor, Hamas as a political organisation and Hamas as a social phenomenon in Gaza. In this case, participants agreed that despite the weakening of Hamas's military leadership, the political and social dimen-

sion is much harder to eradicate. This raised several questions about how Gaza can be governed after the war and if there could be a new political arrangement far from the armed groups.

The participants highlighted the need for renewed political leaderships and credible political institutions. The discussion emphasised the gap between international policy positions and the events taking place on the ground, raising questions about Palestinian self-determination, Israeli security and long-term prospects for peace in the region.



Plugged-in Session III: Beyond the Ceasefire. Lebanon's Political and Security Deadlock

Chair:

Joseph BAHOUT. Director, Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI), American University of Beirut (AUB).

The third plugged-in session examined the increasingly fragile security and political context in Lebanon amid the regional conflict involving Israel, Iran and Hezbollah. The discussion analysed how recent events have weakened the Lebanese state while addressing Lebanon's limited capacity to navigate the geopolitical competition taking place in the region. Participants argued that Lebanon's future depends not only on domestic political reforms, but also on a broader balance of power in the Middle East and the evolution of the conflict between Israel and Iran.

One of the main topics discussed during the session was the impact of the regional

conflict on Lebanon's internal political stability. Participants argued that the conflict has enhanced the country's economic difficulties, political fragmentation and institutional fragility that is limiting the state's ability to exercise sovereignty. Particular attention was given to Hezbollah's role in the country, whose military capabilities and political influence in Lebanon hinder efforts to strengthen the state's institutions while shaping domestic politics and security affairs in the Levant.

The session highlighted the diplomatic efforts aimed at preventing a broader regional war. It stressed the negotiations trying to stabilise the border between Israel and Lebanon, while it seems that those initiatives have made little progress due to political and strategic disagreements. For instance, attendees explored different future scenarios in Lebanon, ranging from managed de-escalation and border stabilisation to a prolonged conflict including in the worst



case a direct intervention of the United States and Iran. Each of those situations would have profound consequences for Lebanon's political stability, governance and economic recovery.

Another relevant theme addressed during the session concerned Lebanon's future reconstruction and long-term recovery. The discussion argued that a sustainable long-term recovery would require not only security arrangements and a lasting ceasefire, but also comprehensive political and economic reforms capable of rebuilding state capacity, attracting investment and restoring public institutions. Simultaneously, it underlined that political fragmentation and

Hezbollah's future role in the country will remain major obstacles for a long-term stabilisation and state-building.

Finally, the session concluded that Lebanon is still one of the central arenas of the conflict in the Middle East and its future remains closely linked to the transformations of the region's geopolitical order. The discussion emphasised that the prospects for stabilisation in the Levant will depend on the evolution of regional diplomacy, the management of Israeli-Iranian tensions and Lebanon's capacity to state institutions through political and economic reforms but also addressing security challenges.

Plenary Session I

**From crisis management
to shared governance:
reimagining human mobility
in the Mediterranean region**



Moderator:

Harry TZIMITRAS, Director, PRIO Cyprus

Panellists:

Markos KARAVIAS. Director, Mediterranean Migration and Asylum Policy Hub – MedMA

Kristin FABBE, Chair in Business and Comparative Politics, Florence School of Transnational Governance, EUI

Amina FAHMY. Migration Policy Researcher

Hrishabh SANDILYA. Co-Director, European Philanthropic Initiative for Migration

The first plenary session focused on the evolving landscape of migration governance in the Mediterranean, paying particular attention to the implementation of the new EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, the cooperation with Southern

Mediterranean countries and the broader political, economic and social challenges that are reshaping migration governance in the region. This session explored the importance of labour mobility, the role of migration agreements and the need to rethink migration policies in a geopolitical context heavily marked by political instability, regional conflicts, demographic pressure and climate change.

After the introduction of Harry Tzimitras as a Moderator, Markos Karavias started the session analysing the implications of the new EU pact for migration and asylum. He argued that the current EU migration policy is deeply influenced by the 2015 migration crisis, characterized by border control measures, asylum management mechanisms and migration externalisation policies. According to Karavias, Europe must move towards a more balanced model of migration governance, developing legal and regulated mobility pathways that could address both labour market needs and humani-



tarian challenges. For instance, he presented labour mobility as a key instrument for establishing mutually beneficial migration frameworks with Southern Mediterranean countries involving different actors. Karavias also stressed the importance of combining compassion with sense of control in the public debate, in order to address humanitarian affairs and the citizens' demands on migration control.

Secondly, Amina Fahmy provided the Egyptian point of view highlighting Egypt's importance in migration affairs as a country of origin and transit for many migrants towards Europe. She underlined Egypt's migration governance with regards to the displacement crisis due to the war in Sudan, a situation that, according to Fahmy, does not attract enough international attention. In addition, she argued that in Egypt migration is not just a socio-economic issue, but a key component of Egypt's foreign policy strategy. She stressed the importance of Egypt's asylum policy and argued that the migration partnership and cooperation frameworks between the EU and Southern Mediterranean countries should extend beyond border management and control, including social protection and integration policies. She agreed with Markos Karavias on the importance of labour mobility and what remittances represent for Egypt's economy. Moreover, she pointed out that migration cooperation between the EU and its Southern partners should address the root causes of displacement rather than preventing migrants' arrival to Europe.

After Fahmy's intervention, Kristin Fabbe offered a critical approach to the EU migration externalisation policies with countries such as Libya, Tunisia, Egypt and Türkiye among others. She warned that

those arrangements could create an asymmetric scenario where Europe could become dependent on third countries for migration management and, in addition, may contribute to the consolidation of autocratic and authoritarian governments in the region. She questioned if those agreements represent a form of shared governance or instead create unequal power dynamics in which the EU keeps its migration management policy while transferring the responsibility to third countries. Fabbe also stressed the democratic implications for the EU's migration governance, noticing a contradiction between the economic dependence on migrant labour and the often-limited options and difficulties for integration and access to citizenship. Finally, she argued that anti-immigration narratives are not solely linked to xenophobic attitudes, but also to the feeling of socio-economic insecurity and disenchantment within European societies.

Lastly, Hrishabh Sandilya highlighted the importance of non-state actors in playing a key role by protecting migrants' rights and supporting labour mobility schemes. Sandilya argued that philanthropist organisations can become spaces for political experimentation and funding new initiatives that may later be adopted by governments and international organisations. He also underlined the importance of including other actors like businesses, local governments and international financial institutions in migration governance. Finally, Hrishabh Sandilya warned about the rise of climate-induced migrations and how governments should adapt their migration frameworks adding a climate dimension to respond to the climate challenge, as the environmental changes in the Mediterranean are generating new displacement patterns.

After the speakers' intervention, the questions raised by participants broadened the discussion addressing other



issues such as the impact of artificial intelligence on labour markets, the challenge of addressing public anxiety towards migration in the European countries as well as the future of human mobility in a context of geopolitical competition in the region, climate change, massive displacements and demographic decline in Europe. Europe's dependence on foreign labour was also addressed, concluding that it will keep requiring migrant workers due to labour shortage and an ageing population.

Overall, the session underscored that migration has become a structural feature of the Euro-Mediterranean region rather than a temporary phenomenon. A migration model based on border control and migrants' containment is insufficient without a more comprehensive framework that includes development cooperation, rights protection, labour mobility schemes and shared governance. Experts called for long-term migration partnerships and cooperation between North and South Mediterranean countries beyond crisis-management.

Plenary Session II

**Reconstruction and cooperation
in fragile geopolitical contexts**

– Syria as a case study

Moderator:

Mark FURNESS. Senior Researcher. German Institute of Development and Sustainability - IDOS.

Panellists:

Ammar KAHF. Co-Founder and Executive Director. Omran Center for Strategic Studies.

Reem TURKMANI. Research Fellow, Director of Syria Conflict Research Programme, London School of Economics.

Henrike TRAUTMANN. Director in charge of Middle East for its Directorate-General for Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf - DG MENA.

First Discussant:

Farah AL-SHAMI. Senior Fellow and Program Director for Social Protection, Arab Reform Initiative.

The second plenary session focused on Syria's Post-Assad transition, exploring the prospects for reconstruction, governance reform, institution-building and re-integration into the regional political land-

scape. The discussion provided different perspectives on the political, social and economic challenges that Syria is currently facing while also addressing the implications for the EU in regional politics.

Firstly, Ammar Kahf analysed the current political and economic situation in Syria following the fall of the Assad regime. He argued that despite the political transition, the country is still facing a wide range of challenges such as institutional weakness, economic deterioration, and widespread poverty. Kahf highlighted that Syria's reconstruction will remain impossible without restoring the basic economic conditions to do so, for instance, facilitating access to international financial systems, easing sanctions affecting banking transactions is essential. In addition, Ammar Kahf stressed the importance of reconstructing governance institutions while avoiding the reemergence of authoritarianism and repeating the former regime's errors, in order to ensure that Syria's future reforms respond to the needs of Syrian society rather than geopolitical interests.

Reem Turkmani emphasised the role of Syria's civil society in reshaping the country's future. She argued that recon-





struction is not solely a physical and economic process but also about rebuilding social trust and political participation after a decade of conflict. Thus, Turkmani emphasised the importance of involving civil society and local communities in Syria's reconstruction and stressed the broader role that the Syrian diaspora could play in the process, especially those citizens with education and professional experience in Europe. Simultaneously, she warned that refugee returns must not be forced by European migration concerns, but should depend on the existence of safe, voluntary and dignified conditions.

Henrike Trautmann explored the EU's approach to post-Assad Syria and the conditions for reconstruction support. She argued that the EU should move beyond a purely humanitarian approach and develop a long-term strategy for Syria based on political engagement, economic reconstruction and institution building. In that sense, Trautmann underlined that reconstruction cannot be only limited to rebuilding infrastructure, and the EU should provide the

necessary tools to strengthen governance, accountability and inclusive political institutions. At the same time, she stressed the importance of the gradual lifting of sanctions under conditional upon respect for human rights, good governance and profound political reforms.

Finally, Farah Al-Shamy highlighted the importance of social and civilian protection during the reconstruction of Syria, addressing social, ethnic and gender inequalities as well as protecting the most vulnerable communities in Syria while creating a sustainable social protection system. She also emphasised the relevance of agricultural reconstruction and aid to rural communities after conflict. After the intervention, participants stressed the broader implications of Syria's reconstruction, which include refugee returns, economic integration and the future role of the neighbouring countries in supporting the transition. This was considered to depend partly on the ambition of the EU's policies towards the region.


To conclude, the session highlighted the idea that Syria's reconstruction goes far

beyond rebuilding physical infrastructure and constitutes a broader challenge involving public trust in governance, political institution reform, economic revitalisation and the strong involvement of civil society.

At the same time, participants agreed that the success of the transition will depend on coordinated international engagement capable of balancing reconstruction, accountability and long-term regional stability.

Plenary Session III

Geopolitical competition in the Middle East and the Gulf: drivers, dynamics, and opportunities

The background features two large, light gray, curved shapes that resemble stylized parentheses or abstract brushstrokes. One shape is positioned on the left side, curving upwards and to the right. The other is on the right side, curving downwards and to the left. They are semi-transparent and have soft, rounded edges.

Presentation of the Regional Study by:

Katarzyna SIDŁO. Senior Policy Analyst for the Middle East and North Africa. EUISS.

Discussants:

Álvaro IRANZO. Ambassador of Spain.

Ruta ZARNAUSKAITE. Head of Unit, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Yemen - MENA.C.2, European Commission.

Moderator:

Hala ABI SALEH. Researcher GERMAC-UCLouvain.

The last plenary session focused on the evolving power dynamics in the Middle East in a regional context profoundly marked by geopolitical competition, security challenges, conflicts and transformation of the international order. The session featured the exclusive presentation of a new study by Katarzyna Sidło exploring the rel-

evance and influence of external powers in the region and addressing how current economic, social and political dynamics are reshaping governance and international relations.

Katarzyna Sidło presented a detailed analysis of external influence in the MENA region based on a wide range of indicators, including trade, official development assistance, remittances and security cooperation. On the one hand, she stressed that the influence of external powers in the region cannot be understood through a single dimension, because every external actor exercises influence through different instruments such as economic, political or financial channels. In that sense, she argued that China now plays a leading role

in regional trade for many countries in the region, however the EU remains a key actor as the main investor and economic partner. In addition, the study challenges the point of view that indicates the perceived decline of the EU's influence in the region, arguing that the EU continues to exert a considerable influence in the region although not being so visible as other powers.

On the other hand, Sidło also addressed the importance of remittances and development assistance. She underlined that remittances coming in particular from the Gulf countries remain a key factor to take into consideration, especially when addressing countries like Jordan or Lebanon. She also addressed the patterns of development assistance, highlighting Türkiye's growing influence in Syria following Assad's fall in 2024, while questioning common assumptions regarding China's contribution to the aid sector arguing that China's development investment remains more geographically concentrated than often is assumed.

Ruta Zarnauskaite and Álvaro Iranzo intervened as discussants. They emphasised the importance of indicators like migration flows, cultural cooperation and soft-power instruments to provide a more comprehensive understanding of regional dynamics. In addition, the discussion also stressed that geopolitical competition does not necessarily exclude cooperation, so often, regardless of competition, regional and external actors often engage simultaneously in both competition and cooperation.

Subsequently, the debate addressed the importance of the conflicts taking place in Palestine, Lebanon, Libya and Iran, arguing that the ongoing crisis in the MENA region reflects both the fragility of regional political stability and the limitations of existing institutions and political mechanisms. As a result, several questions about the future of

cooperation in the Middle East were raised, considering the growing uncertainty of future regional partnerships and alliances in a fragmented and changing international order.

To conclude, the session explored power relations in the region and highlighted the complexity of the current geopolitical en-

vironment. The influence of external in the region is multidimensional and should not be understood solely through security and diplomatic dimensions. Economic investment, development assistance, trade relations and geopolitical competition interact simultaneously creating a regional environment characterised by both multipolarity and interdependence.

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