



The case for a Euro-Arab summit

James Moran

The EU holds regular summit meetings with key partner countries such as the US, China and India and with various regions, notably Africa, Latin America and Asia. But there is one major region that has been conspicuous by its absence from the summit agenda. I refer, of course, to the Arab world, which is an odd omission to say the least, given the host of common challenges that preoccupy both the EU and this region.

For years, a number of EU member states, and virtually all those on the Arab side, have pushed for such a meeting, or at least did not obstruct it, but it was only last December at the EU-Arab League Foreign Ministers' Cairo meeting that a consensus in favour of a summit was found, and a commitment made to "work towards" it.

European and Arab leaders face a host of common challenges. After years of delay, a first Euro-Arab summit is in view.

Since then, the idea has been endorsed by the LAS (League of Arab States) annual summit, and there have been some working-level exchanges, with a date sometime next year in mind. But preparations have yet to get underway. Without greater impetus now, there is little chance of it taking place in 2018, given the lead time needed to ensure that the 50 countries involved (28 plus institutions on the EU side and the 22 Arab League member states) are properly represented at Head of State and/or Government level.

Why the delay? Clearly, new schisms have appeared in recent months on the Arab side, namely the crisis over Qatar, which affects both the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council)¹ countries and most of the rest of the LAS, which is split on the Saudi-led initiative to isolate Doha. There may also be some doubts on the EU side about the prospects for a good turnout, given 'summit fatigue' and domestic distractions such as Brexit. And it certainly won't be easy for either side to come up with meaningful political messages on the most important issues, and there is a risk that it will degenerate into a talking shop, albeit an elevated one.

¹ These include Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman.

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Time to move forward

But if history is any guide, there will always be internal divisions, Arab or European, standing in the way. At the same time, there has never been a greater need to move forward. Three points stand out here:

First, one of the many reasons why the Middle East, North Africa and Gulf region is in such disarray is the woeful lack of progress on regional integration. Despite a common language and culture and it being home to the oldest regional institution, it remains one of the least integrated parts of the world. There is widespread cynicism on the Arab 'street' about the ability of the LAS to find common political cause, and intra-regional economic links, especially in trade, are weak.

With that in mind, and without wishing to exaggerate the EU's influence on its Arab partners, the fact that the European Union would find it useful to upgrade its political relationship with the LAS as a group could help the latter regain some credibility with its own membership and citizens. That in turn might help it to take on a greater role in bringing peace and development to this atomised region.

Working for peace

Second, with a little diplomatic energy and imagination, it should be possible for the two sides to come up with some influential common messaging.

At a time when other key players in the Middle East, notably the US, seem to be wavering and where there is a dearth of viable alternatives, one might recall that both sides have long been committed to the two-state solution and the Arab Peace Initiative, although few leaders today seem to give it the attention it deserves. Crafting a strong common position which directly engages all leaders could help to inject energy into the moribund peace process. Without that, the drums of war for yet another round of violence in Palestine and Israel will only beat louder, giving extremists everywhere new succour.

The summit could inject new energy into the moribund Middle East peace process and help abate other conflicts in the region.

Apart from the appalling suffering visited on the peoples of those countries, the fallout from conflicts in Syria, Libya, Iraq and Yemen is fuelling instability on both sides, whether through the rise of Islamophobia and populism, or through unsustainable policies of repression in the name of security. A Euro-Arab summit in itself will certainly not bring peace, not least because many of the parties to those wars will not be present, but again, it could give momentum to efforts, especially those led by the UN, to find solutions. It could also help to sharpen joint action to fight the deprivation, terrorism, and irregular migration generated by conflict, all of which gnaw at the roots of societies on both sides.

And depending on developments on the military fronts, there may also be room for a discussion about how best to cooperate with post-war governance and reconstruction, wherever that is a feasible proposition.

Facing up to economic challenges

Last but by no means least, the summit could delve into the deep-rooted economic challenges that the region faces. It may well be that after a few false starts, the transition to a post-hydrocarbon world has now begun in earnest and this obviously has fundamental, possibly existential consequences for a number of LAS countries, oil exporters and consumers alike. Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 programme is one among other signs that Arab governments now take this seriously.

Europe is, and most likely will continue to be, the prime source of foreign investment, development aid and trade for the region and has a vital part to play in its economic security, something that is evidently in the EU's own interest as well. One way to do that is through forging closer cooperation on investment between European loan and assistance programmes and those of the Arab funds that focus on infrastructure and job creation for the region's burgeoning youth. Up to now, there has been much talk about this, but very little action.

Moreover, the two regions' private sector organisations and companies could usefully organise a parallel investment summit. And given their crucial role in development and governance, civil society groups could also come together, even if there are diverging opinions about how that should be managed, which there undoubtedly will be.

The EU already has a wide-ranging programme of economic, development and security-related regional cooperation with the LAS Secretariat and there is an ambitious work programme in areas such as energy, the environment and crisis management. While there have been some achievements, for example in raising the League's capacity to better monitor and abate humanitarian crises, the summit could give new direction to calibrating these efforts to tackle the new challenges in the region, and provide some operational 'deliverables'.

What next?

But as said, if the summit is to happen, serious work needs to start now. The UN annual meetings in New York will give an opportunity for the two principals involved with taking the idea forward, namely HRVP Federica Mogherini and LAS Secretary General Ahmed Aboul Gheit, to shift preparations into gear and get to work on the substance.

Serious work on preparations must start now if the summit is to happen next year.

Failing that, Arab cynicism about their own institutions and indeed Europe's real interest in their plight will deepen. And while the destructive forces at work in the region may not quake in their blood-stained boots at the prospect of a summit, they will certainly be heartened if it fails to take place, or perhaps worse, produces nothing but vacuous declarations.