



## HIWARBRIEF

1<sup>st</sup> El Hiwar Summer School on Euro-Arab relations:  
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Susana Terstal, EU Special Representative for the Middle East Peace Process (Twitter @STerstalEU), 2 October 2019.

## OLD TOOLS FOR NEW REALITIES: EU Special Representatives as foreign policy tools in Euro-Arab security dialogue

*Sharon Lecocq<sup>1</sup>*

### Introduction

Scholars, think tanks and practitioners alike usher the European Union (EU) to think more politically and strategically on international affairs, in order to stay relevant and join the game of Great Powers that currently determines world politics. These power dynamics are particularly outspoken in the context of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Despite

<sup>1</sup> Researcher at University of Leuven. Leuven Center for Global Governance Studies (GGG) & Leuven International and European Studies (LINES) institute.



## HIWARBRIEF

1<sup>st</sup> El Hiwar Summer School on Euro-Arab relations:  
new voices, new ideas

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the crucial importance of this region for the EU in terms of security concerns, as the broader regional context of its Southern Neighbourhood, the EU is perceived as an absent political player in the MENA. How can this absence be explained and what can be done? This policy brief proposes EU Special Representatives (EUSRs) as useful instruments to heighten EU visibility, strengthen its position in the region and advance Euro-Arab security dialogue.

### **New realities: regional transnational and non-state thinking**

Both the EU and the MENA region currently cope with a set of “new realities” engendered by wider global geopolitical shifts and internal contestation<sup>1</sup>. In the MENA, these realities entail an increasing interconnectedness of local, regional and global levels, and a proliferation of non-state actors as determinants of regional political and security dynamics (Del Sarto *et al.*, 2019). Conflicts in Iraq, Libya, South-Sudan, Syria, Yemen and the protracted Israeli-Palestinian dispute all illustrate the transnational and multilevel nature of power plays in the MENA. Relations are characterised by volatile and ambivalent alliances and rivalries between regional powers (i.a. Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey), external players (i.a. Russia, United States) and non-state actors (i.a. Hamas, Hezbollah, the Muslim Brotherhood, Kurdish activism or – more extreme and radical – Daesh) (Soler i Lecha, 2017). Meanwhile, the state level and its capacities have in many countries been eroded by internal turmoil, regional power struggles and external interventions (Collombier *et al.*, 2018).

As a response to these intricate dynamics, policy recommendations have highlighted that external actors seeking to influence developments in the MENA, such as the EU, should adopt regional transnational thinking and include non-state groups as key stakeholders, even when these do not necessarily share EU values (Colombo *et al.*, 2017; Kausch, 2017). The need for adopting a broader regional perspective on geopolitical and security dynamics in the MENA (including the centrality of Iran, Gulf states and close interdependence of the MENA with developments in the Horn of Africa and Sahel) and for pursuing an integrated approach to crises and conflict (involving local, national, regional and global dimensions) was also put forward in the EU's Global Strategy (EU: 2016; Soler i Lecha & Tocci, 2016).

Yet the EU struggles to understand and engage with the rapidly-changing alliances and enmities between stakeholders, with the proliferation of non-state actors in the MENA, and with the transnational nature of phenomena (such as identity networks and migration) that cannot be attributed to one state (Asseburg, 2014; Ehteshami *et al.*, 2017). Often

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. recent research projects such as EU Foreign Policy New Realities, and MEDRESET and MENARA presenting their results under the banner of The Middle East and the EU: New realities, new policies.



## HIWARBRIEF

1<sup>st</sup> El Hiwar Summer School on Euro-Arab relations:  
new voices, new ideas

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reluctant to become involved in this complex web of relations, the EU gives the impression of being absent from a region that is of crucial importance to its own security situation, rendering the image of being a “payer, not a player” (Hiltermann, 2015). In Syria for example, despite its major commitments ( $\pm$  €17 billion) in terms of humanitarian, development, economic and stabilisation support (EU, 2019), and its political efforts in the context of United Nations mediation initiatives, the EU continues to remain in the background while other regional and external powers (i.e. Russia, United States, Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia) influence outcomes. How can the EU increase its understanding of these complex realities and enhance its visibility and role in shaping the security situation in the MENA?

### Old tools: EU Special Representatives

EU Special Representatives are an old, yet underexposed instrument of EU external action (Adebahr, 2009). The few recent evaluations on the role of EUSRs assess them as an overall positive addition to both internal and external dynamics of EU foreign policy making and implementation (Costa Reis *et al.*, 2019; European Parliament, 2019; Fouéré, 2016, Sheriff *et al.*, 2015; Tolksdorf, 2015). EUSRs are mainly appointed (preventively or reactively) to external security issues which involve a regional dimension and variety of stakeholders, in view of enhancing both EU internal coherence and external stabilisation and crisis management objectives. As an instrument of the Council itself and working directly with the EU High Representative, technically unburdened by institutional and administrative constraints, EUSRs bring specific added value to EU external action.

The EUSR mandate foresees budget and flexibility to travel<sup>2</sup> (as opposed to Brussels-bound European External Action Service (EEAS) divisions) and to keep a finger on the pulse of broader regional political and security dynamics (as opposed to country-specific EU Delegations). Networking and facilitating dialogue is one of their main functions. Their senior political and diplomatic profile, generally with prior experience in the area of interest, provides them with privileged formal and informal access to governmental actors as well as dissident voices (Lecocq & Costa Reis, 2019). In this sense, EUSRs can be deployed both for enhancing EU visibility as representatives of the Union at the international stage, or for discreetly engaging in more delicate consultations as diplomatic mediators.

In the wake of the Arab uprisings starting in 2010, the EU wanted to profile itself as a more politically involved actor with the capacity to mediate as an ‘honest broker’ by including

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<sup>2</sup> While most EUSRs are based in Brussels, in order to work closely with the EEAS and EU institutions, some are primarily or permanently based in the field. These include the EUSR for the Horn of Africa and so-called ‘double-hatted’ EUSRs who combine their country-specific mandate with acting as Head of EU Delegation to the respective country (i.e. in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo).



## HIWARBRIEF

1<sup>st</sup> El Hiwar Summer School on Euro-Arab relations:  
new voices, new ideas

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different parties in the polarised political landscape that emerged from the revolutions. Former High Representative Catherine Ashton proposed Bernardino León as EUSR for the Southern Mediterranean in 2011, in charge of heading country-specific task forces and coordinating EU activities in terms of political response, policy assistance, networking and mediating between relevant stakeholders in Egypt, Tunisia and Jordan.

Despite the apparent failure of many ensuing political transitions, the efforts of Ashton and León and their "frequent meetings [...] with the main actors did contribute to strengthening the perception of the EU as an international mediator and to upgrading its political role in the region" (Morillas, 2015: 28; Pinfari, 2013). However, when León became UN Special Representative in Libya in 2014, the EUSR mandate for the Southern Mediterranean was not extended. Together with the suspension of the EUSR for the Middle East Peace Process (MEPP) earlier that year, this 'seemed to signal the EU's withdrawal of diplomatic attention from the region' (Asseburg, 2014: 3).

While the EUSR for the MEPP was reinstated during the term of the next High Representative Federica Mogherini, the EUSR for the Southern Mediterranean was not. Arguably, some voices were more sceptical of the EUSR's role in EU foreign policy towards the region. Burke (2012: 3), for example, pointed to the confusion that the appointment of Bernardino León as EUSR for the Southern Mediterranean created for existing EU institutional hierarchy and communication structures, as he allegedly made "promises to EU partners that have not been cleared by the EEAS or the Commission". Moreover, mediating unfolding crises such as those in Libya and Syria proved more challenging, with additional internal and external factors complicating engagement, such as competing Member State interests and initiatives, a lack of EU leverage, or the absence of a central authority or governance structure in the area concerned (Morillas, 2015). Indeed, expanding the network of EUSRs within the MENA region holds promise and opportunities, but also potential challenges.

### **Expanding the EUSR network in the Middle East and North Africa: benefits and risks**

Former EU High Representative Javier Solana stated that the list of EUSRs reflects the EU's foreign and security policy priorities<sup>3</sup>. Yet despite recent acknowledgement by the European Parliament (2019) that "there are other high-priority areas and conflicts, including

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<sup>3</sup> Currently, there are eight EUSRs, of which five have a regional mandate (for the Horn of Africa, the Sahel, Central Asia, the Middle East Peace Process, and the South Caucasus and the crisis in Georgia), two are country-specific (Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina), and one has a thematic focus, i.e. the EUSR for human rights.



## HIWARBRIEF

1<sup>st</sup> El Hiwar Summer School on Euro-Arab relations:  
new voices, new ideas

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in the EU's immediate neighbourhood, that require special focus, more involvement and EU visibility", currently only the EUSR for the MEPP is appointed in the EU's Southern Neighbourhood. Given the intricacy of local, regional and international security dynamics in the MENA, and the variety of actors they involve, expanding the network of EUSRs throughout the region holds the potential for a deeper Euro-Arab security dialogue. It could enhance the EU's capabilities for adopting regional transnational thinking and approaching non-state groups among other key stakeholders. An increased amount of senior political representatives, generally with prior experience in the area of interest, can also boost the EU's presence and visibility in debates about the future of its Southern Neighbourhood (Lecocq & Costa Reis, 2019).

Additional benefits of particular relevance relate to the EUSRs' agility as a foreign policy tool. First, expanding their deployment could be a fast and flexible way to develop and pursue an integrated approach to fast-changing conflicts and crises (Fouéré, 2016), which the MENA is currently rife with. EUSRs can be assigned and deployed quickly as well as respond rapidly, as a result of their relative institutional independence. Related advantages also include EUSR mandates often having a short time-span and therefore being readily adaptable according to how volatile situations develop. EUSR mandates are generally assigned for one year and then extended and amended if deemed necessary.

Second, particularly beneficial is the EUSRs' freedom to retain a broad overview and cut across "thematic and geographic silos" that often constrain institutions' broader strategic vision (cf. Knopf, 2018). The "Red Sea Arena" (de Waal *et al.*, 2018) is a case in point of the "layer-cake structure" of security issues in the broader MENA (Kausch, 2019). Various disputes (concerning governance, natural resources, maritime security, etc.) link Northern Africa, the Horn of Africa, Middle East, Gulf countries and related regional organisations, as well as a broad range of non-state actors and external players. Here, the current EUSR for the Horn of Africa plays a prominent role in monitoring regional security dynamics and engaging with and mediating between relevant actors within and outside the Red Sea area (Costa Reis *et al.*, 2019; Council of the European Union, 2019).

Yet appointing additional EUSRs is not without potential pitfalls. First, given the large window of flexibility and discretion they receive for implementing their mandate, the quality of EUSR actions highly depends on the individual's personality, capabilities and attitudes towards the issue(s) and stakeholder(s) at hand as well as towards cooperation with other EU institutions. In this sense, whether or not EUSRs turn out to be a useful or potentially damaging tool for EU external action is subject to a certain degree of unpredictability. Second, when considering expanding the existing EUSR network, it is important to guard against the danger of creating increased fragmentation, institutional overlap or friction due to an undermining of existing competences of EU Delegations, EEAS or Commission Directorate-Generals (DGs). Expanding the EUSR network should be undertaken with caution. Hence the importance of



## HIWARBRIEF

1<sup>st</sup> El Hiwar Summer School on Euro-Arab relations:  
new voices, new ideas

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taking into account some established best practices as well as recommendations for improvement.

### Recommendations

- EUSRs are recommended here as useful additions to the EU's toolbox for developing and pursuing comprehensive strategies for crisis management and security dialogue in its Southern Neighbourhood and the broader MENA. When expanding the EUSR network throughout the MENA, regional mandates are the preferable format – instead of adopting a country-specific or thematic focus – in view of the complex regional character of crises in the region. One way of structuring the appointment of additional regional EUSRs in the MENA, would be to consider the region's wider security complex and various sub-complexes, i.e. the Levant/Mashreq, Maghreb, Gulf (including Yemen), and arguably also the Horn of Africa (Colombo *et al.*, 2019; Buzan and Wæver, 2003: 44). Different EUSRs could be appointed to each of these sub-regions (with one for the Horn of Africa already in place) or the EUSR position for the Southern Mediterranean could be reinstated, overseeing task forces assigned to the various prominent conflict areas.
- Building on the EUSRs' assets in keeping a broad regional overview of political and security dynamics, their position may also be one of the most suitable for helping the EU grasp interlinkages across regions, i.e. connectivity between North Africa, Sahel, sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, Gulf states and other Western and Central Asian countries, including Afghanistan and Pakistan (Colombo *et al.*, 2019). This objective is in line with the EU's emphasis on developing strategic triangular dialogue and engagement between Europe, Mediterranean and sub-Saharan countries. In terms of their abilities to cut across geographic as well as thematic silos, coordinating EU actions along the triple nexus between humanitarian-development-peace can also be envisioned as a crucial part of the EUSRs' mandates.
- These outlooks would require close cooperation both between EUSRs and existing EU institutions and instruments, and more narrow coordination among EUSRs than is currently the case. This in turn renders the risk of increased coordination costs and loss of flexibility. However, as security issues in the region are increasingly shaped by developments further afield, synergy among potential new and existing EUSRs (i.e. engagement with the EUSR appointed to the MEPP, but also with those working on the Sahel, Horn of Africa and Central Asia) would be indispensable to develop a clear strategic overview of the EU's broader neighbourhood.

### Conclusion

This policy brief presented EU Special Representatives as potentially useful foreign policy instruments to heighten EU visibility, enhance its position in the Middle East and North



## HIWARBRIEF

1<sup>st</sup> El Hiwar Summer School on Euro-Arab relations:  
new voices, new ideas

IE Med.



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Africa, and advance Euro-Arab security dialogue. It argues that EUSRs possess unique assets for strengthening the EU's abilities in coping with some "new realities" in MENA security dynamics, including the interplay between regional, local and global levels, and the predominance of non-state actors as determinants of regional political and conflict situations. These senior diplomatic profiles are a quickly deployable and flexible tool for pursuing an integrated approach to fast-changing conflicts, which the MENA is currently rife with.

The paper therefore recommends expanding the network of regional EUSR mandates throughout the region in view of their specific added value to the EU's current toolbox, mindful of the opportunities and challenges such expansion could yield. In view of grasping the geographical reach of security issues in the region and developing a strategic overview of the EU's broader neighbourhood, synergy among potential new and existing EUSRs is highly recommended.

By way of conclusion, however, it should not be overlooked that the key role of EUSRs is not necessarily situated on an external level, but also mainly to contribute to the EU's internal coherence and consistency in its external representation. Hence, de Vasconcelos' final note remains valid (in Grevi, 2007: 6), that EUSRs "cannot possibly substitute for the need for a clear definition of where the EU as a whole stands with respect to critical issues such as the attitude to be adopted towards Political Islam" and related matters regarding alternative modes of governance and value systems.



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## HIWARBRIEF

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## HIWARBRIEF

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