



**RESILIENCE AND REFORM IN THE  
MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA -  
PRESENTATION OF THE BOOK “THE  
EU, RESILIENCE AND THE MENA  
REGION”**

**Brussels, 8 March 2018**

**FEPS Activity Report**

**FEPS**

March  
2018



FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN  
PROGRESSIVE STUDIES  
FONDATION EUROPÉENNE  
D'ÉTUDES PROGRESSISTES



The new EU Global Strategy (EUGS) ‘Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe’ unveiled in late June 2016 could represent a point of departure to re-calibrate the EU’s external and security policy towards the MENA. One of the most significant novelties brought about by the EUGS is its emphasis on ‘resilience’ as the main pillar of the new comprehensive vision for the EU’s foreign and security policy. In the EUGS document resilience is understood as the opposite of fragility, namely “the ability of states and societies to reform, thus withstanding and recovering from internal and external crises”. It is further defined as a precondition for sustainable growth and vibrant societies as well as for the ultimate attainment of democracy.



Marking the end of a one-year project – launched in January 2017 and jointly undertaken by the Foundation for European Progressive Studies and the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) in Rome – examining the concept of resilience in the context of six in-depth country studies (Egypt, Lebanon, Iraq, Qatar, Tunisia and Turkey), all research deliverables were presented in an edited volume in an event in Brussels on March 8<sup>th</sup> 2018.

Opening the event, **Vassilis Ntousas**, International Relations Policy Advisor at FEPS, stressed the importance of the concept of resilience in shaping the EU’s external action, especially in a region as complicated as the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). As one of the book’s co-editors, he underlined the sense of novelty that existed when trying to unpack this concept, either through the case studies or the comparative section of the book. Explaining the concept’s meteoric rise in the EU’s foreign policy lexicon, he argued that the concept serves a threefold purpose: it provides a clear integrative framework that bridges the fragmentation and injects coherence to the various components of the EU’s external action, it offers a working framework through which the elements of the EU’s interests and values can be continuously assessed, weighed upon and ultimately reconciled in the policy output of the Union, and it (re)directs attention to local resources and practices and away from ready-made blueprints that are parachuted from above, thus laying the groundwork for a more inclusive and legitimate approach on the part of the EU.

In her opening remarks, **Nathalie Tocci**, Director, Istituto Affari Internazionali, and Special Advisor to HR/VP Federica Mogherini, focused on the incredible range of insights the edited volume being presented is bringing to the public debate in Brussels and across Europe. According to her, talking about resilience not at an abstract level, but at a practical one, as the publication does, is essential in clarifying many of the points that still remain open to interpretation about the concept. What is more, discussions like this also provide for a crucial compass through which to see the operationalisation of the concept on the ground. In presenting the book, Ms Tocci also emphasised the complexity of applying this concept in such a complex region as the MENA, but underlined that

therein lies the added value of this intellectual effort, as one of the first comprehensive treatments of the concept in the relevant literature.

Presenting his findings, **Andrea Dessi**, Research Fellow, Istituto Affari Internazionali, pointed out that the EU Global Strategy and its central focus on the concept of fostering state and societal resilience in the Southern and Eastern Neighbourhoods needs to be contextualised into the general international setting characterised by growing trends of conflictual multipolarity. Indeed, these trends are manifest not only at the international level, but also and perhaps more fundamentally at the regional level across both Europe and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and at the domestic level within states and between states and societies. This context creates a number of challenges for EU policy, which needs to come to terms with its declining influence and leverage and consequently necessitates a degree of prioritisation and enhanced coordination if its policies are to succeed. It is at the domestic level across the six MENA-country case studies that the research conducted by IAI and FEPS and contained in the edited volume "The EU, Resilience and the MENA Region" sought to provide most insights and added value, seeking to identify a number of drivers and/or resilience-friendly actors at the state and societal level in these contexts which need to be empowered so as to build up their defences against less progressive actors (international, regional and local) that are constraining their ability to act as incubators of resilience in these contexts. According to Mr Dessi, it was the hope of the book's editors that the research can provide a groundwork on which to begin operationalising the concept of resilience, assisting the work and debates being held at the EU level and among EU member states. However, only a more united and coherent EU will be able to succeed in the ambitious objectives outlined in the EUGS, including fostering resilience. In this respect, while concern and attention are necessarily focused on the neighbourhood to the east and to the south, EU decision makers should be mindful that ultimately, the key ingredient for the success or failure of the EUGS relates to the ability of the EU to overcome internal divisions and act in a united and coherent manner, both in terms of foreign and domestic politics. Ultimately, in order to foster resilience abroad, the EU must first devise means to protect and enhance the internal resilience of the Union and its member states.



**Ranj Alaadin**, Visiting Fellow, Brookings Doha Center, argued that resilience provides an opportunity to move beyond the promotion of democracy and democratic norms, which he felt were concepts that were constraining and at times misled local communities who were not always clear about what democracy meant in practice or what kind of democracy was being aimed for. For him, looking at the Arab world, resilience requires formulating Arab world solutions for Arab world problems because fundamentally we are putting policy recommendations into the local context, for example, through making political compromise the norm rather than exception. Resilience requires aiming for consensus-based politics, rather than going straight for full-fledged notions of Western liberal democracy. Mr Alaadin also stressed the importance of remembering and harnessing bottom-up actors. Given the radically transformed nature of governance and authority in the region, which are far more dynamic than ever before, the dynamics of interaction between the multiple lines

of authority –ranging from civil-society, to members of the political class and the religious establishment and armed groups – have to be afforded greater appreciation so as to establish more inclusive, legitimate national frameworks that can reinforce the relationship between citizen and state.

During the roundtable discussion, **Nathalie Tocci** had the additional opportunity to note that talking about resilience is never something tiresome since the concept is by default a multi-faceted one, which, when applied to different state and societal contexts, produces different outcomes. This is both the concept’s strength but it also is a factor that explains the level of confusion that exists around it. With the implementation phase of the EU Global strategy reaching its second year, there is significant progress that has been made into making resilience a more actionable instrument on the ground, but as it is to be expected, a lot remains to be done in order for resilience to fully serve its role as the leitmotif of the Strategy.

**Kristina Kausch**, Senior Resident Fellow at the German Marshall Fund in Brussels, argued that the EU Global Strategy does a good job at incorporating this very useful concept of resilience, but we need to be mindful of how broad the interpretation of the concept can be, and how easy it is for the concept to be rendered a defensive one, that is, something defined by crises rather than their prevention. Ms Krausch stressed that more attention needs to be paid to the regional dimension of resilience policies, as each state does not constitute a silo, and therefore the impact of these policies can benefit one state but can (un)intentionally harm the other.



**Luigi Narbone**, Advisor to the Managing Director Middle East and North Africa, European External Action Service (EEAS), Brussels, agreed with the several difficulties that had been observed previously in the discussion concerning the application of the concept in operational terms. Resilience might offer the opportunity for a more tailor-made approach but there is a plethora of factors that need to be taken into account, at the regional, state and societal level, in each particular case, that easily demonstrate why the concept’s operationalisation will prove to be a time consuming affair.



Finally, when asked about the debates surrounding resilience at the European Parliament, **Brando Benifei**, Member of the European Parliament, S&D Group, indicated that they have not been particularly contentious or controversial. Evidently, the progressive forces in the Parliament have focused more on the social aspects, where the conservatives tended to centre more on the security aspects. Mr Benifei referred first to Turkey as a country where the concept of resilience, its analytical vigor and its practical limitations can be seriously tested, given the country's authoritarian drift. As the rapporteur on the Tunisia dossier, he also noted that one-size-fits-all solutions are a thing of the past, and that resilience provides the framework for promoting a higher degree of local ownership in the kind of discussion the EU has with respective countries, and the kind of solutions that are being established for the common challenges that both the EU and the region are facing.