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Conceptualizing Relations Between Europe and the Mediterranean Middle East

An examination of the historical relations between Europe and the Mediterranean Middle East reveals a complicated, if not to say ambiguous picture. To capture the nature of these ties, we commence by examining a few basic features. To begin with, the Middle East has a significant legacy of European colonialism, which has included periods of brutal occupation, exploitation, and violence. Napoleon attempted to conquer Egypt from 1798 to 1801; in turn, France's occupation of Algeria lasted for more than a century, from 1830 to 1962, ending only after an extremely bloody war of independence. Similarly, Britain's economic and geostrategic interests in controlling the Suez Canal were the main drivers of its divisive and at times deceitful policies in Egypt and in the Levant from the middle of the nineteenth century until the mid-1950s. Additional cases in point are the infamous Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916, which partitioned the Middle East into spheres of influence between Britain and France, Italy's brutal war of subjugation against the Libyan population during colonial rule (1911–1934), and Spain's colonial control of some parts of northern Morocco and the Western Sahara. While never a colonial power in the region, Germany contributed to the complexities of the Middle East, with the rise of the Nazi regime in the 1930s and 1940s considerably augmenting the number of Jewish immigrants to the then-British Mandate of Palestine. Subsequently, the imperial powers controlled the process of state formation in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) during the interwar years, with European influence over that area continuing until well after the end of the Second World War. It is thus no exaggeration to suggest that the European powers substantially shaped and partially defined the political and socio-economic development of the modern Middle East and North Africa by laying the foundations of politics and typically unequal trade relations.

The history of European colonialism and interference still lingers on in contemporary relations between Europe and the Middle East. For instance, Europe's colonial past is the reason for the presence of large immigrant

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communities and their descendants from the Middle East in some European countries (usually those of the former colonial rulers), with relations between former colonies and rulers often remaining strong but ambiguous. Moreover, populations in the Middle East, including political and economic elites, have generally remained suspicious of European intentions precisely because of this colonial legacy.

Geographical proximity is an obvious second feature shaping relations between Europe and the Mediterranean Middle East (Hollis 2013). Turkey shares a land border with Greece and Bulgaria, while land borders also separate Spain from Morocco at the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla. In turn, the Strait of Gibraltar separating Spain from Morocco is only 14 kilometres wide at its narrowest point. The Italian island of Lampedusa is closer to the Tunisian coast than to Sicily, and a flight between Madrid and Algiers only lasts approximately an hour and a half—by comparison it takes almost three hours to reach Berlin from the Spanish capital. This close geographic proximity has facilitated trade relations between Europe and the Mediterranean Middle East, with Europe remaining the most important trading partner of most MENA states. Similarly, a network of pipelines connect the MENA region to Europe, securing the flow of oil and natural gas from the Middle East and North Africa to the European continent.

Yet such short distances also define Europe's interests vis-à-vis its southern neighbourhood. Wary of any European interference reminiscent of the colonial past, most MENA states expect fair terms of trade and support for economic development from their large and generally much wealthier European neighbours in the north. For the Europeans, such close geographical proximity is the main reason for their concern with stability in the 'southern neighbourhood'. The spectre of regional conflicts and terrorism spilling over to Europe, the trafficking of arms and drugs, possible disruptions to the flow of oil and gas from the Middle East to Europe, environmental hazards affecting the Mediterranean Sea, and undocumented (and unwanted) large migration flows from the southern Mediterranean shores to Europe have been preoccupying European policymakers for decades. Thus the Middle East represents not only a strategically and economically vital region for Europe but also a source of great concern.

The aftermath of the 2011 Arab uprisings and atrocious civil wars in Libya and Syria, two countries in Europe's immediate neighbourhood, saw a considerable increase in the number of refugees and undocumented migrants attempting to reach Europe. This development became a major concern in European capitals. With the exception of Germany and Sweden, which have

taken in millions of refugees in recent years, Europe's response to the growing numbers of refugees and unwanted migrants has been restrictive, prompted by—and fuelling—the rise of right-wing populist and xenophobic movements across the continent. Given these political forces' discursive obsession with closing borders in order to protect 'the nation', a regression into simplistic black-and-white conceptions of territory, the nation, and its borders has become apparent in Europe.

A third aspect of Europe–Middle East relations that warrants attention is the uneasy coexistence of the image (and reality) of 'Fortress Europe' as far as unwanted people are concerned, and the deep and multilayered cooperation between Europe and its southern periphery. For example, trade relations between both sides are extensive. A customs union links Turkey to the European Union while bilateral so-called free trade agreements covering industrial goods are in place between most MENA states and the EU. The term 'free trade' needs to be put in quotation marks, since, as Joseph Stiglitz (2018: 20) has pointedly noted, free trade agreements are not strictly speaking about free trade. If they were, the agreements would be 'short, a few pages—each country giving up its tariffs, its nontariff barriers to trade, and its subsidies' (Stiglitz 2018: 20). Rather, free trade agreements manage trade relations, usually in favour of special business interests in advanced economies. It is perhaps unsurprising then, that EU–MENA trade relations have been strongly in Europe's favour: the European Union is the main destination of exports from MENA states, with the overall trade balance in industrial goods and services to the benefit of the Europeans (natural resources excluded).

Yet Europe's relations with the Middle East and North Africa go far beyond the exchange of goods and services. MENA states that have signed trade agreements with the EU receive technical and financial assistance from the Europeans to reform their economies, and, to some extent, their public sectors. These states participate in numerous European legal frameworks and activities, with the Europeans supporting various educational, vocational training, judicial reform, and civil society programmes in these countries. Last but not least, many MENA governments cooperate with the European Union and with single European states on border control and counterterrorism, as well as in barring unwanted migration. EU border controls have thus been 'outsourced' and 'externalized' (Lavenex and Uçarer 2003; Bialasiewicz 2012). In concomitance with the reality of 'Fortress Europe', MENA states have thus become part of select European rules and practices, with a high degree of interconnectedness defining relations between the two regions. To complicate this picture

even further, relations at the EU level with the 'southern neighbourhood' exist alongside a web of bilateral ties between single European states and the different countries in the MENA region. As will be discussed later, this complex state of affairs shines a light on the boundaries that define common rules and practices across Europe and the Middle East.

A final feature of Europe–Middle East relations is the ambiguity of European policies towards its southern periphery. External observers of the European Union, including those less familiar with the realities of Europe–Middle East relations, may be tempted to claim that Europe's influence in the Middle East is negligible. Indeed, the European Union is not a state, it does not have a unified army under its command, and it does not play a major role in security matters; rather, Europe's typical response to events in the Middle East is a cacophony of public statements issued by European capitals. According to this line of argument then, Europe hardly matters for the politics and international relations of the Middle East—unlike, say, the United States. Such assessments stand in contrast to the somewhat self-congratulatory concept of 'normative power Europe' (Manners 2002; 2006; Birchfield 2013) and the notion of 'Europeanization' that has dominated the discourse both in Brussels and in the European studies academic literature at large. According to these two concepts, the EU exports its norms and values, such as democracy, the rule of law, and human rights, to third countries through its soft power, a process of socialization that induces these countries to gradually accept European norms.

European policies towards the Middle East and North Africa certainly differ from those exhibited by the United States, or for that matter, China. But Europe's influence in the region is neither insignificant nor devoid of crude interests and the assertion of material power. As will be discussed in greater detail later, European policies towards its southern neighbours do involve an attempt to export rules and governance patterns beyond Europe's borders (for example Lavenex and Schimmelfennig 2009). However, not only do these rules differ from the norms of democracy and human rights, they are also effectively subordinated to harder logics such as the concern for stability in the 'periphery' and economic interests—the 'normative power Europe' discourse notwithstanding.

In light of these complexities and ambiguities then, how can we conceptualize relations between Europe and the Mediterranean Middle East, Europe's 'southern neighbourhood'? As elaborated in what follows, a borderlands approach best captures the basic patterns and development of these relations. This approach highlights how European rules and practices are expanded to

the southern periphery and how interconnected the two regions become as a result. A borderlands approach, therefore, throws into sharp relief the various functions that borders play while conceptualizing the European Union and its member states as an empire of sorts. Before delving into the meaning of a borderlands approach and the implications of adopting it for the study of Europe–Middle East relations, let us first clarify the notions of borders and borderlands.

Borders and Borderlands

Attesting to the changing nature of borders in an increasingly globalized world, the social science literature has paid ever-increasing attention to border studies in recent years.[1] In the last two decades scholarly research on borders, once a sub-discipline of political science and International Relations, has expanded into an interdisciplinary field, integrating insights from political geography, sociology, anthropology, psychology, and law, as well as literature and media studies.[2] As a result, a variety of analytical frameworks and a variegated terminology persist, along with differences in defining core notions such as a *border*, a *boundary,* a *frontier*, or a *barrier* (Anderson 1996; Newman and Paasi 1998; Newman 2003; 2006b; Brunet-Jailly 2005; Cassarino 2006; Brambilla 2015). While different academic disciplines have continued to employ diverse conceptualizations and epistemologies of borders, in addition to innovative concepts such as 'borderscapes'[3] and 'borderwork',[4] most scholars agree that borders are not merely fixed physical lines demarcating territory. Rather, as Étienne Balibar (2002: 1) famously noted, borders are everywhere. The meaning of borders is historically contingent, and since borders are social and political constructs, their nature and meaning may also change over time. Perhaps the best way to understand the nature of

[1] Some sections of this chapter expand on Del Sarto 2010 and Del Sarto 2016.

[2] The academic literature on borders reflects global developments over the last decades: during much of the 1990s, the literature focused on the gradual disappearance of borders, including in the context of the EU. The focus of attention shifted to the growing closure of (external) borders in the post-9/11 era. For an excellent overview of the literature, see Newman 2006a.

[3] Borderscapes are an epistemological, ontological, and methodological reconceptualization of borders in an era of globalization and transnationalism. According to Chiara Brambilla (2015: 19), the concept expresses the 'border as a space that is not static but fluid and shifting; established and at the same time continuously traversed by a number of bodies, discourses, practices, and relationships that highlight endless definitions and shifts in definition between inside and outside, citizens and foreigners, hosts and guests across state, regional, racial, and other symbolic boundaries'.

[4] Borderwork is defined as the efforts of ordinary people leading to the construction, dismantling, or shifting of borders (Rumford 2012: 897; also Rumford 2008).

borders is to think about them as institutions that govern inclusion and exclusion through the establishment and maintenance of different modalities of transboundary movement. Through processes of bordering, debordering, and 'othering', borders create categories of 'us' and 'them'. Specific policies, institutional practices, narratives, and discourses as well as daily interactions typically contribute to the construction, maintenance, deconstruction, and shifting of specific borders. Thus, borders are not merely 'lines in the sand' that belong to a state at its outer edge, but rather complex political, social, and discursive constructs that fulfil a number of scopes and functions (see also van Houtum 2005; Rumford 2012; Brambilla et al. 2015; Laine 2016).

When we turn to politics and International Relations, these insights stand in clear contrast to the ideal–typical model of borders, commonly traced to the Peace of Westphalia of 1648 that ended the Thirty Years' War in Europe. Marking the beginning of the era of the nation state, the treaties of Westphalia stipulated the principles of the recognition of state sovereignty and non-interference. Borders 'became central to the nationalist agenda and the development of nation states', as Emanuel Brunet-Jailly (2005: 653) has put it. Fulfilling a triple function, they simultaneously demarcated the territory of the state, circumscribed the limits of government authority, and defined the 'nation'. The holy trinity of *Staatsgebiet*, *Staatsvolk*, and *Staatsgewalt*,[5] prominent in the writing and teachings of the German legal philosopher and jurist Georg Jellinek (1929) as well as in the work of Max Weber (1980: 822), perhaps best encapsulates the critical function that a unified conception of borders played in the definition of the modern nation state.[6]

Yet these ideas of the state, of sovereignty, and borders, prominent in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, never fully corresponded to reality, not even during the Westphalian period of international order (Kratochwil 1986; Brown 2002: 212 ff.; Hurrell 2003: 41 ff.; Stirk 2005). Considering the pace of globalization and technological developments, such concepts have become ever less salient. Stephen Krasner (1999) famously described the Westphalian idea of sovereignty as 'organized hypocrisy'; others defined it as a myth (Osiander 2001). However, the principle of territoriality was and arguably still is important for our understanding of politics. For one, it expresses a one-dimensional perspective on the spatial organization of politics, a defining feature of modernity in international relations (Ruggie 1993: 159).

[5] State territory, people or nation (of the state), and state authority.

[6] Weber famously defined the state as a community of people who successfully claims a monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory, stressing that territory is an essential feature of the state (Weber 1980: 822).

In fact, the process of the territorialization of space served as a precondition for the emergence of politics in the modern sense. In that period, ideas of transnational politics and transnational networks were clearly absent from the political lexicon, as well as from any conception of politics. Second, the concept of territoriality defined the idea of nations as bounded communities. This conception has been shown to be even more of a fiction (Anderson 1991); 'pure' nation states are in fact extremely rare in the real world.[7]

Although largely fictional, sovereignty and the underlying notion of the triple function of borders remain key ordering principles in international law and international politics to this day. This is reflected in the UN Charter, which enshrines the right of the self-determination of peoples, the equal sovereignty of all members, and the need to respect their territorial integrity. These structuring principles of international politics coexist in an uneasy way with the reality of the 'multidimensional function of boundaries' (Newman 2003: 139). Equally, the scholarship in politics and International Relations nowadays pays far greater attention to the bordering practices of states, that is, activities which states engage in to 'constitute, sustain or modify borders between states' (Parker and Adler-Nissen 2012: 776). And while distinctions between 'in' and 'out' continue to inform the study of political science and International Relations, the spread of supranational and transnational patterns of governance, trade, and globalization, along with technological innovations, have considerably transformed the *nature* of state borders. As a result, borders perform tasks that were once previously entwined but no longer necessarily remain so. It is therefore necessary to distinguish between borders that may be *territorial*, i.e. confining territory and hence regulating (or restricting) the movement of people and goods, and *functional* or *legal* borders. The latter circumscribe the validity and application of laws, rules, and other types of normative frameworks, including with respect to the state's monopoly over the legitimate use of force. Borders also circumscribe communities and identities which may or may not coincide with other types of boundaries. To complicate matters even further, there are also different types of territorial borders. In this context, Rainer Bauböck (2015) has distinguished between stable and permeable borders, which he terms 'membranes', stable and impermeable borders, or 'walls', and impermeable and unstable borders ('barricades'). Moreover, it is important to keep in mind that different types of borders usually apply to

[7] This holds true everywhere, but particularly in the Middle East and in Africa, where nations and states do often not coincide. Moreover, various concepts of community and nationhood may coexist in Arab states, such as pan-Arabism and territorially based identities (Lewis 1998; Hinnebusch 2009).

diverse categories of peoples and goods. This is true, for instance, of business people versus unwanted migrants, to 'legally' traded produce versus 'illegally' trafficked goods, and so on. Territorial borders may also not be physically located where one would expect them to be, with border and passport controls in airport terminals being the best example.

The disaggregated nature of borders as well as their multiplicity and ubiquity evidently challenge any clear-cut distinctions into black and white patterns; social reality is never that simple. What does this imply for areas that are close to a border or to various overlapping borders? Particularly when territorial borders are permeable and/or shifting, and when different types of borders coexist and partially overlap within a given space, areas in closest geographic proximity to a border turn into hybrid spaces. These areas become zones of transition from one polity to another, an area of crossover from one geographical unit, functional regime, and 'community of practice' (Adler 2008) to another (Newman 2003; Balibar 2009).

A number of structuring factors determine the main features of borders in a given area, and hence the nature of the borderlands. Market forces and trade flows are two such factors, as is the way in which the borderland is governed. Porous borders are often associated with the existence of a sound cross-border governance system involving multiple actors. In these cases, different levels of government and private organizations operating in adjacent political units cooperate in implementing policies that span both sides of the border. This type of multilevel regime involving regions, municipalities, and private agencies is in place, for instance, in the triangular border area where Switzerland shares its borders with France and Germany. In this so-called *Dreiländereck* ('three-state corner'), such cooperation facilitates the circulation of tourists, but also the movement of numerous commuters crossing the border and that of the inhabitants of the border area more generally. The common airport 'Europort Basel Mulhouse Freiburg', easily accessible from the three countries, is perhaps the most visible expression of this state of affairs. Additional factors that may shape the type of interaction in the borderlands, and hence the nature of the border, are a sense of belonging, a common language, or similar socio-economic traits of cross-border communities (Brunet-Jailly 2005). The 'smuggling' activities of Bedouin tribes in the borderland of Egypt and Libya are a good example here (Hüsken 2017). Deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of the tribal society and tolerated by state authorities to varying degrees at different points in time, the economic practice of smuggling defines the permeability of the border and produces a specific translocal type of order in the borderland.

So how do these insights on borders and borderlands contribute to our understanding of Europe/the European Union and its relations to the Mediterranean Middle East and North Africa, its immediate southern periphery? What does it say about the borders these two regions share?

Europe's Borders

A focus on borders is important if we are to understand the nature and functioning of the European Community (EC)[8] and its successor, the European Union (EU). There is no doubt that the European integration process created a political entity that flagrantly defies the Westphalian model of statehood, along with the inherent 'classical' triple function of borders on which it rests. Instead, a complex mosaic of overlapping functional areas and disaggregated border regimes came to characterize the European space, as best illustrated by the EU's Internal Market, the Schengen area, and the Eurozone.

With a sole initial focus on economics and trade, the European integration process established a territorially and functionally defined area of supranational sovereignty within which European Community law applied—a legally binding body of legislation superior to national law. Theoretically, this space now comprises the territory of all members of the EC and its successor, the EU. The completion of the Internal Market—back then called the European Single Market or Common Market—with a common external customs regime at the end of 1992 abolished the classic border controls on the movement of goods, services, and capital among EU members. The Internal Market also gave every EU citizen the right to reside and work in any other member state. EU nationals even gained the ability to submit lawsuits against private and public enterprises in any EU member state in the event of discrimination on the basis of nationality as regards employment, remuneration, and other aspects of work. While the territorial borders for the movement of goods moved to the EU's external frontiers, the introduction of the free movement of EU citizens and workers saw the emergence of altogether different types of borders. As one of the 'four freedoms' inherent in the

[8] Strictly speaking, the predecessor of the European Union established in 1992 was the 'European Communities', which in turn resulted from the merger of the European Economic Community (EEC) and two other communities in 1965. For the sake of simplicity and following a common use in the literature, the term 'European Community' or EC will be used when referring to the precursor of the EU.

Internal Market,[9] the free movement of people is now governed by the area that legally coincides with the borders of the EU's Internal Market. But it was the originally intergovernmental Schengen Agreement, signed in 1985 between initially five EC member states that abolished border controls for individuals and established a zone for passport-free travel with a single external border.[10] As membership of the Schengen Agreement continued to grow, formally passing into EU law in 1997,[11] it prompted stronger cooperation across visa and immigration policy among the signatories. New member states joining the EU after 1997 did not, however, automatically obtain the right to the free movement of people following their accession; rather, interim agreements signed with individual member states regulated the rights of these citizens to work and reside in the territory of the 'old' EU members (European Commission 2006a). Schengen therefore established both territorial and functional borders for the circulation of people, which only partly coincided with those that defined the free movement of goods.[12] At the same time, European Community law gradually expanded to include other issue areas, including justice and home affairs, social policy, and monetary policy. Marking the realization of the EC's long-held goal to create an economic and monetary union, the euro came into existence as a common currency in 1999, albeit only virtually in the initial phase. Euro banknotes and coins began circulating in twelve of the then-fifteen EU member states in January 2002. As of March 2020, nineteen EU countries had adopted the euro, with the European Central Bank, created in June 1998, appointed to administer monetary policy within the Eurozone.

The functional and territorial border regimes created by the process of European integration thus often have different configurations and territorial coverage. Subject to binding supranational legislation as they are, all EU member states are part of the Internal Market, but did not unanimously adopt the euro as their currency nor join the Schengen area. As long as it was a member state, for instance, the UK opted out of both.[13] Conversely, a

[9] The Treaty of Rome of 1957 defined the free movement of goods, persons, services, and capital as the foundations of the European Economic Community.

[10] The original intergovernmental agreement was signed between Belgium, France, Germany, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands in a small town in Luxembourg called Schengen.

[11] The Schengen Agreement became part of EU law with the 1997 Amsterdam Treaty.

[12] There are also a number of technical barriers to the free movement of people within the EU's Internal Market, such as taxation, social policy, health insurance, and the recognition of professional certificates and qualifications, to mention a few.

[13] As of January 2021, nineteen of the currently twenty-seven member states have adopted the euro as their currency. Denmark and the UK (as long as it was an EU member) decided to opt out; Sweden did not join but may do so at a later stage. The remaining six countries (Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Romania), mainly states that acceded to the EU in 2004, 2007, and

number of European states that are not members of the European Union—Norway, Iceland, Liechtenstein, and Switzerland—participate in the Internal Market and are members of the Schengen area.[14]

A further challenge to the concept of borders as inherent in the Westphalian model of the state lies in the multiple, overlapping, and hybrid identity boundaries that bisect Europe. Reflecting efforts to create an overarching European identity that had accompanied the integration process since its inception, the 1992 Maastricht Treaty formally introduced the notion of EU citizenship. But the notion of European identity has remained persistently vague. With the numerous rounds of the bloc's enlargement from originally six to twenty-eight, and currently twenty-seven member states after the departure of the UK in January 2020, the definition of who belongs to the 'European club' has also changed over time. The changing geography of the European bloc has recurrently fuelled debates on the 'borders of Europe' (see for example Smith 1996; Anderson and Bort 2001; Zielonka 2001a; 2001b). The question of what Europe is, where it starts and where it ends, is indeed difficult to answer. Suffice it to note that many citizens in the Balkans, for instance, or of European non-EU members such as Norway or Liechtenstein, are more likely to define themselves as Europeans than most British nationals, for whom 'Europe' primarily refers to the 'continent' on the other side of the English Channel. In fact, multiple and overlapping identity boundaries at the supranational, national, regional, and sub-regional level characterize the EU, its member states, and the wider European continent. These boundaries are certainly not congruent with the web of territorial and functional borders that define the EU and its members.

Thus the variable border geometry that has defined membership of the EU, the Schengen area, the Internal Market, and the Eurozone clearly implies a distinct range of different territorial and functional boundaries (which may also coincide). These borders not only vary in their permeability, stability, and visibility, but also continue to exist alongside internal borders between EU members that delineate distinct political and legal orders as well as national

2013, may join once they meet the necessary conditions. The Schengen area comprises twenty-six countries: all twenty-seven EU member states except for Ireland, Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia, and Cyprus, and four states that are not EU members (Iceland, Norway, Switzerland, and Lichtenstein). The UK was never part of the Schengen area. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, some border controls among members of the Schengen area have been reintroduced as an exceptional and temporary measure.

[14] Moreover, four non-EU members have a formal agreement with the bloc to use the euro as their currency (Monaco, San Marino, Andorra, and Vatican City), with Serbia and Montenegro unilaterally adopting the euro as their main currency.

identities (Zielonka 2006: 145). In the absence of border controls for goods and people, however, these 'national' borders are no longer territorial in the strict sense. Concurrently, as nation states continue to coexist alongside transnational European governance systems (Ruggie 1993: 172; Rumford 2012) and manifold identities, the European integration process has created multiple perspectives on politics. This development is a clear departure from the one-dimensional and territorially confined conception of politics that defined the modern nation state.

The external borders of the European Union—and of the European space more broadly—are not simply differentiated by their range and permeability, and thus by how 'fuzzy' they are (Christiansen et al. 2000; Hassner 2001). They are also constantly shifting. The removal of (most) borders between (most) member states to enable the circulation of goods, services, capital, and people prompted the strengthening of the outer borders of the EU as regards the entry of illegal goods and unwanted people. Frontex,[15] the EU's external border agency created in 2004–2005, has been instrumental in 'fortifying' the EU against the backdrop of repeated terrorist attacks in Europe as well as in the context of rising numbers of migrants and refugees seeking to enter the EU in recent years. Despite the positive image of itself that Frontex has sought to promote (Frontex 2019a),[16] the agency's operations were initially characterized by an absence of democratic oversight and accountability. While these have improved slightly in recent years—accompanied by an ever-growing budget, staff body, and political power (Perkowski 2018: 460)—the agency's operations continue to raise a host of legal, political, and ethical questions (see for example Rijpma and Cremona 2007; Baldaccini 2010). Moreover, Frontex has raised the question of where the EU's external borders actually lie. As the agency assists EU members at its external borders with 'joint operations' and 'rapid border interventions', including rescue missions in the Mediterranean Sea and patrols off the coast of Africa, the 'Frontex border' has become a 'new sort of flexible border, deployed whenever and wherever it is needed' (Rumford 2012: 891). In Bauböck's term, the EU's external border vis-à-vis

[15] Frontex is the abbreviation of *Frontières extérieures* ('external borders'), the common name of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency.

[16] According to the Frontex website, the agency 'promotes, coordinates, and develops European border management in line with the EU fundamental rights charter'. Its tasks are to 'help identify migratory patterns as well as trends in cross-border criminal activities', '[analyse] data related to the situation at and beyond EU's external borders'; and '[monitor] the situation at the borders'. The website states that 'Frontex coordinates and organises joint operations and rapid border interventions to assist Member States at the external borders, including in humanitarian emergencies and rescue at sea' (Frontex 2019a).

unwanted people and 'illegal' goods has turned into a barricade—impermeable but shifting (Bauböck 2015). This border may also be conceived of as a 'security border', as Balibar (2009: 202) put it. In parallel, the governments of MENA states often cooperate with Europe, including with Frontex, on border controls, in return receiving European border surveillance technology, training programmes for their border police, and other benefits. What is more, joint border patrols involving the border police of MENA states and European coast guards or military police off the coasts of North Africa and the Middle East occur frequently (Rijpma and Vermeulen 2015; Rijpma 2016). As a result, Europe's southern external borders have multiplied and moved closer to the southern shores of the Mediterranean.

Furthermore, a number of countries in Eastern Europe and around the southern Mediterranean are linked to the European Union through different types of institutional and trade relations, and these states vary in their status vis-à-vis Europe. These include EU candidate country status for prospective members, such as Turkey, Serbia, and Montenegro; states in Eastern Europe that are members of the EU's 'Eastern Partnership'; 'privileged partners' such as Tunisia; and states that have obtained 'advanced status' in their dealings with the EU such as Morocco and Jordan. When considered alongside the fact that Europe consists of different cores and peripheries itself, 'broader Europe' may thus be depicted as a system of concentric regions (Hassner 2001). But this also means that the 'the further away [states] are located with respect to the "centre" of the historical "nucleus," the more difficult it becomes to control the borderlines' (Balibar 2009: 199).

In this sense, then, the European Union bears a strong resemblance to history's empires. Rather than having fixed and clearly demarcated borders, these empires had hybrid and flexible boundaries (such as the Roman *limes*). These boundaries created peripheral zones serving as buffer zones for the imperial centre. As discussed later, additional features of the EU further reinforce the image of the European Union and its member states as an empire of sorts that, as a result, engages with its southern neighbours in an 'imperial' manner.

The European Empire and Its Borderlands

Scholars and observers have been trying to define the nature of the European Community and its successor, the European Union, for decades. Equally, the question of how to think about the role that the European bloc plays in world

politics has gained increasing attention in recent decades. Focusing on the European integration process itself, functionalist and neofunctionalist approaches, fashionable in the 1960s and 1970s, posited that ever-deeper integration would be the result of a functional 'spill-over effect' from economic to political integration (Haas 1948; Mitrany 1965). Other scholars, in the intergovernmentalist tradition, emphasized the role of state interests and bargaining among the member states in the European integration process (Moravcsik 1993; Moravcsik and Nicolaidis 1999). In the first decades of the EC's existence, the distinct rounds of enlargement to include new member states were usually treated as part of the European integration process, and thus as an internal matter, not as a question of foreign policy.

Other observers and scholars, however, sought to capture the distinct role that the European bloc played in world politics, starting with François Duchêne's notion of 'civilian power' of the 1970s. Somewhat reformulating this idea, Ian Manners' concept of 'Normative Power Europe' (Manners 2002) became particularly influential in the European studies literature, resulting in an enormous number of studies that examined the EU's normative 'actorness'.[17] For Manners (2002: 239), the EU exerts its normative power by diffusing a set of principles on the world stage to which the member states adhere. These overarching norms include peace, liberty, democracy, the rule of law, and human rights, as well as a number of minor norms, such as social solidarity, anti-discrimination, sustainable development, and good governance. In this way, according to Manners, Europe sets an example in world politics. The EU's support for the International Criminal Court and the abolition of the death penalty serve as prototypical examples here (Manners 2002; 2006; Lucarelli and Manners 2006).

The idea of norm diffusion, central to this body of scholarship, has given rise to a large body of literature on 'Europeanization' and European 'external governance'. First tested in the context of the enlargement of the European polity, studies conducted in this spirit have focused on the transfer of European norms and rules 'beyond the EU's borders', specifically to candidate countries for EU accession and new member states (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2004; Schimmelfennig 2005; Börzel and Risse 2012). Zooming in on specific policy sectors, governance approaches have also looked at the process by which the EU has transferred its rules to the 'neighbours' in the east and in the south of the European Union (Lavenex 2004; 2014; Lavenex and Schimmelfennig 2009).

[17] For obvious reasons, the plethora of studies conducted in this tradition cannot all be cited here.

The 'normative power' literature has certainly evolved since Manner wrote his seminal article, over time becoming more sophisticated and perhaps less naïve. For instance, studies have examined the ways in which the EU constructs its norms and identity while accounting for power and interests, shedding light on the EU's strategic use of norms (Diez 2005; 2013; Youngs 2004). However, the scholarship on the European Union's international role has often reaffirmed the validity of the 'normative power Europe' idea, based on the assumption that the EU is predisposed to act in a normative way *because of its particular history and normative construction* (Whitman 2011; Birchfield 2013; Nicolaïdis and Whitman 2013).

There is much to be said about why these approaches, including their underlying assumptions, have remained problematic. To begin with, the concepts of 'normative power Europe' and 'Europeanization' have remained Eurocentric and highly ideologically tainted, with the scholarship itself actually contributing to the construction of the EU's allegedly normative identity, as Münevver Cebeci (2012; 2018) pointed out. Second, and relatedly, this type of study pays scarce attention to and often ignores crude European interests and unequal power relations. Governance approaches, for instance, have often espoused a rather technical and legalistic perspective on the adoption of EU rules in third countries. While the merit of these studies rests in their evaluation of whether specific aspects of EU conditionality have produced institutional change in third countries (Freyburg et al. 2009), the external governance literature has remained somewhat apolitical, usually disregarding the wider picture. Moreover, this body of research rarely takes into consideration the *actual implementation* of European norms and rules once a third country has formally adopted them. Third, particularly vis-à-vis the states in North Africa and the Middle East, the history of European colonialism in that region and persistent power asymmetries render the EU's supposedly altruistic norm transfers problematic, to say the least. Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, European policies and preferences have plainly contradicted the concept of normative power. For instance, European policies towards third countries have been traditionally marked by a lack of resolve in promoting democratic reforms. Instead, the EU and its members have a long history of pampering dictators and cooperating with countries that clearly exhibit autocratic leanings, thereby ignoring persistent human rights violations in the name of security and economic benefits (Youngs 2001; Bosse 2012). Europe's focus on security and the prevention of unwanted migration from the south, at the expense of human rights, also militates against the EU's claim to export democracy (Cassarino 2005; 2018; Joffé 2008; Cassarino and Del Sarto

2018). Furthermore, the EU's traditionally protectionist trade policies on agriculture, particularly problematic vis-à-vis developing countries (Tovias 2006; Kourtelis 2015), and the prioritization of energy security over reforms are far from 'normative' in the sense of the 'normative power Europe' concept. Last but not least, the EU and its members have displayed a noteworthy inability to resolve conflicts in the 'neighbourhood' (Nuriyev 2007; Tocci 2008; Whitman and Wolff 2010; Gordon and Pardo 2015). These observations may confirm the argument that the EU is a realist power in pursuit of its own interests, though possibly disguised in normative clothing, as Adrian Hyde-Price (2006) and Peter Seeberg (2009) claimed over a decade ago.

Particularly with an eye on Europe's fuzzy borders and the EU's attempts to export its rules beyond its borders, thinking of the EU as an empire of sorts is far more helpful here. It captures the nature—and the modus operandi—of the EU and its member states, as well as their policies towards neighbouring countries.

Advanced by a growing number of scholars dealing with the European Union, this proposition is not entirely new (Smith 1996; Beck and Grande 2004; 2011; Cassese 2006; Chandler 2006; Zielonka 2006; 2008; 2013; Colomer 2011; Gravier 2009; 2011; 2015; Marks 2012; Behr and Stivachtis 2015). The majority of these studies, however, have focused on the internal workings of the European Union or on its policies of enlargement to include new member states. Fewer are those studies of Europe's relations with neighbouring countries that have not, or only a qualified, prospect of membership through this conceptual lens (for an exception see Sepos 2013). Specifically focusing on Europe's relations with and policies towards the Middle East and North Africa, the author of this work proposes—perhaps somewhat provocatively—that the European Union and its member states may be thought of as a *normative empire* (Del Sarto 2016). The main proposition here is that by imagining the EU as an empire, we may conceive of the EU's export of its rules and practices to neighbouring states as the modus operandi of an empire in pursuit of its own interests. At the same time, this specific way of engaging third countries serves the construction of a 'normative' identity. So what characterizes empires and why does the European Union qualify as such?

Although history has produced very different types of empires, a number of distinct feature mark this type of polity. Throughout history, empires have consisted of territorially vast and composite polities that comprise a core (or several cores) and a periphery (or several peripheries). Empires are territorially unstable: they often rise and expand, but they may also shrink and decline. Their borders are not fixed or stable, but exhibit hybrid spaces or borderlands

at the outer fringes of the empire (Doyle 1986; Tilly 1997; Motyl 2001; Münkler 2007). Empires have always sought to stabilize their peripheries and to draw economic advantages from them. They have done so by exporting the imperial order to adjacent regions and by cultivating elites there, a classic aspect of imperial relations (Galtung 1971; Motyl 2001: 12–13). In other words, by combining direct and indirect rule, empires traditionally subordinate formerly independent polities or communities by relying on already established local political structures in this endeavour. With asymmetry and division of labour marking relations between the imperial centre and the periphery, core elites channel the flows of resources from the core to the periphery and back. Interestingly, while empires traditionally exercised some military or economic control in their imperial domains, they tolerated a considerable amount of autonomy in return for compliance, tribute, and military collaboration with the core (Tilly 1997: 3). In other words, 'accommodation is the engine of empire', as Gary Marks (2012: 5) has concisely put it (see also Gravier 2020). An additional key feature of empires is that they usually see themselves as a civilizing power; hence they tend to promote a civilizing mission (Motyl 2001: 4).

Most of these characteristics apply to the European Union and its member states. First, the EU spans a vast territory comprising different and unequal constitutive elements; it has a core—or several cores—and peripheries. With a territory stretching from Portugal in the west to the Baltic republics and Cyprus in the east, and from Finland in the north to Greece, Malta, and Cyprus in the south, the EU comprises more than 4.4 million square kilometres and over 446 million people currently living in twenty-seven states. Additionally, the EU includes islands and territories that are part of EU member states but are situated outside mainland Europe, including in the North Atlantic, the Caribbean, South America, and the Indian Ocean.[18] As noted earlier, supranational laws coexist and partly overlap with distinct national legislation across this vast area. While Brussels is the core of the decision-making process in the European Union, Berlin and Frankfurt (the seat of the European Central Bank), are centres of political and economic power as well, together with Paris, Rome, Warsaw, London pre-Brexit, and

[18] Nine territories form the so-called outermost regions of the European Union. Some EU laws are derogated there because of the geographical distance. These regions include the Azores, the Canary Islands, French Guiana, Guadeloupe, Madeira, Martinique, Mayotte, La Réunion, and Saint Martin. In addition to this, there are twenty-two overseas countries and territories that are associated with the EU, or were before the UK's exit (mainly former British, Dutch, and French colonies overseas), and fifteen special cases where the partial validity of EU law is regulated in specific protocols.

other national capitals. Within the EU, there are also a number of peripheries and semi-peripheries, that is, countries or regions which do not have the same political sway or economic power as the 'cores'. Concentric representations of power relations that are usually associated with the notion of empire thus define the EU and its member states.

Second, repeated rounds of enlargement to include new member states since its inception have contributed to the enduring territorial instability of the EC/EU. Until January 2020, this territory had been in a process of uninterrupted growth, expanding from the original six member states to include twenty-eight members. The United Kingdom's convulsive decision to leave the European bloc has entailed a shrinking of EU territory, but still bears evidence of the bloc's territorial instability. As Johan Galtung (1973: 18) noted more than four decades ago, phases of deepening integration among existing member states following the EC's creation have always been followed by phases of expansion to include new members, but without deepening integration. Territorial expansion to integrate an additional number of members is thus an intrinsic feature of the European Union and its predecessor, notwithstanding the exception of Brexit.

Third, the conceptualization of the EU as an empire is reinforced by the strongly normative political discourse that the EU maintains. Although the image that the EU seeks to project on the internal stage is a constructed narrative of how many Europeans would like the EU to be (Nicolaïdis and Howse 2002), this discourse is still reminiscent of the civilizing missions of past empires (Gravier 2011: 418; Zielonka 2013). Europe's normative rhetoric derives from what the EU perceives to be its specific raison d'être: namely, fostering economic interdependence to prevent the recurrence of war. This perspective also explains why Europe prescribes neoliberal development models to third states, a model that is attached to a European concept of modernity. In turn, the transfer of rules and practices, anchored in Europe's own success story of peace and prosperity in the post-war period, contributes to the EU's self-perception as 'normative power'.

Fourth, and most importantly for our purpose, the EU has been expanding its variable border geometry with overlapping but not necessarily congruent functional and territorial borders to its peripheries. The unbundled, multiple, and partly invisible external borders that are diverse in permeability are thus moved farther away from Europe. European policies vis-à-vis its southern (and eastern) periphery can thus be read as an attempt to integrate these areas in a highly selective, gradual, and differentiated manner into the European order, with the aim of stabilizing Europe's borderlands. This process also

entails a further 'untangling' of the various political and legal functions fulfilled by borders. The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), launched in 2003–2004, most evidently embodies the modus operandi of European policy towards the bloc's 'near abroad'. By offering a 'stake' in the EU's Internal Market, the ENP invited states in the EU's eastern and southern peripheries to negotiate comprehensive forms of cooperation. Yet access to the EU's Internal Market has been conditional upon the countries in question 'approximating' their rules and standards to those of the European Union, that is, making them compatible with EU law (for example European Commission 2012a: 5). Connecting the periphery to the core in crucial areas such as trade, energy, and infrastructure, these policies blur out the EU's external borders and create a buffer zone around Europe (Del Sarto and Schumacher 2005; Comelli et al. 2007; Del Sarto 2010).

Finally, and related to the previous point, Europe has relied on local political structures and elites in the borderlands in its attempts to export the European order beyond the border. The EU's co-optation of political and economic elites of MENA countries into European rules and practices while excluding them from decision-making processes has been a key feature of these policies. As will be discussed later in greater detail, Europe has cultivated political, administrative, and economic elites in peripheral states that share the interests of their European counterparts, a vital component in the machinery of empire. Given that the EU and its members—together with international financial institutions and other major players in world politics—have promoted the neoliberal model of economic development, these co-opted elites act as 'transmission belts' of the European (and global) neoliberal order (Cox 1996; Gill 2003). Concurrently, the cooperation of many MENA governments in the European management of borders, security, and migration has entailed their participation in Europe's violent process of control and suppression targeting refugees and unwanted migrants at the EU's outer border, a process that has been termed 'border wars' (Mezzadra 2004; Balibar 2009).

In this context, it is important to note that Europe's empire-like behaviour towards its borderlands is multilayered and involves different actors. As trade relations remain the prerogative of the European Commission, Brussels is undoubtedly the main engine of the EU's economic policies towards the 'near abroad'. However, EU member states have also played a significant role insofar as they have sought to influence the priorities and modalities of EU policies in accordance with their own specific interests and bilateral relations with individual peripheral countries. Single European states have also concluded

individual agreements with third countries on a variety of issues such as migration control, counterterrorism, and energy. The web of formal and informal bilateral agreements between European states and third countries located at the EU's periphery thus adds to the differentiation of relations between Europe and its borderlands.

The core–periphery patterns underpinning European policies towards its near abroad are not a new phenomenon, as the next chapter explains. However, the European Union started adopting a particularly conspicuous 'imperial geopolitical vision' (Browning and Joenniemi 2008: 521) after it absorbed ten new member states in 2004, a vision that is clearly reflected in the Neighbourhood Policy (Del Sarto and Schumacher 2005). This is certainly no coincidence: the massive expansion of EU territory and the integration of ten countries previously situated at the periphery prompted a change in the way the EU perceived itself and its place in the world. Pointing to the expanded territory and the massively increased number of people living within the EU, official documents from this period constantly underline the new role and responsibilities of the enlarged European Union, including the provision of security and welfare to its citizens (European Commission 2004a; 2004b; 2004c; 2005). As stability in the wider neighbourhood was considered essential to achieve this aim, a pronounced imperial logic came to shape the EU's policies towards the new and old peripheries. In fact, the European Neighbourhood Policy gave rise to a reconfiguration of spatiality in the EU's bordering practices, often described as a neocolonial mechanism by which the European core constructs, orders, and subjugates its periphery (Zaiotti 2007; Jones and Clark 2008; Bialasiewicz et al. 2009; van Houtum and Boedeltje 2011; Bialasiewicz 2012).

Of course, the empire analogy has its limits. Unlike empires throughout history, the EU does not have an army; it does not invade bordering regions or states. EU expansion to include new members, as well as selective rule transfer and differentiated integration of the countries bordering the European bloc, all occur by agreement. Moreover, the EU displays some peculiar features of our times, including multilevel governance and an even higher mobility of capital and labour than was the case in previous empires. Its internal workings and decision-making process also differ from traditional empires, with the constitutive units, the member states, acting more autonomously than the empire analogy allows for. However, in spite of these differences, and as Jan Zielonka (2013: 36) has put it, the EU has all the features of empires and it does what all historical empires have always done.

Europe and Its Southern Borderlands: Rules, Practices, and the Logic of Empire

What is the underlying logic that guides European policies towards Europe's southern periphery and what role do norms and rules play? And how can we think about the impact of European policies on the states in its southern vicinity? As the EU has been trying to spread its rules and governance patterns beyond its borders (Lavenex and Schimmelfennig 2009), it has indeed been acting in a 'normative' way—at least in a certain sense. However, the rules that the EU has sought to export to neighbouring countries have usually not been tantamount to the norms postulated by the 'normative power Europe' concept. As anyone familiar with EU trade agreements with MENA states and their subsequent implementation can attest, the normative content of European policies consists primarily of a plethora of administrative and trade-related rules and standards, procedures, and practices. These include a broad but rather unexciting collection of food safety certificates, veterinary standards, testing procedures for pharmaceuticals, financial control mechanisms, governance rules, and border control practices, to name but a few. We are thus referring to *rules and practices*, with European policies aiming at the regulatory convergence of third states with the EU's Internal Market.

In this context, a focus on practices helps greatly to articulate the reality of Europe's policy towards and relations with neighbouring states. Defined as repeated and performative processes that embody, express, and reify specific background knowledge on the material world (Adler and Pouliot 2011: 6–7), practices are the summary of the way *things are actually done*. They consist of the performance of specific actions, which express a meaning on which the parties have agreed beforehand. European policies clearly aim at spreading the *EU way of doing things* to neighbouring states, at least as far as economics, borders, and migration are concerned. Perhaps unsurprisingly, notwithstanding the customary EU rhetoric about 'partnership' and 'co-ownership', third states must 'converge' with European rules and practices (and not the other way around). In this vein, the European Commission praises third states for their efforts 'to move towards EU transport standards' (European Commission 2013a: 13) or to 'integrate' into the European Research Area (European Commission 2013b: 15).

Hence, European policies towards the neighbourhood—Europe's periphery—do not have the primary aim of spreading democracy, liberty, and human rights. Were this to be the case, Europe would have shown far

greater resolve in pressuring third states to respect such norms. Rather, the main objective of the export of rules and practices is to ensure stability in the neighbourhood, security (Europe's), and the creation of a favourable business environment. Of course, European attempts to promote economic best practice and the rule of law in neighbouring states are not bad ideas in principle; indeed, they may be of mutual benefit. But we must be careful not to conflate the spread of best practice in the economic and public sectors with the promotion of democracy or democratic governance tout court, as some studies seem to imply (Lavenex and Schimmelfennig 2011).

At this point, we may raise the question of why Europe acts in the ways that it does towards its neighbourhood. The simple answer to this question is that *Europe does what it does because it is what it is*. Indeed, rethinking the EU and its member states as a (normative) empire allows us to consider the EU's modus operandi and its policies towards neighbouring countries as the logical consequence of the nature of the European Union itself. In other words, Europe seeks to export selected rules and practices beyond the border because it is an empire of sorts and because this is how empires behave in the pursuit of their interests. For the EU and its member states, rule transfer to neighbouring countries is a cost-efficient way of pursuing these interests, namely stability in the borderlands, security, and economic benefits. Furthermore, exporting the European way of doing things actually contributes to the reproduction of Europe's self-understanding as a normative and quasi-benevolent actor in world politics. Thus, transferring rules and practices to the borderlands is a means to an end; it is a utility-maximizing strategy wrapped in a norm-based discourse.

The specificities of European policies vis-à-vis the states at Europe's borders have obviously had an impact on the latter, even if this impact does not usually make it into media headlines. Yet, as discussed further later on, MENA states have been integrated into very specific aspects of the EU's Internal Market in an asymmetrical and selective manner and have adopted a specific economic model as a result. Based on liberalization and privatization, this development has only benefited a few people in the MENA region, however. Combined with the specific policy choices of MENA governments, European policies may thus have contributed to rising socio-economic inequalities and societal polarization. And as European policies have relied on the elites in the Mediterranean Middle East, these policies may have played a part in strengthening the authoritarian regimes in Europe's borderlands (unless or until they are overthrown by popular revolts). This has become ever more the case as MENA governments have received extensive funding and sophisticated

technology from Europe in return for their cooperation in counterterrorism activities and border controls, as elaborated more fully later on. A borderlands perspective on Europe–Middle East relations, in which we rethink Europe as a sort of empire, helps us understand this ambiguous outcome of European policies.

Interests, Power, and Interdependence

A final theoretical consideration related to a borderlands perspective on Europe–Middle East relations revolves around the issues of interests, power, and interdependence. As argued elsewhere (Del Sarto 2016), a borderlands perspective shows that international actors may pursue their interests by adopting utility-maximizing strategies, which are, however, compatible with rule-based behaviour and rhetoric. As Zielonka (2006) has stressed, power and coercion are often based on rules and norms, with interest-based motivations never being far from the surface. Within European policy towards its near abroad, it is clear that interests and norm-based behaviour interlock and reinforce one other.

A depiction of Europe's relations with the Mediterranean Middle East as interactions between a normative empire and its borderlands thus allows us to move beyond the almost endless discussions in International Relations scholarship on whether interests or norms (and identities) are predominant in defining world politics. Although perhaps less vigorous today, the debate is still relevant between 'rationalists', who maintain that predefined and 'objective' interests define state behaviour, and constructivists, who highlight the role of norms and identities in defining these interests (Fearon and Wendt 2002; Jackson and Nexon 2013: 555 ff.).[19] The conceptualization advanced here sustains the argument that, contrary to what is commonly claimed, it is possible to bridge the divide between rationalists and constructivists, as proposed by a few scholars (Hynek and Teti 2010; Benett 2013: 463). In this sense, the borderlands perspective espouses a synthesis of rationalism and constructivism, thus adopting what could be termed a 'realist–constructivist' approach.

A second set of questions that a borderlands perspective on Europe–Middle East relations allows us to raise has to do with power relations and interdependence. The selective integration of the MENA region into the European

[19] This debate has produced an extensive body of research, not all of which can be cited here.

order—the result of the empire's modus operandi—has undoubtedly brought about a growing interdependence between Europe and its southern borderlands. Yet perhaps surprisingly, the literature on Europe–Middle East relations does not usually pay much attention to the existence of asymmetrical power relations between Europe and its southern periphery and the implications of this asymmetry. In general, studies of Europe–MENA relations typically refrain from engaging with broader theoretical considerations of power and interdependence in International Relations, questions which are nonetheless central to the theory and practice of world affairs (see for example Keohane 2002; Barnett and Duvall 2005; Lukes 2005; Millennium 2005; Keohane and Nye 2011; Baldwin 2016).

But what can be said about the type of power relations between the two regions? Most MENA states are dependent on European trade and aid. Given that these countries lack any significant economic integration among themselves, and since they usually do not cooperate in their relations with Europe, they face the materially far more powerful European Union alone. The hub-and-spoke pattern created by European policies, emblematic of imperial core–periphery relations, thus translates into a clear power asymmetry between Europe and the MENA region at large that works in Europe's favour. This is even more the case in light of two additional key features of core–periphery relations that mark the interaction between Europe and its 'near abroad': the specialization around different types of products—industrial production versus resources and agriculture—and a clear division of labour. Thus, theoretically, Europe should be able to impose its preferences on the governments and societies of the Middle East. However, in the context of complex interdependence (Keohane and Nye 2011), power relations between Europe and its borderlands are far more ambiguous. In fact, as subsequent chapters will demonstrate, some MENA states have considerable leverage over the Europeans on specific issue areas such as migration—leverage that, in recent years, has even increased. Europe's weaker bargaining position is thus a direct outcome of the growing interlinkages between the two sides, together with Europe's co-optation of MENA governments in the management of the borderlands. In other words, while the growing interdependence between the two sides differs across different issue areas, being asymmetrically less dependent than the respective other side is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for exercising influence over weaker partners. Thus, analysing relations between Europe and MENA through a borderlands lens allows us to qualify the idea of unidirectional power relations and necessarily asymmetrical power distribution in north–south relations. Certainly, the notion of EU

power per se needs to be qualified, given the EU's limited ability to influence events in the neighbourhood at large. However, a borderlands approach points to the need to distinguish between the EU's structural power in shaping preferences and expectations on a multilateral basis and the existence of asymmetric power relations that vary from one policy area to another.

Finally, while a borderlands approach to Europe–Middle East relations necessarily focuses on the structurally more powerful European side as a starting point, it allows for a critical perspective on what happens in the borderlands. The main reason is that borderland areas are hybrid by definition, marked by a renegotiated and often locally adapted imperial order at the fringes (Gravier 2020). Imperial accommodation with its borderlands is 'continuous implicit negotiation, not a done deal' (Marks 2012: 6). Rethinking Europe as a (normative) empire thus allows us to shed light on these often tacitly negotiated outcomes of EU rule transfer, including the grey areas in which EU rules and practices are rejected or modified by MENA states (often with European acquiescence). Hence, while a borderlands approach to the study of Europe–Middle East relations may seem somewhat Eurocentric at first glance, in reality it allows us to assign agency to MENA states, thus departing from a Eurocentric logic in which neighbouring states always receive passively whatever Europe proposes and does. Although an increasing number of studies are paying attention to this dimension (for example Joffé 2008; Del Sarto 2010; Cassarino 2010; 2014; Bahçecik 2014; El Qadim 2014; Nicolaïdis 2015; Tholens 2017a; Karadağ 2019; Del Sarto and Tholens 2020), the actions and reactions of MENA states have been ignored far too often and for far too long in the European studies literature.

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To sum up, a focus on borders and borderlands is of crucial importance if we are to understand the complexities of Europe's relations with the Mediterranean Middle East and North Africa. Such a focus captures the multiplicity and overlap of very different types of functional and legal borders within Europe itself, together with the 'fuzziness' and growing dislocation of its external borders. Equally, it prompts us to think of Europe's relations with the Mediterranean Middle East and North Africa as the interaction between a normative empire and its southern borderlands. From this perspective, Europe's 'normative' action of transferring its rules, practices, and disaggregated borders southwards is a cost-efficient means to stabilize the periphery and draw economic benefits from it. The logic of empire is reinforced by Europe's traditionally normative discourse that is reminiscent of its civilizing

mission, and which serves the construction of a normative identity for the EU. Second, a focus on Europe's borders and the type of interaction with its periphery sheds light on European interests and structurally unequal power relations, two crucial aspects that EU studies generally tend to gloss over. And while a borderlands perspective lends itself to investigate the impact of European policies on the southern 'neighbourhood' from a core–periphery perspective, it also allows us to focus on the agency of MENA states in their interdependent relationship with Europe through this lens, including the role played by co-opted political and economic elites in these states.

The next chapter will consider the historical background and the development of Europe's relations with the Mediterranean Middle East, tracing Europe's quasi-imperial approach to its borderlands to the beginning of the European integration process.