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ABSTRACT

The article critically explores the European Union's (EU) engagement in Lebanon (2015–2024) through the lens of decentring—an approach that seeks to transcend Eurocentric perspectives by acknowledging non-European viewpoints and highlighting the agency and lived experiences of local actors in international relations. Focusing on three key areas—the EU liberal development model, the security-driven approach, and the top-down nature of EU engagement—the study combines quantitative data on EU-funded projects with qualitative insights from interviews and official documents. The analysis uncovers certain ambivalence: while some EU practices are positively received and have contributed to important legal and institutional reforms, the EU support is often perceived as hierarchical and misaligned with local priorities. Civil society actors report challenges related to rigid funding structures that prioritize international NGOs, weak monitoring, and a limited understanding of Lebanon's socio-political complexities. The article calls for a more reflexive, relational EU foreign policy that embraces dissonance, learns from local actors, and moves beyond normative projection. It contributes to decentring literature by grounding critique in empirical reality and proposing contrapuntal reconstruction as a way forward. In doing so, it encourages rethinking EU engagement not as imposition, but as mutual adaptation amid shifting geopolitical dynamics and increasing pressures on civil society.

Introduction

The Arab uprisings of 2011 prompted a critical reassessment of traditional frameworks in Middle Eastern politics, particularly the democratization and authoritarian resilience paradigms. This shift also influenced perceptions of the EU's engagement with its southern neighbours. The recent academic debates have sought to decentre the Eurocentric narratives, emphasizing the importance of incorporating non-European perspectives and acknowledging the agency of local actors in the MENA region.[1] The criticism of the EU varies, but it touches mainly upon three main aspects: the existence of

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the EU's unchallenged liberal development model,[2] the pragmatic turn of EU foreign policies (i.e., the security-driven approach) to balance its immediate security and migration concerns while placing less emphasis on commitments to human rights and social justice,[3] and finally, the EU top-down approach that overlooks local needs and perspectives.[4]

Although theoretical developments in the decentring turn have generally gained momentum,[5] a more systematic understanding of what decentring entails, specifically in the context of the MENA region, remains lacking. Also, further empirical research is needed to bridge the gap between EU policies and on-the-ground realities, particularly as EU foreign policy continues to evolve in response to shifting geopolitical dynamics. This study thus attempts to contribute in two ways: theoretically, it organizes and clarifies the decentring critique in the MENA region, breaking down its core components; empirically, it enriches the discourse by applying this perspective to the case of Lebanon, where civil society actors navigate the challenges of political instability and economic and refugee crises. The pursuit of human rights and social justice in Lebanon remains a dynamic and evolving challenge, particularly in the aftermath of the migration crisis, starting in 2015,[6] and later during the war between Hezbollah and Israel. This period marked a turning point for Lebanon and international actors like the EU, which launched its policies to address the issue. By assessing the perceptions of Lebanese civil society actors, this article explores the EU's evolving role in the country. It thus seeks to answer the following research questions: *How do Lebanese civil society actors view the EU's engagement in Lebanon (2015–2024), particularly regarding its development model, security focus, and top-down approach, and how do their experiences and responses reflect the alignment or disconnect between EU policies and local realities?*

Central to this analysis are EU-Lebanon relations in the period 2015–2024 and the role of civil society, which is pivotal in bridging the gap between policy and practice, articulating local needs, and holding international actors accountable. The research design combines a quantitative analysis of data from EU-funded projects in Lebanon with qualitative insights drawn from interviews with representatives of human rights-focused non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and official documents (negotiated between the EU and Lebanon). It thus systematically explores civil society stakeholders' perspectives on the EU's actions and influence in Lebanon, providing an understanding of how these policies align—or diverge—from the lived realities.

The article begins with an overview of the decentring literature in EU foreign policy, unpacking three key areas of criticism prevalent in academic discourse. It then provides a contextual analysis of Lebanon's socio-political crisis, highlighting the role of civil society amid persistent conflict and economic collapse. The subsequent three empirical chapters delve into specific aspects: the first examines the EU's development model, while the second and third investigate the EU's security-focused and top-down approach.

Decentring the EU in the MENA region in the post-uprising period

The Eurocentric approach, explained as a tendency for European actors to consider their external environment through European lenses[7] has been questioned over the last few years.[8] As a response, decentring approaches emerged in the literature to account for the Eurocentric nature of international relations (IR),[9] especially reflecting on transcending

one's own positionalities and viewpoints to overcome the Western-centricity of IR.[10] As Barbieux and Boursis reveal, empirically, it is about presenting perspectives of those that typically lie outside the conventional scope of analysis, but may be relevant to better understanding world phenomena.[11] While the decentring turn has received attention in the literature and the issues have been relatively well theorized,[12] the literature needs to provide additional conceptual and empirical inquiries to further develop the field.[13]

As the decentring approaches evolved, academic contributions also echoed these approaches in connection with the EU-MENA relationship.[14] Among them, Mamadouh stressed the asymmetry in the label 'EU-Middle East relations', questioning the Eurocentric construction of the spatial and assuming unequal agency.[15] Paciello and Stassen explore the effect of the pragmatic turn in the EU's external policies in the region.[16] Others followed a more theoretical line, focusing on the process of 'othering' in the MENA as a practice of shaping the EU's identity,[17] presenting the region as an unstable and imperfect 'other'.[18] Such theoretical ground is later enriched by a new analytical framework introduced by Barbieux and Bouris to study EU-MENA relations through a prism of politico-cultural, socio-economic, and security terms, highlighting the deep-rooted Eurocentricity of foreign policy and the inherent biases through which EU policymakers look at the world and articulate their relations with it.[19] Nevertheless, none of these scholars has attempted to offer a more systematic understanding of what decentring entails in the context of the EU's engagement with the MENA region. Yet, in this academic debate, criticism primarily centres on the EU's development model and approach to international cooperation, its security-oriented policies, and its top-down engagement strategy.

Firstly, when explaining the failure of EU policy in the Southern Mediterranean region concerning either democracy promotion or trade liberalization, the mainstream literature never questions the EU's liberal development model.[20] This is later confirmed by Barbieux and Bouris, who claim that the MENA countries are especially prone to Eurocentric tropes, notably for their co-constitutive nature with the EU's identity.[21] In other words, the EU is often portrayed as an international actor wielding normative power.[22] Yet, the critics argue that it remains unclear whether its norms and values are recognized as legitimate by its counterparts,[23] and whether the EU model could be perceived as a standard others should follow. Moreover, as Tagma et al. claim, even in the post-uprising period, the EU's language remains vague, too technical, and depoliticized concerning democracy and human rights promotion.[24] The EU advocates for a specific form of democracy—procedural democracy—which overlooks aspects like social democracy and egalitarian concerns.[25] The voices that point to the urgent need to put social rights and the perspectives of local people at the centre of the assessment of EU policies have become more prominent. Furthermore, it is not only the voices but also the perceptions of the main terms that should shape the debate. As Paciello highlights, local surveys reveal a broader and more holistic understanding of concepts such as democracy and human rights compared to Western policymakers' narrower definitions.[26] This perceptual dichotomy, often framed through a teacher-student dynamic with the EU in a 'superior' role, leads to inconsistencies affecting the EU's external action, but also raises questions about the legitimacy of its relationship with its counterparts, as EU foreign policy is built only through European lenses and omits the perspective of those whom the policy addresses.[27]

Second, the disparity between practices and expectations has lately been intertwined with tensions between EU values and interests. These critical voices have strengthened with the so-called EU pragmatic turn in its foreign policy, focusing on building resilience and dealing with security issues, such as the migration of neighbouring societies,[28] rather than the top-down promotion of democracy and human rights, as done previously.[29] As Paciello further explains, the EU is seen to have further marginalized human rights in favour of a 'stability-based approach'.[30] On top of that, in the post-uprising, EU policies have remained firmly rooted in the prescriptions of the free market and have continued to neglect their negative employment effects and local people's claims.[31]

Third, there is a clear and significant gap between the needs and expectations of local populations and the policies implemented by the EU. The EU is also criticized for its lack of a bottom-up approach: it tends to conceptualize civil society in a liberal framework and continues to actively promote neoliberal policies. This happens often through selecting civil society actors that embrace similar liberal values, thus excluding egalitarian and Islamic organizations.[32] Yet the post-uprising environment has gained a more colourful nature, where non-institutionalized movements, Islamist groups, labour-related movements, protest movements, or issue-based movements participate.[33] However, these different forms of civil society remain neglected.

The idea of homogeneity among civil society actors, which prevails in the EU institutions, given their official documents and practices, seems to be distant from the current realities in the MENA region. The post-uprising literature on social movement and civil society in the Arab region highlights the need to be aware of multiple perspectives and the voices of bottom-up actors.[34] This is especially important, since the local actors can have various positions in the society, different views on the involvement of various actors and the role of religion, including understanding human rights, freedom and citizenship. Furthermore, as Tagma et al. highlight, an increasing number of civil society actors actively oppose the EU's activities and practices in the region.[35]

The case of Lebanon (2015–2024)

These three critical aspects will be further analysed in the case of EU engagement in Lebanon between 2015 and 2024. The case of Lebanon was selected due to its status as a longstanding EU partner, while also being a country grappling with significant fragility marked by prolonged political turmoil, compounded by financial challenges and a refugee crisis.[36] While Lebanon did not participate in the Arab Spring protests from the beginning in 2011, the situation quickly deteriorated with the massive so-called garbage crisis protests in 2015. Since then, Lebanon has endured a series of crises, including the 2019 protests and the catastrophic explosion in Beirut Port in August 2020, which drew global attention to the country's prolonged decline. Additionally, the country's banking sector and financial governance are plagued by deep-rooted corruption and an inability to effectively address the crisis.[37]

Lebanon also suffers from long-term political instability, given inherent sectarian, intra-sectarian, and non-sectarian conflict through which the experience of violence has become etched into the everyday life of the Lebanese population.[38] It has become the country's status quo.[39] The ongoing political and civil unrest escalated due to the 14-month-long conflict between the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah and Israel. Hence,

war, violence, economic struggles, as well as the refugee issue, have shaped collective memory, socio-economic relations, and, more generally, how many communities perceive the world and Lebanon in it.[40] Indeed, it especially affects their negative view on democracy in the country and on the system, which is often described as very corrupt.[41]

In terms of human rights, Lebanon is a unique case due to the particular characteristics of the Lebanese human rights development sector, the political situation, and poor governance. As Partain claims, Lebanon's human rights issues are deeply rooted in its violent history and the delicate balance between religious and secular politics.[42] The Lebanese development sector is diffuse and opaque, with high historical dependence on civil society. The polarized political landscape and complex multi-sectarian system foster questionable leadership and governance that is not only ineffective but at times actively harmful.[43] Furthermore, NGOs in Lebanon face challenges due to donor-driven agendas, dependency on external funding, and a disconnect from grassroots movements. The competitive nature of fundraising leads to fragmentation and inefficient resource allocation. The overlap of humanitarian aid with human rights efforts further complicates the landscape, as ongoing crises blur the lines between the two.[44] External actors, including the EU, need to consider all these factors when dealing with the country.

Research design

To reach the article's objective and systematically explore the three critical aspects of EU engagement in Lebanon, we used quantitative data on EU funding with qualitative data from EU-Lebanon official documents and insights gathered from interviews with civil society stakeholders. The study captures both the measurable impacts of EU policies and the experiences of those directly involved in human rights advocacy. Quantitative analysis provides a broader view of trends and focuses within EU projects in Lebanon and semi-structured interviews and EU official documents allow for the examination of the EU development model and its approach to local stakeholders.

The data on financial flows were extracted from the EU Financial Transparency System (FTS), an online public database that provides detailed information on the beneficiaries of EU budget funding. This system is managed directly by the EC or indirectly by other international organizations or non-EU countries. The FTS enables users to search for specific details about beneficiaries, including their name, VAT number, address, and financial data, such as committed and consumed amounts. For this analysis, the funds provided to Lebanon from 2015 to 2023 were considered. The study analysed the evolution of the amounts and identified projects related to human rights. Subsequently, we conducted an additional layer of filtering for projects dedicated to refugees and other security-oriented projects. In cases where it was not immediately clear if a project was human rights-related, we used EU or Lebanese websites to gather more information.

In the qualitative part, we combined data collection from semi-structured interviews and desk research focused on EU(–Lebanon) official documents. The interviews took place from October 2024 to September 2025; they were conducted in person or online and lasted 20 to 60 minutes. Ten questions were prepared to guide the dialogue with open-ended answers. The questions explored the impact, evolution, and sustainability of EU support for human rights projects in Lebanon, focusing on funding, cooperation

challenges, policy influence, and outcomes. We interviewed eleven respondents (see the list of interviewees) with experience in various human rights-related NGOs. We formulated broad, open-ended questions (without imposing any preconceived categories) to allow our respondents to freely identify their experience with EU projects, their benefits and challenges 'in their own voice' and to discover local specifics and contexts. Regarding the data obtained from interviews, we transcribed the audio recordings using Microsoft Word and organized and analysed the information using QDA Miner Lite software. Simultaneously, desk research was conducted, examining official EU documents relevant to the MENA region or specifically for Lebanon in detail. A systematic analysis of more than 64 official documents was carried out to identify the views of both actors on human rights funding in Lebanon. The materials include the Association Agreement (AA), Commission communications, joint communications, strategies, action plans and others. The EU official documents include materials on the EU neighbourhood policy and the EU-Lebanon documents from 2015–2024.

We based our research on a qualitative content analysis, a flexible method that focuses on the content and contextual meaning of interviews and documents to provide an understanding of a given phenomenon.[45] Prior to our research, we thoroughly reviewed relevant literature on the decentring approach and on EU-MENA relations. We used these as analytical guidelines to identify three main areas of criticism. In the later stage, we repeatedly reread, compared all interviews and documents, analysed the themes based on their occurrence, connection and context, and organized them according to predefined criticisms of EU engagement in the MENA region. As for interpretation, in the first phase we assessed each interview and document separately to understand its meaning 'from within' (phenomenological approach), and in the next phase we compared all accounts while applying theoretical concepts to identify the underlying structures and dynamics which generate the phenomenon under investigation (critical approach).[46] After coding the information from interviews with NGOs operating in Lebanon and from official documents, the most recurring code pertained to the flow of funds and the process of obtaining EU funding, the second most recurring code referred to the pragmatism of the EU concerning human rights in Lebanon, and the results achieved. Other significant codes (above 10%) included the specifics of Lebanon compared to other countries involved in EU human rights projects, the achievements made possible by EU funding, and the monitoring of EU-funded projects. A categorization scheme was created, merging the group codes into meaningful clusters.[47] Such an arrangement further helped to interpret the data from categories and subcategories based on their concurrence, antecedents, or consequences[48] and to subjectively interpret the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes.[49]

The EU development model in Lebanon: standards, conditionality, and local realities

Since the early 1990s, the EU has pursued a rights-based agenda in Lebanon, situating human rights and governance at the centre of its assistance[50] and these rights and fundamental freedoms have been reaffirmed 'in international, regional and national law as shared values'.[51] Cooperation between both actors has been primarily framed through the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and bilateral agreements such as the

EU—Lebanon Association Agreement (AA). These frameworks establish the conditions of partnership: the EU provides financial and technical assistance to municipalities, public authorities, private stakeholders, and civil society organizations in exchange for commitments to political, economic, and social reforms. The AA explicitly links trade, governance, and human rights, aligning Lebanon with selected European standards and norms.[52] EU engagement is, therefore, not limited to technical or economic cooperation but is explicitly designed as a vehicle for reform. The stated aim of the EU's approach is to '*support Lebanon to deliver better services and tackle governance challenges in compliance with European standards*'.[53] By framing European benchmarks as the reference point for reforms, the EU effectively defines its development model in Lebanon as one of conditionality through standards. This means that financial assistance is not seen as an end in itself but as leverage to promote human rights, governance, and accountability reforms. The EU's development model thus represents a vision of Lebanon as a state governed by the rule of law, transparent institutions, and strong human rights protections. Human rights are understood not only as shared values, but also as practical requirements for stability, legitimacy, and economic growth.[54]

The 2020–2024 Action Plan for Human Rights and Democracy embodies this rationale by linking development assistance to concrete commitments: abolishing torture and the death penalty, empowering women and minorities, combating discrimination, supporting human rights defenders, and embedding climate change within human rights protection.[55] The agenda of rights and governance is therefore not presented as external to development, but as its foundation. Moreover, in the documents after 2021, the EU's support for human rights policies is often influenced by other dynamics: human rights protection is the key component to sustainable development, stability and security in Lebanon, which can be done through cooperation with EU agencies and the adoption of best practices.[56] Civil sector actors are positioned at the heart of this framework. The EU presents them both as beneficiaries of funding and as accountability actors able to monitor government actions and press for reforms.[57] They are expected to participate in preparing, implementing, and monitoring EU support, while acting as watchdogs over public authorities. Simultaneously, in EU official rhetoric, they provide a corrective to Lebanon's dysfunctional state institutions, ensuring that reforms are designed and sustained through citizen pressure.[58]

However, while the EU development model in Lebanon stands for conditionality, rights-based development, and civil society empowerment, in practice, it encounters structural and political obstacles. As the earlier studies also show, local actors frequently perceive EU support as donor-driven, rigid, and insufficiently adapted to Lebanese realities.[59] Civil society actors also voice similar criticism in several other MENA countries, e.g., Tunisia[60] or Algeria.[61] Interviews with civil society representatives reveal significant challenges in how this model operates on the ground.

One recurring concern in Lebanon is the imbalance and inflexibility in the EU's funding structure. Grants tend to be extremely large, requiring compliance capacity only major international or well-established Lebanese NGOs possess. As one interviewee (8) argued, this system forces smaller organizations into subcontracting arrangements under larger NGOs, which undermines their autonomy and reduces them to service providers, '*while the EU's emphasis on transparency and accountability is understandable given the EU's responsibility to European taxpayers, the effect is to stifle innovation and*

reinforce inequalities within the NGO sector'.[62] Other interviewees echoed this critique by describing EU funding as overly prescriptive. One noted that funding applications often required organizations to devote a fixed proportion of their projects—sometimes up to fifty percent—to refugee-related initiatives, regardless of their original mission.[63] In this view, the EU's conditionality transforms civil society actors into implementers of external agendas rather than authentic representatives of local communities. As another interviewee stressed, '*funding should support rather than dictate an NGO's mission*'.[64]

These perspectives converge with broader criticisms of the EU's conditionality in the MENA region.[65] Hence, while legislative reforms promoted by the EU, such as anti-torture measures or enhanced labour protections for migrant workers, have been welcomed as positive steps.[66] Interviewees also stressed that conditionality often reflects European agendas rather than Lebanon's cultural and developmental needs[67] - '*those that prioritise genuine community engagement over box-ticking*'.[68] Yet, the obstacles are not limited to donor practices; they are deeply embedded in Lebanon's political system. Corruption and sectarianism are seen as major obstacles to democracy, with the EU urged to support civil society and pressure the government for reforms.[69] Human rights concerns persist in Lebanon, particularly for Syrian refugees, migrant workers, and women. The fragmented political system complicates aid distribution, with parties like Hezbollah stepping in as de facto charities to bolster their influence. NGOs tied to political groups operate alongside international organizations. At the same time, even UNHCR hiring is reportedly shaped by political affiliations to ease negotiations with the state, creating a system of mutual dependence, as interviewee 2 suggested: '*I think that the UNHCR is not politically affiliated. It's an international organisation. But I think to work in Lebanon and to get what they want done, to use a kind of lobbying with the government, in exchange, the Lebanese leaders are allowed to have their own employees inside the NGO*'.[70]

Therefore, the EU's development model in Lebanon is both ambitious and constrained. On the one hand, it articulates a comprehensive vision linking governance reforms, human rights protection, and development and has contributed to important legislative changes. On the other hand, its reliance on conditionality and compliance with European standards has produced unintended consequences: privileging large NGOs, sidelining grassroots actors, and misaligning with local priorities.

Manifestation of the EU's pragmatic turn in Lebanon

Lebanon's sectarian history fosters deep fragmentation and a persistent anticipation of violence. The influx of Syrian refugees has further strained resources, widened socio-economic disparities, and heightened polarization, with refugees now making up a significant share of the population.[71]

The EU-Lebanon documents have consistently addressed security and refugee issues, with varying degrees of focus depending on the political and socio-economic context. The 2014–2017 EU Roadmap for Engagement with Civil Society emphasized governance, civil society participation, and accountability, indirectly supporting Lebanon's social stability. It acknowledged that '*Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) represent a wide range of "voices" in development debates, particularly the vulnerable and marginalised population*'[72] suggesting an implicit recognition of refugee

challenges. A significant shift occurred in the 2016–2020 with the adoption of the EU-Lebanon Partnership Priorities and the EU-Lebanon Compact, explicitly addressing refugees and committing EU support for Lebanon's resilience amid the Syrian conflict.[73] Hence, since 2016, the refugee situation has been treated as a humanitarian and political crisis.[74] Simultaneously, the joint EU-Lebanon responsibility to protect refugees' rights is stressed alongside the burden-sharing discussion.[75] These documents prioritize displaced Syrians and Palestinians, combining immediate aid and rights protection with a long-term focus on safe, voluntary returns under international law.[76] Especially, forced displacement is mentioned as a critical, but common challenge: '*Jointly addressing the challenges of forced displacement and irregular migration and seizing the benefits of legal migration efficiently, through comprehensive tailor-made and mutually beneficial partnerships, protecting migrants and refugees' rights, in line with the European New Pact on migration and asylum*'.[77] In 2021, the Joint Communication on Renewed Partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood adopted a broader, more comprehensive approach. It explicitly recognized that '*protracted conflicts cause immense suffering, mass displacement, and strain the economic and social prospects, especially for countries hosting large refugee populations*'.[78] Moreover, the 2024–2025 Multiannual Action Plans for Lebanon broadened security efforts, emphasizing renewable energy for security forces and post-conflict support.[79]

These findings are also reflected in financial resources. According to data from the EU financial transparency system (see Graph 1), aid flows through various instruments remained relatively stable between 2015 and 2023, with a decline in 2020 and 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the Lebanon's 2019 economic crisis, which severely disrupted the NGO sector.[80] EU support for Syrian refugees is channelled through the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) and the EU Regional Trust Fund (EUTF Syria—Madad). While the ENI funds humanitarian and development aid, the EUTF has mobilized €2.38 billion since 2014 to support refugees and host communities in Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq.[81] Country-specific figures are unclear due to multi-country projects, but Lebanon is a main aid recipient. EU data shows funding declined after 2015, dropped to 0% in 2021, and rose slightly thereafter.
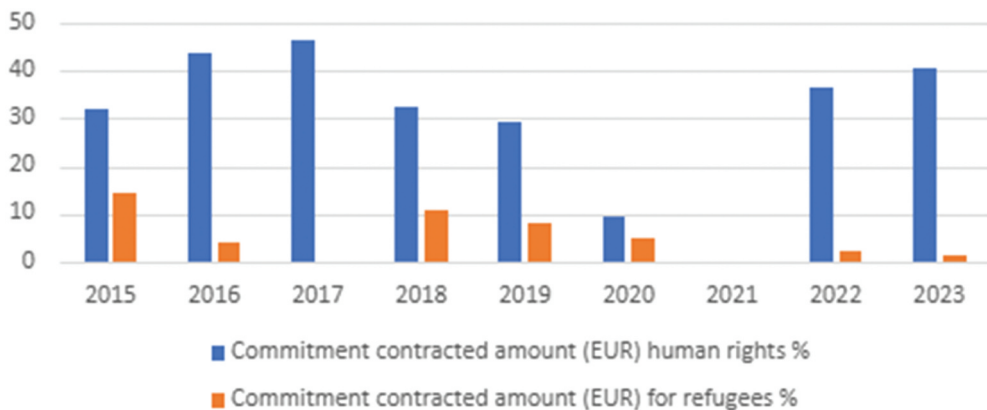
Graph 1. Human rights and refugee-related projects' share of total aid from the EU - commitment contracted amount. Source: Authors, based on EU financial transparency system data.

Interestingly, Graph 1 illustrates that between 2015 and 2023, EU aid commitments to human rights projects remained consistently higher than those for refugee-related initiatives. Human rights funding peaked in 2016 and 2017 at nearly 40% of total aid and has since maintained a substantial share. By contrast, refugee-related funding increased briefly in 2015–2016 but declined sharply, staying at very low levels from 2020 to 2023. This trend slightly challenges the assumption of a pragmatic turn in EU external aid, suggesting a stronger focus on immediate crisis response, such as support for refugees. Instead, the data indicate a sustained commitment to human rights, even as the share of aid for refugees has decreased. This suggests that while the EU's official documents may slightly more emphasize pragmatic responses to global crises, both—the actual financial commitments and EU rhetoric—maintain a strong focus on broader human rights objectives. It also aligns with the EU's broader strategic shift, where human rights nowadays stand alongside priorities like environmental sustainability and sustainable development, again visible in the EU documents.[82] The declining share of aid for refugees in recent years may indicate a broader reallocation of resources towards these other critical areas.

Yet, respondents often view the imbalance between human rights and refugee support negatively.[83] In light of the economic and financial crisis of 2019 and the ongoing conflict, they emphasize the need to demonstrate that they require support comparable to that provided to refugees.[84] For instance, interviewee 4 noted that the Madad Fund aimed to improve Syrian refugees' lives to deter migration to Europe, but not as a prevention for ongoing migration in Lebanon. Such a perspective is also confirmed by Andreou, who highlights the negative perception of non-EU countries as mere 'gatekeepers' of migration flows.[85] A view echoed across the region, as Fazzani and Moisseron note that the EU's security-oriented turn in Egypt undermines progress on human rights, particularly gender justice,[86] while the study on Algeria frames its securitized relationship with the EU as a form of neocolonial practice.[87]

These critical perspectives resonate with the Lebanese case, where interviewees highlight several negative consequences and stress that while the EU's approach aims to enhance border security and reduce irregular migration, it also places substantial pressure on Lebanon's already strained resources and infrastructure.[88] Interviewee 2 suggests that the influx of refugees has significantly burdened on Lebanon, potentially leading to economic and social strains. *I know many, many Syrians who used to live in Lebanon and who came to Lebanon before the war in Syria, so they are not refugees. They are people who were here already. And then when the war happened, they all went to the to the UNHCR to register because they claimed that they came to Lebanon because of the war. Many did this*.[89] Another issue is the prioritization of Syrian refugees over others. Lebanon has long hosted both Syrians and seasonal migrant workers, especially in agriculture, reflecting its geography and regional ties. '*Other than Syrian refugees, there are Iraqis, Palestinians and South Sudanese. And they are not given any priority*'.[90] Uneven treatment among refugees is also commented on by interviewees 2 and 3: '*The Syrian refugees are vulnerable in Lebanon. However, much more attention was to them, even though they were working, getting their illegal salary, and they didn't pay tax to the government, or anything. And on top of it, they were getting the monthly salary from the EU*'.[91] '*Another problem is with the undocumented Syrian*

kids, they are afraid of going back because they don't want to join the obligatory military training back home'.[92] Hence, these situations reinforced by EU practices are perceived as unfair to the rest of the population and strengthen tension in the society.

EU-Lebanon: top-down vs bottom-up approach

Lastly, the impact of EU-funded projects in Lebanon is shaped by funding allocation challenges. Interviewees point to a top-down EU approach, driven by flaws in funding mechanisms and a limited understanding of the local context.

EU mechanisms face criticism for lacking efficiency, especially during conflict. Interviewee 5 noted that bureaucratic requirements make funding hard for smaller Refugee-Led Organizations, which are seen as risky compared to established NGOs; despite their close ties to refugee communities, they face significant hurdles in fulfilling these requirements. Other interviewees echoed this critique. There were comments related to the lack of flexibility in reallocating funds for urgent needs (e.g., during the war), with some unable to shift resources from awareness programmes to displaced populations. Similarly, interviewee 7 highlighted how the technical barriers of the EU's application system systematically exclude smaller actors: '*the EU's complex and time-consuming application process demands resources that smaller organisations often lack*'.[93] Moreover, interviewee 9 described how many NGOs struggle with the technical knowledge required and face difficulties compiling the necessary documentation—'*especially financial audits, which can take up to 18 months due to Lebanon's economic crisis and currency instability*'. Interview 8 went further in criticizing the prescriptive nature of EU funding, explaining that '*many NGOs receiving EU funding tend to shape their missions around available budgets, often at the expense of building true expertise or maintaining credibility*'.[94] The result is that the NGOs most in need of funding to sustain their work are the least likely to secure it. This situation not only disadvantages smaller actors, but also generates a competitive environment in which NGOs hesitate to collaborate, fearing the loss of scarce resources.[95]

However, interviewee 3 emphasized that responsibility for these issues does not rest solely with the EU. The Lebanese context—characterized by corruption, lack of accountability, and judicial inefficiency—must also be addressed to achieve sustainable, long-term solutions. Moreover, it was not a universal experience. Interviewee 1 reported that their NGO successfully relocated funds with only an approval by email, demonstrating that the flexibility of financial procedures varies. Interviewee 2 also highlighted a motivational disparity among NGO workers in Lebanon, noting that *working in NGOs, for Lebanese, is more motivating because of the income rather than the idea of human rights promotion. Positions in NGOs (local and international) in Lebanon are considered very well paid and offer many benefits. Often there is a disproportion seen between the living standards that the employees can enjoy due to the high salaries and the low living standards of the targeted people, the beneficiaries, who are the recipients of the aid.* This is reflected in the gap between beneficiary and commitment amounts in Graph 2, with large sums used for overheads. Interviewee 2 added that while decent salaries are needed to survive in Lebanon, '*it is problematic when administrative staff earn well while the youth receiving aid cannot afford a dignified life*'.
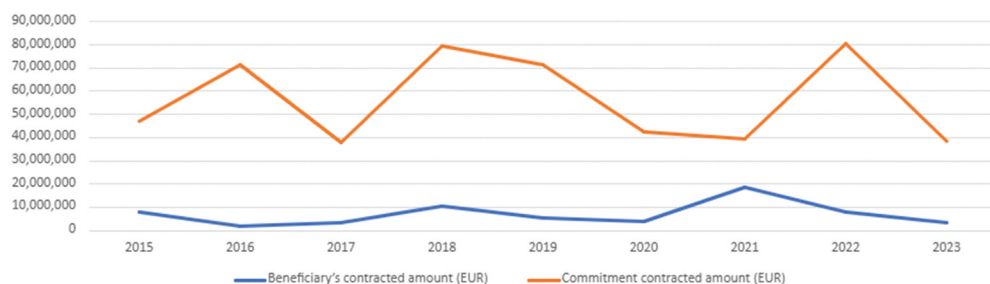
Graph 2. EU aid evolution. Source: Authors, based on data from the EU's financial transparency system[96]

Moreover, interviewee 3 criticized the lack of monitoring of EU funds, especially in security projects, noting the absence of evaluations and field visits. Although projects supported legal reforms and awareness campaigns, oversight gaps and political interference limit effectiveness, while reported ISF (Internal Security Forces) and LAF (Lebanese Armed Forces) violations have faced no real accountability. *We think that to solve the issue, we should target the root causes that have put those people in this vulnerability. These are the deterioration of the country's social, economic and political situation. And we know that corruption, lack of accountability and judicial independence are causing major issues. Throughout the years, on average, there was around $230 million per year. Part of it is from the EU to Lebanon. We don't have proper monitoring* (interviewee 3). Similarly, interviewee 3 documented abuses in EU-funded refugee shelters. Yet, despite raising these concerns with EU representatives, no resolution was reached, and the Lebanese Centre for Human Rights (LCHR) received no updates on corrective actions.

According to others,[97] the EU does have tools to assess human rights impacts. The Human Rights Clause in agreements allows action against serious breaches, while impact assessments set benchmarks and monitor compliance. Consultative and monitoring frameworks, involving civil society and other stakeholders, further support transparency and accountability.[98] Yet, criticism remained: *Through the projects that they are doing, and here I would focus on security support that is being provided. Whether to the ISF or to the LAF, we didn't see any accountability measures or any changes, although we have highlighted violations happening . . .. It is quite unfortunate that there is no monitoring of the use of funds that are being channelled from the EU to official actors . . .. On July 23, the EU Parliament put out a statement that specifically talked about the misuse of EU funding in Lebanon and the projects related to solid waste management . . .. we don't see any proper investigation conducted regarding this.*[99] Moreover, interviewee 3 further revealed that researchers have been discouraged from investigating such fund misappropriation, raising concerns about transparency and oversight.

Finally, interviewees 3 and 11 noted a lack of coherence between EU mechanisms and member states. Countries like the UK, France, and Italy have provided military support for border control, which has been linked to human rights violations, including reports of donated boats being used to intercept and sink migrant vessels. Interviewee 3 explained that *the UK, France, Italy, and others support the military for border control and management. We have witnessed that, with this support, the military has violated human rights. For example, a boat donated by X was used to ram into another vessel carrying migrants,*

attempting to sink it. This is a clear violation . . . Evidently, this is part of a broader strategy to prevent people from moving from one country to another.

These dynamics have major consequences. Haddad notes that CSOs' scope in Lebanon depends on political and economic conditions. The EU risks reinforcing inequalities and depoliticizing social issues by favouring large NGOs and ignoring local needs.[100] NGOs end up substituting for a failing state rather than strengthening it, while grassroots initiatives prioritizing trust and community solidarity, such as those described by interviewee 10, remain outside the formal aid architecture. He explained that '*staying outside the formal system is a conscious choice rooted in trust, flexibility, and a desire to remain untainted by institutional dysfunction*'.[101] His group relies on informal networks to provide essentials such as powdered milk for infants and tuition support, a model that, he argued, '*shields us from the reputational risks often associated with Lebanon's NGO sector, which is plagued by corruption*'.[102]

Overall, EU engagement in Lebanon remains top-down, hindered by rigid funding mechanisms and often limited sensitivity to local realities. While framed as fostering accountability and the rule of law, it is often seen as bureaucratic and externally imposed. Interviews stress that EU aid may reinforce governance failures without more flexibility, monitoring, and grassroots engagement. In an overcrowded, undemocratic funding landscape, NGOs fill state roles but risk depoliticizing issues and perpetuating power imbalances.

Conclusion

The article has critically explored the EU's engagement in Lebanon, contributing to the ongoing debate about how European foreign policy can move beyond Eurocentric assumptions. While much decentring literature rightly critiques the EU for imposing normative frameworks and overlooking local contexts, it often stops short of proposing actionable alternatives or fully acknowledging the complexity of local dynamics.

The EU's engagement in Lebanon shares several characteristics with its broader approach across the MENA region, yet notable differences also emerge when compared to other country contexts—particularly due to the varying strength, autonomy, and political space available to civil society actors. In Egypt, the EU's cooperation has increasingly aligned with a securitization agenda shaped by the government's counterterrorism narrative, which has severely restricted civil society and marginalized human rights concerns.[103] Tunisia, by contrast, has a relatively vibrant civil society that played a central role in the post-2011 transition, allowing for more participatory EU engagement, although stakeholders still critique the EU's limited responsiveness to socio-economic needs.[104] In Morocco, civil society is active but faces structural constraints due to centralized power and co-optation, leading to perceptions of the EU as ambivalent or even neocolonial.[105] Lebanon's civil society, while historically strong and diverse, has become increasingly fragmented and donor-dependent, especially after the 2019 economic crisis, which complicates EU cooperation and undermines bottom-up accountability.[106] Although across all cases, a common thread perceived by the local actors is the EU's tendency to prioritize stability, migration control, and security over inclusive development and democratic deepening, these differences emphasize the importance of tailoring EU engagement to the specific conditions of civil society in each country, where specific challenges appear. Hence, a more differentiated and context-sensitive approach-one that genuinely

incorporates local agency and avoids technocratic or top-down practices—is essential for meaningful and sustainable partnerships in the region.[107]

Yet, while Paciello and Huber questioned the EU's uniform model of cooperation in the MENA region, an issue amplified by the EU's waning influence in the Mediterranean compared to emerging powers,[108] our findings suggest that the EU's development model is not universally rejected. Lebanese NGOs acknowledge certain benefits, such as improvements in transparency and regulatory frameworks. Similarly, although the EU's policies increasingly reflect a security-driven agenda, particularly in migration and border control, the NGOs sometimes overemphasize the securitization trend. Thus, the article shows that local actors perceive EU engagement as both enabling and constraining. This ambivalence emphasizes the need for a more relational and reflective approach-one that engages with dissonance not as a failure, but as a space for learning and negotiation. Building on recent theoretical insights,[109] we propose that the EU's foreign policy—particularly in the MENA region—could benefit from a shift towards contrapuntal reconstruction. Reimagining its approach in this way would allow the EU to move from a one-way projection of norms to a mutual process of being with others. Rather than abandoning its core values, the EU can reinvent them through relational dialogues with local actors who may share overlapping goals but interpret them through different lenses.

Moreover, this approach requires greater reflexivity within the EU itself—recognizing how domestic and internal processes shape external actions, and how normative ideals must be adapted to a post-Western, multiplex world.[110] While still nascent in the Lebanese case, the emerging geopolitical turn in EU foreign policy further challenges the normative agenda and calls for a recalibration of the decentring approach to account for these shifting dynamics.[111] Ultimately, this article contributes to the decentring debate by offering more than critique: it demonstrates the value of empirically grounded, relational analysis recognizing complexity, divergence, and partial convergence. Building on Fisher-Onar and Nicolaïdis decentring agenda, which is based on three pillars: provincializing (i.e., questioning conventional narratives), engaging (i.e., learning from non-European perspectives), and reconstruction (i.e., revitalizing EU foreign policy with decentric perspectives)[112] , the study argues that decentring should not merely expose Eurocentrism but help construct more inclusive, context-sensitive, and mutually intelligible forms of engagement. In doing so, it invites scholars and policymakers alike to reflect on how the EU might act differently—not by denying its identity, but by reimagining it in conversation with others.

Author contributions

Notes

1. e.g., S. Keukeleire, S. Lecocq, and F. Volpi, 'Decentring norms in EU relations with the southern neighbourhood', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 59(4), 2021, pp. 891–908;

T. Fakhoury, *Rethinking Coloniality Through the Lens of Refugee Norms and Histories: The Role of the Arab Middle East* (Vol. 30), IAI Research Studies 7 IAI R, Rome, 2021, p. 33; and S. Wolff, D. Gazsi, D. Huber and N. Fisher-Onar, 'How to Reflexively Decentre EU Foreign Policy: Dissonance and Contrapuntal Reconstruction in Migration, Religious and Neighbourhood Governance', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 60(6), 2022, pp. 1611–1628.

2. e.g., M. Pace, 'The EU's Interpretation of the "Arab Uprisings": Understanding the Different Visions About Democratic Change in EU-Mena Relations', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 52(5), 2014, pp. 969–984; B. Rumelili, 'Constructing Identity and Relating To Difference: Understanding the EU's Mode of Differentiation', *Review of International Studies*, 30(1), 2004, pp. 27–47; and M. Cebeci, 'European Foreign Policy Research Reconsidered: Constructing an "Ideal Power Europe" Through Theory?' *Millennium*, 40 (3), 2012, pp. 563–583.

3. e.g., J. Stassen, *The EU human rights policy in Lebanon, a shift towards realism?* Ca'Foscari University Venice//Université Saint Joseph Beirut. Global Campus Europe, 2023; and F. Barbieux and D. Bouris, 'Decentring European Union Foreign Policy: Addressing Colonial Dynamics in EU-Algeria Relations', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 63(4), 2025, pp. 1138–1157.

4. e.g., M. C. Paciello, 'The EU's "pragmatist turn" and the struggle for social justice and human rights in the Arab world: A decentring framework for analysis', *European Foreign Affairs Review, 25*(Special Issue), 2020, pp. 1–24.

5. e.g., T. Diez, 'Normative Power as Hegemony', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 48(2), 2013, pp. 194–210; M. Araújo and S. Rodriguez Maeso, *Eurocentrism, Racism and Knowledge: Debates on History and Power in Europe and the Americas*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2015; Cebeci, 'European Foreign Policy Research Reconsidered: Constructing an "Ideal Power Europe" Through Theory?', op. cit.; S. Keukeleire and S. Lecocq, 'Decentring European Foreign Policy Analysis: Towards a Paradigmatic Shift', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 63(5), 2025, pp. 1481–1508.

6. The migration crisis in Lebanon started in 2012. However, for research purposes, we consider 2015 as a starting point of the analysis, i.e., the beginning of the migration crisis in Europe.

7. Barbieux and Bouris, op. cit., p. 1.

8. e.g., Diez, op. cit.; Araújo and Maeso, op. cit.; Cebeci, 'European Foreign Policy Research Reconsidered: Constructing an "Ideal Power Europe" Through Theory?' op. cit.

9. S. Keukeleire and S. Lecocq, 'Decentring European Foreign Policy Analysis', *The External Action of the European Union: Concepts, Approaches, Theories*, 137, 2021, pp. 305–320; Keukeleire and Lecocq, 'Decentring European Foreign Policy Analysis: Towards a Paradigmatic Shift', op. cit.

10. K. E. Jørgensen. *International Relations Theory: A New Introduction*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2010.

11. Barbieux and Boursis, op. cit., p. 3.

12. see D.M. Nayak and E. Selbin, *Decentering International Relations*, Zed Books, London, 2010; A. B. Tickner and D. L. Blaney, D.L. (eds), *Thinking International Relations Differently*, Routledge, Oxon, 2012; P. Bilgin, 'The "Western-Centrism" of Security Studies: "Blind Spot" or Constitutive Practice?', *Security Dialogue*, 41(6), 2010, pp. 615–622; B. Buzan and G. Lawson, *The Global Transformation: History, Modernity and the Making of International Relations* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2015; N. Fisher-Onar and K. Nicolaïdis, 'The Decentring Agenda: Europe as a Post-Colonial Power', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 48(2), 2013, pp. 283–303; and Keukeleire and Lecocq, 'Decentring European Foreign Policy Analysis: Towards a Paradigmatic Shift', op. cit.

13. S. Keukeleire and S. Lecocq, 'Operationalising the Decentring Agenda: Analysing European Foreign Policy in a Non-European and Post-Western World', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 53(2), 2018, pp. 277–295; and Barbieux and Bouris, op. cit., p. 4.

14. e.g., Keukeleire, Lecocq, and Volpi, op. cit.; Fakhoury, op.cit.; and Wolff, Gazsi, Huber and Fisher-Onar, op. cit.

15. V. Mamadouh, 'In the Shadow of the European Neighbourhood: Political Geographies of EU—Middle East Relations', in *Routledge Handbook of EU—Middle East Relations*, Routledge, New York, 2022, pp. 137–146.

16. Paciello, op. cit. and Stassen, op. cit.

17. Pace, op. cit.; Rumelili, op. cit.; Cebeci, 'European Foreign Policy Research Reconsidered: Constructing an "Ideal Power Europe" Through Theory?' op. cit., M. Cebeci, 'The EU's Constructions of the Middle East'. in *Routledge Handbook of EU—Middle East Relations*, Routledge, London/New York, 2022, pp. 70–80.

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20. Paciello, op. cit., p. 5.

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28. Stassen, op. cit.

29. Paciello, op. cit., p. 2.

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89. Interviewee 2.
90. Interviewee 1.
91. Interviewee 2.
92. Interviewee 1.
93. Interviewee 11.
94. Interviewee 8.

95. Interviewee 7.
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101. Interviewee 9.
102. Interviewee 11.
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109. Wolff, Gazsi, Huber and Fisher-Onar, op.cit.; Keukeleire and Lecocq, 'Decentring European Foreign Policy Analysis: Towards a Paradigmatic Shift', op. cit.
110. Keukeleire, Lecocq, and Volpi, op. cit.
111. Wolff, Gazsi, Huber and Fisher-Onar, op. cit.
112. Fisher-Onar and Nicolaïdis, op. cit, p. 286.

Disclosure statement

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List of interviewees

Interviewee 1 – Advocacy manager at Caritas Lebanon, 10 October 2024, Beirut, in person.

Interviewee 2 – Worked for several human rights-oriented NGOs in Lebanon, such as SOS- head of youth centre, UNHCR- registration officer, 5 November 2024, AUST offices, Beirut, in person.

Interviewee 3 – Executive director of Lebanese Centre for Human Rights, 7 November 2024, Baouchriyeh, in person.

Interviewee 4 – Country director of the Norwegian Refugee Council in Lebanon, 9 December 2024, Beirut, in person.

Interviewee 5 – Head of the German Red Cross, 9 December 2024, Beirut, in person.

Interviewee 6 – Research technical manager at RLO Basmeh & Zeitooneh, 10 December 2024, Beirut, in person.

Interviewee 7: Founder and director of the *Institute for Governance and Electoral Studies*, 1 September 2025, online.

Interviewee 8: Founder and director of the *March Lebanon*, 3 September 2025, online.

Interviewee 9: Fundraising Consultant, formerly with *My School Pulse*, 5 September 2025, online.

Interviewee 10: Co-founder and leadership member in *Friends on a Mission*, 8 September 2025, online.

Interviewee 11: Funding Manager at *Beit Baraka*, 13 September 2025, online.