

Reconstruction as Strategy: The EU, Gaza, and the Geopolitics of Mediterranean Transformation

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For more than fifteen years, my work has centred on the practical challenges of cross border cooperation in the Middle East. Long before joining the LUISS MCS program, I moved between grassroots engagement and high level diplomacy, managing initiatives that sought to foster regional cooperation and promote meaningful contact between Israelis and Palestinians. Many of these efforts were supported by the **European Union** and involved close collaboration with peacebuilding organisations, EU agencies, and member states. Through this work, I gained a grounded understanding of the EU's strategic concerns in the region and its evolving approach to a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape. This professional experience now informs my academic research, which aims to translate field-based insights into a strategic framework for the region.

Living through a regional war over the last years directed my attention to the role of external actors in shaping both the course of conflict and the conditions that determine the day after. This experience led me to view post-war reconstruction as one of the emerging geopolitical arenas in the contemporary Middle East. As recent scholarship makes clear, reconstruction in the region is inherently political.¹ It is shaped by political economy, by wartime and post war networks, and by the often competing priorities of external actors and local communities. It is a strategic field in which regional powers and global actors compete to define the political, economic, and institutional arrangements that will structure the region for decades to come. Recognising these dynamics is essential for understanding how the region's future will be shaped by those who actively engage in, or remain absent from, this process.

Gaza stands at the epicenter of this emerging geopolitical front. Any reconstruction effort that limits itself to physical rebuilding will inevitably fail to address the deep-seated structural challenges. A sustainable recovery necessitates a comprehensive focus on institutional legitimacy and economic viability: outcomes that are profoundly contingent upon the strategic role of external actors.

What elevates Gaza's significance beyond a localized conflict is its position at the crossroads of continents. Its reconstruction is not an isolated Middle Eastern concern; it is a fundamental Mediterranean issue. Developments within Gaza vibrate across the entire basin, influencing regional mobility, energy security, trade corridors, and shifting political alignments. For the European Union, Gaza is not a distant humanitarian crisis but a vital component of its immediate geopolitical environment. Stabilizing Gaza is therefore synonymous with securing the stability, security, and economic resilience of Europe's own southern flank. For Europe, the current vacuum in leadership in Gaza is a strategic risk, allowing global rivals to prioritize interests that often diverge from European security goals.

My dissertation therefore asks whether Gaza's reconstruction can be designed to cultivate constructive interdependence and allow Europe to reassert its relevance as a Mediterranean actor. Drawing on guidance from Professor Luigi Narbone, the research will examine how European engagement will shape not only the prospects for local recovery but the future of regional stability and the position of Europe within an increasingly contested geopolitical landscape.

¹ Luigi Narbone, *Fractured Stability: War Economies and Reconstruction in the MENA*, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, European University Institute, Publications Office of the European Union, Brussels, 2019

The urgency of this research is driven by two global shifts. First, Europe's growing strategic dependence on external actors for energy and supply chains limits its autonomy, making reconstruction a test of the EU's ability to align foreign policy with economic resilience. Second, the rise of regional powers and global rivals has turned reconstruction into a field of geopolitical contestation. These dynamics require an EU approach that is strategically coherent and capable of asserting leadership in a changing international order. The core objective is to determine how the EU can move beyond reactive crisis management to facilitate a reconstruction that is both locally rooted and strategically aligned with European geopolitical goals.

The core contribution of this thesis would be the formation of a new framework for EU strategy towards the region. It will argue that the reconstruction of Gaza represents a decisive moment to **reverse the EU's traditional role in the Middle East**, transforming it from a "payer" of humanitarian aid into a primary "player" in regional stability. By moving beyond reactive crisis management, the EU has a rare opportunity to implement a new framework for intervention. This approach treats reconstruction as a deliberate policy instrument to secure the EU's southern flank, counter global rivals, and integrate the Palestinian economy into a Mediterranean strategy, solidifying a European strategic footprint through the creation of "constructive interdependence."

Research Design and Methodology

This study will employ a qualitative and comparative framework designed to bridge high-level strategy with the practical realities of the field. The research is structured across three integrated components:

Historical Analysis and Precedents: building upon my previous research work, I will analyze the Marshall Plan and the reconstruction of the Western Balkans to extract governing principles for external engagement.² These cases serve as analytical frameworks to understand how external support, when anchored in shared political objectives, can transform the region. They demonstrate as well the decisive role of external actors in both stabilizing conflict and harnessing recovery as an opportunity for economic integration. By examining these institutional designs, I investigate how external frameworks can provide the architecture necessary for a sufficient strategy.

Policy Review: The study performs a systematic evaluation of EU policy documents towards the region. This component assesses how current frameworks for the EU Neighborhood can adapt to a shifting international order characterized by growing geopolitical contestation around MENA reconstruction.

Empirical Engagement: To ensure the research remains grounded in practical realities, I incorporate semi-structured interviews and roundtables with practitioners, policymakers, economists, and civil society actors, examining central questions. This empirical layer ensures that the dissertation accounts for central challenges and key questions in implementation.

In this multi-layered and interdisciplinary analysis, this research aims to provide a strategic framework for enhancing European engagement in the Middle East. It emphasizes that the implementation of a coherent reconstruction strategy serves as a catalyst for establishing a secure, integrated, and prosperous Mediterranean region. This question is timely and important and thus I am looking forward to enter to this endeavor.

² Liel Maghen, *Lessons for the Sustainable Rehabilitation of Gaza*, Mitvim – The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies, Tel Aviv, Israel, 2025.