

The first EU-Arab League summit

A new step in EU-Arab relations

SUMMARY

On 24 and 25 February 2019, heads of state or government from the European Union (EU) and the League of Arab States (LAS) will meet in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, for the first-ever EU-LAS summit. The summit comes at a time of heightened EU interest in developing closer cooperation with its main regional counterpart in the Arab world. The meeting will be co-chaired by Egyptian President, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, and European Council President, Donald Tusk, who will represent the EU alongside European Commission President, Jean-Claude Juncker. A large number of EU and LAS heads of state or government have confirmed their attendance. A wide range of issues and common challenges will be on the agenda, including multilateralism, trade, investment and economic cooperation, technology, migration, climate change, security and the situation in the region.

Since 2011, EU-LAS meetings have been taking place regularly at different levels in the context of a political and strategic dialogue. The most recent ministerial meeting, which brought together 10 EU and 15 Arab League foreign ministers, took place in Brussels on 4 February 2019. Moreover, working groups have been gathering in between meetings of senior officials to discuss political and security matters of shared concern. The EU and the LAS share positions on a range of issues, including support for a political transition in Syria, the two-state solution under the Middle East peace process, and the recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of both Israel and a future Palestinian state. The two partners also cooperate to find solutions to the war in Yemen and the conflict in Libya. The summit is taking place at a time of intensified talks with Egypt and other North African countries to address the issue of migration. It is also seen as part of a broader effort to build closer ties with Africa. In September 2018, Commission President Juncker urged the EU to strike a new alliance with Africa to boost investment and create millions of jobs. The EU holds regular summits with other regional players, including the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the African Union (AU).



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The League of Arab States (LAS)

The [League of Arab States](#) (LAS), also known as the Arab League, is a regional inter-governmental organisation set up in 1945 to strengthen political, social and military ties among Arabic-speaking states in the Middle East and North Africa. The league has 22 members, but Syria's membership is currently [suspended](#). The [Council of the LAS](#), composed of representatives of all its member states, is the supreme authority of the organisation. Its rotating presidency is currently held by Saudi Arabia. The Council meets twice a year. Summits of heads of state or government take place annually. The league's daily administrative and executive work is the responsibility of the permanent General Secretariat headed by the Secretary General, who is appointed by the Council for a five-year renewable term. Ahmad Abul Ghaith, an Egyptian like all but one of his predecessors, was appointed Secretary-General in October 2016. The seat of the Arab League is in Cairo. In December 2012, the LAS created a parliamentary arm, the [Arab Parliament](#). Its first session took place in December 2012 in Cairo. The Arab [parliament's](#) main objective is to give the citizens of the Arab world a voice that complements that of Arab governments. The speaker of the Arab Parliament is Mishal bin Fahm al-Sulmi, a Saudi.

Map of Arab League member countries



Source: IHS Markit, 2019.

EU-LAS cooperation

[Relations](#) between the EU and the Arab League prior to 2011 were largely 'ad hoc'. A first EU-LAS Ministerial Meeting on Foreign Affairs was held in [Malta](#) in February 2008. A European Commission – League of Arab States Liaison Office ([ECLASLO](#)) was opened in Malta in 2009. However, following the outbreak of the 'Arab Spring' protest movements in the Middle East in 2011, and particularly the crisis in Libya and Syria, relations have gained new momentum. The second foreign ministers' meeting in Cairo in November 2012, which ended with the adoption of the [Cairo Declaration](#), opened a new phase of constructive engagement and cooperation' in [EU-LAS relations](#) as a means to provide an integrated regional response to strategic challenges. The Cairo meeting led to the setting up of a structured political dialogue at senior official, ambassadorial and ministerial level. Senior EU and LAS officials meet on a regular basis, three times a year. In addition, there are annual meetings of the EU's Political and Security Committee (PSC) and the permanent representatives of the LAS. EU and LAS foreign ministers meet every two years, alternating between European and Arab locations. Moreover, the two partners agreed in Cairo on a working programme on bilateral cooperation in the fields of energy, culture, empowerment of women, legal affairs, human rights, humanitarian assistance, crisis response and monitoring of electoral processes. In 2014, the EU and the LAS agreed to establish a strategic dialogue with each other, including on political and security issues. The [Athens Declaration](#), adopted at the third EU-LAS foreign ministers meeting, in the Greek capital, set out a broad agenda for cooperation, covering early warning and crisis response, humanitarian assistance, counter-terrorism, transnational organised crime, and non-proliferation of weapons of mass-destruction. A memorandum of understanding on cooperation between the

European External Action Service (EEAS) and the LAS General Secretariat was signed in 2015. This has led to practical cooperation in the form of working groups and exchanges of diplomats.

A multilateral approach to regional conflicts

Conflicts and tensions in the region have been a clear priority of EU-LAS cooperation in recent years, especially with regard to [Libya](#) and [Syria](#), but also [Iraq](#), [Lebanon](#), [Somalia](#), [Sudan](#) and [Yemen](#), the [Israeli-Palestinian](#) conflict, the [fight](#) against 'Islamic State' (ISIL/Da'esh), and [stability and security](#) in the [Sahel region](#). In Syria, the EU and LAS both support a credible and genuine political transition based on the [2012 Geneva Communiqué](#) and UN Security Council Resolutions [2254](#) and [2268](#). In 2011, the Arab League proposed a [peace plan](#) for Syria to put a stop to the regime's violent crackdown on pro-democracy protests. Shortly afterwards, Syria's [membership](#) was suspended over its failure to respect the plan. In 2013, the LAS formally granted the Syrian opposition [representation](#) in the Arab League, even though it fell short of recognising the [Syrian National Council](#) as the country's sole legitimate representative. The LAS may soon [re-admit](#) Syria once more as a full member. The EU and LAS, as well as individual member states of both organisations, are members of the [Global Coalition against Da'esh](#). The EU and LAS are also members of the [International Support Group for Lebanon](#), launched in September 2013 to help mobilise support and assistance for Lebanon's stability, sovereignty and state institutions, and specifically to encourage assistance to the Lebanese Army. In Libya, the EU and the Arab League have joined forces to form the [Libya Quartet](#), a group that also comprises the African Union and the United Nations. The group aims to support UN mediation and regional efforts, and to accompany the process of the political transition in Libya, while fully respecting Libyan ownership.

The fight against terrorism

The 2014 EU-LAS [ministerial meeting](#) laid the foundations for closer cooperation on countering terrorism. Ministers agreed to cooperate in identifying practical steps to help address the terrorism threat, including by counteracting radicalisation, recruitment, travel of terrorists and the phenomenon of foreign fighters and dealing with returning foreign fighters. They also agreed to continue work on the implementation of the [UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy](#). In parallel, the EU cooperates closely with several individual LAS member states to prevent and combat [terrorism](#).

Migration

The participants in the 2016 EU-LAS [ministerial meeting](#) in Cairo expressed support for a comprehensive approach to migration, involving countries of origin, transit and destination. The approach builds on five areas of action, namely, tackling the root causes of irregular migration through economic and social development; increasing efforts to advance legal migration and mobility possibilities while respecting national sovereignty; tackling criminal trafficking of human beings and people's smuggling; ensuring humanitarian treatment of refugees and asylum-seekers; and increasing cooperation on return and readmission. In an [effort](#) to further prevent illegal migration to Europe, in October 2018 the EU reaffirmed its resolve to strengthen cooperation with countries of origin and transit, particularly in North Africa, as part of a broader partnership. This includes stepping up the fight against people-smuggling networks, by working with third countries on the investigation, apprehension and prosecution of smugglers and traffickers.

Crisis response and early warning

In 2009, the EU and the Arab League signed a memorandum of understanding on [crisis response and early warning](#). The agreement established the basis for long-term institutional cooperation and dialogue in the fields of conflict prevention, risk assessment, crisis response and peace-building. This led to the establishment in 2012 of a regional crisis centre, the [LAS Crisis Room](#), which has been co-funded by the EU to the tune of €4.4 million. Today, this project maintains a pan-Arab early

warning and crisis response system that facilitates timely and efficient responses to political, social, economic and environmental crises.

The European Parliament

Parliament has repeatedly recognised the important role of the Arab League in addressing challenges in the Middle East and North Africa, including with regard to combating terrorism, managing migration and resolving political crises. As regards combating terrorism, Parliament has underlined the importance of basing any strategy on the rule of law and respect for fundamental rights. In its [resolution of 18 September 2014](#) on the situation in Iraq and Syria and the IS (ISIL/Da'esh) offensive, Parliament welcomed the Arab League's decision to take the necessary measures to confront ISIL/Da'esh and cooperate with international, regional and national efforts to combat militants in Syria and Iraq. In its [resolution of 11 February 2015](#) on anti-terrorism measures, Parliament called for the EU to work closely with regional players, such as the Arab League, to actively promote a global partnership against terrorism. In its [resolution of 9 July 2015](#) on security challenges in the Middle East and North Africa, Parliament called for a regional dialogue involving all regional stakeholders, including the Arab League, to address the threats and the security situation in the region. Moreover, Parliament called on the Arab League to participate in regional cooperation schemes for the monitoring of capital movements, and to introduce an efficient system of penalties to end the financing of ISIL/Da'esh by international players and prevent the terrorist organisation from selling illegally produced oil.

Parliament also stressed the importance of long-term strategic dialogue with the Arab League. In this context, Parliament highlighted the central role of the Arab League in terms of crisis resolution and called for its transformation into a full-fledged executive body able to take binding decisions. In addition, Parliament underlined the importance of dialogue and cooperation with the Arab League, to allow partner countries to develop skills and the necessary military and human resources to combat extremism. In its [resolution of 5 April 2017](#) on addressing refugee and migrant movements, Parliament pointed out the need to encourage regional organisations, such as the Arab League, to engage fully in cooperation on migration and mobility, and called on the EU to strengthen cooperation with the Arab League to promote the management of intra-regional mobility. The 2014 EU-LAS ministerial meeting encouraged the European Parliament and the Arab Parliament to strengthen their relationship through open and regular political dialogue. The first steps in this regard were taken through high-level meetings in Cairo and a study visit by a delegation of Arab Parliament members to the European Parliament in Brussels in 2013. The Arab Parliament has observer status in the [Parliamentary Assembly of the Union for the Mediterranean](#).

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