



Europe and the Levant: Strategic consequences of Middle Eastern instability from a Lebanese perspective

European View
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journals.sagepub.com/home/euv**Sami Nader¹****Abstract**

Many Europeans perceive the Middle East crisis as a distant, volatile situation whose repercussions are felt indirectly through migration flows, political tensions or disruptions to the supply of energy. Yet this perception no longer reflects strategic reality. The Levant has become an extension of Europe's strategic frontier. The discovery of natural gas in the Eastern Mediterranean has elevated the region's geo-economic importance, while unresolved conflicts and institutional fragility continue to generate risks that directly affect European security and cohesion. Lebanon, situated at the intersection of regional confrontation, refugee displacement, economic collapse and emerging energy potential, offers a critical vantage point for understanding these dynamics. This article argues that Europe must transition from a reactive humanitarian posture to a proactive stabilisation strategy built around three interconnected axes: migration stabilisation through regional normalisation and refugee return, the transformation of humanitarian assistance into economic stabilisation, and energy diplomacy grounded in maritime and land border delimitation. Supporting Lebanese recovery and regional stabilisation is not charity—it is a strategic investment in Europe's migration stability, energy resilience and geopolitical future.

Keywords

Europe, Levant, Lebanon, Migration, Energy security, Eastern Mediterranean

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Introduction

For decades, Europe approached the Levant primarily as a humanitarian theatre, a region whose instability required relief, mediation and diplomatic caution. While this posture reflected moral responsibility, it underestimated a deeper strategic reality: instability in the broader Middle East directly affects Europe's security environment and political stability (European Council on Foreign Relations 2019).

Today, the Levant must be understood not as a distant theatre of crisis but as an extension of Europe's strategic space. Migration pressures, financial collapse, unresolved borders and the discovery of natural gas in the Eastern Mediterranean bind the region's fate to Europe's own resilience (European Commission 2022).

The discovery of significant gas reserves off the shores of Israel, Cyprus, Egypt and potentially Lebanon has transformed the Eastern Mediterranean into a strategic energy corridor (International Energy Agency 2023, 98–104). For Europe—seeking to diversify its supply and reduce reliance on distant and politically volatile sources—this region represents both opportunity and vulnerability. Energy extraction requires clearly defined maritime borders, diplomatic stability and functioning state institutions. Where these conditions are absent, opportunity becomes risk (Trevisanut and Giannopoulos 2018, 792).

Lebanon lies at the centre of this evolving strategic landscape. Its institutional fragility reflects broader Levantine instability. Yet its geographic position and energy potential make it a critical node in Europe's future strategic architecture. Europe's security frontier now runs through the Levant. Recognising this reality requires a rethink of the tools of engagement.

Europe's strategic responsibility for stabilising migration through the normalisation of Lebanon–Syria relations and refugee return

Migration is the most visible transmission mechanism linking Levantine instability to Europe. The Syrian war displaced millions, with Lebanon absorbing one of the largest refugee populations in the world. This demographic pressure has strained Lebanon's infrastructure, labour markets and public services, placing stress on the fragile demographic equilibrium between sectarian groups that underpins the country's social and political order (Picard 2016, 76–9). Lebanon's capacity to contain migration pressures has shielded Europe from larger displacement flows. Yet this containment rests on a delicate balance that cannot endure indefinitely without a structured transition towards stabilisation and return. Europe therefore has a strategic role to play in supporting both Lebanon and Syria to manage this transition and reinforce stability while protecting its own long-term interests.

Recent developments indicate that such a transition has begun. Approximately 500,000 Syrian refugees have returned safely to Syria, marking the first tangible shift

from prolonged displacement towards gradual reintegration (UNICEF 2026). While still incomplete, this movement reflects evolving regional dynamics and confirms that refugee return is no longer a theoretical objective but an emerging reality. The strategic challenge now lies in ensuring that this process unfolds in a structured and sustainable manner that preserves stability on both sides of the border.

The refugee presence in Lebanon has implications that extend beyond humanitarian considerations. It directly affects the equilibrium upon which Lebanon's institutional and social order depends. The country's stability has historically rested on a delicate balance of demographic composition, social cohesion and state authority. Large-scale displacement amid economic fragility risks heightening social tensions and weakening trust in public institutions. Facilitating structured refugee return is therefore not simply a demographic adjustment, but a necessary step towards restoring institutional predictability and reinforcing the foundations of political stability.

This process is inseparable from the broader normalisation of Lebanese–Syrian relations. For decades, instability along the Lebanese–Syrian frontier has created zones of ambiguity where state authority is weak and informal actors operate. The border has long been highly porous due to weak state oversight and the involvement of political and armed actors in cross-border networks (Khatib 2021, 13). Syria's dominant posture towards Lebanon, particularly under the Assad regime, prevented the emergence of a balanced and sovereign bilateral relationship. The current geopolitical shift creates a historic opportunity to redefine this relationship on the basis of reciprocity, sovereignty and formal institutional cooperation. Europe, alongside key Arab partners such as Saudi Arabia, is well positioned to support this transition by facilitating dialogue, strengthening institutional coordination and anchoring the process within a broader regional stabilisation framework.

Europe can play a decisive role in enabling this transition by supporting structured return, institutional normalisation, economic stabilisation and the strengthening of effective border control. Enhancing border-management capacity—through surveillance systems, customs modernisation and coordinated enforcement—would help Lebanon and Syria restore full sovereign control over their frontier, stop smuggling networks, and curb the illicit cross-border flows that undermine state authority and economic stability. These efforts could build on Germany's long-standing contribution and expertise in border governance. Such engagement would help transform a historically fragile frontier into a regulated and predictable state boundary, governed by state authority rather than informal actors. Thus, Europe would not only be contributing to regional stabilisation but also safeguarding the stability of its own strategic frontier.

Beyond humanitarianism: Europe's strategic responsibility for economic stabilisation and state sovereignty

Europe's engagement in Lebanon has long centred on humanitarian assistance. At the height of the crisis, this support was indispensable in preventing social collapse and

alleviating suffering. However, the prolonged nature of Lebanon's instability now requires a strategic shift from emergency relief to economic and institutional stabilisation. While humanitarian aid addresses immediate needs and preserves social cohesion, sustainable recovery depends on rebuilding productive capacity, restoring fiscal and monetary balance, and strengthening state institutions (International Monetary Fund 2023). Lebanon's financial collapse has wiped out savings, paralysed the banking sector and eroded purchasing power, while host communities face mounting pressure from unemployment, deteriorating infrastructure and declining services. Continuing to rely primarily on humanitarian instruments risks entrenching fragility rather than enabling recovery. Supporting host communities economically is central to this shift. Investment in infrastructure, the energy supply, municipal services and the productive sectors would strengthen the social equilibrium. Europe should also actively participate in developing host communities by building capabilities, skills and productive opportunities for both the Syrian and the Lebanese populations, fostering inclusive economic development that reinforces long-term resilience. When host communities recover economically, tensions decline, migration pressures ease and institutional legitimacy improves.

Hezbollah's armed status remains central to Lebanon's limited capacity to exercise full sovereign authority over its territory. Strengthening the state's monopoly over the use of force is therefore a critical dimension of long-term institutional stabilisation. In this context, the full implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1559—which calls for the disbanding and disarmament of all non-state armed groups—remains an important reference framework for reinforcing Lebanese sovereignty and restoring unified state authority (UN Security Council 2004; International Crisis Group 2024). Advancing this objective requires a gradual and politically managed process, anchored in national consensus and supported by international diplomacy.

Lebanon's recovery hinges on financial reconstruction and systemic reform. An agreement with the International Monetary Fund is indispensable, not merely as a source of financing but as a framework for restoring fiscal discipline, restructuring the banking sector and enforcing regulatory transparency. Corruption and financial crime have deeply undermined Lebanon's institutional credibility. Europe could play a catalytic role in encouraging and supporting such reform.

Equally critical is the need to reduce Lebanon's reliance on a cash-based economy. Cash dominance facilitates tax evasion, money laundering and institutional opacity. Supporting financial digitalisation, regulatory strengthening and banking reform would enhance transparency and state capacity (Transparency International 2022). Economic sovereignty and political stability are inseparable. Without financial reconstruction, political reform remains hollow. Without institutional authority, economic reform remains unenforceable. Europe's long-term interests lie in supporting a Lebanon capable of sustaining its own stability. Stable economies generate stable societies. Stable societies reduce migration pressures and strengthen the regional equilibrium. Lebanon's recovery is therefore not a development issue alone—it is a pillar of European strategic security.

From conflict frontier to energy corridor: Europe's strategic role in stabilising the Eastern Mediterranean

The discovery of gas in the Eastern Mediterranean has introduced a transformative strategic dimension to the Levant. History has shown that energy cooperation can serve as a foundation for broader economic and political integration, as illustrated by the European Coal and Steel Community, which laid the groundwork for Europe's common market and long-term stability. Today, Europe's energy landscape has been profoundly reshaped by the war between Russia and Ukraine, which exposed the vulnerabilities created by excessive dependence on Russian energy. The resulting shift away from Russian gas has accelerated Europe's search for alternative and geographically proximate energy sources, placing the Eastern Mediterranean at the centre of its geo-economic and geopolitical recalibration. In this context, the Levant is no longer a peripheral frontier, but an emerging strategic corridor directly linked to Europe's long-term energy security and strategic autonomy. (European Commission 2022; International Energy Agency 2023).

Yet energy development requires stability and clearly defined borders. Resources located in contested or legally ambiguous maritime zones cannot be fully exploited, and investors remain reluctant to commit capital where escalation risks persist. Maritime delimitation therefore becomes not merely a legal exercise, but a strategic prerequisite for energy security (Klein 2005, 23–5). Several boundaries in the Eastern Mediterranean remain partially unresolved, including the incomplete ratification of the Lebanon–Cyprus agreement and overlapping claims involving Cyprus, Türkiye and Egypt. These disputes create legal uncertainty and constrain the region's energy potential. Given its diplomatic weight, technical expertise and direct strategic interest, Europe is well positioned to facilitate dialogue, support delimitation processes and contribute to resolving these disputes in accordance with international law, including the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UN 1982).

The 1949 armistice agreement between Lebanon and Israel, alongside UN Security Council Resolution 1701, established the cessation of hostilities and reaffirmed the need to respect the internationally recognised boundary, but did not fully resolve border delimitation (UN 1949; UN Security Council 2006). The more recent maritime boundary agreement (UN 2022) demonstrates that pragmatic diplomacy can resolve sensitive disputes and unlock economic opportunity, even in the absence of political normalisation. By creating legal certainty and reducing escalation risks, it opened the way for offshore exploration. Building on this precedent, Europe, in coordination with the US, should support efforts to fully delimit maritime and land borders between Lebanon and Israel. Clearly defined borders strengthen legal predictability, reduce the risk of confrontation, and enable the development of energy infrastructure capable of supplying regional and European markets.

For Europe, the strategic benefits are substantial. Maritime delimitation and regional stabilisation would facilitate the emergence of a new energy corridor geographically proximate to European markets, reducing exposure to geopolitical volatility in

more distant supply regions. European energy companies, financial institutions and infrastructure providers would also gain expanded opportunities to participate in the exploration, development and transportation of Eastern Mediterranean resources. Europe's diplomatic credibility uniquely positions it to advance this process. By supporting maritime border clarification and energy cooperation, Europe would reinforce regional stability while strengthening its own strategic autonomy.

Energy security, migration stability and economic sovereignty are interconnected pillars of Europe's strategic engagement in the Levant. By helping to stabilise this emerging energy frontier, Europe would contribute to regional peace while securing tangible strategic benefits for its own economic stability, energy independence and geopolitical influence.

Conclusion

The Levant stands at a historic inflection point. Migration pressures, economic fragility, unresolved borders and emerging energy opportunities have transformed it into a region of direct strategic importance for Europe. Lebanon sits at the centre of this transformation. Its stabilisation would reinforce Europe's migration resilience, strengthen energy security and enhance geopolitical stability. Its collapse would amplify instability across Europe's strategic environment. Europe possesses the diplomatic, economic and institutional tools necessary to shape the outcome. Facilitating the normalisation of Lebanese–Syrian relations and refugee return, transitioning from humanitarian assistance to economic stabilisation, supporting institutional reform, strengthening host communities and advancing maritime border diplomacy together form a coherent stabilisation strategy. These actions are not acts of charity. They are expressions of strategic responsibility. The Mediterranean no longer separates Europe from instability. It connects Europe to its strategic frontier. Europe's future security will be shaped not only within its borders but through the stabilisation of the Levant. Acting upon this reality is no longer optional. It is imperative.

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