



ThinkPeace

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“By the time we respond to conflict, it’s too late”

A feminist view on Europe’s role in the Middle East

**Barbara Mittelhammer in conversation
with Sussan Tahmasebi**

In this conversation with Barbara Mittelhammer, Sussan Tahmasebi traces the current regional crisis in the Middle East back to its structural roots. She offers a sharp assessment of the EU's potential but also its inconsistencies, from its failure to act on its own declared values on human rights to the backlash against feminist and civil society organisations who spoke up against what human rights organisations, scholars and the UN inquiry commission have qualified as the genocide in Gaza. Beyond critique, Tahmasebi makes a concrete case for what meaningful European engagement would look like: principled, addressing political and economic grievances, and grounded in the experience of civil society actors who have been working in these contexts for decades. Her message: Europe has to rethink how it relates to the region and its people.

Europe's inertia – a reflection by Barbara Mittelhammer

Six months into a war the U.S. President predicted would end within days, ceasefires remain fragile and escalation keeps spreading, from Yemen to the West Bank, each with its own long-standing drivers. Meanwhile, Israel's wars in Lebanon and Gaza continue unabated. The normalisation of use of force, war and routine violations of human rights and international humanitarian law stands out as patterns throughout, by perpetrators and the bystanding international community. The security of people living in the region seems to have played a role only as a rhetorical figure when during the most violent crackdown on peaceful protest in the modern history of Iran, help was supposedly on the way. Human security considerations remain absent in the geopolitical power play.

From a European vantage point, the uncomfortable question remains why the EU is unable to break out of its own inertia. Europe seems caught in a continuous loop of reactions: from Woman, Life, Freedom, to Gaza, Lebanon, the 12-day war, the January mass killings in Iran, or the closure of the Strait of Hormuz. This muddling through neither exhausts Europe's potential to act nor matches the scale of urgency. Iran has long been handled separately from the region through the narrow lens of the nuclear file, with the EU reluctant to jeopardise nuclear diplomacy or U.S. relations.

Moving forward would require a compass, calibrated by a defined set of European interests weighed against one another, the EU's own human rights commitments, and obligations under international law, oriented toward root causes rather than symptoms. To break the pattern, the EU and its member states should opt for applied human security by reflecting, together with civil society actors and experts from the region, on which shared interests to build a more proactive framework. This conversation with Sussan Tahmasebi can be one step in that direction to challenge the muddling through.

Barbara Mittelhammer: Sussan, when you look at how the international community has been responding to the current moment, what do you think is missing most?

Sussan Tahmasebi: When discussing responses to conflict, it is important to recognise that reacting often comes too late. The greater emphasis should be on sustained conflict prevention efforts. In European policy toward the region, the priority should shift to human security, prioritising socioeconomic development, expanding economic opportunities, promoting political stability, supporting democratic reform and strengthening accountability for state violence. Ultimately, these measures address the underlying conditions that give rise to conflict rather than merely responding to its consequences. By focusing on human security and encouraging governments to create conditions in which citizens can reach their full potential, policymakers can help foster more democratic, stable and peaceful societies. For example, the Marshall Plan and the post-Cold War EU enlargement policies prioritised economic reconstruction and structural integration over military containment, and successfully transformed fractured regions into stable, prosperous democracies. These historic frameworks demonstrate that investing directly in measures that impact human security – such as jobs, robust infrastructure, and sound governance – dismantles the core drivers of radicalism and conflict.

It is unfortunate that Europe has become so sidelined with respect to the region. The EU could have played a more significant role in preventing escalation, for example, it could have taken stronger steps to preserve the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) after the United States withdrew from it. Back then, it represented a viable path toward de-escalation.

Barbara Mittelhammer: ... and why is that, would you say?

Sussan Tahmasebi: Europe's reluctance to pursue an independent foreign policy, combined with its deference to the United States on many key regional issues, has diminished its credibility, relevance and impact. Plus, the lack of consistency has been one of Europe's fundamental mistakes, in its approach to Palestine and in its treatment of states across the region. When governments are viewed as strategic partners, most notably Israel, they have largely been shielded from meaningful consequences for violations of international law that would likely have prompted a stronger response if carried out by others. While international double standards on human rights and accountability are most glaring in the case of Palestinian rights, the EU has adopted similar policies toward other countries as well. For example, the EU entered into a financial partnership with Tunisia aimed at stemming migration flows despite substantial evidence that Tunisian authorities were engaged in systemic abuse, arbitrary arrests and racist violence against Black African migrants. Additionally, the EU has concluded similar agreements and forms of cooperation with other rights-abusing states when doing so has advanced

its strategic objectives, including agreements with the governments of Egypt and Azerbaijan.

With respect to the current conflicts, it is essential to recognise the question of Palestine as one of the central underlying issues. The injustice inflicted upon Palestinians over nearly eight decades has become a powerful meta-narrative that shapes political consciousness throughout the region. It informs the work of those engaged in nonviolent movements for justice, while also fueling the rhetoric and motivations of armed resistance groups and extremists.

Europe has played a significant role in creating this underlying problem and has failed to meaningfully address the harm that has followed. Although European governments have at times condemned the scale of violence inflicted upon Palestinians, those statements have rarely been matched by transformative policy action. Following October 7, there was condemnation of Hamas. However, this was not accompanied by comparable action in support of Palestinians, who had been living under apartheid and were subsequently subjected to collective punishment and genocide. Israel's violent and expansionist policies have become a central driver of instability in the region.

The key issue is a principled and consistent approach in upholding human rights and defending the international human rights system that Europe itself played a central role in building and continues to have a stake in.

Barbara Mittelhammer: A recurring pattern you are describing is the gap between what Europe says and what it does. Yet, when crises erupt, Europe seems willing to respond. But what keeps missing is the change of approach from crisis response toward prevention. You have pointed to prevention as the missing piece. What would have to change for Europe to get there?

Sussan Tahmasebi: As a feminist, I believe there needs to be much stronger engagement with civil society, women's organisations and women human rights defenders across the region. This means addressing not only the longstanding challenges women face, including discriminatory laws and repressive political systems, but also the immense harm and devastation that conflicts have inflicted on women in Iran and throughout the broader Middle East. European policymakers should be looking at how they can support women and ensure they are meaningfully included in policymaking processes, particularly women living and working in these countries.

I recognise that direct engagement is not always possible in every context, particularly in Iran. Nevertheless, it is essential to engage with civil society organisations that continue to work in these countries or to create spaces where their representatives can participate safely. That engagement must also include voices that may not fully align with the positions of the EU or individual European

governments. If engagement is limited only to those who already agree with European policymakers, it cannot be genuinely inclusive.

Barbara Mittelhammer: What do you mean concretely? And what should it look like instead?

Sussan Tahmasebi: Following October 7, many feminists were deeply critical of actions taken by several European governments against women's organisations and human rights groups that spoke out about the genocide in Palestine. I also found it striking that governments would convene conversations on feminist foreign policy while remaining silent about one of the most egregious forms of violence affecting women and civilians in the region. Ultimately, a meaningful feminist foreign policy requires more than increasing women's participation in decision-making. It also requires ensuring that women's voices are heard at every level of international policymaking, supporting the work of women on the ground. In series of consultations held by [Femena](#), SWANA feminists criticised Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) as a soft power tool that uses the language of human rights and women's empowerment to legitimise militarism, neocolonial economic practices and alliances with authoritarian governments while marginalising Global Majority perspectives. They called for trauma-informed, community-driven, and decolonial approaches that centre indigenous knowledge, lived experiences and the expertise of structurally excluded communities in shaping policy, research and funding priorities. Participants acknowledged that some Feminist Foreign Policy states, particularly Colombia, Chile and Spain, have created meaningful spaces for feminist advocacy and demonstrated greater solidarity with Global Majority movements through sustained grassroots pressure. They emphasised that continued engagement with state institutions and donor platforms remains essential, as progress depends on persistent collective organising rather than feminist rhetoric alone.

With respect to Iran, Europe responded to crises such as the Woman, Life, Freedom movement, which I want to acknowledge. Its support for establishing the UN Fact-Finding Mission on Iran was an important step. Germany and France also provided humanitarian visas for those forced to flee Iran, and there has been limited funding for human rights organisations outside the country. These were important measures. However, the 12-day war caused significant damage to infrastructure and communities inside Iran, and the subsequent 100-day war as well as the continued military operations by the US against Iran have inflicted serious destruction. In that context, Europe's response has not matched the scale of needs on the ground.

So, while there has been some support – and civil society certainly appreciates it – much more is needed. Given the new regional dynamics, it is critical for the EU and its member states to reengage. One area where it can play a meaningful role is responding to the humanitarian and economic consequences of these conflicts.

This should include support for reconstruction and humanitarian assistance, but more importantly, it requires addressing economic crises and grievances. This includes supporting women's economic development and participation, strengthening opportunities for economic growth, fostering relationships with businesses and investing in reconstruction in war-affected countries. These efforts would also advance Europe's strategic interests. By helping respond to those economic challenges, Europe would not only meet the needs of people in the region but also demonstrate its constructive role and reliability.

Concrete steps should also be taken to mitigate the negative impact of sanctions on ordinary citizens, and especially on vulnerable groups. For example, it is essential to ensure that Iranians have access to medicine. This is especially important since access to medicine has already been seriously compromised by decades of harsh sanctions, as well as the fact that medicine storage facilities and production centres were targeted and destroyed during the war.

Economic revitalisation programs are also essential to supporting ordinary Iranians. However, some of these efforts will require different engagement with the Iranian government. But let me be clear: this does not mean lifting of accountability, certainly not at a moment of mass executions and intensified repression. The distinction is between the Iranian government and the Iranian people. Decades of isolating the government have overwhelmingly punished the people and civil society, not the state. So, the question is how to open channels that reach people, provide access to medicine, strengthen economic lifelines and support civil society, without granting the government relief from accountability for its human rights violations.

Barbara Mittelhammer: We are discussing based on the premise that prevention, engagement with and support for civil society will ultimately lead to more stable, democratic societies, and greater human security. How and where have you seen that borne out? Can you share an example from your experience?

Sussan Tahmasebi: There are important examples in the region of how engagement with civil society, and particularly with women-led organisations, can contribute to greater stability, rights and human security: in Tunisia, civil society organisations, including women's groups who had a long history of advocating for democracy and leading political dialogue and reform initiatives prior to the revolution, played a critical role in facilitating dialogue and preventing a political crisis from escalating. In Morocco, sustained organising and advocacy by women's rights groups contributed to significant reforms to the family code. In Iraq, international support has enabled women peacebuilders and women-led civil society groups to play a greater role in reconciliation, conflict prevention and social cohesion in communities recovering from ISIS, including through local peace groups and initiatives addressing the needs of women and families affected by conflict. These examples demonstrate the importance of supporting locally rooted

civil society actors, particularly women, as partners in building more peaceful, democratic and resilient societies.

Barbara Mittelhammer: Since you mentioned regional dynamics but also the work of women and human rights defenders: you and Femena are working with women and human rights defenders across the Middle East who are navigating war, repression, economic collapse and shrinking civic space all at once. What can feminist solidarity look like in this context?

Sussan Tahmasebi: Solidarity is incredibly important because it helps people recognise that they are not alone. It allows them to see that others have struggled with similar challenges – in repressive political contexts, under authoritarian regimes, and in situations of armed conflict – and that those who came before them found ways to survive, resist and continue their work.

At Femena, we try to create spaces where feminists can share those experiences, sometimes through direct conversations and sometimes through interviews that document feminist movements. For example, how have Lebanese feminists organised to respond to humanitarian needs of those impacted by conflict? How have they built feminist forms of resistance while simultaneously advocating for women's rights and peace? Similarly, the experience of Syria – with years of war, widespread destruction, displacement, exile, and organising inside and outside the country – offers important lessons not only for Iranians, many of whom have not experienced armed conflict in the same way, but also for activists across the region.

Solidarity is also about more than exchanging strategies. It is about knowing that your pain, your struggle and your resistance are seen, acknowledged, supported and held with care. It creates space for people to express themselves, to reflect on what they have endured and to recognise what they have accomplished. Too often, we look to others only to learn from them. We rarely stop to recognise that our own experiences, the ways we have organised and resisted in our own contexts, are also valuable and can inspire others. That recognition can be deeply empowering.

At the same time, as you noted, we are confronting not only escalating conflict across the region but also the long-term closure of civic space. Women's and feminist movements throughout the Middle East have been remarkably creative in carving out and expanding spaces for organising despite intense repression. Unfortunately, we are now also witnessing the shrinking of civic space internationally.

That backlash has been particularly evident in limits on civil society participation in the UN, which impacts women and those from Global Majority countries more significantly, with fewer resources and increased travel barriers. Also, there has been a shift in the policies and responses of Western governments and institutions that many of us once regarded as partners in advancing human rights. For many

feminists and human rights advocates, European countries had long been viewed as natural allies in the struggle for women's rights. Yet after October 7, many women's organisations faced significant backlash for speaking out in support of their Palestinian sisters. Several organisations lost both public and private funding simply for signing statements expressing solidarity with Palestine – including funding from institutions that identify themselves as feminist. That raises profound questions about the consistency and credibility of feminist commitments. In my view, feminism cannot be separated from opposition to genocide.

Barbara Mittelhammer: At the same time, this backlash is compounding with an anti-gender and anti-feminist pushback on a global scale: should we still think about connecting feminist networks from a regional perspective, or do we need a global outlook in that sense?

Sussan Tahmasebi: Global perspectives are extremely valuable. There is much that those of us in our region can learn from Latin America, for example, given its long history of struggles with similar issues, including conflict, repression and violence against women. At the same time, there is also significant value in regional exchange, given the shared experiences, similarities in context and familiarity with the challenges faced across neighbouring countries. Both forms of engagement offer important opportunities.

However, in the current reality of shrinking funding and multiple intersecting crises, these forms of engagement are becoming increasingly difficult to sustain and, in some cases, are treated almost as a luxury.

Barbara Mittelhammer: What you mention about shrinking funding goes back to the relevance – and unused potential – of conflict prevention. In this context: is there one thing or one perspective that you would like policymakers, be it in Berlin, Brussels or other European capitals, to understand, about what should change in how Europe engages with the region – actually, with people in the region?

Sussan Tahmasebi: With respect to the region, Europe needs more consistent and sustained engagement with civil society. While some already exists, there are concerns that parts of European policymaking have prioritised voices with large public platforms over those with long-standing, grounded experience working in and on the country. As some of the more visible prescriptions leading up to the violent repression and loss of life, alongside continued cycles of internal unrest and external conflict, have increasingly proven ineffective, there is an opportunity to re-evaluate and engage more seriously with practitioners who have sustained experience in these contexts.

One important recommendation is to prioritise engagement with civil society actors who have both on-the-ground experience and a demonstrated commitment to human rights, including those who have contributed to tangible rights gains over time. This includes strengthening their work and ensuring their perspectives

are weighted more heavily than opportunistic or less grounded public commentary. Another key step is to conduct rigorous harm assessments before adopting punitive policies, in order to understand their impact on ordinary citizens and civil society. This applies not only to sanctions, but to a broader range of policy tools.

About ThinkPeace

For its second volume, the ThinkPeace series applies a regional focus to allow for more comprehensive analysis, connecting concrete examples with global dynamics and highlighting the convergence of crises at a pivotal global moment. The endeavour is a collaboration of the Heinrich Böll Foundation's Global Unit for Human Security (Vienna), the Global Unit for Feminism and Gender Democracy (Sarajevo) and the Foundation's Foreign and Security Policy Division (Berlin), with Barbara Mittelhammer as author and curatorial lead.

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