

The Mediterranean Chapter at Fifty: The OSCE's Southern Engagement

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DOI: 1058866/WZGD3675

This article is part of the Special Issue on “The OSCE at 50: Reflections on security, cooperation and human rights”, published on a rolling basis between July and November 2025. The Special Issue was curated and edited by Walter Kemp and Christian Strohal, Security and Human Rights Monitor Editorial Board members and guest editors-in chief.

¹ The views expressed in this article are strictly personal and do not represent those of any organization

Abstract

Marking fifty years since the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, this article examines the evolution and contemporary relevance of the OSCE's Mediterranean Chapter. It highlights Malta's decisive role in embedding the Mediterranean dimension into the Final Act, traces how the OSCE's comprehensive security approach inspired later regional initiatives, and reviews the development of the Mediterranean Partnership as a platform for dialogue, confidence-building, and practical cooperation.

Introduction

Fifty years since the signing of the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, this moment offers an opportunity to review recent developments in the OSCE's Mediterranean dialogue. This article will shed light on how the Chapter on the Mediterranean influenced the setup of other regional frameworks in the area as well as how its relevance might evolve amid a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape.

Malta was instrumental in embedding the Mediterranean Chapter into the Helsinki Final Act, ensuring that European security extended beyond continental borders to include its southern neighbours¹. By advocating for the inclusion of Mediterranean dimension, Malta helped broaden the scope of East-West dialogue to reflect the geopolitical realities of the region.

The OSCE was one of the first institutions to establish links with countries on the Southern Mediterranean littoral and the Middle East. Today, the OSCE Mediterranean Partners include all North African countries, Algeria, Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia (except Libya, which has, however, shown interest in the dialogue) as well as Israel and Jordan. As discussed in a paper by Monika Wohlfeld: "No country has been added to this group of six states since 1998, although the Palestinian National Authority (in 2004 and 2008) and Libya (in 2013) have formulated requests for admission as Partner States²".

The partnership is based on interaction between the OSCE and the Mediterranean Partners that enjoy relations similar to observer status with the Organization. The crisis in the Middle East resulting from the 7 October 2023 terrorist attacks on Israel had profound influence on the Mediterranean dialogue. Consequently, the resulting political tensions have had wider implications on the structured cooperation which has reached an all time low. Although the idea of "shared security" is more urgent than ever amid growing geopolitical fragmentation, the Organization is grappling with complex challenges. Consensus is increasingly elusive, foundational divides are widening, and multilateral engagement is under strain. Yet, as the security situation in Europe and beyond continues to deteriorate and other transnational challenges emerge on the horizon, the situation beckons for future enhanced co-operation between the northern and southern shores of the Mediterranean.

1 See Testimony of the late Ambassador Evarist Saliba of Malta, in CSCE Testimonies Causes and Consequences of the Helsinki Final Act 1972–1989; Published by the Prague Office of the OSCE Secretariat náměstí Pod Kaštanem 2 160 00 Prague, Czech Republic Compiled by Alice Němcová © OSCE 2013, page 167, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/6/c/459244.pdf>

2 Monika Wohlfeld, OSCE's Mediterranean Engagement on the Eve of the 40th Anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act, page 44, published in Towards "Helsinki +40": The OSCE, the Global Mediterranean, and the Future of Cooperative Security, New Med research network <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/c/c/126351.pdf>

Distinct yet integral – The Mediterranean Chapter

The Mediterranean Chapter was formally introduced into the Helsinki Final Act of 1975 as a distinct yet integral component of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE)³. The chapter was distinct because it addressed external actors and regional dynamics beyond the immediate East-West divide. At a time when Europe was split by ideological iron curtains and guarded borders, the Mediterranean Chapter cast its attention southward, acknowledging that the region's dynamics could not be disconnected from the broader fabric of European security. Simultaneously, it was integral to the Final Act's architecture because it embodied the CSCE's holistic vision of peace and security. It is thanks to the foresight of Maltese Statesmen and diplomats that the Helsinki Final Act recognized that "security in Europe is to be considered in the broader context of world security" and that developments in the Mediterranean directly affected stability across the continent. This acknowledgment is linked to the OSCE's comprehensive security concept, which encompasses political-military, economic, environmental, and human dimensions, by extending security considerations beyond internal European affairs to also include external partnerships, notably with Mediterranean countries.

Over the decades, the OSCE's Mediterranean Partnership has facilitated numerous collaborative efforts. Regular interaction through structured cooperation, including Mediterranean Partner for Cooperation Group meetings and the annual OSCE Mediterranean Conferences have provided platforms for dialogue on shared challenges, including migration, climate change, counter-terrorism, and economic cooperation. High-level OSCE Troika meetings are held in the margins of the annual Ministerial Council.

This cooperative approach based on the interlinkage of security enshrined in the Helsinki Final Act has influenced the development of relations that resonates beyond the OSCE area. The development of relations from the early nineties with the Asian Partners for Cooperation is testament to that. The Asian Partners include Afghanistan, Australia, Japan, Republic of Korea, and Thailand.

These relations with the Mediterranean and Asian Partners for Co-operation bring added value to the OSCE in the context of the interconnection of global challenges, and the need to enhance mutual trust and stability for the OSCE and neighbouring regions. The structured cooperation supports efforts to incorporate their perspectives and expertise in OSCE work and to increase the visibility of the results of these activities. Partners for Cooperation, while not signing up to the OSCE's body of commitments and decisions, are encouraged to consider their voluntary implementation⁴.

How the Mediterranean Chapter in the Helsinki Final Act inspired other regional initiatives

The inclusion of the Mediterranean Chapter in the Helsinki Final Act was not only significant for broadening the scope of European security-thinking, but also because it laid the groundwork for further Euro-Med engagement. The OSCE's Mediterranean partnership inspired regional initiatives such as the Barcelona Process (Euro-Mediterranean Partnership) in 1995, and later the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) in 2008.

³ See 'Questions relating to Security and Co-operation in the Mediterranean, in the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, pages 34-35, https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/5/c/39501_1.pdf

⁴ "We will encourage them to voluntarily implement the principles and commitments of the OSCE and will co-operate with them in this as appropriate." See OSCE Strategy to Address Threats to Security and Stability in the Twenty-First Century, para 23, in Eleventh Meeting of the OSCE Ministerial Council, Maastricht, 1-2 December 2003 (MC.DOC/1/03), p. 1-10, <http://www.osce.org/mc/40533>

While the Barcelona Process and the Union for the Mediterranean have diverged from an institutional perspective, they retain the OSCE's multi-dimensional approach to security. The Barcelona Process, established in 1995, structured its framework based on the OSCE's three-basket approach, focusing on political and security cooperation, economic and financial partnership, and social, cultural, and human partnership. This framework aimed to foster a Euro-Mediterranean partnership with shared peace, stability, and socio-economic progress.

The UfM, which transpired from the Barcelona Process, focuses more on specific projects and initiatives that address inclusive and sustainable development, stability and integration in the Euro-Mediterranean area. In 2018, the OSCE and UfM signed a Memorandum of Understanding to deepen cooperation between the two institutions to address climate-related security challenges that impact regional stability, and have held some joint initiatives.

The idea of a parliamentary council - similarly a Maltese initiative- was born of a proposal on a Conference on Security and Cooperation in the Mediterranean. Under the auspices of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), the Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean (PAM) that brings together all littoral states of the Mediterranean was inaugurated in Amman, Jordan in 2006 after negotiations that had started in 1992. The three PAM standing committees are also reflective of the Helsinki Final Act's three baskets; with First Standing Committee on Political and Security-Related Cooperation, Second Standing Committee on Economic, Social and Environmental Cooperation, and Third Standing Committee on Dialogue among Civilisations and Human Rights.

A platform for dialogue

Since its inception, the OSCE Mediterranean Partnership has provided an essential venue for dialogue on common priorities and shared concerns that take inspiration from the OSCE experience in the comprehensive approach to security⁵.

In addition to facilitating bilateral relations between each of the Mediterranean Partners and the OSCE, the OSCE Mediterranean Partnership also offers a platform for dialogue among the partners themselves.

Each OSCE Mediterranean Partner for Cooperation has their own specific interests, and bilateral areas of cooperation with OSCE. While all Partners share interest on common themes, they can also exchange experiences according to their own priorities; since cooperation varies based on their geopolitical context, national interests, and regional challenges.

A series of OSCE Chairpersonships have sought to build collaborative agendas, bringing together northern and southern stakeholders to address a shared set of challenges, such as transnational organized crime, migration, climate risks, and regional fragility.

The 2018 OSCE Milan Ministerial Declaration⁶ is the most recent consensus-based document on the Mediterranean. It recognized Mediterranean Partners as collaborators in addressing shared security challenges, acknowledging their active role in fostering regional stability and promoting cooperative solutions to issues like terrorism, migration, and organized crime. The Declaration also highlighted the importance of inclusive dialogue, youth empowerment, human rights, and economic development in promoting regional stability.

⁵ For an overview of the cooperation framework with the Mediterranean Partners for Cooperation, see <https://www.osce.org/partners-for-cooperation/mediterranean>

⁶ <https://www.osce.org/chairmanship/406532F>

In the last two years, the structured cooperation with the OSCE Mediterranean Partners for Cooperation Group has stalled due to the severe deterioration in Middle East tensions, particularly following the terrorist attacks on Israel since 7 October 2023 and rising regional polarization. This has placed significant strain on a format designed around inclusive dialogue based on confidence-building. As a result, the meetings of the Mediterranean Partner for Cooperation Group⁷ have dwindled to a halt, with no annual Mediterranean Conference⁸ nor the high-level OSCE Troika meeting.

Despite efforts, the Mediterranean Partnership continues to face significant challenges. Perceived irrelevance is chief among these. Part of this perception may stem from a deeper structural challenge: many of the region's most persistent conflicts are not merely disputes over policy or territory, but are also rooted in identity, memory, and mutually exclusive worldviews. In such cases, efforts to gather around the table may meet resistance, not only due to a lack of goodwill, but because of fundamentally divergent narratives.

Some critics argue that the partnership lacks strategic impact, with limited tangible outcomes in addressing pressing regional issues. Evolving geopolitics also add to the challenging context. Shifts in global power dynamics and internal conflicts within the Mediterranean, most notably the ongoing conflict in Gaza, have made cooperative efforts difficult.

Indeed, as conflict continues to disrupt cooperation, the OSCE's quiet persistence in maintaining channels of dialogue becomes its greatest asset. In moments of high fragmentation, presence and continuity, not necessarily agreement, are themselves strategic achievements.

Even in this period of high tension, there is space to promote practical cooperation and participation of the Mediterranean Partners in capacity building. The OSCE Mediterranean Partnership offers mutual advantages including opportunities to share experiences and expertise.⁹ By way of example, participants from Mediterranean Partners regularly take part in the annual Study-Visit Programme for the Partners for Co-operation¹⁰. In the course of 2024, Mediterranean Partners have also participated in simulation exercises on combating trafficking in human beings, as well as a regional scenario-based workshop on the illicit trafficking in cultural property held in Malta. Law enforcement experts from Mediterranean Partners also participated in a Mediterranean Regional Simulation-based Training Exercise on Combating Trafficking in Human Beings, held in Vicenza, Italy¹¹. Such activities provide continuity and keep engagement alive, even when the political environment narrows the space for formal diplomacy.

Mindful of the above, the current stagnation of the OSCE's Mediterranean Partnership must not be accepted as an inevitable outcome of conflict or incommensurability. On the contrary, this moment calls for a reframing of what dialogue is and what it can achieve.

7 The most recent meeting of the Mediterranean Partners for Cooperation Group meeting was held on 11 March 2024 on Identifying Opportunities for Women's Economic Empowerment in the New World of Work in the OSCE and the Mediterranean Region.

8 The most recent OSCE Mediterranean Conference was held on 25 October 2022 in Jordan. See OSCE press release, 'Strengthening co-operation to overcome common challenges focus of OSCE Mediterranean Conference in Jordan', 25 Oct 2022, <https://www.osce.org/partners-for-cooperation/mediterranean/529611>

9 See Elizabeth Abela Hampel, The OSCE Mediterranean Partnership – a determined and durable dialogue? (2012) <https://www.shrmonitor.org/assets/uploads/2023/02/The-OSCE-Mediterranean-Partnership-A-durable-and-determined-dialogue.pdf>

10 See OSCE website on 2024 and 2025 Study Visit Programme for OSCE Asian and Mediterranean Partners for Co-operation, <https://www.osce.org/secretariat/593609>; <https://www.osce.org/partners-for-cooperation/570909>

11 See OSCE press release, 'Anti-trafficking practitioners meet in Italy for first Mediterranean regional simulation-based training exercise', 11 Oct 2024, <https://www.osce.org/cthb/578104>

Reframing dialogue in times of fragmentation

For the OSCE's Mediterranean engagement to retain strategic relevance, it may be useful to reconceive its dialogue platforms not solely as precursors to consensus, but as sites of discursive endurance, where competing perspectives can be expressed and heard without requiring agreement.

This model of engagement places emphasis on narrative exchange, even amid foundational disagreement. Such a posture is not unfamiliar to the OSCE: its long-standing commitment to confidence-building, preventive diplomacy, and multidimensional security already recognises that peace is as much about sustaining dialogue as it is about resolving disputes.

In a region marked by entrenched divisions, the OSCE Mediterranean Partnership may not serve as a venue for resolving deep political disputes. Its relevance could lie elsewhere: in sustaining engagement where silence would be costlier, and in advancing cooperation where interests overlap. Even in an era of heightened antagonism, selective, pragmatic dialogue remains possible, and necessary, on transboundary issues that no state can address alone.

Among these:

- Climate and environmental resilience, promoting a blue economy: Rising temperatures, water scarcity, desertification, and environmental degradation are not just ecological concerns, they are direct stressors on security, livelihoods, and regional stability.
- Migration governance: Migration remains a shared and inescapable reality in the Mediterranean. The Partnership can support structured exchanges on practical tools, early warning systems, legal pathways, return and reintegration mechanisms.
- Maritime security and domain awareness: The Mediterranean demands cooperative risk reduction to help prevent accidents, conflict escalation, and criminal exploitation of shared waters.
- Protection of cultural heritage: cultural heritage management can contribute to sustainable development.
- Youth and skills mobility: Long-term regional stability is inseparable from opportunity to future generations. Investing in youth engagement can reduce alienation, strengthen mutual understanding, and contribute to regional development.
- Digital cooperation and bridging the digital divide: Enhancing cybersecurity and leveraging digital technologies to promote economic development, connectivity and social inclusion.

Way forward

Building on this reframed understanding of dialogue, with growing instability in the Euro-Mediterranean area and intensifying tensions across the Middle East, a central question arises: what mechanisms can support a renewed Mediterranean dialogue, one that aligns with present-day geopolitical shifts and addresses emerging regional needs?

A similar question was raised by Emiliano Alessandri (2014)¹² when debating possible options in the region. He then argues that in a context where constructive dialogue is increasingly scarce, every vi-

¹² See Emiliano Alessandri, The Global Mediterranean and the OSCE Platform for Dialogue, International Affairs Forum (IAF), 4 Mar 2021, https://www.ia-forum.org/Content/ViewInternal_Document.cfm?contenttype_id=5&ContentID=9138

able forum should be considered. Longstanding structures such as the Barcelona Process/Union for the Mediterranean and other initiatives under the EU and NATO continue to serve specific functions with their distinct expertise. Alessandri also points out that the OSCE's platform for dialogue brings with it an inclusive and diverse membership, which gathers together key external powers involved in the MENA region, including US, Russia and Turkey. It provides a rare multilateral setting where NATO, the EU, and other participating States can engage in dialogue on issues central to today's Mediterranean security landscape, particularly the link between geopolitical multipolarity and regional stability. Drawing on decades of OSCE experience in easing inter-state tensions and guiding post-conflict transitions in Eastern Europe and the Balkans, this framework has a valuable toolkit to offer Mediterranean Partnership¹³.

Two elements are underscored further by Alessandri, that make the OSCE's Mediterranean dialogue especially pertinent for today's context. First, the OSCE's core mandate includes both inter-state conflict management and responses to transnational threats, enabling it to serve as a convener even when political consensus is limited. Second, the organization has long embraced a comprehensive understanding of security, one that spans military, economic-environmental, and human rights dimensions¹⁴.

Moreover, Alessandri argues the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, which laid the foundation for the OSCE, was groundbreaking in its elevation of human rights and individual freedoms to the level of international commitments. Through its Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), the OSCE has built significant expertise in election monitoring, democratic governance, and the promotion of human rights. These experiences have been shared with Mediterranean Partners, particularly in the wake of transformative events such as the Arab Spring¹⁵. ODIHR's role extended to concrete cooperation projects, such as training of election observers and reviewing draft legislation. In addition, as raised in another article by Colin Scicluna (2012), the Office of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media (RFOM) 'is also uniquely placed to offer a brand of expertise and guidance not easily found elsewhere'. For example, in 2022, the RFOM engaged with youth from the Mediterranean and Middle East during the international conference "Young People and Information: It's Complicated" organised by the Ministry for Foreign and European Affairs and Trade together with 3CL Foundation in Malta¹⁶. They discussed issues of technology and media freedom based on a human rights and a multi-sectoral approach with the active involvement of youth.

In the long run, the OSCE's engagement with Mediterranean Partners could be seen as a way to foster stability and dialogue, not by resolving all underlying tensions, but by maintaining open channels of communication that may later support peacebuilding when conditions allow.

Observers have noted that it is beyond the OSCE's mandate to address the Middle Eastern tensions, particularly when it could jeopardise the Mediterranean Partnership format whilst providing little added value. It is argued such matters should continue to be addressed in other relevant fora, including at the UN Security Council.

It is important that we preserve cooperation in the Mediterranean Partnership format, as it would continue to benefit partners, and common work across the three dimensions regardless of the broad-

13 ibid

14 ibid

15 ibid

16 See Press Release, OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media concludes visit to Malta, 14 November 2022, <https://rfom.osce.org/representative-on-freedom-of-media/531101#:~:text=VIENNA%2C%2014%20November%202022%20%2D%20OSCE,government%20authorities%20and%20civil%20society.>

er political situation. By safeguarding a forum for inclusive, multidimensional engagement, the OSCE can contribute, quietly but meaningfully to long term regional resilience.

Conclusion

The Mediterranean Chapter remains a distinct and integral component of the OSCE's comprehensive security framework. By acknowledging past achievements and addressing current challenges, the partnership can adapt to a changing geopolitical landscape and continue to promote stability and cooperation in the region.

building trust and cooperative security across the Euro-Mediterranean space, it faces multiple challenges in the current geopolitical environment. The shocks of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and the deepening conflict in the Middle East, especially around the war in Gaza and surrounding Iranian-linked escalations, have exposed the structural and strategic limitations of this partnership.

In today's volatile regional climate, success should not be measured solely by breakthroughs or formal agreements, but also by the endurance of dialogue itself. The OSCE Mediterranean Partnership, even in moments of limited political traction, continues to provide a unique space for structured exchange. As peace in the Mediterranean becomes ever more contested, the value of a platform that enables engagement without preconditions cannot be understated.

In a time when many multilateral institutions are questioned or sidelined, the persistence of the OSCE's security approach, inclusive, adaptable, and dialogue-based, is a meaningful reminder of the long-term value of engagement.

Malta's role in the development of the Mediterranean Partnership pays tribute to the foresight of a small state recognizing complex regional dynamics. Malta continues to be a strong proponent of the partnership, considering its unique position as an EU member state and a neutral country to facilitate dialogue between both shores of the Mediterranean. Malta's continued engagement helps to foster cooperation on a range of issues impacting the region, such as youth participation, climate security, countering radicalization and conflict resolution.

In a region grappling with instability and fragmentation, the Helsinki vision and the OSCE Mediterranean dialogue remain a critical reference point for any viable future architecture of peace and co-operation. The OSCE's long-standing principles and adaptive mechanisms offer possible pathways to revive and re-energize Mediterranean dialogue in the future.

At the opening of the 31st annual gathering of OSCE Foreign Ministers - the Ministerial Council - Malta's 2024 Chair-in-Office, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Tourism Ian Borg¹⁷, underscored a critical point: in times of war and overlapping crises, the OSCE is needed more than ever as one of the last remaining open channels of communication in Europe. The same urgency applies to the OSCE's Mediterranean Partnership.

Preserving and gradually revitalizing the Mediterranean dialogue may require not a radical overhaul, but a modest reorientation, one that accepts disagreement as a structural condition, yet insists on the dignity of discourse. The OSCE, with its experience in confidence-building, tolerance of complexity, and emphasis on comprehensive security, is well positioned to support such engagement. In doing so, it upholds a vision of peace that is not only rooted in sameness, but also in respectful coexistence across profound difference.

¹⁷ See OSCE press release, 'We must strengthen commitments and build a safer, more co-operative future, says OSCE Chair at opening of 31st Ministerial Council in Malta', 5 Dec 2024, <https://www.osce.org/chairpersonship/582208>



This article was published by the Security and Human Rights Monitor (SHRM).

Security and Human Rights (formerly Helsinki Monitor) is a journal devoted to issues inspired by the work and principles of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). It looks at the challenge of building security through cooperation across the northern hemisphere, from Vancouver to Vladivostok, as well as how this experience can be applied to other parts of the world. It aims to stimulate thinking on the question of protecting and promoting human rights in a world faced with serious threats to security.

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