



# THE EU AND NORTH AFRICA

Lost in recalibration

Edited by  
Dalia Ghanem

With contributions from  
Adel Abdel Ghafar, Intissar Fakir,  
Eya Jrad, Tarek Megerisi



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CHAILLOT PAPER / **179**  
*October 2023*

## European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS)

100, avenue de Suffren  
75015 Paris

<http://www.iss.europa.eu>  
Director: Steven Everts

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print

ISBN 978-92-9462-228-0

CATALOGUE NUMBER QN-AA-23-002-EN-C

ISSN 1017-7566

DOI 10.2815/92138

online

ISBN 978-92-9462-227-3

CATALOGUE NUMBER QN-AA-23-002-EN-N

ISSN 1683-4917

DOI 10.2815/01535

Published by the EU Institute for Security Studies and printed in Belgium by Bietlot.  
Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2023.  
Cover image credit: Envato Elements

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## Acknowledgements

The editor is grateful to Caspar Hobhouse for his invaluable assistance in preparing this publication. She would also like to thank Gearóid Cronin for his editorial work and Christian Dietrich for designing the infographics.

## Note

The chapters in this *Chaillot Paper* were written in summer 2022 and updated prior to publication in September 2023.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

North African states matter to the European Union as neighbours, partners, and sources of political and economic (in)stability. While much attention has shifted east following the war in Ukraine, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya and Egypt continue to play an important role in the long-term stability and security of the European neighbourhood. This state of affairs has been tested in recent years by the ongoing civil conflict in Libya, chronic economic instability in Tunisia and Egypt and sabre rattling between Algeria and Morocco over the disputed Western Sahara region. All these come on top of the longer-term pressures, such as climate change and the energy transition, which threaten to exacerbate many of the underlying structural economic weaknesses and further undermine the social contract between the region's citizens and their increasingly autocratic governments.

The EU, as a trusted partner for all North African countries, is uniquely placed to play a leading and constructive role in the region, building upon its already strong position. Failure to do so will likely result in greater problems in the future and allow rival geopolitical powers such as China and Russia to deepen their footprint in the region. As the fallout from the war in Ukraine or the current migrant and humanitarian crisis in Lampedusa demonstrate, what happens in North Africa does not stay in North Africa. Equally, however, a prosperous and stable North Africa can only be advantageous for the Union by fostering reliable partners against common security threats and in the fight against climate change. The trajectory of the EU's policies in the coming years will decide the relationship's direction.

Josep Borrell, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, has drawn attention to the danger that the Ukraine war may create a growing schism between the West and other parts of the world, including the so-called 'Global South': 'Russia's war against Ukraine has reunited the transatlantic alliance while exposing differences with other parts of the world. There is a risk that this divide grows and turns into hard rift. While we continue to support Ukraine, we must do more to heed the legitimate expectations of the rest of the world'<sup>(1)</sup>.

This *Chaillot Paper* aims to analyse the state of play in the five North African countries since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine and how it has impacted their relationship with the EU. The publication also addresses some of the perceived shortfalls in the current EU strategy towards these countries and identifies future areas of both tension and cooperation. The paper is divided into five chapters, dedicated to each country in the region: Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia. While there are regional and country-specific idiosyncrasies, all chapters focus on the EU's strategic priorities in North Africa: trade, migration, security, energy and climate change.

This volume aims to identify new areas of strategic planning and offer some foresight into future dynamics which could shape the relationship between the EU and its partners to the south. It aims to primarily paint a picture rather than to offer specific recommendations. In the individual chapters, there are suggestions on where there is room for the relationship to grow and where there have been points of greater resistance. This paper, therefore, aims to aid policymakers in the EU and

(1) HR/VP Josep Borrell, 'Meeting the expectations of a fragmenting world', European External Action Service (EEAS), 7 May 2023 ([https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/meeting-expectations-fragmenting-world\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/meeting-expectations-fragmenting-world_en)).



the Member States in assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the current relationship with North African states.

In chapter 1 on Algeria, Dalia Ghanem examines how the relationship has shifted since the outbreak of the Ukraine war. She argues that the EU and Algeria are currently locked in a 'marriage of convenience' where Algeria, as a major gas exporter, has been able to profit politically and economically from the European demand for alternative energy supplies. However, she argues that this relationship is unstable in the long term.

In chapter 2 on Egypt, Adel Abdel Ghafar examines the evolution of EU-Egypt relations which he contends have been focused on authoritarian stability. While this brings short-term gains in terms of migration management and security, he argues that in the medium to long term it will present problems, especially given the socio-economic challenges faced by the country.

In chapter 3 on Libya, Tarek Meregesi explains why Libya continues to be a source of

instability in the Mediterranean. With a particular focus on migration, he argues that the geopolitical rivalries in Libya have exacerbated the conflict while the EU could also promote its role as a peacemaker.

In chapter 4, Intissar Fakir delves deep into the dynamics of the EU-Morocco relationship, focusing on how Morocco has maximised its negotiating position with the EU by leveraging European concerns about security and migration. The author notes that the parameters and goals of the EU-Morocco partnership need to be defined with greater clarity especially in the face of great power competition from Russia and China.

In chapter 5 on Tunisia, Dalia Ghanem and Eya Jrad critique the EU-Tunisia relationship in light of the changing situation in the country. The authors note that the EU's narrow focus on migration cooperation over human rights and democratic values as a way of ensuring stability in the European Neighbourhood will likely result in longer-term security and stability concerns for the European Union.

# CHAPTER I

# THE EU AND ALGERIA

## A temporary marriage of convenience?

by  
**DALIA GHANEM**

## INTRODUCTION

The EU is Algeria's main trading partner, receiving no less than two-thirds of Algerian exports. Between 2002 and 2014, bilateral trade expanded by 136 %, only to undergo a considerable decline in 2019 and 2020<sup>(1)</sup>. However, the gas crisis caused by Russia's war on Ukraine and Europe's efforts to reduce its dependence on Russian gas supplies has led to renewed interest in Algeria. Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine in February 2022, Algeria, Africa's largest natural gas exporter, has been courted by several European countries, including France, Spain and Italy, urging the country to export more gas to Europe<sup>(2)</sup>. Former Italian prime minister Mario Draghi, followed by his successor Giorgia Meloni, French prime minister Elisabeth Borne and French president Emmanuel Macron, as well as HR/VP Josep Borrell, all visited the country to reiterate the need for cooperation at a moment when Europe was struggling to secure energy supplies.

This chapter examines the contours of EU–Algeria relations since the beginning of the war in Ukraine and how Algeria has used gas to leverage its geoeconomic position. It argues that the marriage of convenience between the two partners will be short-lived, for two key reasons. The first relates to the fact that the underlying pillar of this relationship is energy, and to the expectation that Algeria will continue to increase its gas exports to Europe in the upcoming years. This expectation is unrealistic because the country's capacity to ramp up its hydrocarbon exports in the near future is limited: not only does it need to cater for strong and rising domestic demand, but its oil and gas sector is hamstrung by ageing fields and infrastructure, a lack of investment, and burdensome bureaucratic procedures. The second reason is the irreconcilable divergence of views between Algiers and Brussels on several dossiers, mainly migration management, the Western Sahara issue and Algeria's close relationship with Russia.

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(1) Delegation of the European Union to Algeria, 'The European Union and Algeria', 4 August 2021 ([https://www.eeas.europa.eu/algeria/european-union-and-algeria\\_en?s=82#6581](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/algeria/european-union-and-algeria_en?s=82#6581)).

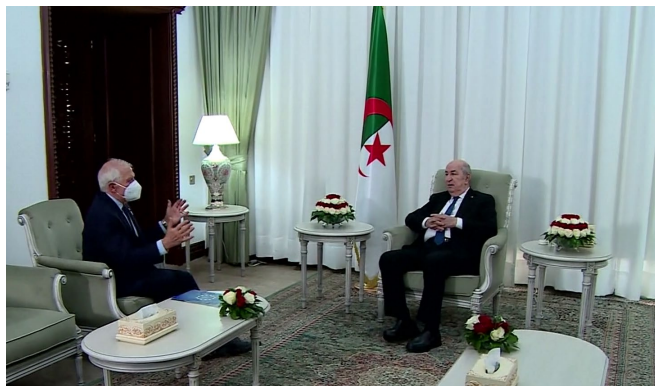
(2) Statista, 'Export volume of natural gas from Africa in 2021, by country', 2023 (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1197968/export-volume-of-natural-gas-in-african-countries/>).



# ALGERIA: A RELIABLE GAS SUPPLIER FOR EUROPE?

Over the last ten years, Algeria has been a steady supplier of gas to southern Europe, albeit with periodic ups and downs. The war in Ukraine led to a sharp rise in gas prices and constricted gas supplies. The EU's 27 Member States consumed 412 billion cubic metres (bcm) of gas in 2021<sup>(3)</sup>, an increase of 4.3 % compared with 2020<sup>(4)</sup>. The war in Ukraine put serious pressure on European leaders to find alternative sources of energy in order to power their economies, given that 83 % of the EU's natural gas is sourced from outside of the Union<sup>(5)</sup>. With Russia out of the game, Algeria has gained crucial importance for the EU's energy supply, even more so in recent months. During his visit to Algiers in September 2022, European Council President Charles Michel called Algeria a 'reliable, loyal, and committed partner in the field of energy cooperation'<sup>(6)</sup>.

As a result, the country increased its gas exports twofold to 100 bcm in 2022, a record after years of stagnation since 1999<sup>(7)</sup>. Algeria is now meeting 12 % of the EU's gas requirements as compared to 10 % before the beginning of the war in Ukraine<sup>(8)</sup>. Algeria exports around 83 % of its natural gas to Europe, with the bulk going to Spain and Italy<sup>(9)</sup>. However, cooperation has not always been smooth. While relations with Italy have recently improved, relations with Spain have been tainted



On 13 March 2023, HR/VP Josep Borrell Fontelles met Abdelmadjid Tebboune, President of Algeria, in Algiers.

EC, Audiovisual Service © European Union, 2023

by mistrust and diplomatic squabbles. The volume of Algerian gas exports to Italy increased to double the forecasted amount in 2022, making Italy Europe's new energy hub. The Italian energy company Eni is now a major partner of Sonatrach, Algeria's state-owned oil and gas company. In December 2021 the two signed a USD 1.4 billion contract that includes projects to explore and develop new gas sources and to produce hydrogen and electricity from renewable sources<sup>(10)</sup>.

However, Algerian gas exports to Spain fell as tensions rose between the two countries in June 2022. In response to Spain's decision to abandon its neutral position towards the Western Sahara issue, Algeria terminated a two-decade-old friendship treaty with Spain, suspended foreign trade transactions and banned imports from Spain, and shut off the Maghreb-Europe Gas pipeline (MEG), which

(3) European Council, 'Infographic – Where does the EU's gas come from?', 7 February 2023 (<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/eu-gas-supply/>).

(4) Eurostat, 'Natural gas supply statistics' (<https://bit.ly/3GhCARH>).

(5) Ibid.

(6) Saini Fasanotti, F., 'Europe turns to Algeria for natural gas', GIS, 20 October 2022 (<https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/algeria-europe/>).

(7) Mills, R., 'Why can't Algeria solve Europe's gas woes?', Euractiv, 18 August 2022 (<https://www.euractiv.com/section/energy/opinion/why-cant-algeria-solve-europes-gas-woes/>).

(8) Butt, H., 'Algerian gas flows to Europe shrink, but Italy gains as trade ties strengthen', S&P Global, 31 January 202 (<https://bit.ly/3Yxw93S>).

(9) Saleh, M., 'Distribution of exports of natural gas in gaseous state from Algeria in 2021', Statista, August 2022 (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1268723/natural-gas-in-gaseous-state-exports-from-algeria-by-destination/>).

(10) 'Algeria's Sonatrach signs two energy agreements with Eni', Reuters, 14 December 2021 (<https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/algerias-sonatrach-signs-two-energy-agreements-with-eni-2021-12-14/>).

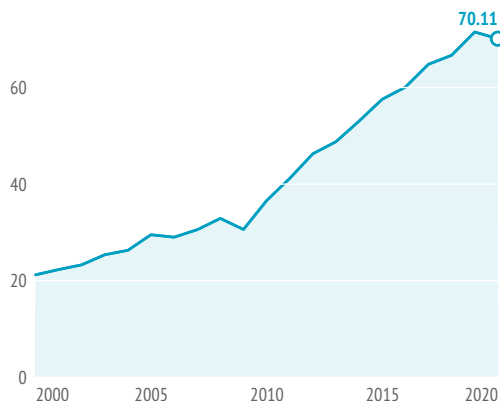
passes through Morocco. As a result, the overall amount of Algerian gas exported to Spain decreased by more than 35 % in 2022 compared to the previous year <sup>(11)</sup>. Nevertheless, current gas supplies continue to flow through the Medgas pipeline, which directly connects Algeria and Spain while Naturgy, Spain's main importer, has secured an agreement with Sonatrach following lengthy discussions. In the meantime, the EU condemned the closing of the MEG, prompting Algiers' ire and a statement from the Algerian Foreign Ministry calling on the EU not to get involved in an issue considered to be 'a political disagreement of a bilateral nature' <sup>(12)</sup>.

Nevertheless, in July 2022 Algiers announced its intention to increase the flow of supplies to Europe with two new pipelines. The first is the Trans-Saharan Gas Pipeline (TSGP), with a capacity of 30 bcm per year which should bring gas from Niger and Nigeria and traverse over 70 % of Algerian territory <sup>(13)</sup>. The second (Galsi), with a yearly capacity of 88 bcm, should run from Algeria to Italy via Sardinia <sup>(14)</sup>. The two projects have a decade-long history but various technical and economic obstacles have delayed their being launched.

Even if these pipelines materialise, Algeria's production capacity remains the biggest challenge. Several Sonatrach chief executive officers, including the latest, Toufik Hakkar, have stated publicly that Algeria's gas output remains dependent on the availability of surplus volumes remaining after catering for growing domestic demand <sup>(15)</sup>. Domestic consumption is

## Electrifying

Algerian energy consumption, TWh



Data: International Energy Agency, 2023

high compared to other countries with comparable levels of development, due in part to high rates of usage, waste and population growth. As a result, domestic consumption has increased by more than 6 % per year from 2010 to 2019, reaching 48 bcm in 2021 against 45 bcm in 2020 and 27 bcm a decade earlier <sup>(16)</sup>. With an annual population growth rate of 1.7%, gas consumption is anticipated to increase by 10 % to reach 67 bcm by 2028 <sup>(17)</sup>.

But domestic consumption alone is not the problem. The main challenge faced by Algeria's gas industry is underinvestment. As explained by an Algerian government source: 'We can do ten Californias in the Algerian desert – like in California we have many fields [...] we have the resources, but we need investment [...] The European partners should invest in the Algerian Sahara' <sup>(18)</sup>. The Algerian economy

(11) 'Algerian gas flows to Europe shrink, but Italy gains as trade ties strengthen', op.cit.

(12) 'Algeria faces criticism over tensed bilateral relations with Spain', Africanews, 13 June 2022 (<https://www.africanews.com/2022/06/13/algeria-faces-eu-criticism-over-tensed-bilateral-relations-with-spain/>).

(13) Schwikowski, M., 'African countries seek to revive Sahara gas pipeline', DW, 8 December 2022 (<https://bit.ly/3RQySTD>).

(14) 'Algeria Sardinia Italy Gas Pipeline (Galsi)', (no date available), Hydrocarbons Technology (<https://www.hydrocarbons-technology.com/projects/algeria-sardinia-italy-gas-pipeline-galsi/>).

(15) 'L'Algérie dans l'incapacité d'exporter davantage de gaz vers l'Europe: Hakkar explique les raisons', *Maghreb Emergent*, 27 February 2022 (<https://maghrebemergent.net/lalgerie-dans-lincapacite-dexporter-davantage-de-gaz-vers-leurope-hakkar-explique-les-raisons/>).

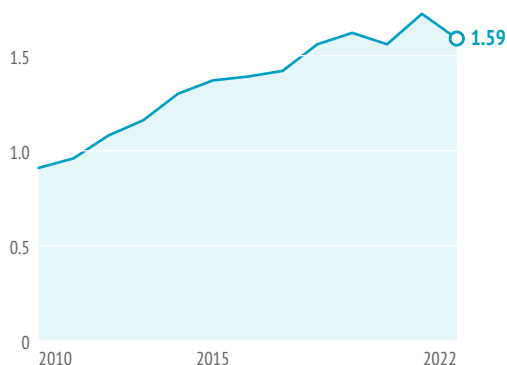
(16) Algeria Energy Information, 'Energy Market in Algeria', Enerdata, February 2023 (<https://www.enerdata.net/estore/energy-market/algeria/>).

(17) Algérie Presse Service (APS), 'Gaz: la consommation nationale à 67 milliards de m<sup>3</sup> à l'horizon 2028', 23 January 2019 (<https://www.aps.dz/economie/84252-gaz-la-consommation-nationale-a-67-milliards-de-m3-a-l-horizon-2028>).

(18) Informal conversation between the author and an Algerian government source, former CEO of Sonatrach, Paris, June 2022.

## Algeria's national natural gas consumption

Algerian natural gas consumption increased by 75 % in the space of 12 years, in exajoules



Data: Statista, 2023

suffers from underinvestment because of the country's inability to attract capital due to unattractive fiscal terms and a painfully slow bureaucracy. In the World Bank's *Doing Business* 2022 report, Algeria was ranked 157<sup>th</sup> out of 190 economies in the Ease of Doing Business Index, while its neighbour Morocco was ranked 53<sup>rd</sup> <sup>(19)</sup>. Opening a business in Algeria involves 112 procedures, takes 18 days and costs 11.3 % of income per capita <sup>(20)</sup>, while in Morocco, it requires just four procedures, takes nine days and costs 3.6 % of income per capita <sup>(21)</sup>.

In May 2020, to attract foreign investors and strengthen the country's economy the Algerian authorities removed legislation that had

## The main challenge faced by Algeria's gas industry is underinvestment.

limited foreign ownership of domestic enterprises to no more than 49 %. However, the new law allowing international investors to manufacture products and sell services without a local shareholder has yet to materialise as the country's leadership remains attached to a very centralised economy retaining tight control over all sectors, especially oil and gas. Either way, so-called 'strategic sectors', including mining, energy, transportation and pharmaceuticals, will continue to be subject to the 51/49 majority ownership regulation <sup>(22)</sup>. Additionally, as of 2020, Algeria ranked 113 out of 190 countries for ease of enforcing contracts, with a quality of judicial processes index of 5.5, compared to Morocco, which ranked 63 for the former and 9.5 for the latter. Imminent progress in the matter is also unlikely as Algeria's judiciary <sup>(23)</sup> is not fully independent and is subject to political manipulation. <sup>(24)</sup> This climate of legal insecurity acts as a major disincentive for foreign investors <sup>(25)</sup>.

As a result, a substantial increase in Algeria's gas exports should not be expected in the medium to long term. Aware of the current unsustainability of maintaining a steady flow of gas supplies to Europe, the leadership intends to exploit its extensive shale gas resources,

the world's third-largest untapped shale gas reserves estimated at 20 trillion cubic metres (tcm) <sup>(26)</sup>. This will probably spark strong opposition in southern regions, which have seen a rise of 'resource regionalism' and constituted

(19) World Bank Report, *Doing Business 2020*, 'Economy Profile – Morocco' (<https://archive.doingbusiness.org/content/dam/doingBusiness/country/m/morocco/MAR.pdf>).

(20) World Bank Report, *Doing Business 2020*, 'Economy Profile – Algeria' (<https://archive.doingbusiness.org/content/dam/doingBusiness/country/a/algeria/DZA.pdf>).

(21) World Bank Report, *Doing Business 2020*, 'Economy Profile – Morocco', op. cit.

(22) Ahmed, T., 'Algeria eases foreign ownership restrictions', *fDi Intelligence*, 11 June 2022 (<https://www.fdiintelligence.com/content/news/algeria-eases-foreign-ownership-restrictions-77886>).

(23) 'Investissements étrangers: Les textes d'application de la règle 51/49 tardent à voir le jour', *ObservAlgérie.com*, 9 March 2022 (<https://bit.ly/3YKRhDz>).

(24) RefWorld, 'Algeria' (<https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/48a3fo280.pdf>).

(25) Meddi, A., 'Algérie : le tabou du « 49/51 » tombe pour les investissements étrangers', *Le Point*, 13 September 2019 (<https://bit.ly/3xBAokZ>).

(26) Privacy Shield Framework, 'Algeria – Oil and Gas – Hydrocarbons' (<https://www.privacyshield.gov/article?id=Algeria-Oil-and-Gas-Hydrocarbons>).

Algeria's Achilles' heel in recent years <sup>(27)</sup>. While it is not likely that the government will abandon oil and gas, Algeria should start extensively developing its renewable energy sector in the coming years. Such a transformation might assist Algeria in ensuring the welfare of its growing population and maintaining, and possibly even expanding, its role as a trusted and reliable energy supplier to Europe. However, this cannot happen unless the government implements investor-friendly policies, adopts difficult reforms in the energy and banking sectors, and addresses the issue of domestic demand.

## POLES APART ON MIGRATION

The second factor contributing to the unsustainability of this marriage of expediency between Algiers and Brussels is their divergence of views and approaches concerning migration management. Unlike other Maghreb states, Algeria has been unwilling to collaborate with the EU on migration management. Even at times when Algeria's crackdown on irregular migration aligns with European objectives, it is a response to apparent local instability rather than to EU pressure <sup>(28)</sup>. The Algerian government views migration management as a question of sovereignty and rejects EU interference in what it regards as its internal security affairs. Algeria's unwillingness to participate in EU initiatives to subsidise and engage in migratory governance support is likely to persist.

**Algeria has been unwilling to collaborate with the EU on migration management.**

With regard to migration, the EU sees Algeria as a transit country, but it is increasingly also a destination for migrants as the country attracts sub-Saharan migrants thanks to its relative economic prosperity. The number of foreign migrants in Algeria grew annually by 10 000 between 2005 and 2019. As of 2020, Algeria hosted 250 400 foreign migrants, or around 0.6 % of the country's total population <sup>(29)</sup>, many of whom (100 600 in 2019) were refugees. Irregular migrants from sub-Saharan Africa, particularly Mali and Niger, continue to arrive in Algeria seeking employment or to use it as a temporary stopover on their way to Europe.

Against this backdrop, Algeria is important to EU Member States regarding migratory governance and migration. Migration is a highly politicised issue in both European and Algerian domestic debates. However, cooperation between Algiers and Brussels in this sphere is limited. On the one hand, the EU has not effectively engaged Algeria in cooperation on migration management because it fails to understand Algeria's perspective on migration issues. On the other hand, Algeria has continuously politicised the question and presented EU pressure on the issue as foreign interference in its domestic affairs.

The 2017 EU-Algeria Partnership Priorities propose that frequent dialogues at the highest level on problems connected to mobility, migration and asylum must be addressed. However, Algeria has not cooperated despite EU incentives. The Algerian government has never agreed to begin negotiations for a Mobility Partnership and technical cooperation has never happened because the country is not involved in any bilateral projects

<sup>(27)</sup> Ghanem, D., 'Algeria's Achilles' heel? Resource regionalism in Ouargla', Carnegie, 24 March 2021 (<https://carnegie-mec.org/2021/03/24/algeria-s-achilles-heel-resource-regionalism-in-ouargla-pub-84157>). Resource nationalism refers to a situation where the government pours money into a resource-rich area for the purpose of extracting resources that power the national economy, but often avoids diverting any of the subsequent revenue to local communities.

<sup>(28)</sup> Zardo, F., and Loschi, C., 'EU-Algeria (non)cooperation on migration: A tale of two fortresses', *Mediterranean Politics*, 2020, pp. 1–22. (<https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2020.1758453>).

<sup>(29)</sup> Integral Human Development, 'Migration Profile – Algeria' (<https://bit.ly/3RZog4M>).

financed by EU funding instruments, except for large regional projects. Projects involving Algeria funded by Mesures d'accompagnement financières et techniques (MEDA) and the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, such as anti-smuggling and anti-human trafficking training, the EuroMed Migration III and IV programmes or the City-to-City Migration project, are regional projects that concentrate on cross-cutting issues rather than directly addressing the specifics of the Algerian context bilaterally.

The prospect of cooperation, for example, to prevent and regulate irregular migration is included in the Association Agreement signed between the EU and Algeria in 2005<sup>(30)</sup> and the same is true of the 2017 European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) Partnership Priorities. In addition, the Algerian government signed bilateral readmission agreements with Germany, Italy, Spain and other countries between 1997 and 2006 as well as a protocol with France to combat irregular migration and human trafficking. However, between 2015–2020, the EU did not achieve tangible progress in its readmission agreements (EURAs) with Algeria. Moreover, the Algerian government does not cooperate with Frontex and in 2018 (along with Morocco and Tunisia) it explicitly rejected EU proposals to establish disembarkation platforms in North Africa.

Algeria ratified the major UN Conventions on the subject and the Palermo Protocols against Smuggling and Trafficking in 2001 and 2004, respectively. In 2009, Algeria became the first Arab nation to join the International Organization for Migration (IOM). Following the signing of a readmission agreement between

Algeria and Niger, IOM specialists did not monitor the repatriation of migrants to Niger and could not confirm claims made by several Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) of grave human rights violations. Also, the country did not comply with the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa and the African Union's Protocol on the Free Movement of People (2018).

Algeria's stance on migration will continue to be characterised by its commitment to the principles of sovereignty and non-interference, which are part of the country's political culture. Partners need to take this into account when engaging in cooperative projects with Algeria.

## TOO CLOSE TO MOSCOW?

Another key factor underlining the inherent fragility in EU-Algeria relations is the two partners' differing perspectives on the war in Ukraine and Algiers' close relationship with Moscow. The Russian invasion of Ukraine and the energy crisis it unleashed in Europe have yielded positive consequences for the regime, which was destabilised by a peaceful popular protest movement in 2019. Thanks to high oil and gas revenues, the regime has distributed subsidies and government handouts and adopted a more assertive foreign policy to compensate for its lack of popular legitimacy<sup>(31)</sup>. Thus, while maintaining its position as Europe's third gas provider, Algeria wants to uphold its non-aligned stance, as it is unwilling

<sup>(30)</sup> The 2002 Association Agreement (AA), signed in 2005, laid the ground for enhanced cooperation between Algeria and the EU. In 2015, Algeria formally indicated its willingness to review the AA. In their agreement, the EU and Algeria had planned to open their markets on a reciprocal basis. However, Algeria has repeatedly asked to renegotiate the text, considering that the agreement is largely unfavourable to it as the Algerian economy is not competitive and has not been able to export its non-hydrocarbon products, thereby losing significant revenue. See the full agreement here: <https://bit.ly/3JWETuy>.

<sup>(31)</sup> Oil and gas revenues exceeded USD 58 billion in 2022, compared to USD 34 billion in 2021 and USD 20 billion a year before. As a result, Abdelmadjid Tebboune's government adopted radical social measures such as offering a monthly allowance to no less than 1.2 million unemployed people and increasing public sector wages and pensions for 2.8 million individuals, all while maintaining subsidies. See: De Souza, O., 'En 2020, les recettes d'exportations de pétrole et de gaz de l'Algérie ont chuté de 39 %', *Hydrocarbures*, 5 July 2021 (<https://www.agenceecofin.com/trade/0507-89799-en-2020-les-recettes-d-exportations-de-petrole-et-de-gaz-de-l-algerie-ont-chute-de-39>); 'Fonction publique: l'augmentation de salaire sera perçue en mars', *Algérie Focus*, 13 February 2023 (<https://www.algerie-focus.com/fonction-publique-laugmentation-de-salaire-sera-percue-en-mars/>).



to jeopardise its security and trade links with Russia, the country's principal arms supplier. Between 2017 and 2021, Russia accounted for no less than 81 % of Algeria's arms imports<sup>(32)</sup>.

Algeria has voiced its opinions at the United Nations (UN), where it abstained from a vote on a resolution demanding that Russia cease using force against Ukraine on 2 March 2022 and did not take part in the UN's General Assembly's vote to suspend Russia from the UN Human Rights Council on 7 April 2022. It once more abstained from a resolution on Russia's illegal annexation of four Ukrainian regions on 12 October 2022. To preserve this carefully crafted image of neutrality, President Abdelmadjid Tebboune declined to attend the US-Africa Leaders' Summit in Washington last December to avoid being drawn into Washington's criticisms of Russia. Nonetheless, the Algerian president paid an official three-day visit to Moscow in June 2023, despite an outcry in Washington.

These subterfuges and equivocations have not gone unnoticed in Washington and Brussels. Last September, US Representative Lisa McClain and 26 other members of Congress sent a letter to US Secretary of State Antony Blinken demanding that sanctions be imposed against the country for purchasing weapons from Russia and for its close relations with Moscow. Similarly, in November 2022, 17 Members of the European Parliament demanded a review of the EU Association Agreement with Algeria, arguing that 'Algeria supports Russia's geopolitical aspirations'<sup>(33)</sup>.

To maintain this stance and be able to pursue an autonomous foreign policy accordingly

while safeguarding its growing economic potential as an energy exporter, Algeria applied to join the BRICS group of emerging economies in December 2022. Although the country's membership bid was rejected, to the dismay of the Tebboune administration, Algeria has been able to ride the wave and perform a difficult balancing act between Russia on the one hand and the Western powers opposed to Russia's invasion of Ukraine on the other.

## CONCLUSION

Algeria will continue to assist the EU as it grapples with the gas crisis, and therefore it is in the EU's interests to address the problems that the gas sector is encountering in Algeria. One of the most pressing issues is the 10.5 bcm of Algerian gas flared each year due to insufficient capacity to collect, process and transport it<sup>(34)</sup>. According to the World Bank's 2022 Global Gas Flaring Tracker Report, by capturing gas that is being systematically burned, vented or lost through leaks in Algeria, Tunisia, Libya and Egypt, Europe could start to replace up to 15 % of its Russian gas via underused pipelines and LNG terminals in the region within 12 to 24 months<sup>(35)</sup>. Algeria's gas production would therefore increase if flaring is reduced. It would also help the country to cover its domestic consumption over the coming years while increasing exports.

Algeria is also a prime candidate for large-scale solar energy production with one of the most significant solar power resources in the Mediterranean region<sup>(36)</sup>. The Sahara, which covers

(32) See: 'Distribution of arms imports into Algeria between 2017 and 2021, by country of origin', *Statista*, 2023 (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1244018/distribution-of-arms-imports-into-algeria-by-country-of-origin/>).

(33) 'Europe: MEPs demand review of agreement with Algeria over links with Russia', *Middle East Monitor*, 22 November 2022. (<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20221124-eu-meps-demand-review-of-agreement-with-algeria-over-links-with-russia/>).

(34) Clean Air Task Force, 'Europe's new gas deals should prioritise wasted methane', 17 May 2022 (<https://bit.ly/3HXbCiu>).

(35) World Bank, 2022 *Global Gas Flaring Tracker Report*, 5 May 2022 (<https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/extractiveindustries/publication/2022-global-gas-flaring-tracker-report>).

(36) Bouzid, Z., Ghellai, N. and Mezghiche, T. 'Overview of solar potential, state of the art and future of photovoltaic installations in Algeria', *International Journal of Renewable Energy Research*, Vol. 5, No 2, 2015 (<https://www.ijrer.org/ijrer/index.php/ijrer/article/view/2075>).



no less than 80 % of Algeria's land area, receives more than 3 000 hours of sunlight annually. This might allow it to construct one of the world's largest solar fields. Collaborating with the EU on Saharan solar electricity can help households not only reduce their gas consumption but also help Algeria steer away from oil and gas, become greener, create more jobs, and improve the competitiveness of locally-manufactured goods <sup>(37)</sup>. For this to happen, the EU needs to invest in interconnection infrastructure across the Mediterranean, thus giving Algeria access to the European electricity market. Sonatrach, Algeria's state-owned oil firm, and the German gas group VNG recently signed a deal to build the first green hydrogen plant in Algiers to generate 50 megawatts of solar-generated power <sup>(38)</sup>.

Because of its gas bonanza, Algeria is, momentarily, in a state of grace. The rise in global oil and gas prices following Russia's invasion of Ukraine has helped the rentier state stabilise the domestic situation, bolstering governmental finances and public confidence. However, this situation is not sustainable and new protests will likely resume in the upcoming five years once the boom ends. Domestic instability is never far away in a country where violence is cyclical <sup>(39)</sup>. Algeria must diversify its economy to reduce its dependence on imports and better meet the needs of its population. The EU can help it to accomplish this aim. It is, after all, in the EU's best interest to help the country implement economic reforms and reduce its dependency on hydrocarbons.

**Domestic instability is never far away in a country where violence is cyclical.**

The EU needs to provide concrete support to initiatives for economic transition and diversification undertaken by the Algerian government. The promotion of the tourism sector as an alternative to over-dependence on revenue from the oil and gas industry is a promising pathway. In 2020 Algeria ranked 120<sup>th</sup> in the world and generated merely USD 50 million from the sector, corresponding to 0.031 % of its GDP <sup>(40)</sup>. With its vast desert, over 1 200 km of Mediterranean coastline and significant historical and cultural monuments, including eight world heritage sites, Algeria has the potential to become a popular tourist destination and thus offset its dangerous over-reliance on oil revenues.

Finally, on the diplomatic level, Algeria's non-aligned policy has to be understood in the context of its political culture. From Algiers' perspective, the objective is not to alienate Moscow and to maintain a position of positive neutrality *vis-à-vis* what is considered 'a North-North conflict'. It would be very complicated, indeed maybe even impossible, for Algiers to jettison its long-standing relationship with Russia. This being the case, the EU could focus on strengthening its ties with Algeria, which is not only an energy partner but also a security partner. Algeria's experience in counterterrorism, its military capabilities and its pivotal role in the Sahel should be emphasised when considering how the EU can constructively engage with the country.

<sup>(37)</sup> For more details on the energy transition in Algeria, see Farrand, A. 'Against the flow: Europe's role in kickstarting Algeria's green transition', Policy Brief, ECFR, 6 October 2022 (<https://ecfr.eu/publication/against-the-flow-europes-role-in-kickstarting-algerias-green-transition/>).

<sup>(38)</sup> Bongarrà, F., 'Algeria, Germany sign MoU to build 50MW hydrogen plant', Arab News, 20 December 2022 (<https://www.arabnews.com/node/2219361/business-economy>).

<sup>(39)</sup> Ghanem, D., *Understanding the Persistence of Competitive Authoritarianism in Algeria*, Palgrave Macmillan, September 2022.

<sup>(40)</sup> World Data, 'Tourism in Algeria' (<https://www.worlddata.info/africa/algeria/tourism.php>).

## CHAPTER 2

# THE EU AND EGYPT

## Back to the future?

by

ADEL ABDEL GHAFAR

## INTRODUCTION

Before the 2011 uprising, ex-President Hosni Mubarak cultivated European leaders and anchored Egypt's relationship with Europe in key partnerships with Germany, France and Italy as well as other European countries. The events of the 2011 Arab uprising shattered the illusion of authoritarian stability, and for some time there was a sense of optimism in Europe that Egypt would pursue a path towards a stable and democratic transition. The 2013 coup and growing instability in the broader Middle East and North African (MENA) region, with ongoing civil wars in Libya, Yemen and Syria, and the onset of the migration crisis, ended that sense of optimism.

While the EU has a strong rhetorical commitment to the promotion of human rights and democracy, in the case of Egypt and especially since 2013, *realpolitik* has dominated due to the EU's focus on combating irregular migration and terrorism<sup>(1)</sup>. The EU's broad priorities in Egypt are political and economic stability, increased trade and security cooperation<sup>(2)</sup>. On

the Egyptian side, the country is careful to project a positive image to the EU, its largest trading partner. By leveraging its geographic location and the EU's fear of irregular migration and terrorism, Egypt has been able to extract maximum benefit from the EU and use the relationship to its advantage.

This chapter examines the key dimensions of EU-Egypt relations as they have evolved since 2013. It shows that currently Egypt's relations with Europe are back in familiar territory: authoritarian stability and a highly transactional relationship pragmatically grounded in economic and security interests. The chapter argues that in the short to medium term, relations will remain solid, but in the long term, they may come under strain again given the socio-economic challenges facing Egypt and the risk that another uprising may erupt. Due to the Russia-Ukraine war, Europe has been focusing on the Eastern Neighbourhood, which has unfortunately created the impression that this has come at the expense of its engagement with the Southern one. Thus the EU needs to recalibrate its approach towards

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(1) Loos, B., 'UE-Egypt: A disgraceful partnership', *Orient XXI*, 19 November 2020 (<https://orientxxi.info/magazine/ue-egypt-a-disgraceful-partnership>, 4304).

(2) Görgülü, A., 'Egyptian elite's views on Egypt, and its relations with the EU', in Görgülü, A. and Kahyaoğlu, G.D. (eds.), *The Remaking of the Euro-Mediterranean Vision: Challenging Eurocentrism with local perceptions in the Middle East and North Africa*, Vol. 2, Peter Lang, Berne, 2019 (<https://doi.org/10.3726/b15448>).

North Africa in general and Egypt in particular before more instability ensues.

## MIGRATION AND SECURITY: EGYPT AS A FIRST LINE OF DEFENCE

In 2015, following some discord after the 2013 coup, a growing *rapprochement* was observed between the EU and Egypt as Cairo's support became increasingly important in European efforts to prevent refugees from reaching Europe via the Mediterranean Sea. From 2015 onwards, the growing refugee crisis was beginning to have far-reaching consequences for European politics and thus EU policymakers felt compelled to act to address the issue in the Southern Mediterranean<sup>(3)</sup>.

Egypt is one of the five North African countries which became part of the EU Emergency Trust Fund (EUTF)<sup>(4)</sup> launched in November 2015, through which the EU has invested about €750 million to 'improve migration management'<sup>(5)</sup>. The EU continued to dedicate substantial resources to this area over the following years. In October 2022, when the EU

Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, Olivér Várhelyi, visited Cairo, the EU initiated the first phase of a new border management programme, whereby it provides Egyptian coast guards<sup>(6)</sup> with services and equipment such as thermal cameras and satellite positioning systems<sup>(7)</sup>.

While the EU Commission claims that Egypt is providing long-term solutions to address the challenge of irregular migration, in reality the EU is externalising migration management to North African countries<sup>(8)</sup>. In exchange for financial assistance<sup>(9)</sup>, North African states (with the exception of Algeria) work with the EU to prevent migrants from reaching European shores. This has also put African migrants in an increasingly precarious position in Egypt, where many have suffered racism, discrimination and abuse<sup>(10)</sup>.

In addition to the influx of African migrants, there has been an increase in migrants from Egypt itself. As a result of worsening economic conditions, in 2022, the number of Egyptian nationals applying for asylum in the EU reached its highest level since 2014<sup>(11)</sup>. In February 2022, one in every three arrivals to the EU – through the Central Mediterranean irregular migration route from Libya – were Egyptian citizens<sup>(12)</sup>. This highlights how short-term the EU's approach has been. The externalisation of migration management, without addressing deeply rooted socio-economic

(3) Lehne, S. et al., 'The roots of Europe's refugee crisis', Carnegie Europe, 1 October 2015 (<https://carnegieeurope.eu/2015/10/01/roots-of-europe-s-refugee-crisis-pub-61465>).

(4) European Commission, 'EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa', 16 January 2023 ([https://trust-fund-for-africa.europa.eu/index\\_en](https://trust-fund-for-africa.europa.eu/index_en)).

(5) Ibid.

(6) Ibid.

(7) 'EU and Egypt sign agreement to control migration flows', InfoMigrants, 31 October 2022 (<https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/44393/eu-and-egypt-sign-agreement-to-control-migration-flows>).

(8) Cuttitta, P., 'Non-governmental/civil society organisations and the European Union – externalisation of migration management in Tunisia and Egypt', *Population, Space and Place*, Vol. 26, No 7, 2020.

(9) Nielsen, N., 'Egypt coast guard to get EU cash to stop fleeing Egyptians', *EUobserver*, 17 June 2022 (<https://euobserver.com/migration/155245>).

(10) 'Fleeing war, poverty, African migrants face racism in Egypt', *Al Jazeera*, 2 January 2020 (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/1/2/fleeing-war-poverty-african-migrants-face-racism-in-egypt>).

(11) European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA), 'Egypt as a country of origin: EUAA publishes Migration Drivers report', 22 July 2022 (<https://euaa.europa.eu/news-events/egypt-country-origin-euaa-publishes-migration-drivers-report>).

(12) European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA), *Migration Drivers Report: Egypt as a country of origin*, 2022 (<https://euaa.europa.eu/publications/migration-drivers-report-egypt-country-origin>).

challenges in the country of origin, will not yield the intended results in the long term.

## EUROPEAN ENERGY SECURITY, RENEWABLES AND CLIMATE CHANGE

The second key dimension of EU-Egypt relations is energy. European efforts to end over-reliance on Russian gas following the war in Ukraine<sup>(13)</sup>, have meant that gas in the Eastern Mediterranean has become increasingly important for European energy security. In June 2022, the EU built on the existing energy cooperation framework and signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on gas

exports from Egypt and Israel<sup>(14)</sup>. EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen was present at its signing, highlighting the importance of the deal. As a result of the deal, more Israeli gas is exported from offshore fields to Egypt and delivered by ships to the EU<sup>(15)</sup>.

Increased gas exports will mean more investments and the modernisation and expansion of Egypt's gas exporting infrastructure. The discovery of additional gas reserves in Egypt's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), in late 2022, potentially means that Egypt can play an increasingly important role as a regional gas hub for Europe. However, given Egypt's demographic pressures and energy needs, it remains to be seen how it can sustainably play that role in the long term.

Egypt has been working at both bilateral and multilateral levels to deepen its energy cooperation with Europe. On a multilateral level, Egypt led the creation of the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) in 2019 with Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Israel, Jordan and Palestine but excluding Türkiye. In this way, Egypt has been able to leverage geopolitical tensions to advance its ambitions as a regional gas hub, capitalising on the tensions between Türkiye on the one hand and Israel, the Republic of Cyprus, and Greece on the other to form the EMGF and sideline Türkiye in the Eastern Mediterranean<sup>(16)</sup>.

Given the global energy transition, Egypt's gas hub ambitions may not be sustainable in the long term. Notably, the trilateral deal between the EU, Egypt and Israel is limited to only five years, reflecting the EU's plan to use less gas in the coming decades<sup>(17)</sup>. However, Egypt's energy-exporting ambitions are not limited

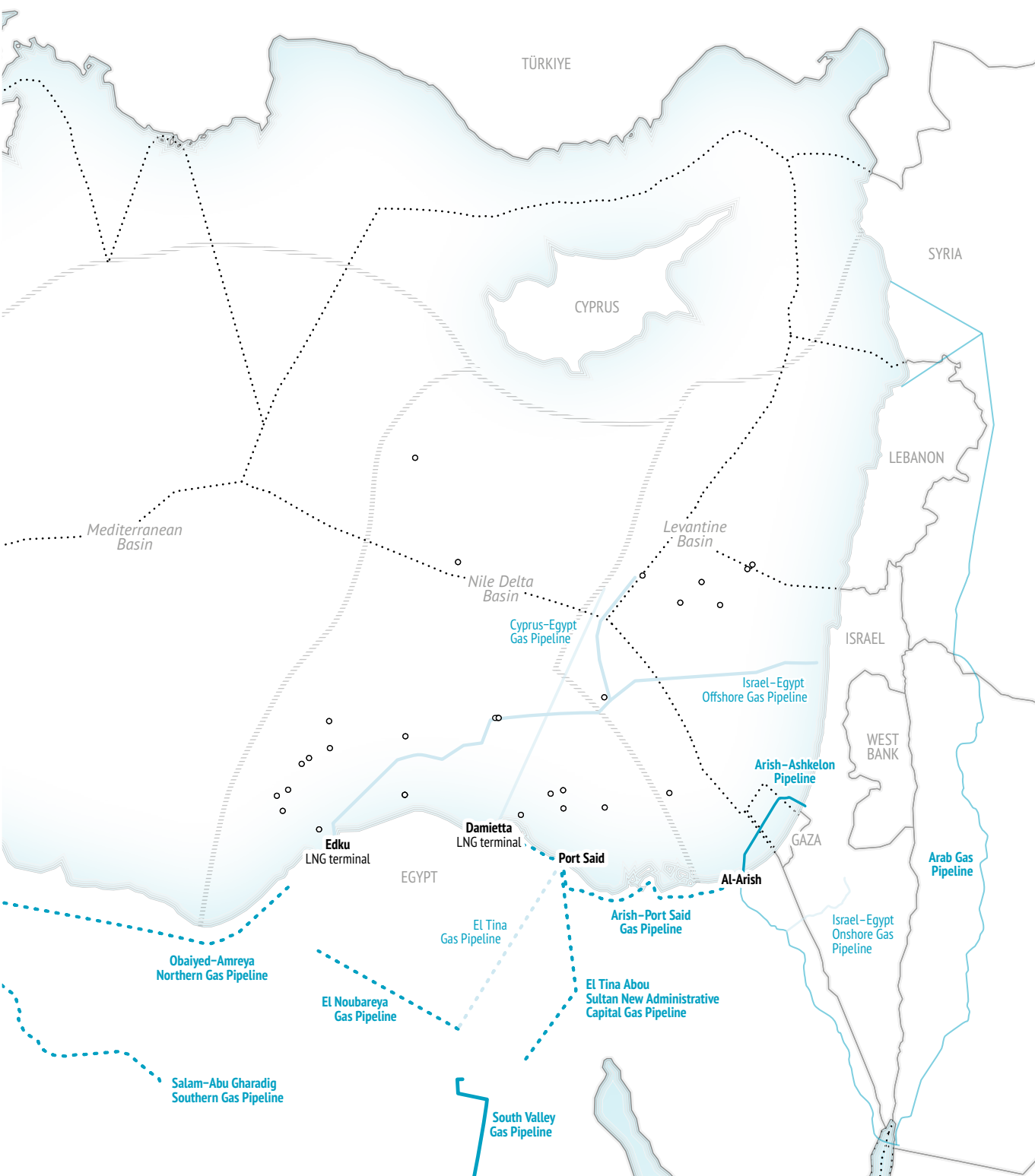
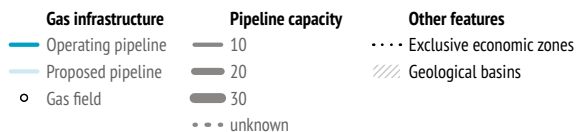


Kadri Simpson, the European Commissioner for Energy, Ursula von der Leyen, the President of the European Commission, Tarek el-Molla, the Egyptian Minister of Petroleum and Mineral Resources and Karine Elharrar, the Israeli Energy Minister (from left to right) in Cairo on 15 June 2022.

EC, Audiovisual Service © European Union, 2022

- (13) 'As invasion of Ukraine plays out, are there alternatives to Europe's dependence on Russian gas?', Mada Masr, 24 February 2022 (<https://www.madamasr.com/en/2022/02/24/feature/economy/as-invasion-of-ukraine-plays-out-are-there-alternatives-to-europes-dependence-on-russian-gas/>).
- (14) 'EU signs gas deal with Egypt, Israel to end "dependency" on Russia', Euractiv, 16 June 2022 (<https://www.euractiv.com/section/energy/news/eu-signs-gas-deal-with-egypt-israel-to-end-dependency-on-russia/>).
- (15) Ibid.
- (16) Elgendy, K., 'Egypt as an Eastern Mediterranean power in the age of energy transition', Middle East institute, 18 July 2022 (<https://www.mei.edu/publications/egypt-eastern-mediterranean-power-age-energy-transition>).
- (17) European Commission, Climate Action, '2050 Long-Term Strategy' ([https://climate.ec.europa.eu/eu-action/climate-strategies-targets/2050-long-term-strategy\\_en](https://climate.ec.europa.eu/eu-action/climate-strategies-targets/2050-long-term-strategy_en)).

# Eastern Med gas infrastructure and pipelines



to gas and include renewables, which is why the country was focused on hosting the 2022 United Nations Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP27) in Sharm El Sheikh. The Egyptian government had multiple objectives in hosting COP27. Firstly, it wanted to showcase the country as a venue for major global events. Secondly, this was part of its endeavour to seek external help and support to address the effects of climate change, which may adversely impact the long-term stability of the country if left unaddressed<sup>(18)</sup>. Finally, the country wanted to promote natural gas as a clean alternative to other fossil fuels and position itself as a strategic exporter of natural gas to Europe.

In the lead-up to COP27 the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, met Egyptian President El Sisi and issued a joint statement on energy, the green transition, and climate<sup>(19)</sup>. The document underlined Europe's desire to boost its energy partnership with Egypt, within the framework of the REPowerEU plan<sup>(20)</sup>, in which the EU aims to reach the target of 20 million tons of renewable hydrogen production in 2030<sup>(21)</sup>, contributing to European aspirations to reduce energy dependence on Russia. During COP27, the EU and Egypt also signed an MoU on a strategic partnership on renewable hydrogen<sup>(22)</sup>.

Climate change will increasingly become another important dimension of Egypt-EU relations.

## TRADE AND COMMERCE: CRITICAL FOR BOTH SIDES

In 2020, the EU continued to be Cairo's biggest trading partner, accounting for 24.5 % of Egypt's trade volume that year<sup>(23)</sup>. Overall, the volume of trade between Egypt and the EU grew from approximately €22.2 billion in 2020 to €27.6 billion in 2021, a significant increase<sup>(24)</sup>. Europe is also one of Egypt's largest investors, with €18.1 billion of foreign direct investment (FDI) stocks in 2020 against €4.4 billion of Egyptian FDI stocks in the EU<sup>(25)</sup>.

While Europe is an important trading partner for Egypt, Egypt is arguably even more significant for the EU. With a population of approximately 110 million, the largest in the Southern Neighbourhood, Egypt remains one of the biggest markets for European goods and services. The country hosts several European companies, as low labour costs and a

(18) See for example Ghafar, A.A., 'A stable Egypt for a stable region: Socio-economic challenges and prospects', European Parliament, January 2018 ([https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/603858/EXPO\\_STU\(2018\)603858\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/603858/EXPO_STU(2018)603858_EN.pdf)).

(19) European Commission, 'EU and Egypt step up cooperation on climate, energy and the green transition', Press release, 15 June 2021 ([https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP\\_22\\_3662](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_22_3662)).

(20) European Commission, 'REPowerEU: A plan to rapidly reduce dependence on Russian fossil fuels and fast forward the green transition', Press release, 18 May 2022 ([https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/e%20n/ip\\_22\\_3131](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/e%20n/ip_22_3131)).

(21) Habibic, A., 'EU forms "key energy partnership" with Egypt at COP27 with focus on renewable hydrogen', *Offshore Energy*, 16 November 2022 (<https://www.offshore-energy.biz/eu-forms-key-energy-partnership-with-egypt-at-cop27-with-focus-on-renewable-hydrogen/>).

(22) Directorate-General for Energy of the European Commission, 'Memorandum of Understanding on a Strategic Partnership on Renewable Hydrogen Between the European Union and the Arab Republic of Egypt', 16 November 2022 ([https://energy.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-11/MoU\\_EU-Egypt\\_on\\_renewable\\_hydrogen\\_FINAL\\_SIGNED\\_by\\_EU.pdf](https://energy.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-11/MoU_EU-Egypt_on_renewable_hydrogen_FINAL_SIGNED_by_EU.pdf)).

(23) In 2020, 21.8 % of Egypt's exports went to the EU and 25.8 % of Egypt's imports came from the EU. See: European Commission, 'EU trade relations with Egypt' ([https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/egypt\\_en](https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/egypt_en)).

(24) 'Egypt-EU bilateral trade rises to \$29.6bln in 2021', *Zawya*, 21 September 2022 (<https://www.zawya.com/en/economy/north-africa/egypt-eu-bilateral-trade-rises-to-296bln-in-2021-x1s1enkw>).

(25) Ibid.



sizeable population make the local market appealing to European investors<sup>(26)</sup>. Pulling out of the Egyptian market could harm large European corporations such as Siemens, whose 2015 multibillion-dollar deal in Egypt allowed the company to save the jobs of hundreds of workers in German manufacturing plants<sup>(27)</sup>.

Following the 2013 *coup*, Egypt has also leveraged weapons purchases to smooth out relations with European countries<sup>(28)</sup>. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), between 2016–2020 Egypt was the third-largest arms importer in the world<sup>(29)</sup>, with the bulk of those weapons coming from European countries. According to one analyst, ‘Egypt’s multibillion-dollar arms imports can be seen as political bribes to global powers in exchange for their political support’<sup>(30)</sup>.

## HUMAN RIGHTS: BETWEEN RHETORIC AND REALITY

Given the focus on energy, economics and security, it is unsurprising that the EU’s values-based diplomacy has taken a back seat

in its engagement with Egypt<sup>(31)</sup>. Between 2018 and 2020, Egypt declined to participate in a number of cooperation programmes with the EU due to the fact that the agreements contained conditionality clauses<sup>(32)</sup>. As per the general conditions annexed to the financing agreements under the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI), the Commission may suspend a financing agreement if the beneficiary breaches an obligation relating to respect for human rights, democratic principles or the rule of law and in serious cases of corruption (Article 26.1)<sup>(33)</sup>. However, this clause is vague, and the EU’s economic and security interests more often take precedence.

Nonetheless, Egypt’s poor human rights record is regularly denounced by European institutions and civil society. After a crackdown on protests in Egypt in 2019, a resolution was adopted by the European Parliament<sup>(34)</sup> but this was not followed by any further actions. However, interventions by some European officials and public pressure has had some effect, as shown by the release of political prisoner and activist Ramy Shaath in January 2022, after more than two years in prison<sup>(35)</sup>.

During COP27, the hunger strike of Egyptian-British activist Alaa Abdel Fattah was extensively covered by European media, with calls for European governments to intervene for his release, but to no effect. At the

(26) El-Shimy, Y. and Dworkin, A. ‘Egypt on the edge: how Europe can avoid another crisis in Egypt’, Policy Brief, European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), 14 June 2017, pp. 1–13, ([https://ecfr.eu/publication/egypt\\_on\\_the\\_edge\\_how\\_europe\\_can\\_avoid\\_another\\_crisis\\_in\\_egypt\\_7298/](https://ecfr.eu/publication/egypt_on_the_edge_how_europe_can_avoid_another_crisis_in_egypt_7298/)).

(27) Ibid.

(28) Ghafar, A.A. and Jacobs, A., ‘Introduction: EU–North Africa relations in an age of turbulence’, in Ghafar, A.A. (ed.), *The European Union and North Africa: Prospects and challenges*, Brookings Institution Press, Washington, 2019, p. 14.

(29) SIPRI Fact Sheet, ‘Trends in international arms transfers, 2020’, March 2021 ([https://sipri.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/fs\\_2103\\_at\\_2020.pdf](https://sipri.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/fs_2103_at_2020.pdf)).

(30) Al-Anani, K., ‘Sisi intensifies arms imports to secure external support for his policies’, Arab Center, Washington D.C., 28 February 2022 (<https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/sisi-intensifies-arms-imports-to-secure-external-support-for-his-policies/#:~:text=Egypt's%20arms%20imports%20from%20Germany,will%20be%20built%20in%20Egypt>).

(31) ‘Egypt is reliable partner for the European Union, European commissioner for home affairs’, *Egypt Today*, 17 November 2021 (<https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/110025/Egypt-is-reliable-partner-for-the-European-Union-European-commissioner>).

(32) ‘UE–Egypt: A disgraceful partnership’, op.cit.

(33) Ibid.

(34) European Parliament, Resolution on Egypt, 2019/2880(RSP) ([https://oeil.secure.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/popups/ficheprocedure.do?lang=en&reference=2019/2880\(RSP\)](https://oeil.secure.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/popups/ficheprocedure.do?lang=en&reference=2019/2880(RSP))).

(35) ‘Egypt frees activist Ramy Shaath after he renounces nationality, family says’, *Reuters*, 9 January 2022 (<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/egypt-frees-activist-ramy-shaath-after-he-renounces-nationality-family-2022-01-08/>).

beginning of 2022, more than 170 EU politicians signed a letter calling on the UN to investigate human rights violations in Egypt<sup>(36)</sup>. In November 2022, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on the human rights situation in Egypt<sup>(37)</sup>, which the Egyptian House of Representatives publicly rejected<sup>(38)</sup>. While laudable, toothless EP resolutions have not significantly impacted the situation on the ground. There is no strong political desire in Europe to take real action to support human rights in Egypt especially given the war in Ukraine, the EU's focus on economic stability in the Southern Neighbourhood and securing new energy sources. It is thus unsurprising that during her visit to Cairo in June 2022, the President of the European Commission expressed the will to 'broaden and intensify' the 'very good co-operation we do have already' with Egypt<sup>(39)</sup>.

## THE EU: NO LONGER THE ONLY GAME IN TOWN

The EU is in a difficult position, given that countries such as China and Russia are deepening their engagement with Egypt and are unconcerned about issues of human rights

and the rule of law. Both countries are increasingly seen as attractive partners in Egypt and the MENA region in general, given their prioritisation of economic and security ties over values-based diplomacy. Overall, Egypt has been moving towards diversifying its external relations beyond the West. Growing US-China rivalry, perceptions of the unreliability of Western partners, the Russia-Ukraine War, and overall increased multipolarity in the international system have meant that Egypt and other states in North Africa will continue to deepen their engagement with China and Russia.

### Egypt has been moving towards diversifying its external relations beyond the West.

After Egypt signed a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) with China, President Sisi and President Xi exchanged several state visits as both countries ramped up their cooperation in several fields, including defence, trade and technology, as well as incorporating the Suez Canal Zone as part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The partnership has become increasingly important for both sides, and Sino-Egyptian relations have grown to unprecedented levels under President Sisi. Last year alone, the volume of trade between both countries increased from USD 11.9 billion to USD 12.7 billion, a jump of 9.8 %<sup>(40)</sup>. Most Chinese investments in Egypt are concentrated in the Suez Canal Economic Zone, comprised of six ports and four industrial estates. China is the Suez Canal's biggest user and the waterway is the shortest route between Asia and

(36) Schaer, C., 'UN asked to monitor Egypt human rights', *Deutsche Welle*, 3 February 2022 (<https://www.dw.com/en/un-asked-to-monitor-egypt-human-rights/a-60649827>); 'EU lawmakers urge UN to monitor Egypt human rights', *Middle East Monitor*, 4 February 2022 (<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20220204-eu-lawmakers-urge-un-to-monitor-egypt-human-rights/>).

(37) European Parliament, 'European Parliament resolution of 24 November 2022 on the human rights situation in Egypt', Resolution 2022/2962 (RSP) ([https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0426\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0426_EN.html)); The World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), 'New European Parliament resolution calls for strong measures to address human rights crisis in Egypt', 24 November 2022 (<https://www.omct.org/en/resources/statements/new-european-parliament-resolution-calls-for-strong-measures-to-address-human-rights-crisis-in-egypt>).

(38) Media Center of the State Information Service, 'Egyptian parliament categorically rejects European Parliament's resolution on human rights situation in Egypt', 26 November 2022 (<https://www.sis.gov.eg/Story/172962/Egyptian-parl%27t-categorically-rejects-European-Parliament%27s-resolution-on-human-rights-situation-in-Egypt?lang=en-us>).

(39) European Commission, 'President von der Leyen in Egypt', YouTube, 15 June 2022 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZbQiyksd8gg>).

(40) 'Volume of trade exchange between Egypt and China increases to 12.7 billion in first 9 months of 2022: CAPMAS', *Egypt Daily News*, 10 December 2022 (<https://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2022/12/10/volume-of-trade-exchange-between-egypt-and-china-increases-to-12-7bn-in-first-9-months-of-2022-capmas/>).

Europe, Beijing's biggest market<sup>(41)</sup>. Defence and security ties have also grown significantly, with both militaries undertaking joint military exercises in the Mediterranean<sup>(42)</sup>.

In addition to China, Egypt has also been stepping up its engagement with Russia. Given their intelligence background and shared suspicion of Islamists, Sisi and Putin hit it off from their first meeting, and the Russian president enthusiastically endorsed Sisi in the lead-up to the 2014 election<sup>(43)</sup>. Since then, Egypt–Russia ties have intensified in several strategic areas. When comparing the 2013–2017 period and the 2018–2022 period, Russia's arms exports to Egypt increased by 44 %, making it Russia's fourth most important market after India, China and Algeria<sup>(44)</sup>. Russia is also building Egypt's first nuclear plant, described by Rosatom, Russia's atomic energy giant, as the 'largest project of Russian–Egyptian cooperation' since the 1950s<sup>(45)</sup>.

Egypt's growing ties to China and Russia mean increased economic competition with European manufacturers and companies, including in defence contracts where US and European firms historically had an advantage. Second, it means Egypt's continued 'non-alignment' *vis-à-vis* the Ukraine war, as well as any potential conflict between China and Taiwan. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, it means an overall weakening of European leverage in Egypt<sup>(46)</sup>.

## CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

Given the dynamics of great power competition in the MENA region and Egypt's domestic context, it is unsurprising that relations with Europe are back in familiar territory: a focus on authoritarian stability and a highly transactional relationship, but this is not sustainable or adequate in the long term.

Over the next few years, Egypt, like Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco, will face the dual challenges of rising inflation and increasing food prices, which may lead to domestic instability as anger against governments grows. The combined impact of Covid-19 and the Russia–Ukraine war continue to batter Egypt's economy, which relies on wheat imported from both countries<sup>(47)</sup>. Before Covid and the war in Ukraine, the Egyptian economy was growing, but much of the growth was financed by debt, leading the country to have one of the highest debt-to-GDP ratios in the world<sup>(48)</sup>. The high debt burden will put further pressure on the Egyptian economy amidst demographic challenges and growing unemployment.

To that end, Europe's top priority should be putting Egypt's economy on a path to long-term sustainability. Further investments in technology, innovation and education are much needed to support job creation

(41) 'China buckles in its belt and road ambitions with Suez investments', SCMP, 1 January 2022 (<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3161705/china-buckles-its-belt-and-road-ambitions-suez-investments>).

(42) 'Egypt, China naval forces carry out joint military drills off Egypt's Mediterranean', Ahram Online, 21 August 2019 (<https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/344171/Egypt/Politics-/Egypt,-China-naval-forces-carry-out-joint-military.aspx>).

(43) 'Vladimir Putin pre-empts presidency bid by Egypt's military chief', *The Guardian*, 13 February 2014 (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/13/vladimir-putin-backs-sisi-military-president-egypt-russia>).

(44) 'Infographic; Which countries buy the most Russian weapons?', Al Jazeera, 9 March 2022 (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/9/infographic-which-countries-buy-the-most-russian-weapons>).

(45) 'Russian firm builds Egypt's first nuclear plant', DW, 21 July 2022 (<https://www.dw.com/en/russian-company-starts-building-egypts-first-nuclear-plant/a-62559065>).

(46) Ghafar, A.A., 'Mapping European leverage in the MENA region – Egypt', ECFR, December 2019 ([https://ecfr.eu/special/mapping\\_eu\\_leverage\\_mena/egypt](https://ecfr.eu/special/mapping_eu_leverage_mena/egypt)).

(47) United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), Foreign Agricultural Service, 'Egypt: Decline in Ukraine wheat imports drives Egypt to diversify its suppliers', 22 June 2022 (<https://www.fas.usda.gov/data/egypt-decline-ukraine-wheat-imports-drives-egypt-diversify-its-suppliers>).

(48) 'Egypt sees budget deficit narrowing to 5.6% of GDP this year', Reuters, 29 August 2022 (<https://www.reuters.com/markets/europe/egypt-finmin-sees-budget-deficit-narrowing-56-gdp-fy-202223-asharq-tv-2022-08-29/>).

and help address the challenge of youth unemployment. Secondly, Europe could support Egypt's ambitions to become a regional energy hub, which will contribute to Egypt's development and enhance regional cooperation and stability. Thirdly, Europe could increase its support for Egypt's efforts to fight climate change, including investments in renewable energy, transport, and water and food security projects <sup>(49)</sup>. These will contribute to the country's long-term stability and be good for European businesses and industries operating in those sectors.

Finally, as all this cooperation grows and interests are prioritised, Europe should not entirely neglect its values. While it may be easy for Europe to succumb to the allure of authoritarian stability, many of the conditions that led to the eruption of the Arab uprising in 2011 continue to exist. It is not unreasonable to expect another wave of protests and instability which may lead to a migration crisis of huge proportions. While in the current context, this would clearly prove challenging, Europe, despite competition with Russia and China, should not completely neglect support for human rights, freedom of expression and the rule of law as key components of Egypt's long-term stability.

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<sup>(49)</sup> European Investment Bank (EIB), 'COP27: EIB announces new support for Egypt's green transition' 16 November 2022 (<https://www.eib.org/en/press/news/cop27-eib-announces-new-support-for-egypt-s-own-green-transition>).

## CHAPTER 3

# THE EU AND LIBYA

## The chaos conundrum

by  
**TAREK MEGERISI**

### INTRODUCTION

Since Libya's 2011 revolution, Europe has been deeply entwined in events and developments in the country. While the EU has invested considerable time and capital in stabilisation projects, its Member States have often helped drive the dynamics that have fuelled the country's destabilisation. This paradoxical situation has undermined European abilities to influence Libya's transition or secure European interests beyond the immediate term. Instead, the EU has played a part in Libya's disintegration and the proliferation of malicious foreign actors, two dynamics which have catalysed crises across the Sahel, North Africa and the eastern Mediterranean. Libya's capacity to foment chaos is now all too familiar to Europeans. Nevertheless, since Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Libya has dropped off Brussels' list of priorities along with other intractable foreign policy problems. This has been partially due to a belief that Libya no longer represented a significant or imminent threat – after all the war had ended in 2020, a political *status quo* of sorts had been established, and the UN,

despite its lack of success, continued to push for a solution.

However, ignoring Libya at a time of relative calm, and when there is a credible opportunity to advance positive change, could be an oversight that Europe may eventually come to regret. Given the geopolitical dynamics which interconnect Libya and Ukraine through the Wagner Group, as well as Libya's role in other areas of concern to Europe writ large – ranging from migrants to the Sahel and the eastern Mediterranean gasfields – restoring stability in Libya would yield both immediate and long-term dividends. The aspirations of Libyan citizens have been made clear many times: they would like to bring about political change through the ballot box, and have already settled upon a long list of priorities<sup>(1)</sup> to be addressed by a future national government. Having a legitimate government, with a clear mandate, which rules over the entire country is also a prerequisite for solving many of Libya's protracted problems. Helping Libyans achieve that political change, as part of an on-going democratising process which crucially continues after election day, is a key step towards Libya's stability and something that the

(1) United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), 'The Libyan National Conference Process Final Report', November 2018 (<https://unsmil.unmissions.org/libyan-national-conference-process-final-report>).

EU and its Member States are well placed to facilitate.

Getting Libya to elections, let alone elections that would actually bring some measure of stability to the country, is easier said than done. Europeans will need to grapple with two key dynamics when addressing the current fragile situation in Libya: the way in which international actors' continuing zero-sum contest for influence over Libya is playing out as a 'Great Game redux' within the country, and how this has altered the machinations of Libya's political elite and deepened their intransigence. These two factors are deeply symbiotic as foreign states push hard to empower Libyan proxies, exploit these proxies for their own ends, and manufacture a zero-sum environment to try and undermine rival nations. For their part, Libyan politicians are keenly aware of how important international support is for their own ambitions. So, they in turn actively manipulate external powers to ensure their continued support. In many cases Libyan politicians have successfully created a 'sunk cost fallacy' that maintains a line of foreign support which is rationally obsolete. This underscores what has become a mutually damaging interdependence between the venal policies of both Libya's 'elite' and their international partners.

## Unfortunately for Europe, what happens in Libya doesn't stay in Libya.

This chapter highlights why Libya remains a high priority for Europe by demonstrating how geopolitical dynamics in the country echo through other crises from Ukraine to the Sahel. It further explores how initiatives undertaken by the EU and its Member States might bolster the chances of elections as the solution to Libya's metastasising crisis while co-opting foreign rivals. Given Libya's importance as a departure point for migrants heading for Europe, the chapter concludes by analysing how Europe's migration policy in Libya is faltering in the face of a very challenging and fluid situation and how it might be reformed within the framework of a new and more constructive EU policy towards Libya.

## GEOPOLITICAL GAMES

Libya's revolution, and subsequent transition, has always been a deeply geopolitical affair. Libya's geostrategic location at the heart of the Mediterranean and as a bridge to sub-Saharan Africa, alongside its vast hydrocarbon resources, are invaluable assets. Neighbouring powers sought to exploit Libya's fragility while it transitioned from Muammar Qaddafi's 42 years of idiosyncratic one-man rule to secure influence over the country's future leadership. Europeans also engaged in this opportunism, to push back migrants, refugees and jihadists, but also to benefit from Libya's oil wealth and resources. This fight among rivals vying for spoils and influence reduced Libya to a battleground, where states not only competed for influence and control over the country but also to exclude their rivals. This competition indelibly altered the course of Libya's transition. It also aggravated other areas of competition between these rivals, while external powers meddling in the country experimented with new tools and tactics that would subsequently be applied in their interventions elsewhere. Today, the geopolitical dimensions of Libya's



President of the European Council Charles Michel and Libyan Minister of Foreign Affairs Najla Mangoush during press statements in Tripoli on 04 April 2021.



transition present unique challenges. If any political process for Libya is to advance, then it will require a critical mass of states on board. If it is to lead to enduring stability, then it will have to prioritise Libyan aspirations over international ones.

Unfortunately for Europe, what happens in Libya doesn't stay in Libya. Instead, the ills besetting the country are often exported in unexpected and convolutedly problematic ways. The best example of this is the way in which EU Member States wilfully ignored Libya's growing instability in the years leading to the war, and during it, in the hopes of securing their own strategic interests amidst the chaos. However in so doing they inadvertently enabled Russia and Türkiye's intervention and the subsequent spillover of Libya's conflict to the eastern Mediterranean and Sahel crises. Türkiye's involvement in Libya came at the behest of the Libyan government<sup>(2)</sup>, and in the face of European unwillingness to do anything to confront military strongman Khalifa Haftar's violation of the global rules-based order<sup>(3)</sup>. Ankara exploited Libya's weakness and desperation by offering military support in exchange for a deal delineating maritime

boundaries, to the dismay and outrage of Europe. Three years on, Türkiye continues to build on this agreement to undermine Greek plans to rebalance the region amid contesting claims over eastern Mediterranean energy reserves, while Greco-Egyptian challenges to Turkish-Libyan claims to waters between Crete and Cyrenaica could now re-ignite this crisis<sup>(4)</sup>. Similarly, Haftar's coalition pleaded for Russia's intervention to help his troops conquer Tripoli after their assault on Libya's capital failed despite massive support from Haftar's other international backers like the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Egypt<sup>(5)</sup>. Russia's Wagner Group could not win the war, but skilfully exploited the collapse of Haftar's Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF) to render them completely dependent on Wagner for operational capability<sup>(6)</sup>. This allowed Wagner to *de facto* seize Libya's oil installations<sup>(7)</sup> and numerous military bases<sup>(8)</sup>, and forcibly divide Libya by constructing a defensive line west of Sirte<sup>(9)</sup>. So, as tensions rose with Europe, Moscow engineered embargoes of Libyan oil<sup>(10)</sup>, controlling ports on the central Mediterranean and military airbases just a few hundred kilometres from NATO's Sicily HQ<sup>(11)</sup>. Wagner has also used Libya as a launchpad for missions to

- (2) 'Libya makes formal request for Turkish military support – official', Reuters, 26 December 2019 (Libya <https://www.reuters.com/article/turkey-libya-request/libya-makes-formal-request-for-turkish-military-support-official-idINKBN1YU15P>).
- (3) 'Europe split over how to respond to Haftar assault on Tripoli', *The Guardian*, 11 April 2019 (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/apr/11/europe-divided-over-how-to-respond-to-haftar-assault-on-tripoli-libya>).
- (4) 'Turkey-Libya preliminary deal prompts Greece, Egypt to push back', Reuters, 3 October 2022 (<https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/turkey-libyan-government-agree-preliminary-maritime-energy-deal-2022-10-03/>).
- (5) Rondeaux, C., Imhof, O. and Margolin, J., 'Introduction: Operation Flood of Dignity – Haftar's Tripoli blitzkrieg', *The Abu Dhabi Express*, New America Foundation, 3 November 2021 (<https://www.newamerica.org/future-frontlines/reports/the-abu-dhabi-express/introduction-operation-flood-of-dignityhaftars-tripoli-blitzkrieg/>).
- (6) 'Russia's Wagner mercenaries calls the shots in fight for control of Libya', *The Times*, 27 February 2021 (<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/russian-force-fight-control-libya-tripoli-gqffq9pg0>).
- (7) 'Intel: Russian mercenaries enter key oil field, Libya oil company says', *Al-Monitor*, 26 June 2020 (<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/06/intel-russia-mercenaries-enter-libya-sharara-oilfield-wagner.html>).
- (8) Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), 'Moscow's next front: Russia's expanding military footprint in Libya', 17 June 2020 (<https://www.csis.org/analysis/moscows-next-front-russias-expanding-military-footprint-libya>).
- (9) 'Foreign fighters were meant to leave Libya this week. A huge trench being dug by Russian-backed mercenaries indicates they plan to stay', CNN, 22 January 2021 (<https://edition.cnn.com/2021/01/22/africa/libya-trench-russia-intl/index.html>).
- (10) Unlacke, R., 'Libya could be Putin's Trump card', *Foreign Policy*, 8 July 2022 (<https://www.strategicstudyindia.com/2022/07/libya-could-be-putins-trump-card.html>).
- (11) This is in reference to Russian operational control over Ghardabiya airbase in Sirte, and influence over Sirte port given their control over the city of Sirte.

countries like Mali and Burkina Faso<sup>(12)</sup>, where they seek to displace Europe's influence<sup>(13)</sup>. Moreover, Russia's experience in Libya facilitated the Wagner Group's expanded footprint in Africa and then in Ukraine, while Türkiye's testing of drone warfare in Libya evolved in future campaigns in Azerbaijan, Ethiopia and northern Syria<sup>(14)</sup>.

Today, new Libyan-international consortiums obstruct Libya's reunification and Libyan aspirations to hold elections. Three rival power centres exist around Türkiye and Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dabaiba: Russia and Haftar's LAAF, and Egypt and the speaker of Libya's parliament Aguileh Saleh. All three helped scupper the 2021 UN electoral process<sup>(15)</sup> and continue competing to dominate Libya, while their international backers accrue benefits.

Dabaiba was appointed on 5 February 2021 through a UN process to form a Government of National Unity (GNU) to prepare for elections in ten months' time and in return pledged not to run for election. Instead of organising elections he worked to establish his government's authority and embarked on a major public spending campaign. He later reneged on his pledge and leveraged government resources to support his candidature for the presidency,

seriously undermining the credibility of the elections. Despite allegations of significant corruption<sup>(16)</sup> as well as overstaying his mandate and failing to bring stability to the country, his close ties with Türkiye have cushioned him from serious internal challenges to his leadership as well as from challenges emanating from abroad. Ankara has signed international agreements<sup>(17)</sup>, developed burgeoning business interests in the country<sup>(18)</sup>, and conducts limited security sector reform (SSR)<sup>(19)</sup> through the GNU, which has helped to solidify the position of what should have been a temporary government with a mandate restricted to facilitating elections.

Russia, meanwhile, provided Haftar with the military support needed to maintain the *de facto* partition of Libya, seize control of key ministries in Libya's government, and retain illicit income streams<sup>(20)</sup>. Since 2021 Haftar has organised a wave of blockades of oil production sites and terminals to extort the government and prevented the GNU administratively unifying Libya or even operating in the country's east<sup>(21)</sup> and south. During the elections Haftar used the LAAF to intimidate candidates and judges<sup>(22)</sup> overseeing the vote while threatening to violently dispute the results. Despite having been instrumental in the

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- (12) Badi, E., 'To counter the Wagner Group's presence in Africa, the US will need to prioritize stabilizing Libya', Atlantic Council 28 February 2023 (<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/to-counter-the-wagner-groups-presence-in-africa-the-us-will-need-to-prioritize-stabilizing-libya/>).
  - (13) 'How Moscow chased France out of Africa', *Politico*, 23 February 2023 (<https://www.politico.eu/article/france-africa-russia-emmanuel-macron-vladimir-putin-mali-central-african-republic-burkina-faso/>).
  - (14) Borsari, F., 'Turkey's drone diplomacy: Lessons for Europe', ECFR, 31 January 2022 (<https://ecfr.eu/article/turkeys-drone-diplomacy-lessons-for-europe/#:~:text=The%20growth%20of%20Turkish%20drone,intelligence%20and%20neutralise%20enemy%20defences.>
  - (15) Harchaoui, J., 'Libya's electoral Impasse', Noria Research, November 2022 (<https://noria-research.com/libyas-electoral-impasse/>).
  - (16) Sbouai, S. and Skrdlik, J., 'Libyan PM implicated in a conflict of interest', OCCRP, 13 March 2023 (<https://www.occrp.org/en/daily/17412-libyan-pm-implicated-in-a-conflict-of-interest>).
  - (17) 'Libya and Turkey sign multi-sector MoU, prepare for launch of strategic projects', *Libya Herald*, 4 October 2022 (<https://libyaherald.com/2022/10/libya-and-turkey-sign-multi-sector-mou-prepare-for-launch-of-strategic-projects/>).
  - (18) 'Turkey's exports to Libya grow with new interim govt in Tripoli', *Daily Sabah*, 15 June 2021 (<https://www.dailysabah.com/business/economy/turkeys-exports-to-libya-grow-with-new-interim-govt-in-tripoli>).
  - (19) Badi, E., 'To advance its own interests, Turkey should now help stabilize Libya', *War on the Rocks*, 24 May 2021 (<https://warontherocks.com/2021/05/to-advance-its-own-interests-turkey-should-now-help-stabilize-libya/>).
  - (20) 'Haftar and Assad accused of "joint drug smuggling operations"', *Middle East Monitor*, 6 May 2020 (<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200506-haftar-and-assad-accused-of-joint-drug-smuggling-operations/>).
  - (21) 'Libya: Armed Haftar supporters prevent PM's first meeting in east', *Al Jazeera*, 26 April 2021 (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/26/haftar-supporters-prevent-the-first-meeting-of-the-dbeibah-govt>).
  - (22) *Middle East Monitor*, MEMO, 'UN Mission in Libya condemns attack on Sebha court', 26 November 2021 (<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20211126-un-mission-in-libya-condemns-attack-on-sebha-court/>).

failure of the elections, he has since used their failure to lobby across Libya for a renewed war on Tripoli<sup>(23)</sup>, although Russia has prevented this from materialising.

Finally, Egypt has exploited what it claims to be Libya's sole source of legislative and political legitimacy – despite the parliament having lost popular legitimacy long ago<sup>(24)</sup> and surviving on dubious legal grounds – to manipulate Libya's electoral process to its own advantage. Cairo pushed hard for presidential elections Libyans had not requested and enabled Aguileh Saleh to unilaterally draft the legal and constitutional framework for elections through heavy international lobbying. Saleh's law aimed to postpone parliamentary elections and create an essentially all-powerful president. The law was so contested and legally dubious that it undermined the entire electoral process. Egypt has since continued the strategy of protecting their proxy while attempting to seize the executive by co-opting the UN mediation process, relocating it to Cairo<sup>(25)</sup>, and refocusing it on replacing the GNU.

## THE POLITICS OF CHANGE

Libyans have repeatedly expressed a clear desire to move beyond their current political class and institutional setup, to unify politically and militarily, and finalise a new constitution to create a cohesive and stable political system,

via consultation with the UN and as demonstrated by their enthusiasm for elections and protests against the ruling elite. Elections are a necessary first step to attaining these goals and creating a Libyan authority with the legitimacy to expel foreign forces and secure the country's borders. It is therefore manifestly in Europe's interest that such elections are held.

Since the failure of the 2021 electoral roadmap, the three centres of power have continued to exert significant influence. The clearest sign of this is how international actors are increasingly engaging with these power centres as if the current political *status quo* is here to stay, as attested by the signing of major business contracts<sup>(26)</sup> or attempts to covertly broker between the different groups<sup>(27)</sup>. This is dangerous to hopes of Libyan stability and by extension regional stability, as a settlement of the current *status quo* involves formalising the divided political structure which fosters state failure, social cleavages, significant corruption and ultimately war – as has repeatedly been witnessed since 2014. Therefore, if the UN's push towards elections fails, not only will Libya relapse into a chaotic and disastrous system, but Libyans will lose faith in the broader international community and the notion of democracy as a means to help them resolve their political problems.

The UN Special Representative to the Secretary General (SRSG) for Libya, Abdoulaye Bathily, announced a new electoral roadmap of sorts to the UN Security Council on 27 February 2023<sup>(28)</sup>. The idea, as put to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), was to create a broad

(23) 'Libya: Haftar calls for uprising, Dbeibeh says reconciliation should not be politicized', *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 19 October 2022 (<https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/3939481/libya-haftar-calls-uprising-dbeibeh-says-reconciliation-should-not-be-politicized>).

(24) Megerisi, T., 'Never let a good crisis go to waste: How Europe can respond to Libya's riots', *ECFR*, 6 July 2022 (<https://ecfr.eu/article/never-let-a-good-crisis-go-to-waste-how-europe-can-respond-to-libyas-riots/>).

(25) 'UN-brokered talks on Libya elections resume in Cairo', *AP*, 12 June 2022 (<https://apnews.com/article/politics-africa-libya-cairo-north-003e7e05f585640be6ba199e92ea7de9>).

(26) 'Italy's Eni signs \$8 billion Libya gas deal as PM Meloni visits Tripoli', *EuroNews*, 29 January 2023 (<https://www.euronews.com/2023/01/29/libya-italy>).

(27) 'Internationally-sponsored deal uniting Dbaiba, Haftars has Libyan oil exports flowing again but raises controversy', *Mada Masr*, 18 July 2022 (<https://www.madamasr.com/en/2022/07/18/news/u/internationally-sponsored-deal-uniting-dbaiba-haftars-has-libyan-oil-exports-flowing-again-but-raises-controversy/>).

(28) 'Libya: Bathily proposes election support body, as public frustration mounts', *UN News*, 27 February 2023 (<https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/02/1133952>).

inclusive electoral steering panel that could help overcome the legal and political obstacles towards holding elections by: enacting an electoral law and establishing a limited constitutional basis for elections (remembering that Libya still has no permanent constitution); creating a code of conduct for electoral candidates; and putting in place electoral security provisions. This plan was light on implementational detail, and yet generated much anxiety among those familiar with Libya due to its similarities to the former UN plan with no discernible sign that it had learned lessons from the failure of 2021. To make matters worse, in a press conference in Tripoli on 11 March the SRSG appeared to again change his plan to instead allow Libya's two parliaments more time to finalise the legal requirements for elections<sup>(29)</sup>. This appears to at least partially have been the result of Egyptian pressure, given Cairo's opposition to Bathily's original plan and its control over this intra-parliamentary track. This represents a considerable blow to Libyan hopes of progress given that Libya's two parliaments have been using the pretext of talks to stall for time and entrench their own power since 2014.

It is clear that if the UN is to shepherd Libya towards elections they will need active assistance from involved states, something the EU and key Member States are well placed to provide given their geographical and historical proximity, and their mutual interest in Libyan elections. While the EU's administrative machinery and expertise can help support the technical and logistical requirements of elections, Member States are well placed to add experience to the UN mission via the secondment of staff. Supporting the UN also means protecting the independence of the UN mission and using European diplomacy to resolve some of the issues which have caused

previous political and electoral processes to fail in Libya.

For example, manipulation of the electoral process by Libya's self-serving political class should be expected, given that they have routinely spoiled and derailed all political processes since 2015. Their continuing impunity has led to their becoming even more entrenched in their corrupt and obstructionist behaviour. As with other conflicts, Europe should be leading international efforts to hold Libyan actors accountable for their war crimes, human rights abuses, financial corruption and violations of UN Security Council resolutions. Through Operation IRINI in the Mediterranean the EU has also accumulated considerable evidence which could provide useful leverage over key actors. While Member States should be facilitating universal jurisdiction trials against war criminals and other perpetrators of human rights abuses, they should also be using the threat of EU travel bans and asset freezes to change the calculations of Libya's elite and incentivise them to take part in, rather than seek to derail, Libyan elections.

Another key lesson of 2021 is the need to protect the integrity of the electoral process from those willing to sacrifice electoral standards in the interests of expediency or from the machinations of interventionist states who want to manipulate Libya's elections for their own ends. Europeans unwittingly facilitated this last time, due to not having their own overarching strategy for Libya regulat-

ing the conduct of elections and ensuring fair, inclusive and transparent electoral processes and how elections fit into a broader stabilisation policy. This meant that both the Member States and the EU as a whole were unable to proactively manage and pressure spoilers, but were instead highly reactive and thus

**I t is clear that if the UN is to shepherd Libya towards elections they will need active assistance from involved states.**

(29) Abdullah, K., 'Analysis: Libya and the Western Powers', *Ahram Online*, 26 March 2023 (<https://english.ahram.org.eg/News/492153.aspx>).

manipulable. From the start of the roadmap, Europeans constantly compromised electoral integrity for the sake of expediency and this eventually made them complicit in the collapse of the electoral process. Days after Dabaiba took office European diplomats were fretfully considering how to facilitate Dabaiba's violation of his pledge to induce him to support the elections, when they had previously lauded the UN's pledge system. Similarly, the Europeans excused Saleh for bypassing due parliamentary process to produce a highly controversial legal and constitutional basis for Libya's seminal elections and went along with Egyptian demands to allow Saleh to lead the process. Enabling such behaviour undermined electoral integrity and has subsequently incentivised worsening behaviour, including Saleh almost sparking a new war as he once again violated all due process to try and appoint another prime minister – in a move again encouraged and supported by Egypt. At each step, Europeans thought that they were being supportive, highlighting their poor awareness of the ramifications of EU decision-making and the overall lack of an overarching European strategy for Libya, and allowing rivals to co-opt European tools and efforts with ease.

## MIRED IN MIGRATION

Controlling migration from Libya has been a core interest and preoccupation for Europe since the 2015 migration crisis. Europe's collective policy has been to effectively externalise the problem by containing refugees and migrants in Libya. In 2017 the then Italian

Interior Minister Marco Minniti devised a plan to financially incentivise Libyan militias to detain rather than smuggle refugees and migrants across the Mediterranean<sup>(30)</sup>. Meanwhile the EU invested in programmes aimed at improving detention conditions in Libya while upgrading Libya's border forces and coastguard. This policy led to a fall in migrant crossings but to an increased mortality rate among migrants attempting the crossing to Europe<sup>(31)</sup>. Moreover, collusion between smugglers and the Libyan coastguard<sup>(32)</sup> has trapped refugees and migrants in a vicious loop of extortion whereby they pay for crossings only to be returned to their captors after being abandoned at sea. Detention centres supported by EU funds are also rife with torture, violent physical and sexual abuse, and general mistreatment on a horrific scale. So, European migrant policy has only made it more dangerous for migrants and refugees to travel across Libya and the Mediterranean sea<sup>(33)</sup>. Moreover, Europe's reputation has been damaged through accusations of complicity in migrant abuse and allegations of *refoulement* for helping return migrants and refugees to Libya.

Migrant flows are again increasing, now departing from eastern Libya<sup>(34)</sup> rather than the previous western hotspots. This all demonstrates that Europe's counter-migration policy was a short-term patch applied to a long-term structural issue. It also reveals various political flaws in this heavily securitised policy. Externalisation and policy decisions like removing Search and Rescue (SAR) activities from Operation IRINI's mandate when it replaced Operation *Sophia* effectively ceded any remaining European control over migration to the Libyan authorities. In turn Libyan

(30) 'Marco Minniti: The man who cut the migrant flow to Italy', BBC News, 20 September 2018 (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-45575763>).

(31) Fine, S. and Megerisi, T., 'The Unacknowledged costs of the EU's migration policy in Libya', ECFR, 25 July 2019 ([https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_unacknowledged\\_costs\\_of\\_the\\_eu\\_migration\\_policy\\_in\\_libya/](https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_unacknowledged_costs_of_the_eu_migration_policy_in_libya/)).

(32) Amnesty International, 'Libya's dark web of collusion: Abuses against Europe-bound refugees and migrants', 11 December 2017 (<https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde19/7561/2017/en/>).

(33) Amnesty International, 'Libya/EU conditions remain "hellish" as EU marks 5 years of cooperation agreements', 31 January 2022 (<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/01/libya-eu-conditions-remain-hellish-as-eu-marks-5-years-of-cooperation-agreements/>).

(34) 'A reactivated migration route from eastern Libya opens the Mediterranean back up', *Le Monde*, 25 November 2022 ([https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2022/11/25/a-reactivated-migration-route-from-eastern-libya-opens-the-mediterranean-back-up\\_6005668\\_4.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2022/11/25/a-reactivated-migration-route-from-eastern-libya-opens-the-mediterranean-back-up_6005668_4.html)).

militias and authorities cunningly weaponise migration to extract continuous concessions from Europeans. The EU Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM) mandate highlights the operational shortcomings of this securitised approach. Libya's dysfunctional government bureaucracy meant that EUBAM's securitised policy drove engagement with non-state armed groups, thereby only further weakening the government and enhancing the power of militias<sup>(35)</sup>. The EU's security focus curtailed options for better managing migration that could be achieved by helping to stabilise Libya and directing European efforts and finances towards resolving governance issues. Arguably a continued focus on conflict management and institution building, as had existed prior to 2015, could have helped develop security institutions, providing greater security for Libyan and migrant communities at a local level and undermining people-smuggling gangs and networks. It could also have created a more hospitable environment for migrants in Libya (many of whom previously sought to stay and work in the country) and development projects that would have benefited Libyans and migrants alike. This could ultimately have been a more effective path to securing borders, protecting migrant communities, assuaging Libyan concerns about border security and smuggling and developing a genuine partner to help manage migration and refugee flows over the long term.

## CONCLUSION: A NEW EUROPEAN APPROACH

The past decade has amply and repeatedly demonstrated the perils of allowing Libya to languish in instability. While Brussels is understandably currently preoccupied with

defending Europe's eastern neighbourhood from Russia's onslaught, if it neglects its southern neighbourhood it will lose a valuable opportunity to prevent crises from escalating and to secure key interests like migration, energy and security. The first step towards any of these goals is to guide Libya to elections. Libyan citizens share an interest with Europe in overcoming the resistance of Libyan elites and their international backers to holding transformative elections to create a new, unifying and legitimate Libyan government.

As recent history has shown, the various political machinations at play in Libya driven by myriad foreign and domestic actors means Europe must have a collective, clear strategy if it is to have more impact. The EU has a natural role to play here in getting Member States to agree upon a strategy, identify support programmes for that strategy, and then manage its implementation. Having such a long-term strategy would also provide a platform for Europe to bring other key actors such as the United States or Türkiye onboard and thereby build the critical mass of states needed to protect UN operations and Libya's election process. Now is an opportune moment for such an initiative, given renewed US interest in Libya in response to the Wagner Group's presence there, and the recognition by Türkiye and other key states that they need a stable Libya to fully realise their economic ambitions.

This cohesive strategy should involve both elections themselves, as well as institutional planning that can continue after elections to carry progressive momentum and provide post-election day visibility. The strategy should encourage the UN to advance an electoral plan that takes the task of crafting the election's legal basis out of the hands of Libya's political elite to avoid a repeat of the last two years where politicians either sought to undermine or deliberately stall the process to advance their own narrow interests. This would allow the UN to manage a smoother,

(35) Toaldo, M., 'Libya: Security, economic development and political reform', Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES), February 2016 ([https://brussels.fes.de/fileadmin/public/editorfiles/events/Maerz\\_2016/FES\\_LSE\\_Libya\\_security\\_economic\\_development\\_and\\_political\\_reform\\_Toaldo\\_2016\\_02\\_23.pdf](https://brussels.fes.de/fileadmin/public/editorfiles/events/Maerz_2016/FES_LSE_Libya_security_economic_development_and_political_reform_Toaldo_2016_02_23.pdf)).



more efficient, fair and transparent electoral process while Europeans provide structural assistance to the UN and leverage their collective diplomatic weight alongside allies to pressure Libya's political class into signing the proposed UN code of conduct. This contains provisions for all to run in elections in exchange for not spoiling the process, stepping down from their current positions, and not using government or military resources to serve their campaigns. This could also be enhanced by a mutually agreed sliding scale of accountability measures for violating the process. This would help ensure the regulated involvement of the political class with safeguards to prevent electoral integrity. Security, political or economic electoral support mechanisms with stabilising potential that secure other interests could be established through and beyond the elections to support vital issues like SSR, national reconciliation or maintaining and upgrading energy infrastructure.

Having a clear roadmap, involving milestones, processes, shared strategic objectives and a process to effectively corral Libya's political elite then makes it easier to devise engagement strategies for intervening states and to bring in key allies like the United States. This should be accomplished while bearing in mind that each state is intervening within a different context, has different interests and will require different strategies.

Egypt will be anxious about losing control over the electoral track, and as Libya's neighbour maintains valid interests in the country's fortunes despite Cairo's surfeit of ambition in recent years. The Europeans can assuage Egyptian anxieties through having a cohesive plan that showcases stabilising measures extending beyond the elections, and facilitating Egyptian involvement in key processes like the security track.

Türkiye's military entrenchment in western Libya necessitates its co-optation into any strategy. Unlike Egypt, Ankara has not spoiled

elections but is wary of destabilisation. A credible electoral plan with Turkish involvement (for example in efforts to persuade Dabaiba to accept the electoral pact and implementing security mechanisms to ensure free and fair elections) will help get Türkiye on board. Over

## **O**ver the long term, Europeans can help build common cause with Türkiye in Libya.

the long term, Europeans can help build common cause with Türkiye in Libya, by attempting to gain Turkish military support for joint NATO activities in exchange for a more accommodating position towards their military presence in Libya, which is a useful carrot given Türkiye's fear of isolation. Moreover, this could help improve and broaden SSR in Lib-

ya and hedge against more malicious Russian activities.

Finally, Europeans must work alongside Washington to pressure Marshal Haftar to decouple from Russia. This will be difficult given his operational reliance on Wagner, and perhaps necessitates financial coercive measures as well as inducements to participate in SSR to create a new national military. Helping the UN process to create an independent force to secure oil installations could also help displace LAAF units infiltrated by Wagner mercenary elements from their current role 'securing' such sites.

Migration from Libya will likely intensify. If Europeans are to successfully address this major issue of concern, they must change the incentive structure within Libya, and seek to exert further control over migration. This necessitates pivoting from externalisation policies to more directly managing migration flows. Given that Libya would absorb large numbers of migrants if its economy was functioning normally in a stable socio-economic context, the EU should foster local economic stabilisation and development initiatives as part of its migration policy. One example of this could be to encourage shared-use development programmes with Libyan communities at key junctures of the migrant trail. The EU's HR/VP, Josep Borrell, should also lobby to restore Search and Rescue activities to the

EU's maritime naval operations especially given that SAR has proven not to create a pull factor. EU assistance to help Member States process claims and create safe processing hubs managed by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) could help streamline the refugee application process and absolve Europe of accusations of *refoulement*. Moreover, accountability mechanisms should be developed in new agreements with Libyan authorities responsible for migrant and refugee welfare like the coastguard and armed groups managing detention centres to ensure humanitarian standards are upheld. Given that migration cannot be stopped, endeavouring to instead regulate and manage flows of migrants and refugees would help Europeans secure better control of entry and assimilation.

European anxieties over Libya stem in large part from concerns about migration and losing control over Europe's borders, and more broadly the situation of political instability and the prospect of geopolitical rivals becoming entrenched so close to European shores. If Europe is to successfully end the chaos in the central Mediterranean it will have to do so through a coordinated, holistic and cohesive policy combining EU and Member State efforts. Given European interest in and diplomatic engagement in Libya, a cohesive European position is capable of turning the tide and providing a platform for other allies like the United States, and partners like Türkiye, to intervene constructively. If instead, Europe's constituent parts continue to pursue their own limited policies, or Libya as a whole is ignored, then Libya will likely continue to sink into the abyss and the resultant chaos will continue to be a source of instability and insecurity for Europe.

## CHAPTER 4

# THE EU AND MOROCCO

## A strategic relationship under strain

by  
INTISSAR FAKIR

In the aftermath of Morocco's devastating earthquake on 8 September, which struck the Al-Haouz region in the High Atlas Mountains, foreign observers were puzzled at what they perceived as the kingdom's reluctance to accept aid from key allies. However there is a straightforward explanation for this apparent reluctance. The condition of the roads connecting the region to the rest of Morocco created immense logistical challenges, making it extremely difficult to access the hardest hit areas and thus hampering rescue and relief efforts undertaken both within and outside of the country. This logistical issue alone may explain why the Moroccan government decided to decline several offers of international aid. Nevertheless, speculation was rife about what other motives or suspicions might explain Morocco's refusal of help. This is one indication of the extent to which Morocco's relations with the EU have become adversarial and fraught with tensions in recent years.

Yet, as an institution, the EU has often lauded its relationship with Morocco as a model for the type of advanced partnerships it seeks to

replicate in its southern neighbourhood. Morocco's Association Agreement with the EU came into force in 2000 and was among the earliest of such agreements concluded by the EU<sup>(1)</sup>. Over the years the relationship has expanded to cover migration, security, trade and more recently the energy transition. But it has also been rocked by a series of disputes, tensions and scandals, and is currently in need of new impetus and revitalisation.

The recent corruption scandal at the European Parliament that implicated several Moroccan nationals, added to spying allegations connected to Moroccan security figures, have exacerbated already existing tensions around the legality of Morocco's fisheries deal with the EU on account of the inclusion of the contested Western Saharan territory in the agreement. This comes on top of the bilateral tensions that marked Moroccan-Spanish relations in the summer of 2021, after Morocco relaxed its border controls with the Spanish enclave of Ceuta, for which Morocco earned condemnation from the EU<sup>(2)</sup>. While the relationship is based on substantial trade ties, close security

(1) Ahipeaud, E. et al, 'EU-North Africa Association Agreements and Trade Integration', Ministère de l'Economie, des Finances, et de la Souveraineté industrielle et numérique, 22 December 2021 (<https://www.tresor.economie.gouv.fr/Articles/2021/12/21/eu-north-africa-association-agreements-and-trade-integration>).

(2) Kassam, A., 'Spain accuses Morocco of "show of disrespect" for EU in migrant row', *The Guardian*, 19 May 2021 (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/may/19/spain-accused-of-summary-deportations-as-thousands-sent-back-to-morocco>).

cooperation and a generally aligned view on shared priorities such as the energy transition and climate change, the tensions that have underscored this partnership exceed the usual ups-and-downs of geopolitical partnerships.

This chapter analyses the EU–Morocco relationship – covering both its strengths and weaknesses – and examines the Moroccan leadership’s approach to the EU in order to gain a clearer understanding of the underlying dynamics at play. The first section analyses the key pillars of the EU–Morocco partnership and argues that while security and migration have been the priority from a political perspective, there is room for growth and for more pragmatic engagement on trade and the economy especially in the sector of renewables. The section makes the point also that while the EU remains Morocco’s largest trading partner, Morocco has sought to diversify its trade relations, with the result that the EU now has to compete with other external players with which the kingdom has forged bilateral ties. The second section explains these two key dynamics. In particular it examines how the more crowded playing field presents a broader dilemma for the EU and the United States, who are both struggling to maintain influence in an increasingly contested North Africa. The chapter concludes with recommendations for policymakers, such as prioritising pragmatic engagement, a clearer institutional position on the Western Sahara issue, and strategic use of the EU’s competitive advantage in an increasingly crowded Maghreb.

**The role Morocco plays in migration cooperation is crucial for Europe.**

## PILLARS OF THE EU-MOROCCO PARTNERSHIP

Migration, security and trade have traditionally ranked among the most important areas of cooperation between Morocco and the EU.

### Migration

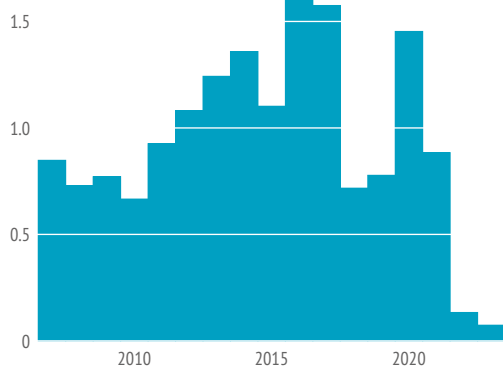
The role Morocco plays in migration cooperation is crucial for Europe, given its position at Europe’s periphery. In this sphere, over the years, the partnership has been structured as follows: the EU (at times directly or else through its Member States) provides funding and technical assistance for border policing. According to EU calculations, Morocco is the Union’s second-largest partner on migration with an estimated €234 million earmarked under the EU Trust Fund for the period 2015–2021 for projects targeting different aspects of migration cooperation. In 2022 Morocco was also granted an additional funding envelope of €150 million to strengthen cooperation on migration under other mechanisms, including the EU Neighbourhood Development and International Cooperation Instrument (ND-

ICI), for 4 years <sup>(3)</sup>. In recent years, Morocco has sought to focus attention on the fact that the country is becoming a destination for migrants as much as it is a point of transit, which necessitates addressing the conditions in which migrants are hosted and ensuring more dignified and humane treatment of migrants or asylum seekers. Some of the funds have also gone to support Morocco’s migration policies – including efforts to identify and offer official status and benefits to migrants currently in the country. These programmes

(3) European Union, ‘EU migration support for Morocco’, February 2023 ([https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-03/EU\\_support\\_migration\\_morocco.pdf](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-03/EU_support_migration_morocco.pdf)).

## EU funding for Morocco

2007–2023, € billion



Data: European Commission, EU Aid Explorer, 2023

still represent a smaller percentage of funding than government-to-government support provided to authorities for policing and control of migration flows<sup>(4)</sup>.

The EU's 'New Pact on Migration and Asylum' focuses on the rights of migrants arriving in the EU but does not extend to those in transition in Morocco and offers few mechanisms to ensure their rights outside of partner country structures, although it does provide 'a single framework for managing migration with partner countries'. This to some extent also shapes Morocco-EU security cooperation, as Morocco can offer the EU key information and intelligence sharing. Some of that intelligence is potentially obtained through surveillance mechanisms that it deploys and that are often unlawful by EU standards. Morocco's ability to gather detailed and actionable information has helped European partners in their fight against domestic extremism<sup>(5)</sup>.

Despite the influx of EU funds, the partnership is often not framed in terms of payment

for services rendered, but rather in terms of cooperation. Formulating it in such terms is somewhat problematic. Firstly, the emphasis on cooperation puts the onus of border control and policing on Morocco and absolves the EU of responsibility *vis-à-vis* the migrants and how they are treated. Secondly, there is little clarity around how support for such cooperation (i.e. payment for services rendered) is generally calculated or identified.

Morocco understands that security and migration are of crucial importance to Europe given the increasing prevalence of right-wing, conservative and anti-migration politics on the continent which often translate into negative attitudes to North African, Arab Muslim and sub-Saharan African migrants. Morocco wants to maximise leverage on the issue given Europe's predominantly securitised approach to migration. Paradoxically, migration, where there is the most potential for political leverage, is also the area with the least room for the relationship to grow. With the current focus on security and given current resources already deployed in terms of border policing, it is unclear how or if Morocco can secure a fundamentally new and more expanded migration framework without compromising its policies and partnerships with African countries.

## Trade and economic cooperation

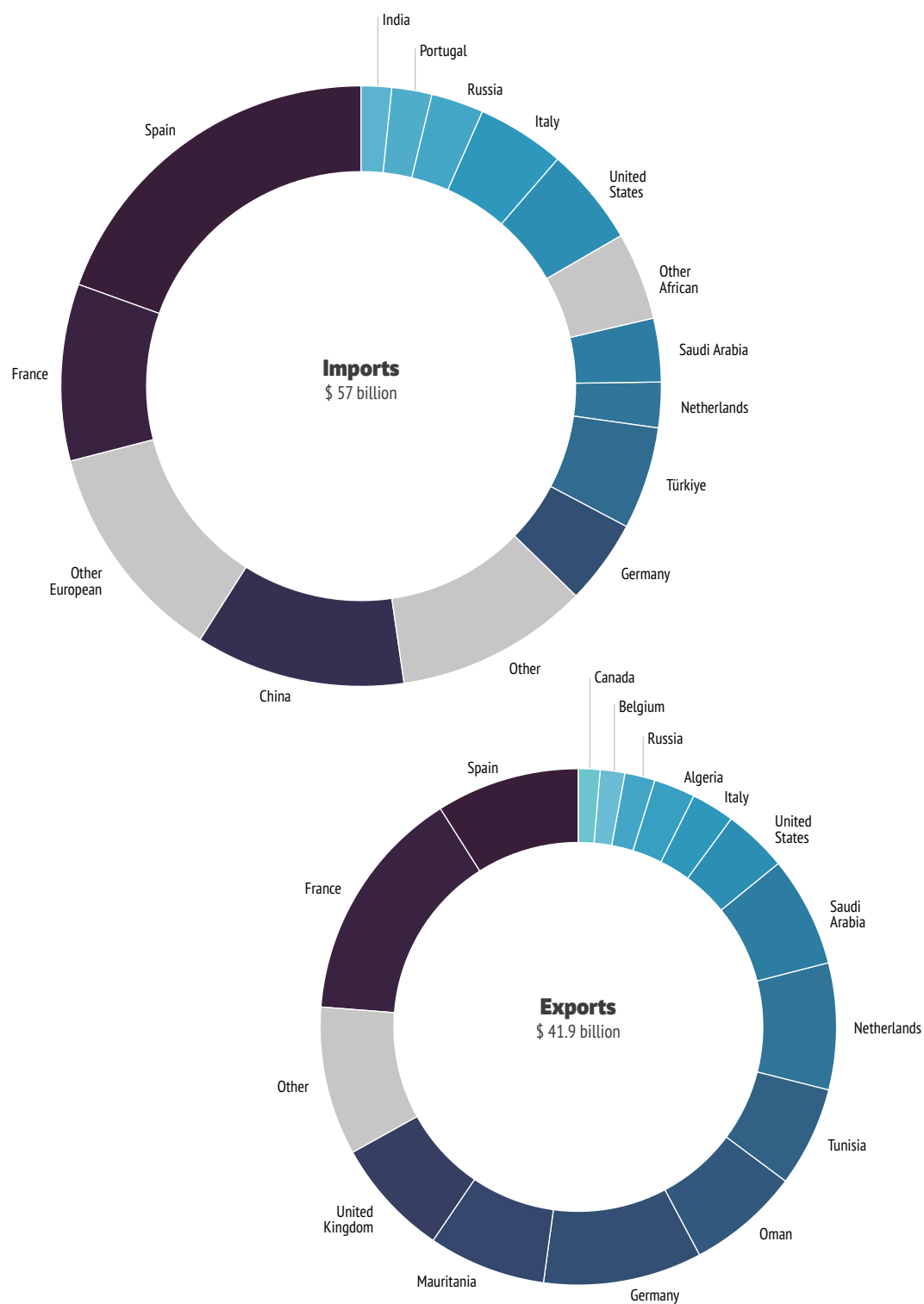
In contrast to migration and security cooperation, trade and economic cooperation affords opportunities for growth. Morocco's economy is dominated by energy imports: the country depends on imports of refined petroleum and gas although it has increased the percentage

(4) EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, 'EU support on migration in Morocco,' May 2021 ([https://ec.europa.eu/trustfundforafrica/sites/default/files/eutf\\_morocco\\_2.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/trustfundforafrica/sites/default/files/eutf_morocco_2.pdf)).

(5) The Moroccan security services have long been acknowledged by their EU counterparts for helping with surveillance and provision of information on EU nationals of Moroccan or North African origin engaged in extremist activities or networks. An example here was the assistance that Moroccan intelligence services provided to the French police leading to the arrest of the perpetrators of the 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris. El Yaakoubi, A. and Blenkinsop, P, 'Europe turns to Morocco in Paris attacks investigation', Reuters, January 2016 (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-shooting-morocco-insight/europe-turns-to-morocco-in-paris-attacks-investigation-idUSKCN0UR1OZ20160113>).

## Morocco's main import and export partners

% of total imports/exports, 2021





of renewable energy in its domestic electricity usage<sup>(6)</sup>. Other key imports include wheat and electrical machinery. In terms of exports, phosphate and its derivatives constitute some of the most significant exports, together with agricultural products, and some manufactured goods, particularly apparel. Morocco also exports vehicle parts and accessories, with semiconductors and batteries accounting for smaller shares of exports<sup>(7)</sup>. The automotive industry — with its significant export and import potential — draws substantial foreign direct investment (FDI) and has the potential to attract greater volumes of investment.

As a bloc, the EU remains Morocco's largest trading partner. According to 2021 data, Spain (Morocco's largest partner), France (its third-largest partner), Italy, Germany and Portugal together account for 38.43 % of Morocco's total imports<sup>(8)</sup>. The fastest-growing import markets in 2020 and 2021, according to the Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC), were Spain, China and Saudi Arabia. Spain and China were nearly neck-to-neck with 32.1 % and 31.5 % growth respectively. Export markets are similarly dominated by EU partners, but other partnerships are being developed as well. Spain and France are the top two destinations for Moroccan exports, accounting for shares of 21.3 % and 28.8 % respectively. Brazil is a distant third with 5.54 % followed by India with 4.93 %<sup>(9)</sup>.

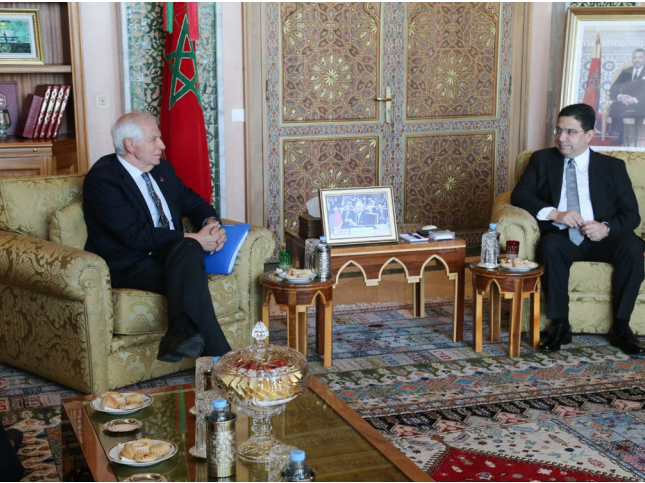
With Russia likewise, the trade partnership has grown over the past 25 years. Exports increased by 13.1 % annually from USD 16

million (roughly €15 million) in 1995 to USD 344 million (about €323 million) in 2020. Morocco's imports from Russia have also increased by 6.98 %, from USD 250 million (almost €235 million) in 1995 to USD 1.35 billion (€1.2 billion) in 2020<sup>(10)</sup>. Over the course of the Ukraine crisis, Morocco's diesel imports from Russia alone increased by 13 % in the first quarter of 2023<sup>(11)</sup>. Morocco has grown to be Russia's third-largest trading partner in Africa, after Algeria and Egypt<sup>(12)</sup>. All of this creates a geopolitically contested and competitive environment for the EU in its southern neighbourhood.

In October 2022, Morocco and the EU signed a historic New Green Deal that capitalises on Morocco's energy transition as a means of securing support for the EU's green energy transition process. Morocco has embraced the energy transition first as a much-needed solution to its domestic budget deficit. For Rabat, as a fossil fuel importer, hydrocarbon price fluctuations create too much budgetary unpredictability that is not conducive to economic growth. Furthermore, embracing the energy transition as an opportunity to drive economic growth helps draw in foreign direct investment, channel innovation, and position the country as a pioneer of climate protection in North Africa. Morocco's efforts have been deemed worthy of support and encouragement because they align with Europe's vision. This is an area where the relationship can grow.

The EU correctly reckons that Morocco — once it satisfies its own domestic energy needs

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- (6) Morocco has identified renewable energy not only as a response to the budgetary impact of high energy prices, but as a key element in a broader economic approach with significant benefits on the international and regional scale. To that end, Morocco's development of infrastructure and of partnerships on renewables together with other climate action has been viewed as a success story, despite remaining challenges of funding and bureaucracy.
  - (7) Observatory of Economic Complexity, 'Morocco's Yearly Trade', 2021 (<https://oec.world/en/profile/country/mar#yearly-trade>).
  - (8) Trend Economy, 'Morocco Annual Trade Statistics', 14 November 2022 (<https://trendeconomy.com/data/h2/Morocco/TOTAL>).
  - (9) OEC, 'Morocco's Yearly Trade', op.cit.
  - (10) Ibid. OANDA conversion of USD figures using current rates.
  - (11) Morocco World News, 'Morocco among countries contributing to increase in Russian diesel exports amid EU sanctions', 29 March 2023 (<https://www.morocoworldnews.com/2023/03/354747/morocco-among-countries-contributing-to-increase-in-russian-diesel-exports-amid-eu-sanctions>).
  - (12) Morocco World News, 'Russia's exports to Morocco double in first half of 2022', 4 September 2022 (<https://www.morocoworldnews.com/2022/09/351159/russias-exports-to-morocco-double-in-first-half-of-2022>).



HR/VP Josep Borrell Fontelles and Moroccan Minister for Foreign Affairs Nasser Bourita in Rabat on 5 January 2023.

EC, Audiovisual Service © European Union, 2023

– can help provide green energy to the European continent, thereby facilitating the fulfilment of its climate protection goals. Morocco has identified domestic benchmarks for renewable energy use, which include 50 % of the country's electricity needs by 2030 as a mix of hydro, wind and solar <sup>(13)</sup>. Morocco holds the potential for nearshoring to help secure supply chains, an issue that has become particularly relevant in the aftermath of the Russia–Ukraine crisis. Furthermore, the country's significant mineral reserves and mining potential can help support the development of green energy sources such as cobalt to produce EV batteries and green fertiliser which could play an even more important role in the EU's outreach to the African continent writ large.

Taking the European Investment Bank's patterns of investment in Morocco within the 2014–2020 timeframe as a bellwether, 27 % of loans went into renewable energy and efficiency projects, and another 15 % towards improving transport infrastructure and facilities, including e-mobility <sup>(14)</sup>. More broadly, since

2014 Morocco has been the recipient of €1.2 billion in climate action funding — amounting to a total of 30 % of total finance over the 6-year period. Other mechanisms under the Horizon EU programme include funding for innovation and collaboration on UN sustainable development goals, the bulk of which are climate-geared <sup>(15)</sup>. This is where the future of the EU–Morocco partnership lies, provided the two partners manage to overcome current tensions, many of which are due to a shift in Morocco's foreign policy approach, which the EU has yet to fully internalise, and more crucially, to which it has yet to adapt.

## THE EVOLUTION OF MOROCCO'S FOREIGN POLICY AND WHAT IT MEANS FOR THE EU

In order for the EU to adapt its partnership with the country, it is important to first understand Morocco's motives and goals. Morocco's post-independence foreign policy prioritised building strong and lasting ties with Western allies, particularly with Europe and the United States. Over the course of major events that have shaped the world since the 1960s, Morocco stood with its European allies against the spreading influence of communism.

Morocco maintained this ideological alignment in the 1980s with its anti-Islamist policies and this continued into the 2000s, including support for the US during its sweeping war on terror. This allowed Morocco to demonstrate its value to Western allies and to maintain a relationship of trust with them. Morocco even

<sup>(13)</sup> International Energy Agency, 'Morocco Renewable Target 2030', March 2023, (<https://www.iea.org/policies/6557-morocco-renewable-energy-target-2030>).

<sup>(14)</sup> European Investment Bank, 'European Investment Bank in Morocco', March 2023 ([https://www.eib.org/attachments/publications/la\\_bei\\_a\\_u\\_maroc\\_en.pdf](https://www.eib.org/attachments/publications/la_bei_a_u_maroc_en.pdf)).

<sup>(15)</sup> Vella, B., 'Morocco is now an Associated Country of the Horizon Europe EU Programme', Across Limits, (<https://www.acrosslimits.com/morocco-is-now-an-associated-country-of-the-horizon-europe-eu-programme/>).

took the unlikely step of requesting membership of the European Communities in 1987<sup>(16)</sup>. Far-fetched as the move was, it pointed to the country's effort to build and sustain this privileged partnership. It also reflected the extent to which Morocco saw its fate and fortunes as tied to the EU. This perception created a dynamic in which the EU was Morocco's closest and preferred partner on the southern side of Mediterranean.

This privileged partnership helped boost Morocco's image as a trustworthy, modernising state. Morocco provides crucial security for close European partners such as France and Spain through intelligence sharing and border control and surveillance. However, in recent years, it seems that both sides have outgrown this particular dynamic. Over the past decade, Morocco has steadily grown frustrated with its European allies for what its leadership views as a lack of commitment and a failure to appreciate the value of their alliance. Another crucial element in Morocco's attitude is the implications of the growing presence of other actors, as the roles of the EU and United States diminish as key poles of global alliances.

The availability and growing footprint of other actors such as China, India and Türkiye provides an opportunity for smaller actors like Morocco to seek to hedge their bets and expand their influence. By diversifying their partnerships or appearing to do so, they gain more leverage *vis-à-vis* the EU. This, for a country like Morocco, also reflects the desire to build more equitable relationships allowing the kingdom to overcome the inferior status from which it suffers in Europe. To be sure Morocco's ambition outmatches the reality of its circumstances, but the kingdom has managed to leverage its geostrategic advantages to gain more diplomatic weight on the international stage.

## The Western Sahara Conflict

On 20 December 2020, then-President Trump announced that the United States recognised Morocco's claims over the contested Western Sahara territory. The announcement reversed decades of US support for the international negotiation process under UN auspices. Morocco and the Polisario have disputed rightful ownership of the territory since the 1960s when Spain came under pressure to decolonise the Spanish Sahara which it had controlled since 1884. By 1975, Morocco had taken over parts of the territory. Following Spain's departure, the fighting between Morocco and the Polisario Front (supported by Libya and Algeria) continued until the UN brokered the ceasefire of 1991. The Polisario Front established a government in exile in Algerian territory with Algerian diplomatic support and Libyan arms and military training. After the ceasefire, the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) was established with the agreement to organise a referendum of Sahraoui populations to determine the final status of the territory. Since then, various negotiations efforts have fallen through but, while the conflict persisted, the ceasefire held for nearly 30 years until November 2020. At the moment, the conflict is active but it remains at a low level and thus largely under the radar of the international community and media attention. While the US official position on the Western Sahara issue has shifted to recognition, the current Biden administration continues to support a UN-led solution and negotiation process. Similarly, the EU institutional position is to continue supporting the UN led-negotiation process for 'a just, lasting and mutually acceptable solution' under the auspices of the current Special Envoy Staffan De Mistura.

(16) Los Angeles Times Archives from Reuters, 'W. Europe bloc bars Morocco as a member', 21 July 1987 (<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1987-07-21-mn-5339-story.html>).

Economically, Morocco has developed a solid renewables sector and is well-positioned to support Europe's green transition. But beyond this, Morocco remains a developing economy still facing poverty and economic vulnerability. Politically, while stable and secure, Morocco remains an authoritarian kingdom with powerful means to curb freedoms, crack down on opposition forces, and avoid accountability.

## CONCLUSION: HOW TO FORGE A NEW PATH WITH MOROCCO?

So what does this all mean for what Morocco wants from its EU partners? In order to assess the strength of Morocco's ties with the EU it is important to look at foreign relations through the prism of their shared priorities: trade, migration and security. Secondly, it is important to understand the trajectory and rationale of Morocco's foreign policy posture. And finally, rather than the EU viewing its relationship with Morocco as a model to be emulated in other southern neighbourhood partnerships, the EU ought to look at the relationship as a test case for how to forge a new path with a long-standing partner in a world of growing options and changing global attitudes.

Morocco's frustration with the EU is a product of two factors; first, the changes that both the EU and the region have undergone in the past ten years, including the emergence of alternative geopolitical actors. The second factor is the evolution of Morocco's foreign policy. Overall, Morocco's frustrations reflect a sense of grievance at being taken for granted in its relationship with the EU, after years of close collaboration. This is most apparent

in relation to the Western Sahara issue where Morocco wants unqualified support from the EU. While Morocco wants to exert more leverage in its relationship with the EU, it appears to be short on specifics in terms of what a partnership in which its role would be more valued should look like. With regard to the Western Sahara, Morocco wants the EU to emulate Washington's and now Israel's unilateral recognition of its sovereignty claims. This proposition being a non-starter for the EU, there should hopefully be scope to work out a unified position that provides a second-best option for Morocco.

In attempting to safeguard its interests and increase its leverage, Morocco has been willing to push previous limits in its relations with the EU. Two examples that illustrate this point are the crisis with Spain and the allegations linking Morocco to the corruption scandal at the European Parliament. Morocco's response to Spain admitting Ibrahim Ghali, the president of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, for medical treatment after he contracted Covid-19 in 2021 was widely viewed in Europe as 'blackmail'. In an act of apparent retaliation, Morocco loosened its border controls. Spanish security forces intercepted 8 000 irregular migrants who reached Spain either by sea or jumping the fence to Ceuta<sup>(17)</sup>. Similar examples include diplomatic tension with Germany, following the latter's call for the UN to condemn the Trump administration's unilateral recognition of Morocco's claims over the Western Sahara territory. Morocco recalled its ambassador to Germany, and a negative media campaign against Germany followed, while the operations of German foundations active in Morocco were suspended.

On the issue of Western Sahara, Morocco's leadership feels particularly vulnerable to any perceived threats – or any action that could weaken its position, especially coming from trusted allies. The change in US policy following the Trump administration's recognition of

(17) 'Spain accuses Morocco of blackmail over Ceuta migrant surge', Reuters, 20 May 2021 (<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/spain-accuses-morocco-blackmail-over-ceuta-migrant-surge-2021-05-20/>).

Morocco's claim to sovereignty over the Western Sahara created a false expectation that if the United States is willing to recognise Morocco's claims, so too should the EU. The leadership has had difficulty accepting the EU's reluctance to follow suit. This perspective holds that perhaps the biggest international obstacle to fuller EU support and international acceptance of Morocco's enduring claims was always US recognition, and with that now out of the way, naturally others would oblige as well. This view within Morocco purposefully overlooks the complexity of the legal international system and the EU's commitment to it because it wants the EU to disregard international legal norms on this issue as it has proven willing to do on other issues for reasons of expediency. Relevant examples here include the EU's willingness to overlook the human rights aspect of Morocco's migration policies or approaches to border policing. Another example is the tendency to overlook the practices by which Moroccan security services collect information which is then shared with EU partners.

Another important incentive for Morocco is the effort to gain leverage to be deployed in such cases. And this is where both the corruption allegations and the Pegasus spying allegations also fit in. In 2020, news stories and investigations implicated Morocco in spying activities using Pegasus spyware, an NSO product, that Morocco allegedly obtained through international partners. According to these allegations, Moroccan security services have spied on French President Emmanuel Macron, Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez, as well as a number of foreign officials and local journalists and opposition figures. In 2022 and 2023, Morocco, along with other Arab states, stood accused of

bribing several EU officials to gain influence in the European Parliament. Soon after, a vote in the European Parliament condemning human rights and press freedom abuses in Morocco was widely viewed in the kingdom as EU retaliation<sup>(18)</sup>. In response, Morocco's parliament voted for a revaluation of its relationship with the EU<sup>(19)</sup>.

On this issue, Morocco is taking a risky maximalist approach. On the surface, Morocco's previous hard-nosed, zero-compromise, ambitious foreign policy posture seems to have paid off. The status of the Western Sahara conflict as it stands is largely agreeable to the kingdom. With regard to migration Morocco is generally able to secure the funding it needs. Overall, the monarchy is still viewed favourably in Europe and its interests are safeguarded domestically. But there have been costs to this approach; some direct and others indirect, and more that may entail long-term repercussions. Morocco's image and reputation within EU institutions and with European partners has been harmed by this intransigent posture; bilateral relations

with France are tense, and in the EU Morocco is increasingly viewed as a capricious and unreliable partner. These tensions have further muddied the waters in the context of a regional outlook that is also particularly uncertain given the conflict with Algeria.

This high-risk approach also betrays a certain degree of recklessness within the foreign policy establishment. Given the extent to which foreign policy formulation is under the palace's purview, its drivers are difficult to identify. The overall change in attitudes within the establishment reflects changing attitudes within Africa and the so-called Global South

**I**n the EU Morocco is increasingly viewed as a capricious and unreliable partner.

(18) Bennis, S., 'New EU Resolution against Morocco: France's frustration and machinations', Morocco World News, 25 January 2023 (<https://www.morocccoworldnews.com/2023/01/353720/new-eu-resolution-against-morocco-frances-frustration-and-machinations>).

(19) Euractiv, 'Morocco votes to review ties with European Parliament', 24 January 2023 (<https://www.euractiv.com/section/media/news/morocco-votes-to-review-ties-with-european-parliament/>).



as a whole regarding the role of actors like the EU. But this attitude masks a larger and more existential lack of purpose in Morocco's overall foreign policy. In the immediate term, the opportunism that drives Rabat's eagerness to secure its interests in the Western Sahara and maintain leverage over current partners while cultivating new ones does not appear to serve a broader strategic goal, beyond satisfying its hunger for recognition and prestige.

## Policy recommendations

In its relations with its southern neighbourhood partners, including its partnership with Maghreb countries, the EU faces the reality of a more unpredictable and competitive partnership field. This creates challenges to the current *status quo* but also opportunities to create new dynamics and Morocco may be a good test case in this regard. This will initially require some soul-searching to find out what the EU can give, where it can compromise and where its competitive advantages lie in this crowded international field. What can the EU offer that China, Russia, India and others cannot? And how can that be communicated to Maghreb partners in a clear and compelling way?

The EU needs to identify a clearer and more concrete goal for its partnership with Morocco. If the EU, for example, wants to engage with Morocco as a rising regional power then it needs to clarify where it can support Morocco's actions and where it cannot. The EU can also put greater emphasis on how the country can ensure that actions taken in relation to the Western Sahara and in its bilateral relationship with Algeria do not jeopardise regional stability.

Finally, the EU can focus more on areas where there is room for the relationship to grow, for instance trade and commerce, including innovation in renewables and beyond. The Green Deal that Brussels struck with Morocco last October is a good example, and there is more to be done in working with the private sector as well as the public sector to promote buy-in and support.



## CHAPTER 5

# THE EU AND TUNISIA

## Great expectations, unfinished business

by

DALIA GHANEM AND EYA JRAD

### INTRODUCTION

Since the 2011 uprisings, the EU has heavily invested in supporting political and democratic reforms in Tunisia. However, 12 years after the overthrow of the Ben Ali regime, the country is being run by a monocratic government and is in the throes of an acute socio-economic crisis characterised by economic stagnation and high levels of unemployment<sup>(1)</sup> and inflation<sup>(2)</sup>. Vigilante violence and xenophobia fuelled by the Tunisian authorities' appropriation of a far-right populist narrative on migration have deepened the country's isolation. The government has sought to clamp down on any criticism from the outside world, as attested by its denial of entry to foreign delegations on repeated occasions, including international trade unionists, and its recent decision to refuse entry to the European Parliament's foreign affairs mission<sup>(3)</sup>. All these factors are putting Tunisia's fragile democracy under strain.

While the EU's support remains relevant and valued, its approach towards Tunisia is driven by an impulse to maintain the *status quo* in the country to better safeguard Europe's security. This approach is not sustainable in the long run and carries risks for the EU, including *vis-à-vis* its own security.

The first section of this chapter provides an overview of Europe's assistance to Tunisia in the past decade. The second section explores the EU's divided approach and the focus on security, migration and the economy, while the third section examines the risks that such an approach entails. The conclusion formulates recommendations on how the EU could more effectively extend support to Tunisia as it navigates its current economic and political challenges.

(1) Unemployment stood at 15.6 % as of June 2023. National Statistics Institute of Tunisia (<https://www.ins.tn/>).

(2) The inflation rate stood at 9.3 % in August of 2023 with the main upward pressure coming from the cost of food products (15.3 %). See: Trading Economics, 'Tunisia Inflation Rate' (<https://tradingeconomics.com/tunisia/inflation-cpi>).

(3) Delegation of the European Union to Tunisia, 'Tunisie : Déclaration de la Porte-Parole sur le rejet de la visite du Parlement Européen par les autorités', September 2023 ([https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/tunisie-d%C3%A9claration-de-la-porte-parole-sur-le-rejet-de-la-visite-du-parlement-europ%C3%A9en-par-les\\_und\\_en?s=126](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/tunisie-d%C3%A9claration-de-la-porte-parole-sur-le-rejet-de-la-visite-du-parlement-europ%C3%A9en-par-les_und_en?s=126)).



Marc Rutte, the Prime Minister of the Netherlands, Ursula von der Leyen, the President of the European Commission, Kais Saïed, the President of Tunisia, and Giorgia Meloni, the Prime Minister of Italy (from left to right) in Tunis on 16 July 2023.

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## THE PROMISE OF A 'NEW RESPONSE TO A CHANGING NEIGHBOURHOOD'

The 2011 uprising dramatically conveyed the need to look afresh at the EU's relationship with its southern neighbours<sup>(4)</sup>, and to move away from the traditional approach which focused only on security and the economy. Indeed, in the wake of Tunisia's political

upheaval in 2011, the EU invested heavily in the political transition and in the economic stabilisation of the country, making significant contributions to the process through financial support for a democratic transformation, building a stronger partnership with civil society and promoting sustainable, inclusive growth and economic development.

Against the backdrop of the growing influence of terrorist organisations as well as the near-total collapse of neighbouring Libya, counter-terrorism has also been a major pre-occupation for Europe. As articulated in the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), the EU aspires to create 'a ring of friends' around its borders. As a result, between 2015 and 2020, it endowed €23 million to support Tunisia's security sector reform programme<sup>(5)</sup>, alongside providing technical assistance and allocating €40 million to the 'Justice Reform Support Programme'<sup>(6)</sup> from 2012 until 2020.

Migration and mobility have remained a top priority for EU policy, particularly in 2021, when Tunisians represented the third-largest nationality (after Syrians and Afghans) to irregularly enter EU territory (8.3 %)<sup>(7)</sup>.

The EU has also provided support for economic recovery and social integration, through several instruments, namely the Macro-Financial Assistance (MFA) package, budget support, thematic programmes, technical assistance and loans to support investment. Nonetheless,

(4) European Commission, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, 'A new response to a changing Neighborhood', COM (2011) 303 final, 25 May 2011 (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=celex:52011DC0303>).

(5) European Parliament, Parliamentary question – E-003501/2016(ASW), 'Answer given by Vice-President Mogherini on behalf of the Commission', 11 July 2016 ([https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-8-2016-003501-ASW\\_EN.html#def2](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-8-2016-003501-ASW_EN.html#def2)).

(6) EEAS, 'Réforme du secteur de la sécurité : l'Union européenne s'engage aux côtés de la Tunisie!', Communiqué de Presse, 4 November 2015 ([https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/delegations/tunisia/documents/press\\_corner/cp\\_signature\\_rss\\_4nov2015\\_fr.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/delegations/tunisia/documents/press_corner/cp_signature_rss_4nov2015_fr.pdf)).

(7) European Commission, 'Overall figures of immigrants in European society', January 2022 ([https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/promoting-our-european-way-of-life/statistics-migration-europe\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/promoting-our-european-way-of-life/statistics-migration-europe_en)).

in 2023, Tunisia's national debt constituted 80 % of its GDP <sup>(8)</sup>, compared to 42 % in 2011 <sup>(9)</sup>.

Since Kais Saied's power grab on 25 July 2021 <sup>(10)</sup>, and with Tunisia mired in a triple political, social and economic crisis, the EU institutions and Member States have been unable to agree on the position to take towards the dramatic events unfolding in the country.

## THE CACOPHONY OF EU VOICES

Since the president's seizure of extraordinary powers, setting the country on a slippery slope to censorship and repression, the EU has adopted a relatively passive approach <sup>(11)</sup>, recalling the not-so-distant Ben Ali era, prior to the uprisings, when economic and security imperatives trumped concerns about democracy and human rights.

In May 2022 the Venice Commission – an advisory body of the Council of Europe which assists and advises individual countries on constitutional matters – issued an Urgent Opinion criticising the constitutional, legislative and procedural basis for the referendum

and parliamentary elections that the president had announced for 2022 <sup>(12)</sup>. Besides, the European Parliament voted a resolution on 16 March 2023, condemning the arrests of journalists and opposition figures, and warning against the return to authoritarianism and the weakening of checks and balances. However, beyond expressing condemnation of the human rights violations taking place in the country, these texts remain non-binding and have no legal effect <sup>(13)</sup>.

Moreover, the Italian and French governments have been vocal in supporting President Saied. Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni has initiated lobbying efforts with the Italian Senate to secure financial support for Tunisia <sup>(14)</sup> with the aim of preventing an influx of migrants into Europe, while French President Emmanuel Macron has declared France's readiness to collaborate with Italy 'to help Tunisia regain political stability' <sup>(15)</sup>.

Prioritising politics and above all migration cooperation over human rights and democratic consolidation might appear in the short term to be the key to ensuring the stability of the European neighbourhood. However, in the long term, this approach is likely to prove counter-productive, as Tunisia is located in Europe's immediate vicinity and adverse developments there inevitably affect the EU's stability and

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- (8) Statista, 'Tunisia: National debt in relation to gross domestic product (GDP) from 2018 to 2028' (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/524541/national-debt-of-tunisia-in-relation-to-gross-domestic-product-gdp/>).
  - (9) 'Tunisia debt to GDP ratio 1990–2023', Macrotrends (<https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/TUN/tunisia/debt-to-gdp-ratio#:~:text=Tunisia%20debt%20to%20gdp%20ratio%20for%202011%20was%2042.48%25%2C%20a,a%204.16%25%20decline%20from%202009>).
  - (10) On 25 July 2021, President Kais Saied dissolved the parliament, dismissed the prime minister, and announced he would temporarily rule by decree.
  - (11) Délégation of the Européen Union to Tunisia, 'Tunisie : Déclaration du haut représentant Josep Borrell sur les développements dans le pays', 22 February 2023 ([https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/tunisie-d%C3%A9claration-du-haut-repr%C3%A9sentant-josep-borrell-sur-les-d%C3%A9veloppements-dans-le-pays\\_en?s=126](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/tunisie-d%C3%A9claration-du-haut-repr%C3%A9sentant-josep-borrell-sur-les-d%C3%A9veloppements-dans-le-pays_en?s=126)).
  - (12) European Commission for Democracy Through Law (Venice Commission), 'Urgent Opinion on the Constitutional and Legislative Framework on the Referendum and Elections Announcements by the President of the Republic, and in Particular on the Decree-Law N°22 of 21 April 2022 Amending and Completing the Organic Law on the Independent High Authority for Elections (ISIE)', May 2022 ([https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-PI\(2022\)026-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-PI(2022)026-e)).
  - (13) European Parliament, 'Resolution on recent attacks in Tunisia against freedom of expression and association, and against trade unions, in particular the case of journalist Nouredine Boutar', 2023/2588(RSP), March 2023 ([https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2023-0084\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2023-0084_EN.html)).
  - (14) 'Italy PM: We are facing a huge problem related to Tunisia stability and possibly its economic collapse', Middle East Monitor, March 2023 (<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20230321-italy-pm-we-are-facing-a-huge-problem-related-to-tunisia-stability-and-possibly-its-economic-collapse/>).
  - (15) 'Emmanuel Macron à Bruxelles : <le bon sens et l'amitié nous conduisent à proposer un report>', France 24, March 2023 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nM9NkbuQ4tE>) [Original speech in French].

security. This ‘traditionalist diplomacy’ echoes pre-revolutionary Euro-Tunisian relations, where Europe turned a blind eye to the country’s political and human rights situation for the sake of authoritarian stability. The relationship is built on shaky foundations, because Tunisia, critically indebted and highly dependent on external suppliers for oil, food and fertilisers, has been compelled to make strategic foreign policy choices based on its economic interests rather than adhere to its customary non-alignment posture.

## CAUGHT BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE OVER THE WAR IN UKRAINE

Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine in February 2022, Europe has shifted its regional focus, and reoriented its geostrategic interests and priorities. In doing so, however, the EU risks turning inward and other actors such as China, Russia and Türkiye are likely to avail of this opportunity to expand their footprint in North Africa and the Sahel where there is growing anti-Western sentiment and a surge in support for Russia<sup>(16)</sup>.

While Tunisian-Russian relations have gone through ups and downs, notably with the discovery of a Russian espionage operation in Tunisia in 2015<sup>(17)</sup>, the country has nevertheless stepped up its cooperation with Russia, and a number of high-profile visits and meetings have taken place between the two sides. Following Tunisia’s participation in the second Russia-Africa Summit<sup>(18)</sup> on 27 July 2023, in St. Petersburg, Russia is reported to be preparing agreements on a free trade zone with Tunisia. The latter’s stance on the Russian invasion of Ukraine is ambivalent: the country appears to have abandoned its customary diplomatic caution, as it has twice voted for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of Russian military forces from the territory of Ukraine, although at the UN it abstained in the vote on the resolution on Russia’s suspension from the Human Rights Council<sup>(19)</sup>.

If anything, this somewhat contradictory stance illustrates the multi-layered crisis and disarray engulfing Tunisia. Indeed, only a few weeks after the entry into force, on 5 February 2023, of Western sanctions targeting the Russian oil sector, Tunisia ramped up imports of diesel and other Russian refined petroleum products to build up its national strategic oil reserve as a precautionary measure in case it had to contend with a fuel shortage<sup>(20)</sup>. Moreover, Tunisia is turning to Russia for cereal products, which it used to import from Ukraine<sup>(21)</sup>.

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- (16) Salah, A., ‘Why does some of the Arab public support Putin’s war in Ukraine?’, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 16 June 2022 (<https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/87353>). A recent survey published by BBC Arabic showed that 70 % of young Arabs interviewed for the survey described Russia as an ally. See ‘Russia and Ukraine: how does the Arab world view the war in Ukraine?’, BBC Arabic, July 2022 (<https://www.bbc.com/arabic/world-6217925>).
  - (17) Inkyfada, ‘Chronicles of a Russian espionage operation in Tunisia’, January 2018. (<https://inkyfada.com/en/2018/01/05/chronicles-of-a-russian-espionage-operation-in-tunisia/>).
  - (18) Second Summit – Russia-Africa Economic and Humanitarian Forum, St Petersburg, 27–28 July 2023 (<https://summitafrica.ru/en/>).
  - (19) UN News, ‘General Assembly decides to suspend Russia from the Human Rights Council’, April 2022 (<https://news.un.org/fr/story/2022/04/1117912>).
  - (20) ‘North African countries snap up Russian oil products shunned by West’, *The Wall Street Journal*, February 2023 (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/north-african-countries-snap-up-russian-oil-products-shunned-by-west-f63aa287>).
  - (21) The National Agricultural Observatory reported that in 2021 49 % of Tunisia’s soft wheat imports originated from Ukraine, covering almost half of the country’s needs, compared to 10 % from Russia. Tunisia, on the other hand, was already dependent on Russia for 46 % of barley imports, compared to 17 % from Ukraine. ‘Nabil Ammar aborde avec Sergueï Lavrov l’importation des céréales russes en Tunisie’, *Business News*, July 2023 (<https://www.businessnews.com.tn/nabil-ammar-aborde-avec-serguei-lavrov-limportation-des-cereales-russes-en-tunisie,520,130849,3>).

Furthermore, the influence of and pressure from neighbouring Algeria, on whose financial largesse President Saïed relies heavily<sup>(22)</sup>, may explain the stance taken by Tunisia towards Russia, a longstanding ally of Algeria. A nuanced position on the Russo-Ukrainian war would strengthen Algiers' credit *vis-à-vis* Moscow, further demonstrating its regional weight and clout<sup>(23)</sup>. In mid-March 2022, Tunisian social networks circulated a copy of a handwritten letter that Kaïs Saïed allegedly sent to his Algerian counterpart Abdelmadjid Tebboune, asking him to intercede with the Russians on his behalf to plead the Tunisian cause and explain his position<sup>(24)</sup>. The Tunisian authorities immediately denounced a forgery and called for the opening of an investigation for breach of national security<sup>(25)</sup>.

This situation is delicate for Tunisia, especially since it does not have the luxury of time to launch negotiations with Russia, whose foreign relations are usually based on security and military cooperation, or on concluding oil export agreements with its allies, rather than providing financial and investment support.

## **T**unisian prisons are becoming incubators for jihadism.

## Key issues and risks for the EU

For the EU, relegating civil liberties and freedom to the sidelines in the pursuit of stability and security is problematic for a number of reasons.

### Justice and security

Despite the decrease in jihadist attacks in Tunisia over the past two years, and while the capacities and efficiency of Tunisia's security sector have improved since 2015, widespread police abuses and other cases of ill-treatment are still well-documented<sup>(26)</sup>.

Recently, discussions about the impact and effectiveness of the security sector 'reforms' adopted in the last decade resurfaced following the attack on the Ghriba synagogue<sup>(27)</sup>. According to local experts and media, the security sector reform has diverted crucial resources that should

have been allocated to other priority sectors such as health and education.

An additional problem is the high level of overcrowding in Tunisian prisons, with some

(22) Beginning in May 2014, Algeria provided Tunisia with a series of economic assistance packages consisting primarily of loans, deposits and grants. In December 2022, prior to Tunisia's parliamentary elections, Algeria offered a package which consisted of a \$200 million loan and a \$100 million donation. In addition, Algeria has reduced Tunisia's required payments for the electricity and gas that transit through the TransMed pipeline to Italy, which Tunisia retains for its use, and on occasion has even agreed to deferred payments. Sakia, A., 'Algeria lends Tunisia \$200M, grants it \$100M', *EL Shuruk*, 27 December 2022 (<https://www.echoroukonline.com/algeria-lends-tunisia-200m-grants-it-100m>).

(23) Tunisia has also jeopardised its relations with Morocco as both countries recalled their respective ambassadors after the Tunisian president welcomed the leader of the Polisario Front at the 8th Tokyo International Conference on African Development, TICAD 8, held on 27 and 28 August 2022 in Tunisia – a 'serious and unprecedented act' according to Rabat. See 'Morocco and Tunisia feud after self-proclaimed Western Sahara leader visits Tunis', *Le Monde*, 1 September 2022 ([https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2022/09/01/the-diplomatic-crisis-between-tunis-and-rabat-over-western-sahara-is-showing-no-signs-of-abating\\_5995479\\_124.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2022/09/01/the-diplomatic-crisis-between-tunis-and-rabat-over-western-sahara-is-showing-no-signs-of-abating_5995479_124.html)).

(24) 'L'étrange « fausse » lettre de Kais Saïed à son homologue algérien', *Middle East Eye*, March 2022 (<https://www.middleeasteye.net/fr/actu-et-enquetes/tunisie-algerie-saied-tebboune-fausse-lettre-russie-ukraine-aide>).

(25) TunisieNumérique, 'Tunisie – Saïed demande à poursuivre en justice ceux qui falsifient des documents touchant la sûreté de l'Etat', March 2022 (<https://www.tunisienumerique.com/tunisie-saied-demande-a-poursuivre-en-justice-ceux-qui-falsifient-des-documents-touchant-la-surete-de-letat/>).

(26) 'Morts suspectes et impunité policière', *Nawaat*, Hors Série, March 2023.

(27) An attack carried out by a national guardsman who killed two of his colleagues and two civilians before he was shot dead, during the Jewish pilgrimage ceremony in the Ghriba Synagogue on the island of Djerba, southern Tunisia, May 2023.

at nearly 200 % of capacity<sup>(28)</sup>. In such conditions and in the absence of adequate rehabilitation services, Tunisian prisons are becoming incubators for jihadism.

Furthermore, with the growing politicisation and instrumentalisation of counterterrorism measures and legislation to arrest and prosecute political opponents<sup>(29)</sup>, the situation might lead Tunisians to view the country's justice and prison systems as illegitimate, as was the case in the past, allowing jihadist movements to grow locally, which in turn will generate a much larger pool of future recruits for terrorist attacks in Tunisia and abroad.

## Migration

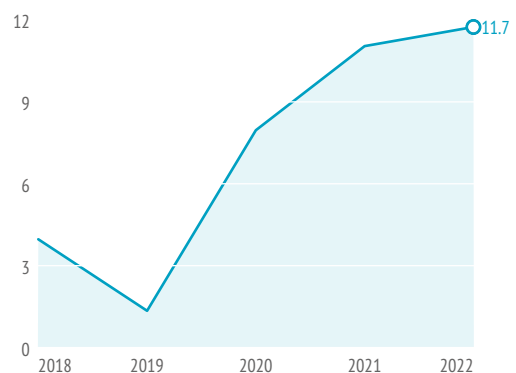
Migration and mobility have always been at the heart of discussions between the EU and Tunisia. The magnitude of this issue has been exacerbated as a result of the successive coups in Africa, triggering new waves of displacement and migration.

The EU relies heavily on Tunisia, a country of both origin and transit, to stem migration, hence the flurry of visits by European leaders in the past year<sup>(30)</sup>. To crown these efforts brokered by several capitals, in July 2023 the Tunisian government signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the EU<sup>(31)</sup>, that was followed by an International Conference on Development and Migration in Rome<sup>(32)</sup>.

The MoU agreement covers five areas: economic development; Investment and trade; the green energy transition; people-to-people contacts; and migration and mobility. Under the agreement, which the European Commission had struggled to secure, the EU will provide Tunisia with funds in exchange for tighter border controls. The bloc announced that the EU had committed to providing €100 million for 2023 to Tunisia to strengthen border management, search and rescue operations at sea and 'anti-trafficking' measures to reduce the number of arrivals from the country, and was prepared to provide Tunisia with more than €1 billion in the areas of trade, investment, and energy cooperation<sup>(33)</sup>.

### Number of irregular migrants from Tunisia arriving on Italian shores

Thousand



Data: SchengenVisaInfo.com, 2023

- (28) Prison Insider, 'Tunisie : La surpopulation carcérale atteint 200% dans certaines prisons, selon Ridha Zaghdoud', May 2015 (<https://www.prison-insider.com/articles/tunisie-la-surpopulation-carcerale-atteint-200-dans-certaines-prisons-selon-ridha-zaghdoud>).
- (29) 'En Tunisie, des avocats dénoncent l'arrestation « politique » du patron de Mosaïque FM', *Le Monde Afrique*, February 2023 ([https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2023/02/23/en-tunisie-des-avocats-denoncent-l-arrestation-politique-du-patron-de-mosaïque-fm\\_6162975\\_3212.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2023/02/23/en-tunisie-des-avocats-denoncent-l-arrestation-politique-du-patron-de-mosaïque-fm_6162975_3212.html)).
- (30) In 2023, Giorgia Meloni visited Tunis twice (in the space of one month). On one of her visits she was accompanied by the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, and the Prime Minister of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, Mark Rutte. Italy's interior minister, Matteo Piantedosi, visited Tunis twice, and was accompanied on one of his visits by the Italian foreign minister, Antonio Tajani.
- (31) European Commission, 'Memorandum of Understanding on a strategic and global partnership between the European Union and Tunisia', 16 July 2023 ([https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_23\\_3887](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_3887)).
- (32) Italian Government, Presidency of the Council of Ministers, 'International Conference on Development and Migration in Rome – Commitments and shared solutions for the Mediterranean and Africa', 23 July 2023 (<https://www.governo.it/en/articolo/international-conference-development-and-migration-be-held-rome-commitments-and-shared>).
- (33) 'EU finalises migrant deal with Tunisia', *Politico*, 16 July 2023 (<https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-migration-deal-tunisia-migrants-africa-european-commission/>). See also Genovese, V. and Tidey, A., 'EU will "continue to criticise" Tunisia despite €100 million migration deal, Commissioner says', 14 June 2023 (<https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2023/06/14/eu-will-continue-to-criticise-tunisia-despite-100-million-migration-deal-commissioner-says>).



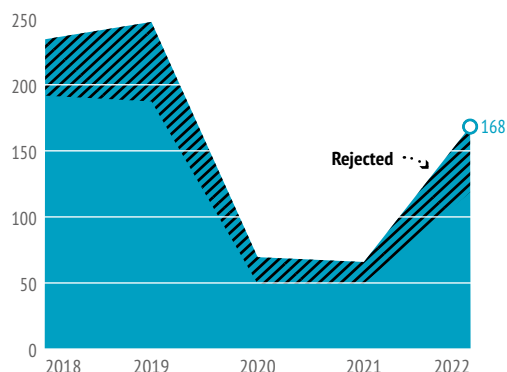
However, some questions remain regarding the nature, effect and potential expiry date of the MoU. For a start, until it is ratified by the European Parliament, the Memorandum remains a mere political declaration and has no legal enforceability. Furthermore, due to internal disagreement on the Pact, as well as concerns over respect for fundamental rights, the European Ombudsman (EO), the EU authority tasked with investigating complaints about poor administration by EU institutions or other EU bodies, decided on 13 September 2023 to open an inquiry ‘on how the European Commission intends to guarantee respect for human rights in the context of the EU–Tunisia Memorandum of Understanding’<sup>(34)</sup>. While the Ombudsman has no power to make legally binding decisions, it retains the power to issue critical remarks and draft recommendations.

Moreover, because of Germany’s use of political conditionality to encourage Tunisia to (re-) establish democracy and human rights, as well as the ambiguous position of France, which was absent from the negotiations and the signing, the agreement may actually be void: according to the EU Council’s legal service, Team Europe and the Commission seem to have overstepped their competencies<sup>(35)</sup>, while the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, has expressed Member States’ ‘incomprehension regarding the Commission’s unilateral action on the conclusion of this [memorandum of understanding] and concerns about some of its contents’<sup>(36)</sup>.

Some questions remain also with regard to the respective parties’ mutual obligations, specifically whether Tunisia has the will and

## Tunisian Schengen visa applications

Thousand



Data: SchengenVisaInfo.com, 2023

capabilities to enforce the agreement, especially when it comes to Tunisia’s obligation to take back non-Tunisian irregular migrants, and whether the European Commission will be able to fulfil its financial obligations. Notably, to facilitate the implementation of the MoU, on 22 September the Commission announced €60 million in budgetary support to prevent a meltdown in the country’s public finances, as well as an operational assistance package on migration worth around €67 million. The latter is to be divided between the Tunisian coastguard and navy, which will be provided with search and rescue vessels, vehicles and other equipment, and international bodies working with migrants, such as the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and the IOM<sup>(37)</sup>. The Commission however, did not specify how the funding is to be disbursed among the respective actors.

(34) European Ombudsman, ‘Strategic initiative SI/5/2023/MHZ on how the European Commission intends to guarantee respect for human rights in the context of the EU–Tunisia Memorandum of Understanding’, September 2023 (<https://www.ombudsman.europa.eu/en/opening-summary/en/175102>).

(35) ‘Migranti, accord con Tunisia non valido?/SZ “Violato Trattato Ue Commissione ha aggirato Consiglio”’, *Il Sussidiario*, 8 August 2023 (<https://www.ilsussidiario.net/news/migranti-accordo-con-tunisia-non-valido-sz-violato-trattato-ue-commissione-ha-aggirato-consiglio/2575227/>).

(36) ‘EU states expressed “incomprehension” at Tunisia migration pact, says Borrell’, *The Guardian*, September 2023 ([https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/sep/18/eu-states-expressed-incomprehension-at-tunisia-migration-pact-says-borrell?CMP=share\\_btn\\_tw](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/sep/18/eu-states-expressed-incomprehension-at-tunisia-migration-pact-says-borrell?CMP=share_btn_tw)).

(37) European Commission, ‘Commission announces almost €127 million in support of the implementation of the Memorandum of Understanding with Tunisia and in line with the 10-point plan for Lampedusa’, 22 September 2023 ([https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-announces-almost-eu127-million-support-implementation-memorandum-understanding-tunisia-2023-09-22\\_en](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-announces-almost-eu127-million-support-implementation-memorandum-understanding-tunisia-2023-09-22_en)).

On 12 September 2023, members of the European Parliament (MEPs) clashed in a heated debate over the migration agreement. They asserted that the number of migrants entering Europe from Tunisia had significantly increased since the agreement was signed in July <sup>(38)</sup>, while the Commission defended the partnership, highlighting the increase in boat interceptions and rescues made by Tunisian coastguards <sup>(39)</sup>.

Meanwhile, EU migration policy continues to be quite restrictive. The rejection rate of visa applications filed by Tunisian nationals, reaching 29.05 % in 2022 <sup>(40)</sup>, compared to 16.5 % in 2017 <sup>(41)</sup>, makes it increasingly difficult for Tunisians to travel to Schengen countries for business, studies, leisure or medical purposes. Moreover, potential candidates for EU membership have also been pushed into restricting their visa-free regimes for third-country nationals (from Tunisia, India, Cuba, Türkiye etc). For instance, Serbia's and Albania's visa-free travel regime for Tunisian citizens drew criticism from the EU <sup>(42)</sup>, to the point that on 20 October 2022, Serbia informed the Commission that it had adopted a decision establishing a visa requirement for Tunisian nationals; the decision entered into force on 20 November 2022 <sup>(43)</sup>, an outcome that was openly welcomed by EU politicians and institutions <sup>(44)</sup>.

## Top five

Countries where Tunisians applied for a visa, 2022, thousand



Data: SchengenVisaInfo.com, 2023

## Highest visa rejection rates

2022, %



Data: SchengenVisaInfo.com, 2023

The tightening of visa requirements and imposition of drastic border control measures appears not to be a sufficient deterrent to Tunisians intent on emigrating, as more Tunisians are opting to leave the country. In the first three months of 2023, the Tunisian Coast Guard intercepted and returned more than 14 000 people attempting to reach Europe. This is more than five times the number of people who attempted the journey at the same time last year. <sup>(45)</sup> As of August 2023, 9 283 migrants from Tunisia had arrived in Italy

(38) Gwyn Jones, M., 'EU lawmakers clash over Tunisia migration deal, denounce lack of results', Euronews, 12 September 2023 (<https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2023/09/12/eu-lawmakers-clash-over-tunisia-migration-deal-denounce-lack-of-results>).

(39) European Commission, 'Remarks of Commissioner Várhelyi on the EU-Tunisia Agreement – aspects related to external migration policy in Plenary Session of the European Parliament', September 2023 ([https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement\\_23\\_4447](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_23_4447)).

(40) Schengen Visa Statistics, '2022 Schengen visa statistics by third country' (<https://statistics.schengenvisa.info/>).

(41) Schengen Visa Statistics, '2017 Schengen visa statistics by third country' (<https://statistics.schengenvisa.info/2017-schengen-visa-statistics-by-third-country/>).

(42) 'Migration : la politique de visas de la Serbie dans le collimateur de l'Union européenne', *Le Figaro*, 14 October 2022 (<https://www.lefigaro.fr/flash-actu/migration-la-politique-de-visas-de-la-serbie-dans-le-collimateur-de-l-union-europeenne-20221014>).

(43) European Commission, Report from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council Fifth Report under the Visa Suspension Mechanism, December 2022 ([https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52022DC0715R\(01\)&from=EN](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52022DC0715R(01)&from=EN)).

(44) Swiss Federal Department of Justice and Police, Twitter post, 'Success for Switzerland and other #Schengen states in fighting irregular migration using the Balkan route. Serbia changes its policy and requires visas from citizens of Burundi as of today and of Tunisia as of 20.11.22', 22 October 2022 ([https://twitter.com/EJPD\\_DFJP\\_DFGP/status/1583761220489781249](https://twitter.com/EJPD_DFJP_DFGP/status/1583761220489781249)).

(45) International Rescue Committee, 'The IRC: the EU's migration agreement with Tunisia "risks driving migrants and refugees onto more dangerous routes"', 19 July 2023 (<https://www.rescue.org/eu/press-release/irc-eus-migration-agreement-tunisia-risks-driving-migrants-and-refugees-even-more>).

(including 2 467 minors and 678 women)<sup>(46)</sup>, compared to 11 742 in the same period of the previous year.

## The financial crisis

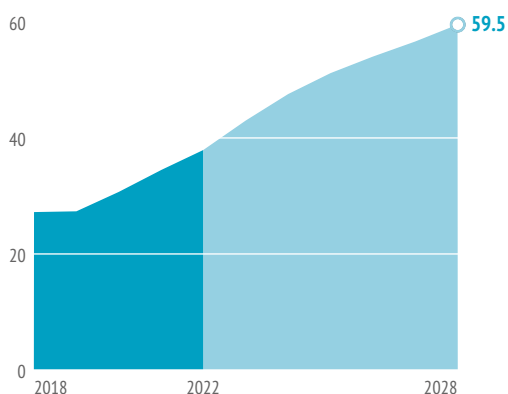
With 15.6 % of the country's total external Public and Publicly Guaranteed (PPG) debt owed to the Paris Club, a United Nations Development Programme report forecast that external debt-service payments (principal plus interest) would consume more than 25 % of revenue between 2019 and 2025<sup>(47)</sup>, thus classifying Tunisia as one of the world's most debt-vulnerable countries<sup>(48)</sup>. Given this dire situation, the Tunisian authorities sought a new deal from the IMF, and in October 2022 they reached another staff-level agreement on the economic policies and reforms<sup>(49)</sup> to be supported by a new 48-month Extended Fund Facility (EFF) with requested access to special drawing rights (SDR) of €1.4 billion<sup>(50)</sup>. An EU macro-financial assistance package of €900 million also depends on the IMF deal. Reportedly, Tunisia is now preparing an alternative proposal for the IMF<sup>(51)</sup> after President Kais Saïed rejected the terms of the loan agreement<sup>(52)</sup>, a deal considered 'key' by the Minister of the Economy Samir Said who during a hearing in Parliament<sup>(53)</sup> said that 'without [it] we will have a weak sovereign

rating' – a statement which contradicts opinions that President Saïed has voiced on many occasions<sup>(54)</sup>.

Following the EU–Tunisia MoU, Tunisia signed a loan agreement with Saudi Arabia worth \$400 million and a grant agreement worth \$100 million, which will serve to pay foreign loan repayments due later this year<sup>(55)</sup>.

## Increasingly in debt

Tunisian national debt is projected to continue to rise steeply, \$ billion



Data: Statista, 2023

Tunisia, critically indebted, and in urgent need of financial support to implement reforms, is however not eligible for debt relief under the G20's Debt Service Suspension Initiative

- (46) Forum Tunisien pour les droits économiques et sociaux (FTDES), 'Irregular migration statistics 2023', August 2023 (<https://ftdes.net/ar/statistiques-migration-2023/>).
- (47) UNDP, 'Sovereign debt vulnerabilities in developing economies – Which countries are vulnerable and how much debt is at risk?', March 2021, p. 25 (<https://www.undp.org/library/dfs-sovereign-debt-vulnerabilities-developing-economies>).
- (48) UNDP, 'Avoiding "too little too late" on international debt relief', October 2022 (<https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2022-10/UNDP-DFS-Avoiding-Too-Little-Too-Late-on-International-Debt-Relief-V3.pdf>).
- (49) However, the IMF's Executive Board review, initially scheduled to take place on 19 December, was postponed indefinitely.
- (50) 'IMF staff reaches staff-level agreement on an extended fund facility with Tunisia', October 2022 (<https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2022/10/15/pr22353-tunisia-imf-staff-reaches-staff-level-agreement-on-an-extended-fund-facility-with-tunisia>).
- (51) 'Tunisia preparing alternative IMF proposal, official says', Reuters, June 2023. (<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/tunisia-preparing-alternative-imf-proposal-official-says-2023-06-13/>).
- (52) 'Tunisia president rejects IMF "diktats", casting doubt on bailout', Reuters, April 2023. (<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/tunisian-president-rejects-imf-diktats-says-public-peace-not-game-2023-04-06/>).
- (53) ARP, Evening plenary session on Friday 28 July 2023 ([https://arp.tn/ar\\_SY/tv/videos](https://arp.tn/ar_SY/tv/videos)).
- (54) 'Kaïs Saïed : "Le FMI n'est pas cité dans le Coran"', *Kapitalis*, 14 June 2023. (<https://kapitalis.com/tunisie/2023/06/14/kais-saied-le-fmi-nest-pas-cite-dans-le-coran/>).
- (55) Agence Tunis Afrique Presse, 'المملكة العربية السعودية تمنح تونس قرضا ميسرا ومنحة بقيمة 500 مليون دولار' ['The kingdom of Saudi Arabia grants Tunisia a soft loan and grant worth 500\$ million'], July 2023 (<https://lnnk.in/a3k1>).

(DSSI)<sup>(56)</sup>, nor does it intend to request a re-scheduling of its foreign debt and partial debt relief negotiations<sup>(57)</sup>. The financial collapse of the country would inevitably lead to internal unrest, and continuing waves of migration, with negative repercussions creating instability in the Mediterranean, eventually turning Tunisia into a surrogate terrain for great power rivalry. This would jeopardise the EU's energy security ensured by the TransMed pipeline, the first ever underwater gas pipeline connecting Algeria to Sicily through Tunisia and under the Mediterranean<sup>(58)</sup>.

## CONCLUSION: WHAT CAN THE EU DO?

A severe crisis is rapidly unfolding in Tunisia, against the backdrop of a sharply polarised political landscape, making it imperative to provide urgent support to address the massive economic and social challenges facing the country. Europe, with which Tunisia shares a deep-rooted history but also common concerns and values, is best placed to play a stabilising role in the short, medium and long term.

It is thus time to strengthen the partnership between the two countries, a genuine privileged partnership based on reciprocal rights and obligations as well as policy cooperation and integration. While the Union struggles with internal pressures, pressing challenges and developments in its immediate vicinity call for immediate action, to be undertaken in collaboration with the

Tunisian government, in order to stabilise the social and economic situation as quickly and as comprehensively as possible. This will, in return, help ensure a stable neighbourhood for Europe.

To support Tunisia in its time of need, the EU has to adopt a unified and coherent stance *vis-à-vis* the situation in the country, taking into account both the current political and socioeconomic circumstances. First, the Union has to balance human rights with politics and economic self-interest, pushing for the release of political prisoners, while continuing to support the justice and security sector reform processes.

Also, the EU could offer financial support, through loans, and more importantly, agree to a moratorium on all debt service payments and a comprehensive debt restructuring process. This could be achieved through an inclusive national economic dialogue about genuine economic reforms that do not disadvantage the most vulnerable and through the establishment of a modern and more efficient administration with less red tape and accountable and independent justice and security systems.

Moreover, as the scheduled date of the presidential elections in Tunisia approaches, the EU can support local actors in maximising election awareness and engagement, and helping guarantee free and fair electoral competition.

Finally, the EU needs to prioritise aid and development programmes that are not conditional on the conclusion of Mobility Partnerships. It is essential that the EU and its

**E**urope is best placed to play a stabilising role in the short, medium and long term.

(56) Qualification is based on per capita income rather than vulnerability: as a middle-income country Tunisia does not qualify.

(57) AllAfrica, 'Tunisia has never sought France for debt relief – French Ambassador', June 2021 (<https://allafrica.com/stories/202106220878.html>).

(58) Ghilès, F., 'As North African energy links are redrawn, Italy becomes Europe's southern gas hub', CIDOB Notes Internacionais, CIDOB, July 2022 ([https://www.cidob.org/en/publications/publication\\_series/notes\\_internacionais/276/as\\_north\\_african\\_energy\\_links\\_are\\_redrawn\\_italy\\_becomes\\_europe\\_s\\_southern\\_gas\\_hub](https://www.cidob.org/en/publications/publication_series/notes_internacionais/276/as_north_african_energy_links_are_redrawn_italy_becomes_europe_s_southern_gas_hub)).

Member States do not exploit the current crisis to establish a foreign intelligence presence in the country<sup>(59)</sup> or to put in place (re)admission centres for Tunisian and Sub-Saharan migrants whose asylum applications have been rejected. It should be noted in this context that the recent calls from the Italian prime minister for a naval blockade<sup>(60)</sup>, following the arrival of a record number of migrants in Lampedusa<sup>(61)</sup>, risk rekindling the debate on this issue, notwithstanding the fact that such a blockade would amount to an act of war, violating international asylum rules and the European Convention on Human Rights, and endangering the lives of people on the move<sup>(62)</sup>.

Any agreement should involve all relevant parties, including the African Union, Libya, Algeria and Morocco, to ensure the proper identification and return of irregular migrants. Integrating mobility schemes, technology transfer and scientific cooperation is key to the long-term stability and prosperity of Tunisia and its neighbourhood.

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(59) Interview with Tunisian Minister of Interior, Radio Monastir, 27 May 2023 (<https://www.facebook.com/radiomonastir.fm/videos/1953781548319108/>).

(60) 'EU "exploring" anti-migrant naval blockade', EU Observer, September 2023 (<https://euobserver.com/migration/157434>).

(61) 'Ten years after tragedy, tiny Lampedusa at centre of migration crisis again', *The Guardian*, September 2023. (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/sep/20/ten-years-after-tragedy-tiny-lampedusa-at-centre-of-migration-crisis-again>).

(62) Recalling the Otranto tragedy in 1997, when 81 people lost their lives as a result of a naval blockade between Rome and Tirana.

## CONCLUSION

# THE SPECTRE OF A THIRD WAVE

Over a decade after the uprisings that swept the Arab world in 2011, the EU has reverted to its traditional policy of favouring the model of authoritarian stability in the region. Given the domestic political context in the countries of North Africa and the region's power dynamics, this situation is not altogether unsurprising. However, it is neither desirable nor sustainable in the long run. The five chapters composing this *Chaillot Paper* offer specific recommendations for the EU's interaction with each of the countries studied. In light of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the existential threat that it poses to Europe, the most important recommendation is that the EU must at all costs avoid the mistake of turning its attention away from this side of the Mediterranean which constitutes its direct neighbourhood. All of the contributors to this volume advocate for a more balanced relationship and longer-term strategy for the EU to avoid being caught off guard by future developments in the region, as was the case with the 2011 Arab uprisings.

As noted by HR/VP Josep Borrell: 'Foreign policy is not just managing crises one after the other. We have to try to think in the medium and long-term. With the pandemic, with the climate, with the energy crisis, we have to think a little bit about what is longer than what is going to happen tomorrow and what [was happening] yesterday'<sup>(1)</sup>.

The Arab Spring, which began in Tunisia in 2011 and subsequently spread to Libya, Egypt, Syria and Yemen, remained dormant for over a decade until 2019 when it jolted Algeria, Sudan, Lebanon and Iraq, four countries that had been largely untouched by the uprisings in 2011. Drawing on a nearly identical collective repertoire of contention, this second surge demonstrated that the Arab Spring is still alive and is an ongoing process. The EU should be aware of this potential third wave, which risks destabilising the region further. Twelve years after the Arab Spring, the spirit of the revolt is still very much alive. Autocrats reacted to the revolutionary protests by providing citizens with generous handouts (when available) in exchange for political stability, or by meting out a sufficient dosage of repression to stifle the last dissenting voices. Nowhere were the demonstrators' demands for political participation, better governance, less corruption and nepotism, and more social justice, employment and dignity met.

The fundamental causes of the Arab Spring continue to simmer beneath the surface of Arab politics and may lead to more revolutionary upheavals in the short to medium term. State policies in the MENA region continue to disregard social, economic and political grievances, which may further sow the seeds of regional instability. The potential catalysts of a third phase are the deeply-entrenched socioeconomic challenges and bad governance

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(1) EEAS, 'EU Ambassadors Annual Conference 2022 – Opening speech by High Representative Josep Borrell', 10 October 2022 ([https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-ambassadors-annual-conference-2022-opening-speech-high-representative-josep-borrell\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-ambassadors-annual-conference-2022-opening-speech-high-representative-josep-borrell_en)).



issues with which the region has struggled for decades.

Additionally, these countries' already fragile economies have been further weakened by the Covid-19 pandemic. During Covid-19, an enormous number of jobs were lost. Between the first and third quarters of 2020, 22 million jobs were estimated to be lost in North Africa due to the pandemic and strict lockdown measures<sup>(2)</sup>. The first quarter of 2020 saw approximately one million full-time employees lose their jobs, while the situation worsened in the second quarter of the year with the loss of 13 million full-time jobs<sup>(3)</sup>. In Algeria, for example, more than 500 000 jobs were lost during the first quarter of 2020 because of the pandemic.

Similarly, in Morocco no less than 432 000 jobs were lost between 2019 and 2020<sup>(4)</sup>. Due to the severe weakness of the industrial sector, the decline in agriculture, and massive urbanisation exacerbating territorial inequalities, most North African states cannot provide enough decent jobs for their citizens. North Africa's unemployment rate in 2022 was 12.56 %. In recent years, North Africa had the second-highest unemployment rate in Africa<sup>(5)</sup>.

While it is true that the conflict in Ukraine has provided opportunities for oil- and gas-rich nations to sustain their inefficient economies for a bit longer, it is clear that the rentier state

is unsustainable, and with it, governments' largesse. In the five North African states, citizens' fundamental needs are hardly met, while the conflict in Ukraine has exacerbated the food security crisis, sending food prices soaring. Egypt and Libya ranked 137<sup>th</sup> and 110<sup>th</sup> out of 171 countries in the 2022 Food Security Index, while Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia ranked 43<sup>th</sup>, 63<sup>th</sup> and 64<sup>th</sup> respectively<sup>(6)</sup>. In a 2021–2022 Arab Barometer report on food insecurity in North Africa and the Middle East, it was reported that in Libya 53 % of citizens, against 68 % in Egypt, stated that they had run out of food before having the means to purchase more<sup>(7)</sup>.

Concerns about climate change may also trigger the third wave of Arab uprisings<sup>(8)</sup>. Arab demonstrations in 2011 and 2019 did not focus on concerns related to water. However, the issue of water access and scarcity may catalyse the third wave. Water shortages have sparked recent protests in North Africa. The current water consumption patterns, the effects of climate change, population increase, urbanisation and poor resource management have all contributed to water stress in the region. Due to this tendency, the state's already fragile legitimacy will undoubtedly continue to erode. Algeria, Libya and Egypt are three of the world's top 17 water-stressed countries. According to a recent World Bank report, water stress affects approximately 40 % of Algeria's population,

## Concerns about climate change may also trigger the third wave of Arab uprisings.

(2) Statista, 'Full-time jobs lost in Northern Africa during the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic from the 1st quarter to the 3rd quarter of 2020', November 2022 (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1190105/full-time-jobs-lost-in-northern-africa/>).

(3) Ibid.

(4) Statista, 'Volume of employment lost in Morocco between 2019 and 2020, by sector', April 2023 (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1218508/volume-of-employment-lost-in-morocco-by-sector/>).

(5) Statista, 'Unemployment rate in North Africa from 2010 to 2023', April 2023 (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/730481/north-africa-unemployment-rate/>).

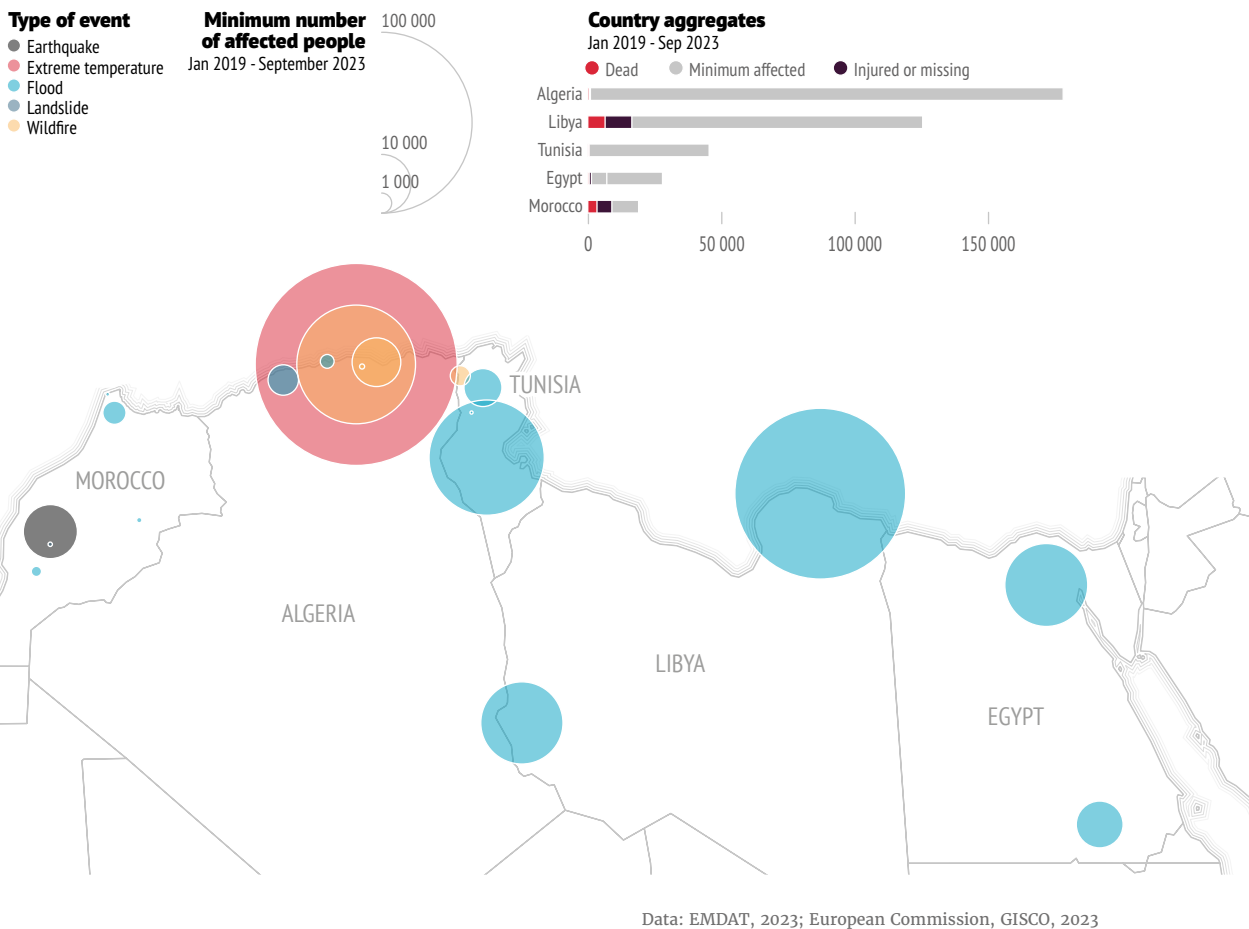
(6) Deep Knowledge Analytics, 'Global Food Security Q2 2022: Food Security Index' (<https://www.dka.global/food-security-index-q2-2022>).

(7) Al Shami, S., 'Food insecurity and its discontents in the Middle East and North Africa', Arab Barometer, September 2022 ([https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/ABVII\\_Food\\_Insecurity\\_Report-ENG.pdf](https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/ABVII_Food_Insecurity_Report-ENG.pdf)).

(8) See Gaub, F. and Lienard, C., 'Arab climate futures: Of risk and readiness', *Chaillot Paper* no. 170, EUISS, October 2021 (<https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/arab-climate-futures>).

## Natural disasters in North Africa, 1990-2023

North Africa has a history of devastating extreme weather events



66 % in Libya, 70 % in Morocco, and 80 % in Tunisia<sup>(9)</sup>.

In the next five years, all these factors could cause another revolutionary upheaval. But engagement by the EU can help North Africa mitigate the risks of these challenges. The EU can go about this firstly by helping to put North Africa's economies on a sustainable path of growth and development as a matter of priority. More extensive investments in technology, innovation and education are required to promote job creation and assist in the fight against youth unemployment in the five countries studied in this volume.

Secondly, the EU has much to offer regarding green energy and can help finance the clean energy transition as these countries have enormous potential in this regard, and Europe needs them as the conflict in Ukraine has disrupted global energy markets and added a new urgency to European transition plans. The European Green Deal and REPowerEU plans commit the EU to ambitious renewable energy objectives, including producing 45 % of its energy supply from renewable sources by 2030. This cannot be done without the involvement of critical energy supply partners in North Africa.

(9) World Bank, *Beyond Scarcity: Water security in the Middle East and North Africa*, World Bank MENA Development Series, 2017 (<http://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/water/publication/beyond-scarcity-water-security-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa>).

Thirdly, the EU can support these countries in reducing the dangers associated with climate change by assisting them in coping with water scarcity, which is today a stark reality in the region. The EU can help North African countries increase desalination capacity and reduce the high levels of energy consumption associated with this process by investing in research, training, and sharing technology. Modernising and upgrading agricultural irrigation systems could be another means of reducing water loss in the region.

There is also a significant risk of intraregional conflicts expanding as everything becomes interconnected and, therefore, more difficult to resolve. The regional antagonism between Algeria and Morocco and the introduction of Israel into the equation since the Abraham Accords must also be considered when contemplating North Africa's future trajectory. In this context, EU support should be focused on: (i) early warning; and (ii) preventive diplomacy and mediation. For example, the EU could increase its funding for the African Union Mediation Support Unit (AU MSU). Leader-to-leader contacts are often the best way to start dealing with a crisis, even if high-profile envoys can still play an important role. More training could be offered to middle-level and lower-level officials who work on the details of peace processes.

The AU MSU is a good first step. The EU could invest more in this mediation unit to train mediators and observers, buy equipment, and provide training and technical support. The unit will need considerable financial support to attract skilled and experienced experts to work on the Western Sahara issue. This conflict has blighted the lives of millions of North Africans and Africans, hindering regional integration and the development of a prosperous North African economy.

Finally, while it is true that the EU is facing an existential threat with the war in Ukraine and

is therefore all the more anxious to preserve the *status quo*, and hence authoritarian stability, in North Africa, it is also beyond argument that Europe is increasingly exposed to the spillover of insecurity from the Mediterranean region. If – or indeed when – a third wave of uprisings takes place in North Africa, it will trigger a massive migratory flow. Egyptians, Moroccans and Tunisians already feature today, in 2023, among the top ten nationalities of illegal arrivals to Europe<sup>(10)</sup>. Europe should not entirely neglect support for human rights, freedom of speech, and the rule of law as essential elements of North Africa's long-term stability.

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(10) International Organization for Migration, 'Migration Flow to Europe – Arrivals', 24 July 2023 (<https://dtm.iom.int/europe/arrivals>).

# ABBREVIATIONS

**AA**

Association Agreement

**AU**

African Union

**bcm**

billion cubic metres

**BRI**

Belt and Road Initiative

**BRICS**

Brazil, Russia, India, China  
and South Africa

**EFF**

Extended Fund Facility

**EIB**

European Investment Bank

**EMGF**

Eastern Mediterranean Gas  
Forum

**ENP**

European Neighbourhood  
Policy

**EUTF**

EU Emergency Trust Fund  
for Africa

**FDI**

Foreign direct investment

**GDP**

Gross domestic product

**HR/VP**

High Representative of  
the Union for Foreign  
Affairs and Security Policy  
and Vice-President of the  
European Commission

**IMF**

International Monetary  
Fund

**IOM**

International Organization  
for Migration

**MEG**

Maghreb–Europe Gas  
Pipeline

**MENA**

Middle East and North  
Africa

**MFA**

Macro–Financial Assistance

**MoU**

Memorandum of  
Understanding

**MSU**

Mediation Support Unit

**NGO**

Non–governmental  
organisation

**SDR**

Special Drawing Rights

**TWh**

Terrawatt hours

**UAE**

United Arab Emirates

**UN**

United Nations

**UNHCR**

United Nations High  
Commissioner for Refugees

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# NOTES ON THE CONTRIBUTORS

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This *Chaillot Paper* analyses the EU's relations with five North African countries – Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia. In particular it focuses on how the fallout of the war in Ukraine as well as the ongoing migration crisis have affected relations. The volume addresses some of the perceived shortfalls in the current EU strategy towards these countries and identifies future areas of both tension and cooperation.

The five country-specific chapters examine the EU approach to each country and provide a range of policy recommendations for the EU's foreign policy in North Africa. One aspect on which the authors agree is the need for the EU to pay more attention to its southern neighbourhood as its influence has diminished considerably in the region.

The different chapters and perspectives presented in this *Chaillot Paper* provide EU decision-makers with insights and recommendations for designing a better approach to the bloc's southern neighbourhood, one that will enable Europe to strengthen its leverage in this critical region.