North Africa: Opportunities and challenges on Europe’s doorstep

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April 2021
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Summary

- The EU member states must change the lens through which they used to see North Africa before the Arab Spring.
- The region provides as many challenges as opportunities to the EU, mainly regarding migration, energy and security.
- The region is witnessing quests for influence by international actors, making collaboration between the EU and the US necessary.
- The absence of an effective North African regional organisation, mainly because of the Western Sahara deadlock, makes building a partnership a complicated task.

A strategic region at Europe’s doorstep, a key piece of its security puzzle, and a gateway to the multiple opportunities of the African continent: that is where the importance of North Africa is lying, and why the EU must keep seeking to build a strong partnership with it. In the end, the two regions will always be linked by their shared geography and history.

Traditionally, EU-North African relations have suffered from excessive bilateralism because of the historical legacy and the disappointing trade agreements (Dadush & Myachenkova, 2018), as well as an ever-growing trend of securitisation (Colombo, 2018), shaped by a multitude of other regional and international trends and variables.

In fact, European policymakers have often observed this region through the Mediterranean prism (Dworkin, 2020), mainly in the framework of the Euro-
Mediterranean Partnership (Euromed) that started in 1995, and because of which the EU-North African relations witnessed important developments. Nowadays, this prism needs, however, to be reviewed. North African countries are increasingly turning their attention to the rest of their continent, the most prominent of which is the Moroccan progressively far-reaching African diplomacy. Thus, North African countries have developed a dual posture over the past few years: they are “looking south while remaining oriented towards the north” (De Groof et al., 2019), hoping, though with little enthusiasm, for continental integration while wanting to preserve their many ‘special’ relations with EU member states, having historically been involved in shaping the joint Africa-EU strategy, among others.

**Additional challenges for the EU foreign and security policy**

North Africa has become ever more volatile since the Arab Spring, characterised by increasing risks of political instability, social unrest, and terrorism. The EU, looking at North Africa as a backyard, must operate in it with care. The region remains an important trade partner for southern EU member states, a rich region in terms of resources of oil and natural gas, and a ‘last resort’ for the migration issue, being one of the largest destination regions for foreign labour and an important region of origin, transit, and final destination for mixed migration flows.

Evidently, the Arab Spring brought to EU-North Africa relations significant uncertainty and further securitisation. The unforeseen uprisings have had important implications, as the series of political, socio-economic and security changes that took places have inspired (fragile) hopes for a democratic transition in some countries but have created additional challenges for the EU foreign and security policy. On the European side, policies have been drafted and adapted to seize the multiple geopolitical
interests in the region. The migration crisis, instability still affecting some parts of the region, and energy-related issues, all placed highly on the European political agenda, became the main themes demanding closer cooperation between the two sides.

The ascendancy of Islamists to power and their vital role in the political process in Morocco, Tunisia, and Egypt was surprising to the EU, to say the least, and raised questions about their willingness and ability to support democratisation. Economically, the revolutions and following instabilities posed a great challenge to trade flows, mainly for the southern EU member states as the ones leading commercial and energy-related cooperation and the key interlocutors of the elites in North African countries. The Arab Spring has, in fact, shed light on the close personal relationships between governing elites from both sides, further destabilising trust in European government’s attachment to democratic principles.

The post-2011 period also constituted a nightmare for the EU migration policy and borders control and a hotly-debated topic between European policymakers (Vohra, 2020), due to the resulting increase in illegal immigration and organised crime of all kinds, from terrorism and radicalization to arms trade and money smuggling. On security matters, building friendly relations with North African countries would help increase the security of southern European member states and foster cooperation in the fight against terrorism, especially with key partners of the EU counter-terrorism efforts such as Morocco and Tunisia.

**Europe’s last resort to tackle the migration crisis**

Demographically, Europe’s situation is characterised by declining fertility rates and rising life expectancy. Although some European officials and parties attribute the deteriorating living standards internally to the major
changes caused by immigration from North Africa, the region remains a sort of demographic treasury for Europe. Considering the continuous increase in the population ageing in the “old continent”, attracting the young and professional workforce from various sectors on a regular and selective basis is an important way to alleviate the problems of labour force shortage within EU member states. Thus, efforts to enhance integration of North African immigrants and their children and to provide equal opportunities must be sustained.

After the controversial agreement concluded in March 2016 between Turkey and the European Union that succeeded in significantly limiting refugees’ access to Europe via the Eastern Mediterranean route, the interest of EU decision-makers shifted to the central Mediterranean route. Meanwhile, the EU is under pressure to present a broader strategic vision - beyond the hastily laid out security solutions - to address the phenomenon. Political and economic investment is needed to create job opportunities in immigrants’ origin countries to improve their living standards. This would ease the flows and avoid exporting the crisis to countries located on the coasts of the southern Mediterranean.

**An important energy provider**

The situation in North African countries remains difficult to read, mostly in Libya and, on a lesser degree, Algeria, but Europe is eager to ‘energise’ ties with the region. The available resources of oil and natural gas in North Africa remain an irresistible target for EU member states that lack a confirmed energy supply. The less than can be said is that the EU is working to transform the region into a machine that balances energy supplies from Russia, especially after the 2008-2009 crisis. Italy, Germany, Spain, and France have long imported large quantities of oil and natural gas from Libya and other
countries in North Africa. Spain, for example, gets more than the half of its natural gas from Algeria (Magnus Commodities, 2019). The North African giant is also Italy’s second-largest gas supplier. If violence were to break out in Algeria—not out of the realm of possibility, taking into consideration the ongoing Hirak movement—and its gas supplies were somehow disrupted, Europe would have a significant problem. Both countries also became the biggest buyers of Libyan crude in late 2020, right before the oil blockade amid the ongoing turmoil in the country.

Similarly, over the past few years, multiple institutional and industrial initiatives have been launched to foster energy cooperation, especially in support of green transition. One of the most relevant of these is “Medgrid”, created in 2010 by a group of utilities, grid operators and equipment makers, with the target of carrying out a feasibility study of the development of a grid aimed at connecting Europe to North African solar electricity producers. Morocco, the only African country to have a power cable link to Europe, could produce 96% of its electricity based on renewable energy by 2050, and will be able to export it. France and Morocco will be the first to experiment with transporting solar power from the south to the north of the Mediterranean in the next few years. In the long run, the project plans to connect Algeria to Spain and Sardinia, Tunisia and Libya to Italy, and Egypt to Greece.

**The necessary EU-US cooperation in North Africa**

Since Biden’s election to the new Presidency of the US, there have been calls for more political investment and cooperation with the EU in coping with the MENA region’s issues. The U.S. strategic interests are at stake in the Middle East, but those of the EU are too on the southern shore of the Mediterranean (Vimont, 2021). This requires a differentiated approach, tailored to the
specifics of each subregion. North Africa must no longer be looked at as “secondary” to the rest of the Middle East, as, given how energy, migration, extremism, and Russia’s influence coincide in North Africa, “Europe’s future will be decided in it” (Cook, 2019). Simultaneously, China has steadily increased its economic presence to become the largest trade partner and foreign investor in some of the countries, even if the region does not figure in the first rank of Beijing’s foreign policy priorities. These threats to stability must not be an afterthought for the EU or the U.S.

**Concluding remarks**

Building up a strong EU-North African partnership remains a complicated task, primarily because of the absence of an effective North African regional organisation. This means the relationships are fundamentally bilateral, showing varying degrees of depth, dynamism, and characterised by some conflicting interests, mainly over the deadlock of the Western Sahara. This same conflict has made many EU-North African trade agreements in and out of court over the past five years. If not treated correctly, it might lead to greater consequences that the recent Moroccan–German diplomatic crisis warns about (Bachir, 2021).

Overall, risks of spill-over of instability remain high, as most North African countries are still highly exposed to the rising geopolitical tensions from neighbouring countries (in the Sahel and the Middle East), creating a loose and sometimes conflictual space at Europe’s doorstep. In this peculiar context, political initiatives to bring together the heads of states to discussion tables are much needed to stabilise the region, and a regional order must be first established.
References


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