

THE MAGHREB'S DISENGAGEMENT FROM EUROPE

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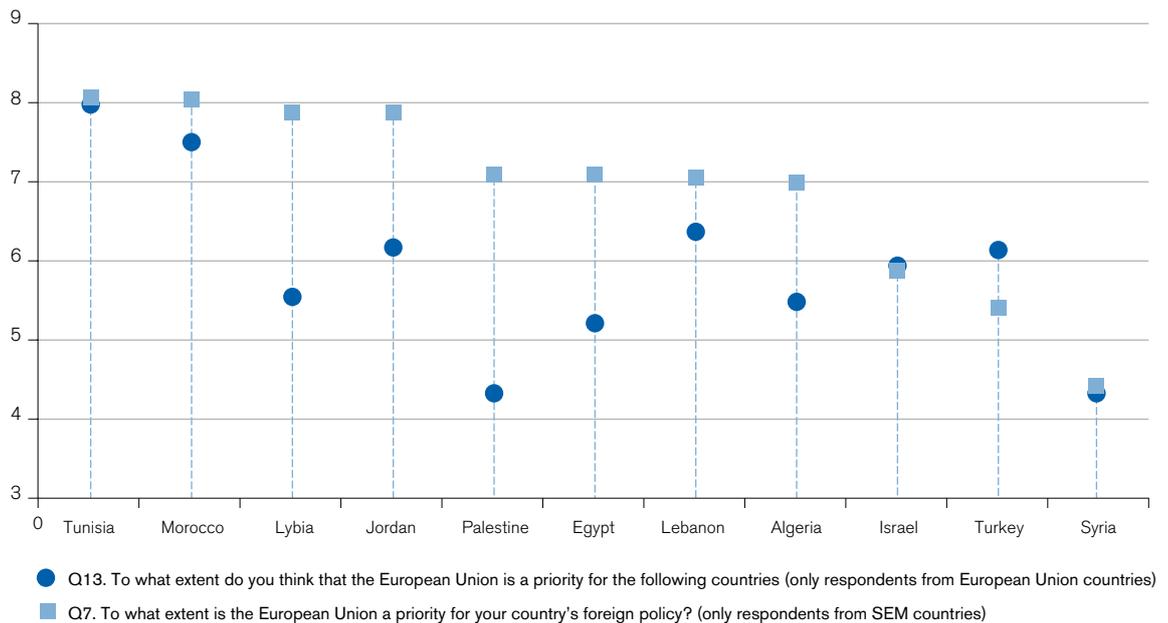
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Europe continues to be the Maghreb's top trading partner and it ranks very high in Maghreb's foreign policy-making considerations.

The Maghreb countries adapted an anti-European discourse for most of their postcolonial history. Half a century after independence, diatribes against France remain frequent in Algeria's official rhetoric. Anti-Italian sentiments are strong in Libya, partly as a result of Gaddafi's propaganda. Even the Westernised Habib Bourguiba in Tunisia and the Europhile Hassan II of Morocco engaged occasionally in strong campaigns against their former colonial masters.

However, Europe continues to be the Maghreb's top trading partner and it ranks very high in Maghreb's foreign policy-making considerations (see Graph 1).

Graph 1: The EU as a foreign policy priority (mean 0-very low extent, 10-very high extent)



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 9th Euromed Survey

The five North African countries therefore align largely on Europe's security and migration policies. Gaddafi's Libya for instance kept Italy as its main economic partner and positioned itself as a strong European ally on migration and counter-terrorism. Algeria, although very strict about its independence, accepts stopping migrants from crossing to Europe and being, perhaps unwillingly, a guardian of Europe's south. Moreover, France is Algeria's first economic partner, where most of its expatriates live and the place where the Algerian leadership goes for medical treatment, etc.

North Africa's postcolonial autocrats therefore acted in a Joker mask: anti-colonial heroes for their populations and docile partners for their European neighbours. For Europe, the Maghreb countries were reliable allies that kept the southern borders safe (apart from the years when Gaddafi went rogue, i.e. 1970-1998). The "deal" was simple: as long as the regimes kept migration on leash and security stable, Europe would limit its criticisms and avoid imposing its human rights-based norms.

This "deal", however, has not stopped these countries from looking for new partners over the years. Gaddafi's Libya and Algeria, for instance, looked at the Soviet Union – then Russia – to arm their troops. Gaddafi even tried to build an anti-European African Union, and Morocco is building a strong pan-African network. Algeria invited the Chinese to invest and work in big numbers in its territory, and Asian cars started invading the markets of Tunisia and Morocco from the 1990s, etc.

The Trend Has Accelerated After 2011

Then came 2011. In fact, the events of 2011 should have encouraged more rapprochement with the European Union (EU). The popular movement was quickly dubbed the "Arab Spring" by European journalists, intellectuals and politicians. It reminded Europeans of the 1848 Spring of Nations and the 1968 Prague Spring. There was a European appropriation of the movement and a wave of enthusiasm was felt across Europe. The European intelligentsia imagined that the Arab world would soon join the club of Western democracies.

What happened later is well known. Civil wars in Syria, Libya and Yemen, international interventions of all kinds, coup and restoration in Egypt, political stagnation in Jordan and Morocco, economic crisis in Tunisia, diplomatic watershed in the Gulf, etc. Hope and enthusiasm ended in fear and despair.

And while the Middle East in the last century was the theatre of countless wars and political upheavals, North Africa was rarely so. But, after 2011, the region, which is historically and geographically closer to Europe than the central Middle East, started to shake.

Europeans, moreover, were not the only ones who felt emboldened by the regional change. Qatar and Turkey were quick to jump on the opportunity offered by the Arab Spring. They pushed their allies to the front row by means of financial, diplomatic or media support. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), on the other hand, saw the Arab Spring as a threat to their national interests and went on a quest to save the falling regimes or restore authoritarian rule. Russia, while militarily overstretched between Ukraine and Syria, has also increased its economic exchanges with Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco (and to a certain extent Mauritania), and started getting vocal on Libya. China, still politically absent, became Tunisia's third export partner and has signed important contracts with Algeria and Morocco. Furthermore, Mauritania, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Egypt announced their enrolment in China's Belt and Road Initiative.

These ties did not start in 2011. However, apart from a few exceptions, their post-2011 intensity is unprecedented. Europe's leverage on North African governments is, conversely, diminishing. Some would argue that the neo-colonial umbilical cord is being cut, while others contend that a new neo-colonialism is emerging.

Values of democracy, peace and human rights, in theory, guide Europe. But the Old Continent remains the echo chamber of former colonial powers. Its approach is therefore easily perceived as paternalist and neo-colonial. Moreover, the EU takes a defensive attitude regarding its borders through fear of terrorism and mass migration. This in turn makes North Africans feel that they are in the dock, not on the allies' list. Furthermore, the conditionality that comes with

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European aid and partnership is often cumbersome. EU values translate into complex legal procedures and political pressures that make partners uncomfortable. Because of the strong anti-European rhetoric that spread during the postcolonial period, the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean populations see conditionality as a form of unwanted interference and a prelude to conspiratorial designs.

The non-European newcomers, on the other hand, make a different offer. They are led by autocratic regimes and do not have democracy promotion projects. They frequently resort to corruption to ease things or make them work, be it in their own countries or in their foreign deals. Their focus on good governance and the rule of law is accordingly limited. Most of these countries have themselves suffered from Western imperialism in the past, which opens common ground between them and the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean nations. Also, because they are new global or regional powers, they are interested in undermining Western supremacy. Their growing economies, on the other hand, push them towards looking for new markets. Hence, they find in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries good candidates to maximise their power and resources. The Southern and Eastern Mediterranean governments are consequently interested in their offer, which looks more appealing and less burdensome. However, and as benevolent as these countries may look, they all have political agendas, if not now then in the future.

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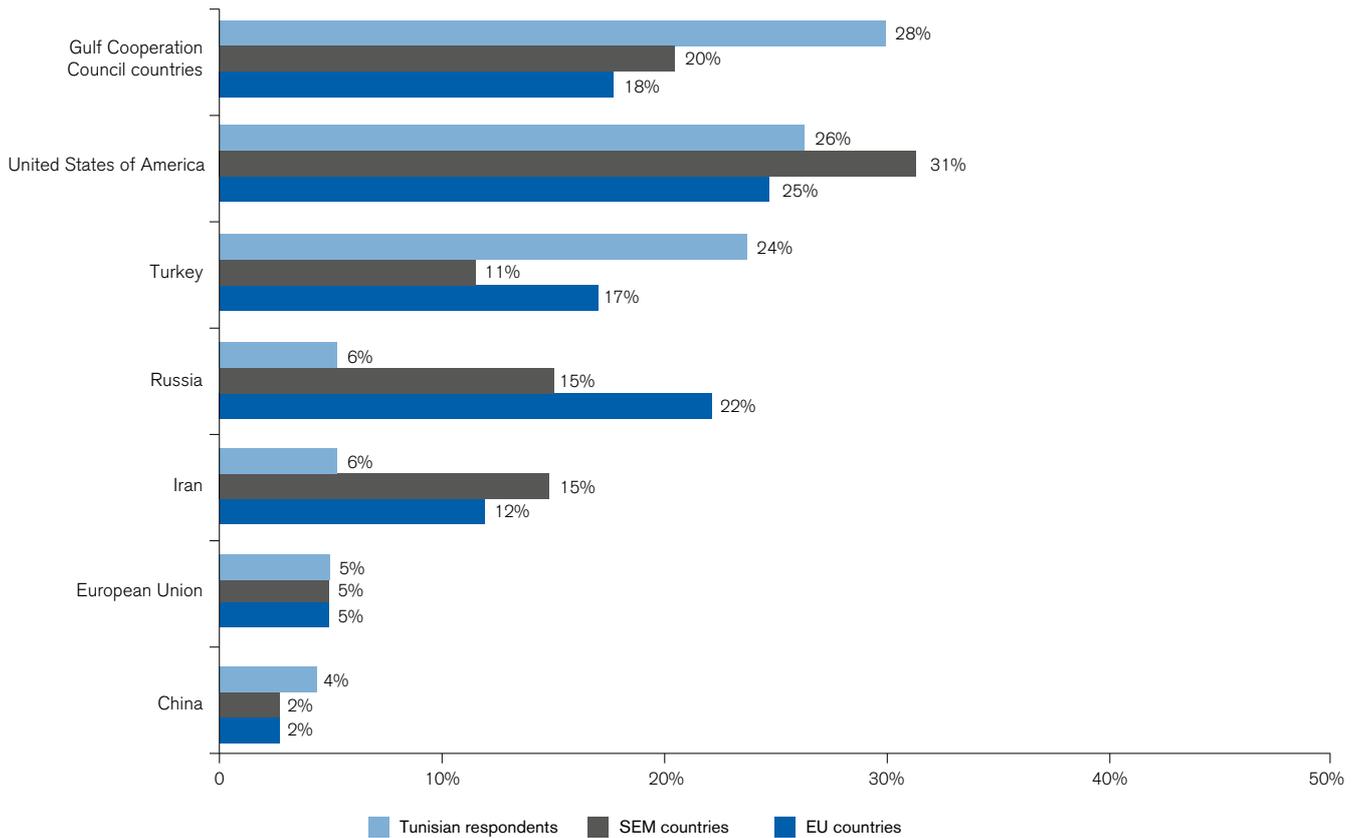
Arab and Muslim countries (Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Turkey) play the Arab-Islamic brotherhood and fraternity card when interacting with their North African counterparts. But their politics is driven by classical realist goals and they are using North Africa to maximise their political and economic power. For the UAE, Qatar and Turkey, for instance, the region is an economic bonanza because of its natural resources (oil, gas, phosphate, etc.), agriculture, proximity to Europe and port facilities. And for the UAE and Saudi Arabia, North Africa is a theatre of their conflict with Qatar and Turkey and a place where they can challenge their enemies' interests, etc. This has precipitated the 2013 coup in Egypt, complicated the civil war in Libya and deepened Tunisia's political crisis. It is telling that the 9th Euromed Survey respondents see the Gulf countries as the second highest threat to Southern and Eastern Mediterranean stability, and actually the highest threat according to the Tunisian participants (they ranked Turkey third, see Graph 2).

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Russia has considerable economic interests in North Africa (Libya, Algeria) and important geopolitical gains to make there, such as pressuring Europe from the south. North Africa might therefore find itself entangled in the cold war game that already opposes Russia to the West in Europe and the Middle East. There is already a Russian military presence in Egypt and news of Russian political or military involvement in Libya continues to pop up. Russian intelligence activities were uncovered in Tunisia, and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov used Tunis as a platform to defend his country's Ukraine policy in March 2014. The relatively positive image of the country among the 9th Euromed Survey respondents from Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries is possibly due to the massive Russian propaganda disseminated across the Arab world (see Graph 2).

Graph 2: Which of the following actors are more likely to have a negative effect on the stability of the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean region?

(respondents were asked to choose 2 options out of 7)



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 9th Euromed Survey

China's hard politics is currently limited to its Asian hinterland, which may explain why very few people see it as a threat to stability in the 9th Euromed Survey. In sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, Beijing relies mainly on soft power. Yet Beijing is now gradually putting pressures on the indebted African countries to follow its political line, as witnessed recently in Kenya or Burkina Faso. Chinese activity has recently been increasing in North Africa. Algeria, for instance, is slowly becoming dependent on Chinese goods and services, and Beijing is becoming an important economic partner of Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt. For China, North Africa is a link between sub-Saharan Africa and Europe and an important energy reserve. So while neutral at this point, China may start putting political pressures on the North African countries in the future if its interests are threatened or if its national interest requires it.

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Hence, it is not surprising to see Egypt under President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi completely ignoring Europe's pressures on issues related to human rights and democracy. In contrast to former President Hosni Mubarak, who was largely dependent on Western aid, Sisi has diversified his country's relationships. Bailed out by the Saudis and the Emiratis, politically backed by the Russians and courted by the Chinese, Sisi can calmly look beyond Europe.

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In Libya, which is divided in two, the United Nations (UN) backed – but weak and inefficient – Western government is considered close to Europe. But, even so, Prime Minister Fayed Sarraj can say “no” to Europe when he wishes. The Eastern warlord Khalifa Haftar frequently speaks out against Europe and follows Sisi’s example. He enjoys Saudi and Emirati backing and shows little interest in adopting European values. Haftar has even asked Russia to establish a military presence in Libya. He can therefore brave European threats and condemnations and continue his war. Europe ended up looking for a compromise with him. In the case of Libya, militias can also hold significant power and influence; they are completely out of Europe’s reach.

The Algerian position has not changed, but there are new patterns emerging in Tunisia and Morocco. Rabat, for instance, has severed ties with European institutions after the EU criticised its Western Sahara policies. Moreover, and although many European voices criticised what is described as setbacks for democracy and human rights, Morocco did not alter its course. Morocco, which established itself as a gate to Africa, and where China – along with Japan – is an important investor, can now take bold positions against Europe without facing retributions.

As Tunisia’s ties with non-European countries continue to increase, the government of Tunis may start changing its stance.

Tunisia remains relatively in Europe’s orbit, especially because its democratic institutions allow for political flexibility. Foreigners can criticise Tunisia without fearing immediate sanctions by the regime in Tunis and Tunisian decision-makers can blame any flaws in the relationship on the imperfection of democracy. Yet as Tunisia’s ties with non-European countries continue to increase, the government of Tunis may start changing its stance. Tunisia has for instance been continuously postponing the negotiations for a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement, disregarding European pressures, etc.

The Maghreb, a European zone of influence for more than two centuries, is slowly moving away. That is due more to Europe’s decline and the emergence of new forces than to an innate emancipation movement. How Europe will deal with this new reality and how the Maghreb will use it remain to be seen.

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