

ALGERIA AND THE EUROPEAN UNION: UNCERTAINTIES OF A DENSE RELATIONSHIP

ABDENNOUR BENANTAR

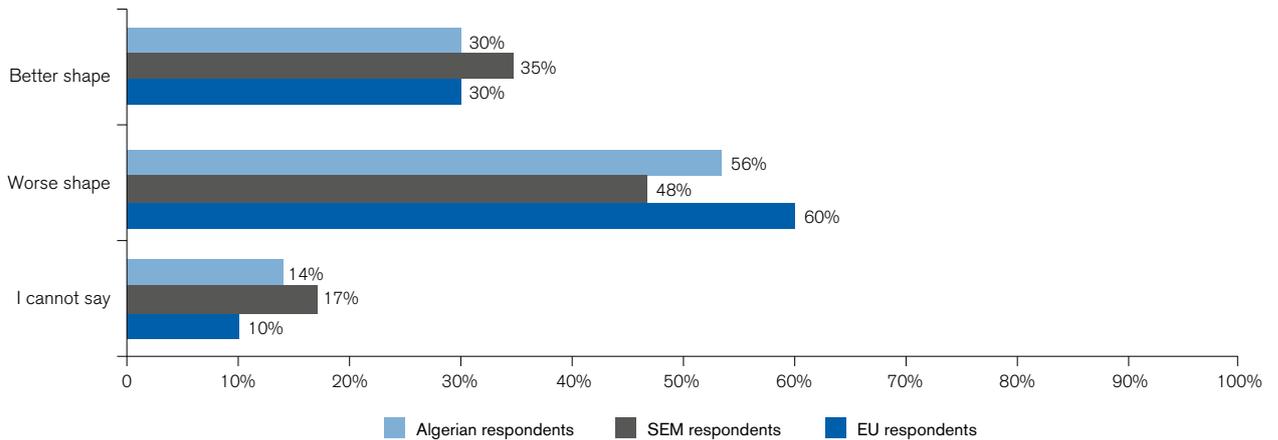
Associate Professor, Université Paris 8, France

Several lessons can be drawn from the Euromed Survey's results. We will analyse the main ones before looking at the major challenges of the relations between Algeria and the European Union (EU) and concluding with the consequences for the Mediterranean region of the rise of populist and nationalist movements in Europe.

Main Sources of Instability for Europe - and its Mediterranean Neighbourhood

The Survey's results reveal concerns regarding the evolution of the situation in Europe: 56% of Algerian respondents believe that the situation is in worse shape than it has been since the launch of the Barcelona Process. A situation that will inevitably have an impact on the Mediterranean region, where Europe is the main actor.

Graph 1: Compared to 1995 when the Barcelona Declaration was signed, overall the European Union today is in:

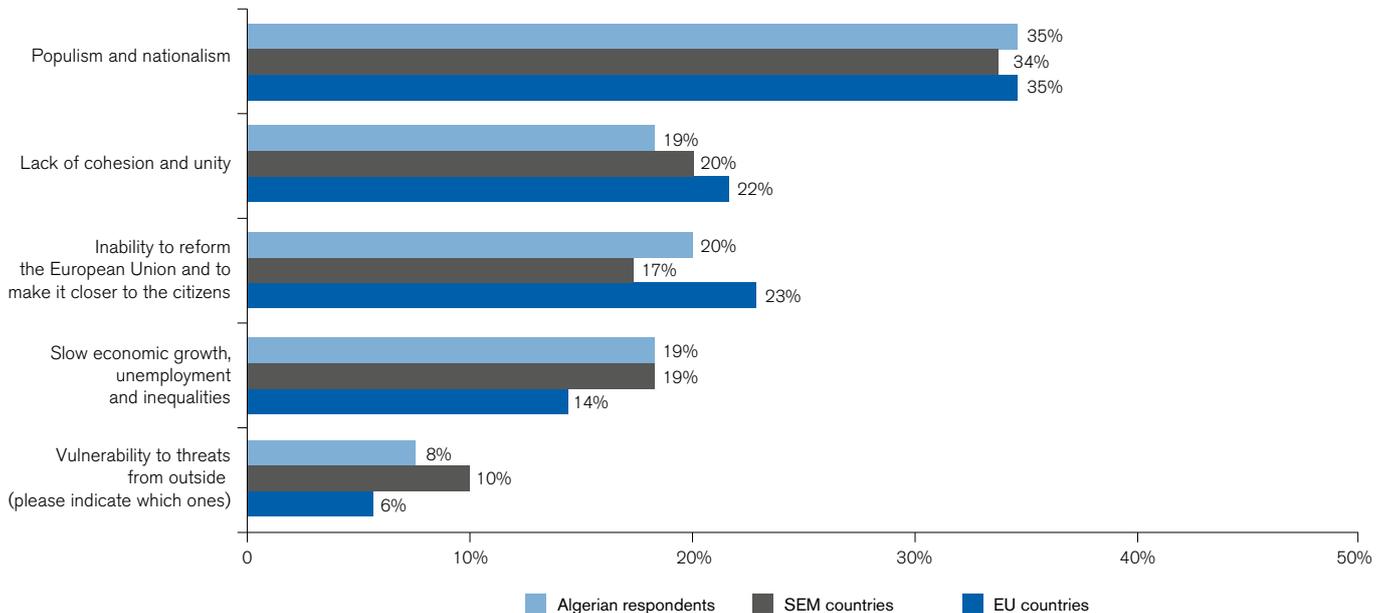


Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 9th Euromed Survey

In contrast to perceived wisdom, political and social issues are more worrying than economic ones. It is interesting to see that Algerian, Southern and Eastern Mediterranean (SEM) and European respondents have the same view about the threat hanging over the European integration process: populism and nationalism. Meanwhile, vulnerabilities to threats from outside are seen as least important (see Graph 2).

Graph 2: What is the main threat to the European integration process?

(respondents were asked to choose 2 options out of 6)

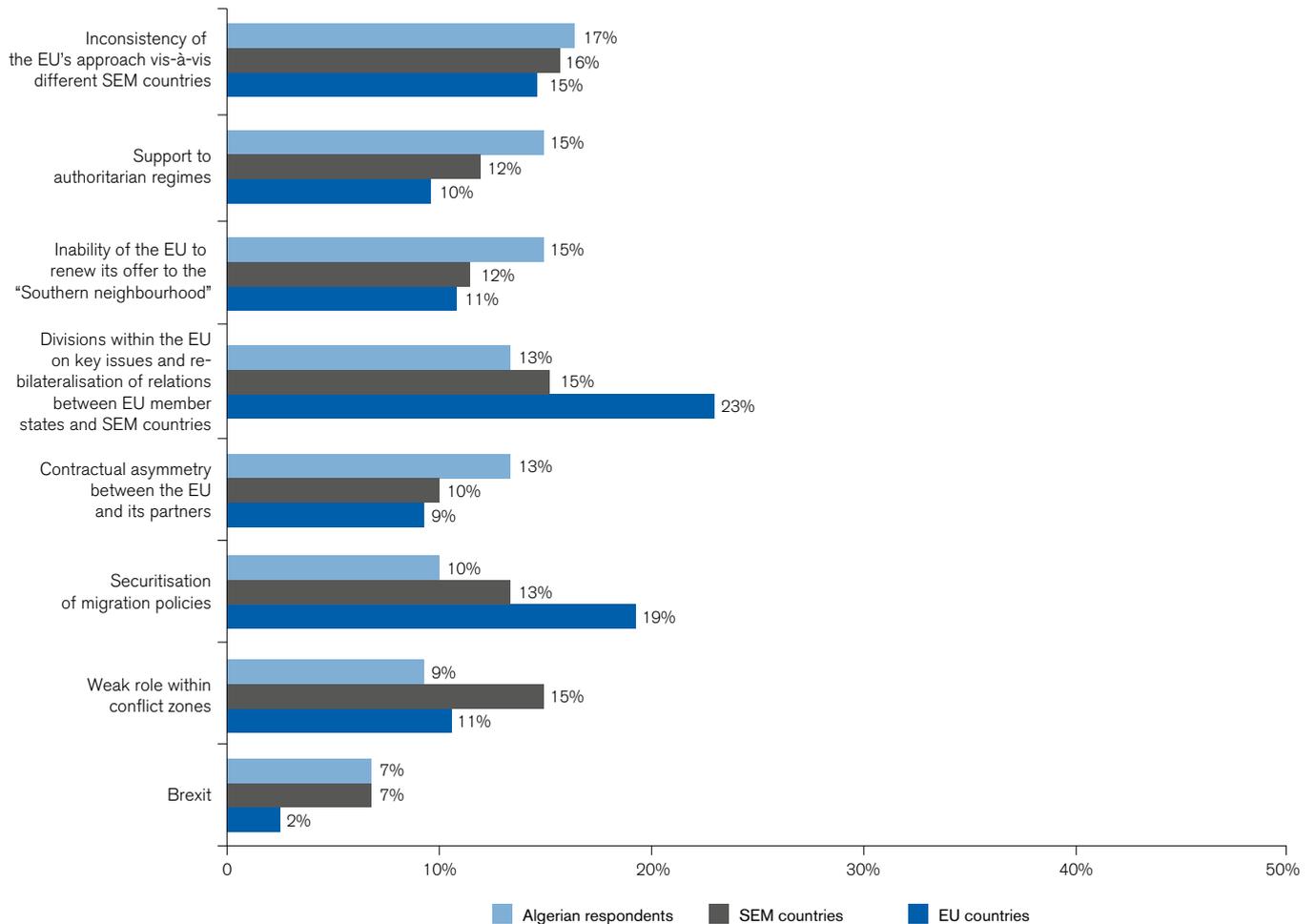


Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 9th Euromed Survey

The Survey's results also show a clear interest from Algerian respondents in the cooperation mechanisms implemented by the EU with its Mediterranean neighbours. We can group these two factors – “Inconsistency of the EU’s approach vis-à-vis different Southern and Mediterranean countries” and the “Inability of the EU to renew its offer to the ‘Southern Neighbourhood’” – within the same category (see Graph 3) of the assessment of the European regional offer and its evolution. This is a major concern for Algerian respondents; an issue they view as the main factor affecting EU credibility in the Mediterranean. Their attitude shows both a concern and also regional expectations that the EU is supposed to meet. Their attitude could reflect a kind of “regional awareness”. The fact that the issue of European support to authoritarian regimes is ranked in second position (see Graph 3) also denotes their expectations and how they see the EU, i.e. a gap between what the EU does and what it is supposed to do, in their view.

Graph 3: What is most likely to affect the EU's credibility in the Mediterranean?

(respondents were asked to choose 2 options out of 8)

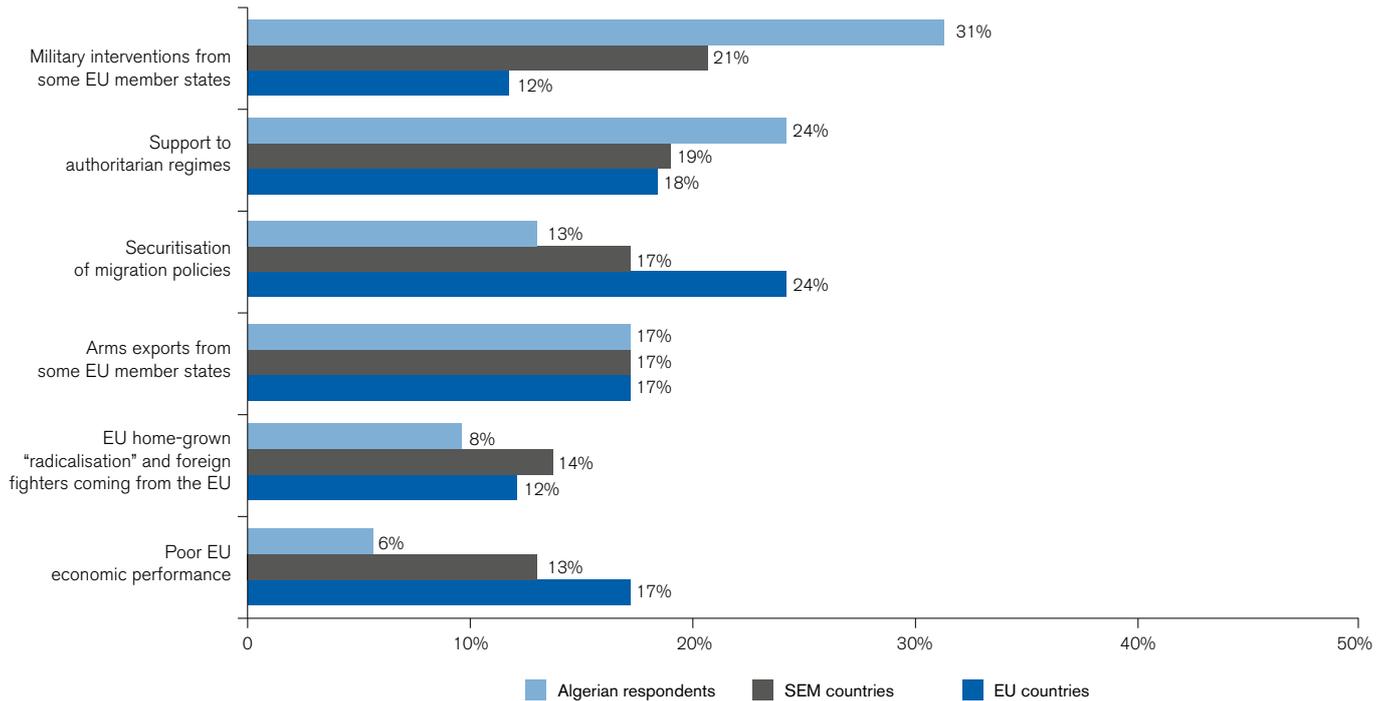


Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 9th Euromed Survey

Algerian participants rank the migration issue in sixth position, but the reality is quite different: this issue polarises, rightly or wrongly, the debates, stances and policies in Europe and quite recently in Algeria but far less intensely. The fact that the issue of support to authoritarian regimes is ranked second reflects a democratic conviction and an interest in Europe continuing to be a provider of stability and certainly to play a role of promoter of democracy in its Mediterranean neighbourhood.

According to Algerian respondents, the three factors linked to the situation in Europe and/or its policies that can have negative effects on stability in the Mediterranean region are different from other EU and SEM respondents (see Graph 4). It is worth noting the convergence of all respondents on the issue of arms exports from some EU member states to Southern Mediterranean countries: 17% consider them as having negative effects.

Graph 4: From the following options that relate either to the situation of the EU or to its policies, which ones are likely to have the most negative effect on the stability of SEM countries?
 (respondents were asked to choose 2 options out of 6)



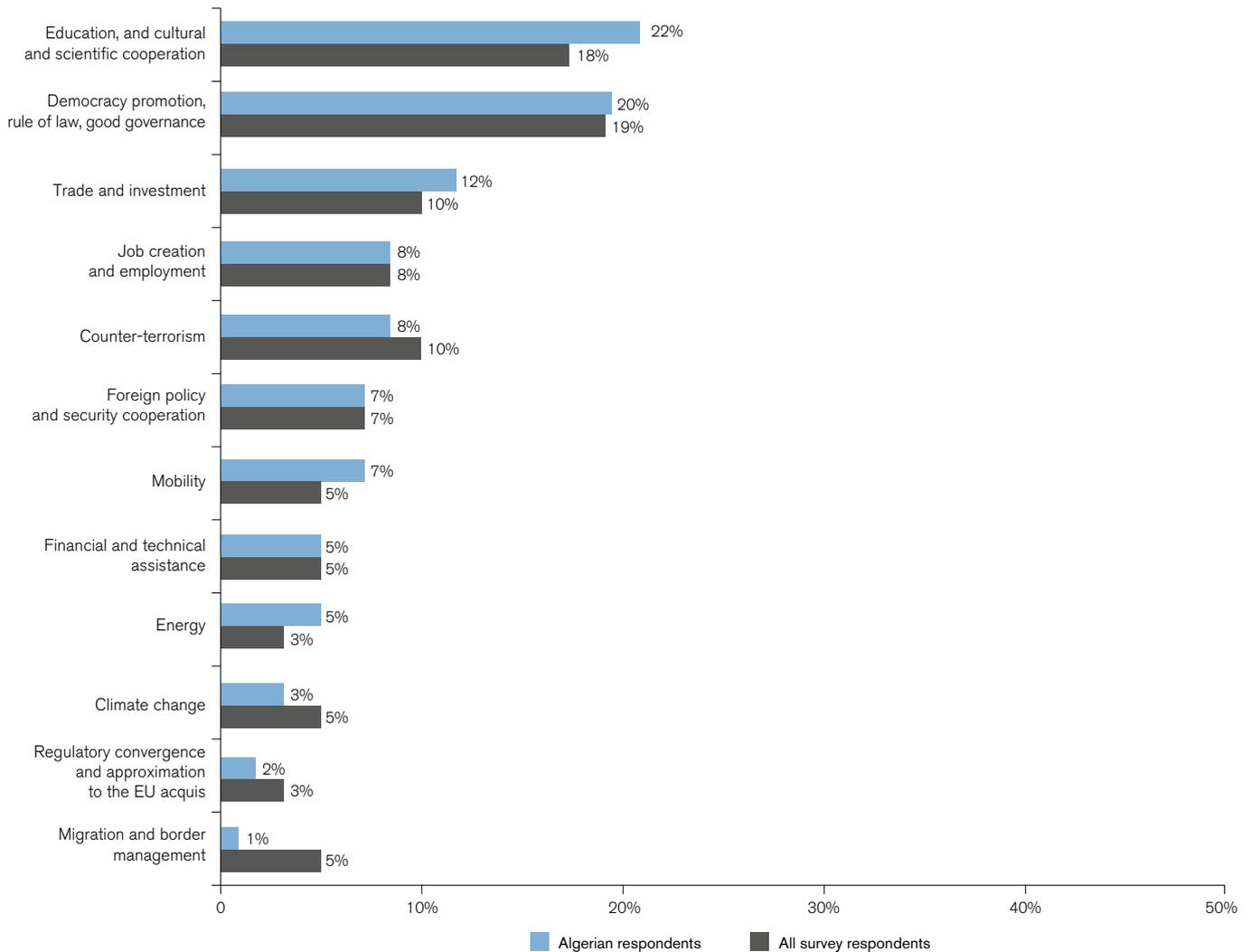
Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 9th Euromed Survey

Primacy of the Democratic Parameter

It is also interesting to note that educational, scientific and democratic considerations prevail over economic issues (trade and investments) and security issues (notably, the fight against terrorism). For Algerian respondents, the two main concerns in Algeria-EU relations should be, on the one hand, education and cultural and scientific cooperation and, on the other, the promotion of democracy, the rule of law and good governance (see Graph 5).

Meanwhile, trade and terrorism are regarded as far less important, with 10% each. Moreover, it is worth emphasising the marginal interest in mobility (see Graph 5), which is somewhat contradictory as logically it is involved in cultural and scientific mobility. In conclusion, the regional political agenda, dominated by security and economic issues, does not seem to influence the perceptions of Algerian respondents.

Graph 5: The most important aspects, when it comes to my country's relationship with the EU should be:
(respondents were asked to choose 3 options out of 12)



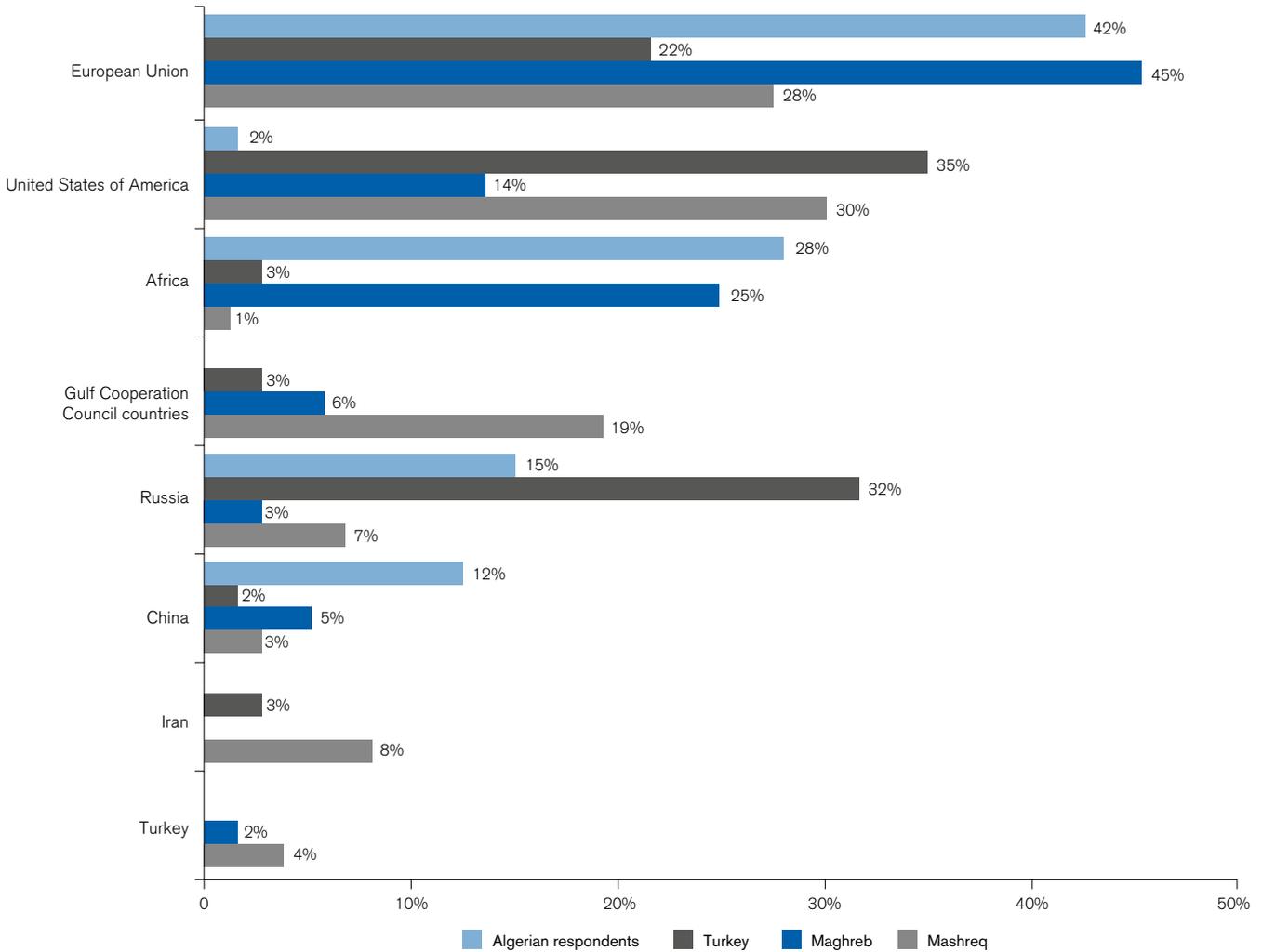
Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 9th Euromed Survey

Algeria's Top Partners: EU Privileged Status

For 42% of Algerian respondents, Europe is far and away Algeria's top partner, followed by Africa and Russia. In contrast, only 2% consider the United States (US) as their country's top partner whereas Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries are completely dismissed (see Graph 6). These are perceptions that do not necessarily correspond to the reality.

While Europe is easily Algeria's top partner, given the density of the economic, political, human, cultural, scientific and historical relations, the ranking for Africa does not correspond to reality. Algeria's official political relations with sub-Saharan Africa are dense but human and economic relations are insignificant: Africa accounts for only 1.5% of Algeria's foreign trade. The third position, occupied by Russia, can certainly be explained by the fact that it is Algeria's main, and traditional, arms supplier. Finally, the attitude to the US and GCC countries also does not correspond to the reality of the political and security relations with the US and political and economic relations with the GCC (investments in Algeria).

Graph 6: As you see it, the top two foreign policy partners of your country are:
 (respondents were asked to choose 2 options out of 8)

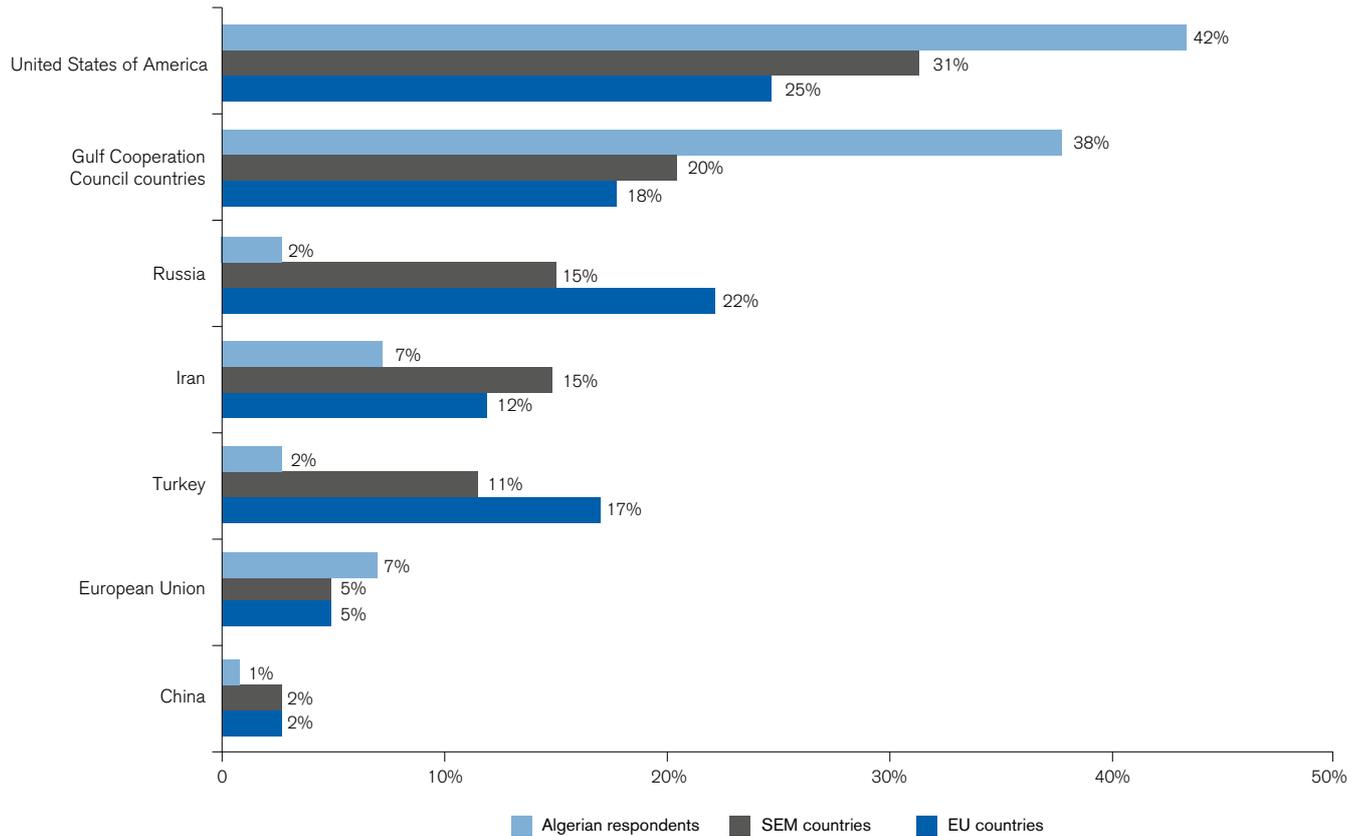


Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 9th Euromed Survey

Algerian respondents' perceptions are supported by their view concerning regional stability. For them, the US and the GCC are the most likely to have a negative effect on stability in the Southern Mediterranean (see Graph 7). We note here a gap between the perceptions of Algerian respondents and those of SEM and European respondents, due to the national context. Only 2% of Algerian respondents consider that Russia can have a negative effect on security in the Mediterranean region compared to 15% for SEM respondents and 22% for European respondents.

Graph 7: 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

There is also a significant gap regarding the GCC, which is negatively seen by 20% of SEM respondents and 18% of European respondents, in comparison to 38% for those from Algeria. Finally, another gap is seen concerning the US, considered as a source of instability by 31% of SEM respondents and 25% of European respondents, in comparison to 42% for those from Algeria.

There are three main reasons that explain the negative assessment of the GCC by Algerian respondents. In the first place, the GCC countries are considered, in the Maghreb in general, as a source of both societal and political threat: a source of religious radicalism, mainly Wahhabi and its funding. Secondly, these countries are also considered as sources of instability in the Arab world in general bearing in mind their involvement directly and/or through allies intervening in several conflicts (Libya, Yemen, Syria). Indeed, the GCC countries today are involved in all the focuses of tension in the Arab world in one way or another. Finally, the current crisis between Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, on the one hand, and Qatar, on the other, has also become a source of regional instability polarising inter-Arab interactions.

Algerian respondents' attitude to the US can be explained by the American policy in the Arab world and, more particularly, vis-à-vis certain issues that mobilise public opinion in Algeria, notably the Palestinian question and Iraq (its invasion and occupation of Iraq) and by its alliance with the GCC countries, which are seen as a destabilising factor both at a domestic (in each Arab country) and regional level. It is worth noting the gap between SEM and Algerian

respondents, on the one hand, and Algerian respondents, on the other. Although they are geographically far from the Middle-Eastern focuses of tension, the latter assess the US more negatively. The historical factor and the Algerian security imaginary, as well as the Libyan crisis, have also influenced their attitude.

In contrast, all respondents see the EU as a factor of stability given that only 7% of Algerian, 5% of SEM and 5% of EU respondents consider that it can have a negative effect on the region.

Main Challenges of EU-Algeria Relations

Rebalance of economic relations

For Algeria, economic relations with Europe are characterised by a “structural asymmetry” that should be corrected. According to a report by Algex (National Agency for the Promotion of Foreign Trade) on the impact of the association agreement, which entered into force in 2005, Algeria's losses between 2005 and 2020 would amount to 19 billion dollars while losses for 2005-2014 would be 8 billion dollars. These losses are the consequence of the tax and customs benefits granted to European countries through the association agreement, which allow them to flood the Algerian market while local products cannot compete and even less so aspire to be exported to Europe. Along with these huge financial losses there are the consequences experienced by Algerian consumers: increased prices of imported products and therefore lower purchasing power. The association agreement is supposed to boost Algerian exports, other than hydrocarbons, but 13 years after its entry into force, the structure of the Algerian economy has not changed at all.

According to the Algerian Ministry of Trade, after the implementation of the association agreement, Algerian imports from the EU have increased by 200%, rising from 8.2 billion dollars (annual average) to 24.21 billion dollars in 2011. Algerian exports to the EU have increased by 140%, rising from 15 billion dollars (annual average) to 36.3 billion, of which 97% are hydrocarbons.

Because of the financial crisis it has experienced since 2014, following the drop of its oil and gas revenues, Algeria has imposed (provisional) restrictions on imports. This has caused tension with the EU, which considers that they contravene the association agreement, while for Algeria they are in line with the provisions set out in the agreement. This is exacerbated by a structural tension making economic issues a major challenge for EU-Algeria relations. It should be emphasised that the EU continues to be Algeria's main partner. In 2017 it accounted for 44% of its trade (in comparison to 16% by China).

The energy partnership

The energy issue has a common strategic nature. For Algeria, the aim is to ensure its positioning in the European market benefitting from its geographical proximity. For the EU, the aim is to strengthen the links with a reliable supplier that guarantees it the security of provisions far from geopolitical hazards. However, this partnership, desired by both parties, encounters many obstacles: 1) Some European partners sometimes put pressure on Algeria by failing to guarantee the renewal of contracts, as was recently the case with Italy, which, from an Algerian perspective, damages the reliability of European partners, thereby creating mistrust. 2) Linking Algeria more to the European energy market means worsening its economic dependency on the EU, and the latter also seeks to reduce its dependency on its suppliers, including Algeria. 3) Bearing in mind its own increased domestic consumption, Algeria will be unable to maintain, in the long term, the steady rhythm of exports to Europe. Hence the intention of the Algerian government to exploit shale gas, which awakens strong opposition in the south of the country.

Algerian losses are the consequence of the tax and customs benefits granted to European countries through the association agreement.

The issue of mobility (visas) risks becoming more sensitive in the next few years bearing in mind the European pressures for total outsourcing of the management of migrant flows.

The migration issue

Europe is seeking to outsource the management of migration flows far from its borders by using the carrot and stick, often the stick, including interfering in the national legislations of its neighbours. Yet, the latter, notably Algeria, have become lands of emigration, immigration and hosting, after having been for a long time only lands of emigration. This makes the migration issue complex and causes tensions in Maghreb societies. Algeria has recently categorically opposed the European call to set up reception centres for sub-Saharan migrants in the Maghreb on behalf of Europe. The issue of mobility (visas), often at the core of discussions between Algeria and Europe (Union and member states), risks becoming more sensitive in the next few years bearing in mind the European pressures for total outsourcing of the management of migrant flows.

Extremisms in Europe risk boosting and fuelling extremisms in the Mediterranean countries.

The security of the Algerian community in Europe

With the rise to power of right-wing movements in Europe, the security of the Algerian community will become a political challenge for relations between Algeria and Europe and probably have an impact on European interests in Algeria if the physical integrity of Algerian nationals living in Europe is threatened. This question concerns both Morocco and Tunisia.

Impact of the Rise of Populisms and Nationalisms in Europe on its Neighbourhood

As the Survey revealed, as if it needed saying, populism and nationalism are the main threats to the European integration process (see Graph 2). Let's briefly look at what this teaches us and how this situation specific to Europe can have an impact on Euro-Mediterranean relations.

Given its geographical proximity, the EU is considered a democratic benchmark for respondents from Arab countries that are not democracies and held up as a model by SEM citizens. Yet this is being undermined by the challenge to European democracy from the rise of populism and nationalism. The rise of populist and nationalist parties, some of which are openly Nazi or fascist, is a danger not only for Europe but also for its Mediterranean neighbours. Extremisms in Europe risk boosting and fuelling extremisms in the Mediterranean countries. This can trigger a process of reciprocal manipulation, so much so that the Southern Mediterranean region is falling prey to extremisms with a religious connotation, even if they are not in power. The weakening of European democracy will therefore have destabilising effects on the political situation of its neighbourhood. It will have at least two opposed effects: to contribute to the authoritarian consolidation while strengthening extremisms that in their turn will feed off European extremism; and catastrophic situation will develop unless the rise of extremisms in Europe is halted, both at a societal and electoral level.

European extremist and xenophobic movements have always made the migrant the enemy and are openly anti-Arab and anti-Muslim. These movements exploit the attacks to try to manipulate societies in depth. Given that there is an important Arab/Muslim community or of Arab/Muslim origin, if populist and/or nationalist governments increase in Europe, the risks of political tensions in Euro-Mediterranean relations would be high. With such governments, the ethical considerations (promotion of democracy, the rule of law and human rights), already marginalised on the EU agenda, will be eliminated. In this respect, Mediterranean Arab authoritarian regimes could adapt to the populist and nationalist governments in European countries. Nevertheless, the xenophobia of these movements will expose these regimes to internal social tensions. The transitional Tunisia, which has recently passed a law to fight against discrimination and racism (the first in the Arab world) could be the source of an ethical demand from the South faced with the increased extremisms and racisms in the North.

In short, the evolution of Euro-Mediterranean relations, already confronted with structural problems, is now facing a tough test; that of the rise of European extremisms and nationalisms in an extreme othering process challenging European democracy and, by extension, the Euro-Mediterranean relations model. It is a time of uncertainties in the Mediterranean region: would Europe, a source of moderation and stabilisation – and a democratic benchmark – risk becoming a source of tension and instability?

Abdenmour Benantar holds a doctorate in political science from Paris X-Nanterre University. He previously studied at the University of Toulouse I and at the University of Algiers (Institute of Political Science and International Relations). He is lecturer at Paris 8 University. He was also a lecturer at the University of Batna (Algeria) and associate researcher at CREAD (Algiers). He was also research fellow at the NATO Defense College in Rome, where he was later guest lecturer.

His research focuses on security issues in the Mediterranean both in their Euro-Mediterranean dimension as well as in their South-South dimension (inter-Maghreb, inter-Arab and Arab / Middle Eastern relations) and its Sahelian extensions.