

THE SECURITISATION OF THE EU'S MIGRATION POLICIES: WHAT CONSEQUENCES FOR SOUTHERN MEDITERRANEAN COUNTRIES AND THEIR RELATIONS WITH THE EU?

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Introduction

For the EU the migration question is shaping both internal and external dynamics.

Both shores of the Mediterranean region are confronted with ample challenges. Europe is grappling with the flow of irregular migration, Brexit and the rise of populism while its southern neighbours linger in political and economic uncertainties. Despite the strong historical, political and economic links that tie the northern and southern sides of the Mediterranean, migration is increasingly dominating discussions on Euro-Mediterranean relations, sometimes pushing aside or affecting cooperation in other policy areas. While migration concerns both sides of the Mediterranean, the challenge seems to be more compelling for the European Union (EU), where the migration question is shaping both internal and external dynamics. Internally, migration is increasingly influencing electoral outcomes and undermining EU solidarity, while externally it has, for instance, occupied the debate on the provision of external resources in the next Multiannual Financial Framework.

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The EU preoccupation with migration seems to be fostering a security-driven approach to migration. The evolving internal context in Europe has cemented a growing perception of migration as a security threat, and has resulted in more measures and policies geared towards stemming the migration flows. The Euromed Survey reveals that the securitisation of migration does not bode well for the EU's relations with the southern neighbourhood. Departing from the Survey results, this article aims to shed some light on the securitisation of the EU's migration policies as far as the Southern Mediterranean countries are concerned and reflect on the possible implications this carries for the future of the EU's relations with its southern neighbours.

Contextualising the EU's Response to Irregular Migration

In order to better understand the securitisation of the EU's migration policies, it is necessary to first provide some context to the EU's handling of the so-called migration crisis. In 2015, over one million migrants and asylum seekers reached Greece and Italy, many of whom then engaged in secondary movements to other EU countries. Between 2015 and 2016, asylum applications received by EU member states exceeded one million (Brekke & Staver, 2018). This new reality almost triggered "a complete meltdown" in the Schengen common travel area and the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) (Maiani, 2018). As member states' reception and registration systems struggled to keep up and deal with this influx, the sustainability of the existing asylum and border control regime was put into question.

In the midst of the crisis, many member states decided on unilateral measures and opted for reinstating border controls and for pushing back asylum seekers to other European countries. Establishing border controls not only defies the idea of a common space but also undermines compliance with the EU Asylum Procedures Directive and the Dublin Regulation (Maiani, 2018). Interestingly, this practice was by no means novel as France, for example, has been involved for years in pushback of migrants towards Italy. However, this practice has grown almost uncontestedly with more countries either engaging in or threatening pushback of migrants. Most recently, the Italian government even threatened to return migrants and asylum seekers to Libya after reaching Italy to put pressure on the EU and other member states to distribute the arrivals.

The migration issue thus “put the tension between national and supranational interests” and raised questions about member states’ ability to manage borders and control migration (Brekke & Staver, 2018). For the EU, tackling irregular migration is no longer about merely ensuring border security. The increasing struggle for power between far-right parties that are sceptical about the EU and pro-EU parties implied that the future of the EU was itself at stake. The idea that migration represents a threat to national security gained momentum, and the link established between irregular migration and infiltration of terrorists into EU territory has exacerbated concerns. This state of uncertainty and growing fears has put more pressure on EU leaders to address the issue.

These concerns about migration are justified as irregular migration “can legitimately be viewed as undermining the exercise of state sovereignty” (Koser, 2011). Concerns also relate to models of integration and social cohesion if the new arrivals come from different social or cultural backgrounds. As one EU official puts it: while the numbers have dropped this year, the crisis is starting inside Europe about how to deal with the migrants in the EU (statement of an EU official at an event in Brussels). However, beyond the mantra of stemming the flows, little solidarity could be found among EU member states on the migration dossier, especially on the question of reforming the CEAS. The unfruitful discussions on reforming the CEAS have recently, once again, shifted attention towards finding “practical solutions” to the challenge with the southern neighbours.

The Securitisation of Migration

The perception of irregular migration as a threat to national security has put defence and security at the heart of the EU’s approach to migration (Völkel, 2014). While this trend of securitising EU migration policies is by no means novel, it has significantly increased in the past few years. In the context of the southern neighbourhood, the securitisation and externalisation of migration management has always tended towards the transformation of North Africa into a buffer zone (Bach, 2010). This is best exemplified by the recent EU proposal to create “regional disembarkation platforms” in third countries in the southern Mediterranean. The EU essentially seeks to secure the cooperation of North African countries on the reception of migrants and asylum seekers in exchange for financial and technical support. It hopes that establishing such platforms would disincentivise migrants from embarking on the treacherous journey in the first place. And, if they do, they could be immediately returned to Africa. This proposal to establish disembarkation platforms seems to be based on the premise that once the southern neighbours assume responsibility for migrant reception, Europe would not need to grapple with the issue of internal solidarity (Maiani, 2018). However, this proposal is likely to face political and practical challenges. And, most importantly, North African countries have immediately rejected the proposal.

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This proposal comes to complement a series of externalisation measures initiated by the EU to tackle migration. The EU has sought to establish “an extensive system of security governance based on such instruments as readmission agreements, capacity-building, export of surveillance technology, or information exchange” with the southern neighbours (Völkel, 2014). Increasing return of migrants irregularly present in the EU has become a central priority under the New Partnership Framework. The EU currently aims to establish a stronger level of cooperation with Tunisia, the new largest exporter of irregular migrants, through for instance establishing an electronic platform for processing readmission applications, modelled on existing arrangements with some Asian countries (European Commission, 2018).

Externalising migration management to a ring of neighbouring countries cannot be the right approach.

While sea crossings sharply dropped by mid-2018 and even returned to pre-2015 levels, the securitisation approach does not seem to wane. Moving beyond “the vicious cycle of permanent crisis management in the current political environment will require a lot of political courage and leadership” (Kausch, 2018). EU member states continue to introduce controversial ideas to stem the flows either over concerns about a new hike in departures from Libya or seeking to bolster their electoral wins. For instance, Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz proposed deploying EU border guards in North Africa while Italy has shut its ports to migrant rescue ships. According to Marco Minniti, Italy’s former Minister of Interior, while Italy is no longer in a state of emergency, “the new government cannot say this because if they [do], they would start liberating Italians from their fears” (Minniti as cited in Reynolds, 2018).

While security-driven measures might seem to yield results in the short term, externalising migration management to a ring of neighbouring countries cannot be the right approach for several reasons. First, past research has warned that while quick security fixes might seem to produce results in the short term, these are not sustainable and risk exacerbating rather than solving the migration challenge. Second, security-driven approaches risk overlooking the needs of those who are fleeing conflicts and wars and thus need international protection. Third, securitising migration comes at the expense of building genuine and fruitful partnerships with the southern neighbours.

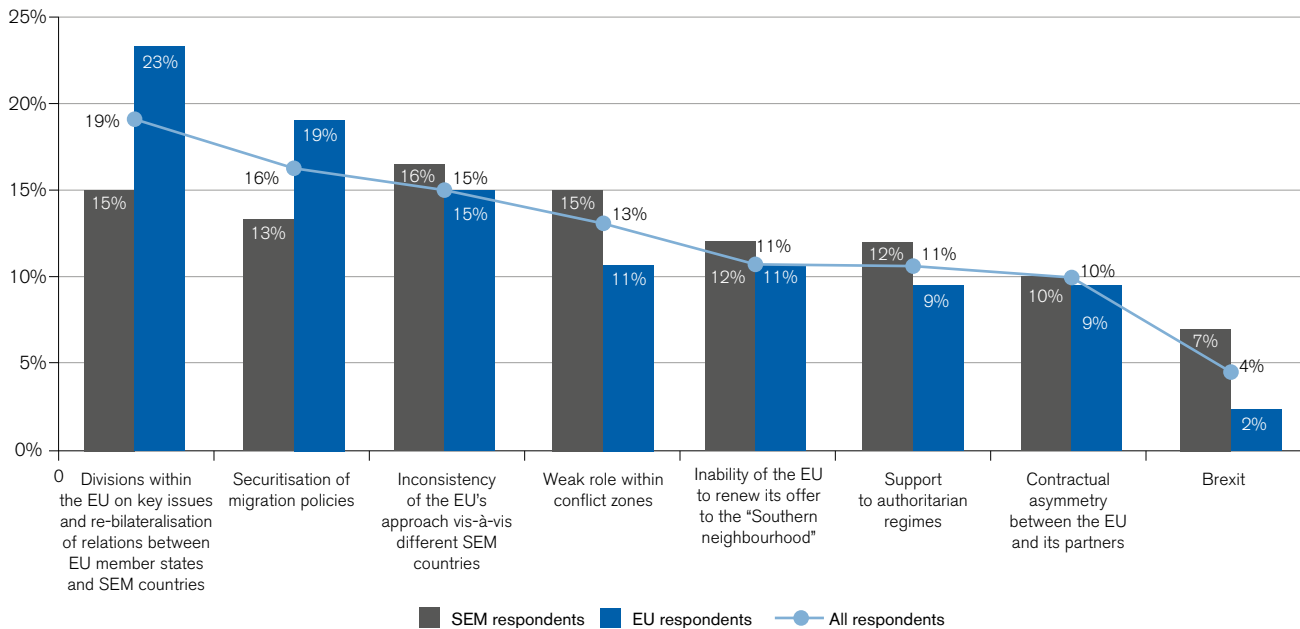
Implications for Relations with the Southern Neighbourhood

The growing securitisation of migration can have implications for both the EU's perception in and relations with the southern neighbours, as the Euromed Survey reveals. The Survey results indicate that the securitisation of migration policies emerges among the key factors that are likely to affect the EU's credibility in the Mediterranean (see Graph 1).¹

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Graph 1: What is most likely to affect the EU's credibility in the Mediterranean?

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

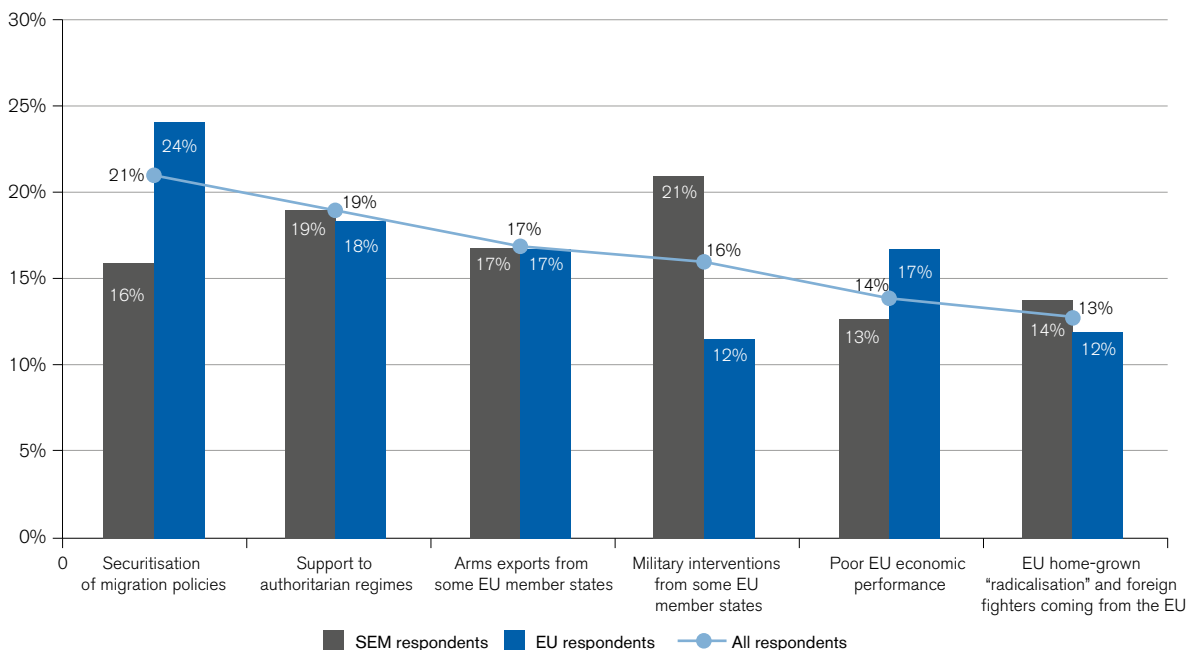


Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 9th Euromed Survey

Statements on the idea to open "regional disembarkation platforms" in North African countries without due consultations with these partners "have been badly received in Southern Mediterranean countries" (Euromesco, 2018). Such proposals affect the EU's image and credibility not only among government officials in the southern vicinity but also among the civil society and the wider public. This is inextricably linked to another finding of the Survey, which is that the securitisation of EU migration policy is among the key policy areas with a potentially negative effect on the stability of the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries (see Graph 2).

1. 16% of respondents identified securitisation of migration as a key factor that can affect EU credibility in the Mediterranean. However, it is worth noting that respondents from EU countries (19%) were more likely than respondents from Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries (13%) to say so.

Graph 2: 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

Exporting the challenges posed by the migrant smuggling business and difficulties in repatriating migrants from the EU to Northern African countries means that these problems are exported to more fragile countries.

While the migrant smuggling business and difficulties in repatriating migrants represent a challenge to Europe, exporting these challenges to North Africa only means that the problems are being exported to more fragile countries. Potentially coercing North African states into hosting these facilities could lead to more dissatisfaction and anger at the governments in place, in an environment which is already marred by loss of trust in state institutions.

The EU's approach towards North African countries has been underpinned by a contradiction between attempting to build strategic partnerships with these countries while at the same time seeking to turn them into a buffer zone (Bach, 2010). This contradiction has impeded a fruitful cooperation on migration, as in the case of negotiations on the double readmission and visa facilitation agreements with Morocco and Tunisia, the EU's closest Southern Mediterranean countries. Despite several rounds of negotiations, progress has been limited. One of the contentious points in these negotiations relates to the clause on returning third country nationals – foreign migrants, mostly from sub-Saharan Africa, who transited through North Africa to arrive in Europe – in the readmission agreement. Tunisia and Morocco have been reluctant to agree on this for many reasons, including that they see the inclusion of this clause as an attempt for the EU to outsource repatriations of migrants. Unless the EU thinks outside the crisis box, these negotiations risk being an endless tale.

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The threat of deteriorating EU-North Africa relations due to securitisation of migration is even more prominent amidst a changing landscape of international cooperation. The current political environment is marked by "the empowerment of non-Western states, non-state actors, and individual citizens" and "shaped by a wider competition in terms of power, money, commerce, diplomacy, and influence both between and within polities" (Kausch, 2018). That is to say the EU faces competition from many actors in the region, and instrumentalising migration cooperation could potentially reduce the EU's leverage with the southern neighbours. The EU thus needs to adapt its policies and instruments to this changing environment, and move

beyond putting old wine in new bottles (Kausch, 2018). Reconsidering migration cooperation with the southern neighbours should be at the heart of this adaptation to the evolving environment. Enhancing EU-North Africa relations will need to forgo proposals that are likely to fuel tensions in southern countries and to channel distrust in the relationship. It has been argued elsewhere that Tunisia, for example, provides a convenient case to try more innovative and ambitious approaches in cooperation with the southern neighbourhood (Kaush, 2018; Zardo & Abderrahim, 2018).

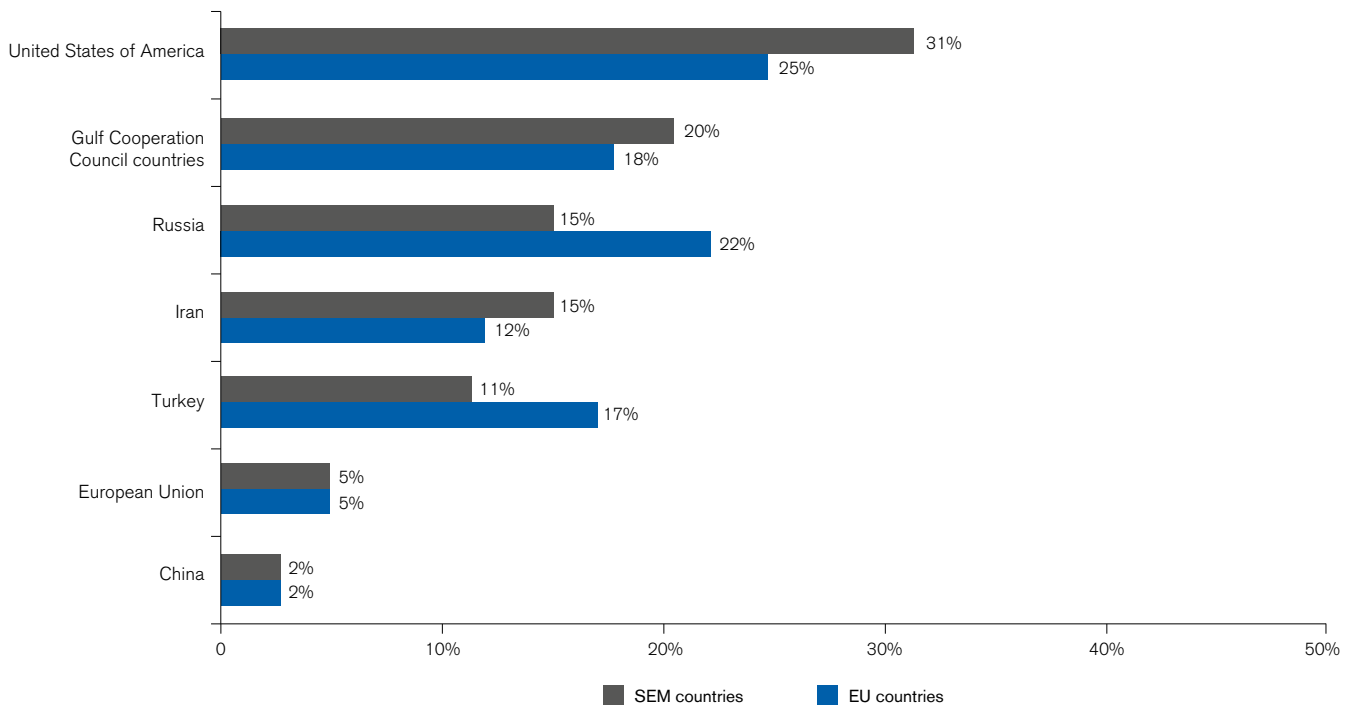
Conclusion: Finding Hope in a Troubled Context

Despite current difficulties and challenges to fruitful cooperation in the Mediterranean, it is possible to overcome tensions and build a more lasting and balanced cooperation. This is primarily because the EU remains largely positively perceived in the southern neighbourhood. The results of the Euromed Survey are revealing in this regard: only 5% of respondents identified the EU as an actor that is more likely to have a negative effect on the stability of the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean region. This shows that the EU's perception remains more favourable than other actors like the United States (USA), Gulf Cooperation Countries (GCC) or Russia.

The EU remains largely positively perceived in the southern neighbourhood.

Graph 3: 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

Besides, the EU is a critical partner for the Southern Mediterranean countries: even if these countries diversify their partners – which they have started to do – (see Youssef “The Maghreb’s Disengagement from Europe” p. 56), there is no immediate alternative to the EU, which remains the largest trade partner for countries of the southern neighbourhood.

Cooperation on migration needs to take the interests and concerns of both sides into consideration.

Both sides, the EU and the southern countries, need to show more willingness and political courage to take their cooperation forward and focus on points of mutual interest. When asked “What do you think that your government should do with regards to its relations with the EU?” many respondents in the Euromed Survey indicate that their governments need to work more with the EU on migration. This is to say that cooperation on migration per se is not undesirable, but this cooperation needs to take the interests and concerns of both sides into consideration. The EU needs to shy away from one-sided proposals that affect its perception and channel distrust in the relationship. At the same time, it is undeniable that irregular departures from Maghreb countries towards Europe have increased, and that these countries need to seriously invest in addressing issues that drive their young people to risk their lives at sea. While cooperation on border security is necessary, this should constitute one element of a broader multi-dimensional strategy that puts job creation and human development at the heart of the solution to irregular migration. Crisis-driven approaches should not be preferable to a lasting long-term partnership.

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