

# North Africa and the European Union: Between Economic (Inter) Dependence and Diversification of Alliances

**Miguel Hernando de Larramendi**

Grupo de Estudios sobre las Sociedades Árabes y Musulmanas (GRESAM),  
University of Castilla-La Mancha

**Bárbara Azaola Piazza**

Grupo de Estudios sobre las Sociedades Árabes y Musulmanas (GRESAM),  
University of Castilla-La Mancha

Since the 2010s, an apparent political/normative disengagement of southern Mediterranean countries from the European Union (EU) has been observed. This disengagement appears to operate more at the discourse level than in strictly material terms, as the levels of economic (inter-) dependence have not changed (Fernández-Molina, 2019). The outbreak of the Arab revolutions or anti-authoritarian protests at the end of 2010 brought the MENA region back into the spotlight of different external, regional and global actors, including the EU and its Member States. The EU's response proved insufficient and lagged behind developments in various southern Mediterranean countries. At the time, the EU was suffering from an internal economic and political crisis, a consequence of the Great Recession of 2008. It was increasingly fragmented and its historical prominence in the region was declining in the face of growing competition from regional powers – the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey – and global ones – China and Russia (Fernández-Molina & Hernando de Larramendi, 2022).

This trend towards “decoupling” of southern Mediterranean countries from the EU (Fabiani, 2021), visible

during the Covid-19 pandemic, has been accentuated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and Israel's incursion into Gaza following the Hamas attacks in October 2023. Observation of the international behaviour of southern Mediterranean countries reveals the use of a new discursive repertoire on the international and regional stage that proposes greater autonomy, at least rhetorically, vis-à-vis an EU on which it is commercially dependent. Taking advantage of the opportunities offered by the changing regional and international environment, these countries wish to avoid unconditional alignments by diversifying their partners. Along these lines lie their interest in other cooperation frameworks such as BRICS, which Egypt, Iran and the United Arab Emirates joined in 2024; Saudi Arabia is expected to officially confirm its membership, and Algeria has unsuccessfully attempted to join. The distancing from the EU can also be observed in southern societies, which question European support for increasingly authoritarian regimes.<sup>1</sup> The EU's discourse on their promotion of democracy and human rights is not credible. The double standards of the Global North, evident in the war in Gaza, discredit the work of civil society organizations in the region that defend rights and freedoms.

## The European Union and the Southern Mediterranean Countries: The EU's Credibility and Attractiveness in Question

The European Union's Mediterranean project has been unable to adapt to regional and international changes. Since the start of the 2011 anti-authoritarian protests, the EU has persevered with an asymmet-

<sup>1</sup> [www.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/analyses/europe-and-the-global-south-how-to-gain-influence-and-credibility-in-a-complex-world/](http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/analyses/europe-and-the-global-south-how-to-gain-influence-and-credibility-in-a-complex-world/).

ric free trade model in which security issues gain weight on the agenda while democratization and human rights protection are diluted. The demands for population mobility from southern countries that were raised at the alternative Euro-Mediterranean conference held in Barcelona in 1995 remain unaddressed. Mobility partnerships remain contingent on the signing of readmission agreements for irregular migrants arriving in Europe from the southern shore of the Mediterranean. These agreements, moreover, often apply to asylum seekers rather than irregular migrants and do not respect human rights. Some European states, such as France, have even “weaponized” the granting of visas to Algerian, Moroccan and Tunisian nationals by using them as an instrument of pressure to try to get their countries of origin to accept the repatriation of their irregular citizens. Obstacles to mobility are an important factor in the deterioration of the EU’s image among the middle classes and elites, the main visa applicants, as is the double standard in the treatment of refugees from different conflicts. The speed and flexibility of reception mechanisms for Ukrainian refugees who left the country after the Russian invasion in 2022 contrasts with the treatment of those fleeing Syria in 2015 or the exclusive evacuation of foreigners or Palestinians holding foreign passports from the Gaza Strip in November 2023. Despite this, regimes take advantage of the security “obsession,” also fuelled by the rise of populist options within the EU, to “transact” by assuming the role of border guardians in exchange for economic and political compensation. The EU has signed migration agreements involving huge sums of money with Turkey (2016), Tunisia (July 2023), Mauritania and Egypt (March 2024), and has pledged financial assistance to Lebanon of one billion euros for the period 2024-2027, under the pretext of “migration management.” This strategy of outsourcing border control to authoritarian regimes, in addition to damaging the EU’s values and proving costly, ineffective and painful, has undermined its credibility in the eyes of some of its citizens, but also in the eyes of societies on the southern shores, which perceive it as a form of “neo-colonial outsourcing” (Tabikha, 2024).

During the pandemic, the EU’s credibility among South Shore civil societies was affected by its handling of access to vaccines. At the same time, other global powers, such as Russia and China, managed to win the communication battle through “vaccine diplomacy.” The Arab Barometer’s sixth wave survey (October 2020) showed how the image of China and Russia improved during this period.<sup>2</sup> Russia’s image also improved, albeit to a lesser extent and not in all cases. The EU’s image, however, suffered, according to the results of surveys conducted by the *EU Neighbours South Communication Programme*. In Morocco, the positive perception of the EU went from 73% in 2016 to 62% in 2021, in Tunisia it fell from 47% to 40% in the same period. In Algeria, it fell from 59% in 2016 to 36% in 2020, although it improved the following year to 55%. The country where image deterioration was most intense was Egypt. The positive view of the EU plummeted from 64% in 2018 to 22% in 2022.<sup>3</sup>

### Southern Mediterranean countries wish to avoid unconditional alignments by diversifying their partners

Since the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Russia wants to strengthen its presence in North Africa and also in the Sahel. In contrast to the image of an EU that focuses its attention and resources on Eastern Europe and shows a clear alignment with Ukraine, Moscow tries to present itself as being on the side of “the Arabs” by promoting the image of a Europe that dehumanizes and undervalues them, through communication tools and strategies, including social media. Russia’s Arabic-language news channel, RT Arabic, has a growing number of viewers in the region and since the outbreak of the Gaza war in October 2023, its Palestinian journalists on the ground have come to resemble those of Arab channels such as Al Jazeera, transmitting information that is closer to the Arab citizenry than that

<sup>2</sup> In Algeria, 65% of respondents had a very favourable or rather favourable opinion of China; in Morocco 62%, in Libya 60% and in Tunisia 59%. In the case of Russia, the percentage of respondents with a very favourable or rather favourable opinion ranged from 52% in Algeria, 44% in Tunisia, 43% in Morocco and 26% in Libya [www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/AB\\_Regional\\_Survey\\_6-IR-Michael-Robbins.pdf](http://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/AB_Regional_Survey_6-IR-Michael-Robbins.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> <https://south.euneighbours.eu/opinion-polls/>.

broadcast by European channels, which are more Israel-oriented (Cherif, 2024). In the Arab imagination, Russia has managed to present itself as an ally, in contrast to increasingly distanced European elites. The provision of subsidized grain and fuel supplies to some countries have also helped populations gain a more positive image of Russia. The “diplomacy of indifference” (Badie, 2024) adopted by most European states in the face of the collective punishment of the Palestinian population in Gaza since October 2023 has also contributed to the distancing of Arab civil societies from the EU, its Member States and the US. The message received by the more than 400 million Arabs is that the lives of seven million Israelis are worth more than the lives of the Palestinian population. China is also trying to align itself with Arab demands and has taken a tougher stance towards Israel. The May 2024 forum in Beijing was presented as a platform where, in addition to deepening Sino-Arab cooperation in various spheres, mainly economic, the unity between China and Arab states on the Palestinian cause was staged. Chinese President Xi Jinping called for a peace conference aimed at resolving the Gaza conflict and supporting the two-state solution.<sup>4</sup> Since the beginning of the war, China has established itself as a reliable option for Arab states seeking an alternative to American influence in the region.

### **Assertiveness and Transactionalism in Morocco-European Union Relations**

Although the EU remains Morocco’s main trading partner, the attractiveness of the EU’s normative power has weakened. In contrast to the objective of achieving a privileged relationship with the EU, embodied in obtaining “Advanced Status” in 2008, Moroccan diplomacy has implemented a more assertive foreign policy over the last decade that seeks to reinforce its autonomy by taking advantage of the opportunities offered by a changing regional and international environment (Casani & Fernández-Molina, 2021). The priority objective is to obtain formal recognition by its partners and allies of its sovereignty over Western Sahara. In the words of Mohammed VI, “The Sahara issue is the lens through which Morocco

looks at its international environment. It is the clear, simple benchmark whereby my country measures the sincerity of friendships and the efficiency of partnerships.”<sup>5</sup> The priority given to this issue became clear between 2016 and 2019, following the EU Court of Justice (CJEU) rulings annulling the application of bilateral agreements on agricultural trade (2016),

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fisheries and aviation (2018) to the territory of Western Sahara. Morocco then decided to interrupt the institutionalized political dialogue with the EU, slow down negotiations for the signing of a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) and not adopt the “partnership priorities” that were to replace the EU-Morocco Action Plan in the framework of the new Neighbourhood Policy adopted by Brussels in 2015. Although this political distancing had no impact on economic exchanges or on security or migration cooperation, it showed a clear desire for autonomy vis-à-vis Brussels. An example of this assertiveness was also the use of bilateral diplomatic crises as an instrument of pressure to obtain explicit support for the autonomy solution advocated by Morocco as a way to legitimize its sovereignty over Western Sahara. Following the three-party transactional agreement whereby President Trump recognized Morocco’s sovereignty over Western Sahara in December 2020 in exchange for Morocco signing the Abraham Accords, Moroccan diplomacy forced bilateral crises with Germany, Spain – weaponizing the migration issue – and later France (Fernández-Molina; Hernando de Larramendi & Ojeda, 2023). At the same time, Morocco has become increasingly transactional in its relations with the EU. Its status as a key security provider and essential partner for the control of migratory flows in northwest Africa has reinforced its leverage in relations with Brussels. By resorting to issue-linkage tactics, Moroccan authorities

<sup>4</sup> [www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/5/30/chinas-xi-calls-for-peace-conference-to-end-tremendous-suffering-in-gaza](http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/5/30/chinas-xi-calls-for-peace-conference-to-end-tremendous-suffering-in-gaza).

<sup>5</sup> Speech by Mohammed VI, 20/8/2022.

seek to secure funding for border control in an increasingly politicized issue in Europe, support on the Western Sahara matter, as well as to prevent criticism on human rights issues or scandals such as the bribery of MEPs and European Parliament officials. At the time of writing, we are still waiting for the CJEU to issue a ruling on the appeal filed by the European Commission following the annulment of the fisheries and agri-food agreements signed with Morocco in 2019, which explicitly included the territory of Western Sahara as its scope of application, after the Commission and the Council resorted to procedural trickery to convince that they had obtained the consent of the Sahrawis, as required by the CJEU in 2018, and that these agreements would benefit the Saharawi population. This reaffirmation of national sovereignty has been accompanied by an attempt to diversify international ties and alliances. In 2016, Mohammed VI made two official trips to Russia and China during which he signed strategic partnership agreements. In 2017, Morocco became the first Maghreb country to join the Belt and Road Initiative and became a member of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). That same year, it multiplied its diplomatic activism in sub-Saharan Africa following its return to the African Union. At the same time, it adopted a position of neutrality in the crisis that pitted Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates against Qatar (2017-2021) in an attempt to preserve and boost its relations with all the Gulf states. Along the same lines is the position it adopted after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, seeking to maintain a balance in its relations with Moscow. In March 2022, Rabat absented itself from the vote on the resolution condemning the Russian invasion adopted by the UN General Assembly, although a year later it supported a similar resolution. Rabat rejected the imposition of energy sanctions on Russia by increasing its imports of diesel, and participated in the Russia-Africa summit in Saint Petersburg in 2023.

### **Sovereignism and the Quest for Autonomy in Tunisia**

In Tunisia, the quest for greater autonomy on the regional and international stage has grown since Kais

Saied became President in December 2019. As part of his populist project to refound the State, Saied has promoted a nationalist discourse that, in the name of sovereignty, rejects the conditions set by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for granting a credit line of 1.9 billion dollars with which to revive Tunisia's weakened and indebted economy, considering it an unacceptable "diktat." In the same vein, he decided in October 2021 to freeze negotiations for the signing of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) with the EU, considering that it would be disastrous to extend free competition to sectors such as agriculture and services between economies that are not on a level playing field. There is also the return of 60 million euros of direct aid to the Tunisian budget disbursed by the European Commission in September 2023 under the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), whereby the EU provided financial assistance in different areas in exchange for the Tunisian authorities strengthening border control. Coming from previously committed funds, this amount was released by the Commission pending ratification of the memorandum by the European Parliament. However, it was rejected by the Tunisian President as contrary to the agreement reached during the visit to Tunisia in July 2023 by Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and the prime ministers of Italy, Giorgia Meloni, and the Netherlands, Marc Rutte.

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Rejection of interference in internal affairs was the argument used by the Tunisian President in May 2023 to declare the delegation of the Venice Commission, a consultative body of the Council of Europe, an *institution non grata* in the country, after it published a critical report on the constitutional and legislative framework for the referendum on constitutional reform on 25 July 2022.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> [www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-PI\(2022\)026-e](http://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-PI(2022)026-e).

Although Tunisia twice supported UN General Assembly resolutions calling for an immediate and unconditional withdrawal of the Russian army from Ukraine, it abstained on the resolution calling for Moscow's suspension from the Human Rights Council. Tunisia's refusal to support the establishment of economic and energy sanctions against Russia has been accompanied by an increase in oil and grain imports and a strengthening of political ties. Tunisia participated in the 2nd Russia-Africa Summit in July 2023 and was visited by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in December of that year. Considering that it refused to allow Western election observers to attend the referendum and election processes after 2022, the Higher Electoral Body (ISIE) signed a memorandum of cooperation with the Russian Federation's Electoral Commission in March 2024 for the 2024 presidential elections. In parallel, Tunisia has sought to strengthen its relations with China. President Saïed attended the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum in 2022 in Riyadh and in 2024 in Beijing, holding meetings with Chinese President Xi Jinping, who expressed China's support for "Tunisia's development path in accordance with its own national conditions," as well as "its rejection of interference by outside forces in Tunisia's internal affairs."<sup>7</sup>

### Algeria: Defence of Sovereignty and Partnership à la Carte

In Algeria, the defence of national sovereignty and the rejection of unconditional foreign policy alignments are pillars of the national political culture built after independence. Although commercially dependent on the EU, to which it directs ¾ of its hydrocarbon exports, Algeria has sought to maintain a position of neutrality in the conflict triggered by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It abstained on resolutions passed by the UN General Assembly calling on Moscow to halt the invasion and absented itself from the session at which Russia was suspended from the UN Human Rights Council. In line with the tenets of non-alignment, Algeria has taken advantage of Brussels' efforts to reduce its dependence on Russian gas and seeks to

strengthen its role as the EU's privileged energy partner without compromising its relations with Moscow. In the field of defence, Russia has increased its arms exports to Algeria in a context of severed relations with Morocco. Russia accounted for 73% of Algeria's arms purchases between 2018 and 2022. The two countries conducted joint military manoeuvres for the first time on Algerian soil near the border with Morocco in November 2022, which does not prevent it from being critical of the presence of Russian mercenaries from Africa Corps – i.e. Wagner before 2023 – in Mali and Libya. Coinciding with the presence of President Abdelmajid Tebboune at the Saint Petersburg Economic Forum in June 2023, the two countries signed a "declaration on a comprehensive strategic partnership" (« *déclaration sur un partenariat stratégique approfondi* »), renewing the one signed in 2001. Along with Russia, Algeria also sought the support of China, to which President Tebboune travelled in July 2023 in his failed attempt to join the BRICS and show his willingness to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as an observer member.

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Algeria considers its trade relations with the EU to be unbalanced and is unhappy with the European Parliament's resolutions on the escalation of arbitrary arrests and judicial harassment of journalists and human rights activists adopted in 2019 and 2020. On the trade front, Algeria has been calling since 2015 for a revision of the Association Agreement signed in 2002. In October 2021, President Tebboune instructed that the agreement be revised "clause by clause according to a sovereign vision and a win-win approach taking into account the interest of the national product

<sup>7</sup> [www.webmanagercenter.com/2023/03/29/504597/crise-tunisienne-la-solution-viendrait-t-elle-de-lest/](http://www.webmanagercenter.com/2023/03/29/504597/crise-tunisienne-la-solution-viendrait-t-elle-de-lest/).

with a view to the creation of an industrial fabric and jobs.” Although Algeria has taken advantage of the war in Ukraine to increase its gas exports to the EU by strengthening energy cooperation with Italy, relations have been marred by the bilateral crisis with Spain.

Algeria’s decision to freeze the Treaty of Friendship and Good Neighbourliness in June 2022 – after Pedro Sánchez’s government changed Spain’s traditional stance on the Western Sahara conflict – was accompanied by restrictions on bilateral trade. The Spanish government received support from Brussels, which considered the freezing of trade transactions between the two countries to be a violation of the Association Agreement. In the area of migration, Algeria considers the management of this issue to be a matter of sovereignty and rejects any European interference. Unlike other North African countries, Algeria maintains a visa reciprocity regime, which obliges European citizens to obtain a visa if they travel to the country. Although the Algeria-EU Partnership priorities established in 2017 foresaw regular dialogues on issues relating to mobility, migration and asylum, no progress has been made on signing a readmission agreement. Algeria does not cooperate with Frontex and rejected, like Morocco and Tunisia, the European proposal to establish disembarkation platforms in Tunisia.

### **Egypt: Alliances of Variable Geometry to Avoid Default**

Egypt’s economic collapse means that Abdel Fattah al-Sisi’s regime is seeking to keep all funding fronts open, including from the Gulf states, the IMF, the EU and rival powers such as the United States, Russia and China. In the first quarter of 2024, and after two years of facing what Prime Minister Madbouly called “the worst economic crisis in Egypt’s history,” the most populous Arab country has received a succession of financial lifelines from the United Arab Emirates, the IMF and the EU totalling \$50 billion. Economic expectations have also guided Egypt’s accession to the BRICS with a view to attracting

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new investment, progressively reducing dependence on the dollar and diversifying trade relations. The 20th anniversary of the entry into force of the EU-Egypt Association Agreement coincided with the signing of a bilateral “strategic partnership” agreement between the EU and Egypt.<sup>8</sup> The latter will receive a total of €7.4 billion from the EU by 2027. This will include €5 billion in loans, €1.8 billion for investments in the green and digital transition and €600 million in grants, which will in turn include €200 million for the management of migration flows. This is yet another example of the strengthening of the transactional, or “informal,” nature of migration agreements with the EU, whereby South Shore countries take on the role of border guards in exchange for economic compensation. The aim of this agreement is to reduce clandestine migration and stem the flow of asylum seekers from South Sudan, Sudan or, potentially, the Palestinian population that would be forced to leave Gaza and pass through Egypt to reach Europe. This agreement has been denounced by a score of Egyptian and European human rights organizations, which have indicated that “without human rights and accountability benchmarks, it would also provide legitimization to al-Sisi’s authoritarian, unaccountable and unsustainable rule, under which Egypt’s human rights situation has deteriorated steadily since 2014.”<sup>9</sup> As part of its financial survival strategy, the Egyptian regime signed a tripartite Memorandum of Understanding with Israel and the EU in June 2022 to transport Israeli liquefied gas to Europe through Egypt that has been maintained even after the Israeli offensive in Gaza in an obvious exercise of pragmatism on Cairo’s part.<sup>10</sup> Economic vulnerability also explains al-Sisi’s response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Al-Sisi initially avoided condemning the invasion or taking a clear

<sup>8</sup> [www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/egypt/joint-declaration-strategic-and-comprehensive-partnership-between-arab-republic-egypt-and-european\\_en?s=95](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/egypt/joint-declaration-strategic-and-comprehensive-partnership-between-arab-republic-egypt-and-european_en?s=95).

<sup>9</sup> <https://sinaifhr.org/show/355>.

<sup>10</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement\\_22\\_3703](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_22_3703); [www.worldoil.com/news/2023/11/13/israeli-natural-gas-flows-to-egypt-rise-as-chevron-resumes-tamar-production/](https://www.worldoil.com/news/2023/11/13/israeli-natural-gas-flows-to-egypt-rise-as-chevron-resumes-tamar-production/).

position on either side.<sup>11</sup> His position has gradually adapted to the circumstances, maintaining a certain neutrality in an attempt to sustain an autonomous foreign policy, at least in terms of discourse. Especially given the fear of a lack of wheat supply – 80% of the wheat consumed in Egypt is of Russian-Ukrainian origin –, of a halt in Russian and Ukrainian tourism – 40% – and of a breakdown in trade relations. Cairo has not supported economic sanctions against Russia and values the support received from Moscow in 2013 when the political transition process was interrupted, which has facilitated bilateral cooperation in defence, security and energy (project to build Egypt's first civilian nuclear power plant). The interests of both countries converge in Libya, where they support the eastern government and General Haftar.

Since coming to power, al-Sisi has also strengthened ties with China by joining the Belt and Road Initiative and from 2022, as a Dialogue Partner of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Chinese investment in Egypt has focused mainly on the Suez Canal Economic Zone. Coinciding with the tenth ministerial meeting of the Forum for China-Arab States Cooperation in 2024,<sup>12</sup> the Egyptian President travelled to Beijing to sign a series of bilateral agreements.

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<sup>11</sup> The Egyptian regime is involved in various initiatives at the regional and global levels. The Arab Ministerial Contact Group on the Ukraine Crisis, for instance, (with Jordan, Algeria, Iraq, Sudan and the UAE, set up by the Arab League following Russia's invasion of Ukraine) met in April 2022 with the Russian Foreign Minister to discuss a possible ceasefire and the use of diplomacy. In June 2023, it was part of a delegation comprising South Africa, the Republic of Congo, Senegal, Uganda and Zambia that visited Ukraine and Russia to pressure both countries to agree to a ceasefire.

<sup>12</sup> [https://a7b4e4.emailsp.com/f/rnl.aspx?fjd=uxzqty.-ge=tyah0=syp\\_9a1.-=55f27d444k7a.5&x=pp&twl4.b35jy:8g=qxsZNCLM](https://a7b4e4.emailsp.com/f/rnl.aspx?fjd=uxzqty.-ge=tyah0=syp_9a1.-=55f27d444k7a.5&x=pp&twl4.b35jy:8g=qxsZNCLM).