

WHY NORTH AFRICA IS SLOWLY DECOUPLING FROM EUROPE

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Akin to a very slow moving of tectonic plates that never produces something as dramatic as a volcanic eruption or a tsunami, North African countries are undergoing a slow process of strengthening their national sovereignty and diversifying their security and economic partners. The Arab revolts of 2011 accelerated a shift which can be traced back to 9/11 and the decision of the European Union and the US to lay the emphasis on security in their relations with southern rim Mediterranean countries. When the West chose to define its relations with these countries as a bed of nails, the only instrument it could use was a hammer. The spirit of the Barcelona Process whose aim was to foster closer economic and cultural links fell victim to what critics viewed as the EU's obsession with security.

It is easier to observe in the detail the shift underway than to define it. The underlying factors are a combination of outside and domestic facts. Riccardo Fabiani, head of North Africa at the International Crisis Group, speaks of America's "selective disengagement from regional affairs" which includes most of the MENA region, way beyond the Maghreb (which for the purposes of this analysis includes Algeria, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia). This shift has "weakened Europe's leverage on its North African neighbours because of the internal divisions of the EU, and its inward focus on migration". The unravelling of the French game in Libya and now in the Sahel has handed a much greater military role to Turkey in the former and in Algeria in the latter, both of which encourage what Fabiani describes as "decoupling". This speaks of a broader failure of EU political imagination and its lack of strategic thinking about Africa.

Whatever its merits, the Union for the Mediterranean, set up in 2007 at the prompting of Nicolas Sarkozy, was no match for the Barcelona Process. Morocco and Tunisia are dragging their feet over the EU's proposed Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) as many economists and businessmen across the region express doubts about its real value to their development needs. As they see it, the EU has not changed the mercantilist thrust of its economic policy; short term considerations govern immigration. For the last four decades, the EU mantra has been that a growing architecture of Association Agreements between North African countries and the EU would lead to faster development and convergence or norms and rules. They note that the free trade associations signed by the EU with Chili or

South Korea are far broader than those they enjoy, which suggest the EU wants to keep them at arms' length. The South is also very much at fault because they continue to privilege their bilateral relations with Madrid, Rome and Paris, oblivious of the fact that Brussels drives policy towards them. No North African country has a serious lobby in the EU capital.

The emergence of new outside actors such as China, Russia, Turkey, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has allowed often precarious north African ruling elites to leverage new sources of military, trade and political ties to reduce their overdependence on Europe. With the exception of Libya, North African countries have avoided getting trapped in the proxy war that has pitted Saudi Arabia and the UAE on the one hand against Qatar and Turkey on the other. In Libya the rivalry between France and Italy further complicated the situation. China and Turkey have increased their exports and investments in Libya, Tunisia and Algeria. The latter supported Turkey military intervention in Libya. Morocco for its part has developed an ambitious policy of economic cooperation with Sub Saharan Africa, mediated by the state phosphate and fertilizer OCP company and leading banks and spurred by the long freeze in its relations with Algeria.

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EU policy making is handicapped by France's stubborn defence of its interests in its former colonies. Paris finds it difficult to imagine a role other than that of dominant outsider it has played for two centuries which explains why the EU has never attempted to try and bring Algeria and Morocco closer and well as its declining influence in Mali and Niger. Algerian security forces are set to replace French ones, which will be cut by half to 2500 men next August in an attempt to ensure a minimum of order in an area which sends many emigrants to the EU. The reappointment of Ramtane Lamamra to the foreign ministry, which he was forced to leave in 2019, comes at an opportune moment. He is Algeria's most experienced diplomat whose intimate knowledge of Africa is internationally recognised. His capacity to juggle Russian, American and French security interests in the Sahel at this critical juncture is second to none.

Having privileged stability in its Mediterranean near abroad after 9/11, which meant supporting authoritarian regimes, the EU had a brief change of heart after the Arab revolts. It supported Tunisia financially, alongside the US and the IMF, but fell into lockstep with Algerian and Moroccan rulers when the latter brutally clamped down on peaceful protests. When the Algerian Hirak movement erupted in a massive and peaceful challenge to the military regime in 2019, the EU sent no political message to the Hirak and then fell into line when the army reasserted its dominant role. As repression against civil society in Morocco and Algeria becomes fiercer than

at any time since 2000 Europe has nothing to say. This discretion contrasts with EU's condemnation of Russia, China and Iran for their alleged abuse of human rights and robs the EU Mediterranean policy of credibility.

Fabiani notes that the ruling elites in north Africa "started to stretch the existing social contracts to distribute available resources to social and economic categories that had been previously on the margins." This was done through the Islamist Nahda party in Tunisia and an increase in the number of public sector employees from 450,00 in 2011 to over 600,000 ten years later. The economic consequences of destroying public investment, slowing growth and increasing the tax burden, have been dire. Despite its growing economies ties to Turkey and China, Tunisia is dependent on the goodwill of the EU, the US and the IMF. But will the EU and the US want to rock the security boat in Tunisia, an oasis or relative calm and successful fight against terrorism for the sake of a few billion dollars and tearing up the book of fiscal rectitude rules? After all, political rules have traditionally attached to IMF rescue packages, even when this was never spelled out in the official agreements.

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The manner in which the economic decoupling of the Maghreb and Europe is occurring is forensically described by Hamza Meddeb, of the South Mediterranean University in Tunis. Looking at the hidden face of informal cross border trade in Tunisia since 2011, he argues that the successful fight against illegal cross boarder flows of trade, especially with Libya and the flow of terrorism which accompanied it led to a switch to often illegal trade flows through the country's maritime borders. His analysis combines a shrewd use of statistics and a quasi anthropological understanding of how Tunisian elites work to conclude that "the dynamics of these maritime trade routes reflect a strategic and progressive shift in Tunisia's trade relations toward Turkey and China and a progressive decoupling from Europe." The statistics bear out this argument as "the increase in imports from China and Turkey (40% and 50% respectively), between 2010 and 2019, corresponds to an almost equivalent decrease in imports from France (-28%).

This shift in turn has allowed new elites to emerge in Tunisia and risks marginalising older ones whose interests are closely tied to France and Europe. In neighbouring Algeria, it is striking to witness the speed with which, to give one significant example, the Turkish private investment in steel making in Oran, the Toysah Group, has prospered compared to the

Italian Danieli Group's ten-year attempt to build steelworks in Jijel and the Qatari ill-fated engagement with the SNS state steel company whose association with the Lakshmi Mittal Group earlier on ended in asset stripping and corruption. Turkey's overarching strategy in the Maghreb is hiding in plain sight: the region offers a market of 250 million consumers, a platform to penetrate Africa and opportunities to leverage its diplomatic punch, not least in Libya where Algeria broadly supports Ankara's policy.

In this game of fast shifting sands, all countries have signed up to China's Belt and Road Initiative. That may not yield dividends immediately but will over time if it is unchecked by a more politically imaginative and economically generous EU response. In Libya, Russia has become an important player diplomatically. None of the above means the EU has no cards to play in North Africa but it does suggest that it is going to need to design a more pro-active policy if it wants to slow the trend of decoupling between the two shores of the Western Mediterranean.