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The declining influence of the European Union in its Southern Neighbourhood

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Civil wars in Syria and Libya, endless conflicts in Palestine and Western Sahara, failed states such as Lebanon, authoritarian regimes in Egypt and Algeria, and recurrent migratory crises are all upheavals that have created a periphery of chaos in the European Union's southern neighbourhood. It is struggling to respond to it, from " Arab Springs " to authoritarian autumns, in the face of the geopolitics of Moscow, Ankara and Teheran, which are fuelling conflict. And all of this whilst dealing with ambiguous partners between Russia and the West. Regional integration initiatives have been forgotten, while Algiers and Rabat are engaged in an arms race. The spectacular, sudden emergence of China has marked the past decade and illegal immigration remains a contentious issue. The [New Agenda for the Mediterranean](#), welcomed by the Council on 19 April 2021, proposes excellent cooperation measures. But it does not have the means to achieve its ambitions. And it fails to address the most vexing issues[1].

A RETURN TO DIFFERENTIATED RELATIONSHIPS

The European Union's relations with the southern shore of the Mediterranean are governed by the bilateral association agreements negotiated in the 1990s and 2000s[2]. Instead of modernising the 1995 partnership, the EU replaced it in 2004 with the neighbourhood policy devised for its eastern partners. However, its "standard action plans" overlooked the differences. Moreover, ignoring the socio-cultural contexts, it focused on shared values, which became ever weaker as power became authoritarian - in Tunis as in Cairo - and as Islamist movements have gained influence. Faced with the "Arab Spring", a

[new response to a changing neighbourhood](#) was launched in 2011 in which universal values replaced shared values.

The latter are however established with countries with a specific status such as Morocco, where the declaration for an "*advanced status*" in 2008 followed King Mohamed VI's wish to achieve "more than association, less than membership". The 2013-2017 plan highlighted an area of shared values and a common economic area. The joint declaration of the 14th Association Council goes further by laying the foundations for a long-term relationship for "*the Euro-Moroccan partnership of shared prosperity around four areas: convergence of values, economic convergence and social cohesion, shared knowledge, political dialogue and security cooperation*".

The same applies to Tunisia where the privileged partnership, in 2012, set political (governance, rule of law, democracy), security and migration cooperation as priorities. Jordan was granted an "*advanced status*" in 2010, emphasising its role in stability in the Middle East. In 2016, the European Union concluded a Pact for Jordan as well as for Lebanon, to help them cope with the influx of refugees from Iraq and Syria.

The European Union has always prioritised investment and trade as factors of stability, development and democracy. The Council gave the Commission a mandate in 2011 to negotiate deep and comprehensive free trade agreements (DCFTAs) with Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt and Jordan, as it had done with the Eastern Partnership countries. The aim was to integrate their economies with that of the European Union by establishing a common

[1] Pierre Mirel: "From the Barcelona Process to the Programme for the Mediterranean, a fragile partnership with the European Union"; European Issue, Robert Schuman Foundation, 21 June 2021

[2] Implemented after ratification: Tunisia 1998, Morocco and Israel 2000, Jordan 2002, Egypt 2004, Algeria 2005, Lebanon 2006, Palestine (interim agreement), 1997

normative space. But neither Jordan nor Egypt showed any interest. As for negotiations with Tunisia and Morocco, they stalled over their fear that their industries and services would be absorbed by those of the more competitive European Union. The fourth round of negotiations with Tunisia in 2019 was not successful. Yet the EU has said it is willing to negotiate asymmetrical agreements. Why did the New Mediterranean Agenda not spell out these principles or propose a new type of approach?

Differentiation and flexibility became the watchwords in the 2015 review of the neighbourhood policy, with the recognition that "*the social and political reality of local communities must be taken into account*". Primacy was given to stabilisation, security and the interests of the European Union, anticipating the [European Security Strategy](#) the following year. It is true that civil wars were raging in Syria and Libya, causing an unprecedented wave of migration in 2015 and that terrorist attacks were causing havoc on both sides of the Mediterranean.

MIGRATION: THE EUROPEAN UNION TAKEN IN HOSTAGE

In 2011, the Council mandated the Commission to negotiate "*Mobility Partnerships*" along three lines: assistance with migration and border management, facilitation of visa procedures, and readmission agreements for illegal migrants. Morocco and Tunisia have signed declarations with the Commission, but none of them have been successful so far. At issue is the refusal to readmit non-nationals who have transited through the partner countries, which argue that it is difficult to prove transit and that they fear creating tensions with the countries of origin, their southern neighbours. There is also the political difficulty of accepting the return of nationals who have left everything behind in the hope of a better life.

Another reason emerged after Turkey's blackmail of the European Union in 2015, which was emulated by others. Hence; in May 2021, when Spain agreed to allow the medical treatment in Madrid of Polisario Front leader, Brahim Ghali: Morocco let thousands of migrants cross the fence of the Ceuta enclave. Then

there was the crisis between France and Algeria, when Paris halved the number of visas granted after Algiers refused to readmit migrants who had been denied asylum. And so, the partners hold the Member States concerned hostage to obtain financial compensation, among other things, and to influence their policy. Spain's alignment with Morocco's plan for Western Sahara ended the dispute.

EU development aid will only have an impact in the long term and only if fertility rates are drastically reduced through proactive policies. In Egypt, where a fertility rate of 3.2 (2020) means that 2 million births are expected yearly to add to the existing 100 million, the problem was already apparent in the 1960s and 1970s[3]. This led President al-Sissi to say that "*overpopulation is, along with terrorism, one of the two real threats to Egypt*". While the rate has dropped in Tunisia to 2.2 and in Morocco to 2.4, it is still 2.9 in Algeria. As a result, there are many young people without jobs or hope, who only aspire to cross the Mediterranean Sea since demography won the economic battle long ago. The High Representative acknowledged in his [blog](#) that "*the difficulties experienced by our neighbours are also largely linked to their demographic growth*". It is regrettable that the New Agenda for the Mediterranean overlooks this vital issue.

Yet the figures speak for themselves. According to Eurostat, Tunisia accounted for 8.3%, Morocco 8.2%, Algeria 6.9% and Egypt 4.6% of the illegal border crossings in 2021. In addition to this, there are those who use the southern neighbourhood as a transit region, coming from Sahelian and sub-Saharan Africa, who represented more than half of the illegal migrants entering through the central and western Mediterranean Sea in 2021. In 2019, according to the UNHCR, 250,000 migrants were living in Egypt, with the aim of reaching Europe. The continent's recurrent wars, lack of jobs and the effects of climate change will amplify these migratory flows in the future. The Commission must therefore pursue a determined policy using all the means at its disposal. A new dialogue was launched in July 2022 with Morocco, which received €360 million for this purpose, and

[3] Pierre Mirel : 'L'Égypte des ruptures', Ed. Sindbad, 1982

Tunisia €93 million under the [Emergency Trust Fund for Africa](#) agreed at the Valletta summit in 2015. And a link has been introduced in the Visa Code between visa issuance and readmission.

Without effective policies with its partners, how can the European Union achieve the acceptance of a controlled migration and asylum policy, as stated in [New Pact on Migration and Asylum](#)? The Union certainly needs workers. But this presupposes controlled migration, otherwise societal divisions will further strengthen extreme political movements, as the recent elections in Sweden and Italy have just shown. There is a need to move from imposed emigration, to chosen migration. The transition will be all the more difficult as conflicts on the EU's doorstep continue to fuel illegal migration.

CONFLICTS FUELLED BY IMPERIALIST GEOPOLITICS

The wars in Syria and Libya cannot be used to disqualify the Union's policy. This would imply that it could have an influence in the face of fundamental movements and internationalisation that have been beyond its control. It has never had a hand in Syria, but it has launched a large-scale aid policy with total commitments of €27.4 billion for Syrian refugees in the countries where they have been living since 2011, particularly in Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon, as well as for humanitarian aid in Syria. In Libya it launched the [Berlin Process](#) for all actors to pledge "not to interfere in the armed conflict or to intervene in the internal affairs of the country". And it set up the [EUNAVFOR-MED Operation IRINI](#) to monitor the UN arms embargo. But neither Russia with its "private" Wagner Group, nor Turkey with its Syrian proxies have honoured their commitments. Ankara intervened militarily after signing a cooperation and security agreement with Tripoli in 2019. In exchange Recep Tayyip Erdogan took advantage of the Libyan Prime Minister's weakness to wrest from him an agreement that modifies the exclusive economic zones, in defiance of the Convention on the Law of the Sea. How can the New Agenda for the Mediterranean allow such behaviour, which is contrary to international law

by a country that is still a candidate for accession to the EU?

Although it has escaped another bloody conflict, Lebanon is nevertheless the victim of a latent civil war, largely fuelled by the Shiite Hezbollah, aided by Iran. In simple terms, its three main components (Shiites, Sunnis, Christians) neutralise its political system, perpetuate clientelism and corruption, and maintain irresponsibility. This is what a powerful youth protest movement denounced in 2019. Proof of this was given on 4 August 2020 with the explosion of the silos in the port of Beirut which disfigured the "Pearl of the Orient". This triggered an acceleration of an economic and financial crisis that plunged the country of the Cedar into misery and despair. The reform framework developed by the United Nations, the World Bank and the European Union in December 2020 is still waiting for the one who has the courage to take up the country's challenges. Hezbollah emerged weakened from the May 2022 parliamentary elections and civil society entered parliament, but Lebanon continues to witness the exodus of its young people.

FROM ARAB SPRINGS TO AUTHORITARIAN AUTUMNS

In Egypt, the electoral victory of the Muslim Brotherhood was short-lived, with the removal of President Mohamed Morsi by the army on 30 June 2013. The latter became the "guardian of the country's democracy and cohesion" in the 2019 Constitution, under the leadership of Field Marshal Abdel Fattah al-Sissi. How could the army let power slip from its hands whilst it controls nearly 60% of the economy? But the lack of competition, the decrease in foreign investment, the decline in tourism due to terrorist attacks and the health crisis, as well as the economy's lost race with demographics, have turned Egypt into a "beggar state^[4]". Highly dependent on external funding, Cairo has to service a debt equal to 36% of the annual budget. The poverty rate has risen from 16.7% in 2000 to 32.5% in 2018. Egypt is nevertheless one of the main buyers of arms in Africa. But it is "too big to fail". The president is using the threat of migration and the return of Islamists

[4] Robert Springbord: 'Follow the money to the truth about al-Sissi's Egypt'. Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED) 7 January 2022

as blackmail. Like Hosni Mubarak said before him, it's "them or us". He rules with the army and the powerful intelligence services. And the prisons are full, so much so that Ramy Shaath, a political prisoner released in January 2022, accused Egypt of having become a "*nation of desperate people ruled by fear and anger*[5]".

President al-Sissi surprised many by launching a national dialogue in April 2022 to help Egypt transform the country into a "*civil, modern, democratic state embracing all Egyptians*". He also reactivated the Pardon Committee to recommend the release of prisoners. Restoring the country's international image to obtain more aid and preparing it for difficult social measures before an extremely serious economic situation seem to be the two reasons for this dialogue[6]. The Muslim Brotherhood have been excluded, as well as those who do not accept the amended Constitution that allows the President to remain in power until 2032. The opposition is divided.

One party has agreed to participate in the dialogue despite the uncertainty of how it will be conducted. The Civil Democratic Movement also accepts it but on condition of transparency and rights equivalent to those of the regime. A third group poses three main conditions: the release of political prisoners, the end of the blocking of Internet sites, and investigations into disappearances.

Given this situation, the European Union is focusing on the stability of this country, which is too important for it to be criticised in view of its foreign policy, its fight against terrorism and its control of emigration. France is a major supplier of arms, followed by Germany. During the [9th session of the Association Council](#), High Representative, Josep Borrell, said that both sides will "*relentlessly pursue progress in their shared commitment to human rights and the rule of law*". But, its only point 40 of the declaration, that expresses its "*concern about the limitations of civil society, the pressure on rights defenders and the restrictions on freedom of expression*". The main part of the text concerns support to Egypt's 2030 Vision-Sustainable Development Strategy with €240 million

by 2024. The grant-investment mix, so much praised by the European Commissioner, is limited by military control over much of the economy.

In Algeria, the army also rules supreme. The Movement/Hirak, born in February 2019, secured the resignation of President Bouteflika. But it has run out of steam amid repression and the suspension of opposition parties and groups since the election of President Tebboune by 58% of the vote, but with a record abstention of 60%. With a political system blocked by the old guard in power and an economy in a state of quasi-autarchy, Algeria is no longer able to offer hope and jobs to its youth, who dreams of finding them on the other side of the Mediterranean. Hence, the government is playing the nationalist card again since the double shock of Donald Trump's recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara and the close cooperation engaged by Rabat with Israel, including of a military nature after the signature of an agreement with Benny Ganz in November 2021. Although the European Union has remained cautious about Hirak, the [Association Council](#) has not convened since 2017. Will this "*constant mood of suspicion*[7]" be overcome with the new agreement sought by President Tebboune? The European Union is all the more reluctant to criticise since Algeria has become very popular for its gas since the war in Ukraine.

IN TUNISIA, THE JASMINE HAS FADED

No country has been more praised by the European Union than Tunisia after its "Jasmine Revolution" in terms of its moderation and reforms. Europe provided it with €1.6 billion in grants and soft loans from 2014 to 2020. But the terrorist attacks and the health crisis have plunged the country into a serious economic crisis. Parliamentary wrangling, lack of clear leadership and polarisation between the Islamist Ennahda party and others have left it without vision and measures for recovery. Per capita income has fallen by more than 20% since 2011. This has led to a social crisis in which the state is no longer able to play its role as provider, since in Tunisia as elsewhere, freedom without bread does not seduce the people for long.

[5] Le Monde 20 January, 2022

[6] POMED, 2 September 2022

[7] Kader A. Abderrahim: 'L'Algérie à la recherche d'une diplomatie égarée', Politique étrangère, Summer 2022.

The country was ready to welcome a strong leader, but President Kaïs Saïed suspended parliament on 25 July 2021 and seized all powers because of an *"imminent danger requiring exceptional measures"*, according to Article 80 of the Constitution. The Constitution has since been amended by referendum to give him full powers and allow him to rule by decree. Members of the Supreme Council of Justice have been replaced and hundreds of Tunisians have been arrested or prevented from travelling^[8]. The Tunisian president has so far encountered little opposition since all previous governments have failed. But the Free Destourian Party, taken over by Abir Moussi, will challenge him, including in the streets. In any event, he will no longer be able to employ his populist measures disguised as policy. But his decisions, as well as the discrediting of Tunisia's liberal evolution, have fractured society, which augurs dark days ahead. Which does not bode well and reflects a loss of EU influence.

To avoid financial collapse, the European Union granted Tunisia a €300 million loan in May 2022. The IMF conducted a mission in July to decide on possible support. Algeria granted two loans of €150 million in 2020 and €300 million in December 2021. It is in Algiers' interest that Tunisia remains stable. Hence an agreement to supply gas at a preferential rate until 2030 and assistance in securing the borders which Algeria reopened in July 2022. The Algerian government is also pursuing another objective, that of rallying Tunis to the camp of support for the Polisario Front over Western Sahara. By hosting its Secretary General in Tunis in April 2021, President Saïed took a step in this direction - to the great displeasure of Morocco - while Tunisia had remained neutral until then.

WAR IN UKRAINE: EU TIES WITH SOUTHERN NEIGHBOURHOOD WEAKENED

Voting at the UN has revealed the ambiguity of the European Union's partners vis-à-vis Russia. While Syria was the only country to vote against the 2 March General Assembly resolution calling for a halt to military operations and the withdrawal of Russian troops, Algeria abstained and Morocco was not represented. On 7 April,

Algeria joined Syria in voting against the suspension of Russia from the Human Rights Council, while Egypt, Tunisia and Jordan abstained and Morocco and Lebanon were absent. Only Libya and Israel supported it.

The heavy dependence on cereal imports from Russia and Ukraine certainly influenced the votes: Egypt is 70% dependent on them, Lebanon 80% and Tunisia 50%. In July 2022 Cairo was the first capital to be visited by Sergei Lavrov in his bid to reassure Africa about grain supplies, and an agreement was reached to regulate trade in their respective currencies.

But there are other reasons worth mentioning: Russia has regained its position as an arms supplier in Egypt, accounting for 40% of its purchases. The two countries have also signed a strategic partnership and Rosatom was granted the construction permit for the El-Dabaa nuclear power plant on 29 June 2022. With Algeria, Russia has a long-standing strategic partnership in which military cooperation is paramount. During a visit to Algiers in May 2022 Sergei Lavrov confirmed that the joint military exercise, "Desert Shield", would take place in November, while Morocco and the United States organise the "African Lion" every year. Libya's votes can be explained by Western support for the Tripoli government, whilst Moscow supports Marshal Haftar who has controlled the eastern part of Libya since 2019. Washington had to pressure Israel to abandon its moderate position. In retaliation, Moscow started the procedure of dissolving the Jewish Agency and 12,000 Russian Jews have already been taken in by Tel Aviv. Does the war in Ukraine foreshadow multiple alignments in the south?

For Egypt, it has also led to a sharp decline in tourism, since Russians used to represent 30% of visitors. Added to the consequences of Covid-19 and the doubling of the price of wheat, its economy has been further weakened. To support it, Saudi Arabia offered \$5 billion in April 2022 and promised to invest 10 more. Likewise, Qatar with 5 billion and the United Arab Emirates with 2. Its stability has a cost, the price to pay is extremely high. But until now, financiers have always come to its aid. Who would want to take the risk of an implosion of Egypt?

^[8] Sarah Yerkes : 'The end of the Tunisian model', *Foreign affairs*, August 2022.

Understanding that this war, and the risks it entails, would alienate many countries in which Moscow is trying to blame the West and NATO, the European Commission launched a €225 million Food Facility on 6 April. Intended to support partners faced with rising prices, it has allocated €100 million to Egypt, €25 million to Jordan and Lebanon and €20 million to Tunisia. This is not much compared to the €12 billion that Cairo has received from its Arab neighbours, but it is a strong symbolic gesture of solidarity and counterpoint to Russian aggression.

The war in Ukraine has raised another question that Elie Barnavi has tackled head-on: "One cannot denounce what a Russian occupation of Ukraine or part of Ukraine would be without reacting to 50 years long of the West Bank, nor helping to find a solution[9]"... Rony Brauman has underlined the different treatment on sanctions "where words that cause annoyance are avoided by western governments to favour used formulations, even anachronistic[10]". The substantial assistance to the Palestinians via UNWRA (246 million € until 2024) cannot be used as a policy. And the European Union should not be satisfied of its impotence by the mere fact that the Abraham agreements are changing the situation. It is losing its credibility[11].

The war in Ukraine has revived high level dialogue between the European Union and Israel. After a ten year lapse the [12th Association Council](#) met on 3 October 2022 where the European Union has "recalled its strong opposition to Israel's policy and settlement and its determination to see it through a two -State solution".

BEIJING'S NEUTRAL AID, WITHOUT "DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS" PROVISOS

China's spectacular progress in investments under the One Belt, One Road Initiative (BRI) is impressive: in Morocco, where it has been building hospitals, highways and technopoles in a strategic partnership since 2016[12], and in Algeria, which is China's 3rd largest arms buyer. As for Egypt, a key country on the Maritime Silk Road, China manages the ports

of Alexandria and El Dekheila. It has invested more than \$7 billion and has lent three billion for the new administrative capital where it is building the highest tower in Africa (386 m). More surprisingly, it is with Israel that China has the most significant relations, focused on high technology. It is the country's 3rd largest customer and 2nd largest supplier, after the United States.

The European Union's trade has grown much less than China's. China's exports have almost doubled between 2010 and 2020 with Morocco, Egypt and Algeria, while the EU's exports only increased by 22% and 65% respectively and decreased by 48% with Algeria. Conversely, their exports to China were on average only 5% of their imports, resulting in very negative trade balances.

The "successes" of Beijing's authoritarian regime appeal to the ruling elites, especially as it imposes no conditions, unlike the European Union, remaining neutral in the face of local conflicts, thus gradually undermining European influence. China's influence is growing as a result of the arms race in which Beijing is positioning itself between Russia and the West. It is in Algeria that its orders are the most significant: six warships, an anti-missile system and an electronic detection system after Morocco acquired one from Israel.

THE EUROPEAN UNION AND ITS DISSONANCE

The New Agenda calls for a "*renewed commitment to unity and solidarity among the Union's member states*", pointing to an internal problem that Josep Borrell has often highlighted: the "*need for a single message*", i.e. a Union capable of consensus on major foreign policy issues. Yet the European Union has displayed its disagreements on Libya and Turkey. This is also the case on Western Sahara.

This frozen conflict is leading Algeria and Morocco into a ruinous and dangerous arms race. Since Washington's change of position, Morocco has constantly tried to rally other countries to its "*autonomy plan*", starting with Spain, on which Rabat has put pressure through

[9] *Le Monde*, 27 March 2022

[10] *Le Monde*, 1st June 2022

[11] Pierre Mirel, *Op. Cit.*

[12] *Ibid.*

illegal migration. These efforts have been successful since the Spanish Prime Minister aligned himself with the Moroccan position on 14 March 2022, immediately provoking a virulent reaction from Algiers: by breaking off diplomatic relations and stopping gas supplies. Germany also took this step towards Rabat. France maintains that the Moroccan plan is a basis for resolving the dispute and the European Union defers to the position of the United Nations. If Western Sahara is "a power issue for Algiers, for Rabat it is a question of identity"[13]. In a speech to the nation on 30 July, King Mohamed VI called on states with ambiguous positions to clarify them and unequivocally support Morocco.

The dissonance between the member states is coupled with a difference in position between the Council and the European Court of Justice on the application, or not, of the agricultural and fisheries protocols with Morocco to the Saharawi people, against which the Polisario Front has appealed. In its judgment of 29 September 2021, the Court confirmed the plaintiff's right to act as "internationally recognised as its representative". In substance, it annulled the Council's decisions on the two protocols, while provisionally maintaining their effects. The Commission and the Council appealed against the judgment in December 2021. The European Union has thus found itself caught in the contradictions of its model, between its desire to support Morocco through political decisions, and the constraints of international law to which it has subscribed and which its own Court intends to enforce. Extrapolating from law to human rights, we note another dissonance between the principle of reality and the values displayed with neighbours who too often distance themselves from it.

Since the war in Ukraine Algeria has been courted by the European Union to supply more gas. These new tensions also negate any hope of the regional economic integration that the Arab Maghreb Union sought in 1989. In 2004 the Agadir Convention, which Lebanon and Palestine joined in 2016, was signed between Morocco, Tunisia, Jordan and Egypt with a view to bypassing Algeria. This agreement was intended to ensure progressive free trade, with a harmonisation of standards, and would have been integrated into the Euro-Mediterranean zone where the cumulation of the origin of products was introduced in 2011. Its implementation has fallen far short of expectations and the dream of a large trade bloc has faded.

Given the major areas of intervention proposed by the New Agenda[14], the €7 billion set out in the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for 2021-27 seems very modest in relation to what is needed for the European Union to exert its influence. It is true that they are supposed to mobilise up to €30 billion in public and private funds. But this is a very optimistic assumption. It would be a serious mistake not to provide the massive budgetary support that the Maghreb needs[15]. The Council has called for improved and more intensive dialogue with partners to "build confidence, reduce tensions and ease certain conflicts". Does the European Union have the means to achieve its ambitions if it is to change its declining influence in the region?

[13] Kader A. Abderrahim, *Op. Cit.*

[14] *Op. cit.*

[15] Highlighted by Hakim El Karoui, *Le Monde*, 28 May 2021.

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