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PATHS TO PEACE TEN YEARS AFTER THE ARAB SPRING

EVENT REPORT | JUNE - JULY 2021

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Ten years after the Arab Spring, the democratic impulse that drove the ousting of regimes appears to be in retreat. Instead, extremist groups, gender based violence, and high levels of economic and social deprivation, and now the Covid pandemic, threaten much of the Middle East and North Africa.

This event report looks at the EU's role in promoting stability in the MENA region, and the region's path away from violence.





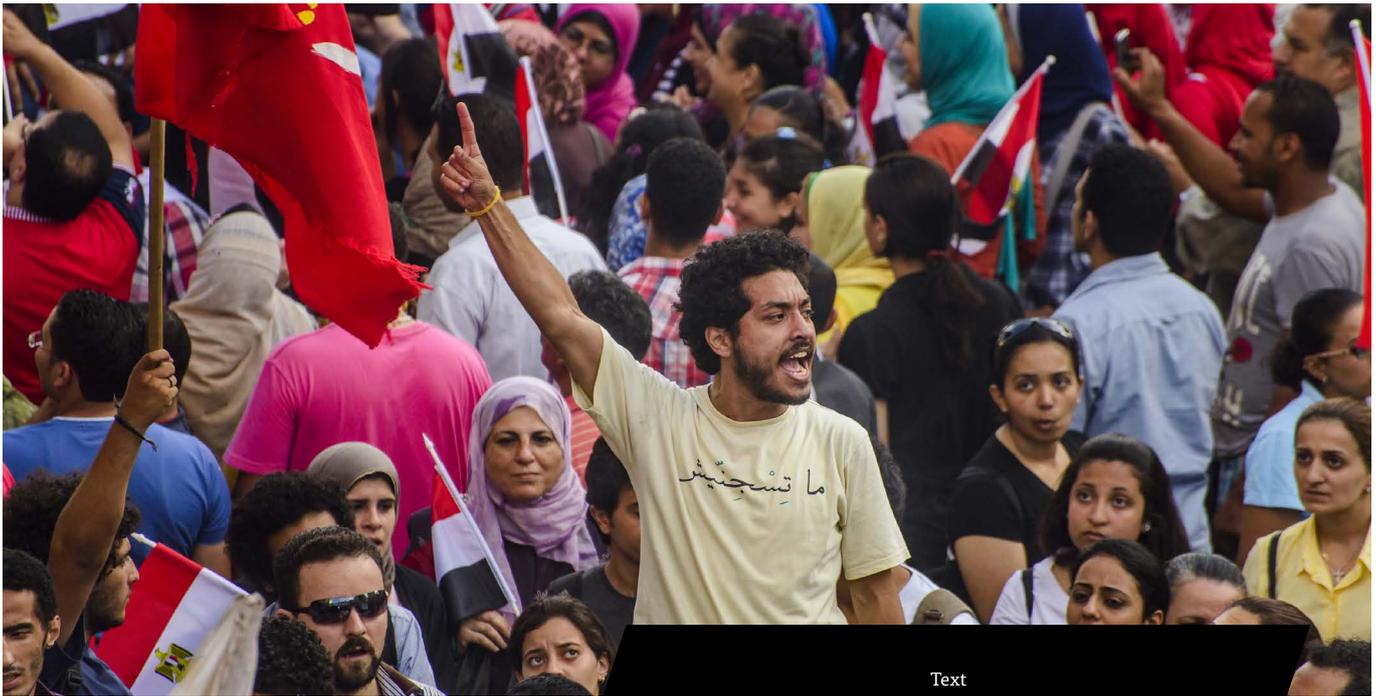
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Wanted: European re-engagement with southern neighbourhood

By Benjamin Fox | EURACTIV.com



Text

Ten years after the Arab Spring, a disjointed European policy approach to the region has resulted in the bloc losing influence in the countries in its southern neighbourhood.

Researchers argue that the Mediterranean region's strategic importance to the EU, means that if the Middle East and North Africa is unstable then Europe is unstable.

Civil wars in Syria and Libya, migration emergencies across the Mediterranean, and the rise of the

Islamic State and jihadist terror groups have limited EU economic and political support for the region's governments.

"The most obvious change has been the redefinition of political space in Arab societies," says Mohamed-Ali Adraoui, a member of the International Panel on exiting violence (IPEV).

Adraoui adds that another effect of the revolutions is that "each social crisis opens the floodgates for real and uninhibited challenges to the regimes in power."

MIGRATION PREOCCUPATION

Other than counter-terrorism and border-management partnerships with security services in Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt, the countries have hardly figured in the regional policies of EU member states other than France and Italy, which have colonial-era ties to much of the region. Even so, French and Italian priorities have been counter terrorism and migration control.

However, the EU's preoccupation

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with migration control has allowed other international powers to gain influence in a region where many countries have moved away from democracy, but the economic and social divisions that fuelled the Arab Spring remain.

Riccardo Fabiani, of the International Crisis Group, contends that the internal divisions of the EU and its inward focus on migration have reduced its leverage in the MENA region.

Similarly, divisions between EU countries over which faction to support in the Libyan civil war, handed a much greater military role to Turkey and Russia in the former and Algeria in the latter, both of which encourage a process of what Fabiani describes as “decoupling”.

ECONOMIC RENEWAL

The EU’s ‘Renewed partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood’, published in February, commits the bloc to a €7 billion ‘Economic and Investment Plan for the Southern Neighbours’. However, little progress has been made on economic relations. Morocco and Tunisia are dragging their feet over the EU’s plans to replace their Association Agreements with a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) as many economists and academics, particularly in Tunisia, doubt its value to their development needs.

Francis Ghiles, North Africa expert at the Barcelona Centre for International Affairs, argues that the EU needs “a more pro-active policy if it wants to slow the medium-term trend of a decoupling between the two shores of the Western Mediterranean”.

Tarek Megerisi, a researcher at the European Council for Foreign Relations, contends that the EU should focus its attention in the region on bolstering Tunisia, the one country in the region which has maintained the democracy obtained following the Arab Spring

But the slow pace of vaccine delivery to the Middle East and north Africa, despite the EU’s attempts to emphasise its ‘Team Europe’ support for the COVAX vaccine initiative, has prompted concerns that the pandemic will lead to Europe taking a more closed approach.

Megerisi contends that the EU should condition its financial support on the completion of reform of Tunisia’s political system, including national dialogue to develop plans for appointing judges to the constitutional court, and upgrading Tunisia’s legal framework to reflect the rights enshrined in the constitution.

Since 2011, the EU has provided over €2 billion in grants and €800m in macro-financial assistance to back up its commitment to Tunisia’s transition to democracy. Despite this, high unemployment and years of sluggish economic performance been hampered further by the COVID-19 pandemic.

“If the EU and key member states can make their engagement with Tunisia more focused and cohesive, Europe could help Tunisia become a successful democratic model in North Africa, as well a valuable partner for Europe in a geopolitically competitive region,” he adds.

EU relations in north Africa hampered by migration tensions

By Benjamin Fox | EURACTIV.com



[Reduan/EFE/EPA]

The EU's role and political influence in North Africa has been hampered by economic and security policy priorities being trumped by the bloc's desire to control migration flows, a leading analyst of the region told EURACTIV.

Despite the political fragility in much of North Africa, and particularly in several of the countries which saw governments ousted during the Arab Spring ten years ago, the EU's policy engagement with the region has tended to be through the prism of controlling migration flows from the African continent.

"Where there has been tension

is when efforts to support regional trade run up against something like the migration agenda, where the EU has taken a much harder line on prevention and blocking migration, and less focused on other ostensibly EU priorities like the promotion of free movement and trade in Africa," Andrew Lebovich, policy fellow at the European Council for Foreign Relations, told EURACTIV in an interview.

The EU's Association Agreements governing trade and political ties with Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt and Algeria, though Algeria is keen to rewrite the terms of its pact with Brussels, and talks with Tunisia

to revamp its accord have been on hold since 2019.

Within the region political and economic relations with Morocco are the EU's most significant and stable in the region, but tensions remain, particularly over the question of the disputed territory of Western Sahara, which Lebovich describes as an "omnipresent issue".

That was underscored by the recent diplomatic row between Morocco and Spain which saw the Rabat government temporarily relax its border controls in response to Spain providing hospital treatment for Brahim Ghali, the leader of the Western Sahara independence

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movement, the Polisario Front, who was suffering from COVID-19.

However, the EU continues to support a UN-brokered agreement on Western Sahara despite the pressure from Rabat.

“The recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara under the Trump administration certainly emboldened the government to push the EU more strongly but we are seeing that the EU is not responding positively to this pressure and is willing to push back. They are not willing to simply give in to this Moroccan push,” said Lebovich.

Similarly, Europe’s key security and military support missions in North Africa have enjoyed mixed results. The French-led Operation Barkhane, a 5,100-strong military force deployed across the Sahel for the past eight years intended to combat jihadist and secessionist attacks, is set to be wound down, with little sign that the volume of terror attacks in the region has fallen.

“The challenge has been that the security situation has not improved in recent years. We have seen the spread of jihadist groups in Niger and Burkana Faso. It is clear that despite the French presence this is still happening,” Lebovich told EURACTIV.

Last week, French President Emmanuel Macron announced that Barkhane, which has cost the lives of 55 French soldiers and has steadily lost popularity with citizens and governments in the Sahel, would be gradually replaced in the coming months by a joint military operation bringing together a group of European countries.

Negotiations between France and a group of European countries are ongoing on how to replace Barkhane with a revamped Opération Takuba, which will bring together troops from other European countries, including Sweden, Italy, Estonia, and the Czech Republic.

“Certainly, the French have wanted Europe to take a more proactive role in combat operations but it’s hard to see for now how this kind of commitment will be sustainable and replace the French mission,” said Lebovich.

The slow pace of delivering European Covid-19 vaccines to the region, while the Chinese Sinopharm vaccine and Russia’s Sputnik have been distributed in large quantities to the likes of Morocco, Egypt and Algeria, has also put the EU on the defensive in the region.

“The fact that it has been so difficult to mobilise vaccines campaigns in the region, contributes to a extremely serious situation. This is something that should be more of a priority for the international community,” Lebovich told EURACTIV.

“The EU and the United States are making more of an effort now to fix this but it’s still less than it should be,” he added.



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