

The Future of Euro-MENA Relations

Edited by Yusuf Can & Maša Ocvirk

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FOREWORD

By Ambassador Mark A. Green

In an increasingly interconnected and multilayered global landscape, the relationship between Europe and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region continues to evolve, presenting both new opportunities and enduring challenges. The Wilson Center's Middle East and Global Europe Programs, with their fierce commitment to non-partisanship and global scholarship, are proud to host this timely conference on *The Future of Euro-MENA Relations*. It brings together experts from both regions to present a range of forward-looking policy perspectives.

This edited volume of six policy papers is the result of collaborative efforts by scholars and practitioners whose expertise covers critical issues such as migration, energy security, trade, and economic development. Each expert offers a distinctive lens through which to examine the future trajectory of Europe-MENA relations, tackling topics that are essential for understanding the complexities of both real-life problems and possible smart solutions.

These contributions are particularly valuable in light of the dynamic, sometimes volatile nature of Europe-MENA relations. From the framing of migration policies between Turkey and the European Union to the intricacies of trade in conflict zones like Libya to the role of refugee-led organizations in addressing humanitarian crises, the insights presented here reflect a deep engagement with some of the most pressing geopolitical and socioeconomic issues of our time. Additionally, energy cooperation between Europe and the MENA region—particularly in clean hydrocarbons—and development assistance that fosters more citizen-responsive governance further illustrate the intricate balance between partnership and policy.

The Wilson Center, with its global network of scholars and unparalleled access to policymakers, is uniquely positioned to facilitate this vital dialogue. Our ability to convene such a diverse and distinguished group of experts underscores the importance of fostering informed and substantive debate on the future of Europe and MENA relations. This report provides only a glimpse into the broader discussions and analyses that will take place during this conference, but it is a crucial one, offering policymakers, scholars, and practitioners valuable insights into the direction these relationships may take.

While this report obviously cannot capture all of the complexities at play, the perspectives offered here are indispensable for anyone seeking to understand the challenges and possibilities that lie ahead. It is grounded in the lived realities and rigorous research of those who are shaping the policies and actions that will determine the future of these regions and more.

As the global order becomes increasingly multipolar and the intersections between regional and international concerns more pronounced, the need for clear-eyed, evidence-based policy insights has never been greater. This volume and the resulting conference are part of the Wilson Center's broader mission to equip leaders with the knowledge and tools necessary to navigate these evolving dynamics with wisdom and foresight.

My gratitude to both the Middle East and the Global Europe Programs' teams, including Merissa Khurma, Robin Quinville, Jason Moyer, Alexander Farley, Faria Nasruddin, Maša Ocvirk and Yusuf Can, for their hard work on this report.

Special thanks to the Embassy of Qatar in Washington, DC, for supporting this research.

INTRODUCTION

By Merissa Khurma and Robin Quinville

We are very proud to present *The Future of Euro-MENA Relations*, the first edited volume put together and published jointly by the Wilson Center’s Middle East Program and Global Europe Program. It is part of a year-long project that included discussions bringing together diverse voices from the MENA region, Europe, and the United States. Its goal is to assess the current dynamics of relations between Europe and MENA in key areas and identify both challenges and opportunities for the future. Europe and the MENA region are both integral to US national security interests; how they interact, cooperate, and advance their goals impacts the United States both from a geopolitical standpoint as well as the geoeconomic one.

The ongoing wars in Ukraine and Gaza have showcased how interconnected these two major conflicts are not only for the MENA region and Europe but also for the United States and its policy objectives to address Great Power competition. Both conflicts have changed threat perceptions and reshaped foreign policy approaches in Europe, MENA, and the United States. But, beyond these conflicts, there are considerable opportunities for Europe and the MENA region to create productive synergy—from trade and economic cooperation to energy transition, collective action on migration and forced displacement, and the EU’s role in supporting democratization in the MENA region.

On migration, Alissa Pavia explores the “evolution and impact of the EU’s migration agreements with North African countries from 2017 to 2023,” using different analytical lenses, from security to the economy, to underscore the “need for a balanced and integrated

approach to migration management, emphasizing immediate measures and long-term strategies to address the complex factors driving migration.”

On trade between the MENA region and Europe, Amir Magdy Kamel zooms into EU-Libya ties and the impact of EU trade on crises in Libya. Kamel assesses these ties during the period between January 2011 and May 2022, when EU ties with the North African country remained strong. Kamel makes the case for why the EU—as Libya’s largest commercial partner—has an integral role in implementing its official policy of preserving and strengthening peace and liberty in Libya through trade.

On migration, both Azza Guergues and Asli Elitsoy assess the EU’s agreements with Egypt and Turkey aimed at curbing migration, a major challenge Europe is contending with from the MENA region. On Turkey-EU migration, Asli Elitsoy explores “the patterns of consensus and contestation among Turkish parliamentarians regarding the EU-Turkey Statement (signed in March 2016) on managing cross-border irregular migration,” which in turn is seen widely as being an “immoral, inhumane, and possibly illegal” deal. The analysis is based on parliamentary speeches and questions posed by government and opposition MPs between 2016 and 2024 and thus examines the domestic political factors that have shaped Turkey’s “adoption of Coercive Engineered Migration (CEM) as a strategic foreign policy tool.”

On Egypt-EU migration, Azza Guergues highlights the EU’s role in supporting refugee-led organizations as millions of refugees, forced migrants, and internally displaced people flee to Egypt due to the ongoing civil war in Sudan. Egypt, while facing this influx, has signed a multibillion-dollar agreement with the EU, which includes a financial package aimed at curbing migration. While this agreement comes at a time of

a rise in anti-refugee sentiments across the MENA region, Guergues examines the potential benefits of funding refugee-led organizations amidst growing criticism of the EU's deals with MENA countries to counter migration.

On the EU's support for democracy in the MENA region, Dima Toukan zooms into Jordan, reflecting on and assessing the EU's "democracy assistance record in the region, limitations of donor effectiveness specific to Jordan, and opportunities the EU can leverage to strengthen its support to civil society and overall reforms in Jordan." Toukan advocates for "targeted assistance" within a more "integrated development approach," leveraging the "drive for aid localization to deliver concrete reforms" at a time when EU's support for democracy as a foreign policy objective has been sidelined by geopolitical and security priorities.

Finally, on EU-MENA cooperation on energy, Pier Paolo Raimondi argues the EU's green energy transition entails a "drastic shift" with "not only major domestic consequences (in terms of environment and the economy) but also for EU's foreign and diplomatic relations, forcing new strategies of engagement with third countries (including hydrocarbon producers) in the name of sustainability." The energy crisis of 2022 faced by Europe due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine provides "new momentum" for more thoughtful EU-MENA cooperation, with "the case of clean molecules being one of the most promising areas."

While this publication does not delve into all the challenges and opportunities between Europe and the MENA region, which are constantly evolving, it offers an in-depth analysis of specific case studies. These shed light on the geopolitical and geoeconomic dynamics between the two regions, which are critical for US national security.

In closing, we would like to extend our heartfelt gratitude and kudos to Yusuf Can and Maša Ocvirk for leading this Future of Europe and the MENA region project and working with the scholars to produce this first volume of research and analysis. Our appreciation also goes to the President and CEO of the Wilson Center, Ambassador Mark, for his support and to the Government of the State of Qatar for their support of this project.

BEYOND THE MEDITERRANEAN:

EU Policy on North African Migration | By Alissa Pavia

Executive Summary

This paper analyzes the EU's migration agreements with North African countries from 2017 to 2023, focusing on four pivotal deals: Italy/EU-Libya, EU-Tunisia, EU-Mauritania, and EU-Egypt. It identifies the following key trends in the European Union's strategic approach to managing migration. *Externalization*, whereby the EU outsources border management to partner countries, providing financial aid and technical support; *securitization*, where the EU narrowly frames migration as a security issue driven by human smuggling networks; *institutional challenges*, where internal EU conflicts and vulnerability to external malign influence, emphasize the need for better inter-institutional communication and oversight; *policy shifts*, whereby the EU's has moved from fostering economic interdependence to a more transactional approach of immediate migration control, potentially compromising long-term stability in partner countries; and *root causes of migration*, whereby recent agreements show a partial shift towards addressing broader development issues, but implementation challenges remain. This comprehensive analysis underscores the need for a balanced and integrated approach to migration management, emphasizing immediate measures and long-term strategies to address the complex factors driving migration.

Introduction

The European Union (EU) has long struggled to address illegal migration and the entry of people from third countries seeking to resettle within its member states. The challenges stem from the EU being an economic powerhouse, its geographical proximity to countries with conflicts, and internal disagreements among member states on the EU's role in the international arena, particularly in dealing with vulnerable people. The EU's economic attractiveness as a source

of jobs and competitive salaries draws people seeking better economic conditions elsewhere. Its geographic proximity to regions marred by conflict, political instability, and poverty also makes it a safe point of resettlement for vulnerable people.

Internally, the struggle emanates primarily from finding a common approach that fits the needs of every member state regarding hosting and processing migrants. The EU also faces challenges in developing a comprehensive strategy that balances the diverse needs of its member states with international obligations, particularly human rights law and its own Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.

This issue became evident after the Syrian civil war in 2015 when close to one million Syrian refugees sought entry into the EU. Overwhelmed countries like Greece, Italy and those in the Western Balkans appealed to the bloc for help. The response was the EU-Turkey deal signed in 2016, where Turkey, a major transit hub, agreed to close its borders to prevent migrants from entering the EU and to readmit those who had entered illegally. In exchange, the EU pledged €6 billion (\$6.7 billion) for humanitarian assistance, migration management infrastructure, and resettlement support, as well as promised to ease (and eventually eliminate) visa restrictions for Turkish nationals—a promise that was never fulfilled.

The effects of the EU-Turkey deal were immediate: After the signing, the external pressure was alleviated, represented by the large scores of migrants at its doorstep, with numbers dropping by over 95%. The perceived success of this strategy resulted in the EU using the deal as a model for future migration agreements with third countries, especially those serving as transit points primarily within North Africa and the Sahel region. Since 2016, the EU has signed similar memorandums with Libya (2017), Tunisia (2023), Egypt (2023),

and Mauritania (2023)—all of which reveal several consistencies about Europe’s strategy for stopping irregular migration. However, while consistent, this strategy may backfire by exacerbating the very issues it aims to solve.

This comprehensive analysis underscores the need for a balanced and integrated approach to migration management, emphasizing both immediate measures and long-term strategies to successfully tackle the complex factors driving migration.

Charting Paths: the EU’s Migration Agreements from 2017 to 2023

The Italy/EU-Libya Deal

Following the adoption of the EU-Turkey deal, Italy experienced a surge in illegal migration from Libya, a country beset by conflict and instability since the fall of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011. The lack of political progress and a weak economy drove many Libyans to migrate; Italy was a primary destination due to its geographical proximity and historical ties.

Libya also became a key transit point for sub-Saharan Africans heading to Europe, facilitated by a

well-established smuggling network. This led to a 20% increase in migration by September 2017¹ and over 3,000² deaths at sea, sparking tensions in Italian public opinion and a rise in anti-migrant political parties, like the 5 Star Movement and Brothers of Italy. In response, Italy sought assistance from the EU, leading to the Italy/EU-Libya Memorandum, which provided economic and material support to the Libyan coast-guard and Italian resettlement centers. This initiative reduced illegal migration by 87%³ in 2017. The agreement, initially met with mixed reactions, was renewed in 2023 and continues to be the primary framework for addressing illegal migration from Libya.

The EU-Tunisia deal

In March 2023, Italy once again became a major destination for migrants coming however from Tunisia rather than Libya.⁴ Several factors drove this change, including internal turmoil in Tunisia and the increased sophistication of smuggling networks in the port city of Sfax. In response, Italy swiftly appealed to the EU, and together, they launched what came to be known as Team Europe’s⁵ quest to combat illegal migration.

African migrants are rescued by Italian authority, Guardia di Finanza and Guardia Costiera in the harbor of Lampedusa, Italy 2023. (Shutterstock.com / AlessiaTricani)



To address the renewed influx of migrants, the EU signed a memorandum with Tunisian president Kais Saied, promising \$117 million for Tunisia's coast guard and \$167 million in direct budgetary support. An additional \$1 billion was earmarked for macro-economic support, pending the signing of an IMF loan to help Tunisia's struggling economy.⁶ The logic behind this deal was consistent with the previous agreement: provide economic incentives to third-party coast guards and border patrols to prevent migrants from leaving, help through capacity training, and provide equipment like vessels.

The deal appeared effective. The number of migrants reaching Italy in March 2024 was cut by more than half,⁷ suggesting a significant effort by the Tunisian coast guard in honoring their commitments. Due to this, European Commission President Ursula Von der Leyen reiterated the EU's intent to achieve similar agreements with other neighboring countries.⁸

The EU/ Mauritania Deal

Leaning into its ongoing strategy to stem irregular migration, the EU carried out its newfound strategy also with Mauritania. In March 2024, the bloc signed a \$210 million agreement to stem irregular migration from West Africa, particularly from Mali. Since 2005, irregular migration routes have veered towards Mauritania to reach the Spanish Canary Islands, an entry point to the EU. Spain has since attempted to stem the flow of irregular migrants, with multiple operations carried out through the years, albeit unsuccessfully.⁹

In its most recent deal, headed once again by Team Europe, the EU pledged a financial package to “support migration management including the fight against migrant smuggling, as well as promote security and stability, humanitarian aid for refugees and support to host communities.”¹⁰ Much like the Tunisia deal, Mauritania one addresses five pillars (job creation, protection, asylum, promotion of legal migration, and countering irregular migration efforts) to stem irregular migration from West African nationals trying to reach Europe.

The EU-Egypt Deal

The EU signed a fourth migration-related agreement with Egypt in March 2024. Recognizing the threat of

another massive influx of irregular migrants if Egypt's economy should collapse, the EU offered a new aid package of \$8.2 billion, parts of which would help Egypt “combat (the) smuggling of migrants and trafficking,” elevating it to a “strategic partner.”¹¹ While Egypt has historically been a country of transit and not of origin, from 2022 until 2024, migration of Egyptian nationals increased just enough to draw Europe's attention (in 2022¹², they represented the first most common nationality).

Patterns, Shortfalls, and Opportunities: The EU's Migration Framework Toward North Africa

The “Externalization” Method

One key element of the five agreements is the EU's use of the “externalization”¹³ method to prevent irregular migration from reaching its borders. Since July 2023, the EU has consistently applied this model, signing agreements with Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Mauritania. All feature similar components: the approval of financial aid for foreign entities to stem irregular migration, technical support for local authorities to combat smugglers and curb illegal migration, and financial incentives for broader development programs. Human rights groups and experts refer to this as the “externalization strategy,” where the EU shifts responsibility for preventing irregular migration to third countries. Specifically, these agreements allocate specific funds to control irregular migration (for Tunisia, \$117 million;¹⁴ Egypt, \$223 million;¹⁵ Libya, \$66 million;¹⁶ Mauritania, \$234 million)¹⁷ earmarked for local border management, including salaries, equipment (vessels), and local detention centers for holding illegal migrants.

The EU has implemented this strategy in all recent agreements, signaling that the bloc views this approach as successful and that it intends to continue pursuing it in future deals. Human rights organizations point out there are many difficulties that may arise from this approach.^{18, 19} By outsourcing the task of controlling irregular migration to third countries, the EU relinquishes direct oversight of these countries' actions, which are often accused of serious human rights abuses. In Libya, for example, there have been numerous reports of torture and inhumane treatment of sub-Saharan Africans in detention camps. Therefore, by financing border patrol mech-

anisms and coast guards in third countries, there is a substantial risk that EU funds may inadvertently support actors committing human rights violations, undermining the EU's norms and values.

Additionally, EU Member States or EU leaders could be held accountable for violating international law. International, regional, and domestic courts, including the Court of Justice of the EU and the European Court of Human Rights, as well as EU Member States' domestic courts, are all responsible for enforcing human rights conventions within the EU. Further, all EU Member States are parties to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC), which has jurisdiction over war crimes, crimes against humanity, genocide, and aggression committed on the territory of state parties or by their nationals.

Individuals, companies, and member states can generally file cases or complaints, petitioning for accountability and reparations or providing information and evidence to the relevant courts. For instance, individuals have submitted calls for prosecution to the ICC for crimes against humanity. In 2011, the ECHR ruled in *M.S.S. vs. Belgium and Greece* that Belgium knowingly subjected an Afghan asylum seeker to degrading treatment by returning him to Greece.²⁰ In 2019, lawyers Juan Branco and Omer Shatz submitted a 245-page communication to the ICC alleging that specific political leaders should be held accountable for the deaths of thousands of Libyans in the Mediterranean.²¹ Human rights organizations have also proposed similar cases against officials like the former EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs Federica Mogherini and former Italian Minister of Interior Marco Minniti.²²

Legal challenges can impose significant burdens on the EU, its member states, and individual parties. The EU risks losing trust and credibility both among its voters and in third countries, especially those home to the nationals who have been subjected to these crimes. This erosion of trust can hinder the EU's ability to negotiate future deals, as third countries may be more reluctant to enter into agreements. Consequently, this would also diminish the EU's political and diplomatic influence on the world stage, undermine its role as a global actor and make it harder to advocate for its values and policies.

The Adoption of a Securitization Approach

Securitization is a consistent theme in the EU's migration approach. This is evident in official agreements and speeches where the EU repeatedly identifies smuggling networks as the key drivers of migration. All five agreements with countries in the MENA region contain several references to combating illegal migration by targeting "migrant smugglers and human traffickers,"²³ the "trafficking of cultural goods,"²⁴ and the "fight against migrant smuggling."²⁵

In their public appearances and speeches, EU leaders often (if not always) refer to human smugglers when referencing the root causes of migration. In her November 2023 speech on migration, Commission President von der Leyen spoke about EU member states "sharing the same desire" to "fight this criminal business" and build a "global alliance against the smuggling of human beings."²⁶ In their joint article from October 2023, former British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak and current Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni denounced the crossing of "thousands of migrants cross the Mediterranean to Italy, entering Europe illegally" as the result of "criminal gangs exploiting and profiting from the misery of the vulnerable."²⁷ This, however, risks oversimplifying the complex drivers of migration and jeopardizes EU's capability to negotiate successful migration agreements in the future.

The EU rightly addresses the problem of human smuggling and trafficking. However, such a narrow approach misleads policymakers and the public into believing that dismantling smuggling networks will end migration. In the end, it can lead to public frustration over the perceived inability of the EU to solve a minor problem or disillusionment when the complexity of migration becomes clear. This could erode trust in EU institutions, weaken their internal cohesion, and undermine their ability to address shared challenges (including migration) effectively.

Another challenge of this narrative is how EU leaders depict migrants to the public. By associating migration with human smuggling, politicians feel compelled to show they can tackle these criminal networks by reducing the number of irregular migrants reaching Europe. The EU and its member states use a two-pronged approach: they provide financial incen-

tives to coast guards in Egypt, Tunisia, Mauritania, and Libya to combat smugglers and enforce stricter measures to return irregular migrants to their countries of origin. For example, the recently adopted EU Pact on Migration and Asylum sets priorities and regulations that member states must implement by 2026 to expedite deportations.²⁸

Additionally, the European Commission has proposed new rules to streamline the process of revoking visa-free access for countries whose nationals arrive irregularly and then move within Europe. However, these actions might unintentionally incentivize smuggling rather than deterring it. Historically, imposing strict visa requirements to reach Europe has led to a rise in smuggling networks. For example, the Schengen regulation required stricter controls on external borders, resulting in more stringent visa requirements for non-EU nationals, enhanced border controls, and asylum policy reforms like the Dublin Convention, which required migrants to register in the first country of entry. This pattern was repeated on four different occasions: after the Darfur war in 2003, the Arab Spring in 2011, in the 2017–2018 period, and most recently in 2023.

The EU seems to be caught in a cycle: the more it attempts to crack down on illegal migration, the more human smugglers are incentivized to exploit and profit from it. As long as the demand to migrate remains high, human smugglers will persist in exploiting those seeking to migrate.

It is noteworthy that some EU member states are expanding legal migration channels. In October, Italy agreed to take in 4,000 “qualified workers”²⁹ from Tunisia and plans to grant up to 12,000 by 2027. Germany has also more than doubled the number of skilled worker visas, from 37,000 to 80,000 as of July 2024.³⁰ In contrast, other EU member states, like France, have reduced the number of visas given to North Africans, citing a lack of cooperation from Algerian, Tunisian, and Moroccan authorities.³¹ Given that Italy alone saw 140,000 irregular migrants in 2023,³² EU member states must create more and better legal pathways for migrants in order to defeat human smuggling networks.

Institutional Fissures and the Potential for Targeting

In July 2023, the European Commission adopted the Memorandum of Understanding with Tunisia without Parliamentary oversight, claiming it was not required given the non-binding nature of the contract. This move drew significant criticism from European Parliament members who raised concerns about the lack of scrutiny over human rights issues in Tunisia. During a meeting in July 2023, European Parliament members from the center-left bloc expressed strong disapproval of the deal, labeling Tunisia’s leadership as a “cruel dictator”,³³ and accusing the European Commission and Team Europe of secrecy and deceitfulness.³⁴

Such conflicts within the EU’s institutions around the migration issue can result in potentially harmful fissures that external malign actors like Russia can exploit. Russia is well known for attempting to undermine EU unity and democracy in myriad ways, including by weaponizing migration “to overwhelm European structures and break European resolve.”³⁵ or orchestrating campaigns highlighting inefficiencies within the EU model. Conflicts like the one that emerged between the European Commission and the European Parliament about the EU-Tunisia deal can, therefore, leave the EU vulnerable to external interferences that can weaken its foundations.

The Shift in EU-Mediterranean Relations

The adoption of five agreements with North African countries marks a shift in the EU’s foreign policy approach toward its southern border. It moved from focusing on economic interdependence, growth, and political stability to prioritizing migration. What was once a strategy aimed at creating a “southern neighborhood” of aligned nations is now a transactional approach that prioritizes the EU’s immediate interests over the long-term needs of the partner countries.

In the post-Cold War era, the EU aimed to enhance its global standing by forming new partnerships with neighboring countries. In 1995, it launched the Barcelona Process with 12 Mediterranean countries, including Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, and Egypt. The initiative centered on “the construction of a zone of shared prosperity” and the “rapprochement between peoples.”³⁶ This decades-long approach led to the establishment of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership,

the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) in 2004, and the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) in 2008.

While moderately successful, this strategy marked a turning point towards a holistic vision of EU-Mediterranean relations, focusing on stability and prosperity across nations. However, the Arab Spring in 2011 and subsequent migration crises have stalled the UfM, with little progress towards a trans-Mediterranean partnership.

Today, the EU's focus has shifted to a more reactive approach, addressing Euro-centric concerns like illegal migration through bilateral agreements. These agreements emphasize short-term EU benefits over the long-term interests of partner countries. This shift is clear from official transcripts, speeches, and talks with officials from the region who view countries like Italy as focused solely on stopping migration rather than fostering long-term partnerships. This shift is also evident in the timing of the agreements; starting from Libya to Tunisia, these agreements were all struck during periods of heightened migratory pressures.

By adopting reactionary approaches, the EU overlooks the benefits of long-term strategy planning for pre-

venting new migration crises. The Barcelona process, even if ultimately unsuccessful, exemplified a holistic engagement that sought to create balanced social, economic, and political partnerships. Today, however, the EU's approach is only a temporary solution to migration that risks the EU and its members losing credibility. Tackling relations with North and Sub-Saharan African countries solely through the migration prism can inflame political opinion in these countries and create perceptions of exploitation, where third countries feel agreements favor EU interests over their own. This undermines the EU's ability to secure effective, mutually beneficial migration agreements and weakens its negotiating position.

Tackling the Root Causes of Migration

Critics argue that the EU's migration strategy fails to address the root causes of migration comprehensively. This would include addressing the political, economic, and social factors in migrants' home countries that drive them to leave.

However, recent agreements with Tunisia, Egypt, and Mauritania suggest a shift from merely stopping migration to addressing the broader economic

African migrants and refugees on a ship in the port of Taranton, Puglia, Italy. (Shutterstock.com / MassimoTodaro)



developmental needs of said countries. The EU-Tunisia agreement allocates approximately \$167 million in general budgetary support beyond migration. The EU-Egypt deal commits \$8.2 billion over three years to stabilize Egypt's struggling economy, which faces high debt, high inflation, and foreign currency shortages. Similarly, the EU-Mauritania deal supports projects "including investments, infrastructures, and job creations primarily in the field of energy."³⁷

While the results of these agreements remain to be seen, the EU's Global Gateway initiative offers potential in connection with the EU's overall migration strategy. Aimed at enhancing connectivity through infrastructure between the EU and third countries and counterbalancing China's Belt and Road initiative, the Global Gateway has the potential to become a real tool for advancing African prosperity. It aims to mobilize \$334 billion in "investments for sustainable and high-quality projects" with partner countries across Africa, Central Asia, the Middle East, Asia, and the Pacific. This includes projects like desalination, wastewater treatment, and investments in education and research. If successful, the Global Gateway can represent a tool to invest in the so-called root causes of migration, such as poverty, famine, and lack of infrastructure, and become a driver for employment and opportunity in the continent.³⁸

Despite its potential, the EU's Global Gateway initiative is still far from realizing its full potential. Rizzi and Varvelli highlight that the EU's Southern Neighborhood (North Africa in particular) is underrepresented, with only three projects awarded to this region. Considering countries like Egypt and Tunisia have become, in recent years, countries of origin and not just of transit, neglecting North Africa presents obvious discrepancies with the EU's stated goals of addressing illegal migration.³⁹ Secondly, the initiative relies heavily on funding from the private sector, with the EU providing financial incentives through guarantees. This can create uncertainty and challenges for the implementation of projects,

The EU's recent migration agreements with Tunisia, Egypt, and Mauritania shift the focus on economic development and stability to address migration issues. Integrating the EU's Global Gateway initiative could

help tackle the root causes of migration, like poverty and lack of infrastructure. However, to effectively address migration's root causes and reduce migration pressures, the EU must ensure more projects in the North Africa region and secure robust financial commitments beyond private sector guarantees.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the EU's migration framework towards North Africa demonstrates the following key trends: Firstly, the EU is externalizing its borders by outsourcing patrolling tasks to third parties in North Africa. This has raised significant human rights concerns and exposed member states to legal challenges, weakening their leverage in negotiating future migration deals. Secondly, the EU's emphasis on a security-focused narrative fuels public disillusionment that stopping irregular migration is simple, potentially undermining public trust in its institutions and creating further political and diplomatic challenges. It inadvertently also incentivizes smuggling networks, as historical evidence suggests. Thirdly, ongoing divisions between the European Commission and the European Parliament make the EU more vulnerable to external interference from actors such as Russia, undermining the EU's ability to deliver cohesive and effective migration policies. Finally, the EU's shift toward prioritizing migration in its Southern neighborhood might erode the EU's credibility and negotiating power, complicating efforts to secure future migration agreements with partner countries as well as hamper the development of long-term partnerships.

Moving forward, the EU must adopt a more comprehensive approach that not only addresses immediate migration challenges but also focuses on the underlying political, economic, and social factors driving migration from North Africa. While recent deals with Tunisia, Egypt, and Mauritania signal a shift towards broader developmental aid, initiatives like the Global Gateway need to be expanded and tailored to meet the specific needs of North Africa. By investing in long-term solutions that foster economic growth, stability, and opportunity in these regions, the EU can build stronger partnerships with its southern neighbors, ensuring more sustainable outcomes for migration management and regional cooperation.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- The EU should ensure that the financial aid allocated to countries of transit and origin is allocated within a framework that ensures alignment with the EU's norms and values, ensuring respect for the human rights, dignity, and security of migrants. To do so, the EU should integrate strict human rights conditionalities into all migration agreements, including specific clauses allowing for aid suspension should significant human rights violations be detected. The EU could set up independent bodies to monitor the conditions of the detention centers it funds in partner countries. It should also ensure migrants have access to protection mechanisms and legal resources in their host countries to challenge human rights violations; this can be done by supporting those NGOs whose mission is to provide legal aid and support services to migrants locally and internationally.
- To address the limitations of the securitization approach, the EU should adopt measures to provide public narratives that also focus on the root causes of migration and create more legal and safe pathways for migrants to enter Europe to reduce their reliance on criminal and smuggling networks. To do so, the EU should increase the number of work permit visas, as Italy did with 4,000 Tunisian workers in 2023. The EU could also offer other incentives, such as student exchange programs and family reunification assistance.
- The EU should adopt measures aimed at strengthening its internal cohesion and enhancing transparency to mitigate the risks that malign actors exploit internal fissures and weaknesses. To this end, the European Commission should ensure that the European Parliament has access to all necessary information and documents relating to migration-related agreements well ahead of time to inform decision-making. The European Commission and the European Parliament could also further specify protocols for inter-institutional communication and decision-making to ensure that all relevant bodies are adequately involved in negotiating and approving significant agreements like the EU-Tunisia deal. The EC should implement transparency measures that require it to publicly disclose the details and progress of negotiations for international agreements, ensuring that the European Parliament and the public are kept informed.
- To avoid the erosion of trust with partner countries, the EU should focus on developing comprehensive partnerships—rather than reactionary, migration-centric agreements—that respect the interests and sovereignty of partner countries, fostering goodwill and long-term cooperation.
- To reduce reliance on private sector investment and ensure the sustainability of development projects, the EU should secure diverse funding also from public and international sources.
- The EU should also leverage the Global Gateway Initiative in its approach to tackle migration. The focus should be on projects that directly address the root causes of migration, such as poverty, lack of infrastructure, and limited economic opportunities.

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TRADE AND CRISES:

Evaluating the Impact of EU Trade on Crises in Libya

By Amir Magdy Kamel

Executive Summary

The EU's foreign and trade policies are designed to influence stability and peace. This paper examines this type of policy by evaluating how EU trade affected crises in Libya following the 2011 fall of Muammar al-Gaddafi. The findings show that EU trade had little impact on crises in Libya between 2011 and 2024 overall. This was largely due to economic (mis)management, a political impasse, and the militarization of disputes in the country. Post-2020 Libya saw falling numbers of crises amidst growing EU-Libya trade, while a political impasse between the rivaling local governments remained in place. This conveys how the strength of the Libyan economy—particularly the high EU demand for hydrocarbons—has the potential to power the country's growth alongside tempered crisis levels even when a lasting political agreement remains elusive. The policy recommendations center on two connected areas. First, the EU should operationalize trade to prompt a political agreement among domestic actors. Secondly, given market shares and demand, the EU should concentrate on hydrocarbon trade to levy this incentive to stimulate development and political institution-building. In turn, this will maximize the potential to stimulate a growing and crisis-free Libya and alleviate migratory pressures in line with the EU's foundational aim to use trade to influence stability and peace.

Introduction

EU ties with Libya remain strong following the 2011 revolution that ended Muammar al-Gaddafi's 42-year reign. This enables the EU's position as Libya's largest commercial partner, accounting for around half of the North African state's total trade. From an EU policy perspective, relations with Libya take place through the overlapping priorities of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), and the Common Commercial Policy

(CP). Each of these policies is derived from the EU's approach to international relations, which centers on the use of resources “to preserve and strengthen peace and liberty.”¹ On the ground, however, EU trade had little to no impact on a lasting peace or political stability in Libya. Put differently, EU trade has been unable to achieve the policy goal of lessening crises in Libya.

To identify the barriers to this goal—as well as the facilitators to alleviating crises—this paper examines EU-Libya ties from January 2011 to May 2024. This timeframe captures post-Gaddafi political and economic developments that accentuated crises amid EU-Libya total trade levels averaging €20.88 billion per year.² These developments include the post-2011 transition that comprised elections and constitutional amendments, the formation of two rivaling governments and the introduction of a third rival government, the signing of the 2015 Libya Political Agreement (LPA) that sought to resolve the political impasse, and pushing back elections that are not yet scheduled at the time of writing. This occurred while Libya houses the seventh largest proven oil reserves and 21st largest natural gas reserves in the world. These hydrocarbons—amounting to almost two-thirds of Libya's GDP and over 94% of exports³—have often been weaponized by local actors to win political concessions following the fall of Gaddafi. This is ignored from an EU policy perspective, which continues to confide in the use of trade to assuage crises. Consequently, other EU and Libyan interests impact the ability of trade to have a positive impact on crises, referred to as the EU trade-crisis policy in this paper.

Importantly, EU-Libya ties occur outside a ratified legislative agreement. As such, EU-Libya trade ties exist in the absence of a bilateral legal framework and take place through the general CFSP, CSDP, and CP instruments. The analysis conducted in this paper is therefore based on observed trade and the impact on crises.

The EU's approach is in reaction to the political impasse persisting in post-Gaddafi Libya. This paper unravels this impasse through an examination of the forces and developments in Libya to better understand how they can be overcome for a successful trade-crisis policy. The findings identify three main barriers to policy success in this arena, namely: the mismanagement of the economy, the rivaling governments in Libya and the linked lack of investment in governance structures and consequential security concerns in the country since 2011, and the weaponization of hydrocarbon production facilities by different actors to induce political gains. The migratory pressures that took a foothold in the country accentuate these three main barriers.

While each of these developments represents a trade-crisis policy barrier for the EU, they also point to a facilitating role should they be resolved. Overcoming these barriers will thus support two of the six European Commission (EC) 2019-24 priorities⁴ that focus on reinforcing the global order through “a stronger Europe in the World” and protecting EU citizens and values through promoting the “European way of life.”⁵

To link the analysis of these political and economic barriers to the trade-crisis policy's success, the next

section details the Libyan context in which these developments emanate. From there, the analysis focuses on three interrelated drivers of crises in Libya: economic (mis)management, the political impasse, and the militarization of disputes. Importantly, this incorporates the influence tribal fidelities and external actors have on the trade-crisis policy. While this has been consistent in the country, the analysis includes examples of these interests to demonstrate the impact of these two elements on Libya's political landscape. This is followed by an analysis of EU trade and crises in Libya since 2011 and a complementary econometric analysis of that relationship.

EU-Libya Ties in Context

Developments that occurred in pre-2011 Libya continue to shape the ability of EU trade to influence crises in the country today. Specifically, tribal and regional kinships, the control and rewards accrued from hydrocarbon production facilities, legacy legislations and affiliations, along with the role of external actors in each of these dynamics, present underlying barriers and potential facilitators to a successful trade-crisis policy.

Container ships with loading cranes in the Port of Tripoli, Libya, November 2020. (Shutterstock.com / HusseinEddeb)



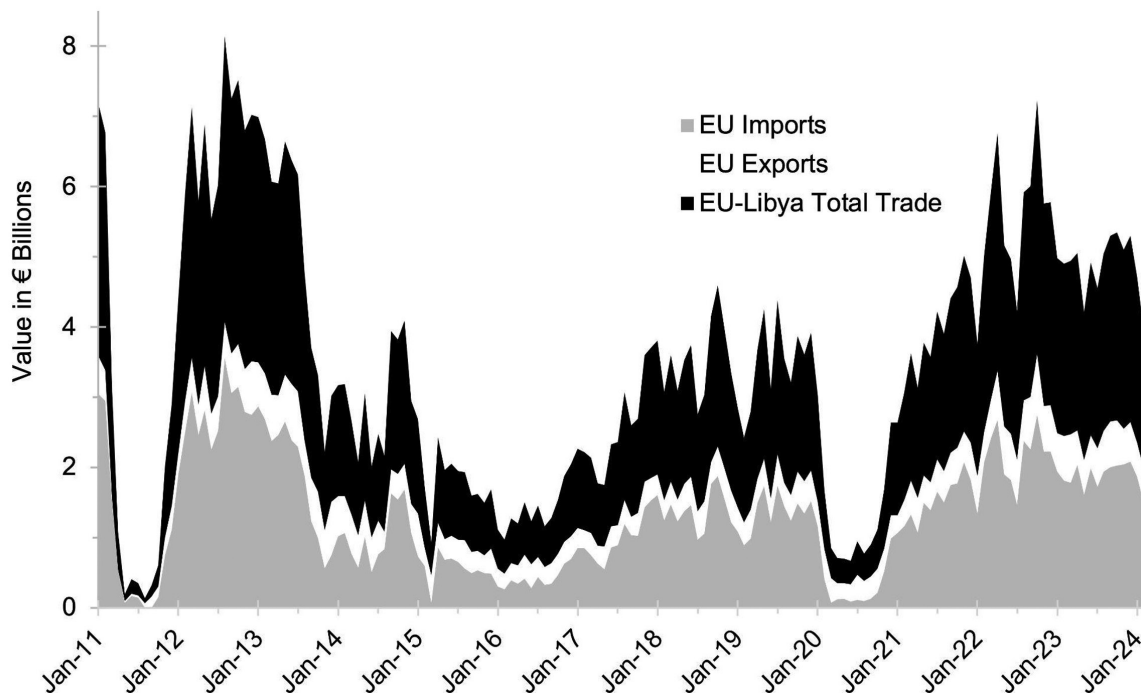
Scholarship on Libya highlights how tribal histories and alliances take precedence over “conventional” governance structures.⁶ This stems from a resistance to external attempts at developing centralized governance systems during the 1911-1943 Italian and 1943-1951 Anglo-French rule over Libya. This reluctance later evolved into a rejectionist sentiment when it came to external actors interfering with domestic politics in Libya—a narrative that was capitalized on during King Idris al-Senussi (1951-1969) and subsequent Gaddafi reigns.

For both Senussi and Gaddafi, legislative, governance, and tax regimes provided benefits to tribal allies that were made possible through the 1955 Petroleum Law, which remains—with some amendments—in effect today. The law permits oil company exploration and production in exchange for a share of the rent going to the Libyan government. This dynamic evolved under the 1977-2011 Great Socialist People’s Libyan Arab Jamahiriya regime that operated public institutions through People’s Committees and Basic Popular Conferences.⁷ This system intended to produce a novel governance structure where Libyans could voice their concerns and enact mitigations. Foreign policy, security, and hydrocarbon industry-related issues were, however, exempt from this system. In other words,

the Gaddafi regime presided over the ministries and decisions responsible for these three key policy areas. As a consequence, Gaddafi’s tribal allies politically and financially benefited from their position,⁸ along with Gaddafi himself, who was able to amass billions of US dollars in personal fortune by the time of his demise.⁹

The 2011 revolution and subsequent vacuum resulted in a setting for rival tribes to compete for hydrocarbon production facilities and the associated political power. In addition, the dissolution of the regime meant rivaling actors were operating in a weakened governance environment that had a lack of investment. This undermines the trade-crisis policy, as the setting does not consist of a consensus-determined regime. The competing actor’s politicization of hydrocarbons (owing to the wealth, power, and historical benefits afforded to certain groups), alongside the militarization of these political and economic disputes, all amount to barriers to a successful trade crisis policy. Furthermore, the Libyan economy’s reliance on external trade partners and geostrategic position along the Mediterranean has seen a vested interest from EU, regional, and globally powerful actors. The post-2011 era reveals how these barriers remain in place despite the ouster of Gaddafi.

Graph 1: EU Goods Trade with Post-Gaddafi Libya (Jan 2011–Feb 2024)



Data extracted from EC. (2024). Eurostat

Economic Mismanagement, Political Impasse, and Militarized Disputes

On the eve of the revolution, Brussels and Tripoli were negotiating a framework agreement that included strengthening dialogue and coordinating action on migration, trade, energy security, and inter-sectoral cooperation.¹⁰ More widely, Libya's ties with the international community had improved following the dismantlement of the Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) program and the associated international sanctions in 2003. The Gaddafi regime had embarked on an economic charm offensive, drawing up and implementing several policies to liberalize the Libyan economy. Consequently, the World Trade Organization (WTO) agreed to establish Libya's Working Party in July 2004, signaling the first step towards membership. This was paused, however, following the 2011 revolution, with a similar pattern following negotiations for an EU-Libya framework on trade between 2008 and 2011.¹¹ Furthermore, Libya does not have an official Euro-Mediterranean (EUROMED) Association Agreement; alongside Syria, these are the only two countries in the EU's southern neighborhood without one.

As a result, EU-Libya relations operate through the Global Europe Neighbourhood, Development, and International Cooperation Instrument for the 2021-2027 period (and previously through the European Neighbourhood Instrument for the 2014-2020 period) when it comes to development and aid. For migration, this comes through the Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF for Africa) and the CSDP when it comes to crisis management, the EU Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM) for border management and security at Libya's borders, EUNAVFOR MED Operation IRINI enforces the UN arms embargo on Libya, and Erasmus+ program for higher education development.¹² This means that EU-Libyan ties are not governed by the proposed and yet-to-be-signed free trade agreement, WTO rules (owing to Libya's non-membership), and the EUROMED (where Libya is limited to "observer" status).

Importantly, the 2011 revolution had a lasting impact on EU-Libya ties due to a succeeding period that continued to be marred by economic mismanagement, political impasse, and militarized disputes. In trade terms, this led to a fluctuating trade trajectory from 2011 onwards, as displayed in Graph 1.

The immediate aftermath of the revolution showed signs of promise through a transition council, the setting up of a new parliamentary system, and elections. This is reflected in EU-Libya total trade in goods falling from €3.59 billion in January 2011 to €68.6 million in August 2011 and back up to an all-time high of €4.06 billion in August 2012.¹³ On the ground, the revolution triggered UN sanction resolutions 1970 and 1973, restricting arms, travel, finance, and the freezing of state assets. This had a detrimental impact on the fundamentals of the Libyan economy, with oil production falling to 516 thousand barrels per day (bpd) and natural gas decreasing to 1.3 billion cubic meters in 2011,¹⁴ representing an estimated 70% and 50% year-to-year drop, respectively. From then on, oil and gas levels followed a fluctuating pattern, with oil peaking at 1,539 thousand bpd in 2012 and troughing at 412,000 bpd in 2017, while natural gas peaked at 5.9 billion cubic meters in 2021 and troughed at 2.4 billion cubic meters on 2016.¹⁵ With these hydrocarbons amounting to over 60% of GDP and 94% of exports, the importance of wealth and the associated power in Libya was recognized by political actors.

Between 2012 and 2015, two rivaling governments gained a foothold in Libya after the National Transition Council failed to reach an agreement on the governing structures. The elected General National Congress (GNC) was challenged by the House of Representatives (HoR) following disputes over the way the country was being governed, along with the conduct of the succeeding 2014 elections. This led to a period that saw these rivaling governments engage in a protracted competition for political authority in Libya. This competition ranged from violent clashes to shutting down oil production facilities. Violence often took place along tribal lines, as demonstrated in 2014 when the Zintan tribe (aligned with the HoR) clashed with the rivaling Misrata tribe (aligned to the GNC). Additionally, the pausing of oil production highlighted the problem for external actors who had a vested interest in ensuring these facilities continued to operate.¹⁶ This was particularly problematic for the EU, which was on the receiving end of 91% of Libya's oil exports by 2015,¹⁷ falling to around 71% in 2022.¹⁸

The LPA, brokered by the UN and signed by the GNC and HoR in December 2015, aimed to forge a "stable environment that enjoys peace and security."¹⁹ This

environment was to be overseen by the Government of National Accord (GNA), relocated from Tunis to Tripoli, where the GNC—which became the Government of National Unity (GNU) in 2021—was based. Despite the LPA, the HoR and its supporters, headquartered in Tobruk, were critical of the agreement alongside the GNC and then the GNU. This led to a period of continued competition between what then became three rivaling governments (including the GNA). Furthermore, the Tripoli-based government demonstrated the influence of foreign actors in the country by awarding Turkey and Qatar investment opportunities in the region.²⁰

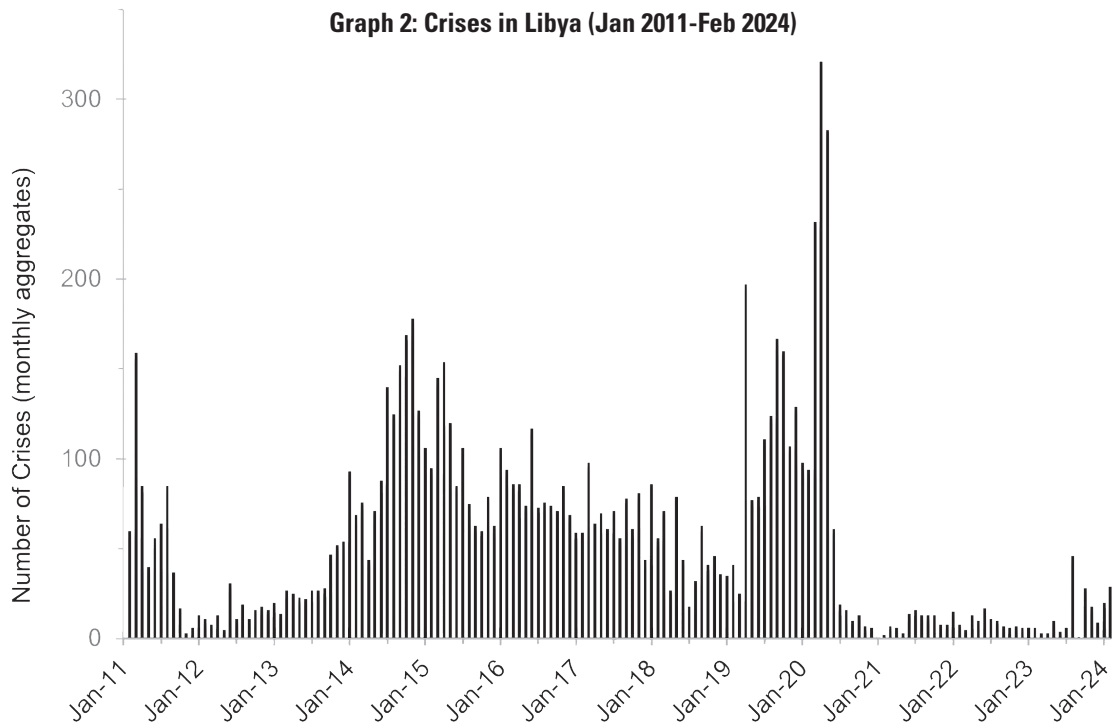
This political landscape created a problem for the trade-crisis policy. In the period from 2011 to 2024, the EU instigated projects in Libya with an aim to strengthen “civil society, human rights and free media, democratic governance, health services and COVID-19 response, entrepreneurship, youth empowerment, and gender equality.”²¹ This was compounded by the releasing of \$6.3 million following the September 2023 storm that caused widespread flooding and damage in the country.²²

Trade-wise, this led to a fluctuating EU-Libya relationship, as demonstrated in Graph 1. Of note, while

EU trade ties with the world fluctuated in this same period—with an acute variation during the COVID-19 pandemic—the pattern of EU-Libya trade was more extreme, with levels reaching their relatively lowest levels in August 2011 and June 2020. From mid-2020 on, the relationship between EU trade and crises in Libya started to change. Following an all-time peak of crises in April,²³ a subsiding number of violent and militarized disputes were recorded, as conveyed in Graph 2.

Together with EU-Libya trade levels conveyed in Graph 1, the political impasse began to matter less for militarized violence and thus pointed to signs of a positive EU trade relationship with crises in Libya between 2021 and 2024. Furthermore, these EU-Libya ties occurred in the context of supporting the UN-led delegation in the country, along with a focus on migrants and refugees through the EUBAM. This mission was mandated with contributing to the enhancement of “the capacity of the relevant Libyan authorities and agencies to manage Libya’s borders, to fight cross-border crime (including human trafficking and migrant smuggling), and to counter terrorism.”²⁴

For Brussels, this initiative was complemented by commercial ties with Libya through the CP, which was



Data extracted from Raleigh et al. (2023)

“conducted in the context of the principles and objectives of the Union’s external action.”²⁵ Notably, these principles and objectives were pursued by EU member states through “pooling their resources to preserve and strengthen peace and liberty, and calling upon the other peoples of Europe who share their ideal to join in their efforts.”²⁶ These foundations made it possible for the EU to situate itself as Libya’s largest trade partner, accounting for half of the country’s overall trade,²⁷ despite lacking a legal framework to govern bilateral relations.

This EU approach has made little headway in ameliorating some of the issues behind the competing rival governments. Disagreements have overlapped with tribal clashes; the lack of investment in governance structures is linked to security concerns in the country since 2011; the migratory pressures have taken a foothold in Libya, and hydrocarbon production facilities have been weaponized by different actors to force political gains. This makes it difficult for the EC to pursue the 2019-24 priorities.²⁸ Specifically, the priority of “a stronger Europe in the World” was hampered in the EU-Libya context as the assistance provided failed to achieve the targeted objectives and observation of international law. The aim of protecting citizens and values through

the “protecting European way of life” priority also fell short in sharing values with Libya, attributed to the ongoing competition and violence. Looking at a complementary econometric assessment of EU-Libya ties in this context sheds more light on these concerns from a policy perspective.

Quantitative Assessment: Negligible Impact of EU Trade on Crises in Libya

To measure the impact of EU trade on crises in Libya, the analysis focuses on monthly data on this relationship. The USD value of EU-Libya total import and export trade in goods²⁹ is taken as the independent variable. This represents the trade relationship between the EU and Libya and makes it possible to determine the predictive nature of trade. The dependent (or outcome) variable represents crises in Libya³⁰ defined as battles, protests (excessive force against protesters), riots, explosions/remote violence, and violence against civilians.³¹ This array of definitions makes it possible to determine the predictive impact of EU trade on different forms of crises in Libya and, thus, a quantification of the relationship between these two variables using the available

Chart 1: Relationship Between EU Trade and Crises in Libya (with controls)

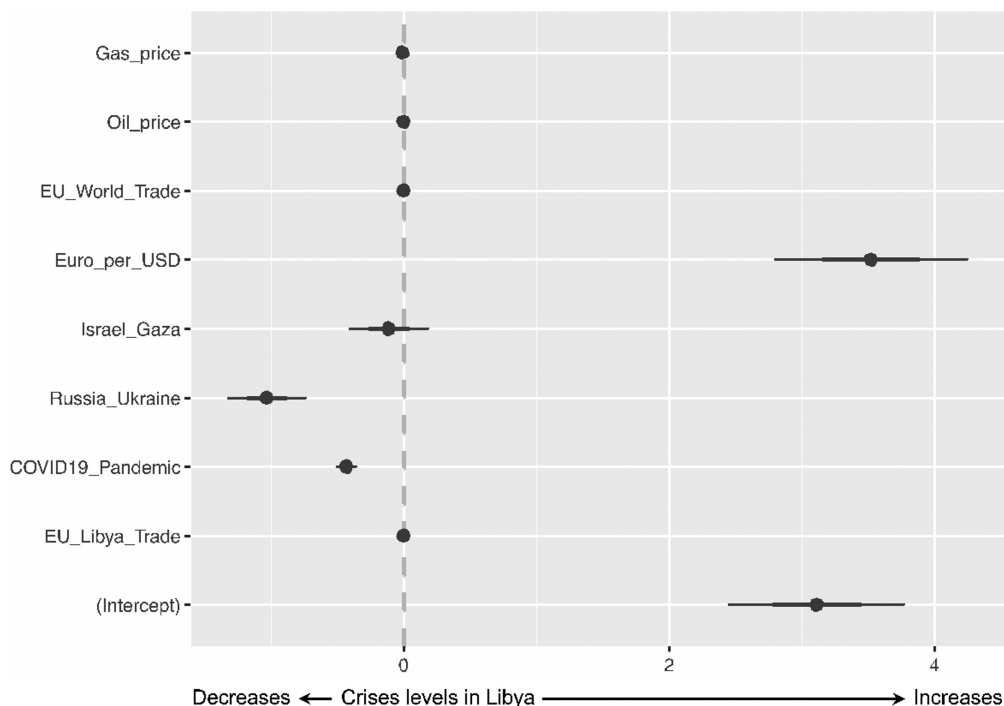


Chart produced in R

monthly data (which runs from January 2011 to February 2024). This is accomplished through a Generalized Linear Poisson Regression model due to the count nature of the crises in Libya data.

To provide a detailed analysis of this relationship, a Multivariate Poisson Regression model captured (or controls for) seven additional variables that represent the specific relationship between EU trade and crises in Libya, as well as the broader context in which the trade-crisis policy was implemented. Specifically, these control variables are: the COVID-19 pandemic,³² the Russia-Ukraine conflict,³³ the Israel-Gaza conflict,³⁴ the EU's total trade with the world,³⁵ the value of the Euro against the US dollar,³⁶ the Oil Price Index,³⁷ and the Natural Gas price.³⁸

To present the findings of the econometric analysis, Chart 1 displays a coefficient plot of the relationship between EU-Libya trade and crises in Libya along with the seven controls³⁹ for the Multivariate Poisson Regression model. This includes the confidence intervals (or margins of error represented by the horizontal lines across the points on the graph) to demonstrate the impact of trade on crises in this case. The results of the Generalized Linear Poisson Regression model that does not include the controls are discussed in the text.

Of the seven controls, the Israel-Gaza conflict, oil prices, and gas prices did not return statistically significant results, while the others were found to be statistically significant and are explained in detail below.⁴⁰ Notably, EU-Libya trade has a minimal negative impact on crises in Libya, as shown by the corresponding point on the graph,⁴¹ albeit almost half as impactful than without controls.⁴²

The chart also demonstrates how the biggest effect on the trade-crisis relationship came from the value of the Euro against the USD, with an almost outlier point to the right in Chart 1. However, this can be explained by the fact that other developments took place in this timeframe that had an impact on European member states and US economies. Furthermore, as this is a more implicit predictor with a higher margin of error (demonstrated by the longest horizontal line on the chart corresponding to Euro_per_USD), it does not bear material implications for the trade-crisis policy. Con-

versely, the biggest decreasing effect on crises in Libya is due to the February 2022-present Russia-Ukraine conflict in the furthest point to the left in Chart 1.

Much like the October 2023-present Israel-Gaza conflict exhibits higher margins of error levels (with long horizontal lines on either side of the points corresponding to these conflicts in the chart), this also makes them a further imprecise implication for the trade-crisis policy. Of note, the control variable with the least impact on crises in Libya came from EU trade with the world,⁴³ indicating the lesser impact that EU-Libya trade has on stability in this context. Taken together, the results of the analysis presented in Chart 1 point to a minimal albeit significant relationship between EU trade with Libya and crises in the country when some of the variables are taken into account. Some policy implications can be derived from these findings, alongside what they mean for broader EU-Libya ties.

Conclusion

The environment in which the EU aims to use trade to alleviate crises in Libya has a determining impact on this trade-crisis policy goal. Consequently, the Libyan political and economic context has provided barriers to the success of this EU policy following the 2011 fall of the Gaddafi regime; specifically, the rivaling governments in Libya (including the UN-supported GNA) continue to compete for political influence. This created a barrier to a crisis-free Libya.

Furthermore, the pre-2011 dynamics in the country and the lack of investment in governance infrastructures have exacerbated this barrier to EU policy goals in Libya. While there is potential for overcoming this barrier (i.e., when a political agreement is reached), this has remained elusive to date. For instance, while the 2015 LPA showed promise towards resolving competition for authority in the country, the post-2015 period has been marred with continued infighting between local actors. While there was hope of political compromise and cooperation in the midst of the September 2023 floods, this has not yet happened at the time of writing.

Linked to this barrier is the politicization of hydrocarbon control. With local actors (on tribal and regional

levels in the country) holding oil production facilities to ransom while demanding political concessions, it is clear that this key feature of Libya's economy has a determining role in both trade with the EU and ameliorating crises in the country. Indeed, a political agreement that ensures hydrocarbon facilities and benefits are governed in an equitable manner would transform this important economic feature into a trade-crisis policy facilitator. The migration pressures in the country are exacerbated by the broader political instability in Libya. Compounding this is the fact that the relative size of Libyan hydrocarbons (at two-thirds of GDP and 94% of trade) and the migratory attraction of the country as a route to the European continent highlights the interests of external actors in Libya. While these are regional and global concerns, a crisis-free Libya with a functioning political agreement will create an environment conducive to improving migrant-based issues and the success of the trade-crisis policy, by extension.

The quantitative analyses support these findings to a limited extent and reveal some additional insights. The models show a negative albeit minimal relationship between EU-Libya trade and crises in the country. In other words, EU-Libya trade led to minimal falls in crisis levels in Libya. This is true with or without the inclusion of other control variables. Indeed, the multivariate model conveys that the

Euro to USD exchange rate had the largest impact on the trade-crisis policy, with EU-World trade having the least impact. Elsewhere, the Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Gaza conflicts, along with the COVID-19 pandemic, had decreasing (albeit with less confidence when it comes to the two conflicts) effects on crises in the country. This may be due to the proximity, intensity, and type of event—along with the fact that they continue to be unresolved policy problems. As such, the general findings convey a statistically significant minimal impact of trade on crises (to different magnitudes).

For the EU, this paper's findings highlight the need for involvement in Libya to be guided by ensuring a political agreement is reached in the country through the European Commission 2019-24 priority: "stronger Europe in the world." This, in turn, will enable the "protecting our European way of life" priority in that a stable and prosperous trade partner and an important provider of hydrocarbon products will contribute towards this goal.⁴⁴

In closing, EU ties with Libya exist in a context where historical and ongoing dynamics continue to hinder political stability in the country. As such, the trade-crisis policy must take into account these different factors to stand a chance of being successful going forward. The analyses articulated here provide some policy suggestions on where to start in this endeavor.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- The EU should operationalize the fact that trade with Libya has increased alongside falling crisis events in Libya post-2020 despite a political impasse among local actors. This can come in the form of a trade policy designed to reward a political agreement that could induce efforts to resolve the persisting governance vacuum.
- The EU should concentrate on Libyan hydrocarbon trade in formulating trade policy, given the size and make-up of hydrocarbons in the Libyan economy. These resources present an opportunity to stimulate development and political institution-building.
- The EU should work on a regional solution to alleviate migration-linked pressures in Libya, reducing instability in the country.

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Appendix

Table A1. Variables and details

Label	Detail	Format	Source
Date	January 2011 to February 2024	mmm-yy	—
EU_Libya_Trade	Total value of EU goods imports from and export to Libya (CN8) on a monthly basis	Value in €	EC. (2024). Eurostat.
Crises_in_Libya	Weekly dataset of the total number of reported political violence events and fatalities on a monthly basis to represent crises in Libya. These events include: battles, violence against civilians, explosions/remote violence event types, and mob/organized crime violence	Count/number	Raleigh et al. (2023).
COVID19_Pandemic	Coded using a dummy variable starting in March 2020 until March 2022 when the European Commission released the document sustaining the response to the virus	0=pre-pandemic 1=pandemic	EC. (2022). ‘COVID-19’.
Russia_Ukraine	Coded using a dummy variable beginning in February 2022 and lasting until the final data point	0=pre-conflict 1=conflict	—
Israel_Gaza	Coded using a dummy variable beginning in October 2023 until the final data point	0=pre-conflict 1=conflict	—
Euro_per_USD	Factored in to capture the extent to which EU-Libya trade was influenced by the strength of the Euro	Value in €	OECD. (2024). ‘Data Explorer’.
EU_World_Trade	Factored in to capture the extent to which EU-Libya trade was influenced by EU-World trade	Value in €	EC. (2024). Eurostat.
Oil_price	Factored in to capture the extent to which EU-Libya trade was influenced by Libya’s largest export, GDP contributor, and the EU’s largest import. Measured using the price index of crude oil (petroleum), where 2016 = 100 and represents simple average of three spot prices; Dated Brent, West Texas Intermediate, and the Dubai Fateh	Index value	IMF. (2024). ‘Primary Commodity Prices’.
Gas_price	Similar to the oil price index, this captures the extent to which EU-Libya trade was influenced by an important Libyan commodity. Defined as natural gas, spot price at Henry Hub, Louisiana and is measured in USD per Million Metric British Thermal Unit	Value in \$	World Bank. WDI. (2024).

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MIGRATION AS A COERCIVE DIPLOMATIC TOOL:

Framing the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement | By Z. Aslı Elitsoy

Executive Summary

This paper analyzes the domestic political factors behind Turkey's use of Coercive Engineered Migration (CEM) as a strategic foreign policy tool, particularly in the context of the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement. It argues that Turkey's use of CEM is influenced not only by the EU's externalization and securitization of migration but also by domestic politics. Through content analysis of parliamentary debates and questions between 2016 and 2024, the study highlights consensus and contestation among Turkish MPs on using migration as leverage in negotiations with the European Union. The findings indicate that the ruling Justice and Development Party has framed CEM as a necessary response to national security threats *vis-à-vis* the Kurdish issue, using the threat of refugee flows to pressure the EU to support Turkey's military actions in northern Syria. Opposition parties, however, criticize the EU-Turkey Statement for exploiting refugees as bargaining chips and causing humanitarian distress, condemning the government's use of refugees to gain concessions from the EU. Moreover, concerns over the government's lack of transparency in distributing EU aid for refugees and the perceived exploitation of refugees for political purposes have further eroded public trust. These criticisms have deepened divisions over the government's handling of migration and foreign policy and contributed to broader political polarization within the Turkish parliament.

Introduction

On February 29, 2020, the Turkish President and leader of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), Recep Tayyip Erdoğan stated that despite then-German Chancellor Angela Merkel's promise, the European Union (EU) failed to send 25 million euros to Turkey for refugees. He added: "We followed up on this amount and called the Chancellor again. She said

that the money is ready but is not coming here. If you are going to give it, give it. If not, I said yesterday we will send these refugees to you. We opened the doors and will not close them from now on."¹

This was neither the first time Erdoğan used migrants and refugees to exert political pressure on the EU nor was it a unique case in diplomatic history. Greenhill identified 56 cases of over 40 displaced groups being used as leverage since the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention.² In 2010, Muammar Gaddafi publicly threatened to "turn Europe Black" unless the EU provided financial assistance.³ Similarly, in response to EU sanctions following the 2020 fraudulent elections in Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko encouraged illegal border crossings into the EU.⁴ More recently, on May 17, 2021, around 8,000 people irregularly crossed from Morocco into the Spanish enclave of Ceuta after Spain decided to provide medical treatment to the leader of the Polisario Front. This instrumentalization of population flows, termed "Coercive Engineered Migration" (CEM) by Greenhill, has become a focus for foreign policymakers, analysts, and scholars.

Greenhill defines CEM as "cross-border population movements deliberately created or manipulated to induce political, military, and/or economic concessions from a target state or states."⁵ This type of coercion is typically employed by states with limited power and capabilities against more powerful counterparts. Moreover, while most target states have been liberal democracies, the majority of coercers have disproportionately not.⁶

This unconventional strategy has proven effective, with over half of the cases achieving at least some of their objectives, mainly due to internal political pressures pushing target state leaders to concede to the coercers' demands.⁷ As Greenhill emphasizes, migration crises tend to split societies into (at least two)

mutually antagonistic and highly mobilized groups: the pro and anti-immigration camps.⁸ Leaders facing the clash of incompatible interests between the two camps may encounter a dilemma where satisfying one group's demands risks alienating the other. Therefore, leaders are pressured to concede to demands, especially when the concession is likely to make an actual or threatened migration crisis cease or disappear.⁹

While studies on CEM extensively investigate migration as a coercive tool in international politics and focus on its foreign policy implications,¹⁰ particularly its impact on international security¹¹ and regional integration¹² and its effects on the target state, they often overlook how this strategy affects and is shaped by domestic political dynamics within the challenger state. Which domestic factors make this unconventional strategy attractive for the challenger? What are its domestic implications for the challenger? These questions remain unexplored.

Accordingly, this paper explores the patterns of consensus and contestation among Turkish parliamentarians regarding the EU-Turkey Statement (signed in March 2016) on managing cross-border irregular migration, a deal widely criticized by various stakeholders for being immoral, inhumane, and possibly illegal. The analysis is based on parliamentary speeches and questions posed by government and opposition Members of Parliament (MPs) between 2016 and 2024.

Background on the EU-Turkey Statement on Migration

The so-called “refugee crisis” refers to the unprecedented influx of refugees and migrants fleeing conflict in the Middle East and North Africa to Europe. In 2015, the number of first-time asylum seekers applying for international protection in EU member countries reached over a million, the highest number since World War I. Refugees from Syria alone accounted for 29% of applications, the highest of any nation; another 15% came from Afghanistan and 10% from Iraq.¹³

Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, left, shakes hands with European Council President Donald Tusk, center, and European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, right, during a media conference at the end of an EU summit in Brussels on March 18, 2016. (AP Photo / Virginia Mayo)



The surge in asylum applications and border crossings has generated widespread xenophobia and anti-immigration sentiments across Europe, which in turn fueled the rise of right-wing populist movements. Despite a steady decline in migrant arrivals to Europe via Greece following the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement, there has been little public support across Europe for allowing more immigrants to enter their countries.

The Eastern Mediterranean route that passes through the Aegean Sea from Turkey to Greece, Cyprus, and Bulgaria has been a major pathway for refugees seeking shelter from conflicts in Syria and Afghanistan. Therefore, facing a dilemma between either fulfilling international and legal obligations regarding human rights and refugee protection or responding to domestic pressure from constituents, European leaders opted for the option of an increased “externalization”¹⁴ and “militarization”¹⁵ of the external borders of the Union. Externalization refers to “measures taken by states in locations beyond their territorial borders to obstruct, deter, or avert the arrival of refugees, asylum seekers, and other migrants.”¹⁶ These measures include direct interdiction and preventive policies as well as more indirect actions, such as the provision of support or assistance to migration management practices in third countries.¹⁷

The logic of externalization is based on the assumption that the EU can outsource the management of migration flows to non-member origin and transit countries. To establish control mechanisms in third countries, the EU shifted its foreign policy priorities towards strategic transit countries, including Turkey, the main transit country for migrants and refugees from the Middle East to Europe.¹⁸ The EU’s securitized and externalized migration regime necessitated close cooperation with neighboring Turkey, which hosts the world’s largest refugee population, making the control of irregular migration to the EU a major area of collaboration.¹⁹

Consequently, the EU-Turkey Statement (commonly referred to as the EU-Turkey Deal on Refugees) was signed on March 18, 2016, as part of the EU’s long-standing and ongoing externalization strategy.²⁰ Under the terms, new irregular migrants who passed from Turkey to Greece and whose asylum applications were declared inadmissible would be returned to Turkey. In return,

the EU agreed to allocate \$6.7 billion for funding projects to assist refugees in Turkey and to expedite the visa liberalization process for Turkish citizens.²¹ According to data from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), migration from Turkey to Greece largely ceased following the implementation of the deal, with daily arrivals dropping from thousands to around a hundred by the summer of 2016.

Studies have shown that the EU’s externalized migration policies allowed some third countries to strategically manipulate migration flows.²² Likewise, as Aras puts it, Turkey’s deliberate strategy of CEM began around mid-2015 when the refugee crisis created a new diplomatic opportunity, later solidified by the EU-Turkey Statement in March 2016.²³

The 2016 EU-Turkey Statement in the Turkish Political Debate

This study employs a content analysis of parliamentary speeches and questions in the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TBMM) from 2016 to 2024 to explore the patterns of consensus and contestation within Turkish political discourse on using CEM as a foreign policy tool. Relevant parliamentary documents were obtained from the official electronic archives of the TBMM by using keywords such as “European Union,” “refugee deal,” “visa liberalization,” “immigrant,” “refugee,” “Syrian,” “irregular migration,” and “repatriation.” Nine hundred sixty-four written parliamentary documents were downloaded and classified by legislative years. Once each document was thematically coded with MAXQDA, a qualitative data analysis software, thematic categories were identified.

The content analysis has shown that opposition MPs frequently used parliamentary questions to criticize the AKP’s use of CEM against the EU or propose recommendations and solutions for migration management. Notably, all parliamentary questions regarding the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement were submitted exclusively by opposition MPs, with no single question from the ruling AKP members. For this reason, the records of parliamentary speeches served as the primary source in analyzing the government’s perspective, while parliamentary questions primarily shed light on the views and attitudes of the opposition members.

Coercive Engineered Migration from the Government Perspective

According to the Presidency of Migration Management, by the end of 2023, Turkey hosted 4,893,752 registered refugees and migrants, with an unknown number of irregular migrants. Opposition representatives, however, claim that the number of registered and unregistered migrants exceeds 10 million. There are also uncertainties regarding the number of Syrians granted Turkish citizenship and the criteria for granting it. Accusations against the AKP government include attempts to influence election results by allowing naturalized Syrians and Afghans, presumed to support Erdoğan, to vote.²⁴ Even within the AKP constituency, there is criticism of the government's exceptional citizenship and "open door" policies.²⁵

Coupled with the political exploitation of the refugee issue, rising unemployment rates, economic pressures, and social tensions have contributed to an escalation of anti-immigrant sentiment in Turkey in recent years. A 2021 survey by the Social, Economic, and Political Research Foundation of Turkey (TÜSES) indicated that concerns about the country's economic performance correlate with negative attitudes toward Syrians. Similarly, a 2020 survey by the Istanbul Political Research Institute (IstanPol) found that 78% of the participants believe the government favors Syrians over Turkish citizens.

The rising anti-refugee sentiment among voters has led most political parties in Turkey to adopt a stricter stance toward migration-related issues. For example, "sending Syrians back" has become a common election promise across nearly all political parties. Analysts suggest that this trend contributed to the decline in public support for President Erdoğan and the victory of the main opposition party, the People's Republican Party (CHP), which promised to repatriate refugees during its campaigns in the 2019 and 2024 municipal elections.

Under public pressure, the AKP government also revisited its migration policy. In 2019, Erdoğan announced the establishment of "safe zones" in northern Syria to facilitate the return of Syrian refugees.²⁶ Subsequently, his government constructed housing units in Turkish-occupied towns in northern Syria for the "voluntary" return of Syrians.

Since 2016, Turkey has conducted several unilateral military operations and installed a stable military presence in northern Syria. While Turkish authorities have justified these actions on humanitarian grounds to create a safe zone for refugees,²⁷ the primary motivation has been to prevent the formation of an autonomous Kurdish administration by the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the Syrian offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), along the Turkish-Syrian border—which could potentially offer strategic advantages to the PKK, including an operational base and political legitimacy. This was one of the reasons for Turkey's inability to persuade the international community—especially the United States and the EU—to support a joint safe zone in northern Syria.²⁸

Turkey's military operations in northern Syria drew widespread international criticism. In October 2019, the European Parliament called for the withdrawal of Turkish forces and limited arms exports to Turkey. Then-US president Donald Trump also signed an executive order imposing sanctions on Turkey. Furthermore, the European Parliament's resolution of October 24, 2019, stated that Turkey's plan to create a safe zone and forcibly displace people with the aim of demographic change was a breach of international humanitarian law.

Widespread international condemnation was interpreted by the AKP and its coalition partner, the Nationalist Action Party (MHP), as a resurrection of a Western conspiracy to use Turkey's minorities to partition the country. Analysis of parliamentary speeches indicates that the majority of members of the ruling coalition see the creation of an autonomous Kurdish region in Syria as the second phase of a Western (particularly American) strategy to establish an independent Kurdish state that would be extended from northern Iraq and Syria to the Mediterranean, along Turkey's southern border.²⁹

Turkey's plan to establish a safe zone for relocating refugees, which would serve as a Sunni Arab-majority buffer zone between its Kurdish minority and their ethnic kin across the border, has been a part of a strategy to prevent any form of Kurdish self-rule in Syria. Since its inception, a Kurdish self-administration in Syria dominated by the PYD has exacerbated the concerns of the Turkish state elite that this could boost

the Kurdish aspirations for independence in Turkey.³⁰ Therefore, creating a safe zone has been framed as a national security and humanitarian concern.

In his speech during the third legislative year of the 27th term of the TBMM, Erdoğan stated: “At the G20 Summit held in Antalya four years ago, I proposed to all participating leaders the establishment of a safe zone in Syria and the resettlement of refugees within that territory. While everyone welcomed the idea in principle, no country took concrete steps to support it. Meanwhile, the terrorism threat from Syria directed at our country had reached intolerable levels. This situation compelled us to take direct action to make Syrian territory safe for both our country and the refugees. We carried out the Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch operations with this understanding.”³¹

Erdoğan’s statements not only addressed Turkey’s concerns about Kurdish self-rule but also reflected frustration with the lack of international support for creating a safe zone for refugees. Consequently, international criticism of Turkey’s military actions has been perceived as a threat to Turkey’s national security and its territorial integrity. This perception contributed to Turkey’s adaptation of CEM as a strategic tool in its foreign policy. By threatening to open its borders and increase the influx of refugees into Europe, Turkey has sought to pressure the EU into supporting its policies and actions in Syria. This leverage shows how national security concerns can be closely linked to the migration policies of challenger states.

Opposition Perspectives on Turkey’s Strategy of Coercive Engineered Migration: Insights from Parliamentary Questions

Despite Turkey’s new political system (defined as a “competitive authoritarian” regime),³² which limits the space for opposition voices, parliamentary questions maintain their significance since they provide MPs with a platform to bring certain issues to the parliamentary agenda and voice their criticisms towards government policies, even though a majority of them remain unanswered. Consequently, parliamentary questions shed light on the opposition perspective on the AKP government’s migration policies, particularly the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement and Erdoğan’s use of CEM towards the EU.

Based on thematic analysis, four framing patterns emerged prominently in the parliamentary questions posed by the opposition MPs:

a. Framing the statement as a violation of human rights and dignity

The 2016 EU-Turkey Statement has frequently been criticized in parliamentary questions—especially by members of the main opposition CHP and the pro-Kurdish People’s Democratic Party (HDP). Critics argue that the statement exploits refugees as bargaining chips to advance foreign policy objectives, thereby violating international law and agreements on refugee protection and human rights. Humanitarian-focused questions frequently raised concerns about the poor conditions and mistreatment in camps where refugees and irregular migrants returned from the Greek islands were held. Issues highlighted include deaths and disappearances in the Aegean Sea (due to increased human trafficking exacerbated by inadequate monitoring from the Turkish security forces) and problems accessing fundamental rights such as health and education.

One claim from this perspective is that the AKP government has (either directly or indirectly) encouraged or overlooked irregular migration through the Aegean Sea to leverage negotiations with the EU for political gains. On December 11, 2015, an HDP deputy highlighted these allegations by emphasizing the dangers and violations of migrants’ basic rights, particularly concerning their safety during dangerous sea journeys.³³ The deputy also criticized the EU for failing to take measures to address the root causes of the migration influx and for closing its borders to refugees.

Opposition MPs have raised the issue of human trafficking as a “profitable trade” in the Aegean Sea—a popular escape route for irregular migrants and refugees due to low costs and lack of oversight. They have questioned the measures taken by security forces to combat migrant smuggling, particularly in Aegean coastal provinces. These inquiries focus on the effectiveness of security measures, potential abuses of authority, and legal actions against offenders.³⁴ MPs also expressed concerns about the treatment of refugees sent back to Turkey, citing allegations of torture and mistreatment by Greek security forces. On December 17, 2019, a CHP MP asked the government about reports of refugees

being deprived of food and water, subjected to violence and “punishment beatings” in EU-backed detention centers in Greece, and sent back to Turkey with their money confiscated. They also inquired whether the Turkish government had informed Greek authorities about these allegations and if any action had been taken with the UNHCR or the EU.³⁵

Additionally, another MP questioned how long the AKP government planned to keep refugees at the border to pressure the EU. He noted that despite the Greek and Bulgarian governments declaring they would not open their borders to refugees, sending thousands of mostly women and children to the border area was neither ethical nor humane. He further emphasized that the Turkish government would be responsible for any resulting humanitarian crisis.³⁶

b. Framing the Statement as a Security Threat and an Economic Burden to Turkey

Other common framings used by the opposition MPs regarding the EU-Turkey Statement included perceived security threats and economic burden. These framings represented refugees as challenges for the host country. These questions contended that the obligations imposed on Turkey by the statement could undermine societal security and stability while adding a burden on Turkey’s already fragile economy. Some MPs argued that establishing repatriation centers, particularly in the Aegean provinces for refugees returned from Greek islands, could negatively affect the tourism industry and, by extension, the national economy. This argumentation combined with the perceptions of refugees as potential security threats to society and even to the demographic structure of cities.

The opposition has typically criticized the AKP government for establishing repatriation centers in Turkey’s most attractive tourism destinations along the Aegean coast. This criticism primarily came from CHP MPs for İzmir, a traditional stronghold of left-wing secular politics and a historical bastion for the CHP, who claimed that İzmir was being “punished” by this decision.³⁷ MPs submitted questions about the potential impact of these centers on regional tourism and the long-term economy, including whether refugees would be transferred through Çeşme Port, one of Turkey’s most popular cruise ship ports.³⁸ Referring

to then-Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu’s depiction of the EU-Turkey summit as “Kayseri bargaining”—named for the hard-bargaining reputation of entrepreneurs from Kayseri, a CHP MP for İzmir asked: “How can you justify a projected annual loss of 10 billion euros in tourism revenue while negotiating to secure 3 billion euros from the EU for refugees? What kind of ‘Kayseri bargain’ is this?”³⁹

Similar parliamentary questions were submitted about repatriation centers in other major tourist destinations. A CHP MP argued that a center in Kuşadası could harm tourism and inquired whether the government had conducted a feasibility report on potential negative impacts and considered alternatives outside tourist areas.⁴⁰ Another MP stated that the proposed repatriation center between Bodrum and Milas, two popular Aegean resorts, could disrupt tourism and the economy. He emphasized that the government had neither informed nor coordinated with local municipal authorities.⁴¹ Additionally, MPs questioned whether the 6 billion euros pledged by the EU for humanitarian assistance would be sufficient for the millions of refugees expected to remain in Turkey for the rest of their lives.⁴²

Another common framework in Turkey’s parliamentary discussions represented refugees as a “security threat.” Several questions pointed out that the government had failed to inform local communities and opposition parties about the permanence of repatriation centers. They also noted that the legal status of asylum seekers under the agreement and the duration of their stay in Turkey also remained unclear.⁴³

The analysis indicated that the increased perception of refugees as a threat to social security was directly linked to the government’s lack of transparency regarding the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement. One identified pattern was the perception of repatriation centers hosting large numbers of refugees as a security and demographic threat, especially in the cities where they would be set up. According to this view, EU member states were sending asylum seekers with criminal records or those involved in criminal activities to Turkey.⁴⁴ Consequently, parliamentary questions frequently cited arguments that refugees would “disrupt social harmony,”⁴⁵ “cause social problems and unemployment,”⁴⁶ and “alter the demographic and cultural structure.”⁴⁷

c. Framing the Statement as a Facilitator of Corruption

The content analysis of parliamentary questions revealed a prevalent perception, particularly among opposition party members, that the agreement facilitated corruption. This perception was mainly attributed to the lack of transparency and accessibility regarding how the government managed EU financial aid for refugees. Numerous questions were raised about the total EU aid received and its specific allocation, most of which went unanswered. For example, a member of the main opposition party pointed out the EU's requirement that aid be linked to specific refugee-focused projects and asked which projects had been developed and which institutions were responsible for their implementation.⁴⁸ Another question inquired about the institutions responsible for managing aid expenditure and fund allocation.⁴⁹

A large number of parliamentary questions reflected serious concerns among opposition parties regarding

the fair and effective distribution of EU aid. In 2018, a report by the European Court of Auditors raised issues about using funds, noting that Turkey's education ministry had refused to share information on the list of eligible beneficiaries due to data protection law.⁵⁰ Citing the report, an MP asked the government about the specific aid allocation.⁵¹ Another MP stated: "As a country hosting four million refugees and actively seeking support from the EU, Turkey is obliged to manage financial aid and maintain accountability effectively. He urged maximum effort to protect Turkey's international reputation."⁵²

Parliamentary questions were directed to the government regarding concerns about non-transparent tender methods used for refugee transportation, accommodations, and the operation of repatriation centers and their security services. One MP mentioned media allegations that tenders had been awarded to AKP-aligned companies and businessmen. The MP asked whether reception, accommodation, and transportation services for refugees would be tendered fairly and transparently

Greek security forces intervene with tear gas to disperse asylum seeker at the buffer zone near Pazarkule border crossing in Turkey's Edirne on March 20, 2020. (Shutterstock.com / TolgaSezgin)



or to benefit AKP supporters.⁵³ Similarly, another MP posed a question about allegations that a contract for “life containers” for Syrian refugees had been granted to a company with close ties to the ruling party and asked whether the government had investigated these claims.⁵⁴

d. Framing the Statement as a Damage to Turkey’s International Reputation

The questions submitted with this framing directly address Erdoğan’s use of migration and refugees as leverage to pressure and extract concessions from the EU. These questions typically followed incidents where Erdoğan openly manipulated refugee flows, like transporting Syrian refugees to border areas to exert pressure on the EU. Such critics show that the majority of opposition MPs viewed these attempts as damage to Turkey’s diplomatic relations, particularly with EU member states, and could potentially harm the country’s reputation and lead to a humanitarian crisis. Consequently, parliamentary questions reflecting this perspective showed that employing CEM as a foreign policy tool not only polarized public opinion within the target state but also served as a politically polarizing strategy within the challenger state.

In February 2020, tensions escalated during a Turkish-Greek border crisis when Turkey unilaterally announced it was opening its borders to refugees and asylum seekers in Europe.⁵⁵ This incident has been the subject of several parliamentary questions and was heavily criticized, particularly by opposition representatives. For instance, a CHP MP questioned whether this move indicated a unilateral suspension of the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement. He further asked for the reason behind opening borders and about the potential repercussions for Turkey’s reputation.⁵⁶ He also emphasized that the growing number of refugees in border areas could lead to a humanitarian crisis due to food shortages and health risks. Similarly, an HDP MP who warned about the health and shelter problems faced by refugees in border zones following Erdoğan’s threat to “open to gates” reported an incident where journalists were detained on the grounds of filming in restricted areas and asked, “How do you explain the presence of thousands of refugees in a restricted area?”⁵⁷

This framing underlined broader concerns about the ethical dimension of employing CEM as a for-

ign policy strategy in exchange for financial aid and visa liberalization for citizens. For example, an MP who compared receiving financial aid for refugees to “bargaining over human lives” stated that such attempts damaged Turkey’s international reputation and honor.⁵⁸ Debates within the Turkish parliament mainly concerned whether the AKP government perceived the EU-Turkey Statement primarily through a pragmatist lens rather than as a humanitarian issue. This was coupled with criticism regarding whether the government instrumentalized migration flows as a strategy to address the ongoing economic crisis.⁵⁹

Conclusion

The 2016 EU-Turkey Statement has demonstrated how migration can be leveraged cooperatively and coercively in foreign policy. On the one hand, Turkey has adopted a new migration regime to meet its obligations in aligning with EU criteria.⁶⁰ On the other, President Erdoğan, who has repeatedly used the threat of “opening the gates,” realized that Turkey’s unique position and ability to control migration flows into the EU constituted a key instrument for achieving foreign policy goals.⁶¹

Parliamentary debates from 2016 to 2024 revealed that this strategy not only strained Turkey’s international relations but also exacerbated domestic political polarization and public discontent. Erdoğan resorted to CEM for domestic political purposes and often justified its use with internal political considerations like protecting national security and state integrity *vis-à-vis* the Kurdish issue.

The significant refugee population in Turkey, coupled with the contentious debates over citizenship and electoral influence, reflects deep-seated political and social tensions. The AKP government’s policies, including the establishment of safe zones and military interventions in Syria, aim to address both internal pressures and external criticisms while preventing Kurdish autonomy. The strategic use of migration to leverage international support and assert national interests illustrates how migration policy can be linked to broader geopolitical and domestic agendas.

On the opposition side, the EU-Turkey Statement, while aimed at managing irregular migration flows, has been criticized for exploiting refugees as bargaining chips

and causing humanitarian distress. The AKP government's lack of transparency and perceived exploitation of refugees for political purposes have eroded trust in the government. Furthermore, the government's instrumentalization of refugee flows to gain political conces-

sions from the EU has been harshly criticized by the opposition parties as contradicting humanitarian values. This criticism regarding the neglect of the humanitarian aspects of migration weakened the legitimacy of the government's domestic and international actions.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

As this study has shown, the coercive use of migration will have broader negative implications for EU-Turkey relations, Turkey's domestic politics, and the vulnerable immigrant populations. Addressing these negative impacts requires a holistic approach prioritizing accountability, transparency, respect for human rights, and inclusive decision-making in migration governance. Accordingly, the following policies are recommended:

- Prevent large-scale displacement due to violence and war; it is essential to promote diplomatic solutions and strengthen international frameworks that discourage foreign interventions, thereby addressing root causes and fostering stability in conflict-prone regions.
- Ensure a fair distribution of refugee assistance responsibilities among committed states, as the current allocation is unsustainable and indefensible.
- Develop comprehensive and ethical migration policies that prioritize protecting human rights, refugee rights, and international legal obligations as well as focus on long-term solutions such as resettlement and integration.
- Implement stricter scrutiny and accountability measures to ensure the financial aid reaches the intended beneficiaries.
- Involve multiple stakeholders and opposition parties in negotiating and implementing migration-related agreements to ensure that policies are perceived as legitimate and beneficial by the broader public.

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IMPROVING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF EU DEMOCRACY ASSISTANCE IN THE MENA:

Supporting Civil Society in Jordan | By Dima M. Toukan

Executive Summary

Development challenges across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region are underpinned by weak accountability mechanisms, limited citizen engagement, and poor human rights conditions. The paper examines the effectiveness of the European Union's (EU) democracy promotion efforts in the MENA region, with a focus on civil society support in Jordan. Jordan receives significant development aid from various international donors, including for democratic assistance, but despite government promises, progress has been slow. Geopolitical concerns and a securitization dynamic often limit donors' efforts, leading to fragmented civil society support that struggles in its efforts to strengthen democratic accountability. Based on literature review and interviews with civil society and EU representatives, the paper analyzes the EU's democracy assistance in Jordan and identifies opportunities for more targeted support. It argues for a more integrated development approach that prioritizes localized aid to achieve tangible reforms and long-term stability in Jordan.

Introduction

The world has become accustomed to a MENA region mired in conflict and development dislocations; foremost amongst them is a democratic deficit marked by weak accountability mechanisms and a poor human rights record. Beyond democracy's procedural elements like fair and free elections and political contestation, the crux of democratic practice grounded in liberal democracy is still eluded by Arab countries. This includes both a commitment by those in power to allow the opposition to take office and ensure the political process is protected from unelected influences.¹ Despite the brief promise of the Arab Spring, the region stayed the course—with authoritarianism proving to be stubbornly rooted across the board.

Decades of foreign aid flowing into the region's various countries have failed to bring meaningful changes.

In the midst of this troubled region sits Jordan, a resource-poor country largely dependent on foreign aid, facing a myriad of development challenges and the collateral effects of ongoing conflicts surrounding it. Widening poverty and chronic unemployment are exacerbated by various waves of refugees that have strained the economy and public services and ensured Jordan remains a favored "geopolitical service provider." With the ongoing war on Gaza, Jordan has continued to play its stabilizing role, buffering Israel from Iran and its proxies and serving as a reliable ally to Western powers. This politically composite role has ensured a steady stream of foreign funding, some of which is received as development and humanitarian aid.

Jordan receives billions of dollars in foreign aid from various international donors like the EU.² This aid, including that earmarked for democratic assistance, remains one of the main stabilizing forces in the country. The aid provision has supported domestic regime stability and effectively lowered the cost of domestic repression.³ According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Jordan received about \$32.4 billion in foreign aid during 2011-2020.⁴

While democracy support appears central to the donor agenda in Jordan, democratic outcomes remain limited. Donors, including the EU, are driven by geopolitical considerations and a securitization dynamic that dampens their willingness to push for real reforms. The ensuing tension between security and democracy has often played out in donors' assistance programming. For example, while the EU continues to highlight democratic governance and rule of law reforms as key goals of their cooperation with Jordan, it does so while providing direct assistance and

training to Jordan's security agencies that harass civil society organizations (CSOs).⁵ In fact, Western democracies are increasingly assuming a more securitized approach in foreign relations by showing a keener interest in defending themselves against more pronounced threats, including migration surges and terrorism.⁶

This paper argues that the EU's securitization agenda is dampening the impact of its democracy assistance to civil society in Jordan. In light of the changing geopolitical landscape in the region, there is a need to support meaningful reforms that leverage the current drive for aid localization. While the introduction captures the framing thoughts behind this piece, the subsequent sections explore the EU's democracy promotion effort in the region donors' civil society support model in Jordan with a focus on the EU, the regional context and its impact on Jordan, and policy recommendations to improve the effectiveness of democracy aid.

EU Democracy Promotion in the MENA Region

The EU's foreign policy in the Southern Neighborhood is conducted through its policy-level framework, the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). The ENP-South covers countries of the MENA, including Jordan. For the past two decades, the EU engaged its eastern and southern neighboring countries through this contractual framework (established in 2004) to regulate and promote its relations with them. The ENP's core objectives include support for democratic change, economic growth, and stability. In practice, the Policy's focus on the last objective has essentially translated into risk-averse cooperation with authoritarian governments.⁷

In response to the Arab uprisings of 2011, the EU revised its neighborhood policies and produced first the Partnerships for Democracy and Shared Prosperity (PfDSP) and then a New Response to a Changing Neighborhood (NRCN).⁸ The EU admitted in the later policy that its support of political reforms in neighboring countries has had limited results and that there is room for improvement. The NRCN called for a new approach, one that promotes "deep democracy" that could be rewarded with greater access to

markets or increased mobility to Europe in the form of positive conditionality coupled with negative conditionality for democratic backsliding.⁹ The NRCN also emphasized that the EU will pursue a higher level of differentiation, allowing partner countries to develop their links with the EU across various areas, including economic integration and political cooperation on governance reforms and security.¹⁰

In an attempt to transcend a narrower and more procedural definition of democracy that emphasizes its electoral decision-making side, revisions emphasized "deep democracy" as a more sustainable type that combines the right to vote with rights to exercise free speech, form political parties, receive impartial justice, and enjoy security from accountable police and army forces (in addition to other civil and human rights).¹¹ NRCN also made provisions for supporting civil society through a newly established Civil Society Facility and a European Endowment for Democracy (EED) to support political parties, non-registered non-governmental organizations (NGOs), trade unions, and other social partners.¹² NRCN is also committed to promoting media freedom through supporting CSOs' access to electronic communications technologies.

Despite declaring otherwise, the revisions following the Arab Spring did not live up to their claims of innovation, neither in their new conception of democracy that goes beyond elections nor their new approach to the delivery of these objectives.¹³ The NRCN (like PfDSP) was considered to be "articulating rhetorical variations on themes already present in pre-2011 policy documents."¹⁴ Related policy statements did not constitute a significant departure from earlier policies.¹⁵ The procedural conception of democracy prevailed, and negative conditionality was never applied in the region—not even in post-2013 authoritarian Egypt.¹⁶ In fact, the EU continued to provide its assistance following the military coup of July 2013.

As Arab countries braced for a backlash of authoritarianism and conservatism, and with issues like migration emerging, the concept of deep democracy lost its luster.¹⁷ Only the EED adopted an emancipatory view of democracy, initially intended by the revised "deep democracy" model. The ENP and the European Instrument for Democracy and Human

Rights (EIDHR) continued to uphold the more static and procedural conception of citizenship and democracy.¹⁸ The EU continued to push its security agenda, propping national sectors for support on counterterrorism and migration management while avoiding more substantive reforms that speak to the power dynamics in targeted countries.¹⁹ For their part, the region's governments instrumentalized the uprisings' externalities (migration and terrorism), and the EU gave in through its enhanced focus on security and stopping migration—particularly after the 2015 Syrian refugee crisis.²⁰

The 2015 review of the ENP again prioritized the security-stability nexus, sidelining socio-political values while emphasizing neoliberal economic reforms and bilateral security partnerships.²¹ The reviewed ENP introduced three priorities for cooperation: economic development for stabilization, security, and migration and mobility. In 2021, a Joint Communication on a renewed partnership with the Southern Neighbor-

hood (that falls within 2015 reviewed ENP) proposed an agenda for the Mediterranean with five policy areas: human development, good governance and the rule of law; resilience, prosperity, and digital transition peace and security; migration and mobility; and green transition.²² While the review acknowledged the importance of democratic principles, EU policies towards its southern neighbors focused on strengthening neoliberal institutions and intergovernmental relations over promoting a democratic culture.²³

A recent review by the European Democracy Hub of European democracy support revealed a loss of some of its political momentum by 2023, with the EU found to be less ambitious in its efforts than in the previous two years.²⁴ As in previous years, the EU's use of sanctions and democratic conditionality was spare and selective.²⁵ In MENA, the EU maintained cooperation with countries despite their democratic backsliding and did not impose any punitive measures, including sanctions.²⁶ The allocation of funds also points to

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen meets with King Abdullah II bin Al-Hussein, King of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan in Brussels, Belgium on Nov. 7, 2023 (Shutterstock.com / AlexandroxMichailidis)



recalibrated priorities: The 2024 increase in the EU budget has been largely channeled to security, migration, and Ukraine's defense.²⁷

The empirical evidence on the impact of EU aid in fostering democratization in general is inconclusive.²⁸ However, several evidence streams are particularly relevant. Some studies have found a positive association between the EU's democracy support and democracy levels.²⁹ One of the studies argues that projects implemented in the Mediterranean countries supported human rights significantly more than democracy, favored politically less relevant actors, and were implemented in easier contexts.³⁰ It has also been argued that aid recipients only implement democratic projects that aim to improve state capacity and service delivery when these reforms do not risk regime survival.³¹ Evidence also suggests that donors who fund regime-compatible programs are ineffective in ensuring these programs continue to operate.³²

It could be said that the EU's democracy assistance has lacked progress due to the restrictive, authoritarian environments of recipient countries and the EU's prioritization of security interests.³³ More broadly, the success of democracy assistance has been associated with donors' ability to implement political conditionality, offer incentives, and track project implementation.³⁴ EU membership plays an important role in successful political conditionality. In its absence, partnership and cooperation incentives may not be enough to push countries to democratize.³⁵ Consequently, the link between democracy assistance and democracy levels appears to be stronger for countries with the prospect of joining the EU.³⁶

The EU's Support as Part of a Broader Dysfunctional Dynamic

In Jordan, the EU provides funding and technical assistance to support public administration reforms, free and fair elections, media freedom, civil society, legislative processes, and human rights.³⁷ Democracy support is defined in the EU-Jordan Partnership Priorities for 2021-2027, which outline three priorities: strengthening cooperation on regional stability and security, including counter-terrorism; promoting sustainable economic stability, green, digital,

inclusive, and knowledge-based growth and quality of education and decent job creation; and strengthening good governance, the rule of law, democratic reform, and respect for human rights.³⁸ The third priority, the need to strengthen the democratic and justice system, the rule of law, gender equality, the protection of human rights and freedoms, and the importance of a vibrant civil society is emphasized. However, EU support for civil society is modest compared to other assistance for human rights, local socio-economic development, poverty alleviation, and social protection.

Civil society in Jordan includes a myriad of actors, including NGOs, community-based organizations (CBOs), royal non-governmental organizations (RNGOs), business associations, cooperatives, trade unions, media organizations, and professional associations. In 2011, the number of registered CSOs with the Ministry of Social Development (MoSD) was 2,813.³⁹ As of late 2021, there were a total of 6,749 CSOs registered with MoSD.⁴⁰ Despite decades of foreign funding, many CSOs in Jordan suffer from institutional weaknesses, including a lack of strategic vision and short-sighted programming. The majority of CSOs lack an organic connection to the communities in which they work. Their dependence on foreign donors hinders the sector's sustainability and obviates the need for building organic relationships with local communities.

The role of civil society is undermined by a host of legal, administrative, and funding mechanisms that reflect the government's continuing suspicion of civic action. Civic space in Jordan has shrunk considerably over the last four years. In December 2021, CIVICUS Monitor, an organization that follows the situation of civil society in 107 countries, downgraded Jordan's civic space rating from "obstructed" to "repressed."⁴¹

The government's restrictions on foreign funding to CSOs are particularly damaging. The 2008 Law on Societies prohibits CSOs from accepting foreign funding without government approval. By serving as an intermediary between donors and civil society, the government determines what can and cannot be funded. Most civil society aid in Jordan, including from the EU, flows into three-to-five-year programs

that support soft civic activism centered around CSOs with limited attention to the legal environment in which they operate or the structural hurdles they face. Unregistered movements and trade unions, which long served as the locus of organic civic action in Jordan, receive no support from the EU.

To secure an ongoing presence in developing countries, foreign actors avoid friction with host governments by pursuing measurable and regime-compatible programs.⁴² Measurable programs emphasize safe quantitative outputs and outcomes, such as the number of women trained, workshops held, or CSOs receiving grants.⁴³ For example, a recent call for proposals by the EU lays out the global objective of the call as one that aims to contribute to “an inclusive, participatory, empowered and independent civil society in Jordan” with the specific objective being to support “civil society in Jordan working on human rights, democratization, good governance, and development in Jordan.” However, the call limits proposals to those in support of people with disabilities, raising awareness of drug abuse, or providing capacity building support to small CSOs outside Amman.⁴⁴

Grants to CSOs are usually restricted, with local organizations having to align their projects to donors’ priorities and funding cycles. This effectively consigns them into a subcontractor role as managers of various small donor projects rather than drivers of strategically coherent long term programs.⁴⁵ This has inhibited issue progress and the ability of the sector to move beyond small-scale activities, welfare and relief services, and basic advocacy (awareness raising, dialogues, and meetings). The emphasis on “unthreatening” programs and projects has also largely translated to repetitive and inconsequential programming.

A 2019 EU-funded project implemented in Jordan sought to deepen the role of CSOs in contributing to democratic governance, particularly regarding civic education, voter information, public awareness of Parliament, domestic election observation, parliamentary monitoring, coalition building and joint advocacy, lobbying and policymaking, monitoring the human rights situation, and promoting the roles of women and youth in political life. It also sought to

build CSOs’ capacities to expand their role in Jordan’s political life. The project supported local CSOs/CBOs with technical assistance and sub-grants to conduct thematic interventions.

While the project’s evaluation found that it was aligned with civil society needs and political reform objectives as defined by various national strategies and EU-defined priorities, the review recognized the overly linear framing of the project and what it was trying to achieve. Development interventions in Jordan tend to adopt relatively closed theories of change, treating the operating universe as one where linear reform is possible.⁴⁶ In reality, aid programs are typically impactful in conjunction with other programs or policies as well as other contributing factors regarding the implementation environment.⁴⁷

Evidence from the evaluation indicated the project was moderately effective, especially in the shadow of the restrictive legal environment and government resistance to civil society engagement in political life. It was also difficult for the evaluators to assess the higher-level impact of the project embodied in the program’s objective to support Jordan’s reform process towards, among other things, deepening the role of civil society in contributing to democratic governance and policy making. While the evaluation found that the project had improved the capacity of targeted organizations, CSOs’ lack of financial viability dampened their ability to translate this into on-the-ground action. The government’s inconsistent commitment to the role of civil society in Jordan was also highlighted as a factor that often limits the impact of civic activism.

These findings spilled over to the assessment of the project’s sustainability. While improved capacities enhanced the prospects for sustaining the project results, the deteriorating financial viability of CSOs and the hostile legal environment surrounding their activism were found to limit the sustainability of the project’s results. In an interview about the broader program this project was part of, a Jordanian beneficiary said that the program was focused on ensuring the current electoral system is more effective—including election procedures and public perception of its integrity—but did not aim to change the electoral rules of the game.⁴⁸

Regional Context Raises Cost of Delaying Reforms

The Hamas-Israel war in Gaza has had a seismic impact on the region. In Jordan, the war exacerbated pre-existing economic risks, fueled protests against normalization of relations with Israel, and intensified anti-West sentiment—along with fears about the country’s future. With a strong tribal connection to Palestinians, the presence of over two million Palestinian refugees, and the majority of Jordanians being of Palestinian descent, the war in Gaza has amplified national discontent and pro-Palestine sentiments. Youth, who represent one-third of the population, continue to have an instrumental role in leading the protests that escalated in March 2024. They are driven by strong pan-Arab and pan-Islamic sentiments due to Jordan’s geographic and demographic proximity to Palestine.

Jordan’s internal stability is not easily assessed, but the optics of a quiet front should not be conflated with stability. The war in Gaza is providing fodder for the Muslim Brotherhood and its local political arm, the Islamic Action Front, as well as increasing the resonance of Hamas.⁴⁹ Jordan’s official participation in intercepting the Iranian attack has prompted the government to expend significant political capital in trying to justify its support. The King Abdullah II bin Al-Hussein’s political dexterity has enabled him to contain the local scene effectively so far, but not all of the war’s shockwaves across Jordan have surfaced.

With Jordan gaining strategic weight and visibility through an enhanced security role in the war in Gaza, it is highly unlikely that democratic reform will be on the minds of foreign donors. The recent decision by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to open a regional liaison office in Jordan is another gauge of the West’s prioritization of security. Democratic promotion and its programming are expected to take a back seat, and reform backsliding is expected.

In such a charged environment, the EU’s soft and tactical democracy promotion efforts could undercut a free civil society that can peacefully mediate between society and the state and expose the structural disconnects that contribute to injustices and marginalization while bolstering the state. With a closing space around civil society, public criticism under restrictive

conditions can plausibly fester while protests against Israel can turn inward. The current struggle between reformists and reactionaries is also tipped in favor of the reactionary camp.

Concurrently, the credibility and legitimacy of the EU have been hit hard by the war in Gaza. International commitment to the rule of law, human rights, and a rules-based order is now widely regarded by Arab citizens to be undermined by the West’s glaring bias towards Israel. Most resource-stripped CSOs in countries like Jordan are expected to continue to apply for foreign funding. However, their ability to serve as conduits for community empowerment, social cohesion, and accountability is expected to be undermined. Back in January 2024, the head of a CSO based in Amman said his ability to engage Jordanian participants in a donor-funded program related to human rights was severely affected because of the war in Gaza.⁵⁰

The situation could also play into the government’s hands. The government could take advantage of the soured image of donors to sow further distrust in civil society and justify further sector scrutiny. Parliamentarians in Jordan often attack local organizations as recipients of foreign aid who allow international donors to pursue their political, economic, and security interests through sinister foreign agendas.⁵¹

Aid Localization Offers Opportunity to Address Sector Dysfunctions

Calls to localize aid have increased since the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, which promised a more leading role for local actors in delivering humanitarian assistance. Similarly, the 2005 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, with its principles for effective development cooperation, also called for more “country ownership” in the development. The localization agenda recognizes that aid work can be more effective by shifting resources, power, and decision-making to local actors. While localization now remains a generic and donor-driven plan with a patchy implementation record, the agenda offers the EU an opportunity to address its programmatic shortcomings in the aid sector. Working with other donors and local actors to develop a country-specific, gradualist localization

roadmap (that delineates the roles of the various actors towards a shared and integrated long-term reform vision) can help address dysfunctions and deliver tangible results.⁵²

A localization roadmap can also promote pooling funds towards common objectives. In this regard, marrying the development agenda with local philanthropy carries much potential for the country and its civil society sector. Channeling only Official Development Assistance (ODA) to development actors has yielded mixed results. ODA can be employed differently to mobilize other local funding sources, including philanthropy. From private foundations to corporate and individual philanthropy, the philanthropy sector has the potential to more flexibly and patiently support and scale innovative models of civic action and development work. Philanthropy can provide effective models for unrestricted funding and streamlined reporting procedures. Through innovative partnerships, philanthropy can also help de-risk and catalyze public and private investments in the sector.

The philanthropic sector in the region continues to move away from traditional charitable/religious donations towards a more developmental focus that is increasingly evidence-based. The growing industry is already contributing to the relief of the immediate needs of the poor as well as the medium- and long-term development goals—namely education, health, and economic empowerment. Like CSOs, philanthropic organizations should also be interested in promoting democratic reform. The sector's contributions are starting to supplement state efforts with solutions that could be scaled across the region if and when the government and the private sector come together to provide the necessary policy reform and financial resources.⁵³

Various successful foundations in the region can serve as models for effective civil society support, including in Jordan. The Sawiris Foundation in Egypt, for example, is already working to maximize its impact by supporting evidence-based solutions championed by local civil society organizations. Since January 2021, the foundation has been funding only evidence-based programs and working with research organizations worldwide, including the Abdel Latif Jameel Poverty Lab, to generate evi-

dence for decision-making and test innovative ideas. Programs that generate positive results receive additional funding and can then be referred to the government for scaling nationally.

Alfanar Venture Philanthropy offers a focused social enterprise support model that can provide context-sensitive solutions. In 2015, it decided to scale back its funding of charities that rely on grants and to focus on revenue-generating social enterprises and socially driven businesses in the region, including in Jordan. Alfanar partners with philanthropists, corporations, and institutions, providing patient finance management support and impact management. By leveraging various financial tools, Alfanar helps revenue-generating social enterprises to become sustainable change agents.⁵⁴ It partners with philanthropists to support aspiring social enterprises, helping them to grow through grants or zero-interest loans. Recognizing the scarcity of impact investments in the region—Alfanar has also established an affiliated impact investment vehicle to enable social enterprises and businesses scale and achieve sustainable growth.

Conclusion

Amid continuous regional turmoil and internal democratic fragility, the EU has become an integral part of the restrictive matrix that the government has subjected civil society to. This calls into question the effectiveness of the EU's short-term democracy promotion programming that ignores the complex systems under which local actors operate. The continuous funding of basic civic “startup” activities is cultivating dependency and institutional stagnation while stifling the transformative potential of civic action in Jordan. Civil society programming is not meant to be disruptive of entrenched power dynamics or to drive progress on related reforms.

Democracy promotion is losing prominence as an EU foreign policy priority, as it increasingly aligns with the EU's geopolitical agenda and the securitization approach. The EU democracy support model remains deliberate in not addressing inherent power dynamics necessary for large-scale systemic change. The war in Gaza is inviting a new reading of the democracy imperative in Jordan and the region, one now viewed

through a geopolitical lens. Jordan remains instrumental in the region's political landscape, security, and future stability. Western donors must recognize the changing political moment and adapt accordingly to seize opportunities to create meaningful avenues for civic engagement and dissent, fostering alternative ideological strands to political Islam.

As geopolitical priorities centered around security and stability continue to hollow out democracy promotion

programming, a mismatch between the EU's stated policy ambitions and development programming remains. The agitation for change in Jordan has not subsided, and regional turmoil has only accentuated the urgency of political and economic reform—and raised the specter of extremism, divisive identity politics, and Islamist threats. Without catalyzing broader reforms, investments in CSOs do little to remove systemic barriers to civic action or to support the sector's mediating role as a buffer between citizens and the state.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Considering ongoing geopolitical tensions in the region, ensure a pro-democracy conception of securitization—one that entrenches democracy promotion as part of the EU's security agenda and self-interest.
- Ensure that democracy promotion encompasses support for both procedural/technical and substantive aspects of democracy. Work with the government and civil society to define non-threatening political reforms that are both acceptable to the state and substantive enough to expand freedoms and civil society space.
- To address the risk of democracy backsliding and its impact on stability in Jordan, adjust the approach and instruments for democracy promotion from a project-centric model to longer-term support. This would blur the lines between programming and donors and ensure tangible progress toward key political reforms.
- Instead of dispersing resources across a large and changing set of CSOs, focus on developing a number of selected organizations with a proven record of achievements and potential for growth. Through such long-term support, they can be weaned off foreign aid. This can be informed by existing philanthropic support models already in the region.
- Together with other donors and local actors, develop an aid localization roadmap that addresses systemic challenges to political reforms, particularly civil society participation. This should ensure a shared, harmonized, and integrated development approach among development actors, including for democracy promotion. It would foster strategic cohesion in development work, prevent scattered efforts, and ensure a concrete, transparent plan with gradual pro-democratic policies and programs. Such clear goals, targets, and timelines would allow all concerned actors to track and evaluate its progress effectively.
- Given the large number of development and humanitarian donors in Jordan, supporting a national learning function would ensure that donor evaluations assess the alignment of their various efforts with the aid localization agenda. This included measuring progress, local leadership and implementation, relevance to needs, contribution to national priorities, and identifying areas for needed course correction.

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A NEW EU-MENA ENERGY AND CLIMATE PARTNERSHIP:

The Case for Cleaner Molecules | By Pier Paolo Raimondi

Executive Summary

Russia's war on Ukraine has renewed momentum for the EU-MENA energy partnership. The MENA region, rich in oil and gas reserves, is also home to some of the world's largest hydrocarbon producers and exporters. Geographical proximity, history, and infrastructure are some of the other relevant factors for deeper energy cooperation. However, as the EU remains committed to its net-zero target by 2050, this cooperation cannot solely focus on fossil fuels. Both regions share an interest in reducing methane emissions and developing a sustainable hydrogen economy. Therefore, cooperation on methane emissions reduction and the development of a sustainable and secure hydrogen economy would bring environmental, economic, and energy security benefits. The EU's new regulation, extending standards and measures also to gas imports, calls for deeper cooperation with MENA governments and national oil companies. In parallel, the EU and MENA region could cooperate on building a hydrogen economy through imports. However, the international hydrogen trade faces multiple challenges. It is, therefore, crucial for both regions to prioritize domestic hydrogen use in MENA to accelerate mitigation strategies in key industrial sectors and produce sustainable, low-cost, decarbonized products for both regions and the world.

Introduction

Energy has been a key component of the relations between the European Union (EU) and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The MENA region is well endowed with vast hydrocarbon resources (51% of the world's proven oil reserves and 43% of the world's proven gas reserves in 2020¹). Conversely, the EU has developed energy relations with MENA countries to partially meet its growing energy import needs through both pipelines and

liquefied natural gas (LNG). By selling hydrocarbons abroad, MENA countries have benefited from sizeable revenues ("hydrocarbon rents"), which have ensured socioeconomic growth and shaped state formation² as conceptualized by the theory of the rentier state.³ This condition, however, has contributed to the exposure of MENA economies to oil price volatility.

Energy cooperation between the EU and MENA region has gone through different ups and downs and now faces significant challenges. The EU has been at the frontline of the green energy transition and it is expected to reduce its energy import needs in the foreseeable future. This drastic shift entails not only major domestic consequences (in terms of the environment and the economy) but also for Europe's foreign and diplomatic relations,⁴ forcing new strategies of engagement with third countries (including hydrocarbon producers) in the name of sustainability.

The 2022 energy crisis and the consequent reconfiguration of global energy flows that forced Europeans to search for new gas deals provided a newfound relevance to cooperation with the MENA region. Nonetheless, under its energy security strategy, the EU has enhanced its decarbonization targets, which will further decrease EU imports, questioning the need for new deals and infrastructure. On the other hand, MENA countries have reconsidered their approach to the energy transition—largely driven by economic reasons—by looking into alternative export solutions while enhancing the resilience of their hydrocarbon sectors.

Against this backdrop, the continuation of EU-MENA energy cooperation based on unabated fossil fuels is challenged. The EU's main issue is creating new partnerships with MENA countries aimed at ensuring energy security while promoting decarbonization. This research policy brief addresses potential cooper-

ation in the field of clean molecules and analyzes the need and the opportunities for common and shared actions aimed at tackling methane emissions (section 3) and developing a sustainable and secure hydrogen economy (section 4). Section 2 provides an overview of the evolution and constraints of the EU-MENA energy and climate relations and constraints.

Trends and Constraints

Energy has been a fundamental economic link between the EU and MENA countries. However, energy interdependence has developed through different phases and regional focus. Until 2010-11, European markets were relevant for both Qatari (equally distributed between Asia and Europe) and North African LNG exports. For example, North African gas supplied around 50% of Italy's imported gas⁵ until geopolitical and market developments led to a deterioration of such interdependence.

Euro-Mediterranean energy relations were facilitated by geographical proximity and existing infrastructure. Conversely, energy trade with Gulf countries has been more limited.

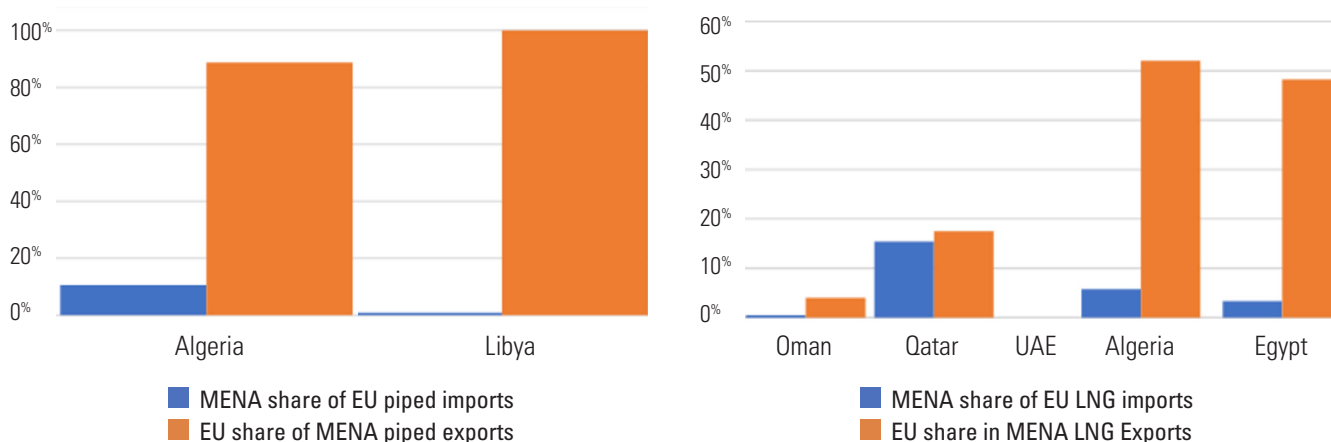
Since 2010, Qatar has increasingly sold its LNG to energy-hungry Asian markets (which now account for about 70% of total Qatari LNG exports),⁶ while North African countries have experienced political turmoil due to the Arab Spring. The political developments have severely hindered exploration activities, hence

affecting gas production. The inability to increase gas output resulted in the erosion of gas export volumes due to the rising domestic consumption encouraged by fossil fuel subsidies. As of today, it is fair to say that North African countries are more reliant on European gas than Gulf countries. At the same time, North African countries account for a limited share of total EU imports (figure 1).

Politically, the EU and MENA region have failed to fully integrate and deepen their cooperation, and historically, the EU has engaged more with North African countries, given the geographical proximity. In the 2000s, the European Commission set a vision for an integrated Euro-Mediterranean energy market through the Euro-Mediterranean electricity and gas rings.⁷ There were also attempts to establish a new pattern of Euro-Mediterranean relations with initiatives such as the Mediterranean Solar Plan and Desertec, aimed at massively deploying renewables in North Africa and enhancing South-North green electricity exports. However, these initiatives failed to achieve any significant or positive results due to several geo-political and economic reasons.

Following the 2015 COP21 in Paris, EU-MENA energy cooperation entered a new phase with the global energy transition, along with technological developments being the key factors of energy geopolitics. Indeed, the EU has embarked towards climate neutrality by 2050.⁸ By launching the European Green

Figure 1: Interdependence of Piped Gas and LNG Trade Between the EU and MENA Countries, 2022



Source: Author's elaboration on Energy Institute (2023) Statistical Review of World Energy

Deal (EGD) in 2019, Europe seeks to become the first climate-neutral continent by mid-century, and the EU is expected to ultimately reduce its fossil fuels import needs.⁹ The energy transition puts pressure on the current energy policy and strategy (based on reserve management) as well as the socioeconomic model of the MENA countries (based on hydrocarbon revenues).¹⁰

Governments have had to reconsider their preference for the “energy trilemma” (security, affordability, and sustainability) over the past two years. In mid-2021, energy markets experienced the first signs of turmoil, with an initial spike in energy prices due to market reasons. In 2022, Russia’s war on Ukraine exacerbated the energy crisis, ultimately becoming the first global energy crisis, as affirmed by Fatih Birol, General Director of the International Energy Agency (IEA).¹¹ 2022 marked the abrupt end of the energy interdependence between the EU and Russia, built and consolidated over six decades despite political tensions.¹²

In 2021, Russia supplied 155 billion cubic meters (bcm), accounting for about 40% of EU gas imports. Despite being its major export market, in 2022, Moscow drastically and deliberately reduced its gas supplies to Europe, aiming to fragment European unity and support to Ukraine. This caused tremendous economic damage to both households and industries in the EU.¹³ As a result, Europeans have faced two issues: the lack of volume as well as higher and more volatile prices. Diversification of energy supply and energy security again became a top priority for governments. Despite the unprecedented crisis, the EU has not lowered its climate objectives— even during the 2022 energy crisis. The European Commission presented the REPowerEU Plan, which aims to completely phase out Russian energy imports by 2027 and drastically accelerate the energy transition through higher renewable and energy efficiency targets.¹⁴

Table 1: Renewable targets, installed capacity, and share in power generation and capacity in MENA countries in 2023

	Renewable Target	Renewable share of power generation	Renewable share of installed capacity
Algeria	27% of power generation by 2030	0.9	2.1
Egypt	42% of power generation by 2035	12.2	11.2
Morocco	52% of installed capacity by 2030	17.4	36.5
Tunisia	30% of power generation by 2030	4.1	11.9
Israel	30% of power generation by 2030	8.6	20.5
Jordan	31% of power generation capacity by 2030	24.0	37.1
Lebanon	30% of energy consumption by 2030	8.7	31.8
Iraq	33% of power capacity mix by 2030	2.6	5.0
Bahrain	20% of power generation by 2035	0.2	0.6
Kuwait	15 of power generation by 2030	2.3	0.6
Oman	35-39 of power generation by 2040	4.0	6.2
Qatar	18% of power mix by 2030	0.3	7.2
Saudi Arabia	50% of power generation by 2030	0.7	3.3
UAE	32% of power capacity by 2030	5.0	13.8

Note: Libya is not included, given the political instability that has prevented any significant development both in the installation rate and political commitment. Source: Author’s elaboration on IRENA reports and statistics

Given the pledge to phase out Russian energy imports and the consequent reconfiguration of energy flows, the MENA region gained a newfound relevance. With many European officials engaging with producing countries to secure new gas deals, this provided new momentum for the EU-MENA energy partnership. For example, Italy seeks to seize this opportunity by becoming an energy hub and bridge between Africa, the Mediterranean, and Europe, as outlined by its Mattei Plan. Additionally, the EU also has broadened its regional focus to the Gulf. The Joint Communication on the Strategic Partnership with the Gulf¹⁵ highlights the EU's willingness to deepen cooperation with GCC countries on energy issues. However, the expansion of energy partnership is questioned by the expected EU gas demand decline, forecasted to occur at a faster rate compared to the previous scenarios. According to the scenario related to the Fit-for-55 package, gas demand is expected to decline by 30% by 2030 (as compared to 2019 levels). Under the REPowerEU Plan, European gas demand is expected to lower by 200 bcm by 2030, relative to 2019, as a consequence of the acceleration of decarbonization strategies and high gas prices.

MENA countries are also in search of new ways to remain geopolitically relevant and find new and alternative income sources. It is essential to continue and accelerate their energy transformation, given the global energy transition. The global commitment to decarbonization was reiterated at the 2023 COP28 held in Dubai. In the Global Stocktake, there is a groundbreaking acknowledgment of the need to transition away from fossil fuels in a just, orderly, and equitable manner, targeting net-zero emissions by 2050. The expected decline in global hydrocarbon demand will both have economic and geopolitical consequences.¹⁶ In recent years, several MENA countries have increased their renewable and decarbonization targets, although with different ambitions and implementation throughout (table 1).¹⁷ New commitments towards decarbonization, especially in Gulf countries, have emerged since 2021, with nearly all GCC countries pledging to go net zero by and around mid-century.

There are multiple challenges to a deeper energy partnership between the EU and MENA region based on unabated fossil fuels. MENA countries have

experienced a growth in domestic fossil fuel consumption, driven by industrialization, economic and demographic growth as well as fossil fuel subsidies. These subsidies, an essential component of the social contract, largely encourage energy consumption based on fossil fuels. Several MENA countries have also struggled to increase gas production due to political instability, limited domestic financial capabilities, and low foreign investment. For these reasons, North African countries have all underutilized export facilities,¹⁸ despite the economic incentives to export gas to Europe. Despite the general agreement on the need for cooperative frameworks, the two sides do not always agree on climate change, the green transition, or its speed. The EU has integrated its energy and diplomatic response to the 2022 energy crisis into the climate objectives.¹⁹ However, the EU lacks a single and coherent policy towards the MENA region.

These challenges notwithstanding, there are opportunities for deeper cooperation on sustainable energy security between the EU and the MENA region, particularly on common frameworks and actions aimed at tackling methane emissions and developing a hydrogen economy and trade.

Methane Emission

As the EU has been looking for alternative gas volumes following Russia's war on Ukraine, cooperation with MENA countries can be expanded in tackling methane emissions from the energy sector. By capturing methane emissions, the EU and MENA countries would cost-effectively increase gas supply while tackling its negative environmental impacts. The energy sector accounts for 30% of total methane emissions from human activity and associated emissions, while the extraction and use of fossil fuels resulted in 120 million tons of methane emissions in 2023, according to the IEA. Since 2021, methane has become a global political issue, and the energy sector represents the lowest-hanging fruit to significantly abate methane emissions.

a. Drivers for Addressing Methane

There are strong environmental, political, energy, and economic arguments in favor of a more cooperative and coordinated approach between EU and MENA

countries on methane emissions of the energy sector. Environmentally, methane emission (CH₄) is the second largest contributor to climate change after carbon dioxide (CO₂) and is responsible for around 30% of total warming since the Industrial Revolution. Furthermore, methane is a powerful greenhouse gas with a warming potential more than 80 times stronger than CO₂ over a 20-year period. For this reason, abating methane emissions from the energy sector represents one of the most cost-effective and impactful actions (in the short term) governments can take to address global warming and achieve global climate goals.

Cutting methane emissions from the energy sector is also viable and feasible because there are relevant technical and economic opportunities. For example, the IEA estimates that existing technologies can reduce around 70% of CH₄ emissions from fossil fuel operations. Concerning the oil and gas sector, the use of well-known measures like leak detection and repair (LDAR) programs and upgrading leaky equipment can cut over 75% of emissions. The expansion of digital technologies and satellite data can further

identify methane leaks and emissions and spur measures and programs. Methane abatement is very cost-effective in the oil and gas sector. The IEA estimated that about 40% of methane emissions from oil and gas operations could be avoided at no net cost, based on average natural gas prices from 2017 and 2021. In short, existing technologies can profitably abate methane emissions.

Methane mitigation is one of the EU's strategies to enhance energy security by increasing market liquidity and combating climate change (as also outlined by the new EU external energy strategy). The EU seeks to cooperate with fossil fuel importers to reduce methane emissions. In the strategy, the EU proposed providing technical assistance to partners to set up mutually beneficial schemes ("you collect, we buy"). According to the IEA, the EU could ensure an additional 20 bcm from North African countries (ten bcm from Algeria, seven from Libya, and three from Egypt) from reducing flaring and methane emission.²⁰ Some have the highest gas flaring and venting rate in the world.²¹ Stopping all non-emergency flaring and

(Shutterstock.com / LeonidIkan)



venting activities is the single most impactful solution that governments and companies can undertake to abate methane emissions.

Methane mitigation policies are also becoming more relevant for MENA hydrocarbon-producing countries. Besides selling gas abroad, MENA countries could also benefit from additional volumes for the domestic market. For example, in 2022, Egypt decided to prioritize LNG exports to Europe, given the high European gas prices, resulting in a growth of oil consumption in the domestic power sector. Reducing methane emissions and flaring would provide additional gas supply to the domestic market.

Moreover, improving the carbon intensity rate is an essential component of MENA, producing countries' strategy aimed at enhancing the resilience of their hydrocarbon sector to remain relevant and competitive in the low-carbon future.²² Factors such as low flaring rates, reducing methane leakage, and improving the energy efficiency of operations will translate into competitive advantages in a world of rising carbon prices and carbon border taxes. As of 2024, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE hold a greater competitive advantage vis-à-vis North African producers. This is the result of high operational standards, technology deployment, policy incentives, and geology. Therefore, Gulf countries can provide best practice methods to other countries. Their national oil companies (NOCs) have undertaken measures to reduce methane emissions and have announced a new ambitious methane strategy.²³

b. Policy Developments and Global Commitment

The sense of urgency to address global warming has spurred growing political commitment to mitigation policies surrounding methane emissions. In October 2020, the EU presented its new Methane Strategy, and methane also became a major global political issue at the 2021 COP26 in Glasgow. There, the EU and the US—together with more than 150 countries, including 13 MENA countries²⁴—launched the Global Methane Pledge, which seeks to cut 30% of methane emission by 2030 from 2020 levels collectively.²⁵ Since then, there has been a proliferation of methane policies at the national level across the globe, although there has been limited coverage by direct methane mitigation policies.²⁶

The political commitment has also been expressed in several international and intergovernmental forums. The oil and gas sector has explicitly and proactively joined the race at the COP28. Indeed, 50 oil and gas companies (accounting for more than 40% of global oil production) launched the Oil & Gas Decarbonization Charter (OGDC), which is committed to ending routine flaring by 2030, reaching near-zero upstream methane emissions to provide full, transparent, and independent reporting of emissions using internationally recognized standards.²⁷

In April 2024, G7's Climate, Energy, and Environment Ministers' Meeting reiterated the commitment to collectively reduce 75% of global methane emissions from fossil fuels, including by reducing the methane emissions intensity of oil and gas operations by 2030. To do so, G7 countries aim to develop a robust methodology and use measured data while working with non-G7 producing countries. To implement these, G7 countries also committed to enhancing data transparency and accuracy by utilizing satellite observation data while supporting the work of the UNEP's International Methane Emissions Observatory (IMEO).²⁸

c. The EU Legislation and Approach

The EU has increased its commitment to address methane emissions, and in May 2024, the new EU Methane Regulation came into force.²⁹ These strict rules curb methane emissions for domestic fossil fuels production and include the introduction of new requirements for oil and gas to measure, report, and verify (MRV) methane emissions, mandatory LDAR activities, and ban routine venting and flaring by oil and gas operators. More importantly, the regulation is the first of its kind in addressing methane emissions from imports. This is motivated by the fact the EU has limited domestic production while relying excessively on imports (around 90% of gas is imported). Therefore, the regulation envisages a temporary period for importers to gradually comply with and apply the new standards and measures. The implementation of this measure is divided into three stages from 2025 onwards (table 2).

The 2025-2027 period (transitional period) is focused on data collection and the creation of a methane emitter global monitoring tool and a super emitter rapid

reaction mechanism. From January 2027 on, exporters should demonstrate equivalent MRV measures. Beginning in 2028, they will need to report on the methane intensity of gas production in line with a methodology to be set later by the Commission. Finally, starting in 2030, exporters will need to demonstrate that the methane intensity of gas production exported to the EU is below the maximum value (to be set later by the Commission).

Table 2: Implementation Stages for Imports (according to the EU Methane Regulation)

Period	Main requirement	Element
As of January 2027	demonstrate	Equivalent MRV measures
From 2028	report	Methane intensity of gas production in line with a methodology
From 2030	demonstrate	Methane intensity of the gas production below certain maximum value (to be set later)

Source: Author's elaboration on EU methane regulation

The Way Ahead

By setting import standards and requirements, the EU seeks to influence hydrocarbon producer's export strategies. There are some concerns regarding potential economic and political consequences due to these measures—given the current tightness of the market and the loss of Russian piped gas. Influencing third countries' strategies and policies by setting standards was possible due to the specific conditions of the EU gas market prior to 2022. Before then, the EU was a well-developed and well-supplied gas market, thanks to several suppliers. This allowed Europeans to impose several rules on exporters with no negative consequences in terms of prices and supply availability.

Despite some risks, the transitional period will be crucial to streamlining and supporting adaptation by key exporters. Furthermore, the EU and certain EU member states could leverage their monopsony power vis-à-vis exporters, notably North African countries (figure 1). There have already been some

positive developments regarding cooperation with key suppliers, including Algeria.³⁰ Additionally, many EU energy companies have been operating and investing in MENA countries, representing a potential avenue for cooperation. For example, France's TotalEnergies launched a program with Iraq to reduce gas flaring aimed at providing supply to the domestic market. The requirements envisaged in the EU regulation are expected to be more easily fulfilled by MENA producers. Their gas production and supply chains are much more integrated, given the role of NOCs compared to other gas exporting countries, notably the US.³¹

The EU should engage with MENA NOCs because of their relevance in the domestic energy sector and the role that they will need to play in the energy transition. Several NOCs in the region³² have signed OGDC³³ and others are also members of the Oil and Gas Methane Partnership 2.0 (OGMP 2.0), a UNEP-led initiative to measure, report, and reduce methane emission. However, more MENA countries would benefit from addressing methane emissions and joining international initiatives. For example, Iran and Iraq are currently not signatories of the OGDC. Furthermore, the EU regulation is built on the OGMP 2.0 framework. The two sides should use the transitional period provided by the regulation (2025-2027) to address key remaining issues, such as data sharing and transparency, building capacity, and common frameworks.

Decarbonized Molecules: The Case for Hydrogen

Another promising area for EU-MENA cooperation in line with the net zero scenario is hydrogen. Hydrogen has gained a newfound political relevance in the late 2010s, representing a decarbonized solution for several sectors. Given its versatility in multiple sectors, it has been referred to as a Swiss Army knife for global decarbonization. Nonetheless, its true potential contribution lies especially in those sectors where other solutions and technologies are not efficient and feasible—the hard-to-abate sectors like heavy industry, maritime, and aviation. The EU will need to turn to hydrogen imports from other regions due to the continent's limited size and high population density. However, demand for green hydrogen is yet to emerge significantly due to economic costs.

a. EU Legislative Developments

Green hydrogen³⁴ is seen as a valuable option to decarbonize the existing energy-intensive industries in Europe. In July 2020, the EU launched its Hydrogen Strategy, which envisaged hydrogen covering 13-14% of Europe's energy mix by 2050, elevating its role in the EU's clean energy transition. The strategy also foresaw imports from neighboring regions, including the MENA region.

Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the EU has increased its import targets up to 10 million tons (Mt) of green hydrogen by 2030, with a potential relevant contribution from MENA countries. In May 2024, the European Council adopted the final version of the Hydrogen and Decarbonised Gas Market Package, establishing the adequate regulatory framework for a future gaseous energy mix that includes a growing share of renewable and low carbon gasses and less unabated gas.³⁵ The Package partially clarifies the distinctions between renewable and low-carbon gasses.³⁶ Indeed, the EU clearly states that its preference is green/renewable hydrogen. The new directive establishes a greenhouse gas emission reduction threshold of 70% in order to define low-carbon hydrogen and gas.

b. MENA's Hydrogen Ambition

Several MENA countries—both hydrocarbon-rich and poor countries—are increasingly starting to develop new low-carbon solutions, i.e., hydrogen and its derivatives,³⁷ to exploit their natural resources, both fossil fuels and renewables, ensure future export revenues and income sources, and position themselves in the new geopolitical map. North African producers could ideally benefit from their geographical proximity and existing gas pipeline interconnections to Europe. Morocco created a National Hydrogen Commission in 2019 and published its green hydrogen roadmap in 2021. In the case of Egypt, its hydrogen ambitions gathered pace during its COP27 presidency, when it released a hydrogen strategy, managed to attract foreign investments for its renewable plans, and signed several MoUs that would link renewable projects to green hydrogen production and exports.

By contrast, Algeria still lacks a regulatory framework, enough renewable deployment, financial

capabilities, and a general political commitment. Despite these modest developments, Algeria could be a key hydrogen supplier, thanks to pipelines to Italy and Spain. Given Italy's ambition to be an energy hub, Italy (along with Austria and Germany) has promoted the construction of the SouthH2 Corridor, which would ideally supply 4 million tons per year of green hydrogen to Germany by 2030. The existing pipelines hold a competitive advantage and remain a more favorable solution vis-à-vis long-distance transport. The latter solution has been under consideration by the Gulf countries for obvious geographical reasons. Nonetheless, Gulf countries have been expanding their hydrogen ambitions in search of opportunities for new income sources and technological developments. While Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Oman have been the first movers in the region and were recently joined by Qatar. These countries have been developing projects and strategies based on their natural resources.

Oman, which has smaller hydrocarbon and financial reserves compared to its neighbors, aims at producing green hydrogen thanks to a favorable regulatory framework for international partnerships. Its green hydrogen strategy envisages around \$140 billion in investment by 2050 and aims to increase production to around 1 Mt/y by 2030, about 3.5 Mt by 2040, and between 7.5 and 8.5 Mt by 2050.

Qatar is firmly committed to exploiting its assets, and gas will play a role in the global energy transition. In 2022, it announced intentions to build the world's largest blue ammonia plant called Ammonia-7. The \$1.1 billion facility is expected to produce 1.2 Mt of ammonia per year and is set to launch in 2026. Saudi Arabia and the UAE are looking to produce both blue and green, given both renewable potential and vast hydrocarbon reserves. Saudi Arabia is developing the world's largest green hydrogen facility in NEOM. The \$5 billion green hydrogen and ammonia project is expected to produce 1.2 Mt of green ammonia. At the same time, Saudi Aramco exported the world's first blue ammonia cargo to Japan in 2020 and aims to meet a significant share of global blue hydrogen demand by 2025. The UAE can leverage its multiple national players, large financial capabilities, and the ability to attract international investors.

c. Challenges to Hydrogen Cooperation

Given these potentials, the European Commission is working on a Mediterranean Green Hydrogen Partnership (starting with the EU-Egypt Hydrogen Partnership)³⁸ and is exploring opportunities to form similar partnerships with Gulf countries. In order to develop secure and sustainable hydrogen partnerships, EU and MENA countries need to overcome several barriers that currently hinder final investment decisions and off-takers. Indeed, despite many MoUs signed and projects announced at the global level, around 7% of announced projects have reached the FID stage.³⁹

Firstly, MENA countries will need to increase their domestic renewable capacities to both adequately decarbonize their domestic energy system and have enough additional renewable capacity to export hydrogen. Otherwise, there could be a paradox of exporting “green” while keeping burning fossil fuels at home. Table 1 shows the gap between targets and realities, suggesting that governments will need to undertake important measures to reduce historical barriers to renewable deployment and accelerate investments.

Secondly, in the green hydrogen supply chain, water is essential. According to research, for every kilogram of hydrogen produced, 9 kg of water must be consumed.⁴⁰ Given the severe water scarcity in the MENA region,⁴¹ governments might need to deal with serious competition between water-intensive industries like agriculture. As agriculture plays a key role in many regional economies, rising competition between agriculture and export-oriented projects may lead to social opposition or even instability. To partially offset these risks, countries should expand desalination capacity, which would add (limited) higher costs and lead to higher domestic energy consumption.

Thirdly, the hydrogen supply chain includes several steps resulting in additional energy losses due to transportation and conversion.⁴² Furthermore, the hydrogen trade could resemble the natural gas trade in terms of routes and interdependence. However, it will require integrated value chains from production to final users, and that could take decades to achieve. Moreover, the lack of clear and common standards and an internationally recognized certification system

remains an important barrier to final investment decisions in hydrogen projects.⁴³ Countries need to assess and ensure standardized measurement, reporting, and verification for emissions along the entire hydrogen value chain to design the market in a sustainable way.⁴⁴

d. Potential Cooperation and Solutions

Given the aforementioned barriers, international hydrogen trade is yet to emerge. However, MENA producers could favor the domestic use of hydrogen to decarbonize products such as steel, cement, petrochemicals, and fertilizers. This option would contribute to overcoming logistical, technological, and economic challenges while guaranteeing higher returns and fostering green industrialization. For example, Oman is working on a steel plant powered by green hydrogen, while the UAE has been working on decarbonizing its steel industry using low-carbon hydrogen—also thanks to international partnerships—in light of its national hydrogen strategy.

Furthermore, these sectors have been relevant for economic diversification strategies but are increasingly under the spotlight of international climate and trade policies, also in the EU. Indeed, the EU launched its Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), which prices the embedded carbon emissions of imported goods (namely iron and steel, cement, aluminum, fertilizers, electricity, and hydrogen) in order to prevent carbon leakage and preserve the competitiveness of its industry. By promoting the use of clean hydrogen domestically, MENA countries will reduce their CBAM liability, and they could further integrate into the European supply chains.

The EU and MENA countries should cooperate in creating green markets for decarbonized products to incentivize demand for decarbonized products and also through public procurements. Should the EU support this approach, it would promote further integration of supply chains, favor decarbonization in the MENA region, and meet MENA economic needs and ambitions. Nonetheless, the EU will need to overcome its own fears and concerns regarding the possible deindustrialization due to the loss of competitiveness caused by high energy prices in Europe.⁴⁵

CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Energy cooperation between the EU and MENA region has undergone different phases. While the two sides have failed to further integrate, there are significant opportunities for deeper cooperation. The energy crisis provided new momentum for such cooperation, and the case of clean molecules is one of the most promising areas.

Politically, it is crucial to favor a regional strategy while preserving a country-specific approach regarding the implementation:

- Promoting an integrated MENA strategy would foster dialogue and technical exchanges addressing frequent misunderstandings and frustrations in relation to energy and climate policies. Expanding existing platforms, such as the EU-GCC energy export groups, to cover the entire region would be beneficial. The EU should also recognize varying priorities, needs, and objectives while engaging in these initiatives.

Regarding the actions on tackling methane emission:

- The EU should leverage its monopsony power to push countries lagging on methane emissions to improve, especially in North Africa. It should also incentivize European energy companies to take a proactive role in MENA countries. The EU should promote cooperation among regional countries, exchange of best practices, coordination of investments, and support for capacity building. The two sides should institutionalize a dialogue among stakeholders—governments and energy companies of both importers and exporters—to address EU regulatory issues, including data transparency and the MRV system.

Regarding the actions on hydrogen cooperation:

- The two sides should work on creating common standards in order to facilitate hydrogen trade. Given their significant role in the hydrogen market, they should promote an institution to address common challenges. The EU and MENA countries should incentivize demand both at the international and domestic levels and the development of green markets. To accelerate global and regional decarbonization, the EU should support the use of hydrogen in the MENA region through technological, financial, and industrial cooperation.

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THE EU-EGYPT DEAL ON IRREGULAR MIGRATION:

Should Europe Back Refugee-Led Organizations? | By Azza Guergues

Executive Summary

The ongoing conflict in Sudan has displaced millions of people, with over half a million fleeing to their northern neighbor, Egypt. Egypt has recently signed a multi-billion-dollar partnership with the European Union that includes funds for curbing migration. This comes at a time when anti-refugee rhetoric is spreading across MENA countries. Egypt lacks a national asylum law, and migrants are often referred to as “guests” by the Egyptian government and, therefore, often denied basic rights. While international organizations have been slow to provide aid, refugee-led organizations—established and run by migrants—have served as a lifeline for migrants, providing them with legal aid, shelter, food, and cash assistance. Yet, they continue to be underrepresented in migration-related policymaking. As questions about the effectiveness of EU funds to curb migration and aid displaced people continue, this paper explores the opportunities and benefits of funding refugee-led organizations.

Introduction

In June 2023, a Sudanese refugee named Aya Hassan, along with other migrants, stood before the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Cairo, Egypt, holding her two-month-old son and clutching her two-year-old daughter. She had come to register for aid. Weeks earlier, she had sought refuge in Egypt, escaping the war in Sudan. The UN agency took several months to process the paperwork, and Aya was left alone in a new country with her infants. There was nowhere for her to stay, and she had no idea how she would survive.¹

The war in Sudan, which led to the world’s largest displacement crisis,² has brought South-South migration (largely involuntary) back to the forefront.³ Over the past few years, many individuals in the Global South have been forced to migrate—either legally or irregularly—to neighboring countries as a result of a

combination of factors, including political upheavals, worsening economic conditions, and climate change. Since the turn of the millennium, Egypt has become a frequent⁴ destination for migrants due to its moderately low living costs location—the heart of the volatile Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and bordering the fragile Horn of Africa. Over 700,000 refugees and asylum seekers are registered in Egypt under the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). However, other organizations suggest these numbers are significantly higher.⁵

In the event of war, UNHCR typically responds by setting up refugee camps and providing urgent food and health-care to those fleeing conflict.⁶ However, Egypt does not allow refugee camps,⁷ and international organizations, like UNHCR and IOM, must follow lengthy and bureaucratic procedures to register refugees and assess their needs—a process that can take months or even years.

Refugee-led organizations (RLOs) have stepped in to fill the gaps, providing emergency aid to forcibly displaced people and assisting with settlement in urban areas.⁸ The role of RLOs within their communities has become increasingly apparent in Egypt. There are over 100 organizations aiding migrants of various nationalities. Some have formal status as local organizations operating in the country, and others do not. With no national asylum laws, Egypt places responsibility for refugees on UNHCR, which has increasingly relied on RLOs to help provide services to refugees and host communities. UNHCR’s 2009 Protection Policy recognizes the importance of RLOs in addressing forcibly displaced persons’ needs and promoting self-reliance in urban migrant communities.⁹

Egypt, which is experiencing its worst economic crisis in decades and almost 30% of its population living in poverty,¹⁰ signed the Joint Declaration on the Strategic and Comprehensive Partnership¹¹ with the

European Union (EU) in March 2024. According to the agreement, Egypt will get \$9.2 billion in financial and investment support from the EU between 2024 and 2027. This includes \$223 million for migration management and hosting refugees, with both parties pledging to uphold migrants' and refugees' rights. There was a similar partnership¹² signed between Cairo and Brussels in 2017, with the EU allocating \$100 million to Egypt for managing irregular migration and supporting local refugee communities.

This paper explores the opportunities and benefits of funding RLOs amid growing criticism of the EU deals with autocratic regimes in the MENA region to curb migration.¹³ The research focuses on the role of RLOs in supporting Sudanese migrants, emphasizing the need to assess the diversity of refugee contexts in Egypt to meet both migrant and host community needs. While there is existing EU-funded research on migrants and refugees in Egypt, this paper underscores the need for practical solutions, especially in light of ongoing wars in Sudan and Gaza.

Displaced People in Egypt: Decades Without Rights

Throughout the 20th century, Egypt became a refuge for migrants and refugees from many different countries. During the Armenian Genocide (1915–1916), many Armenians fled to Egypt, though the largest influx of forcibly displaced people came from Palestine between 1948 and 1967.¹⁴ In the 2000s, wars in Darfur and between Addis Ababa and Asmara forced many Sudanese, South Sudanese, Ethiopians, and Eritreans to flee into Egypt. The Arab Spring further escalated migration from Libya, Syria, and Yemen, resulting in an 18-fold increase in the number of forcibly displaced persons in Egypt between 2000 and 2019.¹⁵

a. No Rights

While Egypt signed the 1951 Refugee Convention¹⁶ and its 1967 Protocol, in most cases, the government has not upheld the rights of refugees as outlined in the provisions. The UN treaty sets minimum standards for how refugees should be treated, including the right to work, shelter, and education, and stip-

Photos of a huge fire in the city of Omdurman due to violent clashes between Rapid Support Forces and the Central Reserve on June 28, 2023. (Shutterstock.com / Abd_Almoheimen_Sayed)



ulates that refugees must not be sent back to countries where they face danger. In 1954, Egypt signed a memorandum of understanding with the UNHCR to establish its office in Cairo and delegated the responsibility for determining refugee status to the UN agency, effectively stepping aside from providing migrants with services and protection.

The Egyptian state has intervened against displaced people on several occasions. In 2005, security forces dispersed a sit-in by Sudanese asylum seekers in front of the UNHCR building, resulting in the deaths of 25 people protesting against the agency's mistreatment. During the political turmoil in the country after the overthrow of President Mohamed Morsi, Human Rights Watch¹⁷ reported over 1,500 Syrians (including 250 children) were arrested, and another 1,200 Syrians were deported. In recent months, multiple reports have emerged of large-scale detentions and forced deportations of Sudanese refugees¹⁸ back to war-torn Sudan even though the 1951 Refugee stipulates, “the principle of non-refoulement is so fundamental that no reservations or derogations may be made to it.”

In addition to the risk of detention, refugees and asylum seekers registered with the UNHCR in Egypt face significant challenges in resettlement, such as registering with the authorities, enrolling in education institutions, and obtaining work permits. Although millions of migrants and refugees live in Egypt, only 13,300 foreigners—including investors—were officially registered to work in the formal economy in 2022.¹⁹ Most refugees, therefore, work primarily in informal sectors.

As for education, Egypt allows Arab refugees (including Syrians, Sudanese, Yemenis, and some Palestinians) to enroll in its public schools while turning away non-Arab refugees in a clear violation of international treaties. The UNHCR said on multiple occasions that they have been working with the Egyptian government to integrate other refugee nationalities into public education—so far without any outcomes.²⁰

On the other hand, millions of Egyptians have emigrated abroad for work in the last few decades. Seven million are estimated to live and work in different Gulf states, making significant financial contributions to the

Displaced Palestinians set up their tents next to the Egyptian border. They fled to the city of Rafah due to the Israeli army's invasion of the cities of the Gaza Strip on March 8, 2024. (Shutterstock.com / AnasMuhammed)



Egyptian economy. The government has encouraged Egyptians to migrate to work abroad with laws such as the Emigration and Sponsoring Egyptians Abroad Law No. 111 of 1983, which aimed to facilitate legal emigration and improve the impact of remittances on the Egyptian economy.²¹ The remittances sent by Egyptians working abroad now make up 6% of Egypt's GDP.²²

The high emigration numbers of Egyptians have affected several sectors, including healthcare. Between 2019 and 2022, around 11,500 doctors left Egypt, leaving the medical sector severely understaffed. Despite this shortage, the Egyptian government has not taken steps to improve access to the labor market and recruit qualified medical professionals among refugees and migrants to close these gaps.²³

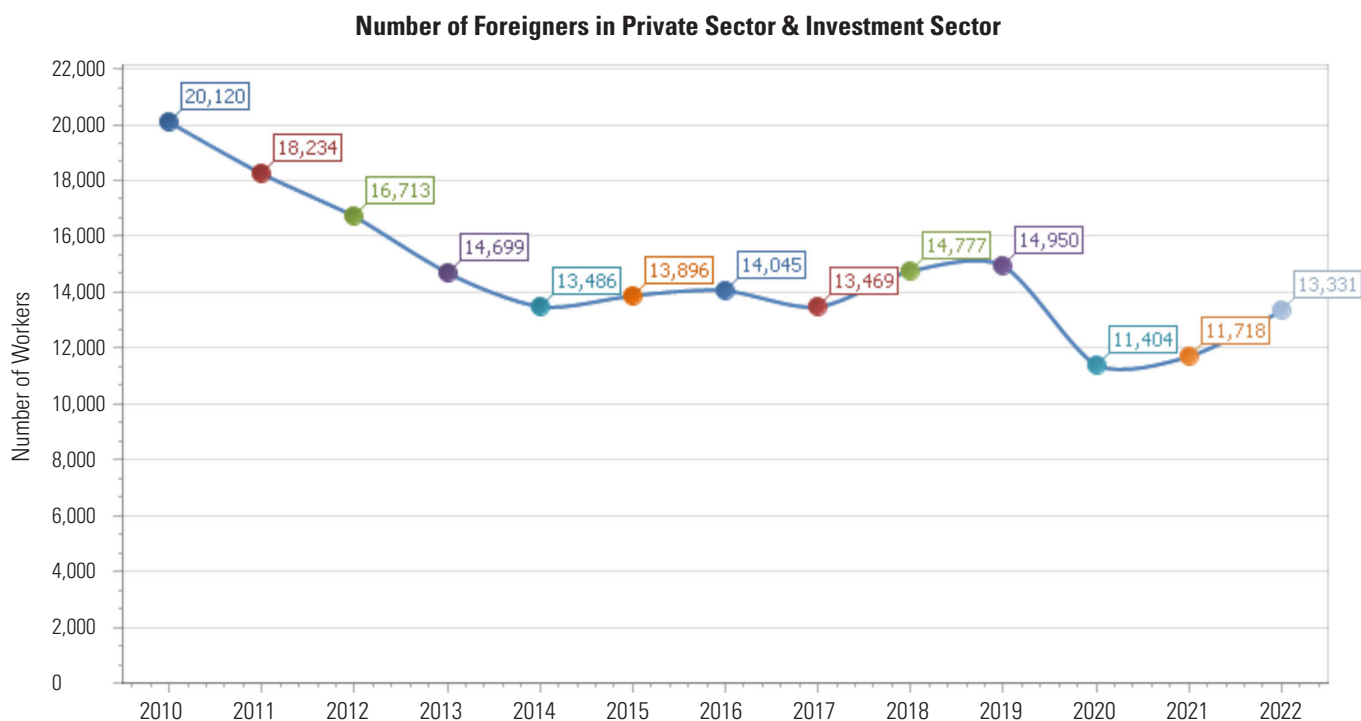
Over the years, many scholars have criticized Egypt's treatment of refugees. "This view of refugees as a 'burden' overlooks the role of the host government's policies in perpetuating this image by its failure to remove obstacles to formal employment and its disregard for the contributions refugees make to the host economy."²⁴ For example, Syrian refugees have contributed approximately \$800 million to the Egyptian economy between 2011 and 2016.²⁵

b. Awaiting First Asylum Law

The national legislation of Egypt makes extremely minimal if any, mention of refugees and asylum seekers. Only article 91 of the 2014 Constitution stipulates that Egypt can offer political refuge to foreigners persecuted for defending human rights, though it does not mandate the country or refer to international treaties.²⁶ In many cases, the clause has been used to offer sanctuary to government allies,²⁷ such as Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the last monarch of Iran, as well as former members of Libya's Muammar Gaddafi.

International organizations have urged Egypt to adopt a national asylum law to protect refugees' rights and ensure they live in decent conditions. Since 2023, the government has been drafting an asylum law, however, its provisions have yet to be made public, prompting concerns that there is again no real commitment to implementation, as with the UN refugee convention.

In recent Egypt-EU talks, border management and curbing human smuggling were on top of the agenda.²⁸ It has been reported²⁹ that the EU agreement with Egypt may serve as a framework for Egypt to finalize its national asylum law. Among the mandates of the law



© Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics (primary source of official statistics for the Arab Republic of Egypt)

is the establishment of a permanent refugee committee that will collect statistics and provide services and protection to refugees, with the EU providing technical assistance.³⁰ It remains to be seen whether the new law will actually help integrate refugees or merely serve as a formality to secure more funding for the government.

EU's Controversial Curb-Migration Deals: Have They Worked?

In 2015, 1.3 million people fled their homes in search of safety from the wars in Syria and Iraq, and over 3,500 drowned in the Mediterranean Sea, leading to what became known as “Europe’s refugee crisis.”³¹ Against this backdrop, the EU pursued deals to curb migration, most notably signing an agreement³² with Turkey in 2016. As a result, the number of migrants entering Greece decreased from 150,000 (in the months before the deal) to 8,000 in the months following the implementation.³³

In the following years, the focus turned to curbing migration from Africa. In an attempt to stop the flow of migrants arriving in southern Europe from African countries, the EU signed agreements with Egypt, Libya,³⁴ Tunisia,³⁵ Mauritania,³⁶ and Morocco.³⁷ Despite the efforts to curb migration, the number of refugees who have died in the Mediterranean has only increased from 2,411 in 2022 to 3,041 by the end of 2023, making 2023 the second deadliest³⁸ year for migration since 2015. Over the past nine years, the Mediterranean has tragically become a “refugee graveyard,” with 30,000 refugees lost and missing. Meanwhile, migrant smuggling across has flourished, generating multimillion-dollar profits.³⁹

a. A Record of Migrants: The Ship Has Sailed

Egypt has been a key stopover for migrants heading for Europe via trawlers. In 2016, a surge in number of migrants leaving Egypt’s coastlines prompted the EU to sign a 3-year partnership with Cairo in 2017 to curb migration. This was followed by another agreement in 2022 for a frontier management program worth €80 million.⁴⁰ The deals did manage to prevent trawlers from departing Egypt’s coast, however, migrants shifted to using new routes from Libya (and, in some cases, Turkey) to reach Europe.⁴¹

These agreements effectively stopped boats from leaving the Egyptian shore after the Egyptian Coast Guard received multiple training by European companies.⁴² However, data shows more than 21,000 Egyptians reached Italy’s shores in 2022, making them the largest group of sea arrivals to reach Europe from Africa, followed by migrants from Tunisia,⁴³ Côte d’Ivoire, and Ghana.⁴⁴ According to the European Commission, Egypt has primarily addressed irregular migration “from a security perspective, sometimes at the expense of other dimensions of migration management, including the rights-based protection of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers”.⁴⁵ The agreements—worth billions of dollars for border externalization—signed with non-democratic regimes in Egypt and Tunisia, as well as militias in Libya and Sudan,⁴⁶ have therefore done very little to stop migration.⁴⁷ Meanwhile, the EU faces growing criticism for using its funds to push back migrants and detain them in detention facilities in transit countries.⁴⁸

b. Root Causes

After 2015, irregular migration is again becoming a major concern for Europe, as hundreds of thousands have been forced to flee their homes due to the ongoing wars in Gaza and Sudan. Since the start of these conflicts, Egypt has received 100,000 people from Gaza and 500,000 from Sudan. The Egyptian government claims it now hosts over 9 million refugees, though no official data supports this figure.⁴⁹ The government repeatedly states that these “guests” are a burden for the country’s already struggling economy.⁵⁰

However, it is not only conflicts that have pushed people to migrate to Europe irregularly but also crumbling economies and authoritarian regimes. As MENA countries fail to provide adequate living conditions for their citizens, migrants and refugees face an even harder time. Human rights groups argue that the EU undermines its own regulations⁵¹ by partnering with repressive governments that oppress both their populations as well as migrant communities.

During the negotiations on the latest partnership, Egypt reportedly⁵² demanded more financial and political control over the EU funds. In the latest partnership signed between the two parties, \$5.5 billion

was allocated to Egypt from the EU in the form of soft loans or macro-financial assistance (MFA), with Egypt having discretion on how to use the funds. The EU, however, imposed specific conditions reflecting its interests—a total of €200 million is earmarked for migration management, including border control and tackling irregular migration, but no further details have been provided.

A joint NGO letter published by the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH)⁵³ stated: “structural reforms to strengthen the rule of law, guarantee fair trials, open civic space, uphold the rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association and media freedom, and release all those arbitrarily detained, are crucial. [...] to address some of the root causes of Egypt’s financial and economic instability.” The EU has the authority over how specific migration funds are distributed and could require that some of them be allocated for localized aid for refugees and host communities, typically concentrated in Egypt’s low-income neighborhoods with limited welfare, employment, and educational opportunities.

Migrant’s Self-Reliance: Funding RLOs

Since the start of the civil war in Sudan, people have been crossing the border into Egypt to escape the country’s sprawling conflict. Once in Egypt, they face many challenges in assuring their well-being due to the absence of an asylum law that would ensure access to aid in the host country⁵⁴ as well as UNHCR’s drawn-out registration procedures. RLOs, which are severely underfunded in the global humanitarian aid sector, have stepped in to fill the void left by the Egyptian state and UN agencies in assisting newly arrived Sudanese by providing accommodation, food, healthcare services, cash assistance, as well as access to education.

Due to the critical role RLOs play, experts have called⁵⁵ for international donors to provide direct funding to these groups to ensure the welfare of migrants and the localization of humanitarian aid. Yet, the RLOs operate on a fragile basis due to the numerous legal challenges that prevent refugees and migrants in Egypt from exercising their full rights.

a. Backbone for Migrants

Over 100 organizations, about half of them Sudanese-led, help migrants in Egypt, though only some are officially registered. These well-established initiatives, some of which were founded by refugees fleeing the turmoil in Darfur in the 2000s, benefit not just migrants but also local Egyptians.

RLOs are designed to fill the gaps and provide assistance to newly arrived refugees and migrants. Because of their wide network of refugees and migrants already in the country, they are able to organize a sizable volunteer force as well as serve as a social network of useful information. They can, therefore, provide a variety of services to migrants and refugees, including legal assistance with applications for residency and asylum. The RLOs also offer educational programs to help address the education gaps caused by Egypt not allowing most refugees to enroll in their institutions. They educate new arrivals on a variety of income-generating crafts and other skills to enable them to participate in the informal economy.

During crises, such as the conflict in Sudan, RLOs are at the frontline of humanitarian response. They rely on peer-to-peer donations from both within and outside of Egypt to help migrants integrate into the new communities. They are able to meet the needs of newly arrived refugees, having been in the same situation themselves. As one RLO community leader explained: “The process in international organizations is long. For example, if they want to provide aid, they cannot provide aid quickly. They must first appoint employees, conduct assessments to see who is in most need, and then appeal for donations. It is a long process. However, we are always at the forefront. Our thinking in the assessment is practical. If there are people in need, we announce it to our communities, and donations come, and aid is distributed quickly. During COVID, we filled many needs while international organizations were paralyzed.”⁵⁶

COVID-19 has exacerbated the role of RLOs as crucial responders, as they have stepped in to replace multinational groups that withdrew during the pandemic.⁵⁷ The UNHCR policy⁵⁸ on refugee protection recognizes the importance of RLOs in supporting integration

into urban areas. This policy also acknowledges that “UNHCR staff, especially those who have worked for many years with camp-based refugees, may lack the skills required to undertake effective outreach activities in urban areas.” To address these challenges, the UNHCR adopted a community-based approach to work with RLOs in providing services in relevant communities. However, UNHCR continues to treat these organizations as subcontractors rather than full partners, hindering the full implementation⁵⁹ of this community-based approach.

b. The Challenges

Due to the limited funding sources, certain RLOs face short lifespans⁶⁰. They often rely on volunteer labor and personal funds. Their lack of registration namely prevents them from collecting funds from international NGOs and donors, which disrupts their operations and jeopardizes their survival.⁶¹

The majority of RLOs in Egypt are not formally registered due to restrictive regulations and lengthy bureaucracy. One such restriction is the need for the board of directors to have at least 75% Egyptian, which presents a challenge for many of these groups focused on refugee issues. Additionally, non-Egyptian board members are required to be residents of Egypt, with their tenure ending upon the expiration of their residency. Since refugees in Egypt are often issued six-month residency permits, this affects their ability to serve on the board of such organizations. However, some organizations have been able to register and offer services that serve both host communities and migrants (like education programs and assistance for people with disabilities).⁶²

In recent years, the role of refugee organizations in Egypt has been the subject of numerous scholarly papers, and the bulk of the organizations that were studied were not registered.⁶³ Nevertheless, restrictions also apply to many civil society organizations (CSOS) in the country, as the law stipulates that CSOS must not violate “public order, morals, national unity, or security,” which are ambiguous conditions that can be used by security forces against these organizations.

One advantage of operating on the margins is that RLOs, as civil society actors, enjoy some autonomy

and flexibility. Authorities are aware of RLOs’ presence and work and typically do not interfere with them. However, this does not imply that they have no issues,⁶⁴ especially considering the periodic arrests and deportations of advocates for refugee rights.⁶⁵

c. A Seat At the Table

Recent research demonstrates the need to localize humanitarian assistance by supporting RLOs to address social protection gaps for migrants. In 2018, The Global Compact on Refugees (GCR),⁶⁶ introduced⁶⁷, a framework for responsibility-sharing on refugee-related issues, aiming to reform and find a long-term solution for support of refugees and host communities. GCR acknowledges the critical role of RLOs as frontline responders and in fostering self-reliance and resilience among migrants and host communities

A key issue with the localization agenda, according to a recent study published by Development Initiatives⁶⁸ and the think tank ODI, is that it fails to recognize RLOs as essential civil society actors in their aid. There are calls for a paradigm shift to recognize these groups as legitimate partners in addressing refugee challenges and involving them in decision-making.

The Development Initiatives and ODI study highlight that “there is a need to recognize RLOs as key actors in global localization and refugee leadership instruments. While there are no legal obligations for donors to fund RLOs, there are compelling policy and moral reasons for doing so.” It was concluded that a lack of funding for local refugee organizations exacerbates service gaps for refugees as well as misses opportunities to strengthen the international refugee system and prioritize refugees’ welfare.⁶⁹ In 2022, only \$26.4 million in humanitarian and development funds reached RLOs and only 1.2% of total international humanitarian aid (\$485 million) directly reached local actors—seen as a “failure”⁷⁰ in the localization of humanitarian assistance.

While European countries are key donors to UNHCR, they should establish partnerships to be able to directly fund RLOs—with or without formal status. The EU could also support UNHCR programs to help

RLOs scale up, register, and provide capacity-building training to their personnel, as well as encourage private donors and foundations to provide funding opportunities to RLOs.⁷¹

Conclusion

Many displaced people have crossed the border into Egypt seeking safety conflicts in Sudan and Gaza, but numerous social, legal, and economic obstacles risk worsening conditions for migrants. To improve the situation, it is essential to direct funding to RLOs—as well as Egyptian CBOs—that serve migrants and their host communities. Development funding should focus on capacity-building as well as strengthening these organizations' internal structures for better governance and long-term impact.

While the EU continues to sign agreements with MENA countries to curb irregular migration, externalization has proven largely ineffective, and the root causes driving individuals to choose dangerous routes to Europe remain overlooked. Working with Egypt to improve living conditions in the country, where many people face dire circumstances, would directly address the reasons for irregular migration, as would establishing legal migration pathways for low-income workers and migrants, such as the one launched by Greece this year.⁷²

The EU's agreements with non-democratic regimes in the MENA region call into question its commitment to supporting human rights, freedoms, and democracy. Political reforms are essential, as democracy fosters economic growth and improves the standard of living across socioeconomic groups.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Refugees as Major Players in Their Own Aid:** Supporting over 100 RLOs in Egypt, whether registered or not, will benefit a large number of migrants, refugees, and host communities. By helping these organizations with registration and scaling operations through training and implementation of monitoring and evaluation processes, donors can strengthen their capacity to deliver the services they provide to refugees and host communities.
- **Pushing for Reforms in Asylum Policies:** Having an Egyptian national asylum law that is compliant with the 1951 Refugee Convention and allows for migrants and refugees to officially access the labor market, enroll in public education and other social safety programs will ensure their well-being and help them better integrated into host communities.
- **Pushing for Political, Economic, and Social Reforms:** Years of mismanagement in MENA countries underscore the need to advocate for political reforms, social protection, and job development for both migrants and residents in poverty-stricken areas across Egypt.

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