



NORTH AFRICAN DIASPORA IN EUROPE: ASSET FOR EURO-MEDITERRANEAN COOPERATION

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Almost three decades after the Barcelona Process of 1995, Euro-Mediterranean relations stand at an inflection point. Several domestic, regional and international dynamics continue to shape the evolving partnership between the two shores of the Mediterranean. In recent years, emerging challenges on security, trade and strategic competition have faced the European Union (EU) in its pursuit of building a lasting and powerful influence across the Southern Neighbourhood, especially North Africa. At the same time, various international and regional players including China, Russia and Turkey pose a threat to the EU's interests and role in the region. In that context, Europe's representation and narrative in North Africa are critical for the future of the Euro-Mediterranean relationship.

Amidst the shifting dynamics in the Mediterranean basin, some of the tools that once served the agenda of the EU and its member states are no longer sufficient to safeguard Europe's interests. For instance, democracy-promotion programmes and financial aid packages cannot, on their own, constitute a sustainable cooperation mechanism between the EU and its southern partners across North Africa. Consequently, Europe must reconsider its comparative advantages and liabilities to develop new policy instruments that would consolidate existing

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links with its southern flank. Atop of the available assets is the North African diaspora in Europe, representing the shared history, present and future of the Mediterranean space.

As per historians' estimations, almost 15 million citizens from North Africa reside in Europe with their descendants (Truong, 2016). This community has shown a remarkable level of engagement on the political, economic and social levels, both in Europe and their countries of origin. Considering the ongoing struggles and misunderstandings in the Mediterranean, the diaspora has its place in the discussion on improving Euro-Mediterranean cooperation. Therefore, an analysis of the diaspora's regional role and importance is essential to design a new approach aimed at facilitating the rapprochement between Europe and its southern partners.

Borderless political engagement

In early June, Europe witnessed a crucial election for the EU parliament at a time of social tensions, political polarisation and security challenges (Malte, 2024). While migration emerged as a major security topic, especially regarding control of borders, it was also highlighted on an electoral level during the campaign. In recent years, the votes of European citizens from a migration background have been perceived as a growing leverage in both national and European elections (Moriconi et al., 2023). For instance, the June 2024 elections were marked by the mobilisation of members of the African diaspora in Europe as candidates and campaign actors (Broulard, 2024). This development confirms a political trend in Europe, where citizens from a migration background no longer accept marginal roles. In fact, several senior officials including ministers, members of parliament, and executive advisers, in addition to local leaders across the EU member states, uphold a double identity as they come from an immigration background. These officials today design European domestic and foreign policies on sensitive dossiers such as the rise of nationalism, sustainable development and conflicts in the EU's neighbourhood, such as the wars in Ukraine and Gaza.

Beyond electoral calculations and official positions, the North African diaspora's presence within European policy circles extends to public debate. Throughout the past decade, members of the diaspora have gained relevance in the public and media spheres on key social and political issues including the future of the EU and the latter's partnership with its southern neighbours (Rennick, Galal, Fibiger, Yonus, & Shehata, 2022). In that sense, the European model of governance that is based on legal rights and duties regardless of origins has facilitated the emergence of engaged second and third generation immigrants. These actors, even if they are still lacking unity as a solid front, are now speaking in their name and starting to influence Europe's priorities both at home and abroad and younger generations. For example, European capitals have been the scene of major protests since the beginning of the war in Gaza, mobilising even the new generation of Europeans who no longer identify with the stances of their governments (Kassam, 2024). This dynamic highlights a shift of European societies that are undergoing a significant transformation towards more political and ideological inclusivity.

Aside from domestic European politics, the diaspora has also shown commitment to advancing change in the EU's Southern Neighbourhood. During the 2011 and 2019 protest movements that characterised the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, the diaspora capitalised on Europe's culture of free speech and freedom of assembly to advocate for pro-democratic change in their countries of origin (Colombo & Gozzini, 2024). Even as the outcome of the Arab uprisings may not have lived to the expectations of this diaspora and fellow citizens across the MENA region, such activism is a reminder that these immigrants have embraced democratic values and serve as ambassadors of

change for their countries. This engagement of the diaspora is a valuable asset for political reforms in the EU's Southern Neighbourhood as it stems from personal and lived experiences and benefits from a deep understanding of the local context and its limitations (Moss, 2021).

Growing economic participation

Political engagement is not the only contribution of the diaspora in Europe. In fact, immigrants also play a crucial role in the economic cycle both in Europe and their countries of origin. According to official reports, immigrants are a major actor across vital sectors in Europe and fill labour shortages (United Nations Regional Information Centre for Western Europe, 2023). More importantly, North Africa's diaspora is still attached to the development of their countries of origin as active economic actors through remittances, investments and transfer of knowledge and skills.

While the reasons behind the diaspora's migration to Europe are primarily economic, immigrants are integral to economic progress in the Maghreb countries. First, research shows that remittances that are transferred on an annual basis to the diaspora's families amounted to 48 billion dollars in 2022 and represented approximately 4% of the region's gross domestic product (GDP) (United Nations, 2024). Considering the socioeconomic grievances that undermine social stability in North Africa, the diaspora's remittances can be viewed as a lifeline to millions of families (Kalantaryan & McMahon, 2021). These remittances are also helpful as investments to establish small and medium businesses that foster sustainable local development and entrepreneurial mindset beyond the state's rentier model, especially for the fintech sector (Duval, 2022). The impact of these investments is visible in changing business practices and encouraging economic interdependence between Europe and its southern partners (Abdelkrim, 2022).

The diaspora's importance in their countries of origin is not only financial but also technical. Millions of entrepreneurs, business leaders, scientists and researchers from an immigration background have established and led programmes and networks, often with the support of international organisations and the private sector, across the Maghreb to share their expertise and lessons with fellow citizens (McLean, 2024). Such initiatives are essential on challenges like digitalisation, economic diversification, energy transition and emerging technology trends including artificial intelligence Khoudour et al., 2023). These projects by the diaspora have proven beneficial for the local population, and authorities who may not have the needed capabilities in these fields and require assistance. Moreover, the diaspora's technical work bypasses the classical bureaucratic restrictions and avoids touching upon political and social sensitivities in the Maghreb where all foreign interventions could be counterproductive and result in more damage to Euro-Mediterranean cooperation.

Deep sociocultural links

In addition to the political and economic roles, the diaspora is fundamental for Euro-Mediterranean relations on more subtle levels. Europe and its Southern Neighbourhood are linked by history and social bonds, which creates a special and emotional relationship. Immigrants incarnate these human-to-human connections as they belong to and narrate the stories of both sides, serving as representatives of their countries of origin and adoption (Nicolas, 2020). While acknowledging the complexity of this double identity, it is also important to recognise its value and strength as one of the strongest assets of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation. On a social level, the diaspora can capitalise on its belonging to the Southern Neighbourhood to lobby for values such as human rights and individual and collective liberties. The narrative of the diaspora on these issues is likely to resonate deeper with the local population than the discourse of European institutions and officials.

The multilayered identity of the diaspora also allows them to bridge gaps between Europe and its southern partners. Since the inception of the Barcelona Process, a key challenge that faces Euro-Mediterranean relations has been the asymmetrical ties and lack of understanding between partners due to political and cultural divergences despite the existence of regional structures such as the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) (Albinyana, 2018). While several formal initiatives of dialogue have been attempted, the diaspora retains its importance as an unofficial actor who is capable of fostering mutual understanding between the north and the south. This form of informal dialogue is vital since it evades governmental restrictions and popular scepticism. As free agents of change, members of the diaspora are able to address common misconceptions amongst their social circles about both sides of the Mediterranean and address the reigning fears of each side (Knudsen et al., 2024). This social implication is necessary in the medium and long term to build healthy Euro-Mediterranean ties based on the realistic needs and expectations of all partners.

Beyond political values, the diaspora has the potential to push for cultural rapprochement between the EU and its southern partners. Despite the recurrent debate on the diaspora's attachment to the countries of origin, immigrants' integration into the social fabric of their host countries and ability to navigate new norms and traditions suggest that what links the two sides of the Mediterranean is stronger than potential divisions. Furthermore, both cultures have become interlinked on linguistic, artistic, normative and gastronomic levels. The diaspora has contributed to decades of exchanges that have produced a visible and diverse Mediterranean culture that surpasses all attempts by local and international actors to undermine the future of partnership.

Recommendations

Building on the political, economic and social engagements of the diaspora across Europe and the Maghreb, it is crucial to account for immigrants' contribution to Euro-Mediterranean relations. In that context, capitalising on the diaspora's potential and significance is a necessity to advance relations between Europe and its southern partners. The EU and its member states should consider the diaspora regarding their neighbourhood and foreign policies, Europe's perception and narrative in the Maghreb, Euro-Mediterranean economic interdependence and development, and social impact on issues related to human rights and democratisation. First, the Maghreb diaspora's struggle against the systemic marginalisation and silencing is a strong signal that political change is a priority in Europe. The EU and its member states should engage the diaspora in policy discussions and benefit from its perspective on choosing the right approach for the Southern Neighbourhood. In fact, the diaspora would constitute a realistic and knowledgeable policy guide given its anthropological and sociopolitical understanding of North Africa. Furthermore, the construction of the Euro-Mediterranean future must be a common mission that bypasses borders, nationalities and origins. Europeans from an immigration background must have their place in the conversation on the EU's vision of regional cooperation to ensure diversity of perspectives and prevent social tensions within Europe itself. The persistence of a homogenous and bureaucratic approach will not only harm the EU's interests in North Africa but will also undermine social and political unity within the EU.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, it is established that the EU is victim of disinformation and propaganda campaigns by international competitors like Russia and China (Pamment, 2020). These campaigns are as destructive to Europe's geopolitical agenda as much as they are dangerous to the stability of the EU and its member states. In order to enhance the perception of the EU in its Southern Neighbourhood, the diaspora is an unparalleled interlocutor to address the EU's southern neighbours beyond official statements and resolutions. With its attachment and contribution to European societies and institutions, diaspora members are an asset for the EU's communication strategy towards North African societies. Diaspora members,

especially those who serve within institutions of the EU and its member states, are an authentic voice that could showcase the success of Europe's integration and governance models and deconstruct the disinformation narrative that focuses exclusively on issues such as racism and xenophobia. Disregarding this diaspora is not only a recipe for failure on a public relations level but would also create a division within Europe on the latter's social and political future. Political reconciliation between Europe and its Southern Neighbourhood is a long process that must also include an economic aspect. In an age of interconnected and globalised interests, the EU's image in its Southern Neighbourhood depends on Europeans' ability to advocate a new economic agenda across the Maghreb that addresses local concerns and builds upon Europe's comparative advantages. In that respect, the EU is not obliged to follow the footsteps of its competitors and should rather focus on empowering existing third-party actors including the diaspora. European institutions and member states should invest and support businesses established by the North African diaspora that operate both in Europe and North Africa. These projects, as small as they could be, will play a decisive role in the long term on the level of economic and business reforms. Economic interdependence may not be a magical solution for the socioeconomic grievances of the Maghreb, but it would counter competitors' narratives and address partners' worries about the unequal partnership between the EU and its southern flank. Furthermore, these businesses will assist the EU and its member states in incentivising local authorities in the Maghreb to rethink their economic model without enduring the liability of direct interference in domestic affairs.

Finally, the diaspora is a reliable ally for the EU to encourage progress on issues where Europe's direct intervention would be counterproductive. Since the 2011 Arab uprising, members of the diaspora in Europe have continuously proved their commitment to the democratic struggle in their countries of origin. The EU and its member states have the opportunity to make use of this reality by encouraging human-to-human links through cultural exchanges and social dialogue. Allowing the diaspora to speak in Europe's name as full, engaged and committed citizens can open doors for concrete and lasting social change in the Southern Neighbourhood. While the enforced exportation of values of democracy, freedom of expression and rule of law to the EU's southern flank remains unrealistic and rejected by local actors, the diaspora may act as a soft power asset to bridge cultural gaps regarding these values.

In the end, Europe is currently at a crossroads regarding its Mediterranean policy and approach with its southern partners. The different shifts underscore the urgency and necessity to adopt a different strategy to face the increasingly unstable environment, adapt to regional economic and sociopolitical trends, and counter the disruptive agenda of various competitors. At a time of conflicts and tensions, Europe will need strong allies and tools to defend its interests and grow its influence in the Mediterranean sphere. Hence, the diaspora becomes a natural option for European policy-makers to consolidate the EU's regional presence. However, this diaspora must not remain an electoral slogan but should be given all its rights and responsibilities for Europe to honour its obligations towards its citizens and its partners.

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