

EU: Perspectives on the Maghreb

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Free trade agreements will do little to alleviate the region's economic and demographic crisis

Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia have one thing in common: people, especially the young people, just want to leave. Unlike what is often portrayed in our media, the three countries of the Maghreb are not only the last way station for refugees from sub-Saharan Africa—for more than two decades now, the number of people from the Maghreb itself who are willing to risk their lives in order to cross into Italian or Spanish territory has been growing.

Meanwhile, entire families and an increasing number of unaccompanied children from Tunisia are landing on Lampedusa or Sicily. All this is happening despite the fact that these countries' coast guards are being ever-better equipped by the EU and the refugees "rescued" at sea face severe prison sentences. The refugees are motivated to flee by the lack of prospects in these countries, where even among young people with university degrees the rate of unemployment rests at around 50 percent, purchasing power has been falling dramatically for years, and—with the exception of some modest efforts in Tunisia—the rule of law does not exist.

Following the "[Arab Spring](#)", Western governments seemed to be very enthusiastic about the democracy movements in the Maghreb: Tunisia even received the title of "beacon of transformation" on the German Foreign Office's website. Numerous civil society initiatives aimed at promoting the rule of law, democracy, women's rights, election observation, etc. received considerable funding, often through the German political foundations that are extensively represented in the Maghreb states.

Parallel to this rather cosmetic level of civil-society engagement, the EU massively pursued the signing of new comprehensive free trade agreements, especially with Morocco and Tunisia. Algeria, which as a prototypical rentier state generated revenue almost exclusively from the export of oil and gas, had never given substance to an existing association treaty with the EU. Free trade agreements of this kind give the concept of freedom a completely different content than the civil liberties celebrated with such pomp in official speeches and publications. The principles of these free trade agreements, entirely beholden to neoliberal ideology, are:

- **Exemption from customs duties:** The abolition of customs duties facilitates the import of cheap, because industrially produced, goods from EU member-states. The importing state loses important revenues that are no longer available for the development of infrastructure (roads, schools, hospitals).
- **Free investment and free movement of capital:** This is mostly based on the price of labour. Low-wage countries or countries with free production zones (production sites in the country where the national minimum wage does not apply and no trade unions may be formed) are attractive for such investments. The products are exclusively destined for foreign markets (extended workbenches), they do not create purchasing power. Capital can leave at any time if it finds an even more advantageous location. Profits, as far as they are generated in the

producing country, are freely transferable.

- **Tax exemption:** This is often granted by third world countries to attract investment. The state forgoes money for infrastructure measures. To promote investment, it often provides water and electricity connections at its own expense, as well as road and rail access.

These freedoms come to an end where the interests of the powerful, in this case the EU, are at stake. The EU subsidises the agriculture of its member states with over 250 billion US dollars a year, while the apologists of neoliberalism in the dependent countries combat subsidies of any kind—including for basic foodstuffs—as the work of the devil. The trade imbalances are even more glaring: while the markets of the associated countries are wide open to European goods, their exports (such as early vegetables, citrus fruits, olive oil) are strictly limited by quotas and a calendar, put in place to protect the agriculture of the EU members on the northern shore of the Mediterranean.

Algeria concluded an association treaty in 2002, similar to those signed with Tunisia and Morocco. The export of hydrocarbons aside, there was no significant exchange of goods. Beyond these virtually non-existent trade relations with the EU, however, Algeria signed a gigantic contract with Rheinmetall: since 2018, the company has been supplying parts for the construction of tanks to a firm in Algeria, founded specifically for this purpose. The deal amounts to several billion euro, and the subsequent export of the killing machines from Algeria to third countries will be free from the jurisdiction of German laws controlling the sale of arms.

During the Arab Spring, the government prevented major protests. About 30,000 armed men sealed off the capital. Bus and train services were halted. But since 22 February 2019, a unique popular resistance has developed, the [Hirak movement](#): triggered by the renewed candidacy of President Bouteflika, who as a result of multiple strokes had been aphasic and in a wheelchair since 2013, hundreds of thousands, even millions of people took to the streets every week. They not only succeeded in getting Bouteflika to renounce his candidacy, they also brought about the dissolution of the bloc in power, made up of various clans: numerous leading figures from politics and the military have been arrested, and are being indicted in series and convicted on grave charges of corruption. However, it is a mistake to believe that an independent judiciary is finally fulfilling its duties. These very trials demonstrate that the judiciary is only doing the clean-up work for those clans that have proven strongest in the power struggle going on behind the scenes. The latter did stage-manage a fresh round of presidential elections, but just 20 percent eligible voters participated—a similar fate is likely to befall the parliamentary elections currently being planned.

The Hirak movement, on the other hand, is back on the streets in full force after a lull induced by the COVID-19 pandemic, and is showing its unbroken strength. Beyond the mobilization of the masses, this consists in the fact that there is no political leadership for the regime to target. Furthermore, the movement is absolutely non-violent, and demands a civil, non-military state. The reactions by state power have been diffuse. Arbitrarily arrested “ringleaders” are charged, sometimes convicted, sometimes acquitted or amnestied, and attempts are made to introduce *agents provocateurs*. However, these arbitrary and seemingly inconsistent measures are obviously not capable of splitting the movement.

The Moroccan monarchy reacted to the violent protests during the Arab Spring by subsidising the prices of basic foodstuffs, sometimes considerably, and promising constitutional reform—which did take place, albeit without limiting the king’s absolute power. Relatively free elections resulted in the Islamists becoming the strongest force, but they were successfully co-opted. The Kingdom is characterized by extreme social contrasts: one fifth of the population lives below the poverty line, one third is illiterate. Regional protests and unrest, such as the Hirak movement that began in the Rif Mountains in 2016, repeatedly show the fragility of the system of the “ruler of the faithful”—who

is the world's seventh richest monarch, with a private fortune of two billion US dollars.

The Kingdom is also burdened by the war in the former Spanish colony of Western Sahara, annexed in violation of international law in 1975. The war now costs around 110,000 US dollars a day. In November 2020, Morocco broke the 1991 ceasefire with the Polisario Liberation Front by carrying out extension work on the 2,700-kilometre border wall between occupied and Polisario-held territories. On 13 November, the Polisario declared that it would no longer abide by the agreement.

The Kingdom, which is heavily supported by France, maintains excellent relations with Europe. Morocco also signed an association treaty with the EU in 1996 and, like Tunisia, has been negotiating the signing of an "extended and comprehensive association agreement" for years. So far, this has not been finalized, due to massive resistance from local scholars, civil society, and some of the business associations.

Aggravating Long-Standing Problems

Negotiations over the free trade agreements demonstrate the prevailing balance of forces: on the one hand, the powerful EU, which acts as a representative of the interests of large European corporations; on the other, relatively small economies that are already deeply dependent. However, in countries such as Tunisia and Morocco, where civil society organizations and academics, but also business associations such as the Tunisian farmers' and fishermen's association, are beginning to offer some resistance, the sell-out of national interests does not yet seem to be inevitable.

In the debate on free trade agreements, it is becoming increasingly clear that social peace and a world without conflict will be impossible without securing material human rights. Cosmetic operations that translate into modest support for women's rights, election monitoring, or freedom of the press are certainly laudable, but they do not help against the impoverishment of societies whose purchasing power has fallen by more than half since the Arab Spring.

The EU's pressure towards radically implementing neoliberal economic policies is likely to prove politically counterproductive in the medium and long term, as will ignoring the practically heroic democracy movement in Algeria. The neoliberal transformation of the societies of the Maghreb, for which policymakers are striving, will only further aggravate the "migration problem" and make a mockery of the EU's human rights discourse given the numbers of people drowning in the Mediterranean due to the increasingly brutal border apparatus.

While entire societies sink into poverty and despair, it seems like the height of cynicism that Germany would at the same time deliberately recruit hundreds of doctors and nurses in Tunisia. Trained at the expense of the Tunisian state, these highly qualified professionals are permitted entry to the promised land of Europe so as to prop up the ailing German health system at low cost; meanwhile, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to rage in their homeland.

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