

## Chapter 7: Revisiting the Role of the EU in the Neighbourhood: Moroccan Elite Perceptions on the EU and Its Policy Impact in the Mediterranean

Featuring a rich cultural blend of Arab, Berber, African, and European influences, Morocco is a strategic actor in the southern Mediterranean and in the MENA region, and one of the most developed countries in Africa, despite being a lower middle-income economy.<sup>2</sup>

With its strategic location and proximity to Europe, Morocco has deepened political, social, and economic ties with the EU and its member states. Within the spectrum of the MEDRESET project, which aims to reassess the understanding and definition of the Mediterranean, along with the related EU policies,<sup>3</sup> this chapter centres on Morocco, and attempts to provide a comprehensive assessment and understanding on the country's perception of the EU and the Mediterranean in general, and the Union's Mediterranean policies in particular.

The assessments reflected in this chapter are based on a qualitative elite survey that was carried out in Morocco with local elite stakeholders. As a snapshot of the full analysis presented in the following sections, the Moroccan perception of the EU in the Mediterranean at the elite level centres on the view that the EU has a fragmented approach towards the region. In this

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1 Omar Iharchane and Samir Bennis were commissioned by PODEM, as Work Package 3 leader for the MEDRESET Project. Iharchane Bennis contributed to the background sections of this chapter.

2 See World Bank Data website: *Morocco*, <https://data.worldbank.org/country/morocco>.

3 Daniela Huber and Maria Cristina Paciello, 'MEDRESET: A Comprehensive, Integrated, and Bottom-up Approach', in *MEDRESET Methodology and Concept Papers*, No. 1 (June 2016), p. 3, <http://www.medreset.eu/?p=13169>.

view, the EU's policies to the region need to improve in: (1) 'consistency', (2) 'integrity', and (3) 'parity'. Furthermore, the ENP was described 'a policy of defence in the interests of the EU rather than a win-win exchange' by the Moroccan stakeholders. Although diverging opinions were retained on to what extent and how the Euro-Mediterranean partnership can prove successful in addressing the challenges the region faces, the central focus was on the theme of 'development'. Above all, the EU was declared to be among Morocco's major stakeholders and a main actor that the countries in the region can continue to benefit from at different levels.

Elaborating on the elite survey findings, the structure of the chapter is arranged in three main sections. The first section introduces a country profile on Morocco, leading into the second section which features a brief history of EU–Morocco relations and their changing dynamics under the influence of domestic and regional developments. The third section is exclusively devoted to the elite survey and detailed analysis of the survey data. The chapter concludes by identifying policy priorities for the future collaboration between the EU and Morocco.

## 1. Country profile of Morocco

### *1.1 Demographics and current domestic issues*

Unlike many Arab and African countries, Morocco is an old nation-state whose creation dates back over 1,200 years. The country's foundations were laid in the year 808 with the founding of the Idrisid dynasty. In the Arab world, what distinguishes Morocco's history from that of other countries is that it was unique in not being under the domination of the Ottoman Empire, and in fact preserved its political independence until the establishment of the French and Spanish Protectorate in 1912.

Like many other countries in the Arab region, Morocco has a young population. According to World Bank data, Morocco has a population of 35,739 million, primarily Sunni Muslims of Arab/Berber ancestry. The figures provided by the country's High Commission for Planning

show that the urbanization rate had reached 60.3 percent in 2014, against 55.1 percent in 2004.<sup>4</sup>

With a growing young population, the main challenge the Moroccan economy has faced over the past decades is to provide job opportunities to the increasing number of young graduates. Every year, about 95,000 graduates<sup>5</sup> join the ranks of unemployed people striving to enter an insufficient job market, which puts constant pressure on the state. According to the latest estimates, the unemployment rate has reached 10.6 percent. Young people are among the most affected by unemployment, with 29.3 percent of youth between 15 and 24 left unemployed.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to unemployment, the health and education systems are among the areas that prevent Morocco from improving its human development index. All the *Human Development Reports* published in recent years by the United Nations Development Programme have ranked Morocco among the worst underachievers in the Arab region. According to the latest Human Development Indicators, published in September 2018, Morocco ranked 123rd worldwide. In the Arab region, it lagged way behind Algeria, which ranked 85th, Tunisia (95th), Libya (108th), and Egypt (115th).<sup>7</sup>

### 1.2 The Arab uprisings and their impact in Morocco

Over the years, Moroccans have become increasingly vocal in expressing their disgruntlement with the failure of the government to meet their demands. With the start of the Arab uprisings in early 2011, the Moroccan

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4 See the 2014 Moroccan census indicators: *Chiffres clés* [Key figures], <http://rgphentableaux.hcp.ma>.

5 Moroccan Ministry of Education, Vocational Training, Higher Education and Scientific Research, *Statistiques Universitaires 2018-2019* [University Statistics 2018-2019], December 2018, <https://www.enssup.gov.ma/fr/Statistiques/4537>.

6 'Unemployment in Morocco: Young Urbans Have It the Worst in 2017', in *Morocco World News*, 9 November 2017, <https://www.morocoworldnews.com/?p=233471>.

7 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP): *Human Development Indices and Indicators: 2018 Statistical Update*, New York, UNDP, 2018, <http://hdr.undp.org/en/2018-update/download>.

youth especially seized the opportunity to put heavier pressure on the state to take their concerns into account. They hoped the authorities would make the necessary economic, social, and political reforms to improve the living conditions of the working and middle class, protect fundamental freedoms, fight corruption and nepotism, and bring corrupt politicians to account.

Demonstrations were spearheaded by a movement called the February 20th Movement. Hundreds of thousands of unemployed and disgruntled Moroccans identified with the Movement's demands. This time around, demonstrations were not only limited to Rabat, but spread to Morocco's main cities. But unlike other Arab countries facing the Arab Spring—such as Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria, where the governments used excessive violence against protestors—the Moroccan government maintained its composure and spared the country a potential escalation between security forces and protesters.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, while protestors in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and Syria called to overthrow the regimes in place, Moroccan protestors merely called for a deep and genuine political reform, in the form of a constitutional monarchy where the elected government would be accountable to its citizens and would have exclusive control over the country's political, economic, and social policies.

Answering the growing demands of Moroccan streets and seeking to reassure the Moroccan masses that their concerns were being heard, King Mohammed VI addressed the nation on 9 March 2011. During his speech, the monarch announced the formation of a committee entrusted with revision of the Constitution. The speech proved to have a positive effect on the turn of events in the country, in that it successfully reassured Moroccans that the monarchy was willing to compromise and engage in genuine political reforms. These would put the country on the right track towards democratic reform and away from old practices and abuses.

On 1 July, Moroccans adopted a new Constitution with the majority of those who voted, the fifth in the country's history since its independence in 1956. Although there might still be debate over the scope of the reform, the new Constitution reduced some of the prerogatives of the King, enshrined

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8 James N. Naster, 'Morocco's "Arab" Spring', in *MEI Publications*, 1 October 2011, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/moroccos-arab-spring>.

the principle of the appointment of the head of government from the party that ranks first in the legislative elections, enhanced gender equality, gave more powers to elected officials and more independence to the judiciary, and upgraded the status of the Amazigh language, which become official language of the country along with Arabic.

### 1.3 *The issue of territorial integrity*

The completion of territorial integrity has been the main feature of Morocco's foreign policy since its independence in 1956. When Morocco obtained its independence from France and Spain, large swaths of its territory remained under Spanish occupation, especially in southern and northern Morocco. This reality would condition both Morocco's overall policy and its relations with Spain.

When King Mohammed VI ascended to the throne in July 1999, the question of the Western Sahara was at the forefront of the main challenges facing Morocco's foreign policy. Following the ceasefire agreement reached between Morocco and the Polisario—which claims to represent the Saharawis and seeks to establish an independent state in the Western Sahara—and the adoption of the UN Settlement Plan in 1991, a referendum of self-determination was due to be organized in 1992. But due to irreconcilable disagreements between the two parties over voter eligibility, the referendum was stillborn.<sup>9</sup> After over 10 years of shuttle diplomacy and innumerable fruitless meetings, the UN decided to adopt a new approach. Between 2011 and 2013, the UN Secretary-General Personal Envoy for Western Sahara, James Baker, came up with two proposals under which the Western Sahara would be granted autonomy for a period of years, following which a referendum of self-determination would be held to decide the fate of the territory. The two proposals were rejected respectively by the Polisario and Morocco.<sup>10</sup>

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9 Erik Jensen, *Western Sahara: Anatomy of a Stalemate*, 2nd edition, Boulder, Lynne Rienner, 2005.

10 Samir Bennis, 'How Ban Ki-moon Missed a Golden Opportunity to Solve the Western Sahara Issue', in *Morocco World News*, 6 March 2016, <https://www.morocccoworldnews.com/2016/03/181419>.

As a result of the failure of this approach, in 2004 the Security Council called on Morocco and the Polisario to come up with creative proposals that would help them achieve a mutually-acceptable solution to the conflict.

On 11 April 2007, Morocco submitted to the Security Council its autonomy proposal for the Western Sahara. The proposal, which was described by major members of the Council as ‘serious and credible’, grants significant autonomy to the region and unprecedented prerogatives to its elected assembly. One day earlier, however, the Polisario had submitted a counterproposal, which stressed that the only way to end the conflict was through a referendum of self-determination.

On 30 April 2007, the Security Council adopted Resolution 1754, which initiated a new chapter marked by more emphasis on the necessity that two parties work towards reaching an agreed upon and mutually-acceptable political position. The resolution seemed to give more prominence to the Moroccan approach, which was described by influential members as ‘providing the basis’ for reaching a mutually-acceptable political solution. While Resolution 1754 ‘welcom[es] serious and credible Moroccan efforts to move the process forward towards resolution’, it only ‘take[s] note of the Polisario Front proposal presented on 10 April 2007 to the Secretary-General’.<sup>11</sup>

As of today, the Western Sahara issue remains unresolved and affects EU–Morocco relations.

## 2. Relations between Morocco and the EU

The European Union is Morocco’s main economic and political partner, absorbing the bulk of Morocco’s exports and providing much of the country’s imports. Since Morocco’s independence in 1956, for historical,

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11 UN, *Security Council Extends United Nations Mission in Western Sahara until 31 October, Unanimously Adopting Resolution 1754*, 30 April 2007, <http://www.un.org/press/en/2007/sc9007.doc.htm>.

political, and geographical reasons, Rabat strove to strengthen its political and economic relations with the European Union. This policy translated into the signing of a number of co-operation agreements with France, Belgium, Spain, Italy, Germany, and the United Kingdom. However, these agreements did not result in a surge in economic exchanges between Morocco and its European partners. One of the main reasons for this was the protectionist and interventionist policy that the Moroccan government adopted in order to create an independent economy, decrease the volume of imports and preserve the balance of payments.<sup>12</sup>

### 2.1 Overview of Morocco–EU relations

With the signing of the Association Agreement in February 1996, relations between Morocco and the European Union were given a stronger impetus. Unlike previous agreements, the Association Agreement sought also to strengthen relations between the two parties at the political level. Additionally, an important component of the agreement was devoted to the support and promotion of human rights, fundamental freedoms and democracy in Morocco; the support of non-governmental organizations; and the support of mutual understanding between both shores of the Mediterranean.<sup>13</sup>

By virtue of the agreement, which came into force in March 2000, Morocco committed to establishing a free trade zone with the European Union. For its part, the EU committed to lend political and economic support to help Morocco to achieve a smooth transition by means of supporting the private sector and the country's socioeconomic balance.<sup>14</sup>

12 Samir Bennis, *Maroc-Espagne: Les relations politiques, économiques et culturelles (1956-2005)* [Morocco-Spain: Political, Economic and Cultural Relations (1956-2005)], Rabat, Confluences, 2008.

13 Mohamed Boussetta, 'Processus de Barcelona et Partenariat Euro-Méditerranéen: Le cas du Maroc avec l'Union Européenne' [Barcelona Process and Euro-Mediterranean Partnership: The Case of Morocco with the European Union], in *ERF Working Papers*, No. 110 (April 2001), <http://erf.org.eg/?p=15586>.

14 See trade figures between Morocco and the EU in the European Commission DG Trade website: *Countries and Regions: Morocco*, <https://europa.eu/!gh34tH>.

To further deepen their economic and financial ties, Morocco and the EU launched in 2013 negotiations aimed at establishing a DCFTA. This new instrument seeks not only to liberalize economic exchanges through the elimination of custom barriers, but also to deepen the integration of the economies of the two parties. If signed and implemented, this agreement would ‘reduce non-tariff barriers, simplify and facilitate customs procedures, liberalize services, ensure the protection of investment, and harmonize regulations in several areas of the business and economic environment’.<sup>15</sup>

However, negotiations to reach such an agreement have been at a standstill for the past 18 months, because of the Western Sahara issue, and the apprehensions of Moroccan officials about the impact the DCFTA could have on the Moroccan economy.

After four rounds of negotiations held in March and June 2013, and January and April 2014, the Moroccan government decided to conduct a survey to study the impact of the DCFTA on the Moroccan economy. The study, finalized in 2015, pointed that while the DCFTA could provide the ‘possibility of profound reforms for our economy and all its actors’, it also entails major social challenges and could put the Moroccan sectors of agriculture and service in jeopardy.<sup>16</sup>

What further complicated the situation is the position taken by the European Court of Justice (ECJ) with regard to the Western Sahara. In a ruling it issued in December 2015, the ECJ annulled the 2012 Agriculture Agreement signed between Morocco and the EU on the grounds that at the time of the signing of the agreement, the EU ‘did not consider whether the exploitation of the natural resources of the part of Western Sahara under Moroccan control was for the benefit of the population

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15 European Union External Action (EEAS), *Les relations commerciales UE et Maroc et les négociations d’un Accord de libre-échange complet et approfondi (ALECA) UE-Maroc* [EU and Morocco trade relations and negotiations for a comprehensive and thorough Free Trade Agreement (ALECA) EU-Morocco], 7 February 2014, [http://eeas.europa.eu/archives/delegations/morocco/documents/news/20140210\\_questions-reponses\\_aleca\\_ue-maroc\\_07\\_02\\_2014\\_fr.pdf](http://eeas.europa.eu/archives/delegations/morocco/documents/news/20140210_questions-reponses_aleca_ue-maroc_07_02_2014_fr.pdf).

16 Ayoub Naïm, ‘Négociations sur l’ALECA: Le Maroc toujours en “stand-by”’ [Negotiations on the DCFTA: Morocco Still in “Stand-by”], in *LesEco*, 13 January 2017, <http://www.leseco.ma/economie/53670>.



of that territory'.<sup>17</sup> This ruling was followed by another in December 2016, stating that the Association and Liberalization Agreements, concluded between the EU and Morocco on trade of agricultural and fishing products, are not applicable to the Western Sahara.<sup>18</sup> The two rulings caused the ire of the Moroccan government and, among other consequences, the suspension of negotiations on the DCFTA.

As clearly seen, the questions of agriculture and fisheries and that of the Western Sahara are intimately linked and have a major influence on relations between Morocco and the European Union. While in the past Morocco made sure to increase the monetary compensation that the EU pays in exchange for the exploitation of its territorial waters, in recent years it has added to its demands the inclusion of the Western Sahara in any agriculture agreement signed between the two partners.

As a result of the EU Parliament's refusal in 2011 to extend the EU–Morocco fishing agreement for one-year, Moroccan authorities suspended the activities of European fishermen in Moroccan waters and announced the end of the agreement linking the two parties. Following this decision of the European Parliament, it took the two parties 18 months of extensive negotiations to come to a new agreement. However, this time around, Morocco hardened its position by demanding a further increase in financial compensation, as well as the inclusion of the Western Sahara in the agreement.

The two parties signed a four-year agreement in 2013, pending the approval of the EU Parliament. Under the new agreement, the EU fishermen were allowed access to Morocco's fishing resources in exchange of 40 million euro per year. The new agreement increased the annual compensation that the EU paid to Morocco by 4 million euro. In 2018, the ECJ ruled that the fisheries agreement was valid as long as it does not include the Western Sahara and its adjacent waters, as such inclusion would violate certain rules of general international law.<sup>19</sup>

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17 ECJ, Judgment in Case T-512/12: *Front Polisario v Council*, 10 December 2015, <http://curia.europa.eu/juris/liste.jsf?num=T-512/12>.

18 ECJ, Judgment in Case C-104/16 P: *Council v Front Polisario*, 21 December 2016, <http://curia.europa.eu/juris/liste.jsf?num=C-104/16>.

19 ECJ, Judgment in Case C-266/16: *Western Sahara Campaign UK*, 27 February 2018, <http://curia.europa.eu/juris/liste.jsf?num=C-266/16>.

## 2.2 *Changing dynamics in Morocco–EU relations*

The dynamic of relations between Morocco and the European Union has shifted in the past decade. With the growing role that Morocco has come to play in the EU security policy—especially in the fight against terrorism and illegal immigration, combined with Morocco’s efforts to put an end to the Western Sahara conflict—Morocco is adopting a more assertive foreign policy that demands more reciprocity from the European Union.

To understand the scope of Morocco’s contribution to the EU security policy, one has to consider the efforts it has undertaken in recent years to help its European partners to effectively address the scourge of illegal immigration, as well as in stopping many terrorist attacks on European soil. Part of Rabat’s effort to halt illegal immigration using the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla in northern Morocco was the decision to build a wire wall along its border with Melilla.<sup>20</sup> This decision, along with Morocco’s close collaboration, has resulted in a dramatic decrease in the number of undocumented sub-Saharan immigrants arriving on European soil.

The role that Morocco plays in stopping illegal immigration to Europe has a particular importance. According to a report in the Spanish daily *El Mundo* in August 2014, a decision by Moroccan authorities to turn a blind eye to undocumented immigrants attempting to reach Spanish soil caused an unprecedented surge in makeshift boats arriving on the Spanish coasts.<sup>21</sup>

What was said about Morocco’s role in securing the EU borders applies also to Rabat’s role in the fight against violent extremism and in thwarting several attacks in a number of European countries. In addition to the close co-operation between Morocco’s intelligence services and its European counterparts, Rabat’s contribution to the EU’s counterterrorism

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20 Fiona Govan, ‘Morocco Building Wall to Halt Tide of Illegal Immigration into Europe’, in *The Telegraph*, 12 May 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/morocco/10825647/Morocco-building-wall-to-halt-tide-of-illegal-immigration-into-Europe.html>.

21 Ignacio Cembrero, ‘Mohamed VI llamó a Felipe VI para quejarse de que la Guardia Civil le diese el alto frente a Ceuta’ [Mohamed VI called Felipe VI to complain that the Civil Guard stop him in front of Ceuta], in *El Mundo*, 25 August 2014, <http://www.elmundo.es/espana/2014/08/25/53fa3bdf2704ec6128b457a.html>.

strategy was on display following the November 2015 Paris attack, when Moroccan intelligence services assisted their French counterparts.<sup>22</sup>

### 3. Elite Survey: Research findings on Morocco

#### 3.1 Methodology

This chapter seeks to introduce Moroccan elite perception in an attempt to offer a ‘non-Eurocentric’ reflection on EU–Morocco relations as well as the EU’s presence and role in the Mediterranean.<sup>23</sup> For the purposes of this research, the elites here refer to local interlocutors chosen based on their influence over policy-making processes or institutions at the social, economic, and political level.

To achieve this goal, an ‘elite survey’ was carried out in Morocco with 22 interviewees between January 2018 and May 2018. The questionnaire designed for the survey included questions that would contribute to answering the main research questions of this particular study,<sup>24</sup> including country-specific questions to inquire in more depth about Morocco and its domestic agenda.

Three researchers including two experts from PODEM were involved in the research phase. One researcher based in Morocco was assigned as a country expert for this particular research study and completed one set of interviews at intervals. Apart from the interviews done by the country expert, the two experts from PODEM conducted interviews in March 2018, in Rabat.<sup>25</sup>

22 Samia Errazouki, ‘AP Interview: Morocco Had Key Intel Role after Paris Attacks’, in *AP News*, 5 January 2016, <https://apnews.com/dacb89528e9d4eab9eff162bfff8cf713>.

23 Zeynep Gülöz Bakır and Gülşah Dark, ‘Review of Surveys on Euro-Mediterranean Relations...’, cit.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

25 Preliminary meetings for research arrangements took place before the actual interviews. The research team also held evaluation meetings between April–May 2018.

The in-depth face-to-face interviews conducted for the elite survey included academics and researchers at universities and NGOs, journalists, authors, civil society organization representatives, and political actors including representatives from political movements and parties. Coming from varied political and social backgrounds in Morocco, the local elites who agreed to take part in the research were aged between 25 and 65 and were informed beforehand about the subject of the project through either email or phone. During the arranging of the interviews, there were instances when potential interlocutors did either not respond or expressed their unavailability at the time of the interview arrangements.

The research team encountered limitations in reaching female respondents, and only three female respondents took part in the in-depth interviews (see Annex for the anonymized list of interviewees).

All interviews were anonymous, and the research team only took notes during the interviews. The following sections present and analyse the research findings.

### *3.2 Moroccan perceptions of the EU and its policies in the Mediterranean*

Moroccan–European relations form a picture of reciprocity, complexity, and overlap, especially in the fields of politics, migration, and regional stability in North Africa, which are decisive in determining the nature of the relationship and priorities in policy management. The EU was seen as a strategic partner for the Moroccan state in these respects. A two-level relationship appears to set the direction of discourse and partnership between the EU and Morocco, which, according to the elite-level respondents, are complementary and interdependent. However, as also stated by the respondents, Morocco is not always seen to be in a comfortable position to choose when, how or where it can best serve its interests. As far as the EU's position towards the Mediterranean concerned, the impression retained from the interviews was that the EU is perceived as approaching the southern Mediterranean as an integrated part of European security arrangements yet prioritizes its own national security at the expense of development and fostering democracy in the region.

Although various views were put forward during the interviews, the Moroccan perception of the EU appeared generally positive at the public level, because the Union was held to be economically-attractive, and a destination for emigration. According to the interviewees, the existence of Moroccans living in the EU is another side of the relationship, which was also linked to the development of the Moroccan economy. Europe, as one interviewee pointed out, ‘entices Moroccans, who see it as “El Dorado”, and a place for social well-being.’<sup>26</sup>

‘The relationship between the EU and Morocco dominates a paradox of love and hate. On one hand, many Moroccans consider the Union a land of opportunity, especially from the side of the youth.’<sup>27</sup>

On the EU’s approach to the Mediterranean, the interviewees pointed out the lack of an equal relationship with the countries in the region and criticized the Union for pursuing ‘double standards’ and taking action without a ‘unified strategy’ towards the region.

‘The European Neighbourhood Policy is below the needs and the expectations of the region in terms of financial assistance, which is something related to the political and ideological constraints that the Union faces.’<sup>28</sup>

‘One key objective of EU policies in the Mediterranean is to promote trade and investments between the EU and southern Mediterranean countries, and among the Southern Mediterranean countries themselves. However, the discrepancy between the declared goals and what takes place on the ground is wide indeed. Unless the relations are based on balanced policies that consider the interests of all those concerned, the Southern Mediterranean countries cannot expect much.’<sup>29</sup>

In Morocco, assessment of the EU varies from one social segment to another based on ideological motives as well as the political and economic position of each group. Among the political actors, the leftists adopted a more contrary stance to the state on strategic issues, with their argument that the Moroccan economy is being increasingly dictated by

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26 Interviewee 9: Independent democrat, male, Rabat, January 2018.

27 Interviewee 2: Professor in Agriculture, male, Rabat, January 2018.

28 Interviewee 9: Independent democrat, male, Rabat, January 2018.

29 Interviewee 7: Head of political movement, male, Rabat, January 2018.

recommendations of the credit institutions including those run by the EU. The conservatives, on the other side, expressed dissatisfaction with the decisions of the EU's representative bodies including the European Parliament and the European Court.

'The Moroccan state [still] has reservations on the EU policies that are against the Moroccan interests such as in fishing and agriculture as well as the issue of Western Sahara.'<sup>30</sup>

Certain criticisms were also levelled at Morocco's position in the region, which was perceived to 'play the role of the gendarmerie' on the southern bank of the Mediterranean to reduce the flow of clandestine migration to Europe.

'By preventing migration to Europe, 'Morocco is making benefit from the EU, which turns a blind eye to Morocco's policies that are contrary to human rights, and do not contribute to the establishment of true democracy.'<sup>31</sup>

'There seems to be an empty shell of negotiations. The EU has high expectations from Morocco yet has less incentives to offer.'<sup>32</sup>

The next concern raised by the interviewees related to the lack of a unified voice within the Union and the EU's reductionist approach to Morocco as the European position to the country is seen as fundamentally dependent on the position of France. On one hand, Morocco engages with the EU as an integrated entity, which sets the framework of the main co-operation and policy areas. On the other hand, southern Europe is historically a major stakeholder in Morocco. Most Moroccans were said to associate the Union with certain member states, the first two of which were, unsurprisingly, France and Spain.

'France and Spain are perceived in Morocco with mixed feelings; they have strong relationship with Morocco, but at the same time they are still viewed as the former colonizers.'<sup>33</sup>

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30 Interviewee 5: Socialist political party member, female, Casablanca, January 2018.

31 Interviewee 2: Professor in Agriculture, male, Rabat, January 2018.

32 Interviewee 17: Researcher at a policy centre, female, Rabat, March 2018.

33 Interviewee 12: Associate Fellow at a research institute, Male, Rabat, March 2018.

While the colonial legacy, cultural dependence, linguistic commonality as well as the geographical proximity and economic relations were put forward as the main reasons that shape the dynamics of relations with France and Spain, Germany was viewed to have a good reputation at the elite level for development and economic modernity as well as its comparatively positive stance on absorbing immigrants. The French hegemony over Morocco was described as a source of competition for other countries, especially Germany, which is already asserting itself in the field of energy.<sup>34</sup> It was understood that although a major part of the financial aid to Morocco is provided through the EU, the level of investment flow and security co-operation is majorly dependent on interstate relations. Other countries where Moroccans were said to create a certain kind of association were Belgium, Italy, and the Netherlands, basically because of the Moroccan community residing in these countries, and the tourists visiting Morocco from them.

Finally, the US–EU axis was seen as a handicap for the EU in forming its foreign policy. ‘The EU succeeded in consolidating currency and economic unity but has so far failed to develop a unified foreign policy. The dependence on the American position on foreign policy strategies is one reason to put forward.’<sup>35</sup>

Moving to observations on the EU response to the Arab uprisings, one notable finding was that there were disparities in the Union’s response over time and from one country to another in the region, and the EU was unable to address the expectations of the Arab people.

‘At the beginning, the EU’s response was not decisive [but calm] to say the least. When the uprisings intensified, the Union stressed its commitment to support the people’s demand for change. However, it did not live up to its promises. It soon changed its policy on the grounds that security and stability should take precedence.’<sup>36</sup>

The perception was that European countries acted based on a case-to-case approach, and the EU’s foreign policy remained under the influence of the interests of its major member states. In the case of Morocco, the position of France—which was believed to be in favour of the authoritarian elites to

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34 See GIZ website: *German-Moroccan Energy Partnership*, <https://www.giz.de/en/worldwide/57157.html>.

35 Interviewee 2: Professor in Agriculture, male, Rabat, January 2018.

36 Interviewee 7: Head of political movement, male, Rabat, January 2018.

neutralize the pressure—was dominant. The case of Tunisia, on the other side, was described as a confrontation between ‘Europeanization’ and ‘Arab states’, where the EU tried to promote the revolution as a success story, dismissing the political and social challenges in the country. With regards to Egypt, there was a perception that the EU has failed.

‘Arab Spring was a resilience test for the EU, yet it failed. Security triumphed over democracy as witnessed in the EU’s stance to the Sisi regime.’<sup>37</sup>

### *3.3 Views on key challenges and stakeholders in the region*

Throughout the interviews, the Mediterranean region was characterized in terms of varying challenges and risks compelling the countries within its territory.

To begin with the key observations, most of the interviewees declared security, migration, terrorism, and the lack of democratic development to be the major geopolitical challenges. At the elite level, the challenges with regard to security were mostly associated with regional instability, as well as transnational crime, including networks of human and drug-trafficking.

In addition to these, the conflict in Syria as well as the profound instability in Libya were stated as growing geopolitical concerns on regional security. At the elite level in Morocco there also appeared to be a higher take on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, which was described as an ‘obstacle [ahead for] the integration of the Mediterranean countries’<sup>38</sup> and a ‘driver’ for regional instability. According to the respondents, although the Israeli–Palestinian issue may be overlooked by the ruling regimes of the Mediterranean, the European position on Israel, notably on the level of its unsatisfactory commitment to end the occupation, was claimed to widen the gap between the EU and the societies in the region.

As further retained from the interviews, sectarian tensions, the problems in democratic transitions in Tunisia and the long-rooted issue of the Western Sahara were cited among other key challenges in the Mediterranean. Another economic factor was described as ‘the need to

37 Interviewee 16: Senior Researcher at a policy centre, male, Rabat, March 2018.

38 Interviewee 4: Professor in IR at University, male, Marrakech, January 2018.



reduce the economic disparities between the countries of the North and the South of the Mediterranean states', as put by a senior academic at a university in Marrakech.<sup>39</sup>

Also mentioned was the return of nationalism in the north of the Mediterranean and the perception that the EU now faces, indicating that the rising nationalist trends as well as the greater frictions among the member states hamper the Union's effectiveness. In the words of a teaching fellow in Rabat:

'After 60 years of European experience, the dynamics of autism [i.e. the EU goal of expansion within the European continent] have succeeded horizontally with the accession of a number of countries, but the deep unification has not succeeded in the same degree of horizontal integration. What I mean here is the unification of policies.'<sup>40</sup>

Regarding the main stakeholders in the region, based on the survey responses, the Moroccan elite level perceives the EU and the US as the two key actors in the Mediterranean region at the international level, while mentioning China, Turkey, and Iran as the three countries with an increasing interest in accessing the African market. At the economic level, China's growing economic engagement with the larger Mediterranean region—with its future manifestations in terms of being drawn into regional affairs and frictions with the US and Russia—was raised as a potential geopolitical concern. At the regional level, the ruling elites and business community—especially those close to the decision-makers—were seen as the primary stakeholders. On the other side, the civil society sector was not among the frequently mentioned stakeholders but was expected to become an important partner in the region with its potential to bring change.

### 3.4 Policy issues in Morocco–EU relations

Going beyond the general nature of the relationship between Morocco and the EU, the main policy areas between both parties revolved around five themes, based on the survey responses: (1) agriculture, fishing and water; (2) energy and industry; (3) migration and security; and (4)

39 Interviewee 8: Professor and CSO activist, male, Marrakech, January 2018.

40 Interviewee 2: Professor in Agriculture, male, Rabat, January 2018.

civil society. The level of co-operation between the EU and Morocco, however, was observed to vary from one area to another.

*Agriculture, fishing, and water resources:* The respondents mostly highlighted the significant co-operation between Morocco and the EU in the field of agriculture along with the investments of European companies in Morocco's agricultural products and import activities. Despite this, the interviewees pointed out the competition between Morocco and Spain on similar agricultural crops. As stated by an academic in agriculture, Spain and Morocco are two competing sides in the field of agriculture, while Morocco is the weaker one because of the pressure exerted by Spain on the EU against Moroccan agricultural products.<sup>41</sup>

'Spain and France monopolize almost 90 percent of Moroccan tomatoes. To satisfy the needs of the EU and to avoid competing with Spanish products, Morocco is resorting to the intensive production of agricultural products, which in turn drains the land.'<sup>42</sup>

The import of agricultural products was also said to be influenced by political tensions between Morocco and Spain. According to the respondents, the use and management of water resources is interrelated with the developments in agriculture, especially with the overexploitation of agricultural land in Morocco. Fisheries is another area where the competition between Morocco and Spain was highlighted by the interviewees, some of whom also raised the exploitation of fisheries resources by the EU.<sup>43</sup>

*Energy and industry:* As understood from the interviews, the EU does not prioritize energy in its co-operation with Morocco, which is one of the largest energy importers in the region. A senior research fellow stated that Germany's investment interest in the field of renewable energy is very crucial for Morocco's energy security and path on green and sustainable energy.<sup>44</sup>

The respondents mostly put emphasis on Morocco's potential to become a key partner in this particular area if the country succeeds in

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41 Interviewee 6: Professor in Agriculture at University, male, Rabat, January 2018.

42 Interviewee 2: Professor in Agriculture, male, Rabat, January 2018.

43 Ibid.

44 Interviewee 12: Associate Fellow at a research institute, Male, Rabat, March 2018.

launching a gas pipeline that will connect Morocco, along with some other African countries, to Europe.

In the field of industry, the EU member states are known as the main supplier of industrial products to the Moroccan market.

‘There is a greater need for investment in Morocco’s energy and industry sectors. Although co-operation between the Union and Morocco is present at many levels, the level of co-operation should be more on technology transfer and agricultural mechanization [to increase the competence of Moroccan companies].’<sup>45</sup>

An additional comment concerned foreign direct investments by the EU, in particular France and Spain, which target only certain Moroccan sectors such as the automotive sector. France was further criticized for its attempt to curb Morocco’s industry expansion to other EU countries, and for monopolizing the Moroccan market.

*Migration and security:* The general perception revealed during the interviews was that Europe focuses heavily on the migration issue due to its concern with European security. As described by a research fellow at a think tank, when it comes to the southern Mediterranean, the EU’s policy is merely centred on security.<sup>46</sup>

‘The problem of migration in Europe poses intractable problems, not only about security and counterterrorism, but also the issues of identity, cultural integration, and the challenges posed by the growing Muslim demographic in Europe.’<sup>47</sup>

Compared to other sectors, the co-operation on migration with the EU was seen as more consistent, yet respondents raised the need for agreeing upon a common agenda and approach on this particular issue, referring to the conditions of the mobility partnership between the Union and Morocco.

‘There is an asymmetry of interests: while the EU prioritizes readmission and security, Morocco is more on visa facilitation.’<sup>48</sup>

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45 Interviewee 5: Socialist political party member, female, Casablanca, January 2018.

46 Interviewee 16: Senior Researcher at a policy centre, male, Rabat, March 2018.

47 Interviewee 3: Author, political party member, male, Tangier, January 2018.

48 Interviewee 16: Senior Researcher at a policy centre, male, Rabat, March 2018.

According to the interviewees, the co-operation on migration—which is similar to the deal with Turkey to stem the flow of migrants entering the EU illegally—was not expected to produce effective results but to merely return illegal migrants to Morocco. The respondents would prefer to see a more inclusive strategy on migration, which would be based on the ‘neighbourhood of the neighbour,’ meaning that the Union should also consider Morocco’s neighbours like Senegal, one of the hotspots for migration in West Africa, when forming its strategies.

As for Morocco, the increasing migration from sub-Saharan Africa is expected to lead to a change in the country’s demographic structure in the near future, making Morocco not only a transit country but also an immigration destination.

With respect to mobility, the tourist flow from Europe to Morocco and Europe-based Moroccans coming with investment projects were seen as an important aspect for the economy.

*Civil society:* Throughout the interviews, perceptions on civil society were relatively divergent, especially due to the ideological factors involved as well as the differences in perspective at the elite level.

On one hand, the respondents asserted that there is a good level of co-operation in civil society with the Union and the particular focus is given to human rights issues, notably women’s rights, combating discrimination and violence against women, gender equality, and discriminatory laws. The support of the EU on the recognition of homosexuality and decriminalization of consensual sexual relations was further indicated.

On the other hand, the EU’s degree of openness to the civil society in Morocco was believed to vary according to the Union’s ideologies and principles, leading to the Union’s presence in limited subject areas. There was the expectation that the EU should go beyond its rhetoric and show its determination for concrete partnership based on impartial criteria and common interests.

‘There is a selective and patronizing relationship. The aid is majorly offered to those whose work does not deal with the concerns of the society, and these organizations are mostly linked to the regime. There is another challenge that

setting up independent and credible associations is also difficult in Morocco, notably in receiving consent.<sup>49</sup>

Above all, representatives from the civil society sector drew attention to the transfer of expertise and technical knowledge from the EU, as indicated by a research fellow at an NGO:

‘There is a lack of knowledge on how to use the EU funds or applying for a civil society programme launched by the Union. To improve Morocco’s competency in the civil society sector, the EU can be more on the ground.’<sup>50</sup>

### 3.5 *Expectations and prospects for co-operation in the Mediterranean*

The fact that the Mediterranean region is not a homogenous territory appears to make it difficult to predict the future role of the EU in the entire region, as put forward by an academic in agriculture.<sup>51</sup> At the elite level, there were varied views on envisaging the EU’s future role in the region. Some respondents took a cautious stance due to the internal challenges facing the EU, including the anti-immigrant trend and the Union’s perceived lack of transformative power in the Middle East, except for its efforts on the Palestinian issue. On the other hand, certain respondents indicated the Union’s potential to play a more proactive role in the political and socioeconomic development of the region.

It is possible to conclude, however, that there are two areas where the EU is expected to exert more effort in the region, the first of which is support for democratic transition and putting pressure on authoritarian regimes, while the second is to contribute to forming a secure environment and living conditions through development that would bring stability to the region and reduce migration. Any initiative that would aim at helping to build democratic systems and foster social and economic development would be positively welcomed. The transfer of knowledge and expertise was among the most mentioned topics; further partnership is seen as necessary and highly valuable.

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49 Interviewee 7: Head of political movement, male, Rabat, January 2018.

50 Interviewee 19: Researcher at a policy centre, male, Rabat, March 2018.

51 Interviewee 6: Professor in Agriculture at University, male, Rabat, January 2018.

Additionally, the civil society sector was described as the ‘door to the success of co-operation’ between both sides, which must be taken care of by strengthening advocacy initiatives, including women’s empowerment, and forming a balanced relationship between the society and the ruling elites. One recommendation was to launch an annual report in conjunction with the EU, specifically on monitoring the status of political and civil rights in the Mediterranean countries.

With respect to regional integrity, there was an emphasis on co-operation platforms, notably on the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), in relation to which the EU is expected to show more support in overcoming the political and economic challenges that the AMU faces.

A final note was that the presence of Russia as a major actor should be considered in the creation of a more balanced Euro-Mediterranean grouping.

## Conclusion

This chapter aimed at reflecting how Moroccan elites evaluate the EU vis-à-vis its presence and policies in the country, but also in the Mediterranean. The findings discussed in the previous sections support the assumption on the EU’s ‘technocratic approach’, which ‘remains at the level of decision-shaping and not decision-making’ and is based on ‘on vaguely-defined benchmarks and standards’.<sup>52</sup> The assumption is particularly relevant for Morocco within the context of the agreements concluded with the EU, as seen in DCFTAs and EU-funded programmes, where Morocco receives insufficient incentives from the Union in terms of both technical knowledge and practical assistance.

Furthermore, the challenges that the EU faces in the Mediterranean lie in the nature of the approach to co-operation that it adopts. It could

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52 Münevver Cebeci and Tobias Schumacher, ‘The EU’s Constructions of the Mediterranean (2003-2017)’, in *MEDRESET Working Papers*, No. 3 (April 2017), p. 18.

be argued that what the Mediterranean countries need is a European role that can develop the region and improve the living conditions of the fragile social groups there. To enable better co-operation, one path would be to intensify the transfer of knowledge and strategies among the political actors and support the creation of a culture that could strengthen the political community and facilitate the transition to democracy.

It is further understood that the EU is expected to perceive Morocco as ‘more than a border guard’; as a ‘key partner’ that has the potential to provide investment opportunities to the European economy, and to address security challenges in the region. Respondents highlighted that EU’s image of ‘Fortress Europe’ is still present in the Mediterranean.

The key to a successful co-operation between the EU and Morocco also lies the area of civil society, which must be taken into account in terms of composition, qualification, and strengthening of advocacy capacities in specific areas such as climate, security, migration, justice, and the activation of participatory democracy and human rights.

To this end, based on the responses retained from the elite survey, it is possible to put forward the most pressing issues in Morocco that require the knowledge of the EU, while shaping the priorities of its work with the country.

### *Policy priorities for future collaboration with the EU*

At the political level:

- The EU is expected to contribute more towards efforts that could ensure a true democratic transition without the threat of instability, both in Morocco and the region.
- The Union can support Morocco in introducing a profound constitutional amendment, which would redraw the relationship between institutions.
- Successful fight against drug-trafficking and transnational organized crime is believed to require joint strategies with the Union.
- There is a clear need to form a roadmap on the Western Sahara issue, which has direct impact on Morocco’s relations with the EU and member states on certain policy areas such as agriculture and fishing.

- To enhance relations with the Union, there is the expectation that the position of the EU should not be left to France alone, but be more unified and inclusive.
- The nature and content of partnership agreements with the Union, such as the DCFTA, can be revised to improve their efficiency.

At the economic level:

- The Moroccan development model was said to lack a political basis, and the need to link economic development with democracy was highlighted. The development model should also encompass 'geographical equity'.
- The EU can help on promoting governance, transparency, and competitiveness in the Moroccan economy.
- It was seen as paramount to enable 'social dialogue' between the government and trade unions actors to achieve 'social peace', which would benefit the state, the trade unions and workers.
- Political interference in the Moroccan economy was seen as another challenge and hampers the provision of equal opportunities to all social segments.
- Equal distribution of development revenues to all regions and sectors in Morocco was highlighted.
- Further initiatives are expected on eliminating unemployment, poverty, and corruption.

At the social level:

- More efforts should be made on ensuring the freedom of belief in constitutional law and protecting the right to practice religious beliefs.
- Education was described as an urgent problem to handle through new reforms. The Moroccan state should be encouraged to spend more on the education sector.
- The EU can provide more support to the civil society and the media to play their role as awareness-raising sectors.
- Gender equality along with women's and youth empowerment are the two other areas where further development is deemed necessary.



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## Annex: List of interviewees

- Interviewee 1: Party member, male, Rabat, January 2018  
Interviewee 2: Professor in Agriculture, male, Rabat, January 2018  
Interviewee 3: Author, political party member, male, Tangier, January 2018  
Interviewee 4: Professor in IR at University, male, Marrakech, January 2018  
Interviewee 5: Socialist political party member, female, Casablanca, January 2018  
Interviewee 6: Professor in Agriculture at University, male, Rabat, January 2018  
Interviewee 7: Head of political movement, male, Rabat, January 2018  
Interviewee 8: Professor and CSO activist, male, Marrakech, January 2018  
Interviewee 9: Independent democrat, male, Rabat, January 2018  
Interviewee 10: Journalist/editor, male, Rabat, January 2018  
Interviewee 11: Academic at University, male, Rabat, February 2018  
Interviewee 12: Associate Fellow at a research institute, Male, Rabat, March 2018  
Interviewee 13: Researcher at an institute, female, Rabat, March 2018  
Interviewee 14: Senior Researcher at an institute, male, Rabat, March 2018  
Interviewee 15: Professor, Academic at University, male, Rabat March 2018  
Interviewee 16: Senior Researcher at a policy centre, male, Rabat, March 2018  
Interviewee 17: Researcher at a policy centre, female, Rabat, March 2018  
Interviewee 18: Senior Executive at a policy centre, male, Rabat, March 2018  
Interviewee 19: Researcher at a policy centre, male, Rabat, March 2018  
Interviewee 20: Researcher at University, male, Marrakech, April 2018  
Interviewee 21: Academic at University, male, Casablanca, April 2018  
Interviewee 22: Academic at an institute, male, Rabat, May 2018

