

UK North Africa policy post-Brexit

1. Introduction

On 31 January 2021, the United Kingdom finalised its withdrawal from the European Union, transferring its formal relationship to the UK-EU Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA).

The UK's withdrawal from the EU fundamentally changed its relationship with the bloc but after four decades of close political and economic union, there remains a great deal of overlap in foreign policy with European partners.

This paper aims to address UK interests in the North African region and proposes policies for engagement post-Brexit.

It will stress the growing, and often undervalued, importance of the region and make the case for re-energising relations.

The North African region is both geographically and politically significant for Europe, it exists at the southern gateway to continental Europe and shares close post-colonial relationships with a number of European states.

It is at the center of the debate in Europe surrounding irregular migration, trafficking and international terrorism, and acts as the point of departure for numerous Mediterranean trafficking routes originating in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Regional instability and insecurity in the Maghreb, the Horn of Africa and an increasingly unstable Sahel continues to displace civilians who go on to make the perilous journey seeking security and a better quality

of life on Europe's shores and to a lesser, but growing, extent, the UK's.

Unscrupulous transnational criminal organisations, which hold scant regard for human life, operate the routes often channeling funds to corrupt officials and violent extremist groups for passage, such as [Islamic State](#) (IS), further fuelling instability and insecurity.

[Displaced civilians travel routes](#) which take them through Morocco to the Canary Islands, across the Strait of Gibraltar or into the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, as well as through Tunisia and Libya to Malta, the Italian island of Lampedusa, Sicily or mainland Italy by sea.

They flee insecurity and dire economic conditions at home.

2. European Values in the Region

In 1995 the United Kingdom, along with 31 other countries and representatives of the EU Commission and Council, became a signatory to the Barcelona Declaration.

The declaration stated its objective as turning the Mediterranean basin, including North Africa, into an area of peace, stability and prosperity as well as fostering development, democracy and respect for human rights.

It led to the formation of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) which expressly aims to promote stability, human development and

integration in the region, goals the UfM continues to strive towards today.

Likewise, up until the end of the transition period the UK continued to participate in the [EU's European Neighbourhood Policy \(ENP\)](#), launched in 2003.

The ENP governs EU relations with its southern neighbours including Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia, aiming to foster prosperity, stability and security based on values of democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights.

The EU reaffirmed these goals in [2015](#).

These shared values continue to underpin both the EU and UK relationships and objectives in the region.

3. Bilateral Relations

The UK's bilateral relations with the region have focused on aid in support of human rights, development and democracy.

It was a participating member of the NATO coalition in Libya and has undertaken joint military exercises in Egypt and Tunisia.

Italian bilateral engagement with the region has been more pronounced over the past two decades and has long been defined by efforts to control irregular migration, trafficking and terrorism.

Since the early 2000s, [numerous Italian agreements with countries in the region](#) have centered around police cooperation, joint maritime patrols and the repatriation of irregular migrants, regardless of the political persuasion of the government of the day.

Italy donated two patrol vessels to Egypt in 2010, two to Tunisia in 2012 and four to the Libyan Coast Guard (LGC) in 2017, one of which, the *Ras Jadir*, was accused of obstructing a migrant rescue mission in a case before the [European Court of Human Rights](#).

Meanwhile Spain's focus has been on political, economic and cultural links, having singled out Morocco, Algeria and Egypt as countries of economic interest.

The country established an international public diplomacy consortium '[Casa Arabe](#)' which aims to promote economic relations, channel inter-cultural dialogue and mediate regional socio-political changes.

To this end it runs a governance programme which aims to support North African countries in democratic transition.

It also operates an Arabic language center which offers training to youths and professionals in order to support their presence in Arab countries.

4. Economy, Governance and Climate Change

In 2017, trade between the UK and the Maghreb accounted for 0.5 percent of the UK's global trade while British official development assistance (ODA) in the region [exceeded £20m](#).

North African governments and business leaders have expressed frustration at an assumption among various sectors in the UK that their countries are already spoken for, by way of their post-colonial relationships.

It is a perception which they feel puts UK companies off seeking out contracts and discourages the UK government from building political or trade relationships. In fact, many of them wish for the exact opposite.

As the UK withdraws from the EU it is presented with a unique opportunity to reset policy in this area, particularly as it exercises greater autonomy over its foreign and trade policy.

British companies have faced challenges in the region from protectionist trade regimes and market regulations, such as the 51:49 rule that caps foreign ownership at 49 versus 51 percent for a local investor.

However in 2020, [Algeria announced the end of its own 51:49 rules](#) and the Casablanca Stock Exchange (CSE) started making moves towards easier access for foreign investors and called for greater [privatisation of state companies](#).

In March 2021, [Rabat signed a bill](#) broadening the definition of corruption to include administrative and financial bodies, as well as the misuse of public bodies and funds, while the [Hirak movement protests](#), which in part targeted corruption, have returned to the streets of Algeria.

UK companies, which carry the added weight of anti-bribery legislation, reflect these changing attitudes and would be well placed to enter the North African utilities, food and financial sectors.

Economic development would help to promote as well as consolidate democracy, and the UK both through its aid and trade and investment can be a major player in this regard.

Citizens rely on their government to provide basic necessities such as food, water, power and jobs, when it is unable to do so they turn to other groups or leave, damaging the country's human capital.

As mentioned above, UK companies are well placed to help address some of these issues and should be supported in doing so by the government.

In this vein, the UK could learn from the experience of Spain which has signed agreements and funding arrangements allowing for Spanish investment in large-scale projects in Morocco.

One such project is the [large solar energy site built at Noor Ouarzazate](#), which involved billions of dollars of investment and was developed in partnership between the Spanish consortium TSK-Acciona-Sener and ACWA Power, the Clean Technology Fund, the African Development Bank, the World Bank and the European Investment Bank.

Ultimately, climate change will exacerbate demographic changes in North Africa and the Sahel and displace greater numbers of people.

Desertification in the Sahel and intensifying weather patterns, such as droughts and flooding, are degrading natural resources which are essential to the agropastoral livelihoods that underpin the economy in the area.

The depletion of natural resources in the region is also creating [conflict between farmers and herders](#).

Division and economic as well as physical insecurity increases vulnerabilities to radicalisation and instability.

Directing aid and encouraging investment towards green projects in North Africa and the Sahel is both a moral and strategic imperative for the UK.

5. Democratisation and Security

The Arab Spring, which began in 2011 in Tunisia with the self-immolation of Mouhammed Bouazizi, has been experienced unevenly in the region to say the least.

Sadly, the Libyan and Egyptian experiences were violent and fractious whilst Algeria and Morocco saw widespread political unrest and only modest reform.

However, the experience of Tunisia has exemplified the optimism of the Arab Spring. The country is now classified as free and ranks equal with the US on political rights and higher on [measures of electoral freedom](#).

International aid, where the UK has been and continues to be a leader, has a role to play in supporting human rights, democracy and development in North Africa.

Although [Africa received 57.6 percent \(£5.9bn\)](#) of the UK's bilateral official development assistance (ODA), it was largely focused on the Horn of Africa, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Nigeria as well as the southeast of the continent.

There is an argument for channeling larger sums of ODA to the region, particularly to countries such as Morocco and Algeria which will likely be security guarantors for the region to risks emanating from the proliferation of violent extremist groups in the Sahel.

In this regard, EU policy and projects in the region are primarily channeled through the UfM.

The UfM allows for the involvement of third countries in projects provided the “agreement of participants” is received and the UK should strive for this where projects promote economic development and democratic governance.

Ultimately, the UK should endeavour to formally join the UfM and start formally cooperating with the EU on common development and security goals in the region.

Further to security, North African links to the Manchester Arena attack in 2017 and the Paris terror attacks in 2015 demonstrate the shared UK-EU imperative for supporting the fight against violent extremism and terrorism within the region.

Likewise, the Sousse attack in 2015 underlined the importance of domestic security capabilities in order to protect in-country western targets as well as domestic victims.

In the past, the UK has sent military personnel to train [Tunisian](#) and [Egyptian](#) security forces and is exploring ways to promote military [cooperation with Morocco](#), with which it already has a Status of Force Agreement.

Supporting North African security would help prevent violent extremists gaining a foothold in the region, as they risk doing in Algeria and Egypt's Northern Sinai, and provide a bulwark against an increasingly unstable Sahel.

6. Regional Integration and Cooperation

In any event, North African countries will be key to addressing many issues of the future, particularly those emanating from the Sahel, all the more pertinent as [France seeks to wind down military operations in the region](#).

[The UK should support North African](#) integration and autonomy in order to face common regional challenges.

However, regional cooperation is severely hampered by the Western Sahara dispute that pits Algeria and Morocco against one another.

The Arab Maghreb Union, an organisation aiming for economic and political unity amongst North African states, has been paralysed by the matter, having not met since 2008. The result is a fractured region in a world increasingly characterised by blocs.

[Intra-Maghreb trade](#) accounts for less than 5 percent of its total trade, compared with 16 percent for Africa, 51 percent for Asia and 70 percent for Europe.

In an increasingly globalised world, the region will continue to struggle to compete globally or provide sufficient opportunity and development without greater economic integration.

International support in the resolution of the Western Sahara dispute must draw on the legitimacy afforded multilateral action.

Exchanging unilateral recognition of sovereignty for support on foreign policy objectives serve only to divide and undermine progress.

7. The Libyan Civil War

The Libyan Civil War has been exacerbated by the presence of foreign powers, with Russian mercenaries and Emirati drones supporting General Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA) in the east and the Turkish military supporting the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) based in Tripoli.

It has caused rifts between EU and NATO allies with France's political support of the LNA in direct conflict with Italy's support for the GNA.

[France acknowledged](#) supplying the LNA with US-made Javelin missiles and was accused of sending soldiers to fight within its ranks by the [GNA](#).

It has now stepped back from that relationship and Italian PM Mario Draghi has met with the interim Libyan PM in his first official visit abroad.

However, France's relationship with fellow NATO member Turkey remains frayed amid a [dispute in the eastern Mediterranean Sea](#) over hydrocarbon resources that involves France, Greece and Egypt on the one hand and Turkey and Libya on the other, which has led to France suspending involvement in a NATO mission off the coast of Libya and calling Turkey's actions "[unworthy of a NATO ally](#)".

The Libyan conflict has also threatened to spillover into the wider region. Egypt has suffered [cross-border attacks](#) and [Egyptian Christians](#) have been targeted within Libya, whilst Algeria continues to suffer exorbitant costs in securing its border.

Such costs could impact on Algiers' security budget, which is also used to combat terrorism at the border

with Niger and Mali, areas with increasingly concerning levels of violent extremism.

8. Policy Proposals

1. North Africa hosts three of Africa's five largest economies and looks set to play an increasingly significant role on the continent particularly through the newly functioning African Continental Free Trade Area and the Community of Sahel-Saharan States as well as African Union initiatives such as the [Nouakchott Process](#).

The UK should renew efforts to promote intercultural dialogue and offer Arabic language training to young persons and professionals through the British Council, as a means of equipping individuals to take advantage of opportunities in the area and to encourage British investment in the region.

Additionally, the UK should seek to increase the number of international trade representatives at its embassies in the region, who could assist British businesses in-country.

2. There is a certain momentum towards liberalisation and against corruption in the region.

The UK currently occupies the unique position of the G7 presidency with a summit to be held in June in Carbis Bay, Cornwall.

The UK should advocate strongly for support among the G7 nations for market liberalisation and anti-corruption measures in North African countries, much like it did with Ukraine in 2014.

3. At present, economic growth and recovery in Algeria, Egypt and Libya depend upon the export of hydrocarbons at the same time the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the transition to low emission and green economies.

These countries and the wider region will require assistance in diversifying their economies to meet the demands of the future.

The UK hosts the COP26 meeting this year where it should promote green investments in the region and seek to forge funding partnerships, ensuring British business is equipped to take advantage of opportunities.

4. The Mediterranean region is significant for both the UK and the EU, and an area where their interests are closely aligned.

The UK should seek to formally join the Union for the Mediterranean and present a delegation to its parliamentary assembly.

5. North African states will play a critical role in future challenges to African security, in particular to those threats emanating from the Sahel where there has been a

proliferation of armed extremist groups, increasing violence and rising instability.

The UK should continue to support regional partners through joint exercises and the provision of training.

The UK-EU TCA leaves plenty of scope to work for the common interest through informal structures and the UK should look to cooperate with the E3 and NATO in this regard.

Likewise, the UK should look to formalise its relationship with [the Counter Terrorism Group \(CTG\)](#) and Club de Berne intelligence sharing organisations, as Norway and Switzerland have done with the latter.

6. Morocco and Algeria are the security guarantors of North Africa and cooperation between them is essential to the stability of the wider region.

The UK should support the UN in its efforts to resolve the Western Saharan conflict, cooperating with allies such as France and Spain where possible.

7. There is cause for cautious optimism as the Libyan Political Agreement succeeded in forming a unity government which seeks to hold the first successful nationwide elections in nine years.

It is vital that foreign powers now leave the country and the UK should strongly support the UN agreement that calls for them to do

so, encouraging those with whom it is friendly to comply.

It should also strongly support the EU Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM) in order to help stem cross-border attacks, arms transfers and trafficking.

9. Conclusion

To state the obvious, the UK's relationship with the EU fundamentally changed on 31 January 2021.

Yet both actors still have significant interests in the region, which will only grow with time, and there is a great deal of scope for cooperation.

As a continuing member of NATO, the Five Eyes alliance and the UNSC P5, and with the largest defence budget in Europe, the UK remains an attractive partner.

In 2021, the UK holds the presidency of the G7, will host the COP26 climate meeting and has reasserted autonomy over its international trade and foreign policy.

It is also comfortably in the top five of countries worldwide for vaccines administered per capita, having provided [first doses to over 32m people](#), which represent the priority groups that account for 99 percent of preventable deaths from COVID-19.

What better way to announce the country's recovery from COVID-19 than with a return to the 0.7 percent of GDP international aid commitment that made the UK a soft power superpower.

In 2018, the British Council found contribution to international development to be the single biggest driver of trust in the UK government and the second biggest of [trust in its citizens](#).

People who say they trust the UK are almost twice as likely to do business with or study in the UK.

The challenge is to re-energise relationships with the governments, business communities and people of North African countries and to reaffirm the trust on which mutually beneficial relations rely.

However, the UK finds itself in a uniquely favourable position to do so and to give the term Global Britain real substance.

May 2021

About the author

Thomas Simpson is a Commons parliamentary officer focusing with the Cabinet Office. He previously worked at the European Parliament in Brussels, where he supported work on fisheries, international trade and relations with the Commonwealth and South Asia. He also previously worked at the United Nations General Assembly in New York supporting the Special Political and Decolonization Committee. He has an interest in foreign policy and affairs, particularly as it relates to the Middle East and North Africa, and increasingly the Sahel. He graduated with a degree in Politics and Economics from the University of Reading.

© Conservative European Forum

PO Box 46

Prestigne

LD7 9AP

www.conservativeeuropeanforum.com

*The views and ideas expressed in this paper are not necessarily the views and ideas of the Conservative European Forum nor should they be considered to represent Conservative European Forum policy.