

Ukraine and the Changing Face of the Southern Mediterranean – European Relations

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The Ukraine crisis has widened the rift between the West and Russia. It has also allowed several countries in the Global South to consolidate their autonomy. Southern Mediterranean states are no exception, and their reactions have proven to be a difficult test for the European Union. But ultimately, energy and migration have prevailed over diplomatic and identity considerations. Therefore, if the southern Mediterranean countries respect their share of the deal, they are allowed to go their own way. In the long run, this means more autonomy for them, more space for other global actors and less influence for the West.

The Ukraine crisis is primarily a tragedy for Ukraine and Ukrainians. But it hit the southern Mediterranean countries, from Egypt to Morocco, at a particularly delicate moment. From 2010 on, the southern Mediterranean went through a period of political upheavals (the Arab uprisings), security havoc (civil wars and jihadist insurgencies), economic collapse (a direct consequence of the two previous issues), drought and other climatic changes, and finally the Covid pandemic. And just as this region started breathing again, in early 2022, with the gradual return of peace and the dissemination of Covid vaccines, Russia invaded Ukraine. This, in turn, has led to an unprecedented food security crisis and an increase in energy prices, triggering inflation, as well as having social and political repercussions.

The crisis has also created a global division akin to the Cold War. “With us or against us” has become the new normal in international politics, leaving smaller and poorer states to struggle amid the geopolitical competition between Russia and the United States (US). As we enter the second year of the Ukraine crisis, we can decipher trends that were less clear a year ago, such as the diplomatic alignment of the southern Mediterranean countries. These countries have strong political, security and economic ties with the European Union (EU), but their populations – and to a certain extent their leadership – have a penchant towards Russia. While they confronted tremendous economic, security and climatic challenges that require – in theory – bandwagoning with European partners, the southern Mediterranean regimes needed also to respond to the demands of local public opinion. They had to listen to the calls of the anti-Western sections of their elites, who have gained influence in recent years. This group blames the West for the totality of the problems of the previous decades, calling for an equilibration of international affairs and a diversification of partners, away from the West.¹ They see the war in Ukraine as a moment of emancipation from Western tutelage. A year after Russia invaded, it became clear that, while Europe’s closest partners were not siding with Moscow, they weren’t on Brussels’ side neither. When it comes to the southern Mediterranean’s popular and elitist support for Russia and the lack of support towards Ukraine, we can list five main reasons (Cherif, 2022). Firstly, there is a strong anti-imperialist feeling in the Global South. Secondly, Russia is leading a successful disinformation and misinformation campaign across that part of the world, to which

¹ The West in this paper refers to the broader group of the European Union, the UK, and the US.

the anti-imperialist elements are receptive. Thirdly, the way Western countries behave vis-à-vis Ukraine is different from how they act when it comes to the Palestinian question or issues of human rights and democracy in the Global South. This has led to frequent accusations of double standards. But double standards exist on the other side as well, and this is the fourth point: regimes from the Global South keep feeding their populations with anti-Western – and somewhat pro-Russian – propaganda, while at the same time maintaining strong economic and military ties with American and European capitals. And, finally, as a fifth reason, there is the policy of Ukraine. Ukrainians have rarely reached out to Arab hearts and minds, while they did a lot to win Western publics to their cause; it is only in May 2023 that Volodymyr Zelensky, a frequent traveller since the beginning of the crisis, visited the Arab World (to attend an Arab League summit in Saudi Arabia).

The votes of the southern Mediterranean countries in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) on the Ukraine crisis reflect this dichotomy. Algeria often abstains or votes against the motions, whereas Morocco usually does not care to attend. Egypt, and to a lesser extent Tunisia and Libya, do abstain occasionally as well. But overall, these countries do not support Ukraine (or the EU) unconditionally, and certainly not as Kiev or Brussels would want. Hence, the UNGA Resolution ES-11/1, adopted in early March 2022, demanded that Russia withdraws from Ukraine and reverses its recognition of two separatist entities inside Ukraine.² Algeria abstained and Morocco did not even attend. That same month, UNGA Resolution ES-11/2 was adopted, asking Russia to withdraw from Ukraine and expressing concerns over human rights violations and violence against civilians. Again, Algeria abstained and Morocco was absent.³ And when UNGA Resolution ES-11/3 was adopted in April 2022, suspending Russia's membership of the United Nations Human Rights Council, Algeria voted against, Egypt and Tunisia abstained and Morocco did not attend.⁴ Then, in October 2022, Algeria abstained from voting on

UNGA Resolution ES-11/4, a resolution that declared Russia's referenda in occupied Ukrainian territories invalid and demanded that Russia "immediately, completely and unconditionally withdraw" from Ukraine.⁵ And when UNGA Resolution ES-11/5 was adopted in November 2022, imposing a war reparation mechanism on Russia, the representatives of Algeria, Egypt, Tunisia and even Libya abstained, while the Moroccan ambassador skipped the session.⁶ Then, finally, when UNGA Resolution ES-11/6 of March 2023, which calls for peace in Ukraine, was adopted, Algeria abstained.⁷

The Ukraine crisis gave the southern Mediterranean regimes a way to mitigate European pressures and play the autonomous card

Why did the countries of the southern Mediterranean act the way they did? What is the difference between the policies of the five states towards the Ukraine crisis? How did the EU react? And how is the war impacting the relationship between Brussels and its southern neighbours?

A Changing Neighbourhood

The EU remains the most important economic partner of the southern Mediterranean countries. The US is a strong security guarantor, and US weapons and military tactics are prevalent among the Moroccan, Tunisian and Egyptian armies, which often participate in joint military drills. Even Algeria participates in this security framework. Yet the region is changing (Cherif, 2018). Over the last two decades, China has become a leading economic player. Chinese investments in infrastructure are growing, and Beijing's soft power comes with them. Russia, largely absent until five years ago, has established a strong

² <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3965290?ln=en>.

³ <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3966630?ln=en>.

⁴ <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3967950?ln=en>.

⁵ <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3990673?ln=en>.

⁶ <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3994481?ln=en>.

⁷ <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4004933?ln=en>.

presence in Libya and the Sahel, backed by its other lethal weapon: the media and social media network, of which Russia Today, Sputnik and the Troll Factory are important components. Russian propaganda is widely trusted among peoples from the Global South, and its message is well received in places like Mali or Burkina Faso. In fact, the current wave of anti-imperialist (anti-French) activism perceived in the Sahel is partly the product of Russian propaganda. Turkey and the Gulf countries are other actors that gained pre-eminence in a region that was, until not so long ago, a European sphere of influence.

The Ukraine crisis gave the southern Mediterranean regimes a way to mitigate European pressures and play the autonomous card. The fact that similar settings are observed in other regions of the Global South did encourage this trend (Askew, 2023). It is the opportunity that the anti-Western group of southern Mediterranean elites was waiting for. This situation is creating discomfort in the North. In the early days of the War, Europeans attempted to exert pressure on their poorer southern neighbours, but they failed. The next strategy to gain support is to formulate a united message focused on Ukraine, and frame their aid to the southern neighbourhood as initiatives to alleviate the side effects of the War. European officials visiting the southern Mediterranean or meeting representatives from its five states always reiterate these points. In Algiers, Western embassies are relatively quiet because the Algerian diplomatic rules do not favour foreign activism, but be it in Rabat, Tunis (and by extension Tripoli) or Cairo, they multiply events and statements in support of Ukraine.

Europeans exert pressure when they can, but they are inevitably constrained by the realities of energy supplies, migration influx, security equilibrium and their own economic interests. Moreover, and perhaps just as importantly, they are not alone in this region anymore. They fear that if they push too hard, southern Mediterranean countries may reach out to other partners, and possibly Russia or even China, which would be a nightmare for Brussels and Washington DC. Algeria is the most difficult partner they have to work with, followed by Egypt, and then Mo-

rocco. Tunisia is where they can still apply pressure more openly, but its regime is becoming less malleable. Libya shows a pro-European position, but it is a divided and semi-functional country, whose voice has less clout. We will examine them one by one.

Algeria: Russia's Friend that Is also Europe's

Algeria is the southern Mediterranean country that never voted for a UNGA resolution against Russia. Moscow is Algiers' first military hardware provider, and the two capitals have agreed on several points at international level since the Soviet era, including most recently the return of Syria to the League of Arab States. Mutual visits and contacts are ongoing (foreign ministers, military delegations, presidential phone calls, etc.), and so are arms contracts and military cooperation (Belkaid, 2022). In June, the presidents of the two countries signed a joint declaration making their respective countries strategic partners, falling just short of establishing an alliance.⁸ There is also growing excitement among Algerian policy circles about a possible inclusion of Algeria in the BRICS circle. As tensions with Morocco increase, Algeria is strategically obliged to keep Russia close by. But Algeria has never fully supported Russia, most of the time abstaining in the UNGA sessions, rather than voting against. Algerian leaders do meet with the Ukrainians, and they call for peace rather than side with Russia. Algerian President Abdelmajid Tebboune was supposed to visit Moscow in 2022, but the visit did not take place until June 2023. Algeria sells oil and gas to Europe, and Europeans would like to see Algerian energy resources covering for what they lost with Russia, something the Algerians are keen to promise.⁹ Rather than joining Russia to contain Europe economically, as is usually expected from an ally, Algiers has practically replaced Moscow and reaped enormous benefits thanks to the sanctions imposed on Russia.

Brussels, therefore, likes to woo Algiers, while refraining from criticizing its seemingly pro-Russian stance. Algiers has become a pilgrimage site for European

⁸ "Algeria-Russia: Signing of in-depth strategic partnership declaration, several agreements and MOUs." *Algeria Press Service*, 15 June 2023 www.aps.dz/en/algeria/47912-algeria-russia-signing-of-in-depth-strategic-partnership-declaration-several-agreements-and-mous.

⁹ "Ukraine – Russia: Algeria ready to provide more gas to Europe." *Jeune Afrique*, 28 February 2022 www.theafricareport.com/180206/ukraine-russia-algeria-ready-to-provide-more-gas-to-europe/.

leaders: the European Commission's President, the EU High Representative, the Italian and French Prime Ministers, etc. Their statements are rarely critical of Algeria, as if to avoid the Algeria regime's sensitivity towards foreign criticism. It is telling that President Tebboune flew all the way to Moscow, met with President Vladimir Putin and signed pacts, without fearing any backlash from Europe. Algeria is now a "reliable" partner.¹⁰ And when Algeria had a spat with Spain over the Western Sahara issue in the summer of 2022, freezing economic ties with the country (including the export of gas),¹¹ the EU barely reacted. Algeria, moreover, exposed divisions inside Europe: in January 2023, when the Italian Prime Minister visited Algiers (Kaval, 2023), there were tensions between Algeria and Spain as well as France, but Giorgia Meloni defended Italian interests and offered her country as *the* strong European partner for Algeria.

Egypt: Russia's Old Friend back from the Cold?

While Egypt did vote a few times in favour of UNGA resolutions against Russia, it comes second after Algeria in the number of abstentions among southern Mediterranean countries. Cairo was in Moscow's orbit between the mid-1950s and mid-1970s, before shifting towards the US. From normalization with Israel to joining American military alliances, gone are the days of Nasser and his pan-Arab anti-imperialism. The public mood, however, remains pro-Russian, and it is rare to find pro-Western voices in Egyptian media outlets.¹² And while segments of the elite are pro-West, there is a strong leaning towards Russia, including among the military leadership, despite the fact that this receives annual US funding. Furthermore, Egypt has gradually diversified its economic partners, keeping the US and EU important but not irreplaceable. When General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's staged his coup, the country was ready to resume its "Russian affair"; mutual visits multiplied and several contracts and agreements were subsequently signed. Trying to

circumvent Western criticism of his human rights record, al-Sisi has used the old stratagem of going East in the face of rising pressure from the West.

In 2015, Egypt and Russia announced a \$25-billion project to build a nuclear plant by Rosatom, the Russian state corporation. The construction began in July 2022, five months after Russia started its war and well into the period of Western sanctions. Such a major project would consolidate Russian-Egyptian ties, and has the potential of recruiting other Arab states to join Russia's network. In fact, a number of Arab states are contemplating the possibility of developing nuclear energy, and the project in Egypt is a model that countries like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates will want to emulate, especially in light of the recurrent Western veto towards sharing nuclear technology with Middle Eastern and North African states.

Mutual visits between Russian and Egyptian ministers continued in 2022 and 2023, and pro-Russian propaganda is omnipresent in the Egyptian media. There is no planned visit of President al-Sisi to Moscow, but he and Russian President Vladimir Putin have spoken on the phone at least twice since the war began. Most recently, American intelligence officers leaked Egypt's plans to supply Russia with rockets (Hill, 2023). The story triggered strong US and EU warnings, which obliged the Egyptians to step back. But the fact that Egypt was going as far as providing Russia with weapons at such a tense moment is an indicator of the depth of the relationship. Nonetheless, Egypt is needed for the region's stability. Hence, when the EU and its Member States evacuated from Sudan, they sought help from Egypt. The country is, furthermore, an important contributor to UN and African Union peacekeeping missions. In addition, Egypt keeps its shores under tight control, limiting the risk of mass migration towards southern Europe. It also helps to uphold Israel's security, the most important Western ally in the region. Egypt remains a stable and cheap country for millions of European tourists. And, because of the prevailing Cold War atmosphere, Europeans are wary that Egypt

¹⁰ Statement by President von der Leyen on energy, 7 September 2022. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/bg/speech_22_5389.

¹¹ "Algeria suspends cooperation with Spain over Western Sahara." *Al-Jazeera*, 8 June 2022 www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/6/8/algeria-suspends-spain-co-operation-over-w-sahara-dispute.

¹² Egypt's state-controlled media empire has a pan-Arab reach, and can therefore make its message heard beyond Egypt's borders.

might return to Russia's nest. Like with Algeria, Europeans feel obliged to court this big country rather than put pressure on it.

Morocco: Always Ambivalent

Morocco has a foreign policy that generally avoids clear alignments, as long as the situation does not involve the Western Sahara question.¹³ Hence, during the Qatar crisis of 2017, the monarchy was able to keep good ties with both the Saudis/Emiratis and the Qataris, enjoy ongoing investment and trade.¹⁴ Rabat is historically pro-US/EU, but, like Egypt, it has forged strong ties with non-Western partners, including Russia.¹⁵ So, when the Ukraine crisis started, Rabat largely ignored it. Furthermore, Morocco remains a privileged destination for Russian tourists, now that Europe has banned them.¹⁶ Moreover, the Kingdom is apparently participating in the redistribution of Russian fuel, indirectly circumventing Western sanctions and helping Moscow survive economically.¹⁷ During UNGA votes, the Moroccan Permanent Representative usually avoids showing up (with two exceptions: ES 11/4 and ES 11/6).

This position did anger the country's European partners. The Finnish Ambassador to the country, for instance, wrote an angry tweet early in the war criticizing the Kingdom's policy (which he later deleted).¹⁸ European diplomats expressed their disagreements in private with their Moroccan counterparts. Hence, Rabat seemed to have changed course by the end of 2022. Increased pressures and European rapprochement with Algeria perhaps pushed it to send military aid to Ukraine in late 2022,¹⁹ the only Arab country to do so.²⁰ In October 2022 and March 2023, Rabat joined its European partners in voting

for UNGA Resolutions ES-11/4 and ES-11/6. Morocco also hosted the Ukrainian Foreign Minister in May 2023, the highest-level Ukrainian visit to a southern Mediterranean country (until Zelensky's trip to Saudi Arabia that same month).²¹

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While less strategic than Egypt and less rich than Algeria, Morocco has several advantages that allow it to impose its views on Europe: it masters the migration card, it is a stable and historical partner for Europe and the US, influential in several theatres, from the Mediterranean to the Sahel and West Africa, it produces phosphates, it is a safe and close holiday destination, etc. Its ambivalence towards the Ukrainian issue is, consequently, excused, as long as it does not go too far. Seen from Brussels, Rabat can make strong moves against France,²² or be condemned by the European Parliament,²³ without facing any serious backlash, in order to be kept on the side of the West and not drift towards Russia.

Tunisia: Shifting East or Standing still?

Tunisia is a curious case. The country is the most indebted country per capita to the EU among its peers.

¹³ A notable exception is in the relationship with Iran: here Morocco largely aligns itself with the Saudi position.

¹⁴ www.editions-harmattan.fr/livre-le_maghreb_et_la_crise_entre_les_monarchies_du_golfe_une_neutralite_positive_abdennour_benantar-9782343231204-70479.html.

¹⁵ www.lopinion.ma/Maroc-Russie-La-guerre-en-Ukraine-menace-t-elle-les-relations-commerciales_a25011.html.

¹⁶ www.france24.com/en/europe/20230523-russian-tourists-seek-new-destinations-as-europe-shuts-its-doors-over-ukraine-war.

¹⁷ www.wsj.com/articles/north-african-countries-snap-up-russian-oil-products-shunned-by-west-f63aa287.

¹⁸ <https://ledesk.ma/live-content/vote-lonu-lambassadeur-de-finlande-rabat-prend-lhistoire-temoin-contre-la-position-du-maroc/>.

¹⁹ www.dw.com/en/tanks-to-ukraine-mark-change-in-moroccan-foreign-policy/a-64527084.

²⁰ Although the information has been challenged by Russian sources, no Moroccan official confirmed or denied: www.arabnews.com/node/2289691/world.

²¹ www.editions-harmattan.fr/livre-le_maghreb_et_la_crise_entre_les_monarchies_du_golfe_une_neutralite_positive_abdennour_benantar-9782343231204-70479.html.

²² www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/morocco-recalls-ambassador-to-france-amid-simmering-tensions/2814847.

²³ www.euronews.com/my-europe/2023/01/19/european-parliament-condemns-morocco-for-first-time-in-25-years-after-vote-on-human-rights.

Its economic, social and, to a certain extent, political ties are mostly with the EU. Yet its official rhetoric is approaching Russia's. Social media pages, Facebook accounts and figures close to President Kais Saied often question Tunisia's relationships with its Western partners and advocate for more rapprochement with Russia (and China, and the BRICS in general). The President's speeches, while refraining from naming Russia and Ukraine, often allude to the imbalance in international relations, an idea largely shared by Global South leaders, often repeated in Moscow and Beijing. Russian-Tunisian cultural and scientific ties have increased in recent years, including a small but nonetheless symbolic space cooperation announced in 2021.²⁴ In the UNGA, the country occasionally abstains from voting on anti-Russia resolutions. And, like Morocco, it is open to Russian tourists and oil.

This is creating discomfort among Tunisia's Western partners. After the first UNGA vote on Ukraine and Tunisia's abstention, the EU Ambassador to the country tweeted his dissatisfaction.²⁵ Actually, Tunisia's stance on the War on Ukraine is adding to the problems in the relationship between Tunis and Brussels, already complicated by the authoritarian turn that Tunisia is undergoing. There is, therefore, increasing tension between Tunisia and the EU, both because of Tunisia's internal politics and because of its position on the war. And since Tunisia remains relatively free compared to its neighbours, European embassies often host talks and other events in support of Ukraine, or to counter the Russian messaging on Ukraine, at the moment contradicting Tunisia's official position.²⁶ Tunisia is, therefore, multiplying gestures of good faith towards the EU. For instance, it was rumoured in early 2022 that President Kais Saied would go to Moscow, but the visit never came about. There were also rumours about a visit by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov to Tunisia, yet that didn't happen either. And when NATO invited its allies for a ministerial meeting in Germany in April 2022, seen as a warning to Russia, the Tunisian Defence Minister participated, provoking strong internal reactions due to the presence of his Israeli counterpart.²⁷

Unlike its richer and more influential neighbours, Tunisia feels coerced by its European partners. While the President and his followers adopt a gradually pro-Russian, or anti-Western, position, the country remains largely within the bosom of European and American influence. How long this duality can prevail remains to be seen.

Libya: Two Positions

Official Libya, i.e., the Government of Tripoli, is pro-West, after decades on the anti-Western side. The country's oil and gas keep flowing to Europe, and very few contacts have been recorded between "official" Libyan and Russian officials since the beginning of the War on Ukraine. Tripoli, furthermore, has made repeated calls on Russia to withdraw its forces from Libyan territory.²⁸ Libyan officials have condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and they often vote in favour of UNGA resolutions related to the crisis. For the Libyan leadership, bandwagoning with the EU allows them to counter the secessionist Eastern government and its Russian partners.

But its East, under the influence of the self-styled Libyan National Army (LNA), is largely pro-Russian, and that is where Russian presence is located (through the Wagner Group). In recent years, Libya has become crucial for Russian operations in the Central African Republic (CAR) and the Sahel, and now Sudan, with regular flights recorded between the Wagner-controlled Jufra airport in Libya and Bangui in CAR. Until now, EU and US pressures on the LNA commander Khalifa Haftar have failed in uprooting the Wagner forces from Libya.

Libya remains divided and mired in its internal problems. Its internationally recognized government is siding with the EU in this conflict, and its energy flows to Europe continue unabated, which contributes to feeding Europe's strategic reserves. European diplomats are turning a blind eye to the massive corruption plaguing the regime and the strong authoritarian turn the country is undergoing. As for the

²⁴ <https://tass.com/science/1325591>.

²⁵ www.businessnews.com.tn/conflit-russo-ukrainien--cornaro-ne-serait-pas-satisfait-de-la-position-de-la-tunisie,520,117007,3.

²⁶ Example: www.institutfrancais-tunisie.com/hiwarna-le-nouveau-rendez-vous-geopolitique-de-lift.

²⁷ www.leconomistemaghreb.com/2022/04/29/normalisation-polemique-face-a-face-tuniso-israelien-base-us-allemande-2/.

²⁸ Wagner forces have military bases and a strong-armed presence in the country.

LNA, it has proven to be a difficult partner: it is needed for Libya's stability and to keep oil and gas production stable, but it is playing a dual game with the Wagner Group, several Sudanese and Sahelian militias, and in many illicit activities, which often reach Europe. In Libya, therefore, like in Egypt, Algeria and Morocco, the EU must cope with what is available, rather than impose its will. Yet the recent developments in Russia proper, i.e., the conflict between Wagner and the Russian state, might lead to new developments that are hard to predict at this point.

Conclusion

For centuries, the southern Mediterranean was Europe's backyard. European powers were the region's main partners before, during and after colonialism. And, while Egypt, Libya and Algeria occasionally took anti-European positions under their postcolonial regimes, they would often "come back" to Europe, like Egypt after 1973 or Libya after 2011. There was an overall perception in the northern Mediterranean that the southerners would never risk navigating too far, because their choices were limited.

However, when Russia invaded Ukraine, few countries in the region sided with the EU. European officials, who at first sent warnings to those who would not take their side, later backed down in order to secure energy flows, keep stability, limit informal migration and avoid losing their southern neighbours to external powers. The Ukraine crisis showed Europe that it lacks the lead and that the former colonies are increasingly their own masters. Pressure works, but only up to a point, and the region has moved on to new directions.

The crisis also made it clear to the southern Mediterranean regimes that they can forge their autonomous way, away from Europe, without risking much. They know what is being asked from them: energy, security, migration control and, when possible, political stability and business transactions. What they ask for, in return, is more independent decision-making and, when it applies, development aid. Since these regimes are authoritarian, their independence coincides with unchecked authoritarian consolidation. It also comes with an inhibited embrace of the West's geopolitical competitors.

This means that, in future years, they will be tempted by greater cooperation with other players, from China and Russia, to Turkey and the Gulf, and on to India and Brazil, etc. Such diversification will lead to less European influence, and perhaps a neo-independence of the southern Mediterranean countries, like what occurred in Latin America and Asia in previous centuries. Can they then avoid the dependency trap they ended up in concerning their relationship with Europe after World War II, or will they simply replace an older master with a younger one? Or will Europe be able to reinvent itself and build new bases to reinvigorate its relationship with the southern Mediterranean?

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