

Guest Editorial, Morocco's Advanced Status with the European Union: A Locomotive and a Model for Reforms in the Region

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As the European Union (EU) prepares to welcome Croatia as its twenty-eighth member, it is nearing its maximum capacity eastwards, for obvious geopolitical reasons. Given the stalled Union for the Mediterranean process, it is important to reflect on the future of the European Neighbourhood Policy and the nature of the relationship that will bind the EU to its southern Mediterranean neighbours, with the Kingdom of Morocco in particular.

There is no doubt that interesting developments have been unfolding in recent years in the context of the Barcelona Process/Union for the Mediterranean process and the adoption of the Morocco-EU Joint Document on the advanced status. However the 'Arab' spring that swept through North Africa has slowed down if not delayed this encouraging momentum. Today the EU partnership with its neighbours in the southern Mediterranean region can be viewed as a cup half full by some or a cup half empty by others.

In light of new disturbing challenges that have emerged in the Sahel region, particularly following the thwarted attempt by terrorist and extremist groups to take control over Mali, there seems to be an ever more urgent need for a renewed partnership between the EU and its southern neighbours.

Over the years, Morocco has undoubtedly proven, time and again, that it is a pioneering African and Arab country, paving the way towards a more strengthened partnership with the EU and a renewed euro-Mediterranean process.

While history, geopolitics and trade may have contributed to this, it is crystal clear that the vision set out by the late King Hassan II and His Majesty King Mohammed VI of a reinforced EU-Morocco partnership based on shared values and common destiny leading to the same aspirations, have been an important driving force behind one of the closest partnership that the EU has ever developed with a country on the southern shores of the Mediterranean sea.

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1 THE ADVANCED STATUS: A CLEAR RECOGNITION OF DECADES OF REFORMS BY MOROCCO

Indeed, the Morocco-EU partnership has grown steadily in importance over the years, a process punctuated by a giant leap forward with the signing, on 13 October 2008, of the Morocco-EU advanced Status joint Document, thus propelling the half a century old ties towards new horizons, allowing for the strengthening of the existing multidimensional partnership in many respects, including at the political, economic and human level. Through this advanced status, Morocco and the EU agreed to give new impetus to their bilateral cooperation based upon shared values of democracy, rule of law, good governance, respect of human rights, a reinforced political dialogue, a common economic zone namely through the recent launch of negotiations over a new Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade agreement (DCFTA), the gradual participation of Morocco in European agencies and programmes as well as the creation of a common space for knowledge, cultural and academic exchanges and scientific research.

Perhaps one of the most important aspects of the Advanced Status is that it serves not only as recognition by the EU of the deep and multidimensional reforms that Morocco has undertaken over the past two decades at the political, economic, social, cultural and human rights levels on its path for greater openness and in its transition to greater democracy, but also reflects the trust that the EU places in Morocco, and more specifically in its endeavour to pursuing these efforts even further. The Advanced Status entails both that the Kingdom will continue on the path of reforms and that the EU will continue to support and accompany such efforts.

The advanced status, the first in its kind to be signed with a country in the region, continues to represent an important step forward in the context of future prospects of cooperation within a revamped European Neighbourhood Policy. Morocco's request for an advanced status was not aimed at standing out from the rest of the 'crowd' but was rather motivated by its belief in the need of a strengthened north-south euro-Mediterranean space. It is encouraging to see that Morocco's approach has inspired other countries in the region like Tunisia or Jordan to follow on this same path and to review its partnership with the EU.

2 MOROCCO: A TRUSTED PARTNER FOR THE EU IN AN UNSTABLE SOUTHERN MEDITERRANEAN ZONE

It can be argued that history, geography and a clear vision for a democratized Moroccan society are not enough, in self-interest oriented world, to explain the nature of existing Euro-Moroccan relations.

Given the persistent political changes that have shaken North Africa and given the real security threats that have emerged in the Sahel region, Morocco's stability, its Arab, African and Mediterranean roots and self-perception combined with its shared values of openness, democracy and rule of law have been valuable assets for the EU in the framework of the existing political dialogue. Furthermore, Morocco's active involvement in finding solutions to conflicts affecting the African continent and the Arab world, as well as its readiness to foster greater regional security cooperation have made it a strategic interlocutor of prime importance for the EU.

At the economic level, Morocco remains an important partner of the EU. Indeed, the EU is the first commercial partner and the first foreign investor in Morocco. Bilateral trade has more than doubled in the last decade, thanks to the EU-Morocco free trade area that reached its full cycle of tariff dismantling the 1 March 2012. Commercial exchange totalled more than Euro (EUR) 24 billion in 2011. Besides, Morocco remains the largest recipient of European foreign aid in the southern region of the Mediterranean, with EUR 580.5 million during the two-year period 2011–2013.

However, Morocco's wide array of free trade agreements already signed or being negotiated with countries in North America (USA and Canada), the EFTA countries, Turkey, the arab-mediterranean zone (Agadir agreement) and West Africa (UEMOA) represents an opportunity for the EU in a time marked by economic and financial difficulties.

Furthermore, Morocco's vision for gradual convergence, involving technical twinning with the aim of aligning its norms, standards and regulations with those of the EU is also an asset, allowing as it does for easier movement of goods and services. While more efforts need to be undertaken, Morocco is determined to pursue this objective, aiming at to aligning all its norms to those of the EU in the near future.

The finality of this voluntary process of legal harmonization and convergence with 'the *acquis communautaire*' undertaken by Morocco is to lay the foundations towards a common economic space enabling Morocco to fully integrate the European single market with its 500 million Consumers. Moreover, by so doing, Morocco would ensure for European investors a suitable legal framework and a suitable environment of business in accordance with the highest standards.

3 THE WAY FORWARD

The EU seems to have recognized that, at a time when its enlargement is reaching limits in the East, the southern shore of the Mediterranean represents a new frontier for enhanced and deepened partnerships. Analysis and reflexion on this issue should become a priority on both ends of the Mediterranean Sea, in order to create a common strategic zone at the image and level of NAFTA and ASEAN.

Morocco's partnership with the EU can be used as a locomotive and a model for others to follow.

Five years after the signing of the Advanced Status Joint Document, and as stipulated in Article 7 of the Lisbon Treaty regarding the signing of a new generation of Agreements with the most willing Partners, negotiations for a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area were launched on 1 March 2013 and the first round of negotiation started on 22 April 2013 in Rabat. This will open up new horizons, allowing to envisage the future as well as new perspectives for Morocco-EU relations through the establishment of a more 'privileged partnership', building upon half a decade old ties and recent achievements.

If on the one hand the Kingdom of Morocco is required to continue on the path of political and socioeconomic reforms, the EU, on the other hand, is required to adopt a more open and balanced concept of partnership based, amongst others, on solidarity and security. The way forward will also impose that the EU-south Mediterranean partnership become less focused on border control and security related issues, in favour of enhanced cultural exchanges and development partnerships that take into account the issues of identity, cultural and 'civilizational' diversity.

The democratic developments witnessed in the south Mediterranean basin, the recent financial shockwaves that rocked the biggest economies of the world all coupled with the emergence of multidimensional challenges, be it security, energy or environment related, as well as increasing discussion related to the issue of identity, all point towards the clear need of a debate on the future of the EU-South Mediterranean partnership and on a geostrategic transformation of the Mediterranean space.

The democratic transformation taking place in the Arab countries, in particular, implies envisaging the setting up of a newly conceived Charter for the Mediterranean region, covering, on an equal footing, the issues of regional security, democracy and common development and solidarity.

Building upon the progress achieved since the early Sixties, with the signing of trade conventions, the cooperation agreements of the Seventies, the partnership agreements of the Nineties and more recently on the neighbourhood policy, such a charter could, first, allow for the consolidation of economic integration between

the two Mediterranean shores, and beyond that, help build synergies as regards the strategic priorities of all the members of the region, more specifically, towards the edification of a euro-Mediterranean cultural entity that brings together specificity and universality as well as openness, while respecting tradition.

At the economic level, this charter will aim at the creation of a highly competitive joint economic space worthy of negotiating with the American and Asian trade blocs, which would allow trade agreements (in agriculture, services and maritime fishing ...) to flourish through the recovery (inclusion?) of trade exports from the south to the north. This implies a more ambitious and evolving objective, overcoming the limited logic of free trade and taking into consideration that the trade surplus of the EU in the Mediterranean region is the most important at the international level.

Culturally speaking, this new charter is meant to reinforce the values of openness, pluralism, diversity and respect of the specificities of each other, aspects of which Morocco has always been a staunch defender, at the forefront of countries concerned with the euro-Mediterranean partnership.

The prevalence of the populist discourse in some regions of Europe raises questions of the purpose of the European integration process and threatens the cohesion and the culture of coexistence which has always characterized the Euro-Mediterranean space. Today, resorting to isolationist tendencies or holding on too strongly to one's identity without accepting the other's differences goes against the existing trend of a more globalized world, in which increased mobility, economic competitiveness, new demographic equilibrium and technological development are key. All these aspects constitute an opportunity, a potential common source of wealth that would benefit all Euro-Mediterranean societies.

In the same vein, a balanced approach to the issue of immigration covering all its aspects (development, legal migration, regional, visa facilitation ...), not only the security one, would allow to redress the demographic gaps between countries of the Mediterranean. This could be achieved through the encouragement of temporary immigration between these countries and ensuring greater social and economic integration of migrants in host countries. In this context, the on-going process of opening negotiations between Morocco and the EU towards concluding a Mobility Partnership comprising migration security and development is heralding a new stage of partnership between the North and the South underpinned by a shared awareness of common interests regarding this issue.

Today is a unique point in time in the history of the Euro-Mediterranean zone that should be seized upon in order to build a newly reinvigorated Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, a partnership that is able to provide new synergies and opportunities, a safer and more secure Euro-Mediterranean zone while at the same time bringing hope and answers to the needs of the peoples of

the Mediterranean. Morocco for its part is ready to assume its responsibilities and fully play its role, in this new vision of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership, and to continue to play a pioneering role through the conclusion of a 'privileged partnership' between the Kingdom of Morocco and the EU.