

## Time to move Algeria-EU relationship away from a 'one-size-fits- all' approach

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Feature

The time is right for the EU to reinvigorate its European neighbourhood policy and negotiate a comprehensive ENP action plan with Algeria, writes Charles Tannock.



Algeria is the world's sixth largest supplier of natural gas and the EU's third largest via direct pipelines.

Gas, oil and mining account for nearly 97 per cent of EU imports from the country, with these industries dominating the Algerian economy and contributing to approximately 95 per cent of its total exports.

Such dependency and lack of diversification is not uncommon in hydrocarbon powered economies, but at a time when world commodity prices, including oil and gas, are falling it is difficult to balance a budget that relied on energy exports for 60 per cent of its income in 2014.

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Diversifying away from these industries and generating new employment opportunities for its growing and youthful population - 44 per cent are under the age of 24 - is therefore a key political priority.

It is one the EU strongly supports and will help abate some of the uncontrolled emigration from Algeria to the European continent, with all the political pressure this places on neighbouring Mediterranean EU states. This priority has been identified throughout the EU's official engagement with Algeria and features in the association agreement signed in 2002.

As part of the association agreement, a twelve-year process was set in motion that is gradually reducing tariffs and duties between Algeria and the EU, a process that will be concluded by 2017. This is one of the most significant steps in reducing trade barriers and should act as a rallying call to the potential opportunities for investment on both sides of the Mediterranean.

From a foreign policy perspective, the renewal of the European neighbourhood policy will play a prominent role in the EU's interaction with Algeria. Worrying developments in the eastern neighbourhood, namely the annexation of Crimea by an expansionist Russia and the collapse of Armenia's association agreement, added to the political disruptions in North Africa.

Together with the deteriorating security situation in the Middle East, which together as a region constitute the southern neighbourhood, the ENP is undergoing a much needed reappraisal.

The European Parliament has set out its vision for the future of the ENP, voting in favour of a report authored by Eduard Kukan on the subject of the ENP Review at the last plenary session. The report refers back to the founding principles of the ENP, those of enhancing cooperation and partnerships with neighbouring countries to create a shared area of prosperity, security and stability.

No countries are referred to specifically but it takes account of the political situations in many of the sixteen ENP countries. Algeria is in one of the best positions to pursue opportunities for cooperation with the EU.

A move away from the "one-size-fits-all" approach to a more regional and individual country-led ENP will almost certainly be an outcome of the review.

As Algeria is in the process of negotiating its ENP action plan with the EU, this provides the perfect opportunity to push its economic diversification and private sector agendas. Algeria and, for instance, Azerbaijan are clearly different countries and the "more for more" ENP guiding principle will yield different results.

Algeria has already been awarded up to €148 million between 2014 and 2017 in funding via the European Neighbourhood Instrument for the purposes of labour market reform, diversification of the economy and justice reform. This is in addition to its participation as a partner country in the newly launched Erasmus+.

Only a couple of months ago, it also launched a joint EU-Algeria political dialogue on energy matters aimed at boosting its renewable energy production with the help of EU expertise.

These all combine to form a growing sense of partnership and illustrate how the EU can offer value-added to its nearest neighbours, as the ENP intended.

Beyond the economy, however, there are other areas of engagement with Algeria that are important for Europe. As the migration crisis in the Mediterranean worsens, the so-called Western Mediterranean route that Algeria forms part of has seen approximately 5,000 illegal migrants enter Europe in 2015.

Of course this figure is small compared to the other, more problematic, routes, but this does not diminish the severity of the issues at stake, particularly as a gateway for human trafficking.

Algeria has largely escaped the horrors of the civil war and chaos of Syria, Yemen, Libya and the rise of ISIS in Iraq and now Libya. Algeria has in the recent past seen a bitter war against its own jihadi terrorists that have largely been defeated, although the situation in the Sahel remains fragile.

Like Tunisia, Algeria has a strong tradition of secularism and a determination to forge a pathway of progress and modernisation that the EU needs to support.

As Islamist extremists like AQIM plague Mali, or Ansar Al Sharia terrorise Libya, Algeria is in a strong position to play an important role in counter-terrorism activities and intelligence gathering in the region by extending cooperation on regional security with EU partners.

The 1991 military coup and the ensuing battle against FIS Islamist insurgents throughout the nineties have provided Algeria with a great deal of valuable experience in this area. Working together to tackle drug smuggling and international organised crime are also areas where EU member states have an interest in working with neighbours.

At some point, Algeria must mend its tense relations with its own neighbour Morocco, but this depends in part on the peaceful resolution of the Western Sahara question, where Algeria sides with the right to self-determination of the Saharawi people and the official position of the AU, of which it is an active member.

Algeria is a vast and important trading partner, geographically close, and a stable polity in the region that should be supported and embraced as a partner in the fight against terrorism, illegal migration and organised crime including people trafficking.

The concluding of tariff and duty reductions in 2017 between Algeria and the EU will be a symbolic moment and should pave the way for more improvements to trading as well as wider economic and political links. The time is now right for the EU to reinvigorate its European Neighbourhood Policy and negotiate a comprehensive ENP Action Plan with Algeria.

## **About the author**

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