



## Rethinking the EU's approach towards its southern neighbours

by Luigi Scazzieri

10 July 2020

The grave threat to stability posed by the coronavirus pandemic means it is more urgent than ever for the European Union to rethink its flawed approach to its southern neighbours in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The EU should help these countries – such as Morocco and Tunisia – deal with the COVID-19 crisis, make them a more ambitious long-term economic and political offer, and take more responsibility for the region's security. That is the crux of a new Centre for European Reform paper, '[Rethinking the EU's approach towards its southern neighbours](#)', which examines why and how Europe should do more to promote security, prosperity and stability in neighbouring MENA countries.

In recent years the EU's approach to its southern neighbours has been driven by short-term concerns about migration and terrorism. This has failed to serve the Union's long-term interests as it has done little to foster lasting economic and political stability in the region. The EU has provided too little support to countries like Tunisia, where reforms stood a good chance of success, while providing unconditional assistance to authoritarian regimes such as Egypt. Europe has also done too little to foster security in MENA countries, leaving more forceful actors like Russia, Turkey, and China to play an increasingly important role in shaping the region to their benefit.

The COVID-19 crisis is likely to hit the EU's southern neighbours hard: unemployment and social strife will fuel instability, migration to Europe and possibly conflict. Against this backdrop it is more urgent than ever for Europe to rethink its approach to neighbouring MENA countries. Europe should help them with the immediate health and economic impact of the coronavirus. In the longer term, it is in the EU's interests to offer them deeper market access and more opportunities for their citizens to work in Europe, and also develop an 'associate membership' model for democratic countries in the region that cannot currently aspire to be EU members. The EU should also target its financial assistance more strategically by making it more conditional on respecting human rights and aligning with Europe's foreign policy goals.

*"The EU should not think it can insulate itself from instability amongst its southern neighbours. If European leaders reduce funding for external action to promote security, prosperity and stability in neighbouring MENA countries in the EU budget, they will simply be creating greater challenges for the future,"* said Luigi Scazzieri, CER research fellow and author of the publication.

### Note for editors:

For further information on the new research and to request an interview with Luigi Scazzieri, please contact Nick Winning in the CER press office on [pressoffice@cer.eu](mailto:pressoffice@cer.eu) or +44 (207) 976 3429 and +44 (0) 7714 256241.

The Centre for European Reform is a think-tank devoted to making the EU work better and strengthening its role in the world. The CER is pro-European but not uncritical. Follow us on Twitter: [@CER\\_EU](#) [@LScazzieri](#)